

APPROACHING CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEMS
HISTORICALLY:
*On IDEALISMS, REALISMS, and PRAGMATISMS,
Combining Undergraduate Teaching & Research*

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Abstract: As guest editor of this special issue of *Esercizi Filosofici*, the author introduces Kenneth R. Westphal's and Paolo Parrini's position papers on pragmatism, idealism and realism by elucidating the background and rationale of the workshop she organized on 29 April, 2015 at the Department of Humanities of the University of Trieste, within the framework of her undergraduate course in «History of Modern and Contemporary Philosophy». The Appendix lists questions posed by students and by the audience, to which the invited speakers replied in discussion following the presentations; their respective replies follow their main papers.

Key Words: Teaching systematic philosophy historically; research and teaching for undergraduates; contemporary issues and modern philosophy; pragmatism.

1. *Background*

The workshop, «A Real Dialogue on an Ideal Topic», with Kenneth R. Westphal¹ and Paolo Parrini² on idealism, realism and pragmatism took

¹ Kenneth Westphal has held (full) professorships in philosophy in England (Norwich, Canterbury), visiting professorships at Northwestern University and at the Martin Luther Universität Halle (a.d.Salle), and research fellowships in Heidelberg, Bielefeld (twice) and Göttingen. He has now settled in Istanbul as Professor of Philosophy at Boğaziçi Üniversitesi. The main focus of his research is on the character and scope of rational justification in non-formal domains, including both morals (ethics & theory of justice) and theoretical philosophy (epistemology, history & philosophy of science). In response to the Pyrrhonian Dilemma of the Criterion, and drawing upon Kant, Hegel, classical American Pragmatism and analytic epistemology, he has been developing a pragmatic, social and historical account of rational justification which provides sufficient ground for realism about the objects of human knowledge, and strict objectivity about basic moral norms: independent of debates about «moral realism» and motivation. His books include *Hegel's Epistemological Realism*

place on April 29, 2015, partially sponsored by the Department of Humanities of the University of Trieste. It was conceived and organized within the framework of my 2014–15 undergraduate course in «History of Modern and Contemporary Philosophy», entitled: *Idealism, Realism and Pragmatism: Historical Aspects of a Contemporary Philosophical Problem*. Students were involved in preparing for the workshop: A reading group³ worked on additional material provided by the two invited speakers, which the group presented to the class, and they prepared a set of questions for discussion at the workshop.

At the methodological level, one main aim of this course was to avoid the pitfalls of the stereotypical historian devoted to the close, antiquarian study of past ideas, the prevailing analytical trend to dismiss meticulous and supposedly sterile attention to philosophy's history and the theoretical distortions of instrumentalizing texts of the past for present purposes.

(1989), *Kant's Transcendental Proof of Realism* (2004), and *How Hume and Kant Reconstruct Natural Law* (2016). He edited the collected later papers of Frederick L. Will, *Pragmatism & Realism* (1997), and recently *Realism, Science and Pragmatism*. He has published over a hundred research articles.

² Paolo Parrini served as full professor of theoretical philosophy at the University of Florence until 2010–11. He anticipated his retirement to devote himself to research. He is founding member and president of the Italian Society of Analytical Philosophy, founding member and member of the Board of the Italian Society of Theoretical Philosophy, and member of the Board of the Florence Centre of History and Philosophy of Science. During his academic career he was continuously and closely involved with doctoral training programmes in Philosophy, not only locally but nationally. His research addresses the major fields of theoretical philosophy: epistemology, ontology, metaphysics, and hermeneutics, with special focus on the issues of realism, truth and rationality. His books include: *Knowledge and Reality (Conoscenza e realtà, 1995; Engl. tr. 1998)* and *Il valore della verità* (2011). He is currently working on a book on «Epistemology and Ontology», addressing the issue of realism from the standpoint of the subject-object relationship. An international speaker in the field, he has published nearly 200 research works, including translations into other European and extra-European languages. His international prominence is also indicated by his editing *Kant and Contemporary Epistemology* (1994) and co-editing *Logical Empiricism: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (2003).

