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The Revival of Pragmatism

Edited by Morris Dickstein

NEW ESSAYS
ON SOCIAL
THOUGHT, LAW,
AND CULTURE

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Introduction: Pragmatism Then and Now

MORRIS DICKSTEIN

The revival of pragmatism has excited enormous interest and controversy in the intellectual community over the past two decades. By the middle of the twentieth century, pragmatism was widely considered a naively optimistic residue of an earlier liberalism, discredited by the Depression and the horrors of the war, and virtually driven from philosophy departments by the reigning school of analytic philosophy. Now once again it is recognized not only as the most distinctive American contribution to philosophy but as a new way of approaching old problems in a number of fields. As the present volume shows, pragmatism has become a key point of reference around which contemporary debates in social thought, law, and literary theory as well as philosophy have been unfolded. It has appealed to philosophers moving beyond analytic philosophy, European theorists looking for an alternative to Marxism, and postmodernists seeking native roots for their critique of absolutes and universals. The revival has not only drawn new attention to the original pragmatists but altered our view of writers as different as Emerson and Frost, Nietzsche and Wittgenstein, Santayana and Stevens, Du Bois and Ellison, all of whom have been reconsidered in the light of a broader conception of pragmatist thinking.

Pragmatism as a branch of philosophy is exactly a hundred years old. The term was first brought forward by William James in a lecture in Berkeley in 1898, published as "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results." In developing pragmatism as a critique of abstractions and absolutes and as a philosophy oriented toward practice and action, James insisted that he was only building on thoughts developed by his friend Charles Sanders Peirce in Cambridge more than twenty years earlier. But the cantankerous Peirce was far from pleased with what James did with his ideas. Pragmatism's early years were as filled with controversy as its recent career. James plunged into the fray with his usual zest, and the lectures published as *Pragmatism* in 1907 became one of his most widely read

books. In part because they were so clearly yet provocatively formulated, James' lectures created something of a scandal. James had targeted rationalists and idealists of every stripe, and pragmatism was widely attacked as an extreme form of relativism that undermined any notion of objective truth.

As it is used in common speech, the qualities associated with "pragmatism" generally win our enthusiastic assent. Politicians and pundits see pragmatism as the essence of American politics—the art of the possible, rooted in our aversion to ideology and our genius for compromise. Those who take a pragmatic approach to diplomacy and foreign policy—or those who craft legislation and strike political deals—pride themselves in negotiating differences and achieving incremental results rather than holding out for unbending moral absolutes. Others condemn this kind of pragmatism as policy without principle, goal-oriented but lacking a moral anchor. When presidents like Franklin Roosevelt, John Kennedy, or Bill Clinton are described as the ultimate pragmatists, this may mean that they got something done, or that their behavior, for better or worse, differed from their rhetoric, or that they were cunning and pliable men with few consistent values or ideals. "I'm a pragmatist, a problem solver," said one recent presidential advisor to explain his seemingly contradictory approach to two different issues.

As a philosophical position, pragmatism seems at first to have little in common with this widespread usage. John Dewey's ideas were radical and dynamic rather than limited to practical considerations. His emphasis on "creative intelligence," especially in education, stressed the transformation of the given rather than the acceptance of the status quo. Despite the value it places on doing and practice, in some ways it was more utopian than practical. This is why Dewey repeatedly criticizes empiricism, to which his work otherwise shows a strong kinship. "Empiricism is conceived of as tied up to what has been, or is, 'given,'" Dewey wrote. "But experience in its vital form is experimental, an effort to change the given; it is characterized by projection, by reaching forward into the unknown; connection with a future is its salient trait."¹ For pragmatists the upshot of thought comes not in logical distinctions or intellectual systems but in behavior, the translation of ideas into action. As Peirce wrote in "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," one of pragmatism's founding texts,

The essence of belief is the establishment of a habit, and different beliefs are distinguished by the different modes of action to which they give rise. . . . Imaginary distinctions are often drawn between

beliefs which differ only in their mode of expression. . . . [T]he whole function of thought is to produce habits of action. . . . To develop its meaning, we have, therefore, simply to determine what habits it produces, for what a thing means is simply what habits it involves.²

Within the American tradition, this practical, result-oriented side of Peirce, James, and Dewey places their work in a line that goes back at least to Benjamin Franklin, while the pragmatists' commitment to creative self-transformation shows the influence of Emerson. "The world stands really malleable, waiting to receive its final touches at our hands," says James near the end of *Pragmatism*. He goes on to describe a world that "suffers human violence willingly," that is "still in the making, and awaits part of its complexion from the future."³ A bit disingenuously, James presents pragmatism not as philosophy but as a way of doing philosophy, "a method of settling metaphysical disputes that otherwise might be interminable" (42). Pragmatism provides a practical test but "it does not stand for any special results," he claimed. "It is a method only" (46). Yet its consequences were far-reaching.

