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Recently, the question of narrative has been thrust into the foreground of philosophic controversy, and widely divergent understandings of narrative and its significance for philosophy have emerged. Thinkers as different as Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, Hannah Arendt, Charles Taylor, Alasdair MacIntyre, Martha Nussbaum, and Richard Rorty have argued that narrative and story-telling are central for any adequate philosophizing. What gives a critical edge to their claims is their battle against the bias of many modern philosophers who are still deeply suspicious of any philosophic use of narrative.

This suspicion, which has been so entwined with modern philosophy since Descartes, persists right up to the present. When I was a graduate student during the 1950s, the question was frequently asked: Do you do philosophy, or the history of philosophy? The underlying presumption was that serious “tough-minded” types did philosophy. Those who were “tender-minded”—not good or original enough—focused on the history of philosophy (a study that presumably had little relevance for original creative philosophizing). Although there has been an explosion of excellent work in the history of philosophy during the past few decades, it would be naive to think that the prejudice against history and narrative is dead. In their heart of hearts, many of our philosophic colleagues still believe in some version of this rigid dichotomy.

Most recently, the question of narrative has been raised in a polemical fashion by Lyotard, who begins The Postmodern Condition by identifying as “modern” any discipline that seeks to legitimate itself by appealing to a grand metanarrative. “Postmodern” is a stance of thorough skepticism and incredulity toward metanarratives. Ironically, one of the reasons why Lyotard’s provocative claims have been so widely discussed is because he so effectively sketches a grand narrative about the eruption of the “postmodern.”

Let me declare here that I want to engage in the “argumentative retelling” of a metanarrative—literally a narrative about the narratives that we tell ourselves about the history and development of the American pragmatic movement. I have several objectives in undertaking this task. I hope to demonstrate the following points:

1. That what we call pragmatism is itself—to use a Kantian turn of phrase—constituted by the narratives that we tell about pragmatism.
2. That the history of pragmatism has always—from its “origins” right up to the present—been a conflict of narratives. Despite family resemblances among those who are labeled pragmatists, there have always been sharp—sometimes irreconcilable—differences within this tradition. There are (as a pragmatist might expect) a plurality of conflicting narratives.
3. That there is not only a conflict of narratives, but a fortiori, a conflict of metanarratives. There are better and worse narratives and metanarratives. And we can give good reasons in support of our claims for what is better. (I take this to be a cardinal principle of any pragmatic narrative.)
4. That when future philosophers tell the story of the development of philosophy in America from the late nineteenth century through the twentieth century, they will highlight its thematic continuity far more than is presently acknowledged. They will see it as a continuous series of explorations and controversies about persistent pragmatic themes.

After these preliminaries let me begin by taking the plunge into what may well be called “founding” narrative of pragmatism—the famous story that James sketches in his 1898 address at the University of
California. James begins by telling us that: “Philosophers are after all like poets. They are pathfinders.” In his typically literary and nuanced manner, he develops an elaborate simile of “blazes made by the axe of the human intellect on the trees of the otherwise trackless forest of human experience. They give you a direction and a place to reach.” Then James tells his story.

I will seek to define with you merely what seems to be the most likely direction in which to start upon the trail of truth. Years ago this direction was given by an American philosopher whose home is in the East, and whose published works, few as they are and scattered in periodicals, are no fit expression of his powers. I refer to Mr. Charles S. Peirce, with whose existence as a philosopher I dare say many of you are unacquainted. He is one of the most original contemporary thinkers; and the principle of practicalism—or pragmatism as he called it when I first heard him enunciate it at Cambridge in the early ‘70’s—is the clue or compass by following which I find myself more and more confirmed in believing we may keep our feet upon the proper trail. Peirce’s principle, as we may call it, may be expressed in a variety of ways, all of them very simple. In the Popular Science Monthly for January 1878, he introduces it as follows: the soul and meaning of thought, he says, can never be made to direct itself towards anything but the production of belief, belief being the demicadence which closes a musical phrase in the symphony of our intellectual life.

