John Patrick Diggins

THE PROMISE OF PRAGMATISM

Modernism and the Crisis of Knowledge and Authority

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On the evening of December 7, 1941, hundreds of New Yorkers crowded into Cooper Union’s “Great Hall” auditorium to hear the famous philosopher John Dewey speak on “Lessons from the War in Philosophy.” The lecture pertaining to the First World War had been planned in the summer, part of a series that had already featured the anthropologist Margaret Mead and the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr speaking on the same subject from their respective disciplines. Shocked by the news of Pearl Harbor, the audience sat in silent gloom as Dewey, eighty-two years old and his face pale and tense, approached the podium. Slowly he began his speech, the hands trembling, sweat beads streaming down his forehead and misting the upper part of his glasses, the voice crackling with uncertainty. Moments before he spoke, his thoughts had turned back to the First World War and what he later concluded was his disastrous decision to support America’s military intervention. Wondering if events ever repeat themselves, Dewey could only ask himself whether anything had been learned from the last war. And the present war? Could the lofty wisdom of philosophy be made to illuminate the tragic ravages of history?

“I have nothing, had nothing, and have nothing now, to say directly about the war,” Dewey told an audience anxious to hear some reassuring words. Intellectuals in particular, he went on, must be careful not to generalize too hastily lest they end up justifying the course of events—what the theologian calls “apologetics” and the psychoanalyst “rationalizations.” In his prepared statement Dewey had written that the earlier war had taught philosophy the value of some unified view of human beings so that “ideas and emotions, knowledge and desire” might be more integrated. But of the present war Dewey could only say in his improvised
post

operations, in general, are likely to come after events. This is a sort of ex post facto enterprise and very often by the time philosophy is formed, events have changed so much there isn't much for ideas to lay hold of."

Dewey’s dilemma would have earned the sympathy of the great American historian Henry Adams. The philosopher advised Americans of the difficulty of gaining knowledge prior to experience; the historian had earlier advised Americans of the even greater difficulty of doing so after experience. Nothing obscures truth so completely as the experience of events have changed so much there isn't much for ideas to lay hold of."

Pragmatism, America’s one original contribution to the world of philosophy, had once promised to help people deliberately reflect about what to do when confronting “problematic situations.” This instrumental approach to knowledge remained more characteristic of Dewey’s pragmatism than that of William James or Charles Sanders Peirce. Dewey’s more public-oriented philosophy proposed to bring reflective intelligence to bear on society so as to help define ends and select the means to reach them. But in his speech at Cooper Union, Dewey had come to the same conclusion that Adams had a half-century earlier. Adams had studied history to find the clue to controlling power; Dewey looked to philosophy to develop a methodology for dealing with an environment of disruptive change. Both sensed that the rush of events often left the mind grasping for explanations.

A certain Hegelian pathos stalks Adams and Dewey. In the nineteenth century Adams regarded slavery as an evil, but he could not say which faction of the Republican party had the right response to southern secession: the faction advocating the resort to force or that proposing negotiation. Only the future could judge. Similarly, Dewey knew that European fascism posed a demonic threat, but with the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 he considered the “method of coercion” and that of “discussion,” only to conclude that force and violence could not be justified even in America’s confrontation with Adolf Hitler. Perhaps Hegel was right to believe that philosophical knowledge could only be retrospective, and even then, like the Owl of Minerva taking flight at dusk, it arrives too late to be of use.

Pragmatism advises us to try whatever promises to work and proves to be useful as the mind adjusts to the exigencies of events. Does pragmatism itself work? To raise that question risks going against the American grain. For much of the twentieth century the school of thought known as pragmatism has enjoyed a charmed life. Older progressive scholars hailed pragmatism for breaking the deductive chains of nineteenth-century conservative ideology and thereby making possible the advent of modern liberal reform thought. More recent scholars have likened pragmatism to the European currents of poststructuralism and deconstruction in order to place the future of philosophy in the realm of linguistic processes rather than in reason and logical proof. Pragmatism never meant to provide "foundations" on which to ground knowledge, we are told, but simply ways of thinking, talking, and writing about specific situations that are not so much known as described. Rhetoric, conversation, narration, and discourse are presently offered by the neopragmatist as a means of coping in the modern world.

The neopragmatist Richard Rorty has been criticized by fellow pragmatists for taking Dewey’s scientistic-oriented philosophy and reformulating it as a linguistic enterprise. Yet Dewey himself had been sympathetic to literature and its ambitions to understand the world as well as write about it. In 1899 the young literary scholar Lionel Trilling sent Dewey a note of appreciation for an essay on Matthew Arnold that the philosopher had written in 1891. Dewey’s essay encouraged Trilling to proceed with his book-length study despite the criticisms Arnold’s work had been receiving in the radical depression years. In the essay, which had appeared in the theological Andover Review, and in unpublished materials and lecture notes, Dewey seemed haunted by Arnold’s meditations on modernity. The most crucial issue Dewey faced as a young philosopher was the dualism between nature and spirit and all its ramifications for matter and mind, science and morality, and other chasms that estranged man from God. "No verse of Matthew Arnold is better known," Dewey wrote in his notes, than that describing "modern man" as

Wandering between two worlds, one dead
The other powerless to be born.

