



Tom Rockmore  
DUQUESNE UNIVERSITY,  
USA

# Remarks on the structure of twentieth century philosophy

## Abstract

In this paper, the author reviews recent developments in twentieth century philosophy. Three important movements emerged independently, movements which for different reasons rapidly came to dominate the debate: American pragmatism, so-called continental philosophy, and Anglo-American analytic philosophy. Each of these tendencies has its own undeniable charms. It would be mistaken to think that one has a decisive advantage over its philosophical competition. The author argues that these three movements of the past century need to be understood against the prior historical background, above all as reactions to Kant.

It makes sense to pause from time to time to take stock of where we are in the debate, what has been accomplished, and what new directions are emerging, what problems have been solved (or resolved) and how the present phase of the discussion relates to earlier discussion. To vary the same point, one can say that it can be useful to ask ourselves what the difference is between the older and the more recent phases of the discussion, between the views now under consideration, which emerged around a century ago, and their predecessors.

## 1 Three new philosophical tendencies

The first step in considering the structure of twentieth century philosophy is to limit the discussion in identifying the important philosophical movements, those that must be included on any list of what went on in that period. In one sense the answer is simple enough. If we limit the question for the moment to roughly the last hundred years, we know that towards the beginning of the twentieth century, at a time when other philosophical tendencies were in the ascendant, three important movements emerged independently, movements which for different reasons rapidly came to dominate the debate: American pragmatism, so-called continental philosophy, and Anglo-American analytic philosophy.

These three tendencies are very different, independent, and cannot be reduced to each other. Much of the discussion over the ensuing century takes the form of a contest for hegemony between them fought out in the philosophical space. Each of these tendencies has its own undeniable charms. It would be a mistake not to be knowledgeable about one or the other. It would be just as mistaken to think that one has a decisive advantage over its philosophical competition. I further think that at a minimum all three of them must be taken into account to have any hope of arriving at a viable understanding of the evolution of

the recent debate. Anything less, an account which fails to consider one or another of these tendencies, presents a false view of the debate in the twentieth century.

In different ways and to different degrees, these three tendencies have dominated the philosophical debate since they emerged. Their fortunes have been very varied. As a result of a variety of pressures, after they emerged each of them later changed in ways that perhaps could not have been foreseen. Analytic philosophy, which for about a half century has clearly been the dominant tendency in English-speaking countries, although that may be changing, emerged in part through a struggle against British idealism in England. This struggle was pioneered by Russell and Moore, classmates at the University of Cambridge and the thinkers most responsible for the emergence of analytic philosophy in England. Ever since Frege, analytic philosophy has been concerned with the semantic problem under the heading of reference (or what Russell called denotation). About a century later, analytic philosophy seems to be in the process of abandoning a theoretical approach to reference, hence the very problem as originally understood, while turning to pragmatism and curiously to Hegel. In different ways, for Quine, Putnam, Rorty, and Brandom, though not for McDowell a neo-analytic form of pragmatism is increasingly seen as the most viable alternative to a formal theory of reference.

Continental philosophy emerged in Husserl's breakthrough to phenomenology and continued through Heidegger, then later through such others as Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Gadamer, and Derrida. Yet understood as phenomenology it was severely tested by Heidegger, and seems, with some exceptions, to have sharply declined after his death. Heidegger's theories, which he officially constructs on his reading of Husserl – *Being and Time*, his major work, is dedicated to Husserl – seem less to continue than rather sharply to oppose a number of central tenets of Husserl's position, such as reduction, essential intuition, and the claimed link to Cartesianism. There is a lot of confusion about what 'phenomenology' means. Yet if the truth be told, Heidegger contributes less to prolonging than to putting an abrupt end to what has been called the phenomenological movement. Although there are still many philosophers committed to phenomenology, it is unclear that, beyond the term, they share anything approaching a central doctrinal commitment.