³ I gladly mention the participants: Gabriele Buzzai, Belén Colom (an Erasmus student from Argentina), Nicola Freschi, Tobias Kompatscher, Federico Passavanti and Giacomo Pirani.

A decade ago this set of issues was already prominent within Anglophone scholarship: in his Introduction to a collection of Descartes' sources for the *Meditations*, John Cottingham wrote: «the practice of <up-to-date> analytic philosophy risks becoming obsessive and shortsighted unless it is informed by a lively awareness of the philosophical tradition that delivered us where we are today». ⁴ More recently, this year Robert Pippin published a book aiming to show the bearing of the practice of the history of philosophy on philosophy itself. ⁵

Embedding this spirit in the scope of my course, my first purpose was to show how great issues of the past remain pertinent to current philosophical debate, and how thematically focussed instruction in history of philosophy develops students' abilities to discern and define the basic parameters of these issues and to recognize the interplay between persistence and changes in philosophical problems across the ages. To foster students' reflective and sensitive analysis, assessment, conclusions and decisions, they must develop these skills and abilities by confronting competing considerations bearing on the philosophical issues, to consider arguments for and against proposed solutions, to evaluate the grounds of philosophical approaches and claims – both present and past – and to identify which challenges these must meet: ⁶ in short, to mature their capacity to judge through an historical-philosophical education which I regard as indispensable when majoring in philosophy. ⁷

⁴ Ariew, Cottingham and Sorell (1998: xiii).

⁵ Pippin (2015). According to the editorial presentation: «Robert B. Pippin offers the thought-provoking argument that the study of historical figures is not only an interpretation and explication of their views, but can be understood as a form of philosophy itself. In doing so, he reconceives philosophical scholarship as a kind of network of philosophical interanimations, one in which major positions in the history of philosophy, when they are themselves properly understood within their own historical context, form philosophy's *lingua franca*. Examining a number of philosophers to explore the nature of this interanimation, he presents an illuminating assortment of especially thoughtful examples of historical commentary that powerfully enact philosophy» (available on line at: <http://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/I/bo20299044.html>).

⁶ See the roundtable discussion on these issues in Schneewind, *et al.*, (2004: 361–388).

⁷ See on the point Westphal (2012a), (2012b).

Now history of philosophy is not merely preparatory to something else, that is, to how philosophical problems and questions, taken in abstraction from their historical context and instances, should be articulated, presented, defined and practised; historical philosophy is itself a rational and critical enterprise. For example, if anti-Cartesianism has become a prominent issue today in epistemology, philosophy of language, phenomenology, ontology, philosophy of mind and philosophical psychology,⁸ to identify Cartesian or Anti-Cartesian features of contemporary views requires understanding both Descartes and the Cartesian traditions flowing from his work.⁹

This concern does not simply reflect a traditional Italian historical approach to philosophical studies. Today, the critical dimension of the history of philosophy is internationally acknowledged also in research works which reflect an Anglophone philosophical orientation and examine the fundamental standpoints and terms of reference of philosophical enquiry from late modernity to contemporary reflection. For instance, in his introduction to a collection of essays examining the <transcendental turn> in philosophy from Kant to Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, Sebastian Gardner (2015: 1) insists on taking together the historical and systematic aspects, arguing that: «In so far as historical interest has a critical dimension, it will constantly broach systematic issues, just as any convincing account of the nature of transcendental philosophy will need to take account of the historical development». Pippin's *Interanimations* (2015) argues that no strict separation between the domains of history of philosophy and philosophy is defensible; reviewers of his book highlight that it shows us how «philosophizing historically is very much a future-oriented enterprise, addressing the foundational philosophical concerns

⁸ As Amy Schmitter (2010: 497) writes: «Descartes is a figure who looms large in many different spheres both inside and outside of philosophy, and in considering how to weight the reception of his work, we cannot avoid intersecting with several such spheres».