Reading Arnold, Dewey knew the meaning of alienation as a kind of cosmic loneliness. Bereft of spirit, the natural world becomes a chilling

1. A transcript of Dewey’s speech, including the improvised remarks, is in the Dewey papers, 102 S1/4; the description of Dewey’s emotions at the time of the event was obtained from his relatives by Charles F. Howlett and conveyed in his Troubled Philosopher: John Dewey and the Struggle for World Peace (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1977), 3–4.

2. See, for example, Henry Steele Commager, The American Mind: The Integration of American Thought and Character since the 1830s (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940). Commager represents perhaps the last voice of the progressive spirit of Vernon L. Parrington. For a postprogressive analysis of pragmatism that remains within the spirit of liberalism, see Morton White, Social Thought in America: The Revolt against Formulation (Boston: Beacon Press, 1949).
void, and modern man can no longer feel at one with the universe. "Na-
ture, in ceasing to be divine, ceases to be human," wrote Dewey. Arnold
had taken refuge in poetry to contemplate what could not be found in
modern empirical philosophy: the imagination of moral possibility in a
world of mechanical necessity. "Here, indeed, is just our problem,"
Dewey concluded. "We must bridge this gap of poetry from science.
We must heal this unnatural wound. We must, in a cold reflective way of
critical system, justify and organize the truth which poetry, with its quick
naive contacts, has already felt and reported."

How, then, to "organize the truth," which in the future might only be
accessible to the literary imagination? One way, taken up by the modern-
ist writer, was to forget truth as unity and convey experience as it hap-
pened without any sense of order or meaning.

Three decades after he had written on Arnold, just after James Joyce's
_Ulysses_ had appeared in 1922, Dewey observed that intellectuals mistak-
enly choose only two ways to confront a world in which events have lost
their meaning. "We revive 'the classics.' Or we become extreme modern-
ists and string words together in a jumble, feeling that if we can only get
as many shocks from the words as we do from things and render the
sequence of words as jumpy and blind as the sequence of events, we shall
have proved our competency to keep even, up-to-date, with the most
recent events." Dewey's description of the modernist literary world,
where traditional narrative, action, and drama seem to give way to contin-
gency and simultaneity, would perhaps have pleased Adams, the historian
who ended his career portraying the world rushing toward "chaos" and
"entropy," the specter of a disintegrating "multiverse."

The literary artist no less than the philosopher is interested in the
relationship of mind and reality and language and the world. But as a
philosopher Dewey was committed to the logical clarification of ideas,
and thus he offered pragmatism as a way out of the worldview presented
by the "extreme modernists." Convinced that after Darwinism there could
be no return to classical knowledge and its timeless truths, Dewey also
convinced himself that the problems of modernism were more apparent
than real. To the pragmatist the discrepancies and contingencies of the
universe should not provoke meaninglessness and anxiety. On the con-

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lished under the title "Poetry and Philosophy" in the _Andover Review_ in 1891, Dewey's essay
on Arnold is reprinted as "Matthew Arnold and Robert Browning," in _Character and Events_,
Jan. 11, 1939, Dewey mss.

4. Dewey, "Events and Meanings," in _Character and Events_, 125–29; the essay first ap-
peared in the _New Republic_ in 1922.

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5. Dewey, unitled address on Tolstoy, Dewey mss., 102 60/29.
activity without the world satisfying our need for some basis of human value and meaning.

What a picture of life as an eternal Sisyphus forever engaged in an aimless activity whose sole result is to intensify its aimlessness by accelerating the pace. It is of business conceived as such a life and life as such a business that George Santayana mordantly remarked that those who dedicate themselves to it may have the proud happiness of knowing that when life is extinct upon the globe, the earth may, because of them, cast a slightly different shadow across the moon's crater.6

The Dewey who wrote of the contradictions and antimonies of existence is the Dewey admired by Trilling, the philosopher as anguish humanist struggling with the problems of modernity and experiencing the humility of doubt. This early Dewey seldom emerges in scholarly writings on the philosopher.7 But it bears mentioning that Trilling esteemed Adams for much the same reason he appreciated Dewey. If the philosopher worried about the dualism of spirit and nature, the historian agonized over the tension between politics and ethics. America cannot dismiss Adams, Trilling wrote in 1952, the year of Dewey's death. His somber convictions may yield deeper truths, and if his despair offers little hope, it radiates the power of darkness and makes the American mind more a treasure to behold than a tool to be used. "We come to see, as William James saw," wrote Trilling of the philosopher's attitude toward the historian, "that there is a kind of corruption or corruptingness in the perfect plenitude of his despair. With James we understand that Adams's despair is the chief condition of its own existence, and that the right to hope is earned by our courage in hoping. And when we see this, we turn on Adams, using against him every weapon on which we can lay our hands." Should Adams, then, be dismissed unambiguously?

