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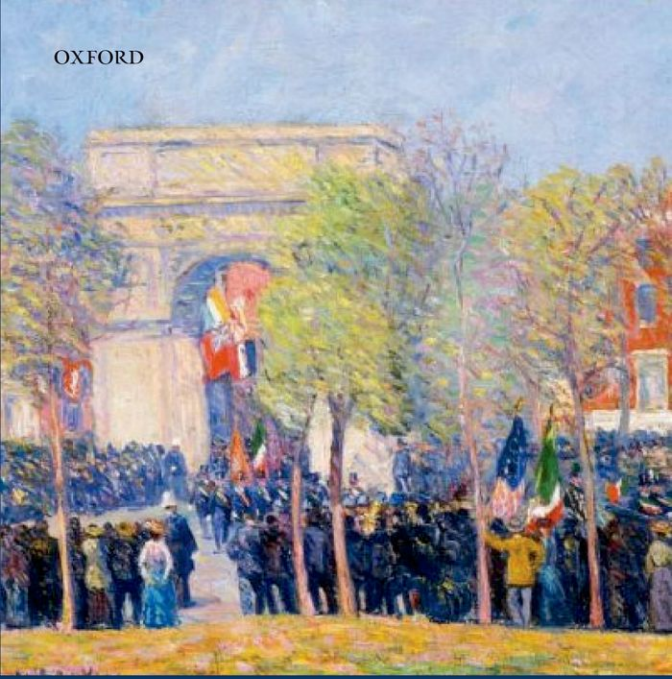

THE OXFORD HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

The American Pragmatists

Cheryl Misak

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Preface

Pragmatism is America's home-grown philosophy. It originated in Cambridge Massachusetts in the late 1860s and early 1870s in The Metaphysical Club—a reading group whose members included Oliver Wendell Holmes, William James, Charles Sanders Peirce, Nicholas St. John Green, John Fiske, and Chauncey Wright. James, Peirce, and Holmes were sons of New England intelligentsia. James's father was a well-known Swedenborgian theologian with inherited wealth; Peirce's father was an eminent professor of mathematics at Harvard; and Holmes's father professor of anatomy and physiology. Wright, from much humbler circumstances, was the oldest member of the group and was acknowledged by the others as their driving intellectual force.

The members of The Metaphysical Club found themselves at a critical juncture in the history of American thought. They were the first generation of philosophers to put some distance between philosophy and religion. Protestantism, in one variety or another, dominated America when the pragmatists began their careers. The college philosopher tended to be also the college minister or moral tutor and appointments in philosophy were reserved for the religiously orthodox.[1] This was about to change. Two exciting and related ideas about science and philosophy were in the air in Europe and had drifted across the Atlantic. First, the scientific method was being brought to philosophy with a vengeance. In 1740 Hume titled his masterpiece *A Treatise of Human Nature: An Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects* and a century later the kind of naturalism he favored had taken root. When The Metaphysical Club started to meet, the implications of Comte's positivism and Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* were being hotly debated in universities and in drawing rooms. Science seemed to entail the abandonment of the world-view that had God and religious absolutes at its centre.

The other idea was that philosophy should take science as one of its topics for investigation. The three members of The Metaphysical Club who went on to found American pragmatism—Wright, James and Peirce—were all working scientists who wanted not only to have science inform philosophy, but wanted also to develop a philosophy of science. They cut a trail that changed the course of American philosophy for generations to come.

The intellectual world that The Metaphysical Club members exited was very unlike the one they entered as young men. By the time James and Peirce were nearing the end of their lives, the philosopher was no longer the college's moral tutor. He had, rather, a distinctive set of topics to engage and a distinct profession, focused on the training of graduate students and the specialization of the discipline into identifiable sub-fields.

[1] See Schneider (1963 [1946]: 208ff.), Campbell (2006: 107) and Wilson (1990: 13ff.).

Professors of philosophy, at least in the elite institutions of Johns Hopkins, Harvard, Michigan, and Chicago, were to be researchers and graduate supervisors, as well as teachers of undergraduates.[2]

The lives of the members of The Metaphysical Club took very different turns. Holmes became one of American's most famous legal theorists and members of the Supreme Court. Wright was a master conversationalist, but suffered from depression, took minimal care of himself, and died in his early forties, leaving a small but impressive body of writing. James was soon one of the most famous academics in the world, in both psychology and philosophy, all the while trying to beat back his own depression, which hit him hard in the 1870s. The brilliant Peirce was by all accounts extraordinarily difficult and never managed to secure a permanent academic position. He was hardly known during his lifetime and died penniless and miserable. One gets the feeling that the great advances in the intellectual world took its toll on those at the frontier, sometimes resulting, in James's evocative phrase, in breakdowns with the head (*CWJ* 1: 177; 1872).

The early pragmatists made major contributions to almost every branch of philosophy and to other fields of investigation—for instance, Peirce in logic and the theory of signs; James in psychology; Dewey in education. But my focus in this book will be on what Bertrand Russell calls "the cardinal point in the pragmatist philosophy"—"its theory of truth" (1992 [1909]: 261). It is the view of truth and knowledge that is most associated with pragmatism and marks it off from other traditions. Indeed, the reader might take this book to have an implicit subtitle: *Truth, Knowledge, Value*. It may be that much that is interesting in some of the pragmatists' work lies elsewhere. But the story I am tracing is the story of pragmatism as a recognizable tradition and I will leave it to others to show in a sophisticated way how, for instance, James forever changed the face of psychology.