Pragmatism, which is the only indigenous American philosophical movement, nearly came to a halt when Dewey died. Although it was still studied after Dewey, there was little original work from the time of his death in 1952 until, say, the end of the 1970s, when it was taken up and transformed by a number of important analytic thinkers. It has lately been revived in very different form, mainly through Rorty's efforts, through the migration, or conversion, of such analytic stalwarts as Quine, Putnam and Rorty to neo-analytic pragmatism. Peirce, the inventor of pragmatism, was a strong critic of Cartesian epistemological foundationalism, which he criticized in a series of articles in the 1880s. Pragmatism, which emerged in the wake of Peirce's canonical critique of Descartes, has always been a very pluralist movement centered on the concern to continue the discussion of knowledge on a non-foundationalist basis (see Rescher 2000). Yet neo-analytic

pragmatism arguably consists in a collection of theories which bears little direct relation to the views of Peirce, who founded the movement. In simplest terms, pragmatism has now split into scholarly discussion of first-generation American pragmatists such as Peirce, James and Dewey, and so-called neo-analytic pragmatism, including such thinkers as Rorty, Putnam, and now Brandom, concerned to appropriate selected pragmatic themes for their analytic concerns, on the other.

## **2 Kant's Copernican turn and later philosophy**

Different accounts of the relation of analytic and continental philosophy, and of both within the wider contexts of twentieth century and modern philosophy, are obviously possible. In a recent study of analytic and continental philosophy, Michael Friedman, for instance, has recently depicted twentieth century philosophy as centrally concerned to understand the role of logic, and, hence, of science, in respect to the wider problems of knowledge (see Friedman 2000). Though his discussion is important, and sensitive to different points of view, I believe it falls short of an adequate account of the debate in twentieth century philosophy in two ways. First, it does not mention pragmatism, which, as one of the three main movements in this period, is surely central to any account of philosophy during the last century. And, second, it is concerned to understand the debate among analytic and continental philosophy through the interaction of several main figures (Carnap, Cassirer and Heidegger) without regard, or without adequate regard, to the prior discussion. On the contrary, I believe the movements of the past century need to be understood against the prior historical background, above all as reactions to Kant.

In a general study of action, or activity, Richard Bernstein has examined the relation of among the main currents of twentieth century philosophy, including pragmatism, analytic philosophy, and continental philosophy (see Bernstein 1971). In comparison to Friedman's book, his study is wider, more inclusive, and in that sense richer. Yet I think in retrospect, his account falls short on two counts. On the one hand, he overestimates the importance of Marxism while simply neglecting the distinction between Marx and Marxism (see Rockmore 2002). Although he discusses Hegel in relation to Marx and Marxism, he does not do nearly enough to take into account the Kantian background.

The Kantian background, which both Friedman and Bernstein neglect in considering twentieth century philosophy, is specifically helpful in understanding the debate in this period in two ways. On the one hand, it allows us to see the various movements which loom large in the twentieth century as responding in different ways to the critical philosophy, hence as engaging different sides of Kant's position. Positions do not just emerge, but rather emerge in reaction to other positions. Kant's influence remains a major component of the contemporary discussion. On the other, the Kantian background allows us to evaluate the comparative success of later philosophical tendencies in carrying the discussion beyond the point at which Kant left it.

Friedman and others have often tried to understand twentieth century phi-

losophy in terms of the relation of continental and analytic philosophy. Richard Bernstein, who casts a wider net, is interested in understanding twentieth century philosophy as also including pragmatism (see Bernstein 1971). I believe that at a minimum the relation of analytic and continental philosophy particular needs to be understood within the wider context composed by the three main movements of the past century, including pragmatism. I further believe that the results of the philosophical debate of the past century need to be understood with respect to the main modern movements, which form their conceptual background.

In the modern discussion, Kant plays a central role. His critical philosophy turns on the little understood, obscure, but crucial so-called Copernican revolution in philosophy. Not all philosophy turns on the problem of knowledge. But when it does, then the basic insight that separates the pre-Kantian and the post-Kantian discussions of knowledge lies in Kant's Copernican turn. I believe that the Copernican turn is central to understanding Kant and to providing an account of the evolution of the latter discussion, including analytic and continental philosophy. In the final part of this paper, I will be sketching the outlines of a very different reading of the relation between continental and analytic philosophy in relation Kant's familiar but rarely studied Copernican turn.

There is no generally accepted view of Kant's Copernican turn. For the purposes of this paper, I will understand it as arising out of his reaction to, and reading of, Copernican astronomy. Copernican heliocentric astronomy is central to Kant's view of the philosophy of science and to the epistemology he develops in the critical philosophy, particularly in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

Copernicus' astronomical revolution consists in making objective claims to know directly dependent on the subject, more precisely in offering a better explanation of basically the same astronomical data available in Ptolemaic geocentric astronomy through attributing retrograde motion to the observer on the surface of the earth. This leads to an explanation of objective cognition in terms of the subject while abandoning any effort to know the mind-independent world as it is. In fact, the point can be put more strongly. If Copernicus is right, then there is absolutely no hope of knowing the mind-independent world as it is. In a word, metaphysical realism must simply be abandoned.