But we shall be wrong, we shall do ourselves a great disservice, if ever we try to read Adams permanently out of our intellectual life. I have called him an issue—he is even more than that, he is an indispensable element in our intelligence. To succeed in getting rid of Adams would be to diminish materially the seriousness of our thought. In the intellectual life there ought to be frequent occasions for the exercise of ambivalence, and nothing can be more salutary for the American intelligence than to remain aware of Adams and to maintain toward him a strict ambivalence, to weigh our admiration and affection for him against our impatience and suspicion.8

American historians have come close to reading Adams out of our intellectual life because his mocking presence seems an insult to the nation's creed of optimism and progress, an intellect that erodes whatever it touches. To relate Adams to the study of pragmatism may seem doubly insulting to the historian who demands a precise context for the study of ideas. By no means can Adams be categorized as a pragmatist; how, then, does he fit into the actual historical setting of discourse and debate out of which developed a specific set of ideas? The contextualist wants to know the "meaning" of ideas and their text may be reduced to a context that it is the historian's obligation to establish. This work obviously sins against the contextualist's commandments by violating the canons of authorial intent and ignoring the historically conditioned character of texts. Adams and Dewey scarcely intended to scrutinize each other's writings, let alone engage in a dialogue of argument and counterargument (Adams does so with James). Yet the history of ideas need not be so unduly restricting as to relegate their importance solely to their particular setting. Ideas may be appreciated for their validity as well as their genealogy, and when evaluating ideas for the problems they illuminate, we can use one author to interrogate another so that ideas speak to our condition as well as theirs. Various thinkers in this study will be treated as though they were in a conversation with one another, with Adams looking over their shoulders as they compose their thoughts on texts that the author has critically examined. In juxtaposing Dewey to Adams, one may better appreciate the affirmations of pragmatism as an effort to overcome the negations of modernism.

Modernism may be defined in a number of ways, but each definition returns to the problem of belief and the limits of cognition. The idea of order and objective truth becomes untenable to the modernist, as do all traditional modes of acquiring knowledge. Modernism arose in the late

nineteenth century when Darwinism challenged the idea of divine creation and left religious dogma in shambles. Man without God was also left, as Arnold put it, wandering between a world that had been lost and a world that had yet to be found. With God dead, the problem of creating meaning fell to men and women, especially writers like Herman Melville and Emily Dickinson, who gazed into the void to see if the intellect could be at home with the unknown and face the look of death. The modernist can neither believe nor rest content in disbelief.

What, specifically, is modernism? As a way of reacting to the modern world, modernism is the consciousness of what once was presumed to be present and is now seen as missing. It might be considered as a series of felt absences, the gap between what we know is not and what we desire to be: knowledge without truth, power without authority, society without spirit, self without identity, politics without virtue, existence without meaning. Such dualisms and gaps had been known since Plato, but traditionally it had been assumed that the faculties of mind or the forces of faith would enable humankind to resolve them. Today the contemporary "postmodernist" offers a different message: we should go beyond modernism and take a more relaxed look at things, either by comprehending how knowledge, power, and society function, by viewing history without purpose and meaning as simply the longing of human desire for its completion, or by giving up trying to explain the nature of things and being content with studying how beliefs come to be justified. To Dewey, who in some ways anticipated postmodernism (minus the later Parisian verbal fuss), all such absences and their desire for fulfillment could be traced to the dualism of nature and spirit, a false outlook that fails to recognize that mind evolved from matter and thus can neither be separated from it nor reduced to it. Dewey could agree with the postmodernist that philosophy has been trying futilely to prove what is not there; but while the postmodernist seems to delight in exposing the illusions of thinking, Dewey had long been convinced that the classical questions of philosophy have no practical bearing in daily life. In offering pragmatism, Dewey gave America something to be used; in resisting it, Adams held out for something to be worshiped.

Why did Adams refuse to embrace pragmatism as a solution to the problems of modernism? Was it because the historian and heir of illustrious presidents looked backward and had little interest in the future? Hardly. The future obsessed him. Still, a common impression sees Adams as a lost soul who cannot accept modernity and instead pines nostalgically for the vanished world of his ancestors. Yet if there was one thing Adams remained convinced of, it was the inevitability of change and transformation regardless of the political and moral costs. With Adams one feels the universe of power, force, energy, and motion, a universe without purpose, meaning, or hopeful human destiny. With Adams one also feels more inside the mind of a European than an American. In some respects he looms as an American counterpart to Friedrich Nietzsche, the German philosopher who recognized a truth that Adams prized in Pascal's meditations: reason can prove only the limits of reason and the contingent, even arbitrary, character of all thinking. Like Nietzsche, Adams came to sense that knowledge of the past had become as problematic as expectations of the future had become pessimistic. Both thinkers saw how foolish it was to have once assumed that the study of history would shed ever more light on the meaning of existence. "The worst of it is that, as historians, we have wholly lost confidence in our own school," Adams wrote to a friend in 1912, now aware that new currents in intellectual life had left the historian with no certain access to history itself. "I am overwhelmed with astonishment to see how futile and feeble our critical faculty was, and how idiotically we took it." As with Nietzsche, Adams also came to the conclusion that when one knows history cannot be readily understood, the modernist must be prepared to endure irony and accept that "Why?" finds no answer.

