On Recent Trends in Philosophy in the United States

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At present, any list of the main philosophical movements would include analytic philosophy, so-called continental philosophy, pragmatism, and then a series of philosophical tendencies, which currently attract less attention, although that is subject to change, such as scholasticism and neo-scholasticism, process philosophy, etc.

For most of this century, philosophy in English has been dominated by the views of three philosophers associated with Cambridge University in England (G. E. Moore, Bertrand Russell, and Ludwig Wittgenstein), which led to what later became popularly known as analytic philosophy. This tendency, which arose out of a rebellion against British idealism, combines traditional English empiricism and logical techniques. It includes ordinary language analysis—which, with the single prominent exception of Dummett, is almost extinct at present—as well as the Vienna Circle movement in analytic philosophy of science, a positivistic approach to science and scientific knowledge that is presently the most important subfield in analytic philosophy.

Wittgenstein, who was a philosophical opponent of Russell and Moore, was arguably the single most influential analytic philosopher. Over the past half-century, Quine, who, although still active, is now retired, has been the most influential analytic philosopher in the United States. At present, a short list of the most important living analytic philosophers would include W. V. O. Quine, Donald Davidson, Hilary Putnam, and Richard Rorty.

Continental philosophy is a term that is widely but rather imprecisely utilized to refer to European philosophy in general with the ex-
ception of philosophy in Great Britain (hence, including England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales) and Austrian philosophy that developed in the Vienna Circle movement. Continental philosophy includes Kant and the post-Kantian idealists as well as such important figures as Husserl and those influenced by him within what is often imprecisely referred to as the phenomenological movement. Besides Husserl, this movement is usually held to include such important philosophers as Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty, but not Hegel.

At present, the discussion in continental philosophy seems to have moved beyond Husserlian phenomenology. Roughly since the Second World War, continental philosophy has been dominated by Martin Heidegger, the German phenomenologist. The most important living continental philosophers include Hans-Georg Gadamer and Jacques Derrida, who are closely connected with Heidegger, as well as Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas, whose positions are also influenced by Heidegger's.

American pragmatism, the only really original indigenous philosophical movement, arose in the writings of C. S. Peirce, William James and John Dewey. It is widely believed that the main ideas of this movement were first stated in a series of articles published by Peirce in the 1870s. It is known that Peirce and James held different, incompatible views of pragmatism. Dewey held still another position. "Pragmatism" was never employed to refer to more than a series of views bearing a family resemblance; it is now an imprecise term used to refer indiscriminately to two very different sets of views. These include the diverse views of the three main members of the original generation of American pragmatism. They include as well the views of recent converts from the ranks of analytic philosophy, whose positions are often very different, even incompatible with even a liberal interpretation of "pragmatism" as it applies to the original American pragmatists.

If the three most important philosophical tendencies in the United States are analytic philosophy, continental philosophy, and American pragmatism, then an account of recent developments in philosophy in the United States will be largely confined to an account of recent developments in these three philosophical tendencies. Each of these tendencies has long espoused a very different view of the nature of philosophy. Yet the lines separating these tendencies have recently become so blurred that it is now very difficult to distinguish between these dif-
different movements.

Let us look separately at these philosophical tendencies, starting with analytic philosophy. Although analytic philosophers have long formed a united front against non-analytic philosophy, analytic philosophy was never itself a very unified movement. Strong tensions separated Moore, Russell and Wittgenstein, the founding members of this tradition, almost from the start. Wittgenstein, in particular, developed his own distinctive theories mainly through raising difficulties in the theories of Moore and Russell.

Analytic philosophy arose on the basis of traditional British empiricism. This was continued in Moore, whose famous refutation of idealism, regarded as a denial of the existence of the external world, consists in an enumeration of what he regarded as obvious facts. Wittgenstein’s attack on Moore is based on the denial that there is anything like direct knowledge in favor of a contextual view of claims to know. According to Wittgenstein, the latter are justified only against a referential framework, which he called a language game. Subsequent analytic philosophers, particularly Quine, Davidson, and Rorty have deepened the analytic attack on empiricism.

In practice, analytic philosophers are strongly critical of non-analytic philosophy; in attacking empiricism, they are also strongly critical of the basis of the analytic philosophical movement. The result of the long-standing analytic critique of empiricism has turned analytic philosophy inside out, since it has destroyed the conceptual glue linking together the different views within a single tendency, leaving often little more than the name.

