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Author(s): James T. Kloppenberg

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Pragmatism: An Old Name for Some New Ways of Thinking?

James T. Kloppenberg

William James was stuck. Facing the publication of *Pragmatism* in 1907, he had to decide whether to stress the novelty of his philosophy or its continuity with earlier ideas. James joked that pragmatism would launch “something quite like the protestant reformation” and predicted that it would be “the philosophy of the future.” Yet he also believed that he and his fellow pragmatists were building on a foundation laid by philosophers from Socrates to the British empiricists. To soften the blow he was about to deliver, James dedicated *Pragmatism* to the memory of the venerated John Stuart Mill and added the subtitle *A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, hoping that such a pedigree might restrain those inclined to denounce his progeny. As my inversion of James’s subtitle suggests, a historian seeking to analyze and explain the current revival of pragmatism confronts the same question James faced: Have contemporary pragmatists resurrected the ideas of earlier thinkers or rejected everything but the name?¹

The return of pragmatism is something of a surprise. When David A. Hollinger recounted the career of pragmatism in the *Journal of American History* in 1980, he noted that pragmatism had all but vanished from American historiography during the previous three decades. In 1950, Hollinger recalled, Henry Steele Commager had proclaimed pragmatism “almost the official philosophy of America”; by 1980, in Hollinger’s judgment, commentators on American culture had learned to get along just fine without it. “If pragmatism has a future,” Hollinger concluded, “it will probably look very different from its past, and the two may not even share a name.” Yet pragmatism today is not only alive and

James T. Kloppenberg is associate professor of history at Brandeis University.

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¹ William James to Henry James, May 4, 1907, in *The Letters of William James*, ed. Henry James (2 vols., New York, 1920), II, 279; William James to Theodore Flournoy, Jan. 2, 1907, in Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James: As Revealed in Unpublished Correspondence and Notes, Together with His Published Writings* (2 vols., Boston, 1935), II, 452–53. James traced pragmatism to its ancient roots in William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (1907; Cambridge, Mass., 1978), 30–31. *Ibid.*, 3.

well, it is ubiquitous.² References to pragmatism occur with dizzying frequency from philosophy to social science, from the study of literature to that of ethnicity, from feminism to legal theory. As Hollinger predicted, much of this pragmatism looks very different from the original version. Some postmodernists are attracted to pragmatism because it offers a devastating critique of all philosophical foundations and justifies a wide-ranging linguistic skepticism against all claims of objectivity, consensus, and truth. So conceived, as a species of postmodernism rather than as an updated version of the quest for truth that James identified with Socrates and Mill, pragmatism has indeed become an old name for new ways of thinking.

In this essay I advance three arguments: First, the early pragmatists emphasized “experience,” whereas some contemporary philosophers and critics who have taken “the linguistic turn” are uneasy with that concept. Second, the early pragmatists believed their philosophical ideas had particular ethical and political consequences, whereas some contemporary thinkers who call themselves pragmatists consider it merely a method of analysis. Third, the current controversy about pragmatism matters profoundly to historians. At stake is not merely the historical meaning of early-twentieth-century pragmatism, important as that issue is for intellectual history. Looming even larger for historians in contemporary debates about pragmatism are implicit questions about our practice of historical scholarship. Two rival camps are struggling over the legacy of pragmatism. Early-twentieth-century pragmatists envisioned a modernist discourse of democratic deliberation in which communities of inquiry tested hypotheses in order to solve problems; such contemporary pragmatists as Richard J. Bernstein and Hilary Putnam sustain that tradition. Other contemporaries such as Richard Rorty and Stanley Fish present pragmatism as a postmodernist discourse of critical commentary that denies that we can escape the conventions and contingencies of language in order to connect with a world of experience outside texts, let alone solve problems in that world. Connecting with experience is precisely what we historians attempt to do. These controversies over pragmatism old and new are thus tied directly to the legitimacy of our practice in studying the past and to the claims of our community of inquiry about the significance of the past for the present.

Experience and Language

The early pragmatists sought to reorient philosophy away from interminable and fruitless debates by insisting that ideas should be tested in practice. As part of their overall commitment to problem solving, their conception of experience linked the philosophies of William James and John Dewey, the pragmatists who most powerfully influenced American culture during the first half of the twentieth

² David A. Hollinger, “The Problem of Pragmatism in American History,” *Journal of American History*, 67 (June 1980), 88, 107. Five years later Hollinger cheerfully admitted that his obituary had been premature. See David A. Hollinger, *In the American Province: Studies in the History and Historiography of Ideas* (Bloomington, 1985), 23, 25, 43. A splendid survey is Richard J. Bernstein, “The Resurgence of Pragmatism,” *Social Research*, 59 (Winter 1992), 813–40.

century.³ What did James and Dewey mean by experience? Both rejected the dualisms—the separation of the mind from the body, and of the subject from the object—that had divided idealists from empiricists since René Descartes and John Locke. They were equally scornful of nineteenth-century idealists' infatuation with introspection and positivists' reduction of all philosophical questions to matter and motion. Instead they preferred other metaphors such as “field” or “stream” or “circuit” to suggest the continuity and meaningfulness of consciousness that had eluded both empiricists and rationalists; their “radical empiricism” rested on their revised concept of consciousness. Immediate experience as James and Dewey conceived of it is always relational (it never exists in the abstract or in isolation from a world containing both other persons and concrete realities, as did Descartes's rationalist *cogito*), creative (it never merely registers sense data passively, as did Locke's empiricist *tabula rasa*), and imbued with historically specific cultural values (it is never “human” or universal, but always personal and particular). Pragmatists distrusted all forms of foundationalism, all attempts to establish philosophy on unchanging *a priori* postulates. Rather than grounding values in the bedrock of timeless absolutes, they urged us to evaluate all of our beliefs—philosophical, scientific, religious, ethical, and political—before the test they considered the most demanding of all: our experience as social and historical beings.⁴

The early pragmatists' conception of testing the truth of ideas in experience ignited a fire storm of controversy that continues to rage. Philosophers such as Bertrand Russell, George Santayana, Josiah Royce, and Arthur Lovejoy immediately targeted James. Cultural critics such as Randolph Bourne, Van Wyck Brooks, and Lewis Mumford and partisans of natural law such as (the erstwhile pragmatist) Walter Lippmann and Mortimer Adler later went after Dewey, as did Marxists such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. All these critics charged pragmatists with elevating expedient, novel, narrowly individualistic, instrumental, and technocratic considerations above truth and goodness as revealed by philosophy, art, or theology.⁵

³ In this essay I will concentrate on William James and John Dewey instead of Charles Sanders Peirce for two reasons. First, Peirce explained in 1904 that he “invented” pragmatism “to express a certain maxim of logic . . . for the analysis of concepts” rather than “sensation” and grounded it on “an elaborate study of the nature of signs.” For the precise reason why Peirce's ideas have influenced analytic philosophers and semioticians, his work is less pertinent here. See H. S. Thayer, *Meaning and Action: A Critical History of Pragmatism* (Indianapolis, 1981), 493–94. Second, discussing the recent torrent of work on Peirce is beyond the scope of this essay. For a fine introduction, see James Hoopes, ed., *Peirce on Signs: Writings on Semiotic by Charles Sanders Peirce* (Chapel Hill, 1991); on Peirce's tortured life see Joseph Brent, *Charles Sanders Peirce: A Life* (Bloomington, 1993); and on his philosophy of science, see C. F. Delaney, *Science, Knowledge, and Mind: A Study in the Philosophy of C. S. Peirce* (Notre Dame, 1993).

⁴ On James's concept of immediate experience, see James M. Edie, *William James and Phenomenology* (Bloomington, 1987); more comprehensive are Perry, *Thought and Character of William James*; and Gerald E. Myers, *William James: His Life and Thought* (New Haven, 1986). On Dewey's life and thought, see Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca, 1991); on qualitative issues in Dewey's philosophy, see James Gouinlock, *John Dewey's Philosophy of Value* (New York, 1972).

⁵ A compilation of these criticisms is in John Patrick Diggins, *The Promise of Pragmatism: Modernism and the Crisis of Knowledge and Authority* (Chicago, 1994). James Hoopes, Robert Westbrook, and I are unpersuaded by Diggins's interpretation of pragmatism. For our explanations and Diggins's response, see James Hoopes, “Peirce's Community of Signs: The Path Untaken in American Social Thought,” *Intellectual History Newsletter*, 17 (1995), 3–6; James T. Kloppenberg, “The Authority of Evidence and the Boundaries of Interpretation,”

Much as such criticism stung, it sharpened James's and Dewey's formulations of their ideas. Some of their best writing, notably James's *The Meaning of Truth* (1909) and Dewey's *Experience and Nature* (1925), came in response to their critics. Their clarifications reveal why some contemporary postmodernists' enthusiasm and some contemporary traditionalists' scorn are misdirected at James and Dewey. In *Pragmatism* James had tried to head off some misunderstandings in advance. Looking back at his argument, it is difficult to see how anyone could accuse him of identifying truth with whatever it is convenient to believe. He specified "our duty to agree with reality" and expressed exasperation at his critics' "favorite formula for describing" pragmatists—"persons who think that by saying whatever you find it pleasant to say and calling it truth you fulfil every pragmatistic requirement." To the contrary, James protested: "Pent in, as the pragmatist more than anyone else sees himself to be, between the whole body of funded truths squeezed from the past and the coercions of the world of sense about him, who so well as he feels the immense pressure of objective control under which our minds perform their operations?"⁶

When his critics continued to accuse him of counseling his readers to believe any fiction they might find expedient, James responded by writing *The Meaning of Truth*. There he specified the circumstances in which one might invoke the pragmatic test of truth and clarified the conditions necessary for verifying any proposition pragmatically. First, and fundamentally, it must correspond to what is known from experience about the natural world. The following apparently unambiguous sentence has escaped the attention of James's critics—and some of his contemporary champions: "The notion of a reality independent of . . . us, taken from ordinary social experience, lies at the base of the pragmatist definition of truth." Calling himself an "epistemological realist," James explained that he simply took for granted the existence of that independent reality and did not consider its independent existence philosophically interesting or important. Second, to be judged pragmatically true, a proposition must be consistent with the individual's stock of existing beliefs, beliefs that had withstood the severe test of experience. That, James felt sure, would rule out simpleminded wishful thinking. Finally, a statement may be considered pragmatically true *if* it fulfills those two conditions and yields satisfaction. Religious faith represented to James a perfect illustration of the appropriate terrain for testing truth claims pragmatically: in the absence of irrefutable evidence, James judged relevant the consequences of faith for believers.⁷

17 (1995), 3–6; James T. Kloppenberg, "The Authority of Evidence and the Boundaries of Interpretation," *ibid.*, 7–15; Robert Westbrook, "The Authority of Pragmatism," *ibid.*, 16–24; and John Patrick Diggins, "Pragmatism and the Historians," *ibid.*, 25–30. On critics who valued the capacities of creative individuals above pragmatists' concerns with communities of discourse and social justice, see Casey Nelson Blake, *Beloved Community: The Cultural Criticism of Randolph Bourne, Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank, and Lewis Mumford* (Chapel Hill, 1990). On Walter Lippmann and Mortimer Adler, see Edward A. Purcell Jr., *The Crisis of Democratic Theory: Scientific Naturalism and the Problem of Value* (Lexington, Ky., 1973). On Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, see Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923–1950* (Boston, 1973).

⁶ James, *Pragmatism*, 111–12.

⁷ William James, *The Meaning of Truth* (1909; Cambridge, Mass., 1975), 117, 106, 126–28.

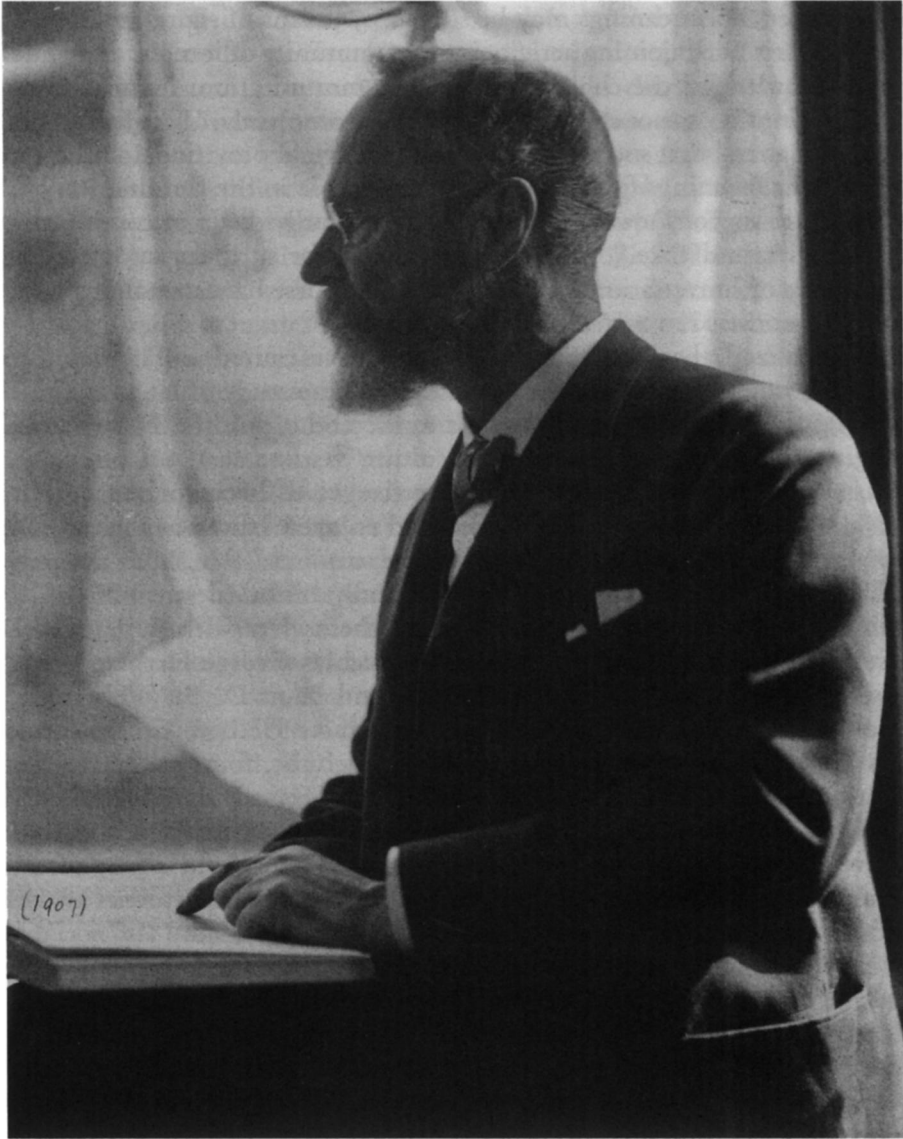
Dewey, whose prodding had helped spur James to refine his position, likewise argued throughout his long career that we should conceive of all our knowledge as hypotheses to be tested in experience.