James himself was exhilarated by the controversy that surrounded his lectures on pragmatism. Just as Marx saw his materialist version of Hegel as a Copernican turn in philosophy, James quite seriously compared pragmatism to the Protestant Reformation, which augmented the authority of the individual conscience against the power of the Church.⁴ He also suggested that his account of truth, once it was definitively settled, would "mark a turning-point in the history of epistemology, and consequently in that of general philosophy" (196). Yet in the subtitle of his book, James described pragmatism as "a new name for some old ways of thinking," perhaps to deflect the charges of outrageous novelty and irresponsibility that were already being leveled against him.

In the first decade of the century James's pragmatism was under sharp attack from adherents of philosophical and religious idealism. Pragmatism had a considerable tradition behind it, yet it was also part of a larger modern turn marked by the inexorable growth of science, secularism, and the historical consciousness in American thinking. In Dewey's hands especially, it reflected an evolutionary perspective that showed the influence of both Hegelian historicism and Darwinian naturalism. Darwin's work undercut not only traditional religious belief but also the sense of an unchanging, essential nature. As Hegel (and Marx) fostered a dynamic view of history, Darwin legitimized a genetic approach to animal and human behavior. Social Darwinists took this as a justification of the harsh struggle

for life under unregulated capitalism, but for progressive thinkers it meant that the sources of social inequality, far from being a given, could be traced empirically and altered by changes in education and public policy. In Dewey's work as an active reformer and prolific theorist, pragmatism became part of the surge of liberalism, progressivism, and social reform in the first decades of the twentieth century.

Yet even apart from questions of social policy, pragmatism also had its cultural dimension. Though pragmatism and modernism often diverge, and the early pragmatists themselves had mixed feelings about modern art, the moment of pragmatism was also the moment of Picasso's and Braque's cubism, Einstein's theory of relativity, and a new wave of advanced literature. Realism and naturalism, which had sought an objective standpoint on man and society, gave way to experiments that tried to capture the flow of the individual consciousness. William James' focus on the stream of consciousness in his *Principles of Psychology* (1890), his admired friend Henri Bergson's studies of *durée*, or experienced time, in his *Time and Free Will* (1899), and Freud's explorations of the unconscious in his *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) ran parallel to these literary experiments, including the close attention to point of view in the difficult late novels of Henry James. The James brothers were often impatient with each others' work, but they achieved a momentary convergence in 1907 when Henry, after reading *Pragmatism*, wrote that "I was lost in the wonder of the extent to which all my life I have . . . unconsciously pragmatized,"⁵ and the easily exasperated William yielded conditionally to the prismatic hall of mirrors he saw with some astonishment in *The American Scene*. Together and separately, James, Bergson, and Freud had an incalculably large influence on the forms and outlook of modern art.

Pragmatism, like modernism, reflects the break-up of cultural and religious authority, the turn away from any simple or stable definition of truth, the shift from totalizing systems and unified narratives to a more fragmented plurality of perspectives. In modern literature this would be epitomized by Joyce's shaping of the interior monologue, Ford Madox Ford's use of the unreliable narrator, Gertrude Stein's flow of verbal association, and Faulkner's overlay of multiple perspectives in *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*. Literary modernism displaces the omniscient narrator in fiction as religious liberalism unseats the omniscient deity. But where many modernists, especially after World War I—the *Waste Land* generation—would portray the fragmentation of the modern world with an acrid nostalgia for earlier hierarchies, the pragmatists tend to be exuberant and constructive rather than pessimistic. The dark and apocalyptic

strain of modernism held little appeal for them; the rupture with past certainties opened up new horizons. They saw "the quest for certainty" as the futile and misguided remnant of an outworn metaphysics, and they take the new, contingent, human-centered world as source of opportunity and possibility. For the pragmatists, truth is provisional, grounded in history and experience, not fixed in the nature of things. In the words of historian John P. Diggins, "pragmatism offered uncertainty and plurality as an answer to the exhausted past ideas of authority."⁶

Yet the break with the past would also involve a new emphasis on history. The edifice of the law especially came to be seen as an evolving process rather than a set of fixed principles. As Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., wrote near the beginning of *The Common Law*, "It is something to show that the consistency of a system requires a particular result, but it is not all. The life of the law has not been logic: it has been experience. The felt necessities of the time, the prevalent moral and political theories, institutions of public policy, avowed or unconscious, even the prejudices which judges share with their fellow-men, have had a good deal more to do than the syllogism in determining the rules by which men should be governed."⁷

