Review of “Truth and Justification”

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Richard Rorty tells us “most Anglophone philosophers still do not take Hegel seriously.” He continues, “… the rise of what Brandom and McDowell refer to as their ‘Pittsburg School of neo-Hegelians’ may force them. For this school must still pass over from its Kantian to its Hegelian moment.” Habermas’s Truth and Justification is a not so gentle challenge to the spirit of Pittsburg neo-Hegelianism. Habermas is especially uneasy with its emphasis on discursive practices and, its sequela, an epistemic conception of truth. It is well known that Habermas himself defended a discursive view, and the implications he here identifies, until the late 1990s. Qualifying his own transformation, Habermas traces his philosophical development, noting with some restrained approbation, the publication of Rorty’s seminal, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature. Habermas writes:

When I responded to critiques of Knowledge and Human Interests in the appendix to the paperback addition in 1973, the turn toward a postempiricist philosophy of science had already been initiated by Thomas Kuhn. However, I had not yet fully realized the philosophical implications of a consistent contextualism. Only six years later Richard Rorty precipitated a pragmatic turn in epistemology, in which, despite all our differences, I was able to discern some of my own intentions (p. 9).

Habermas thinks that the pragmatic turn transformed Kant’s transcendental problematic. Much of this book is a serious rethinking of the so-called transcendental problem after pragmatism. Kant, Habermas writes, “ensured the status of the unavoidable conditions of the possibility of cognition as rational and atemporal” (p. 9). Neo-Hegelianism attacks the idealist background set aside to guarantee objectivity; without the self-transcendent guarantees, only an “anthropocentrically contingent and perspectively curtailed view of the world” is spared. Defending his Kantian intuitions, Habermas thinks “… the difference between the world and what is innerwordly, which is crucial for the architectonic of his [Kant’s] theory, is blurred” (p. 9). Sympathetic to aspects of the pragmatic turn, Habermas sets out to defend both (a) an ontological assumption about a mind-independent world and (b) a nonepistemic conception of truth. However, Habermas wishes to preserve an epistemic conception of normative rightness in the space of moral and legal theory. Much of the book is confined to an analysis of detranscentalized Kantian position; in the last Chapter, “The Relationship between Theory and Practice Revisited,” Habermas discusses the constitutive nature of our moral orientation and how we determine the conditions for rational judgment formation and the reasonableness of moral action. Habermas wonders at the fate of our realist intuitions against the linguistic turn. Noting the appeal behind the move from a
Kantian to Hegelian moment, he thinks that our ontology faces a “contextualist challenge.” We are left wondering “whether any sense of context-independent validity can be salvaged from the concept of truth” (249).

We are treated to eight essays in this volume. Each can be read as a stand-alone piece, but taken together they reveal a forceful defense of a “justification-transcendent standard for orienting ourselves by context-independent truth-claims” (254). “Realism after the Linguistic Turn,” the first essay, sets the tone; taken with the second essay, “Hermeneutic and Analytic Philosophy: Two Complementary Versions of the Linguistic Turn,” one gets a compelling appraisal of how language went public, and how, historically, the so-called analytic-continental divide came to characterize twentieth century philosophy. Demonstrating grace and mastery, Habermas is able to move about the divide without difficulty. The other essays include: “From Kant’s ‘Ideas’ of Pure reason to the ‘Idealizing’ Presuppositions of Communicative Action: Reflections on the Detranscendentalized ‘Use of Reason’,” “From Kant to Hegel: On Robert Brandom’s Pragmatic Philosophy of Language,” “From Kant to Hegel and Back Again: The Move Toward Detranscendentalization,” “Norms and Values: On Hilary Putnam’s Kantian Pragmatism,” “Rightness versus Truth: On the Sense of Normative Validity in Moral Judgments and Norms,” and “The Relationship Between Theory and Practice Revisited.”

Habermas, in this volume, is a philosopher of record. His discussions of Brandom’s very important Making it Explicit and of Putnam, of Humboldt’s central place along side Frege in the rise of our linguistic orientation, capture nicely the new divide; we are no longer analytical and continental philosophers—though, of course, we are. Rather, if Habermas is correct, our divisions are preserved by whether our affinities are Kantian or Hegelian.

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