That conclusion would also be reached by Reinhold Niebuhr, the theologian who offered some telling criticisms of Deweyan pragmatism in the 1930s. With his sense of the irony of intentions and consequences, the pretensions of virtue and innocence, and the sins of pride and egotism, Niebuhr enriched liberalism and helped to prepare America to face the world of modernity. More than other American thinkers, even more than the domination-struck deconstructionists of our era, Niebuhr enabled us to think about power and its deceptions. In contrast to Dewey and the tradition of the European Enlightenment, Niebuhr rejected the assumption that sufficient knowledge would emerge to constitute a challenge to power. Adams, too, doubted that the intellect would ever master the riddles of power. Both thinkers shared, even if by coincidence, the Nietzschean perspective that the best answer to power is suspicion.

But the early Adams, it should be pointed out, possessed the youthful hopes of the later pragmatists. Although Adams and Dewey had different temperaments and intellectual outlooks, they both assumed that events can be dealt with by bringing science to bear upon historical understanding. Both viewed existence as precarious, and each believed the endless movement of power must be mastered and controlled. "Striving to make stability of meaning prevail over the instability of events is the main task

of intelligent human effort," advised Dewey. Adams agreed, but after writing volumes of history he could find neither meaning nor pattern that would yield purpose or prediction. Later in his career he would discover that modern physics had uncovered indeterminacy in the very structure of matter. Looking forward with apprehension to the twentieth century, Adams projected a world of clashing historical events as random as the micro-universe of subatomic particles. Dewey regarded science as a kind of secular salvation against the assaults of modernism. But Adams was the first historian to relate the implications of modern physics to history, and his fear of the "cosmic violence" that would be released by atomic energy invoked a Calvinist mood of damnation.

The British scholar E. H. Carr has asserted that history can be written "only by those who find and accept a sense of direction in it." The Marxist as well as the pragmatist would like to believe in the rationality of history to assure themselves of a progressive view of the world and the human condition within it. As a historian, Adams resembles Max Weber, the German social scientist who also doubted that the meaning of the world could be derived from analysis alone, discerning instead that consequences defy intentions, and that power continues to escape knowledge in a world in which reason as "rationalization" brings domination instead of freedom. Yet when juxtaposing the historian to the philosopher, a curious reversal of roles occurs. Dewey offered America a philosophy for doing without the conventional concepts of truth. Traditionally it should have been the historian who questions the possibility of truth and the philosopher who feels he must continue to pursue it. Hegel explains why philosophy that aims at the timeless will always be embarrassed by history that shows all thinking as immersed in time: "Philosophy aims at knowing what is imperishable, eternal, and absolute. Its aim is truth. But history relates the sort of thing which has existed at one time but at another has perished."

The "imperishable, eternal, and absolute" are precisely the notions pragmatism set out to purge from philosophy. Pragmatism proposed a philosophy that could dispense not only with classical philosophy but with history as well. For just as truth is unknowable, the past is unrecov-erable. Oriented toward the future, unburdened by the classical problems of knowledge and truth, rejecting the perished past as incapable of being represented (made present) in thought, pragmatism nevertheless offered the promise that modern man could somehow study the world scientifically and live it spiritually.

Neopragmatism, which emerged in the early 1980s due in large part to the searching, profoundly provocative writings of Richard Rorty, offers a different promise: that we study the world historically and live it conversationally. With the "linguistic turn" in modern thought, philosophy no longer has as its task the clarification of truth, morality, and virtue. Instead philosophy is to be conceived as a language activity in which ideas are examined for their edifying import and intellectual history is studied to find out how beliefs have come to be justified. The neopragmatist is haunted by Martin Heidegger's nightmare: "Does this abyss consist only in the fact that reason resides in language, or is language itself the abyss?" Either way, truth is lost for good, and the task is to find out not what is knowable but what is useful. Whether the point of traditional philosophy was to interpret the world or to change it, the point of "post-philosophy" is to find ways of legitimating what we say instead of proving what we know.

