

News item. Retrieved from <http://www.commens.org/news/item/bridging-traditions-idealism-and-pragmatism>, 04.01.2026.

Category: Academic Meeting

Title: Bridging Traditions: Idealism and Pragmatism

Description: Even though the pragmatists, both classical and contemporary, have been attentive readers of various figures in the idealist tradition, their views are normally read in opposition to what an idealist approach to philosophy is supposed to entail. Thus, it is hard to deny that Charles S. Peirce studied in depth Kant when he was a young scholar, or that Hegel was an influence on the young John Dewey. As far as contemporary pragmatists are concerned, figures like Hilary Putnam and Robert Brandom have certainly not neglected to consider some of the idealists' ideas.

This circumstance notwithstanding, pragmatism and idealism have been normally set against each other. Of course there seems to be plenty of reasons to do so. First of all there are methodological reasons. Pragmatists normally propose an approach to philosophy that is in continuity with the sciences and that attacks a priori methods of arguing. Accordingly, they endorse a radical form of fallibilism and leave behind the search for ultimate truths. This seems to be deeply in contrast to many idealists, who certainly used a priori lines of reasoning and aimed to attain certain and stable knowledge. There are also theoretical reasons. For example, many pragmatists (of course with important differences among them) could be seen as endorsing a peculiar form of naturalism, where the human mind is seen as being in continuity with nature, while not being reduced to very basic forms of explanation. On the other hand, idealist approaches to philosophy are normally read in opposition to naturalistic points of view, insofar as they give priority to the mind and to the way in which it offers us the possibility to represent nature in the first place.

There are various reasons to question this rigid opposition. The Frankfurt conference will thus show that idealism and pragmatism have a lot in common. Just to mention some examples, Charles Peirce was surely critical of the a priori method used by the rationalists and by Kant, but he also continued to use some a priori lines of reasoning in his mathematical and logical inquiries. These inquiries provided the basic ideas for his entire philosophy. Moreover, Clarence I. Lewis, another important figure in the classical tradition of pragmatism, developed a new account of the a priori method, which he called the "pragmatic a priori". This is only to show that the a priori method was not simply rejected by the pragmatists. Rather, some of the pragmatists tried to reinvent this method in a new framework. On the other hand, the recourse to a

priori lines of reasoning or to a priori sets of concepts has been understood in very different ways in the idealist traditions. Thus, the way in which Hegel placed a priori concepts in an historical developmental framework can be associated to some pragmatist way of describing the evolution of thought. As far as naturalism is concerned, it is important to keep in mind that the kind of naturalism endorsed by the pragmatists was of a very peculiar kind. In fact, they have not ever tried to reduce mental phenomena to more basic kinds of explanation. They have only tried to read those phenomena as being in continuity with natural processes. In their form of naturalism, the pragmatists allow thus room for the kind of mental phenomena that are considered the starting points of the idealists. Moreover the pragmatists would surely agree with the idealists in saying that our thought plays an essential role in the production of our very own representation of nature.

There are so many reasons to question the customary opposition between pragmatism and idealism. The conference results from an international collaboration in which two different projects are conjoined: 1) A project on 'Pragmatism, Kant and Transcendental Philosophy' that Gabriele Gava is carrying out in Frankfurt as a research fellow of the Humboldt-Stiftung, and 2) A project on 'Idealism and Pragmatism: Convergence or Contestation?', sponsored by a grant of the Leverhulme Trust and lead by Robert Stern from the University of Sheffield. The first two days of the conference, sponsored by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, will be connected to the first project and will be dedicated to the relationship between pragmatism, Kant and transcendental philosophy, while the third day, which is part of the second project, will consist of a workshop exploring the connections between pragmatism and idealism in the fields of metaphysics, epistemology, logic and language.

Confirmed speakers (December 3, 2013):

James Conant (Chicago)

Alfredo Ferrarin (Pisa)

Sebastian Gardner (UCL)

Gabriele Gava (Frankfurt)

Daniel Herbert (Sheffield)

Christopher Hookway (Sheffield)

Wolfgang Kuhlmann (RWTH Aachen)

Catherine Legg (Waikato)

David MacArthur (Sydney)

Marcel Niquet (Frankfurt and Ceará)

James O'Shea (UCD)

Sami Pihlström (Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies)
Sebastian Rödl (Leipzig)
Robert Stern (Sheffield)
Marcus Willaschek (Frankfurt)

Date: 09/04/2014 to 11/04/2014

Place: Eisenhower Saal (Raum 1.314), IG-Hochhaus, Campus Westend, Goethe-Universität, Grüneburgplatz 1, Frankfurt am Main

Link: Conference site

Keywords: Pragmatism, Idealism