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Pragmatism: A bridge between Anglo-American and Continental Philosophy?

A Reply to Joseph Margolis

Abstract

In this paper, I will restrict myself to interpreting certain features of Margolis' rich argument. I will discuss only those features that have a direct bearing on his thesis that pragmatism wins the three-sided contest between Anglo-American Philosophy, continental philosophy and pragmatism and, as such, can serve as a bridge to span the divide between Anglo-American and continental philosophy. Two mottoes Margolis utilizes serve as the vantage point of my discussion, viz. 'natural but not naturalizable' and 'realism by no more than human means'.

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In this response paper, I will restrict myself to interpreting rather than criticizing the main thrusts of Margolis' position. I will not go into the details of his arguments but, rather, emphasize their implications for the purposes of conducting a discussion on the rapprochement between the Anglo-American and the continental philosophical traditions.

Like Rockmore does in his contribution, Margolis takes as the vantage point for his considerations the existence of three distinct sorts of philosophies, viz. Anglo-American analytic philosophy, Anglo-American pragmatism and continental philosophy. His sympathies lie with pragmatism. And the thesis that matters most for our present purposes is that pragmatism is, as he calls it in the written version, '... perhaps a connective tissue spanning the great divide between... analytic and continental philosophy' (section 1).

The reason that it makes a chance of being such a connective tissue is that it is to a good extent capable of avoiding the weaknesses of both analytic and continental philosophy while retaining their respective strengths. This capability is captured in two mottoes, viz. '*natural but not naturalizable*' and '*realism by no*

1. See Joseph Margolis, 'Pragmatism's Advantage,' *Ars Disputandi* 3 (2003), [<http://www.arsdisputandi.org/publish/articles/000126/index.html>].

more than human means'. I will use both mottoes as the basis for the following summary of Margolis' account.

The first motto is directed towards analytic philosophy. The term '*natural*' in '*natural but not naturalizable*' stands for analytic philosophy's tendency to remain within the confines of the natural. That is, analytic philosophy has always strived to avoid what Margolis calls the '*extravagances*' of continental philosophy, viz. to exceed the bounds of the natural in the sense of postulating questionable necessities, e.g. transcendental ones. Margolis regards it to be analytic philosophy's strength that it remains within the boundaries of the natural.

'*Naturalizable*' in the above quoted motto stands for attempts to explain second-order, i.e. legitimacy, efforts exhaustively in naturalistic terms. Put differently: Typical for the naturalizers is their attempt to reduce legitimations to *causal* explanations. The most pertinent specimen of such an attempt is probably Quine's effort to naturalize epistemology, but also Davidson in his *The Coherence Theory of Truth*. The standard criticism of such naturalizing attempts is that legitimation requires normative resources which exceed the merely causal. For example, epistemology being a legitimacy effort requires more than what psychological, sociological and similar explanations could offer.

Margolis provides also another, more comprehensive way of putting the matter. He regards analytic philosophy to be *scientistic*. Globally speaking, scientism is the view that the human world can be exhaustively explained in terms of 'inanimate physical "things" or of the animate world below the level of the fully human' (section 2). This view goes hand in hand with a *bottom-up methodology*, implying that the phenomena constitutive of the human world, i.e. its cultural, mental, linguistic, and historical aspects, can be adequately explained from such an 'inanimate physical' foundation.

Margolis charges both analytic philosophy's naturalizing tendencies and its scientism as being *reductionist*. In the same sense in which the naturalizer wants to exhaustively explain, and hence reduce, the legitimacy to the causal, the scientist wants to exhaustively explain, and hence reduce, the mental to the physical. Margolis' point is that pragmatism's advantage is that it avoids analytic philosophy's scientism in the same sense in which it avoids this philosophy's attempts to naturalize. That being the case, pragmatism is the better alternative.

Let us move on to Margolis' second motto, '*realism by no more than human means*'. This motto is aimed at continental philosophy and has predominantly negative connotations. Margolis' regards attempts to exceed the merely human or natural as typical of continental philosophy and rejects them. '*Exceeding the human*' is an umbrella-term that captures the different attempts on the continental side to secure some form of necessity, transcendental, historically-totalizing, telic or otherwise. I will mention only one prominent example here, Kantianism, since we will delve into the second possible example later, when Rockmore and Jonkers will deal with Hegel.

Margolis summarizes the transcendental attempts in the Kantian tradition, i.e. those of Apel, Habermas, and, on the other side of the Atlantic, Rawls, as exceeding the human. Take e.g. Habermas' obsession with Reason [note the

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capitalized R]. Margolis contends that Habermas ‘has always been uneasy about admitting any allegiance to the *a priori* powers of Reason’. And, more recently, ‘he shows an uncertainty as well about the possibility of securing the reliable universality he needs, by admitting the vagaries of natural reason’ (section 1). But proceeding in such a fashion, he incapacitates his ‘objective universality’ from ‘consensual contingencies’ (ibid.). In short, Habermas postulates more than what he can hope to cash in by reasonable argument, according to Margolis.

Different as the continental philosophies are, Margolis sees them as being united in their search for ‘necessities affecting knowledge or reality’ (section 2). Margolis’ point is that whatever necessity can supposedly be unearthed is ‘indefeasible’. As it avoids all claims to necessities of this sort, pragmatism is preferable.