The founders of pragmatism took their most significant allied traditions to be empiricism and Kantianism. In 1905, in a letter to F. C. S. Schiller, Peirce puts it perfectly. He says that he learned his pragmatism from Berkeley and Kant. I will not be embarking on a sustained discussion of Berkeley, Kant, or others who influenced the pragmatists, such as Hegel. The mere list of these great philosophers should make it clear that, if I were to try to set out their views, this would be an exceedingly long book. Instead, I try to say just enough to give the reader a sense of their impacts on and contrasts with the pragmatists. In the same vein, some topics have inevitably received short shrift—I could have been more expansive on the American predecessors of pragmatism and on Wilfrid Sellars, to mention only a few.

Pragmatists are empiricists in that they require beliefs to be linked to experience. They want their explanations and ontology down-to-earth (natural as opposed to supernatural) and they require philosophical theories to arise out of our practices. As

[2] See Campbell (2006: 107) for an account of this transformation.

Peirce put the pragmatic maxim, we must look to the upshot of our concepts in order to understand them (*CP* 5, 4; 1901). But we shall see that the early pragmatists do not buy wholesale the empiricism and naturalism of their English and Scottish predecessors. They reject the part of empiricism that says that all of our beliefs originate in experience and that our beliefs can be linked in an atomistic way to discrete experiences. We shall see that the nature of the requisite connection between beliefs and experience is a complex matter for the pragmatists. Moreover, they reject any naturalism that gives ontological priority to matter or physicality—they want to consider whether value, generality, chance, etc. might be part of the natural world. They are holists, taking their view to encompass all of science, logic, mathematics, art, religion, ethics, and politics. Unlike most of their empiricist predecessors, they fence off no realm of inquiry from the principles they set out.

Lest it be thought that these empiricist strains in pragmatism are somehow connected with an American disposition to practical, industrial, or entrepreneurial matters, as Russell, Santayana and so many others have suggested, John Dewey slays this idea. It is like saying "that English neo-realism is a reflection of the snobbish aristocracy of the English and the tendency of French thought to dualism an expression of an alleged Gallic disposition to keep a mistress in addition to a wife" (1939: 526).

We shall see that a major Kantian thesis that runs thorough pragmatism is that we need to assume certain things if we are to go on with our practices. I shall argue that the best kind of pragmatism is one that takes seriously Kant's regulative assumptions. Here is Peirce on how important Kant was to him: "I was a passionate devotee of Kant, at least as regarded the Transcendental Analytic in the Critic of Pure Reason. I believed more implicitly in the two tables of the Functions of Judgment and the Categories than if they had been brought down from Sinai" (*CP* 4, 2; 1898). But it will become clear that Peirce wants to naturalize Kant. The "necessity" that Kant vested in the assumptions underlying our practices is brought down to earth—these assumptions are merely required if we are to continue with a practice that we do not contemplate abandoning.

The overarching issue for pragmatism is the problem with which both the empiricists and Kant wrestle. How can we make sense of our standards of rationality, truth, and value as genuinely normative or binding while recognizing that they are profoundly human phenomena? How do normativity and authority arise from within a world of human experience and practice? I shall argue that Peirce was the classical pragmatist who answered this question with the most care and sophistication. In subsequent generations, that care and sophistication resides most strikingly in Lewis and Sellars.

As the reader will surmise, my project straddles the history of ideas and philosophy. One of my aims is to tell what I think is a gripping story in the history of philosophy—a story about how pragmatism came into being, evolved, and branched out. But an equally important aim is to show what is good in pragmatism; where philosophical missteps were taken; and how pragmatists can best go forward. That is, the pages that follow are full of evaluation and argument. This will no doubt irritate those who would rather focus on the history, as stripped as possible from what is acceptable or not in the

positions in play. It will also irritate those pragmatists who are not part of what I argue is the most defensible pragmatist lineage. Part of my argument is that it is Richard Rorty who broke with the direction the pragmatist tradition was taking and returned, to pragmatism's misfortune, to some of the excesses of James and Dewey. I trust that those who disagree with my arguments will engage with them seriously and I look forward to the conversation.

Some will think that the lineage I outline privileges an "analytic" reading of the pragmatist tradition and that analytic philosophy is antithetical to pragmatism. But I shall argue that insofar as the distinction between analytic and non-analytic philosophy retains any force, the founders of pragmatism were pioneers of analytic philosophy. The view I outline is rooted very securely in the work of those founders of pragmatism, especially Wright and Peirce, and its tendrils reach into the work of every one of the classical pragmatists. Part of the burden of this book is to show that it is an interesting and defensible view. Others scholars of pragmatism have been and are on the same interpretative page. Indeed, it is impossible to pull apart those commentators who commend this lineage from those pragmatists who are a part of it.

In writing the kind of book that both tells the history of a philosophical position and evaluates living thoughts, even if they were first articulated in 1867, an inevitable problem with tenses arises. I try to solve it by using the past tense to talk about individuals and the evolution of their views and the present tense to talk about the views themselves.