Such an empirical outlook offended formalists, rationalists, philosophical idealists, and traditional moralists alike. Pragmatism became a new chapter in the struggle between defenders of the ancients and the moderns that went back to Aristophanes and Euripides. In 1915 Walter Lippmann was still the young progressive, not yet the expounder of natural law he became in later works like *The Public Philosophy* (1955). As a gifted undergraduate at Harvard, he had attracted the notice of William James, whom he immensely admired. But in a *New Republic* essay of 1915 he initially expressed concern that Dewey, with his radical experimentalism, was "urging us to do something never done before by any other people. He is urging us consciously to manufacture our philosophy." It would be hard to imagine a better description of what Emerson or Whitman were propounding for the new American nation: a genuinely fresh start, an escape from the heavy hand of European tradition, an emancipation by self-definition. "The whole value of philosophies up to the present," says Lippmann, "has been that they found support for our action in something outside ourselves. We philosophized in order to draw sanction from God, or nature or evolution."⁸ A few years later Lippmann's Harvard classmate, T. S. Eliot, objected to "a certain meanness of culture" in the philosophy of William Blake, which he compared to "an ingenious piece of home-made furniture: we admire the man who has put it together out of the odds and

ends about the house.”⁹ For Eliot, too, philosophy was something you inherited, something externally sanctioned, not ideas and beliefs that could be shaped to your own needs.

But the Lippmann of 1915 quickly reversed field and went on to argue that in fact philosophers had always done what Dewey (and Freud) described: projected general ideas out of their own temperament and needs. “Most philosophy is not a revelation of absolute principles, but a human being’s adjustment of his desires to his limitations.” Lippmann’s sympathy for pragmatism would not endure, but for now he puts an eloquent spin on Dewey’s views:

All philosophies are experiments, but they are unconscious ones. They all represent an attempt to make ourselves better at home in the world. . . . Instead of spinning our thoughts blindly and calling them absolute truth, let us spin them deliberately and be ready to change them. Let us continue to write autobiographies, but let us be sure we know they are autobiographies. Let us recognize that the true use of philosophy is to help us to live.¹⁰

Dewey could not have been entirely pleased to see himself defended in such a spongy, subjective vein. Just as Blake tried to escape Romantic subjectivity by creating an immense, eclectic mythology, the pragmatists hoped to avoid relativism by developing an evolutionary outlook in social and intersubjective rather than merely subjective terms. Working from a scientific model like the one later developed by Thomas Kuhn, Dewey envisioned a self-correcting community of enquirers who would proceed experimentally according to fallibilistic norms of “warranted assertability,” instead of claiming to discover timeless truths that corresponded to the way the world actually is. Richard Rorty has described this as “a search for the widest possible intersubjective agreement,” adding that “objectivity is not a matter of corresponding to objects but of getting together with other subjects.”¹¹

As Rorty would be drawn to literature, especially the novel, for its concrete portrayal of intersubjectivity, James evoked a Whitmanesque version of truth still grounded in “the muddy particulars of experience,” a truth whose claims were “conditional” and constantly evolving rather than abstract and absolute (149, 150). In an arresting passage in *Pragmatism*, James also turned to the common law to describe this process of accretion and transmutation. The key metaphor here is a biological one:

Distinctions between the lawful and the unlawful in conduct, or between the correct and incorrect in speech, have grown up incidentally

among the interactions of men’s experiences in detail; and in no other way do the distinctions between the true and the false in belief ever grow up. Truth grafts itself on previous truth, modifying it in the process, just as idiom grafts itself on previous idiom, and law on previous law. . . .

All the while, however, we pretend that the eternal is unrolling, that the one previous justice, grammar or truth are simply fulgurating and not being made. . . . These things *make themselves* as we go. (158)

Such parallels between law and language, language and truth, all seen as part of an evolving historical process, were prophetic of the later directions of pragmatism, as the essays in the present volume make clear. James sees laws and languages, if not truth itself, as “man-made things.” “Human motives sharpen all our questions, human satisfactions lurk in all our answers, all our formulas have a human twist” (159).

When James says that the pragmatist turns away from abstraction and absolutes “towards facts, towards action and towards power,” when he adds that this empiricist temper “means the open air and the possibilities of nature, as against dogma, artificiality, and the pretence of finality in truth” (45), he is expressing his own robust temperament, his love of the outdoors, of risk and adventure, but also a typical American preference for action over reflection, for facts over theories, and above all for results. “Pragmatism unstiffens all our theories, limbers them up and sets each one to work” (46–47). What made pragmatism so embattled in its original form was also what made it strikingly American: its practical, situational, problem-solving emphasis.

James puts all this in an inflammatory way as a foil to idealism, metaphysics, and popular notions about what philosophy is and what philosophers do. Instead of words like God, matter, and reason that play an almost magical, incantatory role in metaphysics, the pragmatic method prevents you from looking “on any such word as closing your quest. You must bring out of each word its practical cash-value, set it at work within the stream of your experience” (46). James insists that truth or meaning is a process, an action leading to a pay-off, a verb rather than a noun. “The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events. . . . Its validity is the process of its *validation*” (196). “It is the nature of truths to be validated, verified. It pays for our ideas to be validated. Our obligation to seek truth is part of our general obligation to do what pays” (149–50). Truth is the outcome of experience. “Men’s beliefs at any time are so much experience *funded*” (146).

