The Range of Pragmatism and
the Limits of Philosophy

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INTRODUCTION

RICHARD SHUSTERNAN

Having “just finish 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 surprised 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.

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 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.2

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 multicultural 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

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1 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.

2 For helpful discussion of the early history of pragmatism’s reception in France, I wish to thank Guillaume Gorreta and Romain Pudal.
cultural life not only through his 1919–1921 visit there but especially through the continuing efforts of his student and foremost Chinese disciple, Hu Shih (1891–1962). The pragmatist experiment in democracy they proposed for China was one of scientifically guided and educationally nurtured piecemeal reform, a middle way of gradualist liberalism between conservative traditionalism and the radicalism of total revolution that eventually triumphed through communism. In her essay, Tan shows that despite Hu Shih’s uncompromising devotion to Dewey’s views, his interpretation of pragmatism differs from Dewey’s by leaning toward a one-sided emphasis on science as the key to the conduct of life and toward a similarly unbalanced emphasis on education rather than political activism as the means to democracy. Thus many progressive Chinese humanists (who wanted reform but also wanted continued respect for China’s great philosophical tradition) were prompted to reject pragmatism as narrowly materialist and scientific, while pragmatically militant reformers came to abandon it as too idealistic and consequently turned to communism.7

Larry Hickman’s essay continues the theme of pragmatism’s international potential. But rather than concentrating on any particular region of the world, it explores the resources of pragmatism for the more general issue of global citizenship. More than an abstract question of how to define the concept, this issue is also a matter of concrete tools and methods for cultivating the proper kind of global citizens. Such citizens should surely be suitably sensitive and competent in understanding cultural diversity, but Hickman maintains that pragmatist theory best fosters this understanding by emphasizing human continuity and commonality rather than the radical difference and incommensurability emphasized by certain strains of postmodernism. Pragmatism’s scientific method, he claims, moreover cultivates an open-minded but critical spirit of experimental inquiry that both promotes the appreciation of different cultural perspectives and provides rational means for resolving conflicts that may emerge from the clash of such perspectives. But pragmatism avoids scientism not only by recognizing that science depends and builds on a much thicker lifeworld of experience but also by celebrating those dimensions of life where scientific knowledge is not the most important factor.

An enormous obstacle to achieving a truly democratic global community remains the persistent plague of war. Yet, with sad or cynical irony, war increasingly continues to be waged and defended in the name of democracy and world peace. Though some uses of violence may sometimes be necessary and even ethically legitimate, the repeated failure of the most advanced and powerful nations to find more reasonable alternatives to resolve conflicts and strengthen democracy puts not only the moral fiber of our culture but also the imaginative power and practical efficacy of our philosophy in question. John Stuhr’s essay examines how the issue of war proves a critical test of the limits of pragmatism and philosophical theory in general. By revisiting Randolph Bourne’s trenchant criticisms of Dewey’s support of World War I, Stuhr points to two limits of pragmatism: its inability to convince people who do not already share its key fundamental values and its tendency to confine itself to philosophical theory rather than more fully engaging concrete social practice. Because such limits belong to philosophy in general, they do not, he argues, constitute an adequate reason for rejecting pragmatism but should instead spur pragmatists to take much more seriously the role of actual practice, which pragmatist theory views as essential and primary.

If Hickman’s essay energetically defends the value of pragmatism for its theoretical insights and scientific method that can promote better practice, Stuhr’s is a passionate plea that the satisfactions of theory not distract us from more concrete engagement with actual social practice outside the sphere of theory and professional philosophy. This difference of emphasis should not be seen as a theory/practice polarity, which pragmatism cannot tolerate. Even if theories are but instruments or means for the ends of practice, this does not entail that they do not sometimes deserve specially focused attention so that their instrumentality can be improved. Pragmatism insists on the continuity of means and ends. Though a knife’s purpose is to aid the practice of cutting things rather than to be sharpened and cleaned for its own sake, sometimes it is necessary to pause from the practice of cutting in order to work on sharpening and cleaning this instrument as a temporary end so that its instrumentality for the ends of cutting can be improved.