Acknowledgments

This book has benefitted from the insights and comments of Donald Ainslie, Doug Anderson, David Bakhurst, Eric Dayton, Don Howard, Alex Klein, Mark Lance, David Macarthur, Mark Migotti, Trevor Pearce, Huw Price, Alan Richardson, Bob Schwartz, Rob Sinclair, Glenn Tiller, Jennifer Welchman, three readers solicited by Oxford University Press, as well as audiences at many conferences and philosophy departments. Two very special American pragmatists, Richard Bernstein and Morton White, were kind enough to meet with me to discuss periods of the history of American pragmatism in which they were major participants. Their first-person insight into critical moments in that story was enormously helpful and interesting. Thanks also go to Abtin Dezfuli, Ken Boyd, and, most extensively and especially, Diana Heney, excellent research assistants who ran books back and forth from Robarts Library, checked references, and in Diana's case, edited the entire manuscript with great intelligence and care.

As if all this help weren't enough, Robert Talisse organized a workshop on the manuscript at Vanderbilt in the autumn of 2011. He, Scott Aikin, Michael Hodges, Chris Hookway, Henry Jackman and John Lachs spent what were for me two intensely full and fruitful days of interrogation and improvement.

One would think that the book should be mistake-free after all of this, but alas, that will not be the case and I take full responsibility for all remaining errors and gaps. I should also note that I have written on some of these topics before. Parts of this book draw, and I hope improve, upon that earlier work, details of which can be found in the Bibliography.

I have had some demanding jobs at the University of Toronto while writing this book, currently that of Vice President and Provost. These have been challenging times for publicly supported universities and helping my own venerable institution navigate its way through the stormy waters has been no small task. A great group of colleagues—especially the President of the University, David Naylor—have been extraordinarily generous in encouraging me to balance that hard but rewarding work with some philosophical activity. In a corresponding way, my editor at Oxford University Press, Peter Momtchiloff, exhibited grace and patience as each new administrative position stood in the way of a speedy completion.

The reader will correctly infer that my family—David, Alexander, and Sophie Dyzenhaus—had to put up with much more than the usual. But as always, they have done so with immense love and good humor. This book is dedicated to them.

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Reference Policy

My reference policy with respect to the work of the classical pragmatists is as follows:

Reference to the works of C. S. Peirce

If a passage occurs in the new *Writings of Charles S. Peirce: Chronological Edition*, I cite that source as "*W* n, m; year," where n is the volume, m the page number, and the year that of the quoted text. If it is not in the *Writings*, but in the older *Collected Papers*, the citation is "*CP* n. m; year," where n is the volume number, m the paragraph number, and the year that of the quoted text. If it appears in print only in *New Elements of Mathematics*, the citation is "*NE* n: m," where n is the volume number and m the page number. If it is available in none of these collections, then I cite the manuscript number in the microfilm edition of Peirce's papers, as "MS n," where n is the manuscript number. Full details of these works can be found in the bibliography.

References to the works of William James

Unless otherwise noted, all citations of William James refer to his *Collected Works*. References to James's correspondence refer to *The Correspondence of William James*, and appear in the following form: "*CWJ*, n: m; year," where n is the volume number, m the page number, and the year that of the quoted text. Full details of these works can be found in the bibliography.

References to the works of John Dewey

Unless otherwise noted, all citations of John Dewey refer to his *Collected Works. The Early Works of John Dewey, 1882–1898*, are cited as "*EW* n: m; year," where n is the volume number, m the page number, and the year that of the quoted text. *The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899–1924*, are likewise cited as "*MW* n: m; year," and *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925–1953* cited as "*LW* n: m; year." References to Dewey's correspondence refer to *The Correspondence of John Dewey*, and appear in the following form: "*CJD* n: year, i," where n is the volume number, the year that of the quoted letter, and i the item number. Full details of these works can be found in the bibliography.

References to the correspondence of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.

Correspondence between Holmes and Frederick Pollock is cited from the two volumes of *Holmes–Pollock letters: The Correspondence of Mr. Justice Holmes and Sir Frederick Pollock, 1874–1932*, edited by Mark DeWolfe Howe. Citations take the form "Holmes–Pollock Letters (n: m; year)," where n is the volume number, m the page number, and the year that of the quoted letter. Full bibliographical details can be found in the bibliography.

References to the correspondence of George Santayana

Santayana's correspondence is cited from the eight volumes of *The Letters of George Santayana*, edited by William G. Holzberger. Citations take the form "Letters n: m," where n is the volume number and m the page number. Full bibliographical details can be found in the bibliography.

Other authors

I have adopted the following reference policy for works by other authors. Citations of Ralph Waldo Emerson's works are to his *Collected Works,* and take the form "*CW* n: m; year," where n is the volume number, m the page number, and the year that of the quoted text. Wherever possible, citations of Bertrand Russell's works refer to the McMaster edition of *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, and take the form "*CP* n: m; year," where n is the volume number, m the page number, and the year that of the quoted text. Citations of David Hume's works are to the Nidditch editions, and refer to section number and page number. Citations of Ludwig Wittgenstein's works also refer to section number, and to the translations and editions noted in the bibliography.

Wherever an author has an authoritative collected works published, I try as much as possible to refer to that version of their works.

