

**Joseph Margolis**

*Pragmatism's Advantage: American and European  
Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century.*

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The distinctive trait of this newest addition to Joseph Margolis' magnificent oeuvre of thirty books is its broad-ranging and highly partisan approach to evaluating contemporary trends in Western philosophy. The book is divided into three parts. Part 1 addresses the trifecta of competing philosophical traditions: pragmatism, continental philosophy and analytic philosophy. Based on the book's title, the reader can easily forecast the winner: pragmatism. Margolis directs Part 2 to the goal of reclaiming naturalism as an antidote to the ailments of all three philosophical traditions. Part 3 concerns the enduring challenge that Immanuel Kant's model of transcendental reason and G. W. F. Hegel's subsequent critique pose to contemporary philosophy. The book's thesis is that pragmatism has lost its distinctly American quality. In its more recent incarnations, pragmatism (or neo-pragmatism) has been continually cross-pollinated with elements in the continental and analytic traditions. Moreover, this open-ended capacity for hybridization is what constitutes pragmatism's advantage.

The book's first part, titled after the book, introduces the 'three-legged contest between pragmatists, analysts, and continentals', which Margolis admits is a 'familiar simplification' (1). What follows is another familiarity, a narrative about pragmatism's heyday in the early twentieth-century, its decline in the 1940s and 50s side-by-side with the rise of its prime competitor, analytic philosophy, and finally its revival by neo-pragmatists from the 1970s onwards. However, this narrative neglects the influence of the continental tradition on recent philosophy, especially the work of Hegel, Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. While the reader might expect a quick argument skewering analytic and continental philosophy and lauding pragmatism's advantage, Margolis instead cites problems with all three. Analysts tend to reduce our complex world, rich with its many histories, languages and cultures, to a set of fine-grained concepts, logical operations or ontological simples. Continentals make the mistake of appealing to universals that outstrip the natural limits of our experience, transcendental notions that smack of extranaturalism. Pragmatists undervalue the metaphysical distinction between nature and culture. According to Margolis, they 'have hardly begun to articulate the conceptual linkages and differences between the metaphysics of physical nature and the metaphysics of culture in any fine-grained way' (10).

In the second part, Margolis attempts to cure the ills of Western philosophy by

restoring the concept of naturalism to each of the three philosophical traditions. The looming question, though, is this: Which naturalism? As Margolis reminds his reader, “‘the natural world’ itself means very different things to different theorists’ (51). Still, he is able deftly to chart the changes in the meaning of naturalism through the history of Western philosophy, from Aristotle’s teleological biologism to Kant’s decidedly extranaturalist definition of human freedom (pursuing an end beyond nature) to Hegel and Darwin’s insights permitting the distinction between naturalism *qua* progress in human culture/history and naturalism *qua* biological/species-specific evolution. It is this last manifestation of naturalism that the classical pragmatists adopt and Margolis favors. While it is tempting to invoke a special cognitive faculty (e.g. Kant’s transcendental reason), culture reduced to biological or physical nature (e.g. Richard Dawkins’s selfish gene) or a method for yielding purely subjective experience (e.g. Husserl’s epoché), the error in all of these invocations is the appeal to an extranatural property or function, something outside the realm of lived human experience. So, rather than conceive the self as a transcendental ego (Kant), a biologically determined agent (Dawkins) or a transcendental subjectivity (Husserl), it is better to conceive it as naturally encultured and constructed, ‘a hybrid of biological and cultural development whose “second-natured” competences evolve in tandem with biological maturation’ (55)—in other words, an artifactual self.

Having established the superiority of an artifactual conception of the self, Margolis moves in the next chapter (‘Vicissitudes of Transcendental Reason’) and the epilogue (‘Pragmatism and the Prospect of a Rapprochement within Eurocentric Philosophy’) to defend the book’s central claim, namely, that pragmatism’s capacity to combine with aspects of the other two traditions is its distinct advantage. In the penultimate chapter, Margolis conducts a three-way evaluation of Hilary Putnam’s notion of *Grenzbegriff* (or a limiting concept of truth in discourse), Habermas’ pragmatic-transcendental norms of discourse, and Karl-Otto Apel’s a priori assumption of moral consensus among a ‘communication community’. All three add a touch of universalism and transcendentalism (especially of the Kantian variety) to pragmatist theories of discourse in order to mount a preemptive defence against the familiar charge of relativism: the outcome of one discourse is as good (or true) as any other. Putnam criticized his arch intellectual rival, Richard Rorty, in this way, to which Rorty responded in kind. Unfortunately, in every case, Margolis concludes, ‘[u]niversalism seems an entirely unnecessary extravagance’ and, in the end, ‘pragmatism and Kantian transcendentalism remain completely incompatible’ (119). Pragmatism’s advantage, then, emerges from three sources: i) its ‘advocacy of a moderate naturalism’, ii) ‘its commitment to the flux’ of experience, and iii) ‘its own reading of the Hegelian critique’ of Kant’s transcendentalism (136). On a continuum dating back to antiquity, pragmatism gravitates toward Heraclitean flux, not Parmenidean fixity; toward practical naturalism, not airy transcendentalism. Since it easily hybridizes with elements of other philosophical doctrines, ‘pragmatism is distinctly unfinished (in a way analytic and continental philosophy is not)—as a result of its own scattered history’ (140). Perhaps this fragmented history is the legacy of classic pragmatism, a challenging puzzle left to contemporary pragmatists, whether analytic-

leaning or continental-leaning, to continually reconstruct.

Overall, the book's strengths include its sweeping and insightful comparisons of contemporary trends in Western philosophy, the author's impressive command of philosophical history and the sometimes unexpected turns his argument takes. In these respects, it reminds me of another recent work on a similar subject, Colin Koopman's *Pragmatism as Transition: Historicity and Hope in James, Dewey, and Rorty* (New York: Columbia University Press 2009). Still, one caveat is in order: This work is highly partisan, to the extent that it could potentially alienate non-pragmatists. Stated in a more positive light, the author's defence of pragmatism might motivate analytics, continentals and philosophical free agents to reconsider their methods and traditions, especially if they are already sympathetic to pragmatism. To the author's credit, the book's overt partisanship is never so excessive that it exempts pragmatists from critical scrutiny. While they are 'genuinely interesting figures', Margolis writes, 'as a single movement Pragmatism is a disappointing hodgepodge that must be redirected' (13). It is to this task—redirection or reconstruction—that the author sets himself, reclaiming Darwinian naturalism and the Hegelian philosophy as resources for a renascent form of pragmatism. So, whether one agrees with Margolis' conclusions or not, it is difficult to deny that this book offers a significant contribution to the ongoing debate between pragmatists, analysts and continentals—one that clearly favours pragmatists.

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