James' aim with these and other pointed metaphors is to ground ideas in lived experience—to see them as emerging from a living subject and issuing in real consequences, to see them as made rather than given. He uses loaded words like “power” or “cash-value” not to ally pragmatism with force or business—two major American preoccupations during Teddy Roosevelt's presidency, when he wrote his book—but as a way of jolting his audience, appealing to them almost too vividly in terms of the forces that were really running the world.

By stating his case polemically in such charged language, James opened pragmatism to the charge that it was philistine, a methodology without a moral compass, an epistemology with a merely tactical sense of truth. Pragmatism is always contextual. It sees things not in isolation, not as essences existing in and of themselves, but as belonging to contexts that shape their meaning and value. It is concerned about the *production* of meaning, the production of truth, because it sees them as dynamic, always in formation. To its detractors, this emphasis on the situation and the “cash” payoff revealed a method that could be used to justify anything. Had not James himself said that “the true, to put it very briefly, is only the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as the right is only the expedient in our way of behaving”? (196).

The most damning attack on pragmatism as expediency came not from metaphysicians or traditional moralists but from one of Dewey's most gifted admirers, Randolph Bourne. In “Twilight of Idols” (1917), Bourne argued that Dewey's pragmatic justification for the America's entry into World War I, which shocked many of his followers, showed up his concern with technique and efficiency at the expense of consistent values, and revealed the limits of Dewey's instrumentalism: it was a narrowly expedient philosophy of “adaptation” and “adjustment” bereft of ultimate goals. (Dewey's educational views were often attacked in the same terms.) Bourne was appalled that a pragmatist approach could be made to serve repugnant ends. He complained that Dewey's young disciples—like the “best and brightest” who would prosecute a later American war—“have absorbed the secret of scientific method as applied to political administration. They are liberal, enlightened, aware. . . . They are making themselves efficient instruments of the war-technique, accepting with little question the ends as announced from above. . . . To those of us who have taken Dewey's philosophy almost as our American religion, it never occurred that values could be subordinated to technique.”¹² If the social conscience that led to progressive reforms showed Dewey's break with tradition in the best light, the war revealed its darker side.

Bourne's critique became the template for subsequent attacks on pragmatism from both left and right. The date alone, 1917, was momentous: even more than America's entry into the war, the Russian Revolution would energize and divide the left while terrifying and galvanizing the right. Soon cultural critics like Van Wyck Brooks and Lewis Mumford would develop Bourne's attack. To later Marxist critics like Theodor Adorno, pragmatism was hopelessly wedded to the status quo; they saw it as little more than a rationale for America's ruthless and amoral business civilization. Conservatives would be just as offended by its relativism and optimism, its critique of moral absolutes and foundational values. Near the end of the essay Bourne places himself among the young “malcontents” created by the war, who reject “a philosophy of adjustment” and react with “robust desperation” to “the continual frustrations and aridities of American life.”¹³ He thus became the prototype of the disillusioned modernist intellectual who would turn against pragmatism during the next two decades, looking instead toward Europe, toward modern art, and eventually toward Marxism and revolution.

The war discredited the kind of enlightened planning with which pragmatism had become identified. The reaction against progressivism after 1920 also became a reaction against pragmatism, among conservatives who celebrated America's exceptionalism and achievements and as well as among radicals who castigated its abuses and inequalities. The reaction against pragmatism became even more marked after World War II, abetted by a variety of new influences including existentialism, crisis theology, the cold war, psychoanalysis, European modernism, and a cultural conservatism bred of growing prosperity and the fear of Communism. Part of this story was told many years ago in Morton White's 1949 book *Social Thought in America: The Revolt Against Formalism*, where White points to “the submersion of a certain style of thinking which dominated America for almost half a century—an intellectual pattern compounded of pragmatism, institutionalism, behaviorism, legal realism, economic determinism, and the ‘new history.’” “It might be argued,” he writes in his introduction, “that these movements are not dead, but one cannot avoid the feeling that they are past the peak of their influence. These are days in which Dewey's views are being replaced by Kierkegaard's in places where once Dewey was king.”¹⁴

Other versions of this narrative of liberalism in decline can be found in Lionel Trilling's *The Liberal Imagination* (1950), where socially oriented naturalists like Dreiser and Sherwood Anderson give way before modernists like Faulkner and Hemingway, or in Richard Hofstadter's books on the

Age of Reform and the Progressive Historians, which ratified the decline of progressive historiography. Trilling complained of liberalism in exactly the same terms Bourne and Van Wyck Brooks had used in attacking pragmatism: it lacked imagination, it was spiritually empty, it lacked a sense of tragedy, it had become identified with bureaucracy and social engineering—the “organizational impulse.”¹⁵ Yet the eclipse of pragmatism was never complete. Trilling’s and Niebuhr’s critiques of moral absolutes—a key part of their attack on utopian and totalitarian thinking—were deeply influenced by the spirit of pragmatism. Writing as self-described realists skeptical of progressive idealism, they turned instinctively to pragmatism as a supple and concrete form of critical thinking, a refuge from abstraction.¹⁶

At the same time Kierkegaard and Niebuhr displaced Dewey, just when the lively ghost of Henry James can be said to have displaced William James, at the very moment Trilling’s version of “tragic realism” became canonical for critics and legal realism was under withering assault in the law schools, the beginnings of a revival of pragmatism could already be seen among analytic philosophers like W. V. Quine. This would later be brought to the attention of a wider audience by Richard Rorty in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) and the essays collected in *Consequences of Pragmatism* (1982). Meanwhile, a handful of other philosophers like Richard J. Bernstein, John E. Smith, and John McDermott kept pragmatism alive in the schools. During the very period when it seemed least fashionable, the pragmatist renewal was already under way.