Introduction: The Trajectory of American Pragmatism

James's *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* appeared in 1907, "cometlike on our intellectual horizon" (Carus 2001 [1911]: 44). The received view of pragmatism's fortunes is that it shone brightly right through to John Dewey's death in 1952, then nearly burned out. This view has it that in the 1970s, when Richard Rorty brought into being a renaissance for pragmatism, there were very few pragmatists or students of American philosophy in top-tier American universities and pragmatism was in serious disrepute in Britain. As Dickstein (1998: 1) puts the received view, pragmatism was operating on the margins, driven from philosophy departments by the reigning analytic philosophy. Rorty brought it back, but in a resolutely anti-analytic version, a version despised by the ruling philosophical class. The idea is that pragmatism is set against analytic philosophy and has suffered from challenging this wrong-headed but domineering winner of the philosophical stakes. A sense of persecution has thus hung over certain quarters of American pragmatism since Dewey's demise. We shall see, however, that the story is not as the received view would have it.

"Analytic philosophy" used to have a clear meaning when in the hands of the likes of Bertrand Russell: "logical analysis" was the attempt to clarify a concept by using formal methods to reduce it to its constituent parts. It might have been the case that for some years in the mid to late 1900s, pragmatists had reason to distinguish themselves from that kind of analysis and from a kind of finely wrought philosophy which they took to be irrelevant to the problems we actually face in the world. But logical analysis has come and gone as a way of doing philosophy. Perhaps "analytic philosophy" now suggests to some that the philosophy of language is the foundation of philosophy; perhaps that logic is the foundation of philosophy. But it is more realistic to think that the term has lost any precise meaning it once had.

If "analytic philosophy" is taken in a looser sense, as being a tradition that pays attention to logic and prizes rigorous thinking, we shall see that Wright and Peirce must be seen as the pioneers of analytic philosophy in America. We shall also see that some of the stars of modern analytic philosophy—C. I. Lewis, W. V. Quine, Nelson Goodman, to name a few—were also very much in step with American pragmatism during the years in which it was supposedly driven out of philosophy departments by analytic philosophers. Pragmatism, that is, has a strong and unbroken

analytic lineage. Part of the burden of this book is to trace that lineage and argue that it is valuable.

The trajectory of American pragmatism is also not that which is described by Louis Menand in his best-selling and Pulitzer Prize-winning book *The Metaphysical Club*. While Menand is to be thanked for amassing a rich collection of historical detail about the pragmatists and portraying their personalities so well, his story is philosophically misguided. Menand asserts that the early pragmatists "taught a kind of skepticism that helped people cope with life in a heterogeneous, industrialized, mass market society"—a skepticism which helped "free thought from thralldom to official ideologies, of the church or the state or even the academy" (2001: xii). Pragmatism, he says, "belongs to a disestablishmentarian impulse in American culture" (2001: 89). Menand's early pragmatists look a lot like Rorty, arguing that there is no certainty, no truth, and no objectivity to be had, only agreement within a community. His claim is that the American Civil War was, amongst other things, a failure of ideas. It "swept away almost the whole intellectual culture of the North" and "it took nearly half a century for the United States to find a culture to replace it, to find a set of ideas, and a way of thinking, that would help people cope with the conditions of modern life" (Menand 2001: x). That set of ideas, he asserts, was found in pragmatism. After the trauma of the Civil War, in which the lesson was "that certitude leads to violence," people were not in the mood for absolutist philosophies (Menand 2001: 61). Pragmatism thus arose and flourished until its fallibilism and tolerance were thrown into suspicion by the intellectual climate of the Cold War of the 1950s and 1960s. James and Dewey came to be seen as "naïve, and even a little dangerous."[1] With the end of the Cold War, uncertainty was allowable again—hence Rorty's ability to revive pragmatism during the 1980s and 1990s. "For in the post-Cold War world, where there are many competing belief systems, not just two, skepticism about the finality of any particular set of beliefs has begun to seem to some people an important value again" (Menand 2001: 441).

This is a rather breath-taking thesis. In Parts I and II of this book, I will show that it is not the best understanding of pragmatism's reception. The accurate story is less grandiose, but it is actually much more interesting, in terms of the evolution of modern analytic philosophy. There is no doubt that the Civil War was a cauldron of horror that scorched the lives of the early pragmatists. Holmes took part in some of the worst battles and was wounded more than once; one of James's brothers came home shattered. But the Civil War makes no appearance in the stated motivations and in the philosophical writing of the early pragmatists. And while the Cold War had a

[1] Menand (2001: 439). He does say that there were also more mundane reasons for the change in status of the reputations of James and Dewey—their disciples were less impressive and other ways of doing philosophy seemed "more obviously suited to academic modes in inquiry" (2001: 438). But his main reason remains one about the "intellectual climate of the Cold War" (2001: 439).

profound effect on Dewey's political views, there is no hint that it influenced his epistemology.

At the heart of my alternative story is the fact that James was the one to unveil pragmatism to the public—in a lecture in California in 1898—and remained its most prominent proponent. Philosophy, James said, "is at once the most sublime and the most trivial of human pursuits. It works in the minutest crannies and it opens out the widest vistas" (1975 [1907]: 6). In his work on psychology, James worked brilliantly in the crannies and on the vistas. But when it came to talking about truth and objectivity, he was less reliable. It was Peirce who worked on both the careful details as well as opening out the panoramic views. Peirce's version of pragmatism, however, hardly saw the light of day, much to pragmatism's misfortune.