At the core of James's and Dewey's pragmatism was experience conceived, not as introspection, but as the intersection of the conscious self with the world. They conceived of knowing subjects as embodiments of reason, emotion, and values, and they emphasized the inadequacy of philosophers' attempts to freeze, split apart, and compartmentalize the dynamic continuities and multiple dimensions of life as we live it. They conceived of individuals as always enmeshed in social conditions, yet selecting what to attend to from the multiplicity of conscious experience, and making history by making choices. They conceived of experience as intrinsically and irreducibly meaningful, and they insisted that its meanings were not predetermined or deducible from any all-encompassing pattern. They argued that meanings emerge as cultures test their values in practice and that we encounter expressions of those meanings in the historical record.

Language was thus crucial for understanding the experience of others, but for James and Dewey language was only one important part of a richer, broader range that included interpersonal, aesthetic, spiritual, religious, and other prelinguistic or nonlinguistic forms of experience. Moreover, they realized that language not only feeds the imagination but also places constraints on understanding by specifying a particular range of meanings. In *Pragmatism*, James wrote, "All truth thus gets verbally built out, stored up, and made available for everyone. Hence, we must *talk* consistently, just as we must *think* consistently." Although James appreciated what is now characterized as the arbitrariness of signifiers, he drew the following noteworthy conclusion: "Names are arbitrary, but once understood they must be kept to. We mustn't now call Abel 'Cain' or Cain 'Abel.' If we do, we ungear ourselves from the whole book of Genesis, and from all its connexions with the universe of speech and fact down to the present time." We cannot test every proposition ourselves or enter the immediate experience of others. Yet we nevertheless have access to verifiable historical knowledge, even if only indirectly and through language. "*As true as past time itself was*, so true was Julius Caesar, so true were antediluvian monsters, all in their proper dates and settings. That past time itself was, is guaranteed by its coherence with everything that's present. True as the present *is* the past *was* also."⁸ When dealing with verifiable data, whether about Caesars or about ceratopsians, we place each datum in the web of evidence we humans have been spinning for centuries. Even when considering unverifiable narratives such as Genesis, we risk losing the coherence that makes communication possible unless we preserve meanings within our web of cultural memory.

Dewey shared that appreciation of the importance of symbols and the indispensability of common understandings. "All discourse, oral or written," he conceded in *Experience and Nature*, "says things that surprise the one that says them." But that makes communication difficult, not impossible. Conversation understood as

⁸ James, *Pragmatism*, 102-3.



William James in 1907, the year *Pragmatism* was published. There he emphasized "our duty to agree with reality" and "the immense pressure of objective control under which our minds perform their operations," observations his critics often overlooked.

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a quest for mutual understanding, with all its imprecision, provides the appropriate model. In *The Public and Its Problems* (1927) he wrote of "communication as a prerequisite" to undertaking social action. Through language "the results of conjoint experience are considered and transmitted. Events cannot be passed from

one to another, but meanings may be shared by means of signs"; eventually such sharing converts "a conjoining activity into a community of interest and endeavor." Dewey acknowledged the challenge of such communication: "mutual interest in shared meanings" does not emerge "all at once or completely." Like James, however, Dewey emphasized that such communication can yield provisional understandings of the past, its meanings for the present, and its role in the formulation of shared social aspirations. For Dewey, dialogue between individuals in community, with its "direct give and take," provided the model for such communication: "the winged words of conversation in immediate intercourse have a vital import lacking in the fixed and frozen words of written speech."⁹

Dewey realized that the concept of experience caused difficulties for many analytic philosophers, who defined philosophy as the study of language and logic, but despite their criticism, he clung to it to the end of his life. Dewey toyed with exchanging the word "experience" for "culture" as late as 1951, but in the end he refused: "we need a cautionary and directive word, like experience, to remind us that the world which is lived, suffered and enjoyed as well as logically thought of, has the last word in all human inquiries and surmises."¹⁰ In short, the pragmatic sensibility of James and Dewey was a profoundly historical sensibility.

Listing some of the thinkers who aligned themselves with James and Dewey suggests their enormous impact. Sociologists such as George Herbert Mead, legal theorists such as Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. and Louis D. Brandeis, economists such as Richard T. Ely, political theorists such as Herbert Croly, theologians such as Walter Rauschenbusch and Reinhold Niebuhr, founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People such as W. E. B. Du Bois and William English Walling, and feminists such as Jane Addams and Jessie Taft all derived from pragmatism a conception of experience and a way of thinking about abstract and concrete problems that oriented them to historical analysis and away from inherited dogmas. Those who looked to philosophy and social science for solid, permanent principles found pragmatism disappointing and unattractive. But many of those who shared the belief of James and Dewey that the shift from absolutes to the test of experience might encourage independent thinking and democratic decision making endorsed pragmatism because it unsettled traditional ways of thinking without sinking into the morass of subjectivism that swallowed some turn-of-the-century rebels, such as Friedrich Nietzsche. The steadying lifeline of experience prevented pragmatists from sliding into fantasy, cynicism, or self-indulgence.

As the ripples pragmatism sent across American thought extended wider and wider during the early twentieth century, they met—and eventually were submerged by—more powerful waves coming from other directions. Among the most important of these was enthusiasm for the certainty widely attributed to the natural sciences, which stood in sharp contrast to the pragmatists' forthright admission

⁹ John Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, in John Dewey, *The Later Works, 1925–1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (17 vols., Carbondale, 1981–1990), I, 152; John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, *ibid.*, II, 330–31.

¹⁰ Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, appendix 2 (1951), 372.

of uncertainty. Behaviorists in psychology, sociology, and political science adopted Dewey's enthusiasm for testing hypotheses but jettisoned his concern with the qualitative dimensions of experience and inquiry in the human sciences.¹¹

Philosophers turned increasingly toward the models provided by mathematics and physical science, a trend already underway before European émigrés began arriving in the United States in the 1930s. The émigrés' quest for precision and their impatience with pragmatism combined to transform American philosophy departments by elevating the study of language and logic and marginalizing James's and Dewey's concerns with epistemology, ethics, and political philosophy. A discipline scurrying to master the logical positivism of Rudolf Carnap, which sought to rid philosophy of all questions that could not be answered through scientific verification, had little interest in the early pragmatists' attachment to immediate experience and their democratic reformist sensibilities. Dewey had described the writings that launched the analytic philosophy movement, which sought to reduce philosophy to propositional logic, as "an affront to the common-sense world of action, appreciation, and affection." The work of the British philosophers Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore, Dewey wrote, threatened to "land philosophy in a formalism like unto scholasticism." James had urged Russell to "say good-bye to mathematical logic if you wish to preserve your relations with concrete realities!" But many midcentury American philosophers preferred Carnap and Russell to "common sense" and "concrete realities"; they shared Russell's long-standing contempt for pragmatism. The new breed of analytic philosophers shunned history, shifted toward technical discourse, and judged meaningless all propositions that could not be verified by scientific procedures. James wrote about religious experience and Dewey about aesthetics, ethics, and politics in the hope of helping philosophy escape such a narrowly restricted role.¹²

Developments within the pragmatist camp also made it increasingly vulnerable to such attacks. In the 1930s and 1940s some champions of pragmatism tried to popularize the ideas of James and Dewey by simplifying them for mass consumption. Whereas James and Dewey had urged their readers to think critically about their own experience and to take responsibility for shaping their culture, such writers as Will Durant, Irwin Edman, Horace Kallen, Max Otto, Harry Overstreet, John Herman Randall, and Thomas Vernor Smith made available versions of pragmatism that simply endorsed the rough-and-ready democratic sentiments of most middle-class Americans. Such efforts did little to bolster the prestige of

¹¹ On the triumph of scientism in American social science, see Dorothy Ross, *The Origins of American Social Science* (Cambridge, Eng., 1991), 390–470.

¹² On the relation between scientism and the transformation of philosophy, see Daniel J. Wilson, *Science, Community, and the Transformation of American Philosophy, 1860–1930* (Chicago, 1990); and Laurence C. Smith, *Behaviorism and Logical Positivism: A Reassessment of the Alliance* (Stanford, 1986). For Dewey's judgment of Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore, see John Dewey, *Essays in Experimental Logic*, in John Dewey, *The Middle Works, 1899–1924*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (15 vols., Carbondale, 1976–1983), X, 357–58. William James to Bertrand Russell, Oct. 4, 1908, in James, *Meaning of Truth*, 299–300. Russell's jibe appear in Bertrand Russell, "Dewey's New Logic," in *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, ed. Paul A. Schilpp (1939; New York, 1951), 135–56. On this volume, see Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*, 496–500.

pragmatism among professional philosophers or other American intellectuals aspiring to scientific precision rather than democratic deliberation.¹³

After Dewey died in 1952, his ideas faded quickly into the background. Even though one of the most prominent thinkers of the post-World War II period, Reinhold Niebuhr, shared many of Dewey's, and especially James's, ideas, his critique of Dewey's optimism helped discredit pragmatism as too sunny minded for serious intellectuals. As Richard Rorty has put it, pragmatism was crushed between "the upper and the nether millstones": a revived interest in theology or existentialism for some, the "hard-edged empiricism" of Carnap for others. For reasons reflecting changes within philosophy and in the broader culture, then, American intellectuals during the 1950s and 1960s either forgot about pragmatism or, as Hollinger put it, learned to get along without it. That is no longer true. Explaining the resurgence of pragmatism requires sketching the complex cultural changes that cleared the ground and made possible its return.¹⁴

First the claims to objectivity of the natural sciences, which had intimidated humanists while they inspired philosophers and social scientists, were rocked by the historicist analysis of Thomas Kuhn, whose significance in this transformation is difficult to overestimate. Many of the schemes for social engineering hatched by enthusiasts for science led to results that ranged from disappointing (the War on Poverty) to disastrous (the war in Vietnam), as both the findings of researchers and their application to social problems were shown to be grounded in questionable assumptions and, despite the scientists' notion of value neutrality, susceptible to appropriation for ideological purposes.¹⁵ Then social scientists began to admit what pragmatists and such practitioners of the *Geisteswissenschaften* (human sciences) as Wilhelm Dilthey had known since the nineteenth century: Because human experience is meaningful, understanding not only expression but also behavior requires interpreting the complex and shifting systems of symbols through which individuals encounter the world and with which they try to cope with it. Meanings and intentions change over time and across cultures; as that realization spread, hopes of finding a universal logic or a general science of social organization faded. In their place emerged hermeneutics, which relies on methods of interpretation to achieve understanding of historical experience and forgoes efforts to generate rules of transhistorical human behavior.

¹³ George Cotkin, "Middle-Ground Pragmatists: The Popularization of Philosophy in American Culture," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 55 (April 1994), 283–302. On Will Durant, see Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill, 1992).

¹⁴ See Richard Wightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (New York, 1985); and Daniel F. Rice, *Reinhold Niebuhr and John Dewey: An American Odyssey* (Albany, 1993). Richard Rorty, "Pragmatism without Method," in Richard Rorty, *Philosophical Papers*, vol. I: *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (New York, 1991), 64. On the shift of American philosophy departments away from pragmatism and toward analytic philosophy and logical positivism, see Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History* (New York, 1981), 103–26; Bernstein, "Resurgence of Pragmatism," 815–17; and a fine overview, David Depew, "Philosophy," in *Encyclopedia of the United States in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Stanley Kutler (4 vols., New York, 1996), IV, 1635–63.

¹⁵ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, 1962); Paul Hoyningen-Huene, *Reconstructing Scientific Revolutions: Thomas S. Kuhn's Philosophy of Science*, trans. Alexander T. Levine (Chicago, 1993). On the uses of social science in public policy, see Ellen Herman, *The Romance of American Psychology: Political Culture in the Age of Experts* (Berkeley, 1995).

Marching behind the banner of hermeneutics came an influential band of scholars who challenged the ideal of scientific objectivity in the human sciences: Peter Winch, Clifford Geertz, Charles Taylor, Anthony Giddens, Paul Ricoeur, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Jürgen Habermas—a new litany of saints proclaiming variations on a revolutionary gospel of interpretation. They spoke a different language than did those natural scientists, philosophers, and social scientists who sought to escape the clutter of history. Instead of timeless principles and truth, they referred to revolutionary paradigm shifts, incommensurable forms of life, the complexities of thick description, competing communities of discourse, archaeologies of knowledge, the universal undecidability of texts, the inescapability of prejudices, and the colonization of life worlds by an omnivorous technostucture.¹⁶

Although among these thinkers only Habermas explicitly placed himself within the pragmatic tradition, Americans familiar with James and Dewey noted the similarities between recent historicist critiques of the sciences and social sciences and those of the early pragmatists. As the work of these thinkers, many of whom were often grouped together (unhelpfully and even misleadingly) under the rubric “postmodernist,” became increasingly influential, many scholars began to move away from the model of the natural sciences and toward forms of analysis more congenial to hermeneutics and history, most notably toward pragmatism.¹⁷

Despite the undeniable importance of those broad changes in American thought, the resurgence of pragmatism is largely due to the remarkable work done by the Trojan horse of analytic philosophy, Richard Rorty. Rorty’s historicism has had such explosive force because he attacked the citadel of philosophy from within. Troubling as was his insistence that philosophy could never attain the scientific status analytic philosophers yearned for, even more unnerving was Rorty’s equally blunt judgment that the grail of objective knowledge would likewise continue to elude the natural sciences and the social sciences. Rorty first established his credentials with papers discussing standard topics in the analytic tradition. But in his introduction to *The Linguistic Turn* (1967), he suggested that the conflicts within analytic philosophy (between J. L. Austin’s ordinary-language philosophy and Carnap’s logical positivism, for example) were so fundamental that they could not be resolved, thus subtly challenging the idea of progress in problem solving that analytic philosophers took for granted.¹⁸

Over the next decade Rorty broadened his focus and sharpened his critique. Echoing arguments made by James and Dewey but presenting them in the discourse of analytic philosophy, he insisted in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) that problems such as mind-body dualism, the correspondence theory of truth,

¹⁶ See Richard J. Bernstein, *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory* (New York, 1976); Fred R. Dallmayr and Thomas A. McCarthy, eds., *Understanding and Social Inquiry* (Notre Dame, 1977); and Quentin Skinner, ed., *The Return of Grand Theory in the Human Sciences* (Cambridge, Eng., 1985).

