PRAGMATISM From Progressivism to Postmodernism

EDITED BY Robert Hollinger & David Depew



Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	xi xiii
GENERAL INTRODUCTION David Depew and Robert Hollinger	ЛШ
Part I: Pragmatists and Progressives	
Introduction David Depew	
1. The Problem of Pragmatism in American History: A Look Back and a Look Ahead David A. Hollinger	19
2. William James and Richard Rorty: Context and Conversation George Cotkin	38
3. Community Without Fusion: Dewey, Mead, Tufts James Campbell	56
4. Pragmatism, Technology, and Scientism: Are the Methods of the Scientific-Technical Disciplines Relevant to Social Problems? Larry A. Hickman	72

viii	Contents			Contents	ix
5.	The Perils of Personality: Lewis Mumford and Politics After Liberalism Casey Nelson Blake	88	15.	Pragmatism, Democracy, and the Imagination: Rethinking the Deweyan Legacy <i>Giles Gunn</i>	298
Part II:	Pragmatism, Positivism, and the Linguistic Turn		16.	Theory, Pragmatisms, and Politics Cornel West	314
	Introduction David Depew Fertile Ground: Pragmatism, Science, and Logical Positivism Daniel J. Wilson American Philosophy and Its Lost Public	109 122 142		SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY INDEX CONTRIBUTORS	327 341 345
8.	Bruce Kuklick James, Quine, and Analytic Pragmatism Isaac Nevo	153			
9.	Vanishing Frontiers in American Philosophy: Two Dogmas of Idealism Ralph W. Sleeper	170			
10.	The Decline of Evolutionary Naturalism in Later Pragmatism Randall Auxier	180			
11.	Rorty's Pragmatism and the Linguistic Turn Rickard Donovan	208			
Part III	: Pragmatism and the Postmodern Condition				
	Introduction David Depew and Robert Hollinger	227			
12.	American Pragmatism and the Humanist Tradition Konstantin Kolenda	238			
13.	Postmodern Pragmatism: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, and Rorty Bernd Magnus	256			
14.	Richard Rorty's Romantic Pragmatism Isaac Nevo	284			

General Introduction

David Depew and Robert Hollinger

Pragmatism has become popular again. It has become so popular, in fact, that everyone seems to know what it is. In keeping with pragmatism's antiessentialist spirit, however, we should recognize that from its earliest days pragmatism has meant many things to many people. Only a year after William James's influential 1907 lectures on pragmatism, Arthur O. Lovejoy was able to discriminate thirteen distinct meanings for the term.¹ Since then, every subsequent rebirth of pragmatism has generated more views about it. Indeed, having been given new currency by Richard Rorty, the term *pragmatism* is now being bandied about in so many ways that Lovejoy, were he alive today, would be cast into paroxysms of *Schadenfreude*.

We say Schadenfreude because Lovejoy regarded pragmatism's dissemination of meaning as *ipso facto* a condemnation of it. Like other professionalizing philosophers, Lovejoy believed that if philosophy was to make as much progress as science, it would have to trade in sober, unambiguous, technical meanings. By contrast, the editors of this volume, and many of the intellectual historians and historically sensitive philosophers who have contributed to it, are not as sour as Lovejoy was about plural meanings. On the contrary, we are generally in sympathy with pragmatism's tendency to let a thousand semantic flowers bloom. But for this very reason most of us do not believe that taking a pragmatic view of history grants to one's present interests or one's prospective hopes unlimited license to reshape the past, especially the past of one's own intellectual filiation. If pragmatism's present condition is to be properly assessed and if its future prospects are to be realized, no good will come from retrospectively prescribing to diverse people living in diverse times what they must have meant. It is simply not pragmatic to believe that there is a pragmatism that rides serenely over these differing circumstances.

If the arguments of pragmatists, and the consequences they draw from them, have differed wildly, it is nonetheless true that pragmatists share a number of characteristic attitudes, which they explicate, justify, and commend in different ways. Pragmatists have a suspicious attitude, for example, toward the epistemological and ontological problems that have virtually defined the philosophical tradition, which have made of skepticism a constantly looming threat. Accordingly, it is important to recognize that when they claim that ideas derive their meaning, and even get their truth, wholly from their utility in guiding behavior. pragmatists do not wish to cast doubt on our ability to know things. For pragmatists, meaning, truth, and knowledge are not scarce. On the contrary, they are ubiquitous. This is because pragmatists are viscerally convinced that overly objectivistic, or "foundationalist," epistemological criteria are, by their very unfulfillability, the main cause of the skeptical temptations into which philosophers regularly fall, Pragmatists say that such criteria are incoherent and irrelevant. No reasonable person has any cause to be disappointed if it turns out that their conditions cannot be met.