In 1979, in an address to the American Philosophical Association, Rorty shocked his colleagues by announcing "the end of philosophy." As did Adams nearly a century ago, Rorty concluded that the "mind as mirror" turned out to be an illusion, a desperate Cartesian assumption that the cognitive faculties could accurately reflect, represent, and replicate the world as it really is. With knowledge no longer having any basis in ideas that faithfully correspond to reality, philosophy should forsake pursuing theories of truth and look to language and literature to develop new moral vocabularies based on conventions, however contingent and conditional. Rorty calls for philosophy continuing as "conversation," the arguments and discourses used by thinkers to defend and justify their thoughts without reference to anything beyond the language that expresses the thoughts. William James would most likely have been sympathetic to the neopragmatist effort to make satisfying beliefs take the place of truths once regarded as timeless, necessary, and unconditional. Yet it will be seen that James could lose patience with endless talk that avoids taking immediate action, while at the same time recognizing that "all human thinking gets discursified" in verbal transactions. Although Rorty excludes Charles Peirce from his "post-philosophy" project, the founding father of American pragmatism could easily have taken part in its activities even while rejecting its convictions—especially the claim that our beliefs

can rest conditionally on nothing more than the contingency of conventions. Rorty himself excludes Peirce because he continued to believe in the eventual possibility of reaching truth. Yet one can imagine the garrulous Peirce eagerly participating in a Rortyan conversation. John Jay Chapman ran into Peirce one evening at New York's Century Club and conveyed the experience in a midnight letter to his wife:

I am too tired to write . . . I happened to sit down next to Charles Peirce, and stayed talking to him ever since, or rather he talking. He is a most genial man—got down books and read aloud. He began by saying Lincoln had the Rabelais quality. It appears he worships Rabelais. He read passages in Carlyle in a voice that made the building reverberate . . . He then talked about—plasms—force, heat, light—Boston, Emerson, Margaret Fuller, God, Manmon, America, Goethe, Homer, Silver, but principally science and philosophy—a wonderful evening. It was ask and have, and, but that he talked himself positively to sleep with exertion, he would be talking yet.\(^\text{15}\)

Peirce would certainly have been able to keep the conversation going. To Dewey language was more tool than talk. Dewey liked to use the expression “the problems of men” to suggest that if pragmatism offers itself as a “problem-solving” instrument, it is intended for the practical problems thrown up by history and society and not the theoretical issues of knowledge and truth inherent in philosophy itself, issues that preoccupied Adams as well as Peirce. But once we leave Peirce—who regarded culture as more than a matter of behavior and adaptation, and restricted inquiry to scientific matters of the most theoretical nature—and move on to James and especially Dewey, with his determination to make philosophy redemptive in all aspects of life, pragmatism itself becomes problematic. Could it actually solve the classical questions of philosophy? The dualism of nature and spirit left Dewey with “this unnatural wound.” How was it to be healed? Rather than offering solutions to such agonizing theoretical problems, pragmatism simply denies any need to worry about them. “We do not solve them,” Dewey said of philosophical questions; “we get over them. Old questions are solved by disappearing.”\(^\text{16}\)

In what sense are problems of philosophy solved by dropping out of sight? Thirty years after Dewey made the statement above, he offered a convincing explanation of what he had in mind:

It may be remarked incidentally that the recognition of the relational character of scientific objects completely eliminates an old metaphysical issue. One of the outstanding problems created by the rise of modern science was due to the fact that scientific definitions and descriptions are framed in terms of which qualities play no part. Qualities were wholly superfluous. As long as the idea persisted (an inheritance from Greek metaphysical science) that the business of knowledge is to penetrate into the inner beings of objects, the existence of qualities like colors, sounds, etc. was embarrassing . . . Given the old idea that the purpose of knowledge . . . is to penetrate into the heart of reality and reveal its “true” nature, the conclusion was a logical one. It was “solved” by the discovery that it needed no solution, since fulfillment of the function and business of science compels disregard for qualities.\(^\text{17}\)

That science need not grasp the inherent quality of a thing but instead study its relations and connections with other things was certainly a revolutionary breakthrough in modern thought. But could this discovery be extended to topics beyond the reach of science? On this question Peirce was more cautious than Dewey or James. “I also want to say that after all pragmatism solves no real problems,” Peirce wrote to James in 1904.

“It only shows that supposed problems are not problems. But when one comes to such questions as immortality, the nature of the connection of mind and matter . . . we are left completely in the dark. The effect of pragmatism here is simply to open our minds to receiving evidence, not to furnish the evidence.”\(^\text{18}\)

Dewey’s faith in experience reinforced his conviction that scientific inquiry could be extended to society and history. The proposal that philosophy give up the search for foundational truths resulted in making philosophy itself historical as well as scientific. In *Experience and Nature* (1925), Dewey insisted that “objects of natural science are not metaphysical rivals of historical events.” Instead of searching for timeless essences, the pragmatic philosopher investigates events and developments as part of the changing character of reality. Ancient Greek philosophers strove to know the immutable and eternal; the modern philosopher seeks the pattern of order within change so as to bring knowledge to bear on power and control. “The legitimate implication of the preference for worthy objects of appreciation is the necessity of art, or control of the sequential


order upon which they depend; a necessity which carries with it the further implication that this order, which is to be discovered by inquiry confirmed by experimental action, is the proper object of knowledge.  

