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Anti-Kantianism, an Anti-Pragmatist Gesture

Giovanni Maddalena's *The Philosophy of Gesture: Completing Pragmatists' Incomplete Revolution*¹ is an ambitious, original, and creative contribution to the re-evaluation of the history of pragmatism and its contemporary legacy in various areas of philosophy, ranging from logic and the theory of reasoning to the philosophy of science and art, as well as ethics and the philosophy of education. A reader can only admire the author's broad and deep knowledge and learning, which extends from the history of philosophy to literature and natural science. Covering an unusually wide spectrum of topics – many of which are, for obvious reasons, discussed only briefly – the book offers a highly competent analysis and further development of Charles S. Peirce's pragmatism, in particular. Peirce, the founding father of pragmatism, is clearly Maddalena's most important philosophical hero, and it is largely in Peircean terms that he proposes to move on what he takes to be a revolutionary project in (meta)philosophy.

In this brief comment, I will focus on what I take to be the main problem of the book. In my view, Maddalena gets Kant – and thereby, unavoidably, the pragmatists' relation to Kant – seriously wrong. There is, it seems to me, a sense in which he finds Kant *too important* for all post-Kantian philosophy, but at the same time he *too easily and straightforwardly* maintains that we could simply get rid of Kant. Although I agree with Maddalena's judgment about the originality of Kant in contrast to Descartes, I think it is an exaggeration to say that Kant's project "gives form to the entire mentality of the contemporary world" and that "modernity took its contemporary form" with Kant's Copernican revolution (3). One could suggest, rather, that (post)modernity still needs to learn a number of important Kantian lessons; in particular, (post)analytic philosophy should take more seriously the Kantian transcendental method. Yet, on the other hand, even if Kant's role was slightly more modest than Maddalena claims, he is with us (pragmatists) to stay and cannot just be dropped out of any "completed" pragmatism.

In brief, a gesture aiming at a total liberation from the Kantian predicament is a non- or even anti-pragmatist gesture, because pragmatism is, ineliminably, a post-Kantian philosophical orientation and gets its significance from a largely Kantian framework. No pragmatist needs to agree with everything – or perhaps, strictly speaking, with anything – that Kant actually wrote, but the basic critical approach we inherit from Kant cannot be dispensed with. I cannot argue for this general view here, but I will try to indicate where, more specifically, Maddalena's account of Kant and the Kantian legacy of pragmatism is flawed.

One problem with Maddalena's conception of Kant is that his statements are far too general to be useful in any detailed assessment of the pragmatists' (or other contemporary philosophers') Kantian influences. For example, when he tells us that for Kant "reason is the 'measure of all things'" (5), he fails to note that what Kant, far from claiming reason to be all-powerful, primarily offers us is a reflexive *critique*

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1. All references, if not otherwise noted, will be to Maddalena 2015.

of reason. Maddalena also misleadingly claims to perceive a link between Kantian morality and ideology, even totalitarianism, attacking Kant's "intellectualist and self-centred conception of reality based on inner determination and effort" (6). No serious Kant scholar will have much patience with claims like this, as there is nothing "self-centred" in the foundations of Kantian ethics: in one formulation, the categorical imperative of course urges us to treat humanity in others as well as ourselves as an end in itself, never as a mere means. Kantian ethics emphasizing the autonomy of the moral subject is as far from any totalitarianism as an ethical system can be.

While it is of course true that Peirce's theory of representation differs in important respects from Kant's and that Peirce, unlike Kant, subscribed to "scholastic realism" (7-8), it is not impossible to locate a Kantian strain in Peirce's argumentation for scholastic realism as a necessary condition for the possibility of scientific inquiry. In contrast to Peirce, Kant famously maintained that there is a "gap" between human knowledge (and the phenomena it can reach) and reality as such (the "things-in-themselves") (12). However, this is a problematic metaphysical gap only if we assume a "two worlds" reading of Kant's transcendental idealism. While this reading is admittedly becoming more popular again among Kant specialists, the pragmatist should in my view (without taking any definite stand on what exactly Kant himself thought) prefer the "one world" ("two aspects") reading, according to which the distinction between appearances and things in themselves is not a distinction between two separate metaphysical realms or sets of objects but a distinction between two different ways of considering one and the same reality.² At least, the "unbridgeable gap" metaphor is problematic and would have to be properly addressed in relation to scholarship questioning the standard two worlds reading of Kantian idealism. There need not be any fundamental "lack of continuity between cognitive processes and reality" (13) in Kant any more than there is in Peirce.