¹⁷ On these changes in philosophy and political theory, see John Rajchman and Cornel West, eds., *Post-Analytic Philosophy* (New York, 1985); and David Held, ed., *Political Theory Today* (Stanford, 1991).

¹⁸ Richard Rorty, ed., *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method* (Chicago, 1967).

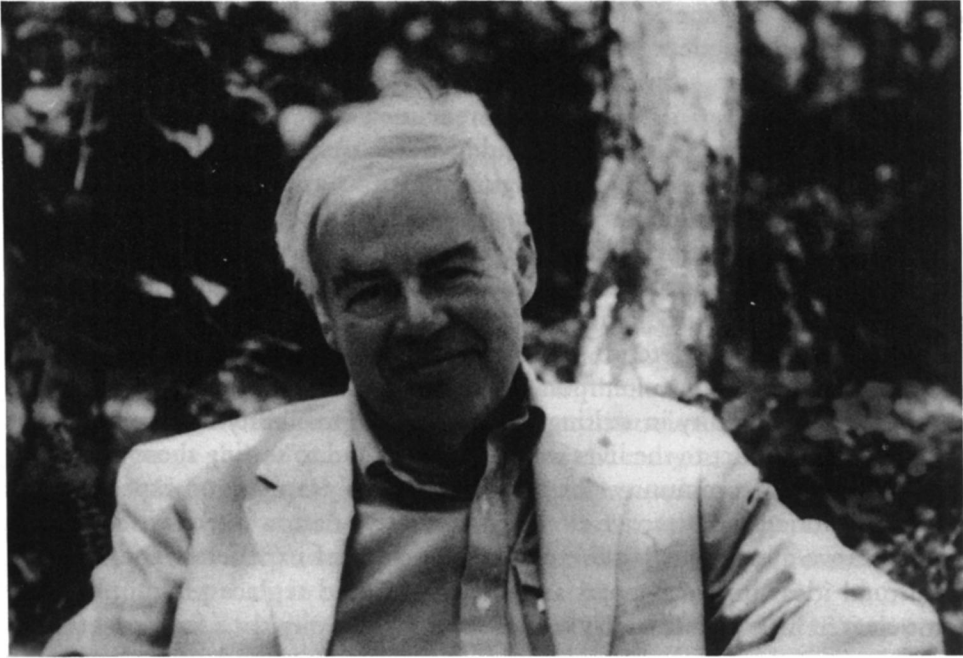
theories of knowledge and theories of language, and ultimately the entire conception of a systematic philosophy devoted to finding foundations for objective knowledge all rested on misconceptions. He urged his fellow philosophers to move "from epistemology to hermeneutics" and to practice "philosophy without mirrors," embracing interpretation and surrendering the vain hope that their writings might accurately reflect the world as it really is. Systematic philosophers, such as John Locke, Immanuel Kant, and Rudolf Carnap, who sought a science of knowledge that would disclose objective truth, should give way to "edifying philosophers," such as James and Dewey, who would contribute to the "conversation of the West" without promising results philosophy would never be able to deliver. Although others had begun to offer variations on this theme of "historicist undoing," to use Ian Hacking's phrase for it, Rorty's assault seemed especially dramatic because it held out no alternative solutions.¹⁹

In *Consequences of Pragmatism* (1982), Rorty defended his heretical historicism. We must admit that "there is nothing deep down inside us except what we have put there ourselves"; our most cherished standards and practices are merely conventions. Science, Rorty concluded with the provocative bluntness that has become his trademark, is only "one genre of literature"; all efforts to find solid, unchanging knowledge are futile.²⁰ Rorty himself realized that there was little in these claims that was completely new. But because enthusiasm for science had overshadowed the historicism of earlier pragmatists, and because Anglo-American philosophers in particular had marched down a road marked "truth" only to find James and Dewey waiting there for them, Rorty's revival of pragmatism seemed revolutionary.

Against critics who assailed him as a relativist, Rorty responded that the notion of relativism itself becomes incoherent when we appreciate the contingent status of all our knowledge. From his perspective, there is nothing for "truth" to be relative to except our tradition, our purposes, and our linguistic conventions. When we have come to that realization, a calm acceptance of our condition becomes possible. While pragmatism cannot offer objectivity, neither does it threaten the survival of civilization. Revolutionary as his message was, Rorty's mood was downright upbeat. He proclaimed pragmatism "the chief glory of our country's intellectual tradition" and noted that James and Dewey, although asking us to surrender

¹⁹ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, 1979). See Alan Malachowski, ed., *Reading Rorty: Critical Responses to Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990); and Herman J. Saatkamp, ed., *Rorty and Pragmatism* (Nashville, 1995). Ian Hacking, "Two Kinds of 'New Historicism' for Philosophers," in *History and . . . : Histories within the Human Sciences*, ed. Ralph Cohen and Michael S. Roth (Charlottesville, 1995), 296–318. The very useful words "historicism" and "historicist" continue to baffle some historians, probably due to their almost opposite meanings in the work of the philosopher of science Karl Popper and in contemporary critical discourse. Popper used "historicism" to designate (and denigrate) any theory (such as Marxism) that purports to predict the future course of human events according to ostensibly scientific laws. More recent commentators understand historicism as "the theory that social and cultural phenomena are historically determined and that each period in history has its own values that are not directly applicable to other epochs. In philosophy that implies that philosophical issues find their place, importance, and definition in a specific cultural milieu. That is certainly Rorty's opinion." *Ibid.*, 298.

²⁰ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 392; Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays, 1972–1980* (Minneapolis, 1982), xl, xliii.



Richard Rorty in 1989, the year *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* was published. There Rorty identified pragmatism with a willingness to discard attempts to use philosophical props to hold up humanitarianism and democratic values and an acknowledgment of the contingency of all commitments and all communities.
Courtesy Cambridge University Press.

“the neurotic Cartesian quest for certainty,” nevertheless wrote, as Nietzsche and Heidegger did not, “in a spirit of social hope.”²¹

Surprisingly, given the ardent opposition to dualism that Rorty shares with James and Dewey, on the concept of experience he has substituted a new dichotomy for those James and Dewey attacked. Demonstrating the distance between his view and theirs has become considerably easier thanks to the appearance of Rorty’s essay “Dewey between Hegel and Darwin” (1994). There Rorty acknowledges the difference between the historical Dewey and his “hypothetical Dewey,” a philosopher who would have been “a pragmatist without being a radical empiricist,” without, in other words, Dewey’s crucial commitment to experience. The central distinction, Rorty now concedes, lies in Dewey’s (and James’s) continuing emphasis on experience, which Rorty finds quaint but unhelpful. He ties it to their purported belief in “panpsychism,” a word for the supposed ability of minds to commune with other minds that Rorty has resurrected from the lexicon of James’s critics to poke fun at those who consider experience important. According to Rorty, contemporary philosophers “tend to talk about *sentences* a lot but to say very

²¹ Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, xviii, 160, 161.

little about ideas or experiences." James's and Dewey's talk about the relation between ideas and experiences, in Rorty's judgment, "runs together sentences with experiences—linguistic entities with introspective entities." They "should have dropped the term *experience* rather than redefined it." "My alternative Dewey," he concludes wistfully, "would have said, we can construe 'thinking' as simply the use of sentences."²² Seeing the linguistic turn as a step forward rather than a dead end, Rorty dogmatically refuses to accept any philosophy in which something other than language, namely, experience—understood not as introspection but as the intersection between the conscious self and the world—plays an important part. As Rorty now admits, James and Dewey had a very different conception of philosophy, and that difference continues to manifest itself in the contrasting versions of pragmatism in contemporary scholarship. Given historians' strong commitments to referentiality in writing history, to the possibility of connecting the arguments we construct to the lives we write about, and to testing those arguments within our scholarly community, the early pragmatists' emphasis on experience will remain for historians an attractive alternative to Rorty's narrow interest in sentences.

Rorty's move away from James and Dewey's view of experience and toward a new cultural ideal in which poets and novelists would replace philosophers first became clear in his elegant, widely read *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989). His shift has coincided with the new tendency of some literary critics to characterize themselves as pragmatists. Just as dissatisfaction with prevailing orthodoxies has sparked novel approaches in philosophy and the social sciences, so many students of literature have deserted the New Criticism and structuralism and turned toward pragmatism. Reversing the common tendency, stemming from the writings of Randolph Bourne and Van Wyck Brooks and reaching fruition in Lewis Mumford's *The Golden Day* (1925), to contrast the pragmatists' supposedly arid fetish with technique with the transcendentalists' celebration of imagination, some critics now invoke a refashioned pragmatism in their constructions of a rich, home-grown literary heritage. For example, Richard Poirier argues in *Poetry and Pragmatism* (1992) for a continuous tradition of "linguistic skepticism" running from Ralph Waldo Emerson through William James to the modernist poets Robert Frost, Gertrude Stein, Wallace Stevens, and T. S. Eliot. Those poets share, according to Poirier, "a liberating and creative suspicion as to the dependability of words and syntax, especially as it relates to matters of belief."²³

²² Richard Rorty, "Dewey between Hegel and Darwin," in *Modernist Impulses in the Human Sciences, 1870–1930*, ed. Dorothy Ross (Baltimore, 1994), 46–68. In this essay Rorty acknowledges his debt to intellectual historians for demonstrating the difference between the historical Dewey and his "hypothetical version" but then contends that the ideas of Dewey's generation no longer make sense.

²³ Richard Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), 5. On pragmatism as the antithesis of literary theory and a rationale for critics to focus on recovering authors' intentions, see Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels, "Against Theory," *Critical Inquiry*, 8 (Summer 1982), 723–42. For the claim that we must supplement pragmatism with other value orientations (such as Marxism) because the pragmatic method "cannot help us do the social work of transformation," see Frank Lentricchia, *Criticism and Social Change* (Chicago, 1983), 4. Stanley Fish argues that we create the meaning of texts when we interpret them; trying to catch what Fish means by pragmatism is thus like trying to catch a fly with a fish net. See, for example, Stanley Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally* (Durham, 1989). On one version of Fish's pragmatism, see the examination of legal theory below.

Poirier enlists James to provide an American alternative to varieties of post-structuralism imported from France and fashionable among contemporary critics. He quotes a phrase from James's *The Principles of Psychology* on "the re-instatement of the vague to its proper place in our mental life"—a phrase consistent with James's portrait of the depth and richness of immediate experience—then draws an etymological line from "vague" to "extravagance" and then to "superfluity." This tenuous link prompts him to assert that for James, as for Emerson, thinking involves punning, so that "gains and losses of meaning are in a continuous and generative interaction." Poirier compares the writings of Emerson and James with those of Frost, Stein, Stevens, and Eliot, whom they resemble in their use of metaphor and their "allusiveness and elusiveness of phrasing." Poirier characterizes James's language as "no less 'superfluous'" than the language of modernist poets, "subject to the same degree of metaphorical proliferation, slippage, and excess." James's language slides "out of bounds, toward the margin, until it becomes loose and vague." Although James conceded the limits imposed on clarity by the ineffable in experience and the unstable in language, as his classic *The Varieties of Religious Experience* makes abundantly clear, in his writings he sought to move beyond the vague, rather than to revel in it.²⁴

James sharpened his thinking against the hard edges of the world he encountered in experience, and his own writing reflected his preoccupation with clarity and precision. In a letter to his former student Gertrude Stein, written shortly before his death, James explained why he had not yet finished reading a novel she had sent him: "As a rule reading fiction is as hard for me as trying to hit a target by hurling feathers at it. I need *resistance* to cerebration!" James's pragmatism also reflects his awareness of the resistance to vagueness offered by the world beyond his own fertile imagination. In the absence of any "resistance" in "external reality," writing can become an exercise in creativity—or an excuse for unrestrained self-indulgence. James also insisted on respecting the conventional meanings of words lest we become "ungeared" from our cultural tradition and unable to communicate with each other. When critics align his pragmatism with a "linguistic skepticism" that encourages creative (mis)readings by "strong poets"—critic Harold Bloom's description of critics who interpret texts unconstrained by conventional understandings—they depart from James's vision.

²⁴ Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism*, 44, 46, 92, 131. Compare James's own cautionary words about language, which might seem to confirm Poirier's view: "Good and evil reconciled in a laugh! Don't you see the difference, don't you see the identity?" James asked. "By George, nothing but *othing!* That sounds like nonsense, but it is pure *onsense!*" James published these epigrams, however, to show how words that struck him as brilliant when he wrote them—under the influence of nitrous oxide—dissolved into meaninglessness when the nitrous oxide wore off. In such extravagant language, James said, "reason and silliness united." See William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (1897; Cambridge, Mass., 1979), 219–20; see also William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (2 vols., 1890; Cambridge, Mass., 1981), I, 254–55. For an interpretation that stresses the instability of James's writings but emphasizes what James hoped to accomplish thereby, see William Joseph Gavin, *William James and the Reinstatement of the Vague* (Philadelphia, 1992).

²⁵ William James to Gertrude Stein, May 25, 1910, William James Papers (Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.). On William James's letters to his brother Henry that contrast the writing of fiction with his own struggles against the "resistance" of "facts" and the ideas of "other philosophers," see R. W. B. Lewis, *The Jameses: A Family Narrative* (New York, 1991), 409–10. Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism*,

Two of the most prominent late-twentieth-century pragmatists, Richard J. Bernstein and Hilary Putnam, have challenged versions of pragmatism, including Rorty's and Poirier's, that emphasize language and dismiss the concept of experience. Their work, less known outside philosophy than Rorty's, is of particular interest to historians. For three decades, since the appearance of his first book, *John Dewey* (1966), Bernstein has worked to forge links between recent continental European philosophy and the American tradition of pragmatism. In *Praxis and Action* (1971), he traced the pragmatist philosophy of activity to its roots in Aristotle's philosophy and contrasted the promise of that orientation with the danger that analytic philosophy might sink into scholasticism under the weight of "its own demand for ever-increasing technical mastery." Dewey, by contrast, was alert to "the moral and social consequences" of his ideas, which demanded a community of inquiry devoted to the "shared values of openness and fairness." From the beginning, Bernstein's pragmatism was grounded in a Deweyan conception of experience and its consequences for social organization: "it is only by mutual criticism that we can advance our knowledge and reconstruction of human experience."²⁶

The twin pillars of Bernstein's pragmatism have been a community of inquiry and social action. In *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory* (1976), Bernstein exposed the reductionism of mainstream social science and looked for alternatives in hermeneutics, phenomenology, and Habermas's critical theory. In *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (1983), he identified the "Cartesian anxiety" that had dominated and debilitated modern Western thought: "Either there is some support for our being, a fixed foundation for our knowledge, or we cannot escape the forces of darkness that envelop us with madness, with intellectual and moral chaos." As an alternative Bernstein invoked the ideas of Hans-Georg Gadamer, Hannah Arendt, Habermas, and Rorty, arguing that these thinkers pointed toward "the central themes of dialogue, conversation, undistorted communication, [and] communal judgment" that become possible "when individuals confront each other as equals and participants." Bernstein advanced a characteristically Deweyan conclusion on the consequences of these ideas: we must aim "toward the goal of cultivating the types of dialogical communities" in which practical judgment and practical discourse "become concretely embodied in our everyday practices," whether those practices involve organizing a neighborhood to build a playground or organizing a group of students to investigate a historical controversy and test alternative interpretations against the available evidence. Pragmatism,

166–67. For an alternative view, see David Bromwich, "Recent Work in Literary Criticism," *Social Research*, 53 (Autumn 1986), 447. Too often, Bromwich writes (with Fredric Jameson and Terry Eagleton in mind), critics who indulge their own impulses as readers obliterate the past, minimizing "the differentness of the past," a consciousness of which "performs a critical function." Historical materials "are not altogether tractable: they will not do everything we want them to." When recounting changes in literary criticism, Poirier underscores Bromwich's point by shifting from the "linguistic skepticism" he endorses in theory to a commonsense reliance on shared meanings of words. See Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism*, 171–93.