At present, at least five main tendencies can be discerned within analytic philosophy in the English-speaking world. First, there is the effort still underway (e.g. Michael Dummett) to treat philosophy of language as the foundation of all philosophy. Second, there is the development of analytic philosophy of science, particularly in the positivist direction taken by the philosophers from the Vienna Circle, who later emigrated to the United States, including most prominently Rudolf Carnap and Hans Reichenbach. Here Adolf Grunbaum and Wesley Salmon, who were trained in the US, arguably remain as the most important contemporary neo-positivist philosophers of science. Third, there is a shift toward bioethics, in which analytic philosophical techniques are applied to questions of medical ethics. Examples would be
the writings of Tristram Engelhardt or Thomas Beauchamp. Fourth, there is the widening interest of analytic philosophers in the history of philosophy. For many years, they have done important work in Greek philosophy (e.g. Gregory Vlastos) and, in the modern tradition, in Kant (e.g. Henry Allison). In the last several years, a number of analytic philosophers have become interested in Hegel, who was earlier mainly a topic of ridicule (e.g. Craig Hardimon). Fifth, since the early 1960s there has been an important shift to pragmatism by a number of the most important figures in analytic philosophy, including Quine, Hilary Putnam, and Richard Rorty. This is, as noted, a form of pragmatism that often has only the name in common with the positions of the first-generation American pragmatists.

The most interesting recent development in analytic philosophy is the continuing effort to revive the theory of knowledge on an anti-empiricist basis. Primarily under the influence of Hegel and, to a lesser extent, of the later Wittgenstein, Wilfrid Sellars, attacked the basis of empiricism, or the direct givenness of experience, as the so-called myth of the given, to which he preferred a kind of coherence theory of truth based on what he called the logical space of reasons. Like the position of the later Wittgenstein, Sellars's position seems to lose any contact with the independent external world. After all, a theory can be coherent, but false, if it fails to describe anything outside the mind.

In his recent book, _Mind and World_ (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996) which has attracted a lot of attention, John McDowell has tried to develop Sellars's position beyond Sellars in a way that meets this objection. McDowell, who sees the problem, proposes what he calls bare naturalism as an alternative to coherentalism, which, he claims, is unrestrained by the independent external world and the mythical given. In passing, he rejects Quine's holistic version of coherentalism on the grounds that the latter's behavioristic position cannot serve as a real restraint on thought. He further rejects Davidson's idea that only beliefs justify beliefs as lacking an experiential constraint.

In formulating his position, McDowell is influenced by Aristotle, Hegel and Gadamer. From Aristotle, he takes the idea that character, or second nature, is not innate but learned behavior. From Hegel, he takes the idea that the education of the human species (Bildung) is centered around the learning of language, which he interprets as similar to Sellar's logical space of reasons. From Gadamer, he takes the idea that tradi-
tion is constituted within the horizon of language that functions as the repository of tradition. In this way, McDowell arrives at bald naturalism as a naturalistic conception of human conceptual capacities.

Within the analytic debate, McDowell’s contribution lies in presenting a naturalized account of what Wittgenstein calls a language game and what Sellars calls the logical space of reasons. Yet in part because of his reliance on Gadamer, who has no conception of the relation of horizontality to the empirical world, McDowell cannot link the social justification of knowledge claims with the empirical world as, for instance, Hegel and Peirce do. If he had done so, he would have overcome the problem posed by the analytic view of idealism as denying the existence of the external world. Since he does not, the problem which has been on the agenda since the rise of analytic philosophy through the rebellion against British idealism still remains unresolved.

Continental philosophy has been dominated since the end of the Second World War by Martin Heidegger, who has evoked an enormous discussion, which has succeeded in deflecting attention from other philosophers. His position was regarded as so important that in France, for instance, where he displaced Sartre from Sartre’s position as the central French cultural figure, Heidegger, who was German, could until recently be said to be the single most important “French” philosopher. His influence on the French philosophical discussion is still enormous. Derrida, who is an important philosopher, can be said to have been deflected from his own course by his “encounter” with Heidegger’s philosophy. Although Derrida is reputed to be critical of Heidegger, in fact he seems never to challenge any of the basic ideas of Heidegger’s thought.

