



# Response to Jeffrey Stout

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## 1. Introduction

**I think that every author dreams** of the ideal reader—someone who not only reads carefully but has the hermeneutic generosity to interpret the letter and the spirit of the author’s texts.<sup>1</sup> Such a reader may even discover themes that the author himself fails to fully appreciate. Jeffrey Stout is such a reader. I learned a great deal about my work that I had not fully appreciated until I read his article. So I am enormously grateful for his subtlety and thoroughness in examining writings that span fifty years. I also think that his (gentle) criticisms help to advance the discussion of basic philosophic issues that concern both of us. When the Editors of the *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* asked me if I wanted to reply to his critical discussion of *The Pragmatic Turn*, my initial response was: “I agree with almost everything Stout says.” His detailed analysis is not only perceptive about my own Hegelian pragmatism, but is a *tour de force* in his reconstruction of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. I am flattered to be described as “a metaphysically austere, praxis-oriented, democratic *Hegelian*” (SP 190). But in the spirit in which Stout wrote his study, I want to respond by focusing on some of his criticisms and the few issues that I find perplexing.

Before turning to these, let me say something about how Hegel (and especially the *Phenomenology*) came to shape my thinking. In my first year of graduate school (1953) at Yale, I was free to select my courses. I decided to take a seminar on Plato because Plato had been my first love in college—the thinker who seduced me into the study of philosophy. I also took a course with Carl Hempel, who taught at Yale before joining the faculty at Princeton. Although I had been an undergraduate at Chicago and Columbia, I had never read a word of Hegel. As a new graduate student I thought it might be desirable to learn something about Hegel. I decided to enroll in an advanced seminar on the *Phenomenology* taught by George Schrader. That seminar was a

traumatic and transformative experience—and it changed my life. It was traumatic because initially I found Hegel’s text completely opaque. I didn’t understand a word and felt intimidated because other students appeared to discuss the text intelligently. (Dick Rorty also participated in the seminar.) I was terrified about giving a seminar report. But somehow when I had to give an oral presentation on Hegel’s discussion of the *Antigone*, I had a breakthrough. I began to grasp what Hegel was “up to”—and the experience changed my life. (This was a time when there was barely any serious interest in Hegel in the Anglophone philosophical world.) When I decided to write my dissertation on John Dewey—it was my experience (*Erfahrung*) with Hegel that enabled me to understand Dewey. I came to pragmatism through the study of Hegel just as Dewey came to his pragmatism through Hegel. I also worked with John E. Smith, who not only had an appreciation for American pragmatism but had written a dissertation on Josiah Royce—and was thoroughly familiar with Hegel. Because Paul Weiss, the co-editor of *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, was such a dynamic teacher I was exposed to Peirce’s work. I also took a course on Hegel’s *Science of Logic* with Weiss. A few years later Wilfrid Sellars joined the Yale faculty, where I attended his seminars as a young assistant professor. When I wrote *Praxis and Action* during the late 1960s, the book was based on several years of teaching Hegel and post-Hegelian philosophy. I had come to the view that post-Hegelian philosophy—including pragmatism, Marxism, existentialism, and analytic philosophy—could be read as a development of (and/or) a strong reaction to Hegel. I have increasingly come to believe (like my friend Dick Rorty) that Anglophone philosophy has moved from a Humean to a Kantian to a Hegelian style of thinking. Since those early days I have continued to teach courses on Hegel (most frequently the *Phenomenology* but occasionally the *Science of Logic*). So from my earliest experiences in graduate school, Hegel has been with me. I fully agree with Stout when he says that the pragmatism I endorse is a version of “Hegelian pragmatism.”

In mapping the “dialectical terrain” surrounding my pragmatism, Stout adopts the procedure of developing a “reconstructive interpretation” of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Although I am very sympathetic with his reconstruction—one that shows the influence of Brandom’s reading of Hegel—I also think Stout downplays strands in the *Phenomenology* (and Hegel’s other works) that cannot be completely ignored. But I will turn to this issue later. Those who know the *Phenomenology* will discover that Stout draws from each of the major sections of the *Phenomenology*—“Consciousness,” “Self-Consciousness,” “Reason,” and “Spirit”—to illuminate and criticize some of my claims and arguments.

Because I agree with so much of what Stout says, I want to focus on his criticisms—sometimes to express my perplexity and sometimes my agreement with his critical remarks.

## 2. Peirce and Fallibilism

Peirce, as everyone knows, is a complex and not always a consistent thinker—especially if we take account of his extensive unpublished manuscripts. But I do think that on the issue of fallibilism Peirce is clear and consistent. I also agree with Hilary Putnam when he writes that what he finds attractive in pragmatism “is a certain group of theses, theses which can be and indeed were argued very differently by different philosophers with different concerns.”<sup>2</sup> And two of the theses he lists are

(1) *antiskepticism*: pragmatists hold that *doubt* requires justification just as much as belief (recall Peirce’s famous distinction between ‘real’ and ‘philosophical’ doubt); (2) *fallibilism*: pragmatists hold that there is never a metaphysical guarantee to be had that such-and-such a belief will never need revision (that one can be fallibilistic and antiskeptical is perhaps *the* unique insight of American pragmatism).<sup>3</sup>

The best succinct formula for characterizing Peircian fallibilism is a variation on Sellars’ famous claim.

