

Reading Misreadings: On Some Hegelisms in American Philosophy

Although it is well-known that 19th century German philosophy, especially Kant and Hegel, contributed to the inspirational economy of classical American philosophy from Emerson to Royce, the nature as well as the extent of this influence remains largely unexamined and thus underappreciated. The trans-Atlantic appropriation of Hegel into classical American philosophy is riddled with philosophical misunderstandings; but in his "Pragmatism and its Misunderstandings" (1908), James suggested that the Germans returned the favor by egregiously misunderstanding pragmatism. Hans Joas suggests that "the German, French, and Italian reception of pragmatism is a concatenation of misunderstandings" (1998: 190); and wary of those who try to reduce everything to one single factor, Joas elsewhere attempts "to offer a *history* of misunderstandings, deliberate distortions, a well-meaning incomprehension – and to show that these misunderstandings were compounded over generations" (1993: 94).

In all fairness, a similar history could be told – indeed, should be told – about the appropriation of German thought, especially Hegelian thought, by American philosophers. In most cases, there is far more afoot than a simple misunderstanding or even a "well-meaning incomprehension"; as a rule, the inheritor is far less interested in conceptual exposition than in *revising, correcting, or otherwise overcoming* his or her predecessors as a means of laying claim to a certain intellectual territory. To view the revisionist appropriation in question as a simple "misunderstanding" or "misreading" misses the more interesting critical point.

The question of philosophical influence, of misunderstanding or misreading or misappropriation, will go some distance in the direction of answering adequately – though circuitously – questions about the distinctive character of classical American philosophy. In an effort to better understand these alleged misunderstandings, I have found it helpful to examine – following an interpretive thesis proposed by Harold Bloom (1973, 1980) – the "question of influence" as itself influential on American philosophy. The various misreadings of Hegel by American philosophers, while teaching us something about Hegel, teach us a good deal more about American philosophy; reading misreadings teaches us more about those misreading than those misread. This typology of misunderstanding, I wish to argue, is indispensable to a adequate appreciation of – if not a rapprochement within – German and American philosophical thought.