James goes on:

Beliefs, in short are really rules for action; and the whole function of thinking is but one step in the production of habits of action. . . . Thus to develop a thought’s meaning we need only determine what conduct it is fitted to produce; that conduct is for us its sole significance. . . . To attain perfect clearness in our thoughts of an object, then, we need only consider what effects of a conceivably practical kind the object may involve—what sensations we are to expect from it, and what reactions we must prepare. Our conception of these effects, then, is for us the whole of our conception of the object, so far as that conception has positive significance at all.

So much for what James calls “the principle of Peirce, the principle of pragmatism.” James thinks it should be “expressed more broadly than Mr. Peirce expresses it.”

The ultimate test for us of what a truth means is indeed the conduct it dictates or inspires. But it inspires that conduct because it first foretells some particular turn to our experience which shall call for just that conduct from us. And I should prefer for our purposes this evening to express Peirce’s principle by saying that the affective meaning of any philosophic proposition can always be brought down to some particular consequence, in our future practical experience, whether active or passive; the point lying rather in the fact that the experience must be particular, than in the fact that it must be active.

I have cited passages from this address at such length for several reasons. It is, as I have already mentioned, the founding narrative—some might say “the founding myth”—of pragmatism. “Pragmatism” is not a word that Peirce used in the articles to which James refers. And it was only at the turn of the century that the word “pragmatism” spread—so much so that nine years later speaking of “Peirce’s pragmatic principle,” James wrote in his Pragmatism: “It lay entirely unnoticed by anyone for twenty years, until I, in an address before Professor Howison’s philosophical union at the University of California, brought it forward again and made a special application of it to religion. By that date (1898) the times seemed ripe for its reception. The word ‘pragmatism’ spread, and at present it fairly spots the pages of the philosophic journals.”

For any close student of Peirce, however, we can understand the quip that pragmatism is the movement that began with James’s misunderstanding of Peirce. For despite James’s generous intentions toward his cantankerous friend Peirce, James runs together what Peirce so diligently sought to distinguish. Unlike James, Peirce carefully distinguishes questions of meaning and truth. James shows almost no sensitivity to Peirce’s categories, especially the way in which Peirce distinguishes Secondness and Thirdness, action and conduct, the evident and the real, or the particular and the universal. This is not simply a matter of logical or conceptual finesse. James’s understanding of what he calls “the principle of Peirce, the principle of pragmatism” is essentially nominalistic—it is a version of the type of nominalism that Peirce spent so much of his life opposing. It is little wonder that Peirce in his 1905 Monist article, “What Pragmatism Is,” renamed his doc-
trine “pragmaticism,” which is ugly enough to be safe from kidnappers”— and went on to tell his own narrative about the emergence of pragmatism.3

The primary issue that interests me is not: Did James get Peirce right? The answer, I believe, is quite straightforward: No—or, more cautiously, not quite. It was James himself who taught us just how important temperament is for philosophizing. Temperament involves a complex set of attitudes, preferences, a sense of what is vital and important that is shaped by one’s personal history and education. It would be difficult to imagine any two thinkers who differed more than Peirce and James in their philosophic temperaments. It is not accidental that James, despite his dabbling in experimental science, likened the philosopher to the poet while Peirce is always holding before us his idealization of the experimental laboratory scientist. I do not think that James ever had any deep understanding or “feel” for the importance of the role that logic, mathematics, and the exact sciences play in Peirce’s philosophic speculations.

If we look at the contemporary scene and explore the recent resurgence of pragmatism, the types of differences, tensions, and conflicts that we find between James and Peirce have their echoes and parallels in the contested differences between Rorty and Putnam—both of whom think of themselves as working in, and carrying on, the pragmatic tradition. Indeed, many of the differences between Rorty and Putnam revolve around the same set of issues that divided James and Peirce—the question of the meaning and philosophic status of “realism.”

If one extends James’s understanding of temperament to Dewey, then the diversity of the pragmatic movement—as reflected in its “founding” figures—is stretched even further. Dewey lacked Peirce’s logical finesse and hands-on knowledge of the natural sciences. He also lacked James’s grace and nuanced powers of description. Dewey is America’s preeminent philosopher of democracy. At the center of his vision and philosophic concerns are the social and political issues of the individual in a democratic community. Of all the pragmatists he comes closest to being what Gramsci called an “organic intellectual.” Returning to the contemporary scene, it is not surprising that Cornel West, who also thinks of himself as a committed pragmatist seeking to restore and extend the political and social significance of pragmatism, takes Dewey to be his great “hero”—“the greatest of the American pragmatists.”