For empirical knowledge, like its sophisticated extension, science, is rational, not because it has a foundation but because it is a self-correcting enterprise which can put any claim in jeopardy, though not all at once.<sup>4</sup>

(Peirce would say this about all inquiry.) Peirce—and indeed every pragmatist—would endorse this claim. But let me turn directly to Peirce. Stout says that “fallibility and dubitability are not, however, the same thing, and neither Peirce nor Bernstein are especially precise about the connections between them” (SP 197). I find this perplexing because in *The Pragmatic Turn*, I discuss Peirce’s critical common-sensism and cite the passage where Peirce says “what has been indubitable one day has often been proved on the morrow to be false.”<sup>5</sup>

Critical Common-Sensism admits that there not only are indubitable propositions but also that there are indubitable inferences. In one sense, anything evident is indubitable; but the propositions and inferences which Critical Common-Sensism holds to be original, in the sense one cannot ‘go behind’ them . . . are indubitable in the sense of being acritical.<sup>6</sup>

Peirce makes an even stronger claim. Insofar as he maintains that we must begin the study of philosophy (or any inquiry) “with all the prejudices which we actually have”—prejudices or prejudgments that cannot be “dispelled by a maxim for they are things which it does not occur to us *can* be questioned” then we cannot avoid *taking* some things as indubitable.<sup>7</sup> But what we *take* to be indubitable can be challenged, rejected, or modified in the course of inquiry. This is also true of perceptual judgments. “We all know, only too well, how terribly insistent perception may be; and yet, for all that, in its most insistent degrees, it may be utterly false.”<sup>8</sup> Consequently, indubitability is compatible with fallibility because further inquiry and further evidence or reasoning may require revising our *indubitable beliefs*. Furthermore, there is no such thing as an *incorrigible* knowledge claim (for Peirce, like Quine, this includes mathematical and logical claims). There is no knowledge claim that cannot, *in principle*, be questioned and revised. In this respect all knowledge claims are corrigible. Stout affirms that for Peirce the degree of confidence—even what we might call the absolute degree of confidence—in a proposition, belief, opinion, or hypothesis is not any guarantee of its truth. So contrary to Stout’s claim I believe that Peirce is clear about the relation of indubitability, fallibility, and corrigibility.<sup>9</sup> Employing an expression that Stout uses to characterize Hegel, Peirce is clearly committed to “strong corrigibilism.”

In some of my writings, I have—in a pragmatic spirit—extended the notion of fallibility. Fallibilism for me is *not* simply an epistemological doctrine; it is an ethical and political *virtue*. A fallibilistic mentality—willingness to listen, to imagine the situation of someone who is really different, to open oneself to radical challenges, and having the courage and intellectual modesty to change one’s mind when reasoning and evidence demands it are features of this virtue.<sup>10</sup> In *The Pragmatic Turn*, I also distinguish Peirce’s fallibilism from epistemological skepticism. “Peirce carefully distinguishes between our knowing ‘things as they are’ (which he does not doubt) and being ‘absolutely certain of doing so in any special case’ (which is never completely justified)” (PT 36).

Stout asks, “How different, then, is Peirce’s corrigibilist account of inquiry from Hegel’s account of spirit’s quest for an adequately capacious standard of cognitive and practical success?” (SP 199). I will defer answering this question until I turn to the explicit discussion of Hegel. But before moving on I want to say something about Stout’s invoking a standard paradigm of knowledge and truth. “To say that *S* knows that *p* is plausibly taken to imply that *p* is true. But if *p* is true, as opposed to merely being taken to be true, it is hard to see how *p* could also be prone to error (liable to be false)” (SP 198). Now I certainly do not want to deny this standard way of conceiving of the relation between knowl-

edge, truth, and error. But I also think that philosophers' obsession with this paradigm can be (and has been) deeply misleading. Every scientist knows that what he claims to know will most likely be revised, modified, or abandoned in light of further inquiry. So, *strictly speaking*, what he claims to know *may* turn out to be false. To draw the skeptical conclusion that consequently there is no such thing as scientific knowledge (because any knowledge claim may turn out to be false) is hyperbolic. There is a more pragmatic and perfectly legitimate way of speaking of knowledge that takes it to be provisional and fallible. And when we discover that what we claim to know is not, *strictly speaking*, true we have a variety of options. We may say that what we thought we knew was only *approximately* true, or that we need to revise our knowledge, or perhaps even abandon our knowledge in favor of a better account, etc. We don't just say that we never really had any knowledge because "genuine" knowledge cannot be false. I also think that this more pragmatic way of speaking about provisional knowledge and truth is perfectly compatible with the way in which Hegel speaks of *Wahrheit* (truth), which he contrasts with *Gewissheit* (certainty).