In part because of the American interest in French culture, Heidegger studies in the United States have long been strongly influenced by the French approach, particularly Derrida. The latter is very popular in the United States, where his views have often been given exaggerated importance, especially among those interested in what is widely but imprecisely called postmodernism. This term is a label that is applied widely but inaccurately to designate a whole series of very disparate French (Lyotard, Deleuze, perhaps Foucault) and American thinkers (especially Rorty) who seem mainly to have in common the fact that they are influenced by the later Heidegger.

It would be an important mistake to take Heidegger’s position for
all of continental philosophy, which cannot simply be understood through the theories of a single philosopher. Yet he is important within recent continental philosophy to a degree that its shape is strongly affected by his own fortunes. In this respect, two points should be made as concerns his relation to Husserlianism and his relation to Nazism, both of which are very important for continental philosophy in America.

First, the relation of Heidegger’s position to Husserl’s is philosophically quite interesting. Although Heidegger seems to be continuing and developing Husserlian phenomenology, his position is not only very different from, but even the opposite of, Husserl’s. For Heidegger’s position, which in effect destroys Husserl’s, in effect undermines the very idea of phenomenology as Husserl conceived it.

The differences between the theories of Husserl and Heidegger are easy to detect. One central difference is that Husserl is mainly concerned with epistemological issues whereas Heidegger is steadily concerned with ontological issues only, what he initially calls the problem of the meaning of being. Another central difference concerns the conception of truth and knowledge. Husserl understood his position as continuing the theories of Descartes, Fichte, and Kant. Husserlian phenomenology makes traditional claims for absolute, or apodictic, knowledge that is unrelated to time, place, or to the nature of the particular person, and so on. Heidegger’s early position features a very interesting concept of hermeneutical truth roughly as an interpretation, which never attains absolute status. Still another difference concerns the conception of the subject, which for Husserl is what, following Kant, he calls the transcendental ego, as opposed to Heidegger’s view of human being as Dasein, or existence.

These differences are very basic and cannot be bridged. Heidegger’s and Husserl’s views cannot be brought together within a single conception of phenomenology. Although Heidegger was deeply interested in and influenced by Husserl’s writings, particularly the *Logical Investigations*, it should be clear that Heidegger’s position develops through a fundamental critique and rejection of some main aspects of Husserl’s position.

Heidegger’s rise to prominence virtually everywhere, including in America, rapidly undermined the Husserlian phenomenological tradition. The most recent “event” in phenomenology has been the rapid and
perhaps fatal undermining of Heidegger's own position by sharp debate about his Nazism and its relation to his philosophy.

It has been known for many years that Heidegger became a member of the Nazi party in early 1930s and later briefly served as the Nazi rector of the University of Freiburg. Discussion of the possible link between his philosophy and his Nazism, which smoldered over almost a half century since the early 1930s, was nearly instantaneously transformed in 1987 by Victor Farias's publication of *Heidegger and Nazism*. The appearance of this book in France led to a rapid, very heated debate, which was followed by calmer debate in Germany and in the United States. The American debate featured contributions by, among others, Michael Zimmerman, Thomas Sheehan, Richard Wolin and Tom Rockmore.

The result of the American debate, in which Derrida intervened, has been to undermine Heidegger's paramount role within the American discussion of continental philosophy. Heidegger's students, including his American students, have traditionally been very protective of his position, systematically impeding discussion of it. The leading American association for continental philosophy, the Society for Phenomenology and Philosophical Philosophy, has been dominated by Heideggerian scholars, who were mainly uncritically committed to maintaining Heideggerianism, which often appears more as an ideology than anything else. The annual meeting in October 1996 in Washington, DC, featured open criticism of Heidegger's position for the first time in recent memory.

The fact that Heidegger's paramount role within American continental philosophy has now come under severe scrutiny has begun to lead to deep changes in continental philosophy in America, of which two appear particularly important. First, in part because of the attention to the link between Heidegger's philosophy and his Nazism, in part because of the rapid, unprecedented, unforeseen collapse of the Soviet bloc, and finally in part because of the impact of the writings of Jürgen Habermas, interest has been spurred in continental political philosophy. In the United States, there has long been an interest in analytical political philosophy, whose most important recent representative is John Rawls. The emergence of non-analytic, continental political is a new development.

