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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