### 3. The "Myth of the Given" and Two Senses of "Immediately Present To Me"

Stout thinks that I run together two distinct senses of "immediately present to me."

In the first sense, I am immediately aware that the object before me is a desk if my awareness of this is noninferential. . . . In the second sense of immediate awareness, I would be immediately aware that the object before me is a desk only if my awareness of this is something that I could have *independently* of everything else I know, including the various things I learned while acquiring competence as a speaker of English. (SP 203)

Stout is referring to the distinction that Sellars makes in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*.

Sellars differentiates, then, between (a) the question of whether all judgments, including perceptual judgments, are undertaken as inferred conclusions and (b) the question whether someone could make any perceptual judgment without first having acquired a fairly extensive set of inferential and linguistic capacities. Sellars gives negative answers to both questions. (SP 204)

I want to be absolutely clear that *I agree and endorse* this distinction between these two senses of immediacy. And I agree that having direct immediate knowledge in the first sense *presupposes* the capacity to master inferential processes. Let's call the first sense, "immediacy A,"

and the second, “immediacy B.” (“Immediacy B” would be the *counterfactual* claim that I can have immediate A knowledge *without* also “first having to acquire a fairly extensive set of inferential and linguistic capacities.”) There *is* immediate (“immediacy A”) first-person direct non-inferential knowledge. I don’t infer that I have a toothache or that I am seeing red spots (or a desk) before me. But this immediate knowledge *presupposes* the ability to master a set of concepts and inferential linguistic capacities. Consequently there is *no* immediate knowledge in the sense of “immediacy B.” I don’t confuse these two senses of immediacy. Nor do I think that Peirce is guilty of this confusion. This distinction between two senses of immediacy is implicit in Peirce’s critique of intuitive knowledge in his “Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man.” Peirce shows that immediacy A presupposes the capacity to master inferential processes. Peirce, like Sellars, gives an account of how we learn to make direct immediate (immediacy A) first person reports. When Peirce distinguishes between *having* an intuition and *knowing* intuitively that it is an intuition he is, in effect, distinguishing between immediacy A and immediacy B. He is telling us that having direct immediate knowledge (immediacy A) does not mean or entail that I can have this knowledge without having mastered inferential processes. Peirce is clearly criticizing what Sellars calls “the myth of the given”—or, to cite Stout’s paraphrase, Peirce rejects “committing oneself to immediate awareness in the second sense, immediacy as *self-sufficient* or *independent intelligibility*” (SP 204). In short, I do not see any difference that makes a difference among Hegel, Peirce, Sellars, and myself on this understanding of two senses of immediacy, although I think Sellars is particularly illuminating in making this distinction fully explicit.

My agreement with Sellars on this point does not entail accepting Sellars’ analysis of language entry and language exit transitions—a thesis accepted by Brandom and apparently by Stout. I think that this linguistic approach to entry and exist moves (which is supposed to be necessary in order to account for perception and action) needs to be *supplemented* by the more robust conception of habituation and experience that is so prominent in the classical pragmatists. I will explain this more fully when I consider Brandom’s Hegelian rational pragmatism.

#### **4. Hegel, Brandom, and Pragmatism**

Clearly, Stout is heavily indebted to Brandom’s interpretation of Hegel and pragmatism. He notes that although I discuss Brandom in my examination of the pragmatic understanding of objectivity and truth, I

have not yet fully discussed Brandom's understanding of Hegel and pragmatism. He is right. This is not the occasion for a full-scale discussion of Brandom's masterful achievement and his version of a Hegelian rational pragmatism. I have an enormous respect for Brandom's achievement and his contribution to an understanding of how norms are implicit in discursive social practices. But I want to indicate a few basic reservations about Brandom's interpretation of classical pragmatism and Hegel. The first concerns Brandom's interpretation of the classical pragmatists—especially Peirce and Dewey. I think Brandom has a blind spot about classical American pragmatism.<sup>11</sup> He reads the American pragmatists through Rortian spectacles. I have never understood why Brandom fails to see that Peirce anticipated his own project of a normative pragmatics and an inferential semantics. I find it perverse to suggest that the classical pragmatists (especially Peirce) recognized only “instrumental norms” and not “rational cognitive norms.” Let me quote one of my favorite passages from Peirce (a passage that might have been written by Brandom). When Peirce explains what he means by the *summum bonum*—the highest admirable ideal—he writes:

So, then, the essence of Reason is such that its being never can have been completely perfected. It always must be in a state of incipency, of growth. It is like the character of a man which consists in the ideas that he will conceive and in the efforts that he will make, and which only develops as the occasions actually arise. . . . This development of Reason consists, you will observe, in embodiment, that is, in manifestation. The creation of the universe, which did not take place during a certain busy week, in the year 4004 B.C. but is going on today and never will be done, is this very development of Reason. I do not see how one can have a more satisfying ideal of the admirable than the development of Reason so understood. The one thing whose admirableness is not due to an ulterior Reason is Reason itself comprehended in all its fullness, so far as we can comprehend it. *Under this conception, the ideal of conduct will be to execute our little function in the operation of the creation by giving a hand toward rendering the world more reasonable whenever, as the slang is, it is “up to us” to do so.*<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, it was Peirce who suggested a hierarchy of the normative disciplines where logic is dependent on ethics and ethics is dependent on aesthetics (that is, an ideal that is admirable in itself). For Peirce, like Brandom, semantics must answer to pragmatics. Peirce even anticipates Brandom's notion of “material inferences.” I certainly do not want to suggest that everything in Brandom is anticipated by Peirce or the other American pragmatists. This is simply false. But there is more continuity between the classical pragmatists—especially Peirce—and

Brandom's "rational pragmatism"—or as I prefer to say, a "reasonable pragmatism"—than Brandom acknowledges.

But I also want to make the opposite sort of objection. I think that Peirce and Dewey are closer to the spirit of Hegel than Brandom. To put it bluntly, some aspects of Brandom's Hegelian pragmatism are too Kantian! Let me explain. As I read Hegel, there is a whole series of rigid distinctions bequeathed by Kant that troubled Hegel (as well as the other German idealists). Not just the famous distinctions between concepts and intuitions and phenomena and noumena, but also the distinctions between freedom and nature, reason and passion, reason and nature, culture and nature, human and nonhuman animals. Hegel does *not* seek to obliterate or deny these distinctions, but rather he seeks to understand them and to show how they can be *aufgehoben* (which means that they are at once affirmed, negated, and overcome). The classical pragmatists (especially Dewey) are Hegelian in this sense. But Brandom tends to reify such distinctions as sapience *and* sentience, culture *and* nature, reason *and* nature, reason *and* cause. In part this is because he focuses on the problem of demarcation—on what distinguishes us as *rational* beings—beings that operate in the space of reasons; beings who have the ability to give and ask for reasons; beings who can engage in deontic scorekeeping and who can take responsibility for their commitments and entitlements. This is, of course, admirable but it is more Kantian than Hegelian in spirit. Throughout his life Hegel struggled with the relation of nature and spirit—with showing how they could be reconciled. But there is hardly anything about what Hegel calls "nature" in Brandom. Furthermore, one of the limitations of much of the recent Anglophone Hegelian turn in philosophy is that it rarely gets around to treating the issues that preoccupied Hegel in his *Philosophy of Right*, *Philosophy of History*, *Philosophy of Religion*, and *Aesthetics*—issues that also dominate the final sections of the *Phenomenology*. There has been an exaggerated emphasis on epistemological issues—the type of issues that Hegel raises in his introduction to the *Phenomenology* rather than the issues he raises in his preface. (To a lesser extent there has also been concern with issues of Hegel's practical philosophy.) Brandom takes pride that the concept of experience plays no role in *Making It Explicit*. But to erase experience (*Erfahrung*) from Hegel and from the classical pragmatists is to eviscerate them.<sup>13</sup> I fully realize that (at times) the appeal to "experience," especially in James and Dewey, is so vague and all-inclusive that it is difficult to assign the word any determinate meaning. But I believe that Rorty (and Brandom follows him) did a great deal of harm when he sought to abandon the classical pragmatic appeal to experience in favor of the linguistic turn.<sup>14</sup> The pragmatic challenge today is to show



how the linguistic turn can be *integrated* into the understanding of experience such that it takes advantage of the insights of the classical pragmatists concerning a richer conception of experience and habituation that is *not* limited to narrow epistemological concerns.

In some of Brandom's more recent work—especially in the introduction to *Perspectives on Pragmatism*—he gives a more nuanced account of the classical American pragmatists. He acknowledges that they were more concerned with continuity than with the demarcation of our rational conceptual capacities. And although he suggests that we can combine a concern with continuity with demarcation, he really doesn't show in any detail how this can be done. His bias is in favor of demarcation. Like Hegel, Peirce and Dewey are much more focused on the continuity that we find in experience and nature. Even when Dewey “drifted away” from Hegel and turned to Darwin, it is the continuity throughout nature that he emphasized. And Peirce himself coined a special term for his doctrine of continuity throughout the universe—*syncretism*. Continuity is not incompatible with acknowledging that there are distinctive features of human beings involved in perception and in intelligent (reasonable) action. The classical pragmatists are fully aware that *human* communication and signification mark significant differences between human animals and other animals. Because Kantians and even Kantian Hegelians like Brandom are so concerned with demarcation they neglect explaining *how* human beings are continuous with the rest of nature. If we accept Brandom's approach to the analysis of *concepts* and *inferences*, then we are compelled to say that “dumb animals” (nonhuman animals) simply do *not* possess concepts. Or if we do ascribe concepts and inferences to them it is only in a derivative sense. What gets closed off here is the possibility of developing a more *generic* concept of concepts that would enable us to see both the continuity and the differences between human and nonhuman animals. We need to rethink what we mean by concepts and inferences in a way that allows us to understand the sense in which some nonhuman animals have concepts and even the ability to draw inferences—without ascribing to them the linguistic conceptual capacities that we (humans) possess. Brandom's great strength is in his systematic analysis of human rationality, but his great weakness is illuminating how human rational beings are related to the rest of nature, including other living beings.<sup>15</sup>