To what extent does pragmatism demand that philosophy be practiced through active social and political engagement? Are such demands pragmatically effective or do they risk confusing matters by overstepping the conventional limits of philosophy and taking on tasks that other disciplines or practices are perhaps much better equipped to handle? On the other hand, should not the experimental and action-oriented nature of pragmatism encourage us to develop, deploy, test, and reconstruct our thinking through concrete action in the real-world communities that frame our inquiries and whose welfare our inquiries and activism aim to advance? Can pragmatism not respect that philosophy (like any other discipline) must have limits and nonetheless

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7 Dewey’s lectures in China may themselves have also given the impression of scientism and insufficient appreciation of the Confucian tradition. Moreover, the attraction of communism (vis-à-vis American liberalism) was certainly increased by the success of the Russian Revolution and by its leaders’ generous abrogation of Czarist treaties that unfairly subjugated China. This stood in shaming contrast to the way America’s Woodrow Wilson sacrificed China’s interest to Japan’s unreasonable claims in the Treaty of Versailles in exchange for Japanese support of the League of Nations. For more on these points see Smith 1985.
transcend the conventional limits of academic philosophy by productively interacting with sister disciplines in the aim of rendering our practices more effectively intelligent, our communities more democratic, and our lives more rewarding? The essays of the next two sections shed light on such questions by reviewing some exemplary intellectual figures whose social activism pragmatism helped inspire and then by exploring the interaction of pragmatist philosophy with such disciplines as law, history, and psychology.

Race and ethnicity. Though clearly connected to global issues of international power relations, transcultural understanding, and the lingering evils of colonialism, the problems of race and ethnicity also emerge with distinctive and pressing intensity within American society itself. If pragmatism is a philosophy that insists on making a valuable difference to the real world of everyday experience by tackling crucial issues that preoccupy contemporary social life, then its resources for treating the urgent issues of race and ethnicity are surely a relevant test of its value. The essays of this section are devoted to examining these two intimately related issues, largely through the prism of the theory and activist practice of two of America’s most penetrating and influential philosophers of race: W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963) and Alain Locke (1886–1954).

Author of the groundbreaking Souls of Black Folk and one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Du Bois, throughout his impressively long and tireless career, combined the analytic study of racial oppression with ardent political activism to end it, a campaign that earned him honor as a “Father of Pan-Africanism” but also government harassment that eventually cast him into voluntary exile from the United States. Though influenced by a variety of philosophies, Du Bois was clearly marked by his Harvard studies under William James, and Paul Taylor’s essay highlights the pragmatist dimensions of Du Bois’s project. Pragmatism’s empiricism, contextualism, antifoundationalism, and deeply social vision, Taylor argues, can clarify the anti-essentialist, nonbiological, sociohistorical, and contextual account of race that Du Bois offers. Pragmatism helps explain how race can be a social and cultural construction that is contextually variant in its meanings and applications but nonetheless powerfully and stubbornly real in the world of experience (both social and personal) and in the institutional practices that shape experience. Moreover, the pragmatist stance of meliorism—a middle way between naive optimism and action-stultifying pessimism—can illuminate Du Bois’s exemplary attitude of continuing struggle despite a keenly sober recognition that total victory might never be attained. On the other hand, pragmatism also gains by its connection to Du Bois, who not only provides a stunning exemplar of perfectionist self-realization through the social struggle for democracy but also expands the pragmatist model of self-realization by including an erotic or Dionysian sensibility that seems too often absent in the great classical pragmatists. We should not forget William James’s affirmation of what he called “the anti-sexual instinct” (James 1983, 1053–55).

José Medina’s essay, after reviewing the pragmatically transformative logic of Deweyan reconstructive theory and analyzing the subtle complexities of the relationship between the discourses of race and ethnicity, examines Alain Locke’s work on race, culture, and social reform. He shows how Locke’s pragmatism anticipates today’s most astute positions on race theory by de-essentializing race as a fixed biological or cultural category while recognizing it as a constructed social reality with important yet variable and changing meanings that can be reconstructed through collective action. Locke’s extensive cultural work in reconstructing “the New Negro” identity and establishing the Harlem Renaissance is presented as a model of such pragmatic reconstructive agency, a project that while centered on African-American experience was vitally concerned with the reconstruction of the larger American and international contexts. Medina not only defends this model of collective self-empowerment against various objections but, in the spirit of pragmatic innovation, develops the model further to tackle a less familiar but increasingly significant problem of American ethnicity: Hispanic identity. In doing so, he introduces the work of José Martí (1853–1895), the Cuban poet, dramatist, philosopher, and indefatigable freedom fighter for Cuba’s independence from Spain.

