

# **The Range of Pragmatism and the Limits of Philosophy**

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## INTRODUCTION

RICHARD SHUSTERMAN

Having “just finisht the proofs” of the book that launched pragmatism as a robust philosophical movement, William James (1842–1910) wrote about it to his brother Henry, on May 4, 1907, with understandable satisfaction but also astounding confidence. “I shouldn’t be su[r]prised if 10 years hence it should be rated as ‘epoch-making,’ for of the definitive triumph of that general way of thinking I can entertain no doubt whatever—I believe it to be something quite like the protestant reformation” (James 1994, 339). Almost one hundred years later, we can surely celebrate James’s *Pragmatism* as an epoch-making book, but the definitive triumph of its way of thinking, even among American philosophers, remains far from evident. Certainly pragmatism has yet to demonstrate the sort of wide-ranging world influence that could liken it to the protestant revolution.

As a philosophical movement, pragmatism has had difficulty in extending its sway beyond American shores, and even in its native America, it was, for a few decades, repeatedly pronounced dead until its stunning revival in the 1980s. Despite its ardent commitment to changing much more in the world than the contents of philosophy journals and seminar syllabi, pragmatism’s contribution to reconstructing the experience and practices of social life still leaves much to be desired. This unfulfilled ambition should not be cause for discouragement but rather a reason for exploring more carefully the range of pragmatism and the limits of philosophy, with the aim of extending their resources and productive influence beyond their current limitations.

The following essays, all written especially for this collection, engage this project of exploratory, reconstructive analysis in four principal ways. Some essays probe the range of pragmatism in terms of its international impact and its potential for productive dialogue with traditions that might initially seem very foreign to American philosophy. The main focus here will be pragmatism’s relationship to East-Asian thought and particularly Chinese culture. Other essays explore pragmatism’s range in terms of borderline cases of its extension, by considering key thinkers, such as Emerson and Du Bois, whose identity as pragmatists, though often affirmed, may also be contested. What difference of value does it make to interpret such thinkers within the pragmatist fold? Does their inclusion enhance the understanding and utility of their thought or

instead blur their distinctive voices and confuse the meaning of pragmatism?

Sensitive to the pervasive reality of change and the need for new thinking to respond to new conditions, pragmatism refuses to confine itself to the traditional scholastic problems of philosophy but is keen to address the most pressing problems that preoccupy the experience of today's world and its diverse peoples and publics. Several of the essays here collected explore pragmatism's range of impact and resources for dealing with these crucial concerns of contemporary life: issues of globalization, multiculturalism, race, and ethnicity; problems of reconciling individual self-realization with democratic ideals of community; questions about the uses of law and education but also the role of violence and the abiding scourge of war. Finally, some essays chart pragmatism's range by examining the ways it has influenced or could contribute to disciplines beyond the limits of philosophy: such disciplines as law, history, psychology, ethnic and cultural studies, and even psychoanalysis and somatic education. Most of the essays integrate more than one of these four themes, so I have found it more useful to group the essays in terms of three categories.

*Pragmatism in the global context.* In the introduction to *Pragmatism*, James (1963, 3–4) describes “the pragmatic movement” as having “rather suddenly precipitated itself out of the air” and having already found expression in “many countries.” After noting John Dewey (1859–1952) and F. C. S. Schiller (the Oxford humanist-pragmatist, 1864–1937), James invokes the writings of four French thinkers sympathetic to pragmatism. Unfortunately, despite James's friendship with Bergson, and despite the respect that Durkheim and Mauss later expressed for Dewey's work, pragmatism has never really enjoyed a proper reception or substantial following in France. Today its French reception still lags behind that of analytic philosophy, and even further behind German-rooted philosophies of idealism, materialism, and phenomenology that have long waxed enormously influential in French thought.<sup>1</sup>

One problem in importing philosophy to foreign lands is that philosophical texts are detached from their original context, the specific cultural field that helps to generate and structure them and to define their meaning. Transplanted into a foreign cultural field, philosophical texts are not only deprived of the familiar contextual understandings that guide their proper interpretation but they are also subjected to new uses in the polemics and struggles that define the new cultural context into which the writings are imported. In France, for example, pragmatism was, on the one hand, caricatured and used, by its detractors, as a

<sup>1</sup> I should note, however, that there are now some excellent French philosophers who are sympathetic to pragmatism and American philosophy, even if they are sometimes unsympathetically divided among themselves.

symbolic whipping boy to demonstrate the dangerous vulgarity and mercenary democracy of American culture. But pragmatism also suffered in being deployed by its French advocates to oppose the philosophies of rationalism, science, and enlightenment that dominated French academic, cultural, and political life at that time. Thus Durkheim (1983, 1, 9) could warn against pragmatism as “an *attack on reason*” that in France “chiefly appears in the neo-religious movement.” Problematically introduced into French philosophical debates as an anti-intellectualist philosophy of faith, feeling, and action and used to support French movements that were far more reactionary than progressive, pragmatism could not be appreciated for its proper meaning and merits, which certainly include an appreciation of scientific thinking and progressive enlightenment values. No wonder it failed to achieve a substantial and abiding place in twentieth-century French thought. Though pragmatism has proved somewhat more successful in Germany, its reception there, as Hans Joas (1993) has argued, has been largely one of misunderstanding.<sup>2</sup>

If pragmatism wants to expand its global reception, more attention must be given not only to exploring how its ideas can be fruitfully aligned with those of other philosophical traditions but also to examining the actual structure (the dominant contesting positions, historical forces, central issues, institutional powers, and alliances) of the foreign philosophical fields into which pragmatism seeks to enter. In pursuing such an approach, the first two essays of this collection turn from the more familiar connections between pragmatism and European philosophy in order to focus on pragmatism's dialogue with East-Asian thought. The opening essay envisages such dialogue as a valuable resource for developing a more globalized and multiculturally enriched philosophy of the future, liberated from some of the dead-ends and arrogant ethnocentrism that have often plagued European thought. After situating East-Asian interest in pragmatism with respect both to America's hegemonic power and to the past history of cultural disenfranchisement that European philosophy and aesthetics have exacted on East-Asian philosophic and artistic traditions, the essay outlines important convergences between pragmatism and classical Chinese philosophy, showing how the latter's ancient ideas and arguments can reinforce contemporary pragmatist views while conversely suggesting how pragmatic thought can help renew the traditions of East-Asian wisdom without encouraging a nostalgically backward-looking orientalism.

The second essay, by Sor-hoon Tan, then sharpens the focus by providing a more historically concrete and detailed analysis of pragmatism's most significant chapter in China: the pervasive, if short lived, influence that Deweyan thought exercised on Chinese political and

<sup>2</sup> For helpful discussion of the early history of pragmatism's reception in France, I wish to thank Guillaume Garreta and Romain Pudal.