In this regard, a remark Stout cites from *Praxis and Action* takes on a special significance. I wrote that Hegel is “radically challenging the very framework within which the idealist/materialist dichotomy arises.”<sup>16</sup> And the passage continues: “Hegel's philosophy might just as well be called a form of ‘materialism’, for it is just as true and basic to his view of the world to realize that our access to *Geist* and its dynamics is in

and through its concrete manifestations in the world.”<sup>17</sup> I affirmed this in 1971 and continue to affirm it. Now, despite the best efforts of the German idealists and their interpreters, “idealism” still carries the strong connotation that everything is “really” mental or somehow “in” the mind. The unspoken presupposition here is that there is a *clear* distinction—an epistemological or ontological dichotomy—between what is “in” the mind and what is “outside” or “external” to the mind. This Cartesian distinction is even deeply entrenched in our current ordinary language. So if Hegel is an idealist, *presumably* he must be claiming that everything is “really” mental—“really” in one big mind. It doesn’t help that Baillie translated the *Phänomenologie des Geistes* as the *Phenomenology of Mind*. But to think of Hegel as an idealist *in this sense* is a gross caricature. And I am sure Stout would agree. Both in the *Phenomenology* and the *Logic* Hegel brilliantly exposes the instability (the contradictions) of this talk of “inside the mind” and “outside the mind.” He is a relentless critic of *this* understanding of the idealist/materialist dichotomy. Positively stated, Hegel is always showing us how spirit (*Geist*) is *embodied* in the concrete social practices of living human beings. Even Marx grasped this Hegelian point in his famous “Theses on Feuerbach.” In “Thesis 8,” he writes: “All social life is essentially *practical*. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and the comprehension of this practice.” And in “Thesis 9,” he criticizes “perceptual materialism”—what we would today call “reductive materialism”; “the highest point attained by perceptual materialism, that is, materialism that does not comprehend sensuousness as practical activity, is the view of separate individuals and civil society.”<sup>18</sup>

When I say that Hegel radically challenges the standard framework of thinking about idealism and materialism I mean that he completely rejects the dichotomy of what is “in the mind” as contrasted with a material physical reality that is “outside the mind.” When we grasp Hegel’s radical challenge we realize the standard distinction between “idealism” and “materialism” is—to use a Hegelian turn of phrase—a distinction that is really no distinction. There is no *Geist* unless it is concretely manifested and *embodied*.

Here again, I find Brandom deficient in his Hegelianism. Despite the significance of social practices for him, he is primarily focused on *discursive* social practices—not bodily practices—not the practices that are involved in the conflicts and struggles of human beings. When he seeks to give an account of the relation of reason to perception and action in terms of linguistic entry and exit moves, he gives a two-ply theory of perception (and a corresponding two-ply theory of action).<sup>19</sup> For Brandom,

the ability to make non-inferential perceptual judgments is “the product of two distinguishable sorts of abilities: the capacity reliably to discriminate behaviorally between different sorts of stimuli, and the capacity to take up a position in the game of giving and asking for reasons”<sup>20</sup> I find nothing like this “two-ply account” in Hegel or the classical pragmatists. On the contrary, this dichotomy between the behavioral discrimination of physical stimuli *and* taking a position in the game of giving and asking for reasons is just the sort of dichotomy that Hegel and the classical pragmatists sought to deconstruct.

### 5. The Reconstruction of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* and Absolute Knowing

Stout says that his interpretation of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* “is reconstructive in roughly the same sense” that Strawson’s *The Bounds of Sense* is a reconstruction of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. Consequently, Stout doesn’t “hesitate to employ the somewhat anachronistic idioms of *normativity* and *language games* in explicating Hegel’s claims” (SP 239n.10). Stout combines this reconstructive interpretation with a shift to historical interpretation when he thinks I mistakenly criticize Hegel’s idealism and conception of absolute knowing. (I will explain why I translate Hegel’s *Wissen* as “knowing” rather than “knowledge.”)

