

Kant between Plato and Pragmatism

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the link, if any, between Kant and pragmatism. Kant is difficult to interpret. More than two centuries after the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the only thing on which those interested in Kant agree is that his theories are important. A similar point can be made for pragmatism. Long ago Lovejoy noted the existence of more than a dozen types of pragmatism. It follows that the supposed relation between Kant and pragmatism could refer to different things, including Kant as understood from a pragmatic angle of vision, namely a pragmatic reading of Kant, for instance an account of pragmatic elements in Kant, whose most extreme form might be the interpretation of Kant as a pragmatist albeit of a special kind. It could further refer to widely different forms of pragmatism that may or may not be fairly called Kantian, such as the views of the classical pragmatists, and in that case perhaps James but not either Dewey or Peirce, who are arguably closer to Hegel than to Kant. It might further include analytic neo-pragmatism, however understood, including such professed neo-pragmatists as Sellars, and his conceptual stepchildren Rorty, Brandom, who formerly identified himself as a Hegelian, and Price, but apparently not McDowell. According to Michael Williams, who does not himself claim to be a pragmatist, the classical and the neo-pragmatists all reject the view of truth as accurate representation, for instance as reprised by Rorty in the view of the mirror of nature.^[i]

To decide what, if anything at all, is pragmatic about Kant, we need to understand “pragmatism” as well as the critical philosophy. For present purposes I will in following Williams take the idea of truth as accurate representation as the standard by which to evaluate both Kant as well as pragmatism. I will further be assuming that the suggestion that we cannot make out the view of truth as accurate representation is correct for pragmatism, though it remains to be seen what view we can fairly attribute to Kant, hence how to understand the relation of the critical philosophy to pragmatism.

The paper assumes that pragmatism can be understood in terms of epistemic representation in asking the following question: is Kant an epistemic representationalist? This or related claims are often advanced in the debate by Longuenesse and others.^[ii] I will be arguing that, though interpretation of the critical philosophy is difficult, Kant is arguably a representationalist as recently as the widely known letter to Herz (1782), but that in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, 1787), especially in the second edition, he favors epistemic constructivism over representationalism. If epistemic constructivism is pragmatic, then in this limited sense, Kant is a pragmatist.

^[i] See, for recent discussion, Michael Williams, “Pragmatism, Sellars and Truth,” in James O’Shea, *Sellars and His Legacy*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

^[ii] Longuenesse, for instance, contends roughly that in his Copernican period Kant changes from the view that the object causally creates its representation to the inverse view I am calling the Copernican turn, or in Longuenesse’s language the view that the representation creates the object it represents. See Béatrice Longuenesse, *Kant and the Capacity to Judge*,

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998, p. 19. Note that Longuenesse, who closely follows Kant, is, like many Kantians, apparently mainly interested in understanding the critical philosophy as a categorial analysis of experience and not in its role as a solution to the general problem of knowledge.