⁹ This was the subject of my 2013–14 course and is the topic of my forthcoming book: *Cartesio contemporaneo. L'invenzione della disembodied mind negli studi anglo-americani: un mito cognitivista?*

of our culture».¹⁰ In a similar vein, the recent historical turn in philosophy of science focusses either on the historical dimension of the evolution of science or on the problems, solutions and motivations of earlier projects in the philosophy of science, examining how the historical figures engaged in these projects understood them. As Paolo Parrini (2007: 142) remarks: «First, this historical approach is of pivotal importance in reaching a correct interpretation of the philosophies of the past. Second, this approach must interact suitably with theory both in order to give good historical results and to contribute to the evaluation and development of the problems under consideration».

Consequently, the course culminated in the class preparations for the workshop, by forming a study group to formulate in advance significant questions for the invited speakers, which address distinctive features of their positions against the backdrop of the historical material that students studied in this course. Albert Einstein observed: «The value of an education in a liberal arts college is not the learning of many facts, but the training of the mind to think something that cannot be learned from textbooks».¹¹ I would rather prefer to speak, more modestly, of training the mind to think of something by studying textbooks which cannot be learned <from> textbooks.

The specific aim of this course was to address a serious challenge arising from the contingent place of the course within the undergraduate

¹⁰ Reviewing Pippin's book, R. Lanier Anderson remarks: «Pippin has long been a leading voice in the history of philosophy. With *Interanimations*, he brings his readership right into the process of philosophizing historically. The book brings together eleven chapters that engage with other important readers of some of his touchstone historical philosophers (notably Hegel, Nietzsche, Kant). It thereby advances debates with prominent thinkers like McDowell, Brandom, Nehamas, Williams, Heidegger, and MacIntyre. But its real stakes are still larger: Pippin's book aims to show us what it is to advance philosophy through engaging the great minds of the past—and through an ongoing conversation and argument with others doing the same. From this point of view, philosophizing historically is very much a future-oriented enterprise, addressing the foundational philosophical concerns of our culture» (available on line at: <http://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/I/bo20299044.html>).

¹¹ Einstein's statement is quoted from A. Calaprice (2011: 100).

programme. In our Department of Humanities, the course in «History of Modern and Contemporary Philosophy» is to serve both students who shall continue studying within philosophical disciplines and also students who will graduate in historical disciplines. Therefore as a professional historian of philosophy, my main pedagogical challenge is to provide both a service course interesting and useful to students who will not pursue additional courses in philosophy, and yet at the same time to serve students majoring in philosophy by initiating them into current philosophical practices by studying historical philosophy. This dual challenge is certainly demanding, though also intriguing.

To meet this challenge, I sought to connect the expected study of some number of canonical texts and authors to what now occurs in contemporary culture and society, within which students live every day, and which demands and requires elucidation and reflexion. Put otherwise, I usually design my syllabus to address thinking, intellectually maturing young people in a «post-postmodern» society, one largely based on scientific rationality and its various applications, where culture has unveiled our human production and «construction» of so many apparent «facts» of nature by post-structuralist analysis, post-colonial discourse, coining of new philosophical categories and various works in ethics, politics and phenomenology. As Westphal (2014: 1) remarks: «Realism about particular objects and about their features or relations became problematic in Twentieth Century philosophy when it became generally recognized that we cannot, as it were, set aside our concepts, theories, beliefs, or, in general, our language to inspect the fact themselves and on that basis assess our beliefs, statements, or theories about them». In particular, in preparing the syllabus for this 2014–15 course, I anticipated my future mixed group of young people exposed (by media and news) to the debate which, say, associates (permissive) multiculturalism with relativism and confronts problems of rational justification. Today, our young people are also exposed to forms of fundamentalism as faith in «absolute» truths which are threatening the European historical achievement of the idea of non-confessional, universal human rights based upon values such as common humanity, the free exercise of reason and gender equality, all of

which complicates issues about the rationality (or irrationality) of beliefs.¹² Against this background, Locke's (1689) *Letters on Toleration* are as urgently important today as ever, and to inquire, say, *à la* Locke, into the grounds and degrees of our opinions, persuasions and assent, to account for the ways by which our understanding can set down any measures of the certainty of our knowledge, to evaluate different notions of truth (either necessary or sufficient), to face the sceptical dilemma of the criterion, to rework *à la* Kant the meaning of realism and idealism, making sense of both scientific and moral experience, can acquire the significance of examining very basic issues within philosophy while reflecting on contemporary issues from the agent's perspective – namely the students' perspective – who may fully discover, appreciate and exercise her or his cognitive and rational capacities only through her or his «practice-laden being-in-the-world». This perspective is nothing but the practical starting point that makes pragmatism «a most significant framework for contemporary discussions of rationality, knowledge, morality and values» (Pihlström 2011: 6).