In Part I, I shall outline the shape of early American pragmatism. Much of what I discuss will directly or indirectly speak to the debate within pragmatism about its heart and soul. Pragmatism, as Robert Westbrook says, is like a contentious family of thinkers holding distinct but related positions on the "workmanlike" nature of knowledge, meaning, and truth. Peirce, he says:

> quickly denied paternity of the child James had adopted and announced he would henceforth refer to his own position as 'pragmaticism', a word 'ugly enough to be safe from kidnappers'. John Dewey, though deeply indebted to James's thinking, nonetheless took care to distinguish his own 'instrumentalism' from what he took to be James's more tender-minded efforts use pragmatism to secure religious belief. Peirce, in turn, responded to Dewey's praise of his essay on 'What Pragmatism Is' (1905) with a puzzled letter noting that Dewey's instrumental logic 'forbids all such researches as those which I have been absorbed in for the last eighteen years'.
>
> [2005: 1]

The debate within pragmatism continues to this day. There will be plenty of opportunity to make the necessary nuances in the pages that follows. But roughly, it is a debate between those who assert (or whose view entails) that there is no truth and objectivity to be had anywhere and those who take pragmatism to promise an account of truth that preserves our aspiration to getting things right.

On the one side of the divide we have Rorty and his classical predecessors (James and Dewey) holding that there is no truth at which we might aim—only agreement within a community or what works for an individual or what is found to solve a problem. In some moods Rorty goes as far as claiming that truth and objectivity are nothing more than what our peers will let us get away with saying. On the other side of the divide, we have those who think of pragmatism as rejecting an ahistorical, transcendental, or metaphysical theory of truth, but nonetheless being committed to doing justice to the objective dimension of human inquiry—to the fact that those engaged in deliberation and investigation take themselves to be aiming at getting things right, avoiding mistakes, and improving their beliefs and theories. On this more objective kind of pragmatism, which emanates from Wright and Peirce, the fact that our inquiries are historically situated does not entail that they lack objectivity. Neither

does the fact that standards of objectivity themselves come into being and evolve. The trail of the human serpent is over everything (to use James's phrase), but (as James himself may or may not have seen) this does not toss us into a sea of arbitrariness, where there is no truth or where truth varies from person to person or culture to culture.

We shall see that Colin Koopman is right to say that Peirce was "more preoccupied with a philosophical conception of truth than he was with a cultural critique of the role that truth plays in our lives."[2] James and Dewey, on the other hand, were concerned with both projects, not always being clear about when they were engaged in one and when they were engaged in the other. These two tendencies in pragmatist thought persist today. But since the pragmatist account of truth links truth with practice, the lines between the tendencies can never be sharply delineated. Koopman is wrong to think that Peircean pragmatism offers us a "*metaphysics* of inquiry" and Deweyan pragmatism offers us a "*hope* regarding progressivism" (2009: 44). For we shall see, for instance, that Peirce was opposed to a metaphysical conception of truth and that he too put tremendous emphasis on the idea of hope.

Westbrook frames the issue thus:

> Post-modernist skeptics and their few neopragmatist admirers turn to the old pragmatists because they (correctly) see them as potential partners in a struggle against 'strong', that is, absolutist and 'totalizing', conceptions of truth. But what they neglect is the old pragmatists' conviction (shared by many neopragmatists) that once they had overcome absolutism, they could then resume traveling down the road of inquiry in a more fuel-efficient vehicle than Reason toward a more modest destination than Truth.
>
> [2005: 7]

This is the journey that I shall describe and evaluate.

[2] Koopman (2009:43). He is following Joseph Margolis (1998) here.

PART I

The Founders of Pragmatism

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1

Pragmatist Themes in Early American Thought

1.1 Introduction: Empiricism and Idealism

The chief antecedent intellectual moments of American pragmatism are the Puritanism of the colonial period, commonsense realism, transcendentalism, and St. Louis Hegelianism. Many of the proponents of these views were preachers or politicians, well-educated and thoroughly enmeshed in the intellectual debates of their time, but not on the whole taken up with the task of setting out what we now would think of as a systematic philosophical theory. George Santayana says of Emerson, for instance, that "[a]t bottom, he had no doctrine at all," only a wonderful inspiration (1957 [1900]: 218). There is thus much in their views that I will leave untouched and I will confine myself to a brief account of those aspects of their thought most relevant to pragmatism. It is grounded largely in an examination of what was on the highly influential Chauncey Wright's mind as he and Peirce and James started to carve out their view.

Some scholars of American philosophy see the seeds of pragmatism growing from these very early views. Insofar as the early American thinkers were working through the issues of realism and idealism imported from Scotland, England, and Germany, this is most definitely the case. But, insofar as more direct causal relationships go, my suggestion shall be that we can identify only two distinct and important pragmatist ideas in early American thought.

The intellectual air that the pragmatists were born into was a heady mix of empiricism and idealism. The empiricism, I shall suggest, was the more important. But the pragmatists took significant steps away from the empiricism of Locke and Hume. One of those advances is taken directly from their American predecessors. It is the persistent attempt of the early American thinkers to try to widen the concept of experience. We shall see this attempt grow in force and magnitude when the pragmatists come on the scene.

Idealism, as Van Leer (1986: 26) argues, manifested itself in four themes in early American thought, emanating from Berkeley, Hegel, and Kant: (i) the spirit is the primary and unifying force in the world; (ii) there is an immutable ideal world behind or above the world of experience; (iii) what we perceive are really ideas and ideas only exist in the mind; (iv) the limits of human knowledge are such that what man can

know is limited to what he perceives—he cannot know what might stand behind what he perceives. We might add to this list Jonathan Edward's view that truth consists in the agreement of our ideas with ideas of God. We shall see that the strong theological or (in the parlance of the time) "metaphysical" assumptions of the early American idealists gave the pragmatists something to rebel against.