²⁶ Richard J. Bernstein, *John Dewey* (New York, 1966); Richard J. Bernstein, *Praxis and Action: Contemporary Philosophies of Human Activity* (Philadelphia, 1971), 319, 314.

for Bernstein, originates in reflection on experience and culminates in altered experience.²⁷

Putnam established himself by contributing to debates in mathematical logic and philosophy of mind, but like Rorty he has become increasingly disenchanted during the last two decades with much of what passes for professional philosophy in the United States. Without denying the importance of logic, formal studies, or semantics, Putnam has nevertheless described such work as “peripheral” and a reflection of the “scientistic character of logical positivism” that likewise infects much analytic philosophy. “Contemporary analytic metaphysics,” he writes acidly, “has no connection with anything but the ‘intuitions’ of a handful of philosophers.” He is equally scornful of the nihilism he sees in Derrida’s deconstruction. “Analytic philosophers basically see philosophy as a science, only less developed, vaguer and newer, while Derrida basically sees philosophy as literature, as art. I don’t think either is correct.” Putnam interprets Rorty’s occasional expressions of enthusiasm for Derrida as the lingering effects of Rorty’s disappointment with the failure of analytic philosophy to deliver the certainty it promised.²⁸

In *Realism with a Human Face* (1990), Putnam sought to clarify his differences from Rorty by listing five principles that he—along with the early pragmatists—endorses, but that he expected Rorty to reject. First, our standards of warranted assertibility are historical; second, they reflect our interests and values; and third, they are always subject to reform, as are all our standards. Rorty accepted those but challenged Putnam’s two other principles: first, that “in ordinary circumstances, there is usually a fact of the matter as to whether the statements people make are warranted or not”; and second, “whether a statement is warranted or not is independent of whether the majority of one’s cultural peers would *say* it is warranted or unwarranted.” From Rorty’s perspective, warrant is a sociological question, so we should evade pointless debates about relativism by moving “everything over from epistemology and metaphysics to cultural politics, from claims to knowledge and appeals to self-evidence to suggestions about what we should try.” This way of framing the issue illustrates Rorty’s characteristic style of argument, which he candidly describes as trying to make his opponent look bad. When Rorty traces this disagreement to Putnam’s purported “appeals to self-evidence,” he does just that: Putnam’s formulation, however, does not depend on self-evidence any more than James’s or Dewey’s ideas of experience depended on “introspection”; it depends instead on evidence derived from experience.²⁹

Their second principal difference, Rorty points out, stems from Putnam’s “dislike of, and my enthusiasm for, a picture of human beings as just complicated animals.”

²⁷ Bernstein, *Restructuring of Social and Political Theory*; Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia, 1983), 18, 223.

²⁸ Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History*, 126; Hilary Putnam, *Renewing Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), 197; interview with Putnam in Giovanna Borradori, *The American Philosopher*, trans. Rosanna Crocitto (Chicago, 1994), 60–61, 66.

²⁹ Hilary Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), 21; Richard Rorty, “Putnam and the Relativist Menace,” *Journal of Philosophy*, 90 (Sept. 1993), 449, 457.

Putnam has argued that “one of our fundamental self-conceptualizations” as humans “is that we are *thinkers*, and that *as* thinkers we are committed to there being *some* kind of truth.” In Putnam’s words, “that means that there is no eliminating the normative,” and Rorty is correct to emphasize the gulf dividing him from Putnam on this issue. Putnam concedes the historicist point that our ways of using language change, but he insists that even so, “some of our sentences *are* true, and—in spite of Rorty’s objections to saying that things ‘make’ sentences true—the truth of ‘I had cereal for breakfast this morning’ *does* depend on what happened this morning.”³⁰

This conclusion, which many historians will find congenial, depends finally on Putnam’s Jamesian conception of what it is to be human and his conviction, which he has reiterated again and again during the last fifteen years, that we should characterize the mind as “neither a material nor an immaterial organ but a system of capacities,” which returns us to the early pragmatists’ theory of voluntary action. In two essays written with Ruth Anna Putnam, Putnam stresses the “continuing interactive nature of experience” as Dewey conceived of it. Thinking involves relating our choices and our actions to their consequences, which requires reflecting not merely on our words but on the experienced effects of our practical activity. “We formulate ends-in-view on the basis of experience,” they conclude, “and we appraise these on the basis of additional experience.” For a pragmatist, to be engaged in that practice is “to be committed to the existence of truth. Democracy is a social condition of such practice, and therein lies its justification.”³¹

For Putnam, as for Bernstein, all inquiry presupposes values such as mutual understanding and cooperation, which in turn require free and open exchanges of ideas among equals who are committed to the value of the practice. All of these are deeply, irreducibly normative notions, and they require a conception of human thinking and agency different from Rorty’s view. At the conclusion of *Reason, Truth, and History* (1981), Putnam stated this crucial argument clearly and forcefully: “The notion of truth itself depends for its content on our standards of rational acceptability, and these in turn rest on and presuppose our values.”³²

Rorty’s dualisms cannot accommodate the early pragmatists’ conception of artistic or religious experience. Rorty shares Dewey’s conception of the liberating social value of art, which engages the imagination by destabilizing the established order and suggesting imagined alternatives. But for Dewey, as for James, aesthetic

³⁰ Rorty, “Putnam and the Relativist Menace,” 458; Hilary Putnam, “Why Reason Can’t Be Naturalized,” in Hilary Putnam, *Philosophical Papers*, vol. III: *Realism and Reason* (New York, 1983), 229–47. See also Richard Rorty, “Putnam on Truth,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 52 (June 1992), 415–18; and Hilary Putnam, “Truth, Activation Vectors, and Possessive Conditions for Concepts,” *ibid.*, 431–47. Hilary Putnam, “The Question of Realism,” in Hilary Putnam, *Words and Life*, ed. James Conant (Cambridge, Mass., 1994), 299–302.

³¹ Putnam, “Question of Realism,” 305, 292n6. On the early pragmatists’ theory of voluntary action and its relation to their conception of truth, see James T. Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870–1920* (New York, 1986), 79–94. Hilary Putnam and Ruth Anna Putnam, “Education for Democracy,” in Putnam, *Words and Life*, ed. Conant, 227; and Hilary Putnam and Ruth Anna Putnam, “Dewey’s Logic: Epistemology as Hypothesis,” *ibid.*, 218.

³² Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History*, 215. For a recent restatement of this argument, see Putnam, “Pragmatism and Moral Objectivity,” in Putnam, *Words and Life*, ed. Conant, 151–81.

and religious experiences of the sort Dewey characterized as “consummatory” derive their explosive power from qualities that can render them finally inexpressible in language. Rorty admits the importance of such fulfilling experiences—for him they come from art, literature, or the wild orchids that have fascinated him since his childhood—but he denies that such private enjoyments have anything to do with philosophy.³³ James and Dewey disagreed, and the disagreement has important implications.

Dewey’s aesthetics differed from the abstract and formal theories of analytic philosophers and New Critics. He emphasized aesthetic *experience* rather than the *objects* of art. He deplored the compartmentalization that cuts art off from the rest of existence, and he denied the authority of elites to define and control what passes for art. As Richard Shusterman argues in *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (1992), Dewey opposed the idea that all artistic experience requires interpretation by trained professionals. Such linguistic universalism, which Shusterman accurately describes as “the deepest dogma of the linguistic turn in both analytic and continental philosophy,” he judges “neither self-evident nor immune to challenge.” Resurrecting the ideas of James and Dewey, Shusterman insists that pragmatism “more radically recognizes uninterpreted reality, experience, and understandings as already perspectival, prejudiced, and corrigible—in short, as non-foundationally given.” He recommends hermeneutics for use only in particular circumstances. Shusterman insists that understanding does not always “require linguistic articulation; a proper reaction, a shudder or a tingle, may be enough to indicate that one has understood. Some of the things we experience and understand”—notably aesthetic and somatic experiences—“are never captured in language.”³⁴

Rorty, locked inside the tight boundaries of textualism, appreciates such nondiscursive experience but denies it any philosophical significance. Dewey, by contrast, wrote that “a universe of experience is a precondition of a universe of discourse. Without its controlling presence, there is no way to determine the relevancy, weight, or coherence of any designated distinction or relation. The universe of experience surrounds and regulates the universe of discourse but never appears as such within the latter.”³⁵ Linguistic pragmatists such as Rorty and other contemporary thinkers who privilege language and distrust experience not only disagree with Dewey but also thereby dismiss much of what historians value in their efforts to understand the past as it was lived.

In James’s introduction to the lectures eventually published as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, he urged his listeners to think about especially rich, powerful,

³³ See Richard Rorty, “Trotsky and the Wild Orchids,” *Common Knowledge*, 1 (Winter 1992), 140–53.

³⁴ Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Oxford, Eng., 1992), 22, 32, 62, 76, 120–34. See also David R. Hiley, James F. Bohman, and Richard Shusterman, eds., *The Interpretive Turn: Philosophy, Science, Culture* (Ithaca, 1991). On the difference between nineteenth- and twentieth-century hermeneutics, and the reasons why historians should recover the former, see Michael Eramarh, “The Transformation of Hermeneutics: 19th-Century Ancients and 20th-Century Moderns,” *Monist*, 64 (April 1981), 176–94.

³⁵ John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (1938), in Dewey, *Later Works*, ed. Boydston, XII, 74. See also the thoughtful discussion in Richard Shusterman, “Dewey on Experience: Foundation or Reconstruction?,” *Philosophical Forum*, 26 (Winter 1994), 127–48.

and sometimes unforgettable experiences that he described as “entirely unparalleled by anything in verbal thought.” Giles Gunn, in his fine book *Thinking across the American Grain* (1992), quotes at length a passage that expresses “much of the heritage of pragmatism that Rorty has found problematic.” The meaning of such intense experiences, in James’s words, “seems to well up from out of their very centre, in a way impossible verbally to describe.” On reflection, James observed, our experience of every moment of life seems to expand in the way a revolving disk painted with a spiral pattern appears at once to grow continuously from within itself and yet to remain the same size. Such “self-sustaining in the midst of self-removal, which characterizes all reality and fact, is something absolutely foreign to the nature of language, and even to the nature of logic, commonly so-called,” which explains James’s aversion to the emerging philosophical obsessions with language and mathematical logic and his stubborn fascination with religious experience.

Something forever exceeds, escapes from statement, withdraws from definition, must be glimpsed and felt, not told. No one knows this like your genuine professor of philosophy. For what glimmers and twinkles like a bird’s wing in the sunshine it is his business to snatch and fix. And every time he fires his volley of new vocables out of his philosophic shot-gun, whatever surface-flush of success he may feel, he secretly kens at the same time the finer hollowness and irrelevance.

Whereas philosophers who have made the linguistic turn might scoff at James’s insistence on the inadequacies of language to capture and pin down the magic of experience, historians have good reasons to pay attention.³⁶

Indeed, for historians the greater temptation may be to treat experience uncritically, as a court of last appeal, slighting the role of language and communication. Despite the incapacity of language to encompass fully the realms of religious, aesthetic, emotional, and somatic experience, we nevertheless usually have access to the experience of other persons, and communicate our own experience to others, principally through language. Although lived experience may exceed the boundaries of discourse, our expression of it usually, and our discussion of it always, cannot. Moreover, extralinguistic experiences have most often been used to authorize the dogmatic assertions of foundational principles that pragmatists old and new distrust. Traditionally appearing as religious truths proclaimed by believers, more recently such foundational principles have been asserted by those who claim that their race, class, gender, or other characteristic gives them immediate experience and thus insights inaccessible, perhaps even incomprehensible, to those outside the charmed—or maligned—circle.³⁷ How do we assess and adjudicate such competing claims, grounded in appeals to experience? The early pragmatists’

³⁶ Giles Gunn, *Thinking across the American Grain: Ideology, Intellect, and the New Pragmatism* (Chicago, 1992), 112–13. For James’s draft of the opening of his Gifford lectures in Edinburgh, the basis for *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, see Perry, *Thought and Character of William James*, II, 328–29.

³⁷ For an incisive discussion from an implicitly pragmatist perspective, see David A. Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York, 1995).

concept of truth is crucial not only because it acknowledges those appeals but because, in its ethical and political dimensions, it offers a method for evaluating such claims. It thus provides a way of attempting to negotiate differences that might otherwise seem irreconcilable. That pragmatic method is democracy.

