The Relationship of William Torrey Harris and John Dewey

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The thesis of Joe Ervin, David Beisecker, and Jasmin Özel is:

> "By stressing how intertwined Dewey was with Harris and those within his orbit, we have made at least a preliminary case that Dewey's philosophy of education was not so much a radical break from the Hegelianism that came before him."

I think that the overall thesis is successful, as William Torrey Harris and the St. Louis Hegelians certainly were in John Dewey's orbit, and no more so than at the period of the 1895 Herbart Society meeting and the subsequent second yearbook publication of Dewey's, entitled "Interest in Relation to Training of the Will."[1] And to the degree that both Harris and the St. Louis Hegelians, and Dewey, shared a broadly Hegelian standpoint, there was obvious overlap in their interpretations and deployment of Hegel's thought. But this, I think, is where the resemblance ends. There were a number of differences in their respective accounts and uses of Hegel, to say nothing of their respective educational programs, to warrant the conclusion that Harris and Dewey were rivals. Indeed, I submit that Dewey drew relatively little from Harris.

The authors claim that Harris drew on a collectivist reading of Hegel, and that Hegel himself was collectivist. They also claim that Harris was neither liturgical nor theological. For the authors, the St. Louis Hegelians and Harris eschewed the reading of Hegel as pro-

pounding an Absolute as divine, which was the case with the British philosophers T.H. Green and F. H. Bradley. Furthermore, it was the St. Louis Hegelians, and Harris in particular, who first naturalized and secularized Hegel and made Hegel accessible to Dewey and others in the American milieu to appropriate in a naturalist vein. In making each of these points, I think the authors overstate their case. I want to examine each in a bit more detail and come back to my overall claim; that Dewey drew little from Harris.

Some of the claims the authors make rely on James A. Good, who overstates the relationship between Dewey and the St. Louis Hegelians.[2] Though it is true that they were in Dewey's intellectual ambit, and Dewey corresponded with Harris in the 1880s and 1890s, the correspondence can be considered cordial, but not substantive. Dewey seldom, if ever, mentions them in either his lectures on published papers and books; the obvious exception is the review of Harris's *Psychological Foundations of Education* in 1898, and there, Dewey is critical of Harris's stage theory of the curriculum.[3]

The issue of theology is more salient for the authors' thesis. The claim that Harris was non-theological is not borne out by the texts. Certainly, Harris had little use for liturgies or catechisms; neither, for that matter, did Dewey. But Harris's "end" for education was the divine. In an addition to Rosenkranz's *The Philosophy of Education*, Harris claims Rosenkranz (unlike Hegel), "very properly makes [Christian] religious education the last and highest form of the particular elements of education, and "Education, taken in its widest compass, is the education of the human race by Divine Providence. Here education is recognized to include much more that the "conscious exertion of influence. . . ."[4] Harris's Hegel stressed the Absolute in a way that Dewey in his 1897 *Lecture on Hegel's Philosophy of Spirit* did not; for

Harris, Hegel's Absolute eternally knows itself" as "perfect self-consciousness," and elevates itself, as object, into perfect "self-activity" and "independence."[5] Though Hegel subordinated religion to philosophy in the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Outline* and elsewhere (e.g. Hegel 1990), Harris always kept the divine front and centre in his estimation of philosophy's contribution to the West and to the American nation.[6] Harris drew his philosophical legacy from numerous sources. In the 1850s, he was enamoured with Ralph Waldo Emerson and Bronson Alcott, and eagerly took up Plato and Immanuel Kant.[7] Hegel came later, in the late 1850s.[8] Emerson and Alcott were predominantly intuitionists, and though Alcott began to take Hegel seriously after 1870, Emerson never did.[9] The result in Harris was an *intuitionist* Hegel—a Hegel that stressed the intuitive, abstract, and essentialist side or phase of consciousness and self-consciousness, of experience, of philosophy, of history over against the natural, the external, the particular, and the finite.

Furthermore, religion considered as a branch of study was important for Harris's academic curriculum. As much as Harris stressed the psychology of learning in the curriculum, the aims of that curriculum were always in line with Christian theology and teleology. "[T]he laws of psychology . . . are themselves the fundamental laws of teaching".[10] The curriculum was accordingly ordered into five branches, including mathematics, literature, grammar and language, logic, and psychology. Additionally, Harris ordered a sixth branch—"religion".[11] Harris would expand on these branches in his 1898 publication, *Psychologic Foundations of Education*.