The current revival of pragmatism is a varied and complex phenomenon involving many crosscurrents. But a few broad patterns suggest themselves.

—After the chill of the postwar years, which put progressive ideas into cold storage, the 1960s provided a new impetus to radical thinking beyond the exhausted Marxism of the Old Left. Dewey’s ideas about democracy in works like *The Public and Its Problems* (1927), particularly his defense of a town-meeting model of participatory democracy against the authority of elites and the reign of experts, found their way into the Port Huron Statement (1962), the founding document of the Students for a Democratic Society (largely written by Tom Hayden), and into the work of widely read social critics and educational theorists like C. Wright Mills and Paul Goodman.

—The subsequent collapse of the New Left shifted these critical currents into the university. This contributed to the rising influence of European

theory, first with the neo-Marxism of the Frankfurt School, then in linguistically based forms of deconstruction and poststructuralism. As postmodern theorists announced the exhaustion of the “grand narratives,” Americans discovered that the pragmatists had been there first, developing a skeptical theory of knowledge and a well-articulated critique of essentialism and foundationalism that did not devolve into nihilism but emphasized the contingencies of language and context.

—As the Marxism of the 1970s and 1980s once again became the God that failed, intellectuals searched for an incremental, democratic alternative: the French rediscovered liberalism, the Germans discovered empiricism, Americans rediscovered pragmatism. Apocalyptic thinking, the grand narratives of earlier systems, began to go out of fashion in all three countries. The work of Richard Rorty formed a bridge between a Deweyan faith in liberal democracy and a postmodern antifoundationalism. As James and Dewey had attacked formalism, “intellectualism,” and metaphysics, Rorty attacked philosophy itself, deriding its Platonic quest for a truth beyond appearances, its self-described position as an arbiter of knowledge, and insisting that its traditional debates were simply part of an ongoing process of linguistic redescription.

Dewey himself had said that old philosophical problems were never resolved; they simply stopped mattering. Rorty had emerged from the analytical tradition, which had developed its own version of the “linguistic turn” and the critique of metaphysics. Focusing on language rather than on experience as the basis of all our understanding, he forged a synthesis between Dewey and James on the one hand, Heidegger and Derrida on the other—freely discarding what he did not like, such as Dewey’s faith in science. To Rorty science had its own metaphysical assumptions; far from being provisional and experimental, it was another form of the quest for certainty, the faith in an objective order of truth. If pragmatism began with James’s strong misreading of Peirce, it came to life again with Rorty’s strong misreading of Dewey, whom he described as “a postmodernist before his time.”¹⁷

Rorty’s strikingly contemporary versions of Dewey and James led to equally vigorous rejoinders by other students of the original pragmatists, including Richard Bernstein, Robert Westbrook, and Hilary Putnam. Putnam has devoted much of his recent work, including the new essay published here, to a defense of philosophical realism. As these controversies heated up, pragmatism became a broad terrain of ongoing debate rather than a musty historical legacy. The present volume shows up the major

fault lines in that contested ground. This book is not primarily concerned with philosophy, or indeed with the classical pragmatists, although they figure repeatedly in these pages. Instead it focuses on the cultural impact of the pragmatist revival in different yet overlapping regions of contemporary thought.

A major issue that emerges in the discussion of the law is whether legal pragmatism is “freestanding,” perhaps simply common-sensical, or depends on adherence to some form of pragmatist philosophy. Both Richard Posner and Thomas Grey find pragmatism so intrinsic to the way legal decisions are actually made that they paradoxically need no philosophical justification. As Grey writes: “Pragmatist jurisprudence is a theoretical middle way between grand theorizing and anti-intellectual business as usual.” He connects basic legal reasoning to two of the main lines of pragmatic thinking.

