

Between Pragmatism and Rationalism (abstract)

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I read pragmatism and rationalism as irreconcilably opposed, and view the contest between them as unavoidable and very likely decisive in determining the direction of Western philosophy for the near future. Narrowly conceived, the principal, or at least the most salient, agon centers on the validity of Kant's use and advocacy of transcendental a priori claims and arguments, as introduced in the first Critique, amplified in a number of ways in the Critical decade, and reconstrued in logically weaker forms down to our own time. I assume that the "true Kant" never abandoned the apodictic power of the transcendental a priori, that is, the rationalist conviction that claimed to be able to produce necessary and universalist principles validating the effective possibility of objective or realist knowledge about the actual world. I argue that Kant was unable to distinguish satisfactorily between would-be transcendental and empirically qualified such claims and that, given the insuperability of the paradoxes of epistemology and the ease with which familiar such claims (on Kant's part) are defeated or stalemated, it's more than reasonable to suppose that there are no such arguments bearing on epistemological, metaphysical, methodological, moral (and other practical) matters. I take the transcendental claim to be, very possibly, a confusion involving essential similarities between logical and analytic truths, mathematical reasoning, and the bearing of mathematical reasoning on the natural sciences, and mathematized claims among the empirical sciences themselves. This latter line of thinking—which through the reception of Frege's Begriffsschrift—has been thought to strengthen Kant's claim and to offer a compelling brief of its own based on the notion, decidedly unsupported when applied to the empirical sciences or closely related forms of reasoning.

Classic pragmatism, particularly in the pioneer work of Charles Peirce, was very strongly influenced by Kant's achievement and developed in a distinctly equivocal way with respect to Kantian-like claims. But, ultimately, both Peirce and Dewey were strongly opposed to Kant's apriorism, in supporting the orienting pragmatic maxim, even in defending the infinitist form of fallibilism, in openly advocating the principle of the primacy of experience, the pertinence of the abductive turn, the melding of fallibilism and abduction, the dismissal of faculty models (especially rationalist or spectator) of human cognitive powers, the continuum of the animal and the human, the fluxive treatment of cognitive matters along historied and Darwinian lines, and a preference for constructivist and instrumentalist treatments of realism and evidentiary confirmation. There's a deep provisionality that runs through pragmatist treatments of cognition, reasonable commitment, evidentiary support "as good as we need," and a definite sense of the inherent informality of practical life at its most fundamental. I'm persuaded that pragmatism cannot rightly lose this contest, though I'm quite prepared to admit that the easy defeat of Kant's apriorism is too often the result of mistaken readings of his essentialist claim. It's also true that there are very plausible "Kantian" retreats from strict apriorism, for instance in the light of the history of physics and the life sciences. The best of these adjustments to radical contingency that I'm familiar with is Ernst Cassirer's somewhat Hegelianized treatment of post-Newtonian science. But, tellingly, Cassirer closes The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, which very possibly offers the most convincing neo-Kantian

compendium traversing at least the physics and mathematics that Kant originally maps in the Critical era, with the unguarded mention of “the relatively necessary [that] takes the place of the relatively accidental and the relatively invariable that of the relatively variable.” I regard this as an important clue to (and prototype escape from) the impossibility of holding fast to Kant’s strict apriorism; and I argue that this sort of honorable slippage betrays the cognate disorganization of the would-be “necessary” linkage between (say) Kant’s account of the conceptual form and the nonconceptual sensory content of perception and perceptual judgment. I offer evidence in support of the claim that this sort of slippage cannot be stanchd. Modern forms of Kantianism often observe their commitment to the a priori.

Finally, I suggest some fresh ways of strengthening the pragmatist commitment to the fluxive nature of philosophical argument, notably in accord with the distinctive themes of classic pragmatism and current tendencies. This may indeed be a time for a decisive change in philosophical fashion.