Let me return to Dewey’s own narrative of pragmatism. Pragmatism is not a word that Dewey frequently used to characterize his own orientation. Insofar as he used an -ism term, he preferred instrumentalism—even what he meant by it has little to do with what logical empiricists meant by instrumentalism or what the Frankfurt critical theorists meant by instrumental reason. Dewey’s favored term was “experimentalism” or “instrumental experimentalism.” What he meant is much closer to what Ian Hacking means by “intervention”—stressing the imaginative active engagement which is integral to our cognitive and practical encounters with the world.

In the early 1920s Dewey gave a narrative account of pragmatism in his article “The Development of American Pragmatism.” He was aware, of course, of James’s “original” narrative as well as James’s popular lectures on pragmatism. He was also acquainted with Peirce’s 1878 articles discussed by James and with Peirce’s sharp defense of pragmaticism in his 1905 Monist articles.

Dewey begins by reviewing this material stressing how Peirce’s statements “are quite conclusive with respect to two errors which are commonly committed in regard to the ideas of the founder of pragmatism.” The first error is that pragmatism “subordinates thought and rational activity to particular ends of interest and profit.”4 Both Peirce and Dewey thought this was not only an error but also a malicious slander. Peirce emphatically declared that “if pragmatism really made Doing to be the Be-all and end-all of life, that would be its death.”5 As Dewey emphasized, “The rule of action is that of an intermediary” whereby one attributes meaning to concepts. Dewey also stressed that Peirce’s theory is “still more strongly opposed to the idea that reason or thought should be reduced to being a servant of any interest which is pecuniary or narrow.”6 Dewey is reacting against the popular charge that has long plagued the pragmatic movement, viz., that pragmatism is little more than an ideological expression of the most vulgar and objectionable aspects of American “materialism.” He tells us:

In considering a system of philosophy in its relation to national factors it is necessary to keep in mind not only the aspects of life which are incorporated in the system, but also the aspects against which the system is a protest. There never was a philosopher who has merited the name for the simple reason that he glorified the tendencies and
characteristics of his social environment; just as it is also true that there never has been a philosopher who has not seized upon certain aspects of the life of his time and idealized them.7

Earlier I noted that James’s account of Peirce—especially “Peirce’s principle”—tells us as much about James as it does about Peirce. So too, the way in which Dewey describes the differences between James and Peirce is revealing about Dewey’s understanding of pragmatism and the tendencies that he emphasized in this movement.

Peirce was above all a logician; where James was an educator and humanist and wished to force the general public to realize that certain problems, certain philosophical debates, have a real importance for mankind, because the beliefs which they bring into play lead to very different modes of conduct. If this important distinction is not grasped, it is impossible to understand the majority of the ambiguities and errors which belong to the later period of the pragmatic movement.8

In giving his account of the development of pragmatism, Dewey—as he does in other places—assigns special importance to James’s Principles of Psychology. What Dewey found especially significant in James’s Principles is “the biological conceptions of the psyche.”9 Indirectly, Dewey is bringing forth a dimension of the pragmatic tradition that he always emphasized but that has not always received proper acknowledgment—the robust nonreductive naturalism that seeks to understand human beings as essentially biological beings always engaged in a process of organic interaction with their environments. It is this nonreductive open-ended naturalism that helps to underscore the reconstructive character of human intelligence functioning in a world understood “as being in continuous formation, where there is still a place for indeterminism, for the new, and for a real future” and where “the individual is the corner of creative thought, the author of action, and of its application.”10

Dewey concludes his narrative of pragmatism in a characteristic manner when he affirms his “own faith in intelligence, as the one and indispensable belief necessary to moral and social life.”