Law is contextual: it is rooted in practice and custom, and takes its substance from existing patterns of human conduct and interaction. To an equal degree, law is instrumental, meant to advance the human good of those it serves, hence subject to alteration to achieve this end. Law so conceived is a set of practical measures for cooperative social life, using signals and sanctions to guide and channel conduct. (“Freestanding Legal Pragmatism”)

From this viewpoint, most jurists, like the happily surprised Henry James, have been unconsciously pragmatizing all their lives, with little need for theoretical scaffolding. They are likely to agree with Grey that “more precise and determinate general theories of the nature and function of law should be viewed with suspicion, at least when put forward to control practice.” Legal theory, it is said, has value only as a description of legal practice or as an independent inquiry into it, not as a ground or justification for it. (This is very much like what Rorty says of philosophy in general.) Grey points to a friend who, unlike him, is a religious believer and foundationalist but shares his legal views and agrees with him that “law itself imposes no absolute moral claims.” David Luban complicates this argument that legal pragmatism is “freestanding” by introducing another distinction: between philosophical pragmatism, which (he argues) *does* provide a useful basis for judicial thinking, and the kind of post-philosophical pragmatism associated with Rorty, which generally does not.

The parallel debate among social theorists and historians centers on the question of whether pragmatism provides a rationale for democracy and community, as Dewey clearly thought it did, or is simply a method that

presupposes no particular politics, social views, or religious views. “If pragmatism is true it has nothing to say to us,” says Stanley Fish in his afterword to this volume; “no politics follows from it or is blocked by it; no morality attaches to it or is enjoined by it.” Rorty has always insisted that his liberal democratic views are completely independent of his pragmatism, while some acute students of Dewey’s work, including Westbrook, Bernstein, James Kloppenberg, and Hilary Putnam, have tried to reinforce the connections between democratic practice and a pragmatic theory of knowledge.

In his searching essay “A Reconsideration of Deweyan Democracy” (in *Renewing Philosophy*), Putnam finds in Dewey an “epistemological justification of democracy,” which “rests at every point on arguments which are not at all transcendental, but which represent the fruit of our collective experience.”¹⁸ Bernstein stresses Dewey’s view that “regarded as an idea, democracy is not an alternative to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community life itself.” This belief forms the kernel of *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey’s only work of political theory, but Dewey himself adds realistically that “democracy in this sense is not a fact and never will be.” His aim is to approach the problem more pragmatically: “Only when we start from a community as a fact, grasp the fact in thought so as to clarify and enhance its constituent elements, can we reach an idea of democracy which is not utopian.”¹⁹ This is precisely what critics like Alan Wolfe and John P. Diggins maintain that Dewey and pragmatism are unable to do. Both insist that Deweyan ideas of community are utopian and future-oriented, and are therefore of little help in describing communities as they actually exist or have existed in the past.

In his important new essay for this volume, Rorty, criticizing Nietzsche’s contempt for democracy (and for John Stuart Mill) as “an adventitious extra, inessential to his overall philosophical outlook,” comes much closer to identifying pragmatism with democracy—at least with the kind of democracy he finds in Mill’s *On Liberty*. For Rorty, Mill’s conception of liberty—the freedom to pursue private happiness without impinging on others—is virtually identical with Nietzsche’s sparkling meditation on polytheism in *The Gay Science* as a “*plurality of norms*” in which “one god was not considered a denial of another god, nor blasphemy against him.” Joined to Isaiah Berlin’s pluralist argument that different people live with incommensurable values, this polytheism in turn becomes a strong metaphor for Rorty’s pragmatism. It leads him to say that “you are a polytheist if you think there is no actual or possible object of knowledge which would permit you to commensurate and rank all human needs.”

Once one sees no way of ranking human needs other than playing them off against one another, human happiness becomes all that matters. Mill's *On Liberty* becomes all the ethical instruction you need—all the philosophical advice you are ever going to get about your responsibilities to other human beings. For human perfection becomes a private concern, and our responsibility to others becomes a matter of permitting them as much space to pursue these private concerns—to worship their own gods, so to speak—as is compatible with granting an equal amount of space to all. The tradition of religious toleration is extended to moral toleration. (“Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism”)

Rorty has always been extraordinarily resourceful in finding new metaphors for his pragmatism and antirepresentationalism; the notion of “romantic polytheism” is one of the most suggestive. But the metaphor has powerful implications of its own. Rorty has been accused of an implacable antitheism—“proscribing god talk,” as Eugene Goodheart puts it²⁰—but Rorty's expansion of this new metaphor is at least rhetorically more sympathetic to religion than anything he has previously written. He positions his essay as a rejoinder to “those who think that pragmatism and religion do not mix.” A critic might argue that “ranking human needs” is at best a reductive description of ethical and religious values. But by identifying polytheism with toleration and monotheism with intolerance and absolutism, Rorty creates a bridge from religion and ethics, as he understands them, to democracy. The multiplicity of gods becomes a metaphor for the multiplicity of ethical goals and private needs in a democratic society. This becomes a version of the “negative liberty,” the freedom from unnecessary constraint, that Berlin saw as the essence of Mill's liberalism. But as Rorty's religion offers little comfort to believers, dissolving God into a “personal symbol of ultimate concern,” it offers even less to those who feel that “democratic politics” must involve more than what he calls “a free consensus about how much space for private perfection we can allow each other.” They are likely to feel, as Giles Gunn does, that Rorty sacrifices the public sphere for private life and, unlike Dewey, purchases individual liberty at the expense of community.