1.2 Puritanism

As John Ryder (2004) notes, when the American colonists came across the water to their new land, they brought with them a strong Calvinist determinism—the idea that the will of God fully determines everything. They also brought with them the certainty that they were chosen by God to do his will in the New World. Indeed, the Puritans came to America partly so that they could build communities around their religious principles and have social and political authority reside with religious leaders chosen by congregations.

Of the Puritan thinkers, there are a few stand-outs as far as the history of pragmatism goes. One is the colonial governor of New York, scientist, and man of letters, Cadwallader Colden (1688–1776). Colden was a Scot with a good understanding of the empiricism of Locke and Hume. That there is a whiff of pragmatism in the following goes to show just how intimately pragmatism and empiricism are intertwined:

> Every thing, that we know, is an agent, or has a power of acting: for as we know nothing of any thing but its action, and the effects of that action, the moment any thing ceases to act it must be annihilated as to us: we can have no kind of idea of its existence.
>
> [Colden 1939 [1751]: 102][1]

Where Colden breaks with his empiricist predecessors is that he thought he could show how we have a perception of immaterial spirit, just as we can have a perception of matter. Spirit also excites action, power, or force (1939 [1751]: 103). He argues that we can acquire a conception of the reality of the divine being from observation or from religious experience. Someone who is "spiritually enlightened" "truly apprehends and sees" the glory and excellence of God. "He don't merely rationally believe that God is glorious," he has a "sense" of it. Just as "[t]here is a difference between having a rational judgment that honey is sweet, and having a sense of its sweetness," there is a difference between having a rational judgment that God is holy and gracious, and having a sense of the holiness and grace.[2] Colden does not elaborate on why we should think of experience so broadly or on how we can perceive something immaterial. But we shall see that his idea that there can be religious experience survives through to William James.

[1] As Scott Pratt and John Ryder point out, Colden sounds "remarkably like Peirce" (Pratt and Ryder, 2002: 30).

[2] Colden (1999 [1734]: 415–16). Spelling and grammatical errors are in the original.

Two well-known Puritan preachers, Cotton Mather (1663–1728) and Jonathan Edwards (1703–58), clearly saw that the new science posed a problem for Puritanism. The idea that the world is a machine, governed by mathematics and by empirically discoverable laws of nature, undermined the Puritan belief that God's will is the primary causal force. Similarly, Locke's scientific attitude to the study of man and his belief that all knowledge comes from experience pushes God out of the explanatory story. Mather is perhaps best known as an enthusiastic believer in and prosecutor of witches—he was a major figure in the Salem trials. But in his more philosophical thinking, he argued that there had to be a God who created the machine that Newton described.

Edwards—preacher, theologian, evangelist and short-lived President of Princeton[3]—was intent on squaring his Puritan world-view with the scientific world-view. He argues in favor of Calvinist determinism not on the grounds that Scripture tells us that it is true or that God must have created the machinery of nature, but on the grounds that the new mechanical causation entails that determinism is true. He agrees with Colden that we can perceive the effects of God on the material world and on the spiritual world. He sees that the latter is a challenge. In the midst of a spiritual crisis, he writes in his diary: "The very thing I now want . . . to give me a clear and more immediate view of the perfections and glory of God, is a clear knowledge of the manner of God's exerting himself, with respect to spirits and minds, as I have, of his operations concerning matter and bodies" (Marsden 2003: 104). He never quite manages to show how God makes himself felt on spirits and minds, but, again, we shall see that William James, without referring back to his predecessors, tries to take up the task.

When it comes to the concept of truth, it is Edwards's idealism that shines through, although as Kenneth Winkler (forthcoming) notes, there is an early signal of pragmatism here. Edwards thinks truth is correspondence with how things are, but that this is vague talk. It needs to be made more precise. The way Edwards cashes it out is as follows: "Truth, in the general, may be defined, after the most strict and metaphysical manner, as *The consistency and agreement of our ideas, with the ideas of God*" (1980 [1723]: 341–42). We shall see when we turn to Chauncey Wright that it is this very kind of metaphysics against which the pragmatists reacted. The pragmatists too think that we need to say more about what we mean by "truth is correspondence with how things are." But they want to cash that expression out in experience, not in the ideas of God.

A view allied with Puritan empiricism came to dominance in the small number of departments of philosophy during the mid to late 1700s in America: Scottish Commonsense realism. John Witherspoon, brought from Edinburgh in 1765 to replace Edwards as the President of Princeton, as well as his own successor at Princeton, James McCosh, and Francis Bowen at Harvard, were proponents of this view. They argued that since we so obviously have knowledge of things, events, and other minds, we must have an immediate or intuitive knowledge of the principles that make this knowledge

[3] Shortly after taking up the position, he died of an inoculation for smallpox.

possible. The principle of causality, for instance, must be known intuitively, as Hume had shown that it is not given to use through sense experience. We form concepts such as that of causality, which then allow us to interpret experience so that we have a coherent account of the world. While the inferences we might make from experience can be mistaken, the concepts that we get from reason and intuition are certain. We shall see that this combination of rationalism and empiricism was particularly at risk when Darwin's theory of evolution came on the scene.