The more one appreciates the intrinsic esthetic, immediate value of thought and of science, the more one takes into account what intelli-
gence itself adds to the joy and dignity of life, the more one should feel grieved at a situation in which the exercise and joy of reason are limited to a narrow, closed, and technical social group and the more it is possible to make all men participators in this inestimable wealth.11

If I had sufficient space, I would continue in this manner, showing how the pragmatic tradition has always been constituted and reconstituted by “argumentative retellings” of its narrative. I do not think there is any “essence” to pragmatism—or even a set of sharply defined commitments or propositions that all so-called pragmatists share. From the very beginning, pragmatism has been an essentially contested concept. I would go further, for I think that a primary reason for both the richness and diffuseness of the pragmatic tradition is the variety of voices and narratives that constitute it—even when these are strongly dissident. One would also have to do justice to the ways in which George Herbert Mead, Horace Kallen, C. I. Lewis, Sidney Hook, Ernest Nagel, Morton White, Justus Buchler, and many others, tell the story of pragmatism, and situate their own contributions within their narratives.

But I want to come to what some may consider a much more controversial part of my metanarrative. For I want to criticize what is still a widely held belief about the rise and decline of pragmatism. To be deliberately provocative, I will call this the “nostalgic” of “sentimental” story of pragmatism. It goes something like this: Once there was a golden age of American philosophy and American pragmatism. This was the time of such intellectual giants as Peirce, James, Royce, Santayana, Dewey, and Mead. Despite their differences—and even sharp antagonisms—they all shared a largesse, breadth of interest, and speculative audacity. But there has been a significant decline in the creative impulses of American philosophy and American pragmatism. America was invaded by foreign influences—positivism, logical empiricism, ordinary language analysis, which eventually concealed into the ideological smugness of the analytic establishment. By the end of the Second World War, graduate philosophy departments—with very few exceptions—were so transformed that the so-called classical American philosophers were marginalized. Those who still took the pragmatic thinkers seriously found themselves on the defensive. Most of our recent doctoral students have never even studied any of the pragmatic
thinkers. There is now a prevalent patronizing attitude toward the “classic” American philosophers. They may have had their hearts in the right place but they lack the rigor, clarity, and logical sophistication that are now demanded for “serious” philosophic work. So even when philosophers who have been shaped by the analytic ethos use the term pragmatism favorably, they have emptied it—indeed, eviscerated it—of the rich vital meaning it once had.

Even though the above sketch is something of a caricature, it contains an element of truth. Anyone who has spent time in an academic philosophy department—especially a graduate department—knows all too well how so-called American philosophy has been marginalized and denigrated. Nevertheless I believe that this metanarrative of the rise and fall of pragmatism distorts and obscures what has been happening. It blinds us from appreciating the continuity of pragmatic concerns. What is worse, it tends to reinforce an unpragmatic parochialism and slides into the temptation of demonizing analytic philosophy. Such an attitude violates the very pluralism that pragmatism presumably advocates. Not only do I think that we need to demythologize what is labeled “analytic philosophy,” I want to go further. Earlier I indicated that when future historians of philosophy look back on philosophy in America during the twentieth century, they will stress the continuity of concern and controversial debate rather than emphasizing radical breaks. And this future history—these future metanarratives—are beginning to be anticipated now.

Here I want to acknowledge the importance of the work of Richard Rorty. I know that there are many philosophers interested in American philosophy and especially pragmatism who are extremely hostile toward Rorty. He is sometimes viewed as the real kidnapper of pragmatism. For when Rorty speaks of “pragmatism” or “we pragmatists,” his meaning is so idiosyncratic that one can barely recognize any resemblance between what he says and any of the classical pragmatists. So rather than viewing Rorty as a hero who has helped make pragmatism intellectually respectable, his critics view him as the villain in the story—who betrays the tradition he is always invoking. It is a matter of public record that over the years I have had my sharp disagreements with Rorty—and even over the issue of whether he is being “true to” what is best and most important in the pragmatic tradition. But I do think that Rorty—perhaps more effectively than anyone else—has shown that there is a way of reading such thinkers as Quine, Sellars, Davidson, and Putnam—sometimes even against their own self-understanding—as contributing to the ongoing refinement of pragmatic themes.