I am not convinced that there really is a clear distinction between reconstructive and historical interpretation. A reconstructive interpretation must have some fidelity to the text it purports to interpret—even if there are claims in the text that are rejected. And I doubt whether there is any historical interpretation that isn’t in some sense “reconstructive.” At best the distinction between a “reconstructive” and a “historical” interpretation is a fluid and pragmatic one. But there is also something a bit tricky about “reconstructive interpretation.” One might say (as Gadamer does) that any interpretation of a text is reconstructive *insofar as* an interpreter implicitly or explicitly highlights what he takes to be important, relevant, or “living” in the text that is being interpreted. The question can always be asked whether a specific reconstruction is illuminating and fair to the text that is being interpreted. This is always a matter of practical judgment; there is no *algorithm* for making such a judgment. Such a practical judgment is similar to Aristotle’s φρόνησις. I find Stout’s reconstruction of the *Phenomenology* extremely attractive and appealing. At times I felt like exclaiming, “If that is what Hegel is really saying then I completely agree with him.” Stout’s Hegel is “a card-carrying” pragmatist. But is this really Hegel? I don’t quite think so.

There is one issue that I want to get out of the way immediately. When Peirce and Dewey develop their critiques of “absolute certainty” this has *nothing* to do with what Hegel calls “absolute knowing.” But what *precisely* Hegel does mean by “absolute knowing” and “absolute spirit” has been, and continues to be, vigorously debated, right up to the present. The one point that I think is “absolutely” clear—or should be clear—is that *Das absolute Wissen* does *not* mean a final, closed, static system in which everything is encompassed and internally related. Hegel is not subscribing to the caricature that is all too frequently ascribed to him—especially by hostile critics. When the classical pragmatists (Peirce, James, and Dewey) are critical of absolutism, it is frequently the British idealists and their American compatriots, like Josiah Royce, that are the object of their criticism, not Hegel. The reason why I strongly prefer to translate “*absolute Wissen*” as *absolute knowing* rather than *absolute knowledge* is because “knowing” conveys what Hegel stresses—the *activity* of knowing (and self-knowing).

Stout concedes that “the only thing [about the *Phenomenology*] that causes more perplexity than its double beginning is its disputed ending” (SP 230). Stout (closely following Brandom) defends a “reconstructive interpretation” where the epistemological upshot of the *Phenomenology* “is that only a holistic, corrigibilist, diachronic conception of standards, which takes the cognitive and practical significance that subjects and objects possess to be fully intelligible only within a historical account of social practices, can withstand criticism on its own terms” (SP 230–1). The absolute, Stout affirms,

is whatever turns out to be warranted as the self-sufficient standard of belief and action, and that is just the radically expanded epistemic and social context within which subjects perceive and distinguish objects, make inferences, act in the world, attribute authority and responsibility to one another, and revise their conceptual and normative traditions. The most important epistemological lesson one learns when one attains absolute knowledge is, according to Hegel as I read him, that the true standard manifests itself in a corrective *process* in which all knowers and agents, all human beings, indeed all *objects* known to humankind, are either witting or unwitting participants. (SP 231)

Although the language here is indebted to Brandom (“attribute authority and responsibility,” “revise their conceptual and normative traditions”), the content of what Stout is affirming sounds like Peirce and Dewey—especially in their insistence on the openness of inquiry (as well as the standards for inquiry) to future criticism as well as the corrigibility of all validity claims. But is this really Hegel? It strikes me there is simply too much in Hegel (and too much in the *Phenomenology*)

that is incompatible with Stout's claims about Hegel's presumed "strong corrigibilism." Stout's Hegel begins to sound like a Hegel of the "bad" or "spurious" infinite. Hegel sharply distinguishes the bad infinite (*schlechte Unendliche*) from the "true" infinite (*wahrhafte Unendliche*). Many of Hegel's characterizations of the bad infinite sound just like Stout's interpretation of absolute knowing as a historically open process of corrigibility. What is lacking in this interpretation is the emphasis that Hegel places on reconciliation (*Versöhnung*).<sup>21</sup> Already in the preface to the *Phenomenology* Hegel announces:

The True is the whole. But the whole is nothing other than the essence consummating itself through its development. Of the Absolute it must be said that it is essentially a *result*, that only in the *end* is it what it truly is; and that precisely in this consists its nature, viz. to be actual, subject, the spontaneous becoming of itself.<sup>22</sup>

Or consider the following passage:

But the *goal* is as necessarily fixed for knowledge as the serial progression; it is the point where knowledge . . . finds itself, where concept corresponds to object and object to concept. Hence the progress towards this goal is also unhalting, and short of it no satisfaction is to be found at any of the stations on the way.<sup>23</sup>

