Review of “A Philosophy of Culture: The Scope of Holistic Pragmatism”

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Recommended Citation
Schroeder, Steven (2007) "Review of "A Philosophy of Culture: The Scope of Holistic Pragmatism"," Essays in Philosophy: Vol. 8: Iss. 1, Article 23.

As is appropriate for a philosophical work in the tradition of pragmatism, Morton White’s Philosophy of Culture is both an argument and a demonstration: it does not merely state, but also makes a point. In keeping with his self description as having the soul of an historian as well as the soul of a philosopher, it is also a cogent genealogy of holistic pragmatism, anchored in William James and John Dewey but also in White’s own philosophical pedigree. It differs from Cornel West’s assessment of Emerson as a proto-pragmatist, but, like West, finds significant continuity in American philosophy beginning with Jonathan Edwards and continuing through the New England transcendentalists to pragmatism.

One interesting dialogue it invites is between “prophetic” and “holistic” pragmatism--and between both and analytic philosophy as it has taken root and become a dominant force in academic philosophy in the United States. That force is evident in White’s work and especially in the running conversation he maintains with W. V. Quine and Nelson Goodman. All three played significant roles in a pragmatic shift among American analytic philosophers in the middle of the twentieth century. That shift did not divert philosophical attention from language, and, in Quine, it did not divert attention from science and logic as central to philosophical practice, even when the distinction between “analysis” and “synthesis” was blurred. Quine, in fact, concluded that philosophy of science is philosophy enough. White, on the other hand, seeing much in common between Goodman and Dewey, especially in their philosophies of art--and between both and Quine--is drawn toward a broader field. He identifies science as one cultural institution among many and pushes philosophy, guided by epistemology, toward study of the whole range of institutions culture contains. In the end, he says, philosophy of culture may be philosophy enough.

Both the methodological monism evident in this turn and the depiction of culture as a container of institutions are important to understanding what White is about. In this book, which ranges from religion through art, natural science, and jurisprudence to ethics, the common strand is epistemological and methodological. Diverse subject matters are joined by pragmatic methodology that is, as William James suggested, radically empiricist. White’s survey of philosophical predecessors is partly guided by his interest in exposing vestiges of rationalism. Such vestiges are invariably identified as weaknesses, and correcting them is an integral part of White’s own philosophical project. But it is the consistency of empirical/experimental approach that draws the diverse philosophical explorations together. As White understands it, philosophical inquiry may be directed to a variety of institutions limited by nothing other than the range of human cultural activity. White partly identifies the range as culture and includes not only science but also religion, art, jurisprudence, and ethics under its umbrella.
In this regard, it is interesting that White distinguishes his definition of culture from that employed by “some anthropologists.” Unfortunately, he doesn’t indicate which anthropologists he has in mind; but at least part of what he does with culture has much in common with the work of anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz, for whom culture is a human activity carried on across a range as broad as the one explored by White (from “common sense” through religion, language, art, and science). It is worth pausing over what is effectively a bi-level definition of culture. On the one hand, as already mentioned, it is a container of institutions which are themselves social structures within which human activity occurs. While the actual range of institutions examined in this book is limited (the book, after all, is limited to a finite space and therefore cannot have infinite range), the logic of White’s argument (and Geertz’s as well) suggests that the potential variety is not. Societies can divide and group human activities in a dizzying variety of ways, and every such division and grouping is potentially an “institution” subject to philosophical investigation. Science as an institution is one of many, and there is no reason to privilege it over others.

To make this point, White spends considerable time demonstrating that James was doing much the same thing when he studied religion that Quine was doing when he studied natural science—and that Dewey or Goodman were doing when they studied art. But that draws attention to the other hand, which is the doing more than the containing. Certainly one strand of anthropological inquiry (most often associated with Geertz’s thick description, which he borrowed from Gilbert Ryle by way of Paul Ricoeur) approaches “culture” pragmatically, centering on action. Culture is what human beings do. That what we do is create and that what we create is an array of structures by which to organize and occupy the world (in the process of organizing and occupying it) is hardly surprising to philosophers steeped in the psychology of William James. But this is singularly important to White, and it is critically important to pragmatism as a philosophical enterprise—to the point of rendering “holistic pragmatism” (and perhaps also “prophetic pragmatism”) redundant.

The pragmatist is engaged in culture, and that engagement can never be the engagement of a detached observer. Human inquiry into culture is a cultural activity, and every cultural activity both participates in and transforms culture. White’s argument, which draws heavily on Duhem, is that this participation and transformation is a transformation of the whole. All the parts are interconnected, so changing one changes all. This brings to mind another anthropologist, Gregory Bateson, and his attention to systems theory (which has, in turn, been particularly attentive to Peirce). The interconnectedness of systems results in a certain circularity. Knowing is an action in which a subject engages, and action changes the object of the subject’s knowing. Hence White’s emphasis on epistemology—and his description of a pragmatic epistemology that is empirical and experimental. There is not an “essence” to be apprehended or by which to judge the adequacy of knowledge. There is a world in which to be engaged, and the engagement may be tested experimentally. This leads in White (as in other pragmatists) to an equation of “truth” with “utility” that can be misleading if one simply assumes that the meaning of “utility” is self-evident. Utility, understood in the context of a pragmatic epistemology, is experimental, and it points to the provisional, circular, and active character of knowledge. White’s empiricism (like that of James and Dewey) asserts a necessary connection between knowledge and experience—and this leads to a confrontation with strictly analytic philosophy (because it suggests that strictly analytic is not possible, since the distinction between synthetic and analytic is not strict).