Beyond the limits of philosophy. Every intellectual discipline has its limits, since the limiting frame that defines a universe of discourse is one of the logical conditions that make discourse intelligible and enable study to be productively focused and directed. Despite its famous generality, philosophy is no exception to this rule. Even those pragmatists who hope to take philosophy beyond its conventional academic limits, by urging its practice as a fully embodied, critically melioristic, and socially engaged way of life, should recognize that there will always be limits to what philosophy can amount to or achieve, and that, for many important purposes and contexts, other disciplines or practices are both necessary and more useful. This does not entail that philosophers should eschew the expansion or transcendence of borders and entirely confine themselves to what philosophy can uniquely do or do better than any other discipline, a conclusion I criticize as “the disciplinary fallacy” (Shusterman 1997, 174–75). But it does mean that philosophy can be more effective by working more closely with other fields. Pragmatism’s strong commitments to pluralism and collaborative dialogue point to the value of such transdisciplinary interaction, and its own history provides ample evidence of it. The essays of this final section explore such interaction and the role of pragmatism beyond the discipline of philosophy.

In “Legal Pragmatism,” Richard Posner portrays the deeply pervasive influence that pragmatist ideas have exercised on American law. After historically tracing pragmatism’s coevolution as philosophy and as legal
theory and practice all the way back to the participation of Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. (1841–1935) with William James and C. S. Peirce (1839–1914) in the small Cambridge discussion group that is sometimes claimed to have generated pragmatism. Posner expounds and defends the key ideas of legal pragmatism in contrast to the conceptualism and abstraction of legal formalism. For pragmatism, law is not an entirely autonomous system built on absolute, unchallengeable foundations from which incontestably valid verdicts can be deductively derived as timeless truths. Though recognizing that historical precedents can be useful as a means of illuminating and stabilizing the law, pragmatism insists that law is an empirically guided, forward-looking social tool that is concerned with consequences (both broadly systemic and more case specifically limited) and that is fundamentally related to public opinion and should be ultimately directed by reference to social policy.

Since the social sciences clearly have something to say about these empirical matters, legal pragmatism takes the social sciences very seriously, as do the best forms of pragmatist ethical and political theory. Because it leaves considerable room for judges to use discretionary decision making to respond to social concerns that can change very rapidly in such a dynamic and heterogeneous society as the United States (whose legal system and community of judges are also very complexity heterogeneous), pragmatism’s flexible pluralism seems far better suited than formalism for dealing with the heterogeneity and fluidity of American life and law. Posner himself displays the virtues of pluralism by recognizing that legal pragmatism is not always the best way law is or should be approached. European legal theory and practice, as the product of histories and cultures very different from America’s, remain much more structured by formalist than by pragmatist thinking, though Posner argues that this will change through deeper changes toward heterogeneity and complexity in the cultures and institutions of Europe. But even in American law, Posner’s pragmatic pluralism recognizes some areas where formalist thinking works best and should be affirmed as the superior pragmatic strategy.

Marianne Janack’s essay turns to the interface between pragmatism and modern psychology, exploring it through the prism of William James, who is widely celebrated as a father of both. Janack argues that James’s resources for today’s pragmatist revival are not adequately appreciated and deployed because of a failure to bring together his controversial philosophical views on belief (frequently construed as mere religious apologetics) with his scientific psychological research on emotion, attention, and will, and their relationship to belief. Once these two dimensions of his project are connected, James can be seen not simply as a philosophical defender of religious faith but as a progressive proponent of a naturalized epistemology that is willing to explore a variety of epistemological and moral issues through the perspective of empirical science. We can pursue this Jamesian scientific approach without thereby falling into a narrowly mechanistic and inhuman scientism, because science itself, in James’s view, should reflect and serve human interests and feelings, which he strikingly affirms as largely rooted in the body but which he also recognizes as far more varied, complex, and culturally refined than mere biological needs and neurological sensations. Defending such pragmatic naturalism against some likely objections, Janack advocates its approach for reconstructing philosophy and psychology toward a more productively interdisciplinary, value-sensitive, and socially progressive agenda. Pragmatism’s reconstructive role thus should go beyond the discipline of philosophy to penetrate the sciences, and Janack notes some promising examples of such interdisciplinary research.

Vincent Colapietro begins by probing pragmatism’s far from evident relationship to psychoanalysis, but his essay then turns, through the exemplary figures of Emerson (1803–1882) and Dewey, to more general issues of pragmatism’s range, especially its range of voice. Emerson’s example prompts the question of voice in two ways. As a poet and essayist rather than an academic philosopher, Emerson poses the challenge of how pragmatism, which was first proposed as a method for clarifying meaning and often identified with scientific method, can embrace and engage the richly elusive disciplinary voice of literature and the purposeful ambiguities of poetic discourse. But, as Colapietro argues, pragmatism is much more than a single method; indeed, its pluralist, practical spirit enjoins it to deploy the methods of alternative philosophies and disciplines if those methods can help address the problem at hand. For all Dewey’s praise of scientific method, he was no less appreciative of how literature and the arts both express and advance intelligence.