Ethics and Politics

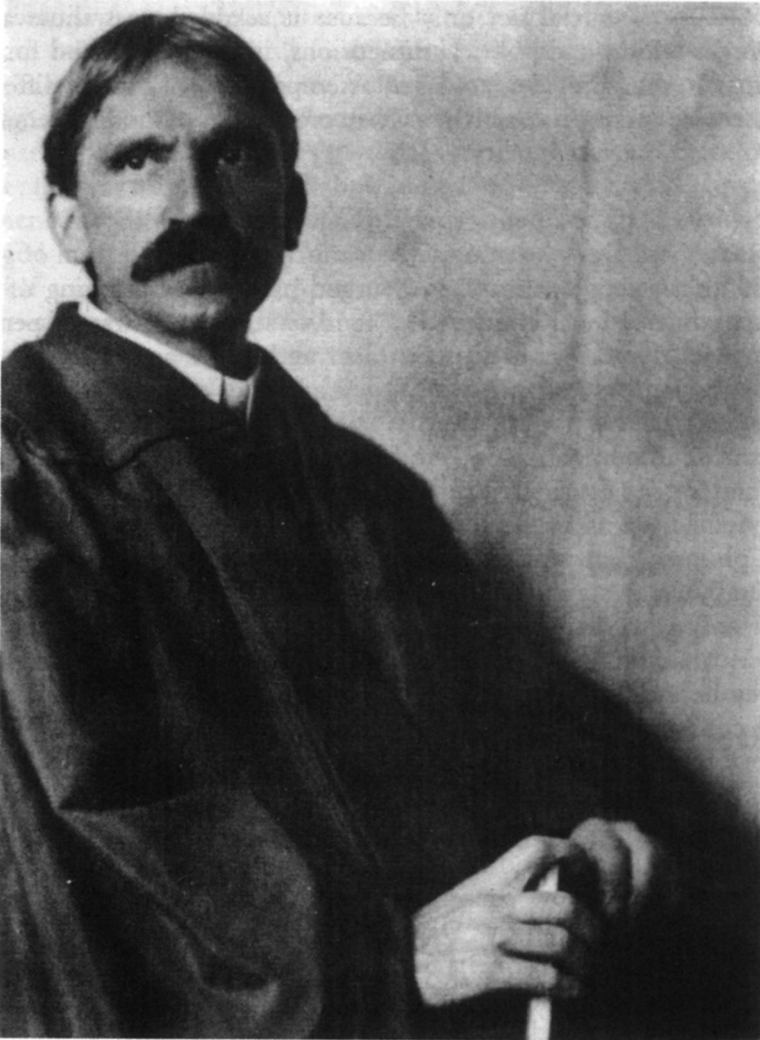
For both James and Dewey democracy was much more than a form of government or a set of legal arrangements. Dewey urged us to stop “thinking of democracy as something institutional and external” and to see it as “a way of personal life,” to realize that “democracy is a moral ideal and so far as it becomes a fact is a moral fact.” In James’s words, “democracy is a kind of religion,” and for pragmatic reasons “we are bound not to admit its failure.” Such “faiths and utopias are the noblest exercise of human reason,” and we must not surrender them to cynicism.³⁸

James and Dewey considered their pragmatism inseparable from their commitment to democracy as an ethical ideal. Both believed that their challenge to inherited philosophical dualisms and absolutes, their conception of truth as fluid and culturally created, and their belief that all experience is meaningful were consistent only with democracy, specifically with the principles of social equality and individual autonomy. The ideals of equality and autonomy appealed to James and Dewey because of their open-endedness and flexibility. They did not entail particular conceptions of the good life for all people at all times, although they did rule out fixed and hierarchical social systems sustained by appeals to allegedly universal truths that all members of the society must embrace.

For appeals to universal truths, James and Dewey substituted a process of inquiry that was both democratic and scientific. Dewey’s enthusiasm for science is often misinterpreted as a narrow concern with technique to the exclusion of ethical considerations; to the contrary, Dewey valued the scientific method because it embodied an ethical commitment to open-ended inquiry wherein human values shaped the selection of questions, the formulation of hypotheses, and the evaluation of results. Dewey conceived of the ideal scientific community as a democratically organized, truth-seeking group of independent thinkers who tested their results against pragmatic standards, but those standards always reflected moral, rather than narrowly technical, considerations.

This unifying thread connects all of Dewey’s writings. In *The Study of Ethics* (1894), he insisted that knowing cannot be separated from valuing. The qualitative and social dimensions of experience make pure “objectivity” or “neutrality” impossible for human beings. In *The Public and Its Problems* he cautioned that “the glorification of ‘pure’ science” is but “a rationalization of an escape” because knowledge “is wholly a moral matter.” In *Experience and Nature* he stressed the moral and aesthetic dimension of experience, its qualitative as well as cognitive

³⁸ John Dewey, “Creative Democracy—The Task before Us,” in Dewey, *Later Works*, ed. Boydston, XIV, 228; William James, *The Social Value of the College Bred*, in William James, *Writings, 1902–1910*, ed. Bruce Kuklick (New York, 1987), 1245.



John Dewey c. 1912. From the 1890s through the 1940s, Dewey insisted that pragmatism provides a philosophical foundation for democracy.

He saw democracy as an ethical ideal extending beyond politics to all forms of economic and social interaction.

*Courtesy the Dewey Papers, Morris Library,
Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.*

aspect. In *Art and Experience* (1934), Dewey tried once more to clarify the position he defended throughout his career: Although champions as well as critics have interpreted naturalism as “disregard of all values that cannot be reduced to the physical and animal,” for Dewey “nature signifies nothing less than the whole complex of the results of the interaction of man, with his memories and hopes,

understanding and desire, with that world to which one-sided philosophy confines 'nature.'" ³⁹ Dewey judged the notion of "value-free" inquiry abhorrent as well as incoherent.

An address Dewey wrote for a banquet celebrating his eightieth birthday in 1939 states clearly and concisely the connection between his devotion to democracy and his philosophical conceptions of experience and ethics. Democracy, Dewey proclaimed, is "a way of life" that requires "faith in the capacity of human beings for intelligent judgment and action if proper [that is, democratic] conditions are furnished." To those who judged this faith naïve or utopian, Dewey insisted that it derives neither from metaphysics nor from wishful thinking but from the everyday experience of neighbors and friends gathering "to converse freely with one another. Intolerance, abuse, calling of names because of differences of opinion about religion or politics or business, as well as because of differences of race, color, wealth or degree of culture are treason to the democratic way of life." Anything that blocks communication engenders "antagonistic sects and factions" and undermines democracy. Legal guarantees—the focus of late-twentieth-century efforts to assure the right to free expression—are inadequate when "the give and take of ideas, facts, experiences, is choked by mutual suspicion, by abuse, by fear and hatred." For Dewey democracy required more than securing individual rights. It required faith in the possibility of resolving disputes through uncoerced deliberation, "as cooperative undertakings," instead of having one party suppress the other overtly through violence or more subtly through ridicule or intimidation. If such cooperation is impossible, then deliberative democracy as Dewey conceived of it is impossible. ⁴⁰

The emphasis on difference in the contemporary United States does not discredit Dewey's pragmatism, as some writers unfamiliar with his ideas assume; instead it echoes Dewey's own view of diversity. Achieving the cooperation necessary for social life requires "giving differences a chance to show themselves," he insisted. "The expression of difference is not only a right of the other persons but is a means of enriching one's own life-experience." Dewey's conception of democracy involved enriching the range of choices, and expanding the possibilities of finding different kinds of fulfillment, for all persons. Democracy does not impose authority from above but relies instead on "the process of experience as end and as means," as the source of authority and the means of choosing among and testing alternative directions. This process is continuous because its terminus cannot be designated, or even imagined, in advance of democratic social experimentation to create "a freer and more humane experience in which all share and to which all contribute." Dewey harbored no secret desire to bring all diversity to an end under the shelter of a snug but stifling consensus: to the contrary, a democracy without difference was a contradiction in terms, because he believed passionately that all individuals,

³⁹ John Dewey, *The Study of Ethics: A Syllabus*, in John Dewey, *The Early Works, 1882–1898*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (5 vols., Carbondale, 1967–1972), IV, 339; Dewey, *Public and Its Problems*, 344–45; Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 74–76; and John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, in Dewey, *Later Works*, ed. Boydston, X, 156.

⁴⁰ Dewey, "Creative Democracy—The Task before Us," 224–30, esp. 226–28.

in their uniqueness, make different contributions to democratic life. The richer the mix, the richer the culture that results from the interaction.⁴¹

Dewey's commitment to pluralism and diversity, to the recognition and cultivation of difference, and to the potential of communication to engender cooperation and clarify, if not resolve, disputes illustrates how wrongheaded is the familiar charge, which Dewey explicitly and repeatedly denied, that his emphasis on a community of inquiry reveals the latent elitism of pragmatism. Throughout the 1920s, against behaviorists and empirical social scientists who invoked his pragmatism on behalf of their efforts at social engineering, he insisted on expanding the "community of cooperative effort and truth." In *Individualism Old and New* (1929) he elaborated the argument advanced in *The Public and Its Problems* concerning the folly of relying on elites. He admitted that some communities of scientists, "small groups having a somewhat technical ability," did indeed illustrate how the process of inquiry might work, yet he insisted that such groups reveal only "a possibility in the present—one of many possibilities that are a challenge to expansion, and not a ground for retreat and contraction" from democracy. Unfortunately, interpreters of Dewey's ideas sometimes ignore such explicit arguments and assert that there must be something antidemocratic about communities of inquiry, even those that are open, expanding, and democratically constituted.⁴²

Although it has long been common to contrast James's individualism to Dewey's commitment to social action, their differences are subtler. They reflect in part the simple fact of James's death in 1910 and Dewey's growing involvement in the distinctive political controversies of the following four decades, rather than any fundamental inconsistency in their political orientations. Both conceived of lived experience as irreducibly social and meaning-laden; both frequently invoked democracy as the social ideal consistent with their pragmatism. James attributed the "unhealthiness" of labor relations, for example, to "the fact that one-half of our fellow-countrymen remain entirely blind to the internal significance of the lives of the other half." Instead of entering imaginatively into their ways of life—to say nothing of entering into constructive, democratic dialogue with them—"everybody remains outside of everybody else's sight." In addition to endorsing deliberative, or discursive, democracy—defined by the creative potential of egalitarian dialogue, not merely democratic institutions or universal rights to participate in political activity—James also championed what would now be designated multiculturalism. His ideal of a democratic culture, grounded on his conception of

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 228–30. On this dimension of Dewey's pragmatism, see also Hilary Putnam, "A Reconsideration of Deweyan Democracy," in *Pragmatism in Law and Society*, ed. Michael Brint and William Weaver (Boulder, 1991), 217–43. On the importance of pluralism to pragmatism, see also Putnam, *Words and Life*, ed. Conant, 194–95.

⁴² John Dewey, *Individualism Old and New*, in Dewey, *Later Works*, ed. Boydston, V, 115. The assumption that knowledge inevitably masks and imposes power often underlies such charges of elitism. From a Deweyan perspective one might concede the point and ask what alternative is preferable to stipulating that democratic principles should shape the process of inquiry and the formation of those communities that evaluate knowledge claims. Particularly for scholars, the refusal to admit that there are better and worse—more and less democratic—ways to generate knowledge is self-defeating. See the judicious review essay: Thomas Bender, "Social Science, Objectivity, and Pragmatism," *Annals of Scholarship*, 9 (Winter–Spring 1992), 183–97.

immediate experience and his commitment to pragmatism, “commands us to tolerate, respect, and indulge” those “harmlessly interested and happy in their own ways, however unintelligible these may be to us.” His creed was “Hands off: neither the whole of truth nor the whole of good is revealed to any single observer.” The political consequence of James’s pragmatism was “the well-known democratic respect for the sacredness of individuality,” the “tolerance of whatever is not itself intolerant.”⁴³

The early pragmatists’ arguments for democracy helped inspire generations of social and political activists ranging from Progressive reformers through New Dealers to members of the civil rights movement and the New Left. In the debates that rage among contemporary thinkers concerning the political consequences of pragmatism, the democratic convictions of James and Dewey have slipped out of focus because the political ideas of linguistic pragmatists such as Rorty have attracted so much attention. Because Rorty’s version of liberalism appeals to many Americans disillusioned with politics or cynical about its prospects, it is important to be clear about the similarities and the differences between his ideas and those of the early pragmatists. Rorty has repeatedly characterized the culture and institutions of liberal democracy as a precious achievement and endorsed the social-democratic program that has been at the heart of pragmatic political activism since the days of James and Dewey, or Rauschenbusch and Croly. But, unlike James and Dewey, he denies that pragmatism provides any philosophical foundation for such a politics—or that we need one.

Rorty nevertheless characterizes pragmatism as “a philosophy of solidarity rather than despair.” He tries to reassure his readers that we need not discard our beliefs about the natural world, or our moral and political values, just because we realize we have made them, rather than found them. Our faith in science, like our other faiths, helps us get things done, and it will continue to help us even after we have stopped trying to “divinize” it—likewise our democratic faith. In the absence of foundations, Rorty recommends that we look instead to history—but from an idiosyncratic, even antihistorical vantage point. We must accept “our inheritance from, and our conversation with, our fellow-humans as our only source of guidance.” This is our defense against the nihilism that those who believe in universal principles fear will follow from pragmatism. “Our identification with our commu-

⁴³ William James, *Talks to Teachers on Psychology; And to Students on Some of Life’s Ideals* (1899; New York, 1958), 188–89, 169, 19–20. On James’s tragic sensibility and Dewey’s indomitable democratic faith, see Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory*, 115–95, 340–415. On James’s politics, cf. the contrasting emphases of Deborah J. Coon, “‘One Moment in the World’s Salvation’: Anarchism and the Radicalization of William James,” *Journal of American History*, 83 (June 1996), 70–99; and George Cotkin, *William James: Public Philosopher* (Baltimore, 1990). On Dewey’s democratic ideas, cf. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*; and Alan Ryan, *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism* (New York, 1995). For the long-standard view of the differences between James’s and Dewey’s outlooks, see James Campbell, *The Community Reconstructs: The Meaning of Pragmatic Social Thought* (Urbana, 1992). For criticism of Dewey, George Herbert Mead, and James Tufts for trying to moderate class conflict and to translate their Protestantism and republicanism into a reformism supposedly ill suited to the industrial era, see Andrew Feffer, *The Chicago Pragmatists and American Progressivism* (Ithaca, 1993). An imaginative analysis that credits Dewey and especially James with realizing that corporate capitalism ushered in possibilities for a “postmodern subjectivity” is James Livingston, *Pragmatism and the Political Economy of Cultural Revolution, 1850–1940* (Chapel Hill, 1994).

nity—our society, our political tradition, our intellectual heritage—is heightened when we see this community as *ours* rather than *nature's*, *shaped* rather than *found*, one among many which men have made.” If we were to surrender our aspirations to certainty, he writes, we “would regard the justification of liberal society simply as a matter of historical comparison with other attempts at social organization.” At first glance historians might find Rorty’s argument intriguing: He urges us to “try *not* to want something which stands beyond history and institutions” because “a belief can still regulate action” even if we realize it is “caused by nothing deeper than contingent historical circumstances.” In Rorty’s “liberal utopia,” the claim that there is “something that stands beyond history” has become unintelligible.”⁴⁴

Rorty urges us to discard attempts to provide philosophical props to hold up our humanitarian and democratic values, to face unblinkingly the contingency of our sense of self and our commitments, and to adopt a posture of ironic distance from whatever we now accept as our “final vocabulary.” The hero of Rorty’s “liberal utopia” can “slough off the Enlightenment vocabulary” of rational foundations underlying universal principles and strive simply to avoid inflicting pain on others, a taboo Rorty simply posits as self-evident to anyone who has inherited our tradition. Having given up his own adolescent attempts to “hold reality and justice in a single vision,” Rorty has become convinced that “an intricately-textured collage of private narcissism and public pragmatism” may be our best hope for synthesizing love and justice. We can no longer aim for more than what Alan Ryan calls “welfare-capitalism-with-a-human face,” Rorty has written. Terms such as “capitalist economy” and “bourgeois culture” have become meaningless since 1989; in the absence of any contrasting socialist alternatives, “we Western leftists” should “*banalize* our vocabulary of political deliberation.” Taking that advice to heart, Rorty claims that our political needs boil down to “security” and “sympathy” or, as he put it, “mere niceness” to all “featherless bipeds.” Such formulations, evidently calculated to infuriate Rorty’s earnest critics, no doubt account for much of his notoriety.⁴⁵

Rorty contends that philosophy can no longer offer much guidance to those interested in ethics and politics. For him liberal democratic cultures are simply “a product of time and chance,” “an accidental coincidence,” or “a fortunate happenstance,” and the historical emergence of the United States was “an admirable result” that occurred “just by good luck.” Rorty’s devil-may-care view of history as caprice and his intentionally banal ethic of “niceness” contrast strikingly with James’s stance in such essays as “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” and Dewey’s historical analyses of the connections between theories of ethics and

⁴⁴ Richard Rorty, “Solidarity or Objectivity,” in *Post-Analytic Philosophy*, ed. Rajchman and West, 15–16; Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, 166; Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York, 1989), xvi, 53, 189–90.

