Preface

Most of the papers collected in this volume were written between 1996 and 2006. Like my previous writings, they are attempts to weave together Hegel's thesis that philosophy is its time held in thought with a non-representationalist account of language. That account, implicit in the later work of Wittgenstein, has been more carefully worked out in the writings of Wilfrid Sellars, Donald Davidson, and Robert Brandom. I argue that Hegelian historicism and a Wittgensteinian "social practice" approach to language complement and reinforce one another.

Dewey agreed with Hegel that philosophers were never going to be able to see things under the aspect of eternity; they should instead try to contribute to humanity's ongoing conversation about what to do with itself. The progress of this conversation has engendered new social practices, and changes in the vocabularies deployed in moral and political deliberation. To suggest further novelties is to intervene in cultural politics. Dewey hoped that philosophy professors would see such intervention as their principal assignment.

In Dewey's work, historicism appears as a corollary of the pragmatist maxim that what makes no difference to practice should make no difference to philosophy. "Philosophy," Dewey wrote, "is not in any sense whatever a form of knowledge." It is, instead, "a social hope reduced to a working program of action, a prophecy of the future." From Dewey's point of view, the history of philosophy is best seen as a series of efforts to modify people's sense of who they are, what matters to them, what is most important.

Interventions in cultural politics have sometimes taken the form of proposals for new roles that men and women might play: the ascetic, the prophet, the dispassionate seeker after truth, the good citizen, the aesthete.

the revolutionary. Sometimes they have been sketches of an ideal community—the perfected Greek polis, the Christian Church, the republic of letters, the cooperative commonwealth. Sometimes they have been suggestions about how to reconcile seemingly incompatible outlooks—to resolve the conflict between Greek rationalism and Christian faith, or between natural science and the common moral consciousness. These are just a few of the ways in which philosophers, poets, and other intellectuals have made a difference to the way human beings live.

In many of these papers, I urge that we look at relatively specialized and technical debates between contemporary philosophers in the light of our hopes for cultural change. Philosophers should choose sides in those debates with an eye to the possibility of changing the course of the conversation. They should ask themselves whether taking one side rather than another will make any difference to social hopes, programs of action, prophecies of a better future. If it will not, it may not be worth doing. If it will, they should spell out what that difference amounts to.

The professionalization of philosophy, its transformation into an academic discipline, was a necessary evil. But it has encouraged attempts to make philosophy into an autonomous quasi-science. These attempts should be resisted. The more philosophy interacts with other human activities—not just natural science, but art, literature, religion and politics as well—the more relevant to cultural politics it becomes, and thus the more useful. The more it strives for autonomy, the less attention it deserves.

Readers of my previous books will find little new in this volume. It contains no novel ideas or arguments. But I hope that these further efforts to tie James’ and Dewey’s ideas up with Hegel’s and Wittgenstein’s may lead a few readers to think of pragmatism in a more favorable light. In an exuberant moment, James compared pragmatism’s potential for producing radical cultural change to that of the Protestant Reformation.² I would like to persuade my readers that the analogy is not as absurd as it might seem.