2. *Rationale*

Accordingly, this course focussed on the set of key words which characterize a central contemporary philosophical debate about overcoming the apparent opposition between idealism and pragmatism, without abandoning realism. The outlook of Pragmatism (with its origins in Peirce and James and antecedents in Reid) can be summarized in the following «pragmatic maxim» of Peirce (1931: 5.412): «a conception, that is, the rational purport of a word, lies exclusively in its conceivable bearing

¹² As to the «perennial epistemic problem of the rationality (or irrationality) of religious belief», see Pihlström (2013b: 27): «This epistemic problem arises from the – real or apparent – conflicts between science and religion, or reason and faith, in particular. Here pragmatism can offer us a very interesting middle ground. As William James argued, in *Pragmatism* (1907) and elsewhere, pragmatism is often a middle path option for those who do not want to give up either their scientific worldview or their possible religious sensibilities». On Pihlström's pragmatist philosophy of religion, see also Pihlström (2013a).

upon the conduct of life». In this way, pragmatism aims to challenge the empty metaphysical abstractions «of a philosophy that has no relation to our activities within the world» and their practical consequences. One classic issue about realism is whether, «in addition to the physical objects and events we perceive, are there also non-physical, and hence non-perceptible forms or ideas of kinds or characteristics, variously instantiated in physical particulars, but which exist independently both of their instances and of what we may happen to say, think, believe or know about them?» (Westphal 2014: 1). By contrast, generally speaking, idealism has been described as the claim that reality cannot be explained only by matter and motive forces, for it is also essentially constituted by ideas or mental structures and active spiritual principles.¹³ The history of philosophy shows a long tradition of «idealisms»: beginning with Parmenides and Plato, then passing through modern times with Descartes, Leibniz and Berkeley, ending up with Kant's transcendental idealism and Hegel's absolute idealism. However, a line of ancient thought also offers relativism with Protagoras and the Skeptics, whereas the development of modern thought is crossed by Galileo's metaphysical and epistemological realism as well as by Locke's and Newton's empirical realism and

¹³ The Leverhulme Trust currently sponsors an international project entitled «Idealism and Pragmatism: Convergence or Contestation?» Its network includes the Universities of Pittsburgh, Sheffield, Cambridge, Sydney and Frankfurt, together with Columbia University, Vanderbilt University and the Collège de France. The aim of the project is described as follows: «a retrospective assessment of both the possible interactions between the two philosophical traditions of Idealism and Pragmatism and their potential towards the production of future original thought in philosophy». According to its rationale, «As such, pragmatism offers a distinctive account of meaning, knowledge and metaphysics, which is opposed to the abstractions of a philosophy that has no relation to our activities within the world. Laid out as such, it may seem that idealism and pragmatism have little to do with one another and could indeed be seen as intellectual opponents; [...] So, it may appear on the one hand to pragmatists, that the idealist represents just the kind of empty and abstract metaphysical theorizing that they want to overturn, while to idealists on the other hand, the pragmatist may be viewed as offering a position that cannot resolve the problems that concern them, in refusing to engage with such problems properly by offering instead a crude appeal to «practical consequences». It could be assumed, then, that these two traditions will simply confront each other as philosophical opposites» (<http://idealismandpragmatism.org/project>).

generalizations. Another approach claims to combine truth with necessity, to oppose demonstration and rigorous universality to a notion of truth attained with sufficiency, proportionality, probability.