It is well known that Quine himself spoke of pragmatism in his classic article “Two Dogmas of Empiricism.” What is less well known is that Quine’s critique of the analytic-synthetic distinction was itself part of a much broader pragmatic critique of what Morton White called an “untenable dualism”—a critique shared by Quine, White, Nelson Goodman, and the young Hilary Putnam. Morton White self-consciously related this critique to Dewey’s attacks on the epistemological dualism so characteristic of modern philosophy. Sellars’s famous claim in “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind” that “empirical knowledge, like its sophisticated extension science, is rational, not because it has a foundation, but because it is a self-correcting enterprise which can put any claim in jeopardy, though not all at once” might almost serve as a cardinal principle which all the pragmatists would endorse. Although Rorty’s interpretation of Davidson is as “original” as his readings of Quine and Sellars, I do think he has effectively shown how Davidson’s own version of holism, and his demythologizing of “truth” can be related to, and integrated into a continuous (albeit contested) pragmatic legacy. Now this reinterpretation of the continuity—if even in subterranean ways—of the pragmatic legacy is not unique in Rorty. There are now a number of us who see it this way. Hilary Putnam, who increasingly understands his own philosophic work as fitting in with and continuing in the pragmatic tradition, declares in the preface to his Realism with a Human Face:

All of these ideas—that the fact/value dichotomy is untenable, that the fact/convention dichotomy is also untenable, that truth and justification of ideas are closely connected, that the alternative to metaphysical realism is not any form of skepticism, that philosophy is an attempt to achieve the good—are ideas that have been long associated with the American pragmatist tradition. Realizing this has led me (sometimes with assistance of Ruth Anna Putnam) to make the effort to better understand that tradition from Peirce right up to Quine and Goodman.

I also think that Cornel West’s “genealogy of pragmatism” and some of my own writings have helped contribute to this revised understanding of
the continuity and vitality of pragmatism. Of course Rorty, Putnam, West, and I disagree about how to tell this metanarrative. We all think that our differences have pragmatically significant consequences. But if we take Alasdair MacIntyre's statement seriously—that a tradition "is only recovered by an argumentative retelling of that narrative which will itself be in conflict with other argumentative retellings" then this conflict of contested metanarratives is precisely what one would expect in a philosophically vital tradition. And this—as I have tried to indicate—has been characteristic throughout the history of the pragmatic tradition, even from its "origins."

Still it will be objected that, even if one grants that there has been some continuity, this is rather superficial. And this "continuity" has been at the expense of a considerable narrowing of scope. For the contemporary "neo-pragmatism" simply lacks the scope, the breadth, the speculative audacity of the classic pragmatic thinkers. In one sense this is undeniable although it is also misleading. For if we look at the resurgence of pragmatism, not just in the academic discipline of philosophy but in the range of social and cultural disciplines, then we can detect many signs of a new breadth. Here let me restrict myself to one aspect of this resurgence which I believe is vitally important.

Recently a number of scholars of Dewey and Mead have helped to retrieve the radical impulses of the democratic ethos that was integral to their understanding of pragmatism and their participation in social reform. I am thinking of the excellent scholarship on Mead by Mitchell Aboulafia, Hans Joas, and Dmitri Shalin, the magnificent study of John Dewey by Robert Westbrook, and the forthcoming book on Dewey by Alan Ryan. It is certainly true that the pragmatic themes that one finds in Quine, Sellars, Davidson, the early Putnam, and Rorty barely deal with social and political issues of a democratic community. During the past two decades even this has begun to change. Since the publication of Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, Rorty himself has turned his attention to the role of politics in our everyday lives. He has chided left-wing American intellectuals for giving up on what he calls "real politics"—the politics of everyday life where the rich and strong exploit the poor and the weak. He scorns those "postmodern radical" intellectuals who have become so obsessed with "cultural politics" of the academy that they ignore the disintegration of the black underclass of our cities who find that the only "viable" economic option open to them is a life of crime. In his autobiographical sketch, "Trotsky and the Wild Orchids," Rorty clearly identifies himself with the progressivist side of democratic politics. He speaks of the cultural war that is now taking place which will decide whether our country continues along the trajectory defined by the Bill of Rights, the Reconstruction Amendments, the building of the land grant colleges, female suffrage, the New Deal, Brown vs. the Board of Education, the building of the community colleges, Martin Luther King's civil rights movement, the feminist, and the gay rights movement. Following this trajectory would mean America will continue to set examples of increasing tolerance and equality.