⁴⁵ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 53; Rorty, “Trotsky and the Wild Orchids,” 140–53; Rorty, *Philosophical Papers*, I, 210; Richard Rorty, “The Intellectuals at the End of Socialism,” *Yale Review*, 80 (April 1992), 1–16; Richard Rorty, “Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality,” *ibid.*, 81 (Oct. 1993), 1–20.

political organization, between personal responsibility and social justice. Rorty claims that Dewey's pragmatism "did not tell you what purposes to have; its ethics is situational at best."⁴⁶ That could be said generally of James as well. But as Robert Westbrook and I argue, Dewey challenged prevailing systems of ethics and conventional liberal and socialist political theories, but he neither endorsed the judgment of many analytic philosophers that ethics and political philosophy are obsolete nor accepted anything like Rorty's advice that urging sympathy is the best we can do.

James and Dewey both believed that demolishing earlier arguments about ethics and politics cleared the way for critical analysis of personal freedom and responsibility, rather than bringing such discourse to an end. As Dewey put it in 1940, in a statement that indicates the gulf separating him from Rorty, "any theory of activity in social and moral matters, liberal or otherwise, which is not grounded in a comprehensive philosophy, seems to me to be only a projection of arbitrary personal preferences." When Rorty writes that "we do not need philosophy for social criticism" or contends that "Dewey, like Nietzsche, altered our conception of reason . . . in a way that leaves no room for the idea that democratic ideals can be supported by invoking ahistorical 'demands of reason,'" he neglects Dewey's own "comprehensive philosophy." More accurate is Rorty's observation of the difference between his hypothetical Dewey and the historical Dewey, who cared passionately about demonstrating the connection between experience and the ethical and political ideal of democracy. Historicizing reason, a project many of James's and Dewey's late-twentieth-century admirers share with them, need not culminate in Rorty's rigid divisions of language from experience and of the private from the public sphere, nor in his dismissal of ethics and politics as proper subjects for philosophers, nor, as I will argue in my conclusion, in his disregard for the careful and critical study of how and why our tradition has taken its distinctive shape. Rorty's position is insufficiently pragmatic. Although he considers himself a partisan of social democratic reforms and criticizes academic cultural politics, his liberal ironism encourages selfishness, cynicism, and resignation by undercutting efforts to confront the hard facts of poverty and greed.⁴⁷

Varieties of Contemporary Pragmatism

Numerous contemporary thinkers have invoked pragmatism to bolster a wide range of political arguments; their contributions to debates about race, gender, and law

⁴⁶ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 22, 37, 68; Rorty, "Dewey between Hegel and Darwin," 65, 64.

⁴⁷ John Dewey, "Nature in Experience," in Dewey, *Later Works*, ed. Boydston, XIV, 150; Borradori, *American Philosopher*, trans. Crocitto, 117; Rorty, "Dewey between Hegel and Darwin," 68. On the contrast between Rorty's ideas about history, religion, ethics, and politics and those of other pragmatists, see James T. Kloppenberg, "Democracy and Disenchantment: From Weber and Dewey to Habermas and Rorty," in *Modernist Impulses in the Human Sciences*, ed. Ross, 69–90; and James T. Kloppenberg, "Knowledge and Belief in American Public Life," in *Knowledge and Belief: Enlightenment Traditions and Modern Religious Thought*, ed. William M. Shea and Peter A. Huff (New York, 1995), 27–51. On the connection between Dewey's ideas about ethics and his commitment to democracy, see Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*. See also Richard Rorty, "Intellectuals in Politics," *Dissent*, 38 (Fall 1991), 483–90.

make clear how many distinct versions of pragmatism are alive and which versions differ markedly from the ideas of the early pragmatists. Cornel West has constructed a loose narrative tradition connecting James and Dewey with Emerson, Du Bois, and such thinkers as C. Wright Mills, Sidney Hook, and Reinhold Niebuhr. In addition to accurately associating antifoundationalism and democratic sensibility with American pragmatists, West characterizes them as champions of those whom the theorist of anticolonialism Frantz Fanon calls "the wretched of the earth." West distances his position from Rorty's pragmatism, which he judges too narrowly focused on language and insufficiently attuned to the pressing need for political activism. "The distinctive appeal of American pragmatism in our postmodern moment," West writes, "is its unashamedly moral emphasis and its unequivocally ameliorative impulse." Although lack of precision and inattention to detail make West's *The American Evasion of Philosophy* problematic as a history of philosophy, it is a spirited and provocative piece of pragmatic cultural criticism.⁴⁸

An ardent admirer of Dewey, West nevertheless argues that Dewey's pragmatism must be supplemented with the tragic and religious sensibilities of Niebuhr ("the vertical dimension"), the awareness of class of Karl Marx and Antonio Gramsci, and a sharper sensitivity to issues of race and gender (the "horizontal dimension") than the early pragmatists showed.⁴⁹ In recent years, as he has attained celebrity status of a sort neither James nor Dewey had to endure, West has become less an academic philosopher than a "jazz freedom fighter" whose "prophetic pragmatism" attempts to translate a philosophical perspective descended from James and Dewey, a religious awareness of evil and finitude, and a radical democratic politics into the idioms of postmodern academic discourse, black spirituality, and hip-hop. Rorty has complained that West's phrase "prophetic pragmatism" sounds as odd as the phrase "charismatic trash pick up."⁵⁰ West's cheerleading seems pointless to Rorty since he believes we cannot bridge the gap between the rich possibilities available to us in private life and Dewey's imagined "great community," a now-meaningless utopia we cannot envision on the flattened landscape of welfare capitalism. Between the negative freedoms individuals enjoy in a liberal democracy and the promise of an even richer form of life within a more radically democratic public sphere—the "positive freedom" that Dewey embraced in *Liberalism and*

⁴⁸ Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison, 1989), 4.

⁴⁹ Cornel West, "Politics of American Neo-Pragmatism," in *Post-Analytic Philosophy*, ed. Rajchman and West, 259–72. On West's account of American pragmatism and his "prophetic pragmatism," see Kloppenberg, "Knowledge and Belief in American Public Life." Fine studies of philosophy, religion, and ethics from pragmatist perspectives are Henry Samuel Levinson, *The Religious Investigations of William James* (Chapel Hill, 1981); and Steven C. Rockefeller, *John Dewey: Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism* (New York, 1991). For a "modest pragmatism" that does not rely explicitly on Dewey but echoes many of his ideas, see Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics after Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents* (Boston, 1988).

⁵⁰ Cornel West, *Race Matters* (1993; New York, 1994), 150–51. For Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s description of West as "the preeminent African-American intellectual of our time," see Jack E. White, "Philosopher with a Mission," *Time*, June 7, 1993, pp. 60–62; for another generous assessment of West, see Robert Boynton, "The New Intellectuals," *Atlantic Monthly*, 275 (March 1995), 53–70. Compare the pyrotechnic display of *ressentiment* by Leon Wieseltier, "All and Nothing at All," *New Republic*, March 6, 1995, pp. 31–36. For responses from readers (including Rorty), see "Decline of Cornel West," *ibid.*, April 3, 1995, pp. 6–7. Richard Rorty, review of *The American Evasion of Philosophy* by Cornel West, *Transition*, 52 (1991), 75–77.

Social Action—falls a chasm. To Rorty, our century illustrates the cruelty that must result from attempts to force community where there is conflict. But to West (and others drawn toward Dewey's ideal), it is essential that pragmatists continue striving for the democratic transformation of everyday experience.

Like West, many feminists endorse pragmatism as an alternative to the sterility of analytic philosophy and the nihilism of post-structuralism and as a lever to dislodge entrenched ways of thinking. Against dueling conceptions of fixed "male" and "female" natures, feminist pragmatists instead call for an open-ended, anti-essentialist, experimental approach to gender. In a special issue of the journal *Hypatia* published in 1993, Charlene Haddock Seigfried, who has written extensively on William James, has brought together works by historians, philosophers, and political theorists exploring the potential of pragmatism for feminism.⁵¹ Such early pragmatists as James, Dewey, and George Herbert Mead considered pragmatism a weapon in the campaign against restrictive gender roles for the same reason they considered it a weapon in the campaigns against imperialism and racism and for democracy. They allied with feminist activists and championed feminist scholars such as Jessie Taft because their conception of pragmatism extended beyond language to an awareness of the experience of people who were denied choices, or unnecessarily restricted in their choices, by prevailing assumptions and patterns of social relations.⁵²

The pervasiveness of power that many contemporary feminists emphasize has led some, notably Joan Scott, to resist the concept of "experience" because they fear it can lead us away from historicism toward a new foundationalism. But instead of dismissing the concept as Rorty does, Scott recommends examining how experience is said to yield unassailable knowledge, a strategy resembling that of James and Dewey.⁵³ Similarly, other feminists resist the ideas of a community of inquiry or a deliberative democracy because they fear such ideas valorize white

⁵¹ Charlene Haddock Seigfried, *Chaos and Context: A Study in William James* (Athens, Ohio, 1978); Charlene Haddock Seigfried, *William James's Radical Reconstruction of Philosophy* (Albany, 1990). Seigfried brought together a group of essays with her introduction, Charlene Haddock Seigfried, "The Missing Perspective: Feminist Pragmatism," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 27 (Fall 1991), 405–74. And see the special issue "Feminism and Pragmatism," ed. Charlene Haddock Seigfried, *Hypatia*, 8 (Spring 1993). There are no specifically pragmatist or feminist doctrines about philosophical or political issues, according to Richard Rorty, "Feminism, Ideology, and Deconstruction: A Pragmatist View," *ibid.*, 96–103.

⁵² The special issue "Feminism and Pragmatism" contains essays on the importance of experience for early feminist pragmatists and responses to contemporary linguistic pragmatists. See especially Jane Upin, "Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Instrumentalism beyond Dewey," *Hypatia*, 8 (Spring 1993), 38–63; M. Regina Leffers, "Pragmatists Jane Addams and John Dewey Inform the Ethic of Care," *ibid.*, 64–77; Gregory Fernando Pappas, "Dewey and Feminism: The Affective and Relationships in Dewey's Ethics," *ibid.*, 78–95; Timothy V. Kaufman-Osborn, "Teasing Feminist Sense from Experience," *ibid.*, 124–44; Mitchell Aboulafia, "Was George Herbert Mead a Feminist?," *ibid.*, 145–58; Jane Duran, "The Intersection of Feminism and Pragmatism," *ibid.*, 159–71; and Lynn Hankinson Nelson, "A Question of Evidence," *ibid.*, 172–89. For documents illuminating Jessie Taft's pragmatist feminism and demonstrating James's commitment to feminism in practice, see "Archive," *ibid.*, 215–33.

⁵³ For a persuasive case for historicizing the concept of experience and examining critically all appeals to experience that resembles the perspective I call pragmatic hermeneutics, see Joan Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry*, 17 (Summer 1991), 773–97. Cf. James T. Kloppenberg, "Objectivity and Historicism: A Century of American Historical Writing," *American Historical Review*, 94 (Oct. 1989), 1011–30. For a feminist perspective on the uses of the concept of experience, see Lorraine Code, "Who Cares? The Poverty of Objectivism for a Moral Epistemology," *Annals of Scholarship*, 9 (Winter–Spring 1992), 1–18.

male norms of rationality and are thus inevitably exclusionary. Recent work by pragmatist feminists suggests both how historicizing experience enables us to move beyond language without positing a new foundationalism concerning "women's ways of knowing" or "rational deliberation" and how to acknowledge power relations without positing a new essentialism about "difference" and "power." Pragmatist legal theorists such as Joan Williams and Margaret Jane Radin argue that profound conflicts, for example, those between women who work inside and outside the home and between women who support and who oppose abortion rights, are powerfully shaped by deep but seldom recognized cultural fissures concerning the meanings of freedom and responsibility for men and women. Those divisions can be traced to the nineteenth-century doctrine of separate spheres, unfortunately resurrected as an indirect consequence of early-twentieth-century feminist essentialism. The ironic result was a reinforcing of stereotypes of home and mother that undercut feminists' efforts to loosen gender roles and broaden women's opportunities. Reinscribing a comparable essentialism under the banner of "difference," as some contemporary feminists do, merely resuscitates older versions of separate spheres and notions of privileged knowledge that exclude new categories of outsiders rather than opening doors of understanding that might lead to tolerance or even, potentially, mutual respect. From an explicitly pragmatist perspective, Williams challenges currently fashionable notions of female as well as male identity and the ostensible predispositions of women for "relationships" and "caring" and of men for "justice" and "rights." Radin argues that pragmatist feminists should "reject static, timeless conceptions of reality" in favor of "contextuality, expressed in the commitment of Dewey and James to facts and their meaning in human life, and narrative, expressed in James's unfolding 'epic' universe and Dewey's historicism." Echoing West's challenge to Rorty's narrowing of pragmatism to language, Radin concludes in a Deweyan spirit: "If we are pragmatists, we will recognize the inescapability of perspective and the indissolubility of thought and action," insights that can help feminists avoid rigid and counterproductive dogmas.⁵⁴

Other legal theorists share Williams's and Radin's enthusiasm for pragmatism as a way of resolving the battles pitting those affiliated with the critical legal studies movement on the left or with the law and economics movement on the right against those attempting to keep alive notions of original intent as the standard for interpreting the Constitution. From the perspective of such legal pragmatists, much legal reasoning—at both ends of the political spectrum—is blinkered by abstract and absolute principles from seeing how the law has functioned in practice in American culture.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Joan Williams, "Gender Wars: Selfless Women in the Republic of Choice," *New York University Law Review*, 66 (Dec. 1991), 1559–1634. See also Joan Williams, "Deconstructing Gender," *Michigan Law Review*, 87 (Feb. 1989), 797–845; and Joan Williams, "Virtue and Oppression," *Nomos: Yearbook of the American Society of Political and Legal Philosophy*, ed. John W. Chapman and William A. Galston (New York, 1992), 309–37. Margaret Jane Radin, "The Pragmatist and the Feminist," in *Pragmatism in Law and Society*, ed. Brint and Weaver, 127–53.