One way to defend this intuition is to stress the primacy of action over contemplation in the cognitive efforts of humans. This is another characteristically pragmatic attitude. If praxis is primary, knowledge abounds whenever and wherever people cooperatively do and make things. Only to isolated, passive thumbsuckers does it seems hard to come by. For this reason, pragmatists deny that philosophical contemplation can furnish a separate kind of knowledge above and beyond what we learn as inquiring animals situated in an interactive cultural environment. They also affirm that ordinary people are capable of running their own lives, and improving the lives of others, because the cognitively rich skills and experience they come to possess can never be eclipsed by the arcane gnosis of this or that priestly caste. In stressing the primacy of *praxis* over *theoria*, accordingly, pragmatism shows itself to be more than an epistemological stance. It is also an attitude about values and purposes. The epistemic permissiveness of the pragmatic tradition, and the active, this-worldly, democratic perspective from which pragmatism speaks, is intended to blunt the moral, social, and political passivity, cynicism, even nihilism, that seem so often to accompany epistemic cramp. It is intended to unleash a sense of freedom, autonomy, novelty, and progress. If there is any respect in which pragmatism is a characteristically American doctrine, this is it. Indeed, following its career in America is a good way of investigating how knowledge and power have been intertwined in this country throughout the twentieth century.

From this perspective the history of American pragmatism can usefully be divided into three periods. In the first period, classical pragmatism became linked to the diffuse social and political movements known as progressivism. This link was formed, on the epistemological side, by what John Dewey called "the influence of Darwinism on philosophy." On the assumption that evolu-

tionary theory shows mind to be a collection of adaptive traits, which enable humans to get around in the world, pragmatists as different as James, George Herbert Mead, and Dewey conceived of personal development as adaptive behavior within a cultural environment, and of social, political, and economic reform as ameliorative human ecology. In this way, pragmatism helped America pass from unregulated forms of capitalism to more regulated versions.

^A A second phase of American pragmatism began when sophisticated advocates of logical positivism or logical empiricist views about philosophy, scientific method, and social engineering began arriving in America in flight from Nazi tyranny in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Positivists like Rudolf Carnap and American pragmatists like Charles Morris felt immediately that they had much in common. Pragmatists agreed, for example, that their own notion of meaning as the "cash value" of an idea was a crude first approximation to the positivists' "verificationist" theory of meaning, according to which a proposition that cannot possibly be judged true or false has no clear meaning. In the course of clarifying this notion, Carnap, and after him W.V.O Quine, took what they both described as a pragmatic turn. No amount of information can determine which of the many conceptual and theoretical frameworks we use to interpret our experience is better or truer apart from our purposes and problems. The proof of conceptual schemes is entirely in the pudding. They are to be judged pragmatically.

In both of these phases, pragmatists took a commendatory view of the natural sciences, the experimentalism of which contrasted vividly with the priestly ideal of knowledge as passive contemplation. At the same time, the pragmatists' positive attitude toward the benefits of scientific method in an experimentalist culture pointed to an ambiguity that has dogged them from the outset. Do pragmatists, and progressives, advocate enhanced participatory democracy or technocratic social engineering? Are they populists or elitists? To this disputed question the authors in this volume repeatedly return. The issue had already been raised in the 1920s, when Randolph Bourne, a former disciple of Dewey, Lewis Mumford, and others, adopted a more critical stance toward capitalist democracy than most pragmatists, as well as a more highly aestheticized sense of the lifeworld, and, from this perspective, attacked Dewey's "pragmatic acquiescence" to "Wilson's War." In this matter, Dewey was not without ways of defending himself. When he gave ground, moreover, it was generally by moving toward Bourne's and Mumford's values. Yet, to Dewey's dismay, the positivists' infusion of markedly scientistic attitudes into the pragmatic tradition subsequently tilted pragmatism's sense of itself toward the technocratic and away from the communal and the aesthetic. In an atmosphere dominated by World War II, the Cold War, the emergence of a national security state, the ascendancy of managerial capitalism, and consumerist conceptions of the good life, behaviorist views about human motives were combined with ideas about how capitalistic economics could be rationalized in ways that displaced the public-minded, participatory ideals of earlier progressive pragmatists, and put in their place versions of liberalism that stressed the wider scope of personal freedom and private pursuits that would be made possible when experts were left free to manage public affairs, and the economy, for others. Positivized and scientized pragmatism played a role in this shift by declaring, often in the name of pragmatism itself, the notion that "an end of ideology" had by the 1950s been reached in America.

In recent decades, things have changed dramatically. Beginning in the 1960s. a cultural reaction against fetishized scientific and technocratic worldviews, and new attraction to aestheticizing, expressive, and participatory conceptions of the lifeworld, began to take shape. This sea-change was doubtless triggered by widespread recognition that enormous power had been flowing to technocrats throughout the century, and that science, when linked to power in that way, was at least as often a force for ill as for good. That is an idea that would scarcely have crossed the brows of most nineteenth-century progressives, including Dewey. This cultural shift stimulated and was in turn intensified by a widespread revolt against positivist philosophy of science by students of many disciplines. Thomas Kuhn's The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (1962, 1970) was an important catalyst of this revolt. Kuhn argued that scientific theories do not organize data in ways that are any more, or any less, rational than political ideologies, religious beliefs, and aesthetic movements, and therefore that those who would strongly demarcate the rationality of science from the alleged irrationalism of these other dimensions of life were misguided. Against this background a third, and quite distinctive, moment in pragmatism's career began to find a voice. Pragmatism began to disentangle itself from positivism, scientism, and technologism, and to link itself with the humanities.