When Rorty writes in this vein he is carrying on the tradition of John Dewey. Hilary Putnam has also turned his attention to the ethical and political consequences of pragmatism. He not only agrees with the classical pragmatists that we cannot make a sharp distinction between fact and value, he also wants to retrieve the idea that philosophy is concerned with practical wisdom and leading a good life. More specifically, he wants to show the consequences of a pragmatic orientation for democratic practices.

But the thinker who has most dramatically sought to retrieve, appropriate, and extend the radical democratic ethos of American pragmatism has been Cornel West. And more than that: West by "his own power, provocation and personality" has attempted to revitalize the Deweyan tradition of the public intellectual—the responsible engaged intellectual who addresses a wider public which is not restricted to university communities. Sometimes I am skeptical about the substantive content of West's "prophetically pragmaticism," which is so rhetorical and programmatic. When one asks hard pragmatic questions about what precisely West is advocating, the answers are not always clear. But we should not forget that a similar type of objection was frequently raised against Dewey. What is impressive about West's pragmatic orientation is the way in which he is able to address contemporary issues of racism, sexism, religious bigotry, and the growing nihilism of black urban ghetto life without succumbing to the various types of extremism and fanaticism that are so prevalent in our time.

In emphasizing the retrieval and continuity of the radical participatory democratic ethos of the classical pragmatists—especially Dewey and Mead—my intention has been to illustrate what is now happening. For
what I think is most exciting and promising about the recent resurgence of pragmatism is its scope, breadth, and depth. It is certainly not limited to “technical” issues concerning “meaning” and “truth.” There are many signs of an increasing concern with what Dewey called “the problems of men”—the problems of human beings—and not merely “the problems of philosophers.”

Let me conclude by tying together some of the threads. I have argued that the pragmatic movement has always been characterized by a conflict of narratives and metanarratives. “Pragmatism” has always been an essentially contested concept. We should not smooth out the sharp differences of temperament, doctrine, and concern of the pragmatic thinkers. One of the best, most pithy characterizations of a community that I know of is “a group of individuals locked in argument.” From its beginnings the pragmatic movement has been an ongoing argument—one in which the participants have raised dissonant voices, and at times have spoken at cross-purposes. The great danger for those of us who have been concerned to keep alive the pragmatic tradition is the danger of nostalgia and sentimentality—a refusal to recognize what needs to be clarified, revised, or even abandoned. We may continue to draw inspiration from the classic pragmatic thinkers, but I cannot think of a more unpragmatic attitude than focusing exclusively on the past rather than on the present and the future. We must also take seriously our commitment to pluralism—even a pluralism in what is appropriated from the pragmatic legacy. Such a pluralism is not to be confused with what I once called “flabby” pluralism—where one falsely assumes that one story or narrative is just as good as another. This is just what I am denying. The pluralism that I take to be characteristic of a vital pragmatism is an engaged pragmatism where we continue the ongoing process of being locked in argument. The contours of pragmatism have always been fuzzy. This is at once a source of its vitality and a frustration for those trying to define it.

Still, it may be objected that even if the contours of pragmatism are vague, there are some characteristics that distinguish pragmatism from other philosophic orientations. I do not want to deny this, but I think similarities and differences are best characterized as family resemblances. Unfortunately the term “family resemblances” has itself been abused and weakened. We should remember that when Wittgenstein spoke of family resemblances, the expression had strong somatic resonances. Not all similarities and differences are to be classified as family resemblances. If we think of how we concretely speak of family resemblances, then we should recognize that although there may be striking resemblances among members of a family, nevertheless individuals within a family (like individual pragmatists) may be strikingly different in their appearance.

