

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