Although Dewey understood that historical knowledge could scarcely be "confirmed by experimental action," he nonetheless believed that pragmatism could illuminate history, since historical events, like scientific objects, have a relational character. Aristotle wrongly assumed that individuals and things develop from some fixed essence and move toward some indwelling end, but "potentialities must be thought of in terms of consequences of interactions with other things. Hence potentialities cannot be known till after the interactions have occurred." Dewey emphasized the word after because he remained convinced, at least a year before Pearl Harbor when he wrote these passages, that history reveals its "temporal seriality" and "sequential order" when events have been actualized. History is like a theater where the audience observes how things turn out. But at the beginning of the play, before the performance has gotten fully under way, one knows nothing and can predict nothing, since social interaction has yet to occur and history has yet to tell its story:  

Individuality conceived as a temporal development involves uncertainty, indeterminacy, or contingency. Individuality is the source of whatever is unpredictable in the world. The indeterminate is not change in the sense of violation of law, for laws state probable correlations of change and these probabilities exist no matter what the sources of change may be. When a change occurs, after it has occurred it belongs to the observable world and is connected with other changes. The nomination of Lincoln for the presidency, his election, his Emancipation Proclamation, his assassination, after they took place can be shown to be related to other events; they can also be shown to have certain connections with Lincoln's own past.  

Convinced that in experience are connections waiting to be established through inquiry, Dewey assumed it possible to discern more historical relations than could even Lincoln himself, who confessed, years after the Civil War had broken out, to not knowing why it occurred. According to Dewey, if inquiry moves from the individual to the social and the potential to the actual, knowledge becomes possible because it now has access to observable outcomes as history manifests its hitherto hidden relational character. Adams, one needs to emphasize, was closer to Lincoln in being perplexed by events and closer to Peirce in appreciating the cognitive limits of science, which should temper philosophical pride with a little intellectual humility.  

Henry Adams could neither solve the old questions of philosophy and history nor allow them to disappear. If theoretical knowledge can no longer sit in judgment of practical thought, if thought verifies itself only in action, then we are left with power and its effects. The pragmatists, Peirce excepted, were innocent of power in technological developments and bureaucratic structures; Adams, like Nietzsche, Weber, and Michel Foucault, became almost obsessed by the autonomy of power and the unconscious human submission to its symbols. He also had a Niebuhrian vision of the human condition in which power rationalizes its actions as writers resort to the sounds of language to conceal the sins of thought.  

Whither American philosophy? Having declared the end of philosophy, Rorty advocates taking up history to learn how beliefs come to be formed socially, while at the same time dismissing those beliefs philosophically. By looking at history along with philosophy as a branch of literature, the scholar can demonstrate not how ideas are validated by reason and the rules of logic but how they are legitimated and justified in order to win acceptance. Several figures in American intellectual history, Thorstein Veblen and the Progressive historians Carl Becker and Charles Beard, undertook such an exercise almost a century ago, only to conclude that there is no correlation between what Americans profess as their legitimating beliefs and what they do in the actual world of power and interest. Adams himself studied the Middle Ages to convey the rapture of religious faith as well as demonstrate how theology found its legitimation in art and ritual, but he concluded that there could be no going back to historically surpassed forms of belief without surrendering the integrity of the intellect. Pragmatism, whether Dewey's instrumentalism or Rorty's conversationalism, aims at adjusting and coping rather than knowing. Adams seemed to want to provoke life into leaving him maladjusted by setting out to know the unknowable. Estranged from the political and philosophical universe of his ancestors, Adams chose to leave open the intellectual wounds of modernity in order to push thought to the edge of the abyss. As long as he lived, the life of the mind lived in defiance of its limits. Rorty advises philosophers to give up the search for the foundations of knowledge. Adams once likened older philosophers to pearl divers who, having never touched bottom and reached the oyster bed, continue to assume it is there. America's greatest historian was its deepest diver.  

Today neopragmatists hail early American pragmatists for demonstrating the futility of many philosophical questions and thereby presaging the European poststructuralists of our era. Specifically the pragmatists  

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are praised for refuting essentialism and foundationalism, which presume that the truth of things exists prior to knowledge, and for being aware that all knowledge is mediated by forms of representation and that the self is itself a social construction. Neopragmatists and poststructuralists have enjoyed considerable influence on the American campus. Yet several important American thinkers understood the meaning of finitude and fallibility without subscribing to pragmatism as the only way out. The philosopher George Santayana, one of Dewey’s leading critics, explained why thought is inherently representational:

Let the reader meditate for a moment upon the following point: to know reality is, in a way, an impossible pretension, because knowledge means significant representation, discoursed about an existence not contained in the knowing thought, and different in duration or locus from the ideas which represent it. But if knowledge does not possess its object how can it intend it? And if knowledge possesses its object, how can it be knowledge or have any practical, prophetic, or retrospective value?

In pragmatism knowledge need not possess its object since it transforms or “reconstructs” it in the act of knowing it. Thus Dewey rejected the idea that knowledge must seek an antecedent reality. But pragmatists, poststructuralists, and deconstructionists were not the first to sense the “metaphysics of presence,” the illusion that our ideas about the world are immediately present to the knowing mind. This issue, now called the “logocentric fallacy,” may be as old as philosophy itself, and certainly as old as American history, which began, intellectually at least, with Calvinists warning us that all pretense to the sufficiency of reason amounts to the sin of pride.