It became apparent that instructing students about significant selections from many ancient and modern authors provided good comprehension of questions central to current philosophical debate, such as those presented by Westphal in the Introduction to his recent collection, *Realism, Science and Pragmatism* (2014). Central to my course are these questions: Does realism contrast to idealism when it holds that material objects exist and have mind-independent characteristics? Is perception direct awareness of external objects? Is scientific knowledge about theory-independent phenomena and unobservable entities possible? The course focused on these specific topics: 1) American Pragmatism: the agenda of its founding fathers; 2) truth, real being and its manifestation to subjects in the Atomists' fragments; 3) description of phenomenal reality by ancient Sceptics and the dilemma of the criterion of truth; 4) perception and unification of sense-data in Platonic idealism; 5) the nature of Galileo's ontological and epistemological realism; 6) the quest for an absolute foundation of science in Descartes; 7) primary and secondary qualities, nominal and real essences in Locke; 8) immaterialism and sense reality in Berkeley; 9) Hume's skepticism about reason, and its relations to ancient and modern philosophy; 10) Berkeley's idealism regarded from the standpoint of Kantian transcendental idealism. The idea to organize a workshop on idealism, pragmatism and realism was conceived against this background.

An interesting coincidence is that the July 2015 London conference of the above-mentioned Leverhulme Trust project includes the following presentations¹⁴: David MacArthur (University of Sydney): «Pragmatism and Skepticism»; Robert Pippin (University of Chicago): «Pragmatist Themes in German Idealism»; Ulrich Schlösser (University of Tübingen): «On Some Differences Between American Pragmatism and Ideal-

¹⁴ See: <http://www.hegelpd.it/hegel/london-idealism-and-pragmatism-convergence-or-contestation-conference/>

ism: Peirce and Hegel on Meaning, Confirmation and Reality»; Claudine Tiercelin (Collège de France): «Why Pragmatism Implies Realism»; and Robert Brandom (University of Pittsburgh): «From German Idealism to American Pragmatism – and Back».

In Italy, media attention was cast on Maurizio Ferraris's 2012 book *Manifesto del nuovo realismo*; this revival of interest in the *Realismusfrage* was further supported by Umberto Eco's critical remarks «Il realismo minimo». A conference on the topic was organized and the meeting was held in May 2012 in Bologna «Quale realismo? Postmoderno e nuovo realismo nel dibattito contemporaneo» (invited speakers: Paolo Parrini, Maurizio Ferraris, Umberto Eco and Patrizia Violi). This meeting occasioned Paolo Parrini's reply to both Ferraris and Eco, and his reassessment of realism, reality and sensible experience in his 2012 essay, «Realismi a prescindere».¹⁵ This upsurge of interest paved the way to welcome reception of such very recent publications as *Il pragmatismo dalle origini agli sviluppi contemporanei*,¹⁶ which focusses on American classical pragmatism (Emerson Peirce, James, Royce, Mead, Morris, Lewis), the diffusion of Pragmatism in Europe, and its relations to analytical philosophy (Quine, Sellars, Davidson), to critical theory (Apel, Habermas, Honneth) and to naturalism (Sydney Hook and Morton White); and considers specific contemporary versions of pragmatism developed by Rescher, Bernstein, McDermott, and Margolis, who follow the classical tradition, and concludes with neo-pragmatism (Putnam, Rorty) and the latest trends in the field (West, Brandom, Shusterman, Haack). In this way also Italian scholars and university students can now rely on a work similar to the *Continuum Companion to Pragmatism* (2011), edited by Sami Pihlström.¹⁷

The speakers invited to our workshop are two distinguished guests. Kenneth Westphal has developed a pragmatic account of rational justification which identifies and justifies universally valid basic moral norms

¹⁵ This work was required reading in my course.

¹⁶ Calcaterra, Maddalena and Marchetti (2015).