⁵⁵ See Joan Williams, "Critical Legal Studies: The Death of Transcendence and the Rise of the New Langdells," *New York University Law Review*, 62 (June 1987), 429–96.

The rise of legal pragmatism may seem surprising. The goal of the legal process is to find truth. Juries are instructed to decide on the basis of the evidence presented; the effects of decisions experienced by defendants and plaintiffs are concrete and determinate. The law might thus seem an especially inhospitable place for a linguistic pragmatism that treats all disputes as ultimately rhetorical contests.

Instead, law offers one of the liveliest arenas of debate about the consequences of pragmatism, and one that should be of particular interest to historians. The jurist Richard Posner, the leading member of the law and economics movement, believes that pragmatists' antiessentialism and consequentialism are compatible with his commitment to "the idea that the law should strive to support competitive markets." He reduces legal pragmatism to the bare minimum: "a rejection of a concept of law as grounded in permanent principles and realized in logical manipulation of those principles, and a determination to use law as an instrument for social ends." For Posner pragmatism is nothing but a method; substantive changes—from attempts to reinstate white supremacy to commitments to securing racial equality—result not from careful reasoning but only from "a sudden deeply emotional switch from one non-rational cluster of beliefs to another that is no more (often less) rational." Holmes at his most cynical could hardly have put the point more bluntly. Posner's pragmatism, like Rorty's, thus appears to consist of nothing more than antifoundationalism.⁵⁶

But the protean critic Stanley Fish, in his recent incarnation as a legal theorist, points out that Posner embraces pragmatism as a fig leaf to conceal economic dogmas concerning market efficiency as absolute as Kant's transcendental aesthetic or Marx's notion of the proletariat. Fish contrasts both Posner's faith in the market and Rorty's faith in strong poets to his own pragmatism, which really does lead nowhere. "Once pragmatism becomes a program"—*any* program, Fish insists—"it turns into the essentialism it challenges."⁵⁷

Fish's linguistic turn carries him even further away from Dewey than does Rorty's. From Fish's perspective, "the law's job" is "to give us ways of re-describing limited partisan programs so that they can be presented as the natural outcomes of abstract interpersonal imperatives." As humans we cannot escape partisanship or perspective; they are inevitable conditions of our existence. For Fish the pursuit of disinterestedness, James's aspiration to tolerance, and Dewey's desire for a deliberative democracy are all chimerical; only the admission that one's own point of view remains partial is consistent with pragmatism. The very pretense of "reasoned exposition"—in judges' opinions or scholarship—is just rhetoric, "impelled by a vision as partisan and contestable as that informing any rhetoric that dares accept that name."⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Richard Posner, "What Has Pragmatism to Offer Law?," in *Pragmatism in Law and Society*, ed. Brint and Weaver, 42, 44. See also Richard Posner, *The Problems of Jurisprudence* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), 150.

⁵⁷ Stanley Fish, "Almost Pragmatism: The Jurisprudence of Richard Posner, Richard Rorty, and Ronald Dworkin," in *Pragmatism in Law and Society*, ed. Brint and Weaver, 63.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 71, 56. At an interdisciplinary conference on pragmatism held in November 1995 at the City University of New York, Fish was chosen to provide the closing remarks, which allowed him to offer as the last word on the subject his version of pragmatism—which might fairly be summarized as "anything goes." Although Bernstein, Putnam, and Westbrook participated in the conference, discussion centered on the ideas of thinkers such as Rorty and Fish. That focus reflects current academic debate; this essay attempts to demonstrate the

But even Fish slips. He concedes that his antifoundationalism finally has a foundation, the concept of "difference," which, he asserts, "is not a remediable state; it is the bottom line fact of the human condition, the condition of being a finite creature." Although the challenge to the law's generality seems jarring, Fish's proclamation of difference resonates with the pleas of many voices claiming to speak for the marginalized in American discourse today. For James and Dewey, appreciating the inevitability of perspective made pragmatism necessary; it was not—as it is for Fish—the last word. From the realization of difference came the necessity of democracy. This more robust conception of the relation between pragmatism and legal theory is reflected in the writings of those legal theorists, such as Cass Sunstein, who consider the democratic commitments of James and Dewey integral to the pragmatist project.⁵⁹

After surveying the competing versions of pragmatism and postmodernism in legal theory, Sunstein recently concluded that "the valuable postmodern claims tend to be not postmodern at all, but instead part of the philosophical heritage of pragmatism," which unsettled formalism without wallowing in the nihilist resignation that all effort is futile in the face of power. Pragmatism insists that all our categories, legal and otherwise, are constructed. This awareness marks "the beginning of the effort to construct our categories well, by reference to our goals and needs, and not as a reason to abandon the whole enterprise." For Sunstein—as for Dewey and for the legal realists who earlier in the twentieth century embraced pragmatism as the philosophy informing their jurisprudence—deliberative democracy provides the standard for judging the adequacy of our ways of determining those goals and needs.⁶⁰

This crucial argument indicates why democracy is uniquely consistent with pragmatism. As Putnam has accurately pointed out, Dewey offered an "*epistemological justification of democracy*." Dewey used epistemology to ground democracy, conceived as the testing of hypotheses by free individuals participating in the unfettered pursuit of truth. In our day such a conception of democracy must remain open-ended because we, unlike seventeenth- and eighteenth-century champions of democracy, cannot claim to know what our final ends will be. Since we cannot answer in advance the questions "what are we?" and "how should we live?"—questions earlier democrats thought they could answer through reason or revela-

differences between linguistic pragmatism and the ideas of earlier pragmatists and to show what has been lost in the transformation.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 72. For versions of pragmatist legal theory more Deweyan than Rortyan (or Fishy), see especially: Thomas C. Grey, "What Good Is Legal Pragmatism?," in *Pragmatism in Law and Society*, ed. Brint and Weaver, 9–27; Cornel West, "The Limits of Neopragmatism," *ibid.*, 121–26; Radin, "Pragmatist and the Feminist," *ibid.*, 127–53; Joan C. Williams, "Rorty, Radicalism, Romanticism: The Politics of the Gaze," *ibid.*, 155–80; Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Civic Identity and the State," *ibid.*, 181–96; Martha Minow and Elizabeth V. Spelman, "In Context," *ibid.*, 247–73; Catharine Wells, "Situated Decisionmaking," *ibid.*, 275–93; and especially Putnam, "Reconsideration of Deweyan Democracy," *ibid.*, 217–43.

⁶⁰ Cass Sunstein, *The Partial Constitution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), 127. For criticism of Sunstein's program as reinstating the power of educated white male elites, see Robin West, "The Constitution of Reasons," *Michigan Law Review*, 92 (May 1994), 1409–37. Cf. James T. Kloppenberg, "Deliberative Democracy and Judicial Supremacy," *Law and History Review*, 13 (Fall 1995), 393–411. On the relation between pragmatism and legal realism, see Morton J. Horwitz, *The Transformation of American Law, 1870–1960: The Crisis of Legal Orthodoxy* (New York, 1992); and James T. Kloppenberg, "The Theory and Practice of Legal History," *Harvard Law Review*, 106 (April 1993), 1332–51.

tion—we must commit ourselves to continuing inquiry. Thus a pragmatist epistemology and ethics in the spirit of James and Dewey culminates necessarily in a democratic politics. In Putnam's words, which echo many similar proclamations in Dewey's work, "democracy is not just a form of social life among other workable forms of social life; it is the precondition for the full application of intelligence to the solution of social problems." It is the form of social life consistent with pragmatism.⁶¹

Pragmatism and Democracy

This view of the relation between pragmatism and democracy, which intellectual historians have been urging now for a decade, helps explain the resurgence of interest in pragmatism. Now that alternative ideals appear either discredited or impossible, democracy has emerged as a universally attractive norm. But in our multicultural and skeptical age, the case for democracy can no longer be established on the basis of self-evident truths about natural rights or arguments from religious doctrine that no longer command general assent. Is there a philosophical foundation on which democracy can rest at the end of the twentieth century? According to linguistic pragmatists such as Rorty and Fish and postmodernist theorists such as Foucault and Derrida, whose work has influenced much recent American critical theory, there is none. But the great strength of pragmatism as James and Dewey conceived of it, which historians more fully than analytic philosophers and law-seeking social scientists have recognized and demonstrated, lay in its denial of absolutes, its admission of uncertainty, and its resolute commitment to the continuing vitality of the ideal of democracy as a way of life.

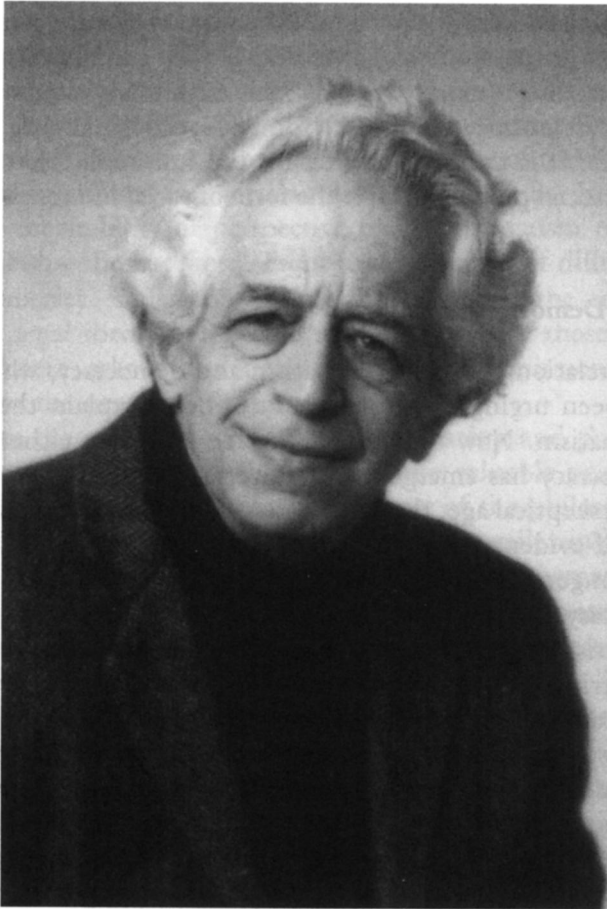
Indeed, pragmatism appeals to many American thinkers as a homegrown alternative to postmodernism that escapes the weaknesses of Enlightenment rationalism without surrendering our commitments to the values of autonomy and equality. Textualists such as Rorty and Fish consider pragmatism consistent with the perspective on language most often associated with Derrida. Others see it instead as a way of thinking open to the critical insights of postmodernism but resistant to cynicism and nihilism because of its conception of experience and its commitment to democracy.⁶²

In *The New Constellation* (1992), his most recent work, Bernstein faces the postmodernist challenge head on. Foucault and Derrida deny, in radically different ways, the possibility of reaching the democratic understandings that Dewey envisioned. Bernstein successfully undertakes the apparently unpromising task of finding in their writings ethical and political ideas consistent with his own pragmatism.⁶³ Bernstein shares postmodernists' commitments to antifoundationalism, fallibilism,

⁶¹ Putnam, "Reconsideration of Deweyan Democracy," 217. On the link between this "modern view of truth" and democracy, see also Putnam and Putnam, "Dewey's *Logic*," 198, 215–17; and Hilary Putnam in Borradori, *American Philosopher*, trans. Crocitto, 61–62.

⁶² I am grateful to Richard Fox, Robert Westbrook, and Joan Williams for conversations that helped sharpen my understanding of the issues discussed in this paragraph.

⁶³ Richard J. Bernstein, *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992).



Richard J. Bernstein c. 1992. Since the 1960s, Bernstein has elaborated the connections between the ideas of European thinkers, from Aristotle to Jürgen Habermas, and his Deweyan pragmatism, which emphasizes practical political activity.

Courtesy Richard J. Bernstein.

contingency, and pluralism, but he emphasizes the grounding of pragmatism in the phenomenology of experience. Because experience itself is social, Bernstein believes, our private selves cannot be cordoned off from our ethical responsibilities—even behind the shield of “difference.” We must always be prepared to expose our private passions and our personal choices to criticism and to engage in dialogue those who disagree with us, not because we believe that consensus will necessarily result, but because it is only through that process that we learn to understand one another and ourselves.