Rorty's emphasis on personal happiness, his agnosticism about social theory except as a gloss on social practice, may explain why his work has been more warmly received by literary critics than by historians or social scientists. The literary side of the revival of pragmatism has been much con-

cerned with critical method, more skeptical of any specific social goals, more postmodernist, and hence more closely allied with Rorty than with Putnam or Bernstein. At one extreme, a recent collection of essays draws pragmatism into the orbit of new work on rhetoric, and especially on the sophists; pragmatism becomes another name for radically detaching the sign from its referent.²¹ Closer to the mainstream of literary thinking are those who see pragmatism as a way out of the cul-de-sac of theory, much as Giovanni Papini once called pragmatism a philosophy for getting along without philosophy.²² Stanley Fish, in *Is There a Text in This Class?*, and Barbara Herrnstein Smith, in *Contingencies of Value*, have adapted Dewey's idea of the community of enquirers into a pragmatic view of the “interpretive community,” which makes critical interpretation and evaluation contingent on the changing assumptions of different reading communities at different times and places. From this viewpoint, statements about the world or judgments of value are always provisional: constructions of language that belong to a particular context. Such arguments, like similar ones in legal interpretation, have drawn outrage from critics upholding a more stable or objective view of linguistic meaning and literary judgment.

The work of Richard Poirier in *The Renewal of Literature* (1987) and *Poetry and Pragmatism* (1992) represents yet another strand of literary pragmatism. Like Harold Bloom and Stanley Cavell, Poirier identifies a tradition of “Emersonian linguistic skepticism” which undermines the once-dominant way of reading American literature through the prism of modernism or New Critical formalism. That kind of formalist modernism had been integral to F. O. Matthiessen's work on the American Renaissance and much of the criticism that followed. Using Emerson and William James—and poets like Frost and Stevens—as touchstones of American writing, Poirier emphasizes the layered, dynamic, self-undoing complexity of literary language, with its residues of historical meaning and individual effort. “When used in the intensely self-reflecting way that literature uses them,” Poirier writes in *The Renewal of Literature*, “words not only continuously modify but actually tend to dissolve one another.” When language reaches this “point of incandescence,” he says, “it marks the disappearance of individuality on the occasion of its triumph.” We can feel a kind of amazement “that any one person, any author (or reader), can be responsible for what we see and hear going on.”²³ Poirier picks up this theme in *Poetry and Pragmatism*, referring to “the responsibilities to words which reading entails, an obligation to all the barely audible cultural inheritances carried within them.”²⁴

Poirier gives a dynamic Emersonian turn to the New Critical emphasis on the irony and complexity of poetic language, disengaging it from the formalism that sees literary works as static, self-contained objects. Poetry, like pragmatism, is provisional, contextual. In contrast to most New Critics, who saw in literature a principle of order, and to more recent cultural conservatives, who cast it a stable source of virtues or values, Poirier sees the twists and turns of literary language as an endless self-remaking, very much in the spirit of William James or of Emerson's "Circles," with its ecstatic, Whitmanesque peroration:

Do not set the least value on what I do, or the least discredit on what I do not, as if I pretended to settle any thing true or false. I unsettle all things. No facts are to me sacred; none are profane; I simply experiment, an endless seeker with no Past at my back. . . . In nature every moment is new; the past is always swallowed and forgotten; the coming only is sacred. Nothing is secure but life, transition, the energizing spirit.²⁵

"I simply experiment." Emerson is too protean to be entirely identified with pragmatism, but this is one strand of Emerson that is central to both the American tradition and the recent revival of pragmatism. It also helps explain why pragmatism remains as controversial today as it was in James' and Dewey's day. Whether we see pragmatism in terms of the flux of the moment, the orientation toward the future, or what Holmes describes as the residue of past experience, to its critics it remains a dangerous and irresponsible form of moral and epistemological relativism.

Today's debate takes place in a different world from Emerson's or James', though many of the same criticisms have surfaced. Despite the conservative nostalgia of bestselling books like Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, the current orthodoxy in academic life arises not from a dominant idealism or an array of traditional moral absolutes but out of a mixture of European theories from Marxism to poststructuralism. Within this context, pragmatism has come to be seen as an American alternative, an escape from the abstraction of theory and the abyss of nihilism. We might describe it as a constructive skepticism. If liberal politicians and intellectuals share one thing at this moment, it is the loss of old certainties. Pragmatism today is less an attack on the foundations of knowledge, as it was portrayed by its early critics, than a search for method when the foundations have already crumbled.