William James notoriously attacks Kantian transcendental idealism in conjunction with his attack on the Hegelian Absolute, but it is simply wrong to say that "the Absolute is intellectualist because it derives from Kant's intellectualist philosophy" and "dualist theology" (15). From the properly Kantian point of view, the Hegelian idealists' Absolute – which James rightly and innovatively criticized – is a speculative metaphysical postulation illegitimately transgressing the bounds of human reason.

Perhaps the most problematic aspect of Maddalena's view on Kant and Kant's relation to the pragmatists is that he never pauses to reflect on whether the pragmatists' understanding of Kant was accurate at all. He does not critically consider whether the classical pragmatists who indeed did reject Kant's strict apriorism and the unknowability of the thing in itself, among many other Kantian ideas (cf. 18-9), actually interpreted Kant correctly. Moreover, and perhaps even more problematically, he simply ignores the bulk of recent scholarly literature that addresses pragmatism's relation to Kant and the Kantian tradition of transcendental philosophy.³ If you are

2. I try to explain how and why the pragmatist ought to subscribe something like this one world account of transcendental idealism in Pihlström 2010. For a classical statement of the one world reading, in my view open to a pragmatist rearticulation, see Allison 2004.

3. Among the most recent contributions, one could mention, e.g., Gava & Stern 2016; and (focusing

attacking a certain interpretation of a given philosophical tradition, you should of course seriously consider the scholarly contributions that would be opposed to your preferred line of thought. This is what Maddalena spectacularly fails to do.

Far from accepting Maddalena's conclusion that "one cannot understand pragmatism if one's anti-Cartesianism is not supplemented by a profound anti-Kantianism" (28), we should in my view observe that pragmatism actually completes Kant's transcendental (critical) revolution, and should continue to do so. The claim that the pragmatist "revolution" should be "completed" by going anti-Kantian is to lead pragmatism to an entirely wrong track. It is precisely in its deep Kantianism – albeit reconceptualizing and thus moving beyond while critically preserving Kant's original views – that pragmatism radically departs from, e.g., mainstream analytic philosophy. Pragmatism and Kantianism are on the same side in the battle against the kind of metaphysical realism (or what Kant would have called transcendental realism) that proposes, for instance, to reveal the fundamental metaphysical structure of the world independently of the conditions of human categorization, representation, and inquiry.

Maddalena could in fact do most that he is aiming to do in his book without claiming to take any radical departure from Kant (or from pragmatism's Kantianism). He could still discuss reasoning, the concept of gesture, and creativity more or less in the way he does, and he could find intriguing philosophical ideas in literary narrative and explore the relevance of gesture in writing and education, for instance, even without claiming these discussions to be based on any radical anti-Kantianism. Thus, while my remarks above have been sharply critical, their purpose is not at all to undermine the ideas and arguments Maddalena is actually developing in his book. My aim has only been to suggest that he – or the pragmatist inspired by his "philosophy of gesture" – could develop these ideas and arguments without giving up pragmatism's (undetachable) attachment to Kantianism.

References

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- Gava G., & R. Stern, (eds.), (2016), *Pragmatism, Kant, and Transcendental Philosophy*, London and New York, Routledge.
- McMahon J. A., (2014), *Art and Ethics in a Material World: Kant's Pragmatist Legacy*, London and New York, Routledge.

more on ethics and aesthetics) McMahon 2014. Of course, Maddalena could not have consulted Gava's and Stern's very recent collection, but the basic idea of pragmatism as a naturalized and historicized rearticulation of Kantian transcendental philosophy has been discussed in scholarly literature at least since Murphey 1968.

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