In the critical philosophy, Kant follows the Copernican stress on the cognitive subject only in part. Two differences are crucial for the kind of story I want to tell. On the one hand, in comparison to Copernicus Kant weakens the conception of subjectivity in order to protect against any suspicion that claims to know depend on a particular human being; on the other, and in the light of the first point, Kant draws a distinction in kind between transcendental philosophy, which studies the most general conditions of knowledge, and psychologism, or the idea, later developed, for instance, by J.S. Mill, that epistemology is merely a form of psychology.

Kant's Copernican turn can be paraphrased in terms of two main aspects. First, and like Copernican astronomy, it includes the claim that there is no way to know that we know a mind-independent cognitive object as it is. This affirmation simply discredits all forms of metaphysical realism, or the traditional epistemo-

logical claims, which go back to ancient Greece, to know the mind-independent world as it is. Different versions of this metaphysical realist claim are featured in different ways throughout Western philosophy from Plato to Descartes and remains central to the post-Cartesian debate, for instance in such contemporary analytic thinkers as Nagel, Nozick, Bernard Williams and many others. Post-Kantian writers committed to metaphysical realism, in practice most of those now concerned with the problem of knowledge, remain committed to pre-Kantian models of knowledge.

Second, Kant suggests, in a way he is not himself able to clarify, that we know only what we in some way 'construct.' This constructivist thesis attributes a primary epistemological role to the cognitive subject, which, while it does not know what is as it is, and hence does not lay claim to knowledge of the mind-independent real, does know the objects of experience and knowledge, or the so-called empirical real, which it 'constructs.' Otherwise stated, Kant offers a theory of how we know through an interaction with something outside ourselves about which we can know nothing but which, through this interaction, leads to objects of experience and knowledge constructed according to the nature of the human mind.

Kant's philosophy, which turns on his Copernican insight, is an epistemological watershed, with respect to which there is a before and an after. It is not too much to say that Kant basically transforms the course of the modern discussion of knowledge. Kant's Copernican revolution in philosophy provides us with an extremely important insight on at least four levels. It helps us to understand his critical philosophy. Then it helps us to understand the reception of the critical philosophy in post-Kantian German idealism. Further it helps us to grasp the considerable interest of idealism today. And, finally, it helps us to understand the difference between pre-Kantian and post-Kantian philosophical discussion, hence what has happened or is still happening in the philosophical debate since Kant.

Constructivism and metaphysical realism are incompatible alternatives. Kant holds that the subject 'constructs' what it knows since he believes that there is otherwise no way to account for the experience and knowledge of objects. The nature of the post-Kantian debate on knowledge can be brought out with respect to different attitudes towards modern forms of metaphysical realism, which is already sketched in Plato's *Republic*.

In Kant's wake, both metaphysical realism and, to a lesser extent, epistemological constructivism are widely represented. Strong realists continue to claim knowledge of the mind-independent world as it is (see Devitt 1991), the form of knowledge which Kant denies. Constructivists follow his denial of metaphysical realism while proposing weak, or empirical, realism, which Kant also favors, in working out the implications of his claim that we know only what we in some sense 'construct.'

As concerns epistemology, there is a conceptual before and after with respect to the critical philosophy. Kant's Copernican turn neatly bisects those who before and after him are still committed to knowledge of the real from a non-constructivist angle of vision, those who continue to believe that we can and must know the mind-

independent world as it is, and those who, sometimes before but mainly after Kant, abandon the very effort to grasp the world as it is in working out a constructivist view of the cognitive object.

I believe that in depicting the discussion of the last century in terms of the fundamental role of logic, Friedman casts too narrow a net. The view one takes of logic is certainly important. Yet it is not and should not be taken as the whole story. It seems obvious that the main division between Carnap, Heidegger and Cassirer and many others throughout most of the twentieth century cannot simply be traced to the status accorded to logic. That is a problem that interests someone committed to some form of scientism, someone who, like Friedman, thinks that science turns on the ability to apply mathematics to the real and philosophy reduces to pointing to the virtues of science as the source of knowledge. If nothing else, this approach to understanding the differences between Carnap and Heidegger, and by extension between analytic and continental philosophy, points to Friedman's commitment in the final analysis to a classical conception of analytic philosophy at a moment when what remains of this tendency is currently discarding much of its formal logical machinery as part of the effort to renew itself after the failure of perfect reference, long its central concern.