Another point Margolis brings up against continental philosophy is that it is based upon unearned forms of privilege. This charge is brought forward e.g. against Heidegger. Margolis’ point is that Heidegger takes over what had been assigned to transcendental sources earlier – thus moving beyond the merely human – and assigns it to ‘the mystery of Being itself, that is, *Sein*, incomprehensibly close, yet utterly inaccessible, to *Dasein*’s initiatives (section 1). The result is an ‘unmatched privilege in matters of philosophical and political prophecy’ (ibid.).

In summary, Margolis sees pragmatism as being the antidote to the excesses of both analytic and continental philosophy while retaining their respective strengths. It remains within the boundaries of the natural—thereby retaining analytic philosophy’s strength and avoiding continental philosophy’s weakness. It avoids analytic philosophy’s weakness, viz. its tendency towards naturalizing and its scientific weakness. And it avoids continental philosophy’s weakness of postulating unearned privileges for one’s own cognitive standpoint.

But what does pragmatism as a philosophical doctrine imply precisely for Margolis and in what sense is it capable of accommodating the restrictions and promises laid down in both mottoes? In his paper, Margolis sets out to characterize pragmatism in terms of eleven conditions or commitments. Here, I restrict myself to mentioning and commenting only on five of them (all quotes taken from section 3).

These are, besides being ‘naturalistic’ and being non-reductive’ in the senses specified above, that pragmatism is:

1. committed to a ‘constructive’ form of realism, ‘drawn in as spare a way as possible from post-Kantian resources, freed from any form of cognitive, rational, and practical privilege, opposed to imagined necessities *de re* and *de cogitatione*. . .’ (section 1). It does take the Kantian lesson seriously—that is its constructive component. Yet, it does not resort to any of the Kantian claims on the alleged capacities of the Subject, thereby avoiding the sort of necessities Margolis criticizes in the Continental tradition.
2. Pragmatism is ‘opposed to any hierarchical or disjunctive order of cognizing powers at the level of reflexively acknowledged human abilities’. I take

that to mean, among others, that pragmatism is at odds with some of the most deeply entrenched feelings in the English-speaking world, viz. that the cognitive ranks higher than the practical and the perceptual higher than the conceptual. Note bene: One may wonder whether pragmatism is by the same token at odds with the most deeply entrenched feelings of the Dutch-speaking world as well.

3. Pragmatism is 'Darwinian, in the sense that linguistic and other cultural competences presuppose and are emergent and incarnate in the biology of the species'. Let me emphasize here that the point of mentioning Darwin has less to do with the constructive views Darwin defended, say, on genetics—his constructive views being so much abhorred in some theological circles, of course. Rather, bringing Darwin into play has first and foremost a *negative* point here. It is meant to emphasize a modest construction of, say, linguistic competence and, as such, is opposed to more ambitious construals, such as Chomsky's.
4. Pragmatism is 'historicized, in the sense that our conceptual resources are historically formed. . . as a result of historical changes in the ongoing formative processes of cultural life itself'. I take the point of that quote to be to mark an opposition to, for example, transcendental and other claims to universal validity. Thus, emphasizing historicism here has a similar point as emphasizing the notion of *paradigm shifts* understood as *Gestaltwechsel*, viz. to emphasize the radical discontinuity and historically-contingent character of our second-order, i.e. our legitimacy, resources.
5. Pragmatism is not '... opposed in principle to admitting objective judgments of a relativistic or incommensurabilist sort, should they prove to be (as I believe they are) self-consistent and coherent'. Here, I take Margolis to allude to something like the 'robust relativism' he defends in *The Truth about Relativism* and elsewhere, which is based upon replacing bivalent truth-claims with many-valued ones in carefully selected contexts.

You may wonder now as to whether the classical pragmatists really accepted all these doctrines. Well, don't wonder. Margolis acknowledges elsewhere that some of those items form a 'proposal regarding pragmatism's future' (section 4). Thus, more than holding that the classical pragmatists held all of those doctrines as a matter of historical fact, his point is, rather, that they can be brought into line with a reasonable reconstruction of pragmatism.

Where do the above considerations leave us now with the topic of the rapprochement of Anglo-American and continental philosophy? One way of putting the matter is the following: Margolis contends that the philosophical contest within the Anglo-American confines is, or, rather, should be decided in favor of pragmatism over analytic philosophy. That being the case, the best insights Anglo-American philosophy has to offer can be used to augment continental philosophy.

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And stripped of its pretensions to exceed the human in the direction of the necessary and stripped of all privileges, cognitive or otherwise, continental philosophy is not as strongly at odds with Anglo-American philosophy as is usually assumed.

There is, however, a slightly different way of putting the matter which turns on adjusting the notion of analytic philosophy. If one is more of a connoisseur of analytic philosophy than Margolis is, one may want to insist that it is not analytic philosophy as such that is committed to scientism and naturalizing tendencies but, rather, that this is the case where some analytic philosophers have taken a wrong turn. But analytic philosophy can be pursued without such allegiances, say, be reconstructed in terms of more or less formal, i.e. (in the broad sense of the word) logical concerns—in line with the intentions that lay at its origin. That way of putting the matter allows you to take a more moderate stance towards analytic philosophy and to regard pragmatism as an important improvement on it rather than as its substitute. And if analytic philosophy is reconciled with or reconstructed in a pragmatist spirit, the Anglo-American philosophy that emerges from this reconciliation has come considerably closer to continental Philosophy and the best it has to offer.²

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