Second, in part because of the decline of interest in Heidegger, and
more generally in Husserlian phenomenology, interest has been focused on Hegel's position. Hegel was obviously a phenomenologist. His initial and perhaps greatest treatise is the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. But American phenomenologists did not often make this connection, and there has been very little direct discussion of the links between Hegelian and Husserlian phenomenology.

Hegel is certainly one of the direct beneficiaries of the decline in Heidegger's influence in American philosophy. Interest in Hegel, which has been steady since the middle of the nineteenth century, has recently increased dramatically. Although the return to Hegel was already underway before the recent controversy about Heidegger's Nazism, there has been almost an explosion of books on Hegel's position over the last several years.

Two recent studies on Hegel have attracted attention. In *The Heterodox Hegel* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), Cyril O'Regan argues vigorously for an interpretation of Hegel's position as basically and fundamentally a religious view. O'Regan's approach recalls the so-called right-wing Hegelianism, which emerged after Hegel's death in 1831, and which also stressed a religious interpretation of his thought. In *Hegel's Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), Terry Pinkard stresses the social nature of Hegel's view of reason. This is interesting both for the understanding of Hegel's position and as a link to recent analytic philosophy, which has a similar stress.

We can be very brief about American pragmatism. This movement is certainly very important. There is widespread agreement that Peirce, who is regarded as the founder of pragmatism, is the most important American philosopher. Yet, it seems fair to say that, if judged by recent publications, nothing philosophically important is now happening in American pragmatism understood as it was understood by the first generation of pragmatists. Although there is a steady flow of scholarly contributions, at present there does not seem to be any concerted effort to develop the insights of the first-generation of American pragmatists in new and different ways.

and increasingly apparent in later texts, although Rorty is strongly influenced by Dewey, Rorty's own view is very much his own. Rorty's view of pragmatism is literally unrecognizable as more than a distant cousin of Dewey's.

In this case, as in the relation of Heidegger to Husserl, the differences in the two positions, especially with respect to the conception of knowledge, are surely more important than the similarities. Dewey's main concern, as described most clearly in The Quest for Certainty (New York: Putnam, 1960), the classical source of his position, is to find a way to utilize philosophical ideas for practical purposes. He does not give up on the theory of knowledge, although he does give up on knowledge as certain. Rorty, who stakes out a more radical position, seems to give up both on knowledge, about which he holds there is nothing interesting to say, and philosophy, to which he prefers so-called edifying conversation. Where Dewey wants to reform philosophy as pragmatism to make it socially useful, Rorty just wants to abandon it.

This discussion has considered some recent developments, if not in American philosophy, since there is no strictly American philosophy, at least in philosophy in America. Analytic philosophy, continental philosophy, and pragmatism are still the three main tendencies in philosophy in America, as they have been throughout this century. When we look at their recent developments, it seems at present that pragmatism has run out of steam, and analytic philosophy and continental philosophy are changing rapidly. It is clear that the old divisions between the different philosophical tendencies are changing as the tendencies themselves change.

One point is the general narrowing of the differences between the different tendencies. We are now witnessing an intermingling among the representatives of the different tendencies. Analytic philosophers have become increasingly interested in pragmatism to the point where many of them now identify with this latter tendency. Those interested in continental philosophy are increasingly interested in other philosophical tendencies. We can anticipate that the interrelation of the different tendencies will continue in way that will further blur the distinctions between them.

Another point is an apparent shift of the philosophical discussion as a whole in a Hegelian direction, typified by a social approach to the nature of knowledge. Hegel's conception of spirit (Geist) can best be
described as a form of social justification of claims to know on an a posteriori, contextual, historical basis, as opposed to a Kantian, a priori form of justification. Pragmatism, which arose through a naturalization of certain Hegelian ideas in Peirce and Dewey has always had a Hegelian bent. As Heidegger's influence diminishes and Hegel's increases, continental philosophy is now moving toward Hegel, whose phenomenological perspective was displaced at the beginning of this century by Husserl. As a consequence of the analytic attack on empiricism, it also seems to be moving toward a generally Hegelian view. Hence, a likely guess about the long-term evolution of the American philosophical discussion, as we move toward the end of the century, is a continued reduction in the differences separating the main philosophical tendencies and a continued evolution in a generally Hegelian direction.