### **3 Conclusion: Kant and twentieth century philosophy**

Since I do not accept Friedman's answer, or any answer to the structure of twentieth century philosophy based merely on the interaction between two of what I have identified as the three main movements, and since I believe an account of philosophy in the last century needs to take account of its relation to the prior debate, I will need to propose my own response. My basic claims are that any account of the structure of the discussion in the last century needs to address all the main movements and further needs to consider them against the background of the preceding tradition.

My answer will consist in noting the difference in attitude toward theory of knowledge. Theory of knowledge is now as in the past a main philosophical theme. All theories of knowledge are realist in the sense that all forms of epistemology aim at a grasp of what is, as opposed to what merely seems to be, illusions and delusions of various kind, arguments from authority, the weight of tradition, and so on. Yet all forms of realism are not the same. There is an enormous difference, a conceptual watershed, in short a turning point, between metaphysical realism, or the very strong but unsustainable view that to know is to know the way the world is, and empirical realism, or the very different, enormously weaker, but sustainable claim that to know is to know no more than what is given in experience.

It goes without saying that there are other forms of realism. But merely noticing the difference between these two forms of realism gives us a useful way to understand the discussion in the twentieth century against the historical background. I see the difference between earlier and later philosophy in the difference in attitude toward what we know when we know, that is the real as it is or what we construct in order to know it, in a word what we find or what we make. Con-

structivism does not originate with Kant, who gave it a powerful new impulse. It is clearly anticipated in such earlier thinkers as Hobbes and Vico. The promise of the new century does not lie in continuing the fruitless effort, which stretches back in the Western discussion at least until Plato, to know the way the world is. As Kant suggests, it rather lies in further working out a constructivist approach to knowledge.

This point can be applied to the differences between the three movements in the twentieth century we have noticed above. If I am correct, the problem of knowledge is a central theme in the Western philosophical tradition since its origins in ancient Greece. With respect to this theme, progress in philosophy concerns progress in formulating an acceptable theory of knowledge. Kant is a turning point since he points out clearly that theories of knowledge based on metaphysical realism must fail since no coherent account can be given of the relation of representations to objects. He shows that the most promising modern alternative, if epistemological scepticism is to be avoided, lies in working out some form of constructivist approach to knowledge on the basis of empirical realism.

If this is the criterion, then philosophy in the twentieth century has mainly been making time in different ways. Though some philosophical tendencies have diverged from the problems of knowledge, others have continued to repeat the concerns of the past without learning from the results of the prior discussion. All too often philosophers in the last century have restated interest in forms of metaphysical realism for ontological (Heidegger) or epistemological purposes (Husserl, Davidson, Rorty, Carnap, the early Wittgenstein). It has often failed to draw the lessons of the critical philosophy in trying to build on the results of the debate in carrying forward the most important insights of the modern debate.<sup>1</sup>

#### 4 References

- Bernstein, Richard (1971), *Praxis and Action*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Brandom, Robert (2000), *Making It Explicit: An Introduction to Inferentialism*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000.
- Devitt, Michael (1991), *Realism and Truth*, Princeton: Princeton University Press
- Friedman, Michael (1999), *Reconsidering Logical Positivism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hackenesch, Christa (2001) *Selbst und Welt. Zur Metaphysik des Selbst bei Heidegger und Cassirer*, Hamburg: Meiner.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1977) *Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated by A. V. Miller, New York: Oxford University Press.

---

1. Paper presented at a conference at Utrecht University, The Netherlands, June 26th, 2003.

Tom Rockmore

- May, Todd (2002), 'On the very idea of continental (or for that matter Anglo-American philosophy,' in *Metaphilosophy* vol. 33, no. 4, pp.401–425.
- Moore, G. E. (1903), 'The Refutation of Idealism,' in *Mind*, New Series, vol. 12, issue 48, pp. 433–453.
- Rescher, Nicholas (2000), *Realistic Pragmatism: An Introduction to Pragmatist Philosophy*, Albany: SUNY Press.
- Rockmore, Tom, (2002) *Marx After Marxism: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Karl Marx*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2002.
- Rorty, Richard (1997), Introduction to Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Sellars, Wilfrid (1997), *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, edited by Robert Brandom, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Stekeler-Weithofer, Pirmin (1992), *Hegels analytische Philosophie*, Paderborn: Schöningh.