Just as each generation reshapes the classics to its own needs, each generation resurrects earlier thinkers and reconfigures them in its own

image. The decline of pragmatism belonged to a moment of deep pessimism in American thought, the moment of the Holocaust, of original sin, of global cold war and nuclear stand-off. But the tragic realism and fashionable dark theology of the 1940s and 1950s proved as perishable as the progressive liberalism that preceded it. They were anchored in their cultural moment. Sartre himself turned against an existentialism that was entirely conditioned by the war experience. The 1960s, which made Emerson and Whitman readable, even inspiring, to a new generation, also contributed to the revival of pragmatism. To everyone's surprise, Dewey returned not only to replace Kierkegaard but to jostle Derrida, Lacan, and Foucault. One would hardly say that it is the same Dewey the second time around, but a Dewey unexpectedly compatible with main currents of American thinking from Emerson to postmodernism. For Americans, at least, always suspicious of abstractions, pragmatism has been the perennial philosophy, one that has become contemporary again in today's post-ideological climate.

Notes

- 1 John Dewey, "The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy," in *John Dewey: The Essential Writings*, ed. David Sidorsky (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 71. First published in a collection of essays edited by John Dewey, *Creative Intelligence: Essays in the Pragmatic Attitude* (1917).
- 2 Charles Sanders Peirce, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," in *Pragmatism: A Contemporary Reader*, ed. Russell B. Goodman (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 42–43.
- 3 William James, *Pragmatism and Four Essays from the Meaning of Truth*, ed. Ralph Barton Perry (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1955), p. 167. Page numbers of further references are in parentheses in the text.
- 4 *Letters of William James*, ed. Henry James, Jr. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1920), vol. 2, p. 279.
- 5 Quoted in R. W. B. Lewis, *The Jameses: A Family Narrative* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991), p. 565.
- 6 John P. Diggins, *The Promise of Pragmatism: Modernism and the Crisis of Knowledge and Authority* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 342.
- 7 Quoted in *Ibid.*, pp. 352–53.
- 8 Walter Lippmann, "The Footnote," in *Early Writings*, ed. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. (New York: Liveright, 1970), p. 307. First appeared in *The New Republic* (July 17, 1915). Also quoted in Diggins, *Promise of Pragmatism*, p. 341.
- 9 T. S. Eliot, "William Blake," in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), p. 321.
- 10 Lippmann, *Early Writings*, pp. 308, 309.
- 11 Richard Rorty, "Does Academic Freedom Have Philosophical Presuppositions?" in *The Future of Academic Freedom*, ed. Louis Menand (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 21, 29.
- 12 Randolph Bourne, "Twilight of Idols," in *The Radical Will: Selected Writings, 1911–1918*, ed. Olaf Hansen (New York: Urizen Books, 1977), pp. 342–43.

- 13 *Ibid.*, pp. 345–46.
- 14 Morton White, *Social Thought in America: The Revolt Against Formalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), p. 3.
- 15 Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (New York: Viking Press, 1950), p. xiv.
- 16 Trilling, for example, writes of a would-be revolutionary in Henry James's *The Princess Casamassima* that she "cannot but mistake the nature of reality, for she believes it is a thing, a position, a finality, a bedrock. She is, in short, the very embodiment of the modern will which masks itself in virtue, . . . that despises the variety and modulations of the human story and longs for an absolute humanity" (*The Liberal Imagination*, pp. 91–92). And Niebuhr's great admirer, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., describes how "the penetrating critic of the Social Gospel and of pragmatism . . . ended up, in a sense, the powerful reinterpreter and champion of both. . . . [T]he resources of democratic pragmatism turned out to be greater than many people—including Niebuhr himself in certain moods—had imagined" (*The Politics of Hope*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963, pp. 123–24).
- 17 Quoted in Diggins, *Promise of Pragmatism*, p. 453.
- 18 Hilary Putnam, "A Reconsideration of Deweyan Democracy," in his book *Renewing Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 183, 195.
- 19 John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1954), pp. 148–49.
- 20 Eugene Goodheart, "The Postmodern Liberalism of Richard Rorty," in Goodheart, *The Reign of Ideology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 52. Goodheart focuses his criticism of Rorty for extruding religion from the liberal commonwealth on statements like the following: "In its ideal form, the culture of liberalism would be one which was enlightened, secular, through and through. It would be one in which no trace of divinity remained, either in the form of a divinized world or a divinized self. Such a culture would have no room for the notion that there are nonhuman forces to which human beings should be responsible. It would drop, or drastically reinterpret, not only the idea of holiness but those of 'devotion to truth' and of 'fulfillment of the deepest needs of the spirit'" (Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 45).
- 21 See Steven Mailloux (ed.), *Rhetoric, Sophistry, Pragmatism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
- 22 See Diggins, *Promise of Pragmatism*, p. 408. John Ashbery develops a philosophy for living without philosophy in an amusing but serious poem, "My Philosophy of Life," in *Can You Hear, Bird* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), pp. 73–75. First trying to live "the way philosophers live, / according to a set of principles," he soon wonders: "What was the matter with how I acted before?" By the end he discovers that "there's a lot of fun to be had in the gaps between ideas. / That's what they're made for!"
- 23 Richard Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections* (New York: Random House, 1987), p. 45.
- 24 Richard Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 175.
- 25 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Circles," in *The Complete Essays and Other Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: Modern Library, 1940), pp. 288, 289.