That last point is what leads to one of White’s most interesting moves, the suggestion that a number of important analytic philosophers in the American tradition (Goodman, Quine, and Tarski, for example)
“matured” out of merely analytic philosophy into something more closely resembling pragmatism. Coupled with this suggestion is the equally interesting one that even Bertrand Russell inclined to holistic pragmatism when he was most consistently anti-rationalist. This makes for an important argument about empiricism, which has often been associated with positivism. For White (as for James before him), the most radically empiricist approach is not positivist at all--certainly not narrowly positivist.

White’s resistance to every attempt to narrow the field of philosophical inquiry is characteristic of American philosophy in the pragmatist tradition, which took root outside academic philosophy and has, at times, continued to thrive there. While White identifies thoroughly academic roots in his prologue, he bridges two schools and takes up pragmatism’s eclectic range of subject matters. Formally, this leads him to reject the traditional understanding of “science” as a body of knowledge. The rejection (again, characteristic of pragmatism) collapses art (traditionally understood as a method) and science, shifting attention from the subject matter to the practice of knowing. For White, this begins early in the simultaneous influence of Dewey and G.E. Moore. Moore argued that the philosopher should arrive at truths that are analytic and not dependent on experience. But White, along with Nelson Goodman (who begins under the influence of C.I. Lewis) and W.V. Quine (who begins under the influence of Rudolph Carnap), “came to think that the philosopher’s task is an empirical enterprise requiring an examination of how we do and should use language rather than an effort to decompose concepts” (ix). While acknowledging the influence of one of the most important figures in Anglo-American analytic philosophy, White understands his own philosophical development as undercutting the foundation of that philosophical approach. And the development depends on the other early influence, Dewey, with which he begins. White credits his study of Dewey and Holmes as turning him toward cultural history, epistemically uniting the historian and the philosopher in him. “Epistemically” is the key, because, while expanding the field of philosophical inquiry, White narrows its methodology, drawing on the epistemological gradualism of Dewey and the epistemological holism of Tarski. For White, “Moorian analysis of concepts” appeared to be “a remnant of classical rationalism from whose influence even James and Dewey did not wholly escape” (x). But, because they partly escaped, they pointed the way for White, who gradually shed the vestiges of rationalism and came to see “that Dewey was right to claim that much of the history of philosophy had been a fruitless quest for certainty” (xi). Under the influence of Moore, White focuses on language; but, under the influence of Dewey, he shifts his attention from concepts to the practice of language. He proceeds in conversation with Quine, Goodman, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and John Rawls; and he does it with the soul of an historian as well as the soul of a philosopher. What this means is that the quest for a fixed body of knowledge corresponding to the “essence” of truth is abandoned in favor of an ongoing philosophical practice--in traditional terms, an “art,” not a “science.” But, in the best tradition of pragmatism, White is convinced that science itself is a practice, not a body or bodies of knowledge. Truth has more to do with methodology than content. And this leads to methodological monism (19ff) that draws its unity from the practitioner as well as the practice: “a whole thinker subjects a heterogeneous stock of opinions to a test in which logical consistency, and conformity to both experience and desire, is to be taken into account” (22). Taking both experience and desire into account along with logical consistency and the practice of a unifying subject results in “a methodological monism that applies to logic, physics, ethics, and esthetics” (44).

White locates the roots of holistic pragmatism in the “regularity” theory of Hume and Mill taken up by Hempel and Popper in the twentieth century (77). But these roots are traced through Dewey and (perhaps surprisingly) Hegel (25) as well as Wittgenstein--particularly his understanding of language as “a form of life” (62). The single most important name in White’s genealogy of holistic pragmatism, though, is
Duhem. It is Duhem who points him to wholeness as a criterion in historical study; and Duhem also plays an important role in alerting him to the significance of interest across the boundary between chronicle and history (92). Neither chronicle nor history is detached from the interest of the historian, and neither is isolated from the whole. While no single account, chronicle or history, can encompass the whole, any legitimate account will be conscious of its connection to both. This enables White to criticize accounts that exclude or deny events in the service of particular ideologies without implying that there is some sort of objective account detached from the interest of the historian to be judged by an equally detached picture of truth. In his philosophical account of history as in his survey of philosophical accounts of cultural institutions, White looks for unity in the inquiring subject and her or his methodology. This is evident in his discussion of the historian’s practice, but it is also evident in the approval with which he cites Goodman’s turn from “What is art? to “When is art?” The shift from “what” to “when” is a shift from “substance” (or the illusion of substance) to the practicing subject, and that is critical to pragmatism as White understands it.

White’s expansive assessment of the field hangs together because of his consistent epistemological focus, a focus that keeps leading him back to a practicing subject. Art is what artists do. Science is what scientists do. Philosophy is what philosophers do. And culture is what humans do. Near the beginning, White asserts that “cultural philosophy or philosophy of culture is more inclusive than philosophy of science because the latter is a study of only one cultural institution and therefore coordinate with the studies of other institutions that make up a culture or a civilization” (xiii). By the end, a whole series of those coordinate studies have been brought to our attention; and what ties them together is the human practice common to all--rule-governed practice the regularities of which lend themselves to systematic reflection even as they defy containment in the kind of system with which rationalism (at its most extreme in Hegel) has been obsessed. Systematic reflection on those regularities, ranging across the whole field of human activity, is philosophy of culture, an evolving practice in which reflection and experience are reciprocally related. And that, open-ended and unfinished as it is, may indeed be, as White suggests, philosophy enough.

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