Bernstein’s Deweyan pragmatism pays attention to history, particularly the history of American democracy. Whereas Rorty asserts confidently that Americans who inherit “our tradition” share his own commitments to preserving individual privacy and refusing to inflict pain, Bernstein insists that the “breakdown of moral

and political consensus" is "the overwhelming 'fact' of contemporary life." Rorty blithely explains the emergence of American liberal democracy as a product of chance and contingency; his account ignores or trivializes the efforts of historical actors. Behind the values and institutions that Rorty and many postmodernists take for granted lie not only the now-disputed doctrine of natural rights and the notion of God's covenant with a chosen people but also the experiences of countless Americans who have struggled to nudge reality closer to the elusive ideal of democracy.⁶⁴

Another important reason for American scholars' renewed interest in pragmatism has been the widespread influence of Jürgen Habermas, arguably the most important philosopher of the late twentieth century, who now describes himself simply "as a good pragmatist." Habermas's affinity with American pragmatism will surprise some historians who know him only by reputation or are acquainted with only parts of his massive work. In his attempt to free Marxism from Marx's scientism and his fetishizing of the proletariat, Habermas has constructed a theory of communicative action centered on what he calls the ideal speech situation. His philosophy depends on ideas of the self constituted through social interaction and of undistorted communication as the paradigm for social democracy that can be traced directly to Mead and Dewey. Although it startles longtime partisans of American pragmatism, interest in these ideas among many younger scholars derives largely from the writings of Habermas.⁶⁵

Habermas too has distanced his understanding of pragmatism from Rorty's. In response to Rorty's jibe that he tends to "go transcendental," Habermas traces his conception of dialogue to "the *already* operative potential for rationality contained in the everyday practices of communication," which depend on our confidence in the validity of propositions, the rightness of norms, and the truthfulness or authenticity of those with whom we communicate. In ordinary experience, Habermas contends, we learn to recognize the (frequently unrealized) potential of dialogue. Dismissing as self-defeating the universal skepticism and resistance of some postmodernists, Habermas opts instead for the perspective of the early pragmatists: "I have for a long time identified myself with that radical democratic mentality which is present in the best American traditions and articulated in American pragmatism. This mentality takes seriously what appears to so-called radical thinkers [such as Foucault and Derrida] as so much reformist naiveté." He endorses Dewey's "'attempt to make concrete concerns with the daily problems of one's community' [an attempt that] expresses both a practice and an attitude."⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Bernstein, *New Constellation*, 326–39; for Bernstein's extended discussion of Rorty, see *ibid.*, 233–92. See also Richard J. Bernstein, *Philosophical Profiles: Essays in a Pragmatic Mode* (Cambridge, Eng., 1986), 260–72.

⁶⁵ Jürgen Habermas, "Questions and Counterquestions," in *Habermas and Modernity*, ed. Richard J. Bernstein (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), 198. On the strange career of pragmatism in Europe, see Hans Joas, *Pragmatism and Social Theory*, trans. Jeremy Gaines, Raymond Meyer, and Steven Minner (Chicago, 1993). Joas has also written the best study of George Herbert Mead: Hans Joas, *G. H. Mead: A Contemporary Re-examination of His Thought* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985). See the significant restatement of pragmatism in Hans Joas, *The Creativity of Action*, trans. Jeremy Gaines and Paul Keast (Chicago, forthcoming).

⁶⁶ Habermas, "Questions and Counterquestions," 196–98. Habermas traces refinements in his major works to insights derived from Mead's symbolic interactionism. See the new concluding chapter written for the English edition of Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen (1983; Cambridge, Mass., 1990), 195–202.

These controversies among contemporary pragmatists replay in a different key the familiar contrast between the images of mind as mirror and lamp, between the empiricism of the Enlightenment and the romantics' obsession with the creative potential of the artistic imagination. Their disagreements have helped focus debate and enabled other thinkers, such as Habermas, to clarify their own ideas by sharpening the distinctions between those who embrace linguistic pragmatism and those who see its inadequacies.⁶⁷

Our heightened awareness of the opacity and instability of language has complicated the question of how we should deal with experience, both as scholars and as citizens trying to reach agreement by exchanging views. So too, our heightened awareness of the historicity of our political institutions and our sensitivity to the social and cultural differences that complicate democratic dialogue make it hard for us to see how we can achieve the early pragmatists' political goals. Dewey recognized that he failed to provide clear, detailed political strategies for realizing his ideal of democratic life, and that fuzziness is one of the most troublesome aspects of his legacy. James's greater sensitivity to the uniqueness of each individual, to the difficulties of communicating the ineffable quality of lived experience, and to the tragic betrayal of some ethical ideal in every choice between irreconcilable conceptions of the good make his variety of pragmatic political thinking perhaps better suited to our own time. For as the experience of community has become ever rarer in the years since Alexis de Tocqueville first announced its endangered status, and as politics is more and more submerged beneath a flood of symbols, finding paths leading toward the creation of democratic communities seems more problematical than ever. History can help, if only we historians have the courage of our conventions.

History and Pragmatic Hermeneutics

Because the community of historians is a paradigmatic example of a pragmatic community of inquiry, distinguishing between pragmatism old and new matters profoundly to us. To "new" textualist pragmatists, history is no more than a linguistic exercise in which professional competitors strive to persuade readers by fashioning arguments that are judged successful according to various contingent and culturally specific criteria. For those "new" textualists, historians are writers of texts who have at their disposal a variety of tools, including but not limited to "evidence," "reason," "logic," and "common sense," all of which require quotation marks to signal their status as merely conventional notions. Canny textualists claim that all such tropes are rhetorical devices deployed (more or less shrewdly and

⁶⁷ See Bernstein, "Resurgence of Pragmatism"; and Richard J. Bernstein, "American Pragmatism: The Conflict of Narratives," in *Rorty and Pragmatism*, ed. Saatkamp, 54–67. Those contemporaries I have linked together as Deweyan critics of linguistic pragmatism do not necessarily share my perception of their similarities. See, for example, Robert Westbrook, "A New Pragmatism," *American Quarterly*, 45 (Sept. 1993), 438–44; and the spirited exchange: Giles Gunn, "Response to Robert Westbrook," *ibid.*, 46 (June 1994), 297–303; and Robert Westbrook, "Response to Giles Gunn," *ibid.*, 304–7.

self-consciously) in our discursive tradition to persuade others in our community and to achieve a certain standing within it. It is indeed difficult to see how history written by “new” pragmatists could contribute anything distinctively different from novels or poetry to helping us to understand experience, communicate with each other, or construct a more democratic culture.⁶⁸

To “old” pragmatists and to historians aligned (consciously or not) with James, Dewey, Putnam, and Bernstein, history retains its distinctive significance as the study of “a reality independent of us,” to use James’s phrase. We understand, as Putnam has argued, that our entire practice as historians—our “form of life,” to use Ludwig Wittgenstein’s phrase—depends on “our belief that truth and falsity ‘reach all the way to’ the past and ‘do not stop short.’” It is possible to admit, with Putnam, that this belief “*is part of a picture,*” but we should acknowledge, with him, that as historians “*the picture is essential to our lives.*” In Putnam’s words, “our *lives* show that we believe that there are more and less warranted beliefs about political contingencies, [and] about historical interpretations.” Were we to discard that way of looking at the past, we would have to discard our form of life.⁶⁹

Narratives capable of inspiring and justifying the sympathy Rorty prizes in “our tradition” already exist, and not only those of the novelists and poets that Rorty invokes. They include the narratives contained in sacred texts such as the Bible and secular democratic texts such as Judith Sargent Murray’s essay “On the Equality of the Sexes,” Abraham Lincoln’s Second Inaugural, and Martin Luther King Jr.’s speech at the 1963 March on Washington, narratives with powerful ethical and cultural significance transmitted by various traditions and by the community of professional historians. In a society that is ostensibly committed to the ideals of democracy but that falls tragically short in practice, the narratives we historians construct help to perpetuate disturbing and inspiring memories and thus to shape a culture more capable of approximating those ideals. Without historians’ commitment to a pragmatic test of truth, which involves subjecting our accounts of the past to rigorous testing by our scholarly community, we are locked into an exercise of textual creation that is arid and pointless.

In *That Noble Dream* (1988), Peter Novick concluded that because the ideal of pure scholarly objectivity has been exposed as chimerical (thanks in part to textualists such as Rorty and Fish), historians have divided into warring camps, unable and unwilling to reach agreement about standards of purpose and critical judgment. Although Novick acknowledged the attempts of Bernstein and Putnam,

⁶⁸ By their qualifications and caveats, two recent endorsements of textualism illustrate the lure of a more Deweyan pragmatism. On the necessity of giving some determinate shape to the past even if one abandons grand narratives, see Dorothy Ross, “Grand Narrative in American Historical Writing: From Romance to Uncertainty,” *American Historical Review*, 100 (June 1995), 675–77. For an argument that “strong misreading”—of the sort Rorty recommends and Derrida practices—“is altogether misplaced as historical reading and critique” because “history does not emulate creative writing and is constrained by different norms of inquiry,” see Dominick LaCapra, “History, Language, and Reading: Waiting for Crillon,” *ibid.*, 814, 816.

⁶⁹ James, *Pragmatism*, 111–12, 102–3; Putnam, *Words and Life*, ed. Conant, 276–77; Hilary Putnam, *The Many Faces of Realism* (LaSalle, 1987), 70–71.

and of historians such as Thomas Haskell and David Hollinger, to sustain a viable, mediating historical discourse that I have termed pragmatic hermeneutics, he curtly dismissed their effort: "as of the 1980s," he wrote, "hardly anybody was listening."⁷⁰ As the spirited debates over pragmatism examined here illustrate, interest in these ideas is now broad and deep. For historians especially, the early pragmatism of James and Dewey presents a sturdy alternative to untenable forms of both objectivism and relativism.

The pragmatic test we should apply to historical scholarship is the same test James and Dewey proposed a century ago: Is it consistent with the evidence we have of others' lived experience, and will it make a difference in our lives? If we historians conceive of our task as the early pragmatists did, we will write not only with an awareness of our rhetorical strategies but also with a desire to document and explain struggles over power in the American past and in the culture that surrounds us and makes our work possible and necessary. Waged by activists inspired by religious and political traditions, these hard-fought battles—and not just the important redescriptions, to use Rorty's preferred term, offered in literary and critical texts—made possible our culture's painfully limited progress toward greater autonomy and equality for all citizens. Historical scholarship understood as pragmatic hermeneutics shows that the outcomes were the result not purely of chance and redescription, as the more cavalier of textualists would have it, but instead of specific struggles fought by people who wielded other weapons besides language.⁷¹

All of this is not to deny the role interpretation has always played, and will continue to play, in historical writing. Just as people in the past selected parts of their experience to record and preserve in the records they left us, we select parts of the past to examine and we choose how to tell our stories. But to admit that interpretation is important is not to claim that everything is interpretation. It is crucial that we historians be able to distinguish what happened from what did not, and what was written from what was not, and our discursive community must test its propositions in the widest range of public forums. Arguments insisting on the importance of such public verification by appeals to evidence from experience, arguments forcefully made against textualists by Gunn, Shusterman, West, Williams, Putnam, and Bernstein, are also made by historians whose pragmatism derives from James and Dewey. That commitment explains why some of us have worked to establish the difference between pragmatists old and new, between Poirier's extravagant James and the historical James, between Rorty's hypothetical Dewey and the historical Dewey. Pragmatism offers historians something beyond

⁷⁰ Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (New York, 1988), 629. For readings of American historians' practice that discern widespread if implicit commitment to something resembling pragmatic hermeneutics, see Kloppenberg, "Objectivity and Historicism"; Thomas Haskell, "Objectivity Is Not Neutrality: Rhetoric vs. Practice in Peter Novick's *That Noble Dream*," *History and Theory*, 29 (no. 2, 1990), 129–57; and David A. Hollinger, "Postmodernist Theory and Wissenschaftliche Practice," *American Historical Review*, 96 (June 1991), 688–92.

⁷¹ On the relation between religious faith, social reform, and pragmatism, see Kloppenberg, "Knowledge and Belief in American Public Life."

the denial of absolutes, a method for providing reliable, even if provisional, knowledge that can make a difference in how we understand our culture and how we live.⁷²

Historians face a choice, then, between newer varieties of linguistic pragmatism that see all truth claims as contingent and older varieties of pragmatism descended more directly from James and Dewey. The latter begin with a nuanced conception of experience as the arena for truth testing and culminate in ethical and democratic activity, the precise content of which cannot be specified in advance or imposed on others because diversity and experimentation are integral to this form of pragmatism. "There can be no final truth in ethics any more than in physics," James wrote, until the last human being "has had his experience and said his say." Or as Dewey put it, "growth itself is the only moral 'end.'"⁷³

Notwithstanding those endorsements of indeterminacy, which contemporaries alert to the threat of oppression and exclusion should find attractive, James's and Dewey's pragmatism did not lack substantive values: the ideals of democracy, grounded in their experience as social beings and their commitment to communities of inquiry rigorously testing all truth claims, provided the norms that guided them. Their pragmatism thus extended beyond the boundaries of language in two directions: in its fluid and historicized conception of the social experience that lies behind linguistic expression, and in its dedication to the diverse forms of continuing democratic practice, including the negotiation rather than the elimination of difference. The early pragmatists believed that eliminating the obstacles of outmoded philosophical and political doctrines would free Americans to solve the problems they faced. The tragedies of the twentieth century have made us less sanguine about that prospect; we lack their confidence that pragmatism and democracy by themselves will resolve all our conflicts. Thus some contemporary thinkers, like those romantics disillusioned by the failures of eighteenth-century democratic revolutions, emphasize the instability of meanings, the particularity of personal identities, and the creative genius of individual artists over rational deliberation. The new linguistic pragmatism will no doubt continue to attract attention from many disciplines because it reflects that disappointment and also challenges the persistent impulses to formalism and scientism still powerful in American thought. But a revised version of the pragmatism of James and Dewey, chastened by tragedy to distrust simple democratic cheerleading, can avoid those dangers while offering a method of generating and testing ideas about what happened to Americans in the past and of deliberating on what should happen

⁷² On the inevitability of selection and interpretation in historical writing, see Putnam, *Words and Life*, ed. Conant, 206–7. For a recent endorsement of pragmatism as an alternative to postmodern skepticism about historical truth, which recommends combining it with "practical realism" because pragmatism is otherwise rudderless due to its "deference to practice over principle," see Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York, 1994), 283–91. This familiar but historically inaccurate characterization of pragmatism as nothing more than antifoundationalism underestimates its resources for historians' practice.

⁷³ William James, "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," in James, *Will to Believe*, 141; John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, in Dewey, *Middle Works*, ed. Boydston, XII, 173.

in the future. For that reason the early pragmatists' ideas will remain valuable for historians committed to explaining why America has taken the shape it has and for citizens committed to solving problems democratically.

The early pragmatists' "old ways of thinking" already incorporated the most valuable insights of the linguistic turn and the postmodern suspicion of power. Those insights did not blind James and Dewey, nor have they blinded the contemporaries who have resurrected the spirit of their pragmatism, to the world of experience that lies beneath and beyond language and to the ties of mutual respect that might bind us together as humans despite our differences. Such clear-sightedness was among the old ways of thinking central to James's and Dewey's pragmatism, and it remains a necessary although not sufficient condition for advancing toward the democratic goals of equality and autonomy. Without it we engage in shadow play, unable to distinguish experience from illusion.