Harris and the St. Louis Hegelians are said by the authors to develop their idealist program in opposition to Green and Bradley, who are considered theological, in opposition to the naturalistic

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readings of Hegel they proffer. In the case of Bradley, this is incorrect. Bradley considered God an appearance; finite, incomplete, and never coterminous with the Absolute.[12] Bradley's divine was an appearance along with the good, the beautiful, and other so-called "forms" or "ideas." Bradley's point is that an appearance is what is known whereas the Absolute is precisely that which cannot be known; the divine as represented in and for us, is but a partial and incomplete "slice" of reality. However, Harris (and Dewey) may have chosen to read Bradley, it is a fact that he did not think the divine the Absolute.

Finally, there is the issue of naturalism. The authors make the claim that the St. Louis Hegelians and Harris move Hegel in a naturalistic direction, and that this is picked up by Dewey and others towards the end of the 19th century. It is of course correct that Harris moves Hegel in a *psychological* direction, as he stresses self-activity and the ethical-practical dimension of learning. Harris often captures this in his insistence that education must attend to the self-consciousness—the self-activity—of the child. And of course, Dewey is well-known for turning his attention to psychological issues in his earliest educational works, notably *Interest and the Training of the Will*. But Harris eschewed the Rousseauist understanding of nature as baleful and thought *Émile* a disaster for pedagogy; this is well understood by historians of education.[13] And while Dewey is by no means Rousseauist in his understanding of the role of the community and society in the child's education, he does rely on naturalistic tropes and conceptions such as adjustment, adaptation, and growth, which Harris generally avoids in his discussion of the soul and self-consciousness (for example, Harris, 1898, 250.)[14] Our self-conscious self-activity is parasitic on our physiologic adaptation, as it is the "higher activity" which puts to use our lower activities. But there is a fundamental divide between these two activities; a divide that roughly constrains the lower activities to nature and the higher

activities to culture. We do not see this divide in Dewey. Indeed, he would spend a good deal of his academic energy attempting to bridge this.

It is the authors' claim that Dewey drew much from the St. Louis Hegelians; it is my claim that Dewey drew comparatively little. Beyond their correspondence and the extant texts, much rides on how the two interpret Hegel. I submit their interpretations were different enough to justify the conclusion that they had less in common than the authors suspect. Further investigation of this issue will perhaps get us closer to a settled conclusion.

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1 John Dewey, "Interest in Relation to Training of the Will," in *Second Supplement to the Herbart Year Book for 1895,* ed. Charles A. McMurry (Bloomington, Illinois: Pantagraph Printing and Stationary Company, 1896), 209-246.

2 James A. Good, "A 'World-Historical Idea': The St. Louis Hegelians and the Civil War," *Journal of American Studies*, 34, no. 3 (2000): 447; James A. Good, "John Dewey's 'Permanent Hegelian Deposit' and the Exigencies of War," *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 44, no. 2 (2006): 293-313.

3 John Dewey, "Review of William Torrey Harris, *Psychologic Foundations of Education*." *Educational Review* 16, (1898): 1-14.

4 William Torrey Harris, in Karl Rosenkranz, *The Philosophy of Education*, trans. A.C. Brackett (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1886), viii, 21.

5 James A. Good and John R. Shook, eds., *John Dewey's Philosophy of Spirit (With the 1897 Lecture on Hegel)*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010); William Torrey Harris, *Hegel's Logic: A Book on the Genesis of the Categories of the Mind* (Chicago: S.C. Griggs and Co., 1890), 105.

6 G.W.F. Hegel, *The Encyclopedia in Philosophical Sciences in Outline and other Critical Writings*, trans. by S. Taubeneck (New York: Continuum, 1991); William Torrey Harris and Duane Doty, *A Statement of the Theory of Education in the United States of America, as Approved by Many Leading Educators* (Washington: Government

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Printing Office, 1874).

7 Henry Pochman, *German Culture in America: Philosophical and Literary Influences* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1957); Kurt F. Leidecker, *Yankee Teacher: The Life of William Torrey Harris* (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1946).

8 Leidecker, *Yankee Teacher.*

9 Leidecker; John Lysaker, *Emerson and Self-Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

10 William Torrey Harris, "Report of Subcommittee on the Correlation of Studies in Elementary Education," *Report of the Committee of Fifteen on Elementary Education* (New York: American Book Co., 1895), 102.

11 Harris, "Report of Subcommittee," 9-22.

12 F.H. Bradley, *Appearance and Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 412.

13 Lawrence Cremin, *American Education: The Metropolitan Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988); Herbert Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum* 1893-1958, 3rd edition (New York: Routledge, 2004).

14 Harris, *Psychological Foundations of Education*, 250.