¹⁷ Parts of this (2011) *Companion* were read and discussed in my course.

and shows how a sophisticated social and historical account of empirical knowledge justifies realism about the objects of commonsense and also of scientific knowledge. As the foreign guest of the workshop he was invited to speak first and he presented a paper entitled «Some Observations on Realism, Science and Pragmatism». Paolo Parrini is an expert in philosophy of science and analytical philosophy of language and epistemology, who has written extensively on realism and anti-realism. To quote Westphal, Parrini «is one of the few genuine experts both on Kant's epistemology and on philosophy of science – especially Carnap and Quine – and more generally on analytical semantics». Parrini presented a paper, «Empirical Realism without Transcendental Idealism: Comment on Kenneth R. Westphal», which identifies points of agreement and disagreement with Westphal's position.

Our proceedings are arranged in two sections: Presentations and Discussion. Since Parrini's paper offered also some comments on Westphal's approach, the discussion began with Westphal's reply to Parrini's remarks, followed by questions from the floor to both invited speakers. The following Appendix lists the issues raised by the students, myself and members of the audience. The Discussion Section contains two papers: Ken Westphal's «Some Replies to Remarks and Queries by Professor Parrini, Students and Members of the Audience» and Paolo Parrini's «Some Replies to Questions Posed by Students». Both speakers elected to answer questions in a thematic order, and indicate the number of each question answered in the Appendix.¹⁸

To conclude, Ken and Paolo indeed proved to be, beyond expectation, the ideal characters to engage in genuine dialogue on the topic «idealism, realism and pragmatism», by focussing on truth and rationality, the justification of knowledge and the criticism of both metaphysical realism and radical relativism, against the background of Kantian Critical idealism. I wish to thank them both once again for their availability and generosity.

¹⁸ In using author-date references to their own or to each other's papers or replies, they use the same designations: «Westphal (2015a)» or «Parrini (2015a)» for the main papers; «Westphal (2015b)» or «Parrini (2015b)» for the replies.

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APPENDIX: *Questions posed by Students
and by the Audience*

To Kenneth Westphal:

Q1. One main point of your presentation is to reconstruct the key concepts of American pragmatism against the background of the distinction between semantic internalism and externalism and their respective links with versions of nonrealism (antirealism, relativism, constructivism) and reference to objects or events in one's physical or social environment. Would you please clarify how do you pass from this assessment to the recovering of the Kantian roots of pragmatism and in which way your inquiry significantly differs from Sami Pihlström's approach we examined in our class? (Cinzia Ferrini)

Q2. How and in which regards the picture of pragmatism (which emerges from reconnecting it with Kantian transcendental idealism and empirical realism) may change when we consider the possibility of an Hegelian legacy? (Cinzia Ferrini)

Q3. You argue that neo-pragmatism is committed to irrealism by its meta-linguistic accounts of *meaning* and *reference*, whereas pragmatism is committed to realism by its semantic externalism and its use of Carnapian explication. What, then, do you make of Brandom's neo-pragmatism, which now claims to account for modal realism about subjunctive, causal conditional truths regarding the objects of first-order discourse, whether commonsense or scientific? (Paolo Labinaz)

To Paolo Parrini:

Q4. We would like to know whether there are significant similarities between your «positive philosophy» and Peirce's pragmatic and regulative characterization of truth in terms of the indefinitely long run convergence of the scientific community's opinion towards a dynamic (evolutionary)

reality that constrains inquiry? (Students)

Q5. Would you please clarify the respective functions of science and philosophy in your view as well as their mutual links? More specifically, in respect to the working scientists, should the philosopher reflecting on science subordinate the philosophical analysis to specific problems, or in your view there is a legitimate space for the autonomy of conceptual, apparently <useless> questions? (Students)

Q6. In our class we learnt that according to ancient Scepticism and to Hume that is a «question of fact» whether the perceptions of the senses are produced by external objects that resemble them. However, according to Hume, here experience must be entirely silent, because the mind can't possibly experience the connection of perceptions with objects. It seems therefore that no «compelling» conflict between an extra-mental reality and our cognitive claims can overcome scepticism via sensible experience. The question is, how can your positive philosophy, distrusting <the transcendental> and relying on sensible experience address this Pyrrhonian/Humean representationalist, and indirect realist challenge? (Student: Nicola Freschi)

To both speakers:

Q7. According to you, what difference does the pragmatic maxim make to philosophy? (Students)