1.3 Transcendentalism

The transcendentalism that followed Puritanism was a major intellectual force in mid 1800s America. Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–82) was its leading light. It gave rise to the St. Louis Hegelianism of William Torrey Harris (1835–1909), George Howison (1834–1916), and Henry Conrad Brockmeyer (1828–1906). We shall see that the American idealism that was born with transcendentalism was the view that most engaged the attention of the fledgling pragmatists.

The transcendentalists are sometimes taken to be the forerunners of American pragmatism because of their focus on individuality, independence, and the cultivation of our own resources. But we shall see that these are not the characteristic features of pragmatism and, anyway, the transcendentalists carried the freight of metaphysics that was scorned by the pragmatists. Although there are some important connections between the two views, they do not reside in a purported American attitude of individuality and resourcefulness.

Emerson was very well known and respected amongst The Metaphysical Club members. He was intimate with the families of Peirce and, especially, James. Dewey, casting his eyes back, considered Emerson "the one citizen of the new world fit to have his name uttered in the same breath with that of Plato" (*MW* 3: 191; 1903). But his place in the history of pragmatism is complicated. He too made gestures at an expanded notion of experience and perhaps James took his own talk of philosophical temperaments from him. But while he most certainly formed a part of the intellectual background against which the early pragmatists worked, his style and approach to philosophy has a very different feel than theirs. And we shall see that his view that the natural world is a revelation of God is an antithesis of what the pragmatists stood for.

Peirce does not engage Emerson philosophically and he is pretty clear that the influence, if any, is not strong:

> the atmosphere of Cambridge held many an antiseptic against Concord transcendentalism; and I am not conscious of having contracted any of that virus. Nevertheless, it is probable that some cultured bacilli, some benignant form of the disease was implanted in my soul, unawares, and that now, after long incubation, it comes to the surface, modified by mathematical conceptions and by training in physical investigations.
>
> [*CP* 6. 102; 1891]

Transcendentalism was expressly set against the Scottish/English enlightenment and empiricist values that we shall see permeated the members of The Metaphysical Club. Emerson argued, starting with his 1836 *Nature*, that nature was an expression of the divine. A motto of transcendentalism was the anti-empiricist slogan that "the kingdom of man over nature cometh not with observation" (Schneider 1963 [1946]: 242). Nature is the manifestation of God's will—the world is a divine dream. Hence science is not a higher kind of inquiry than we find in theology or in what amounted to the same thing in those days, philosophy.

Emerson says in his 1841 essay "The Transcendentalist," that transcendentalism is the current expression of idealism. These "*new views* here in New England . . . are not really new," but are "the very oldest of thoughts cast into the mould of these new times" (*CW* 1: 201; 1841). He says:

> As thinkers, mankind have ever divided into two sects, Materialists and Idealists; the first class founding on experience, the second on consciousness; the first class beginning to think from the data of the senses, the second class perceive that the senses are not final, and say, the senses give us representations of things, but what are the things themselves, they cannot tell. The materialist insists on facts, on history, on the force of circumstances, and the animal wants of man; the idealist on the power of Thought and of Will, on inspiration, on miracle, on individual culture.
>
> [*CW* 1: 201; 1841]

Emerson sides with the idealist. Van Leer (1986: 26) sees all four of idealist theses in Emerson's *Nature*, despite the fact that Van Leer reads *Nature* as being a fundamentally Kantian work.[4] Some of these theses are of course still going concerns in philosophy, others are not. The first thesis—the view that the spirit or the Absolute is primary—is now obsolete. Nonetheless, we need to keep it at the front of our minds as we read the early pragmatists, for we shall see that we can only understand James, for instance, when we see how he sets himself against absolute idealism. The pragmatists grew up, intellectually, amongst idealist Hegelians, William Torrey Harris, one of the St. Louis Hegelians and founder of *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, being the most prominent. They took seriously, even if their aim was one of refutation, the idea that there is one overarching and unifying consciousness which encompasses everything else—an Absolute which is in the world, not in some way independent of it.

The fledgling pragmatists had very diverse attitudes towards Hegelian idealism. Wright hardly mentions it, James sets his view in opposition to it, and Peirce sees the affinities between his brand of pragmatism and Hegelianism (Dewey was later to be the most Hegelian of all the pragmatists). But one thing is clear—the early pragmatists, one way or another, were heavily engaged with idealism. Indeed, Josiah Royce—the most famous idealist of his generation—was the primary interlocutor of Peirce and James.

The part of New England that the founders of pragmatism wanted to preserve was the idea that experience is broad. In Edwards's hands, this thought played out so that experience is central to religion—we perceive the divine. Emerson followed up and

[4] See Winkler (forthcoming) for the argument that Emerson's idealism is more like Berkeley's than Kant's.

amplified. "Life," he wrote in the 1844 essay "Experience," is a train of "temperaments" or "moods like a string of beads, and, as we pass through them, they prove to be many-colored lenses which paint the world their own hue, and each shows only what lies in its focus" (*CW* 3: 30; 1844). "Thus inevitably does the universe wear our color" (*CW* 3: 45; 1844). This is the Kantian idea that human thought structures the world. Emerson's novel contribution is to introduce temperaments or moods. Feelings or emotions are a part of that structuring apparatus.