A key event was the publication in 1979 of Richard Rorty's Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature. In it, and in subsequent volumes such as Consequences of Pragmatism (1982) and Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity (1989), Rorty, an analytic philosopher who had edited a canonical anthology on The Linguistic Turn (1967), chided his professional colleagues for too often remaining enslaved to Platonic dreams of finding the one true "language" in which nature was presumably written, and of having the arrogance to impose the preferred language on all "first-order" inquirers. Rorty argued that in point of fact analytic philosophy's successful pursuit of the "meaning of meaning" leads to an even more thoroughgoing pragmatism than Quine and his disciples had suspected, in which scientific ways of interpreting experience cannot be privileged over those of artists and poets, and in which the transcendance of scientism implies the transcendance of philosophy itself. Appearing in the garb of a latter-day Deweyan public intellectual, Rorty has gone on to proclaim that the death of philosophy carries with it cultural consequences as large as those that once accompanied the displacement of theology from the centrality it once enjoyed. A postempiricist, postphilosophical, and in these respects postmodern, society will certainly affirm the promises of liberal democracy. Each person will be free to reinvent himself or herself. Postmodern pragmatists are convinced, however,

General Introduction

that the full scope for self-creation, self-interpretation, and self-expression will be granted only when liberalism has liberated itself from the earnest appeals to human nature and natural rights that bewitched our founding fathers, and from the religious conceptions of the human condition that modern philosophy both displaced and at the same time preserved. According to Rorty, universalist, essentialist ideas like these fall into the "mind as mirror of nature" fallacy. Just as scientific essentialism "blocks the road of inquiry" by constraining world descriptions, so "the right and the good" cherished by ethicists are too aprioristic to allow Rorty's thousand flowers to bloom.

In this atmosphere, philosophers who had remained true to pragmatism after it lost its earlier ascendancy have gained a new hearing. Some of their voices can be heard in this volume. Moreover, many analytic philosophers, such as Nelson Goodman, Hilary Putnam, Donald Davidson, and Joseph Margolis have acknowledged, sometimes under Rorty's prodding, the pragmatic genealogy and purport of much of their work, while at the same time refusing to follow Rorty in abandoning the philosophical tradition altogether. For Rorty himself, however. disentangling the pragmatic tradition from the cultural primacy of science signals that literary humanists, long on the defensive in the heyday of positivized culture, will henceforth be pragmatism's primary audience, champions, and developers. In this spirit, Rorty, as well as literary and social critics like Richard Pourier, Stanley Fish, Giles Gunn, and Cornel West, all of whom think of themselves as pragmatists, have provided creative new readings of James, Dewey, and other pragmatist heroes, in which they appear as prophets of a culture in which scientific theories will be treated exactly like other texts, and in which texts will be freely constructed and deconstructed from the perspective of active interpreters rather than in terms of supposedly invariant, essentialist intentions that authors impose on supine readers.

This is not to suggest that neopragmatist readings of pragmatism's past have always been received with equanimity. Many of the contributors to this volume, for example, believe that the great figures of classical pragmatism cannot plausibly be construed as harbingers of postmodernity, whose pragmatic impulses just happened to be contingently constrained by a naive belief in science. Nor is it necessary to believe that the classical positivists shared in anything remotely like the kind of scientism to which the positivists and their pragmatic acolytes gave widespread currency in the middle decades of this century. If postmodern pragmatists do not always recognize this, that is because their efforts are better interpreted as a revolt against positivized pragmatism of the middle decades of the twentieth century than as an accurate account of what we have called progressive pragmatism. Postmodern pragmatism bears the scars of that revolt. Indeed, Rorty himself seems merely to invert, rather than fully to transcend, the positivist scale of values when he suggests that public affairs are best left in the hands of technocratic managers, so that the rest of us can get on with the important business of pursuing the private happiness that material well-being makes possible. Is that the sort of politics, we may ask, that postmodern pragGeneral Introduction

matism portends? If so, does it not thereby move even further away from Dewey's participatory politics than positivized pragmatism by combining cultural elitism with deep contentment about leaving the culture of expertise in charge of the public sphere? Alternatively, are there forms of postmodern pragmatism that transcend, rather than merely invert, the science-humanities dichotomy? Does the ''prophetic pragmatism'' of Cornel West, for example, which stresses recovery of the cultural past as a means of communal action, and which has a positive attitude toward the religious traditions that have bound us to one another, count as such a transcendance? Will exploring new forms of pragmatism lead to a deeper recovery of James, Mead, and Dewey, and of the participatory side of the progressive heritage than those we have seen so far? This volume comes up against these questions. But it leaves their answers to others.

NOTE

1. Arthur O. Lovejoy, "The Thirteen Pragmatisms," Journal of Philosophy 5 (1908): 36-39.

Part I

Pragmatists and Progressives

xviii