Throughout the *Phenomenology* Hegel makes similar remarks. And if we also take account of Hegel's *Science of Logic* (especially his remarks about the absolute idea), then I find it impossible to 'reconcile' them with an interpretation of absolute knowing as a version of "strong corrigibilism." Furthermore, we need to carefully distinguish different *emphases* when we speak of "corrigibilism" (an ugly but useful word). It is certainly true that the *Phenomenology* is constructed so that there are cycles of movement from certainty (*Gewissheit*) to truth (*Wahrheit*). We (the *readers* of the *Phenomenology*) keep discovering that there is a disparity between what is *taken* to be certain and the truth that actually emerges. On Hegel's account, the truth of each *Gestalt* turns out to be an inversion (a contradiction) of what we initially took to be certain—but an inversion that moves us forward. *In this sense*, we can say that there is corrigibility insofar as the limitations (and falsity) of each *Gestalt* is corrected by the subsequent *Gestalt*—a process (or journey) that culminates in absolute knowing where we finally achieve the perspective where we can discern the truth and falsity that is implicit in each stage of the journey. But *this is not the sense* in which Peirce and the pragmatists are "strong corrigibilists." Peirce, who always prided himself as having a laboratory habit of mind, focuses on the self-corrective character of scientific inquiry that is checked by brute experience.

Peirce stresses the bruteness and obstinacy of experience—the ‘secondness’ of experience. Experience is our great teacher and experience teaches by surprises and disappointments. Hegel emphasizes the continual process of the self-diremption of *Geist* and the way in which this self-diremption is *aufgehoben*. Peirce and the pragmatists emphasize the way in which the brute character of experience and evidence compels us to correct our hypotheses and beliefs. This is a very different way of understanding the corrigibility of inquiry.

I find Stout’s pragmatic characterization of absolute knowing attractive, but as a “reconstructive interpretation” of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* I am extremely dubious because it ignores (and/or distorts) a good deal of what Hegel actually says. Even if we concede that the meaning of absolute knowing is open to interpretation, we can ask: What is it about Hegel’s text that has led so many thinkers (from the British absolute idealists and the American Josiah Royce, to the French thinkers, Jean Hyppolite and Jacques Derrida, to the German philosophers, Heidegger, Gadamer, and Habermas) to interpret the meaning of Hegel’s absolute in ways that are in flat contradiction to Stout’s “reconstructive interpretation”? I find it disingenuous to say that they all simply misinterpret Hegel.

In the end, I find myself in a paradoxical situation in regard to Stout. On *philosophical* grounds I can endorse a great deal of what he positively affirms—even though I have serious reservations about the extent to which he accepts Brandom’s discursive version of Hegelian rationalism. As I indicated, I think that the classical pragmatic emphasis on experience and habits (especially the habits that constitute social intelligence) is closer to the spirit and letter of Hegel than a pragmatism that focuses almost exclusively on the analysis of linguistic discursive practices *plus* reliable behavioral discriminative capacities. To claim that absolute knowing is a version of “strong corrigibilism” that has no final telos is to suggest that Hegel is—oxymoronically—a Hegelian of the bad infinite.<sup>24</sup> Ironically, we may want to say that “strong corrigibilism” is the “truth” *implicit* in the experiential journey of the *Phenomenology*, but then we must add that it is the “truth” that was made *explicit* by the classical pragmatists and not by Hegel.

Stout perceptively characterizes my philosophical style as conversational and he correctly says that “without a conversation that includes multiple voices, some truths that need to be taken into account will fail to gain a hearing” (SP 188). Jeffrey Stout is not only an ideal reader of my work but an ideal conversation partner. I hope that my response helps to further the conversation of issues that are central for a revitalized pragmatic philosophy for our time.

## NOTES

1. This is a response to Jeffrey Stout's review essay "The Spirit of Pragmatism: Bernstein's Variations on Hegelian Themes," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 33:1 (2012), pp. 185–246; hereafter SP, followed by page number.
2. Hilary Putnam, "Pragmatism and Moral Objectivity," in *Words and Life*, ed. James Conant (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 152.
3. *Ibid.*
4. See Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 79.
5. Charles Sanders Peirce, "Consequences of Critical Common-Sensism," in *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, vol. 5, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), p. 362; cited in Richard J. Bernstein, *The Pragmatic Turn* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), p. 34; henceforth PT, followed by page number.
6. Charles Sanders Peirce, "Issues of Pragmatism," in *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings 1893–1913*, vol. 2, ed. The Peirce Edition Project (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), p. 347.
7. Charles Sanders Peirce, "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities," in *The Essential Peirce*, vol. 1, ed. Nathan Houser and Christian Kloesel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), pp. 28–9.
8. Charles Sanders Peirce, "Telepathy and Perception," in *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, vol. 7, ed. Arthur W. Burks (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), p. 380; I quote this sentence in PT 50.
9. Sometimes the question is raised whether Peirce's claims about fallibilism are themselves fallible. In an unpublished manuscript written in 1913 addressing a "young reader," written a few months before his death, Peirce writes: "[S]ince of course my opinions, however cautiously I may have examined them, cannot be infallible, and presumably are denied by some writers, he is not to place any *implicit* faith in them, but only in so far as they recommend themselves to his own judgment, taking due account of both my fallibility and of his own inexperience in judging of such matters" (Charles Sanders Peirce, "An Essay toward Reasoning in Security and Uberty," in *The Essential Peirce*, vol. 2, p. 469).
10. I stress this aspect of fallibilism as an ethical and political virtue in *The Abuse of Evil: The Corruption of Politics and Religion Since 9/11* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), pp. 29–32.
11. Hilary Putnam forcefully shows how Brandom misinterprets the classical pragmatists. See Hilary Putnam, "Comment on Robert Brandom's Paper," in *Hilary Putnam: Pragmatism and Realism*, ed. James Conant and Urszula M. Zeglen (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 59–65.
12. Charles Sanders Peirce, "What Makes a Reasoning Sound?" in *The Essential Peirce*, vol. 2, p. 255; emphasis added.