Beyond this question of disciplinary voice, Emerson, as a thinker who highlights themes of loss, mourning, and separation from the world, also represents a challenge to pragmatism’s popular Deweyan image of upbeat tone, “can-do” meliorism, and healing holism where the traditional dualisms that ruptured both thought and world are somehow reconciled through scientific and social reconstruction and the synthesizing power of aesthetic experience. This second challenge recalls the familiar criticism of pragmatism as lacking a tragic sense, a criticism Stanley Cavell reformulates by arguing that it is wrong to assimilate Emerson into pragmatism, since Emerson displays the work of loss and mourning (crucial to both philosophy and psychoanalysis), while pragmatism, in its dominant Deweyan expression, does not. Though Colapietro recognizes the value of appreciating Emerson’s singular voice, he demonstrates the role of loss and mourning and other Emersonian strains in Dewey’s work and thus criticizes the failure of Cavell (and others more sympathetic to Dewey) to hear the complexity of Dewey’s voice. Emerson may be more than a pragmatist, but so is Dewey, if “pragmatism” is construed too
simply in terms of generic methods or themes that leave no place for the expressively rich texture of the individual philosophical voices that contribute to the pragmatist tradition. If philosophical labels are tools to enhance our appreciation of philosophy, then "pragmatism" should be used not to flatten the difference of voices to a simple standard tone but rather to heighten our appreciation of their distinctive offerings by listening to them alongside each other through association in a common framework for comparison and contrast.

Though rightly characterized as a distinctively forward-looking philosophy, pragmatism has exercised considerable impact on the study of the past. James Kloppenberg's essay explores the major lines of its influence on the study of American history. Though its richly detailed narrative defies easy summary, the following main points might be useful to highlight by way of introduction.

First, the ideas of Peirce, James, and Dewey were resources for the founders of the "new history," such as Frederick Jackson Turner and James Harvey Robinson. Pragmatist arguments that knowledge is always perspectival, fallible, and instrumental helped the new historians to challenge the established positivist notion of historical fact and to insist that historical meaning and research are always also shaped by the context and needs of the present and that historical study should indeed be used to serve these needs.

Second, pragmatism's democratic and progressive social vision combined with these perspectivist, fallibilist, and instrumentalist themes to encourage historians to treat new topics and forgotten voices that had been wrongly neglected but whose integration into American history was of vital importance to the future of American social life. Thus pragmatism helped inspire the pioneers of black and women's history, W. E. B. Du Bois and Mary Beard.

Third, pragmatism's pluralism and experimental spirit has encouraged historians not only to look at new topics but also to apply and develop new methods for doing history, thus reshaping the field and the disciplinary boundaries of its subgenres. As social, political, and even economic historians have extended their work to include cultural analysis, so intellectual history has broadened from the study of specific intellectuals to the wider matrix of the cultural milieu and social fields (both high and low) that structure the practices of creating meaning, disseminating ideas, and thus transforming experience.

Fourth, American historians continue to use pragmatist epistemology to understand or ground the cognitive status of their own claims to historical knowledge, finding in classical (and some contemporary) pragmatism a fertile middle ground between absolute dogmatism and nihilistic skepticism, between positivist science and anything-goes relativism.

Finally, pragmatism has not only generated methods and groundings for historical research but, through its wide-ranging impact on American thought, has also constituted a substantive subject for American intellectual history to explore. This gift of pragmatism to history has been generously reciprocated by intellectual history's continued interest in pragmatism, which helped keep pragmatist research robustly alive during the decades of pragmatism's nadir in philosophy departments.

Though Kloppenberg's is the final essay in this collection, it is certainly not the last word that needs to be said about pragmatism and its impact beyond the discipline of philosophy. Besides the disciplinary fields covered here, pragmatism's influence has been powerfully extended into sociology, theology, feminism, economics, political theory, art and aesthetics, and literary and cultural studies; pragmatism has been greatly enriched by its interaction with these fields. This ongoing interaction deserves the sort of detailed scholarly attention and encouragement that, for reasons of space and time, cannot be given here. In recognizing the inevitable limitations of this collection, I gladly offer it in the instrumental, fallibilist, pluralist, and future-looking spirit of pragmatism. By my pragmatist lights, a book is but a thoughtful tool for further, better thinking that should eventually result also in improved action. Thanks to the knowledge and industry of the talented colleagues who joined me in this project, I am confident this collection will prove a useful tool. But, to borrow words that James (1963, 26) used to characterize pragmatism itself, this collection is not meant in any way as final answer "in which we can rest" but rather as "a program for more work" on pragmatism's range and philosophy's limits.

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