Emerson, with Kant, wanted to humanize the world. The world is not the inanimate and unknowable world the empiricists would have us living in. He brought to this view a particular focus, one which, as Russell Goodman has shown, is the focus of the European Romantics Wordsworth and Coleridge. The problem is not with empiricism, but with "paltry empiricism."[5] There's nothing wrong with focusing on experience, as long as experience is conceived broadly—as long as experience includes more than what our five senses deliver. Feeling or emotion is a kind of experience. This, I submit, is one of the two primary links between Emerson and the pragmatists.[6] They were joined together by their concern to thoroughly reconstruct the notion of experience so that feeling, passion, and emotion were included.

When Emerson first invokes moods, he seems to do so in order to suggest that all experience is illusory. But as Van Leer (1986: 165f.) argues, he curbs the excesses of this thought in the essay "Experience" with the idea that experience surprises us—with the idea that life is a "series of surprises."[7] And surprise is the stuff of discovery: "In the thought of genius, there is always a surprise" (*CW* 3: 40; 1844). The fact that we can be surprised suggests that experience is not illusory and the world is not structured entirely by us. Although we may color the universe, there is something real that we are coloring.[8] This idea of experience coming to us in surprises is the second primary connection between Emerson and the founders of pragmatism. We shall see that it is precisely the notion of experience Peirce puts forward and that it forms a critical part of his epistemology. He had to have picked it up from Emerson. Experience is, in Emerson's words, "an unlooked for result" or something "somewhat new, and very unlike what he promised himself" (*CW* 3: 40; 1844). We shall see that these words could just as well have come from Peirce's pen.

In 1837, Emerson argued that it was time for an "American scholar" to free American thought from the dominance of the Europeans. He looked forward to a time "when the sluggard intellect of this continent will look up from under its iron lids and fill the postponed expectation of the world with something better than the

[5] Emerson *CW* 3: 48; 1844, see Goodman (1990: 13f., 19).

[6] See also Clebsch (1973: 113), and Goodman (2008).

[7] *CW* 3: 39; 1844. See also *CW* 2: 189–90; 1841 and *CW* 2: 195; 1841.

[8] Van Leer (1986: 25) also points out that the notion of experience as surprise can be found in the early (1836) *Nature*.

exertions of mechanical skill" (1940: 45). Douglas Anderson (2008) argues very persuasively that C. S. Peirce was that American scholar.

Santayana bemoaned the "genteel tradition" of the Calvinism and transcendentalism in early American thought. He thought it originated in the agonized conscience of the Puritans coming to America. These colonists "were occupied, as they expressed it, in wrestling with the Lord" (1967: 38). Santayana thought the imported Puritan ideal was "an old wine in new bottles," and had the unfortunate consequence of rendering America "a young country with an old mentality" (1967: 38–39).[9] It was only when the likes of Charles Peirce and William James arrived on the intellectual scene that America moved away from its being an apprentice of Europe and came into its own. James "has given a rude shock to the genteel tradition. What! The world a gradual improvisation? Creation unpremeditated? God a sort of young poet or struggling artist?" (Santayana 1967: 59). Santayana was right. Pragmatism was rude and shocking to the America of the mid and late 1880s.

[9] In his biography of Emerson, Oliver Wendell Holmes makes the same point (Holmes 1886: 146).

2

Chauncey Wright (1830–75)

2.1 Introduction

Now that we have a sketch of the intellectual world the early pragmatists were born into, we can turn properly to the founders of pragmatism—Chauncey Wright, Charles Peirce, and William James. Wright, obscure to all but aficionados of American philosophy, is a much underrated figure in American thought. He was not born into wealth or academia. His father was a deputy sheriff and merchant in Northampton Massachusetts and his way to Harvard was paid through the generosity of a local woman. While there, he exhibited a distinct loathing for the rote learning of classical languages and seemed not to be doing much of the reading for his courses. Nonetheless, he made a great impression on many of his contemporaries and on Benjamin Peirce, the Professor of Mathematics and father of Charles. Once graduated, the job he found was outside the college system—he was a "computer" for the American Nautical Almanac. His heart was not in it. As Simon Newcomb, the eminent mathematician and astronomer who was a colleague at the Almanac put it, he had:

> an abominable habit of doing his whole year's work in three or four months, during which period he would work during the greater part of the night as well as of the day, eat little, and keep up his strength by smoking. The rest of the year he was a typical philosopher of the ancient world, talking, but, so far as I know, at this period, seldom or never writing.[1]

After devising calculating shortcuts that enabled him to dispense quickly with his Almanac work, Wright would get on with what really seized him—philosophical talk, correspondence, and, when pressured, a bit of reviewing for *The Nation* and *The North American Review*.

At these things he was very good indeed. His correspondence with Darwin impressed the great evolutionist.[2] He was generally held in very high regard and was admitted to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, where he became its recording secretary. But it is clear that Wright's real genius came out in his talk. He was a wonderful friend and a brilliant interlocutor. He died in 1875, when he was only

[1] Thayer (1971 [1878]: 70). Newcomb's reminiscences of Wright make it clear that he was very fond of his unusual colleague. But he did not feel the same about Peirce, intervening to prevent him from getting appointments and grants. See Brent (1993: 128, 150–53, 287) and Houser (1986: xl–xli).

[2] See Wiener (1945) and Madden (1963: 23).