13. In his introduction to *Perspectives on Pragmatism* Brandom does give an eloquent expression of what the classical pragmatists mean by experience, how it is not just input to a *learning*, but rather is learning—a kind of practical understanding. But as Steven Levine notes, he doesn't endorse this conception of experience, rather he translates it into his own vocabulary (Steven Levine, "Brandom's Pragmatism," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 48:2 [2012], p. 129). Sometimes Brandom tries to *domesticate* the pragmatic concept of *experience* by translating it into his own terms. "The pragmatist's conception of experience is recognizably a naturalized version of the rational process of critically winnowing and actively extrapolating commitments, according to the material incompatibility and consequence relations they stand in to one another" (Robert Brandom, *Perspectives on Pragmatism: Classical, Recent, and Contemporary* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010], p. 8). But most of the time he simply sides with Rorty "in rejecting the notion of experience . . . 'Experience' is not one of my words—literally it does not occur in *Making It Explicit*" (ibid., p. 197).
14. Both Hegel and the classical pragmatists insist upon a sense of "experience" that is not limited to *narrow* epistemological contexts. This is the sense of experience that Stout himself employs when he writes: "To be on the receiving end of domination is to have *experiential evidence* that being dominated is horrendous" (SP 210; emphasis added) or when Stout speaks of "the felt dissatisfactions of subjectivity shaped by the *experience* of slavery" (SP 211; emphasis added).
15. Steven Levine says that, although action and perception are somehow coupled for Brandom, "there is a gulf between them that cannot be bridged. For the classical pragmatists, of course, [I would add Hegel—RJB] here we have a categorial dualism—between norm and cause, mind (the space of reasons) and body (reliable response dispositions)—that is ripe for critical dismantling. Brandom, in contrast, is simply not interested in undoing the dualisms and dichotomies passed on by the classical tradition" (Levine, "Brandom's Pragmatism," p. 129). I also agree with Levine when he asserts that Brandom's biggest blind spot is "his lack of a theory of *habituation*. Because of this lack, he must conceive of desire, or any attitude, as completely cognitive and conceptual (as in the space of reasons) or as completely non-cognitive and non-conceptual (as merely causal)" (ibid., 138).
16. Richard J. Bernstein, *Praxis and Action* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), p. 31.
17. Ibid.
18. Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach" are quoted in *Praxis and Action*, pp. 11–3.
19. For critiques of Brandom's two-step theory of action, see Steven Levine, "Norms and Habits: Brandom on the Sociality of Action," *The European Journal of Philosophy* 20:3 (forthcoming); John McDowell, lecture four of his forthcoming *Lectures on Action*; and Rowland Stout, "Being Subject to the Rule To Do What Rules Tell You to Do," in *Reading Brandom: On*



- Making It Explicit*, ed. Bernard Weiss and Jeremy Wanderer (New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 145–56.
20. Robert Brandom, “The Centrality of Sellars’ Two-Ply Account of Observation to the Arguments of *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*,” in *Tales of the Mighty Dead* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 349. See Steven Levine’s critique of this “two-ply” account in “Brandom’s Pragmatism.”
  21. See my discussion of reconciliation in “Reconciliation/Rupture” in *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), pp. 293–322.
  22. G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 11.
  23. *Ibid.*, p. 51; trans. mod.
  24. Gadamer, who is a masterful interpreter of Hegel, describes his own hermeneutical position as a Hegelianism of the “bad infinite.” His criticism of Hegel’s understanding of absolute knowledge is similar to the classical pragmatists: “For Hegel, it is necessary, of course, that conscious experience should lead to a self-knowledge that no longer has anything other than or alien to itself. For him the consummation of experience is ‘science,’ the certainty of itself in knowledge. Hence his criterion of experience is self-knowledge. That is why the dialectic of experience must end in that overcoming of all experience which is attained in absolute knowledge—i.e., in the complete identity of consciousness and object” (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall [New York: Crossroad, 1989], p. 355). In contrast to this Hegelian understanding of science (*Wissenschaft*) and absolute knowledge (*absolute Wissen*), Gadamer asserts that “the truth of experience always implies an orientation toward new experience. . . . The dialectic of experience has its proper fulfilment not in definitive knowledge but in the openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself” (*ibid.*). These last sentences about the truth and dialectic of experience might have been written by John Dewey.