One aim of this work is to bring out the limitations of pragmatism from a historical perspective, and to do so by often going beyond philosophy and its technical arguments to the larger dimension of American culture and politics. But a confession is in order. Because I am more struck by pragmatism’s warning us that all pretense to the sufficiency of reason amounts to the sin of pride.

Where they differed involved nothing less than the promises of inquiry. Dewey ardently believed what Adams came to doubt. According to the philosopher, inquiry begins in an indeterminate, problematic situation, and proceeds by converting that situation into one that is more stable and determinate and that draws the original “discordant” elements into “a unified whole.” Adams also set out to look for “unity” without appealing to anything transcendent or supernatural. As a historian, Adams could agree that the drive to know reflects the seeker’s desire for the unification of experience, as opposed to searching for some external object that stands outside and imposes itself on finite experience. Hence the meaning of history for both thinkers must be found within history itself. But the coherence, unity, and wholeness promised by pragmatism at the end of inquiry was nowhere to be found. In four words Adams confessed his failure: “Experience ceases to educate.”

In dealing with Dewey and Adams it is difficult to know whether one is dealing with different sensibilities or different realities. Consider their outlooks toward their native America. Dewey grew up convinced that America had been encrusted in dogma and doctrinal rigidity, residues of religious traditions and conservative orthodoxies in economic thought. Significantly, Dewey titled his autobiographical essay “From Absolutism to Experimentalism.” Now a common assumption holds that Adams saw history not progressing but regressing from “order” to “chaos.” This point of view characterizes his later explorations of medieval history and his well-known charting of the dissipation of energy from “unity” to “multiplicity.” But in his earlier study of American history he concluded, contrary to Dewey, that the development of the Republic defies all absolutes and fixed theories. After the decline of New England Puritanism in the eighteenth century, the American people ceased looking to doctrines and ideologies and instead responded to the exigencies of change. Even the founding of the new federal government was regarded as an “experiment” in the “new science of politics.” How could pragmatism rescue America from the “acids of modernity” (Walter Lippmann) when Americans had been practicing pragmatists long before the philosophy of pragmatism had been born?

In his nine-volume study of the administrations of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, Adams depicted political leaders behaving pragmatically and allowing their decisions to be determined by “circumstance” rather than by “principle,” by the calculation of consequences rather than by a stubborn adherence to ideology. Even Jefferson’s Declaration of


Independence presaged Rorty’s advice on language supplanting philosophy. As Carl Becker pointed out, the document was less a matter of logical consistency and rational proof than felicitous rhetorical persuasion. The Constitution itself scarcely confined America’s political culture to a theoretical straitjacket that restricted growth and change. The Federalist authors scorned the “theoretic” thinker who believed America could be guided by “reason” rather than by “experience.” With the new Constitution, government itself would leave behind political philosophy as it legitimated its actions as a matter of practical necessity.

History is no friend of truth grounded in theoretical foundations. After the Revolution and its “self-evident” truths, and after the framers drew upon theory to secure liberty by balancing power without resorting to such foundational truths, America developed in ways that identified liberty with the power to grow and expand, to move out beyond its origins in an effort to be more than itself by appropriating whatever it was not, a driving force of energy that the Greeks called dynamas and that Adams would liken to the industrial dynamo. American history, instead of having a determinate character based upon its originating principles, became a series of events and developments that were nothing more than their effects. As products of that history, would Americans remain unknown to themselves? Could political thought be anything more than mind limping after energy?

A century before Rorty announced the “end” of philosophy, Adams discerned the American political mind coming to its end in ceasing to have any significant role in American history. No idea could stand in the way of America’s drive to expand the perimeters of its power and make possible the development of further experience. American history itself shared with pragmatism the assumption that life progresses toward the better since its meaning, always contingent, awaits the future and shuns the past. As Santayana put it, “A sense of potentiality and a sense of riddance are . . . the two poles of American liberty.” Abraham Lincoln fully grasped the dilemma of governing in a political culture where pragmatic potentiality bid riddance to moral commitments based upon past ideals. Lincoln lamented that the “mythic chords of memory” struggled faintly to be heard in a democratic culture that preferred change to commitment and growth to guilt. The meaning of American history is to supersede itself and leave no traces of time and tradition. American history itself embodied almost everything the pragmatists asked for in philosophy and indeed in what they regarded as the true, “dynamic” self: openness, adaptability, and a readiness to grow beyond what has been.

If America’s political culture started on a pragmatic ethos that rendered the Republic responsive to the environment and open to experience, where would it lead? In Adams’s account, instead of leading to unity, wholeness, rational purpose, and conscious direction, American history simply drifted with the course of events and the movement of power, often taking unexpected turns, while ideas had little capacity to shape a changing reality in the image of some ideal, and theory quietly fell by the wayside as Americans did what they desired to do and could get away with. With no defining moment to sustain the Republic’s “first principles,” American history developed with no overarching purpose other than endless action and reaction as the American character seemed to change everything but itself. The difficulty with pragmatism was not that it succumbed to “acquiescence,” as its critics charged, but rather, like American history itself, it was all anticipatory, instructing Americans, in Dewey’s words, to treat “life experiences” as “potential disclosures of meanings and values that are to be used as a means to a fuller and more significant experience.” And if the past itself cannot be an object of experience? “An American philosophy of history must perforce be a philosophy for its future.”

The pragmatist focuses on the future, since the past has no ontological status in that it is over, gone, done with, theoretically thinkable but practically irrevocable. Santayana saw this fetish of the “dominance of the foreground” as typically American in its prevalent absorption in present affairs in view of subsequent consequences. Santayana could agree with the pragmatists that truth and reality escape representation, that philosophy operates as a “discourse,” that is, a “language” instead of a “mirror”; that intelligence functions naturalistically to satisfy needs and purposes, and that existence is contingent and transitory. Yet Santayana was closer to Adams in seeing human beings as creatures in a world of flux that cannot be known by exploring experience alone. Instead of tempting thought beyond its depth, practical knowledge sustains belief in progress by fixing itself on the future. “Grant this,” Santayana observed of the pragmatist privileging the eventual over the actual, “and at once the whole universe is on its feet again; and all that strange pragmatic reduction of yesterday to to-morrow, of Sanskrit to the study of Sanskrit, of matter to some human notion of matter, turns out to have been a needless equivocation, by which the perspectives of life, avowedly relative, have been treated as absolute, and the dominance of the foreground has been turned from a biological accident into a metaphysical principle.”


Although Deweyan pragmatism claimed to have eliminated metaphysics, Santayana saw it as simply projected onto the future where action entailed belief and belief required some certainty of judgment. There remains another implication in the assumption that truth is to be verified to the extent life is conceived as an endless experiment. In this philosophy of expectancy, pragmatism shares with Marxism and capitalism the assumption that the meaning of history and the purpose of life are no longer matters of thought but of action. All three modernist propositions, despite their obvious political differences, presuppose that the meaning and significance of the present await the future, that nature is responsive to human initiative, that the philosopher’s responsibility is to be effective and useful rather than to search for preexisting ideas to which the mind must be congruent, and that objects take on meaning and value only when undergoing change.

With pragmatism in particular, the use of experience only prepares us for further experience, without experience itself being immediately self-illuminating or self-rewarding. The assumption that truth and value are produced in future action rather than revealed in present reflection holds out the promise of success, and as such pragmatism becomes not so much a philosophy but a story of the upward movement of life, a hopeful vision that appeals to America’s romantic imagination:

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that’s no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther... And one fine morning—

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.

Pragmatism advises us to “beat on” and not allow ourselves to be “borne back ceaselessly into the past.” Always looking ahead, pragmatism counsels adjustment and adaptation on the assumption that ideals, or at least something of meaning and value, are expected to emerge from experience and hence need not be regarded as external to it. Pragmatism reorients the meaning of history from retrospective reflection to prospective confrontation. Whether or not Dewey would go so far as to say that the present postpones its own fulfillment so as to exist for the sake of the future, he did advise fellow philosophers to look to experience in order to cope with events.

But Adams saw that history itself dissolves the cognitive import of experience to the extent the historian asks for explanations for events and receives none. Surely history is the sum and substance of human experience; yet the happenings of history may elude the intellect’s quest for meaning and understanding. The historian interrogates history when he asks the reason of things. What do people experience when they experience experience? Is the knowledge supposedly derived from experience found in reality prior to reason’s reflections? Is it grasped or constructed? To the pragmatist such questions are poorly formulated, for experience is not known but anticipated, expected to be “had” in the future, and knowledge that is prospective need not refer to its object that it is in itself but only as it will be experienced. Since the past itself cannot be experienced, or even reexperienced, history is not so much known as acted upon, and Dewey encouraged Americans to act and look forward with hope.

As a historian Adams looked backward into the nature of past events, and even at contemporary unfolding developments, and found no rational principle of explanation, no interpretive scheme that would meaningfully connect sequences and discern patterns, no answer to the demand “Why! Why!! Why!!!” Continually disappointed by the experience of trying to derive knowledge from experience, Adams liked to see himself suffering from what he called, somewhat playfully, the “anxiety of truth.” Pragmatism promised to relieve such anxiety by showing us not what to think but how to think and how to move confidently ahead instead of dwelling behind in a metaphysical wondersickness. If Adams dove deep and found nothing, Dewey taught Americans how to swim on the surface and how to conceive nature for the purpose of using it. In his early years Adams tried swimming in the treacherous currents of modern thought, assuming mind was a truth-knowing faculty, and he ended up drowning in his own doubts. Dewey would gladly have thrown him a lifejacket, a methodology for staying afloat by coping with the instant conditions of experience. Would Adams have grabbed it? Could the philosopher save the historian?