I am not suggesting that it is inappropriate to try to specify—as James, Peirce, Dewey, Rorty, Putnam, and even I have done—what one takes to be the primary characteristics of a pragmatic orientation. This is essential for our “argumentative retellings.” Rather I am calling for a more self-reflective attitude about this endeavor—an awareness that in doing so “we” are making a claim about what “we” think is (or ought to be) taken as most central and important in pragmatism. We should be wary of anyone who claims that there are fixed criteria by which we can decide who is and who is not a pragmatist. Such boundary setting is not only unpragmatic, it is frequently used as a power play to legitimize unexamined prejudices. And those of us who identify ourselves with the pragmatic tradition should be especially alert to the abuse of such boundary fixing—for it has been used to marginalize pragmatism. Slightly parodying the concluding remarks of Rorty’s Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, I would say: the only point on which we should insist is that the pragmatist’s concern should be with continuing the argument—to continue our argumentative retellings of the pragmatic legacy which will be in conflict with other argumentative retellings. This is the way in which we honor the imperative Do not block the road of inquiry!
I enthusiastically agree with almost everything Richard Bernstein says in his paper, which is why I have less to say about it than about other papers in this volume. Bernstein seems to me absolutely and importantly right in saying that “pragmatism” is constituted by narratives and in suggesting that there is always room to expand such narratives into longer ones, incorporating additional figures. I wholeheartedly agree with the remark he quotes from Alasdair MacIntyre: that a tradition “is only recovered by an argumentative reading of the narrative which will be in conflict with other argumentative readings.”

I also agree with Daniel Dennett’s description of selves as “centers of narrative gravity,” so I do not think that pragmatism has a True Self, any more than America does. Competing narratives about America are competing proposals for what America should become, and the same goes for competing narratives about pragmatism. The various competing descriptions of pragmatism that are scattered through this volume are abbreviations for rival narratives. The reader’s job is to pick out useful strands from each and therewith weave a new, improved narrative. Only if these narratives continue on beyond Dewey’s death, however, will it be possible to think of pragmatism as a living philosophical movement. That is why I think Bernstein makes an important point when he protests against nostalgic and sentimental accounts of “the Golden Age of American Philosophy.”

Handy terms like “German idealism” or “American pragmatism” or “international postmodernism” could not have gained currency if historians of philosophy looked only for community of doctrine—for propositions agreed to by all the figures grouped under such rubrics. Rather, these isms are created by saying: Here were a bunch of thinkers who shared a spatio-temporal site, some influences, many enemies, some problems, and maybe even some doctrines. Saying that, and writing a narrative about these philosophers that creates the kind of self we call an “ism,” is a useful thing to do. It is useful even if the philosophers who find themselves (or their shades) sorted out in this way feel uncomfortable with those with whom they are urged to associate. To create such isms you have to temporarily ignore, for example, Hegel’s sarcasm about Schelling, Peirce’s sardonic remarks about James, and Derrida’s and Foucault’s sners at one another.

When I use the phrase to which Bernstein refers, and to which my critics object—“we pragmatists”—I am implicitly saying: try, for the nonce, ignoring the differences between Putnam and Peirce, Nietzsche and James, Davidson and Dewey, Sellars and Wittgenstein. Focus on the following similarities, and then other similarities may leap at you. To grasp my nonce, idiosyncratic sense of “pragmatist,” forget Sellars on picturing, Dewey on scientific method, Wittgenstein on nonsense, and Nietzsche on big strong warriors. Bracket these and other doctrines that strike me as wrong, or parochial, or tangential, and repackage what is left. The sort of repackage job which such nonce usages permit seems to be an important element in the construction of narratives.

I think it important to construct a narrative that links the three “classical” pragmatists to Quine, Putnam, and Davidson because I agree with Bernstein that the neglect of the former in American philosophy departments is a mistake, and that the mistake will only be corrected if such a narrative is available. Such a narrative has to get across the point that the linguistic turn was neither a world-historical event, in the course of which philosophers gained a kind of clarity hitherto unknown, nor a lapse into the world-weary frivolity characteristic of what Lavine calls “the troops of the disenchanted, the generation of the college-educated in America, for whom the 1960s fervor has long since burned out” (48)—the people among whom, she believes, I find my readers.

The enthusiasm for the linguistic turn which changed the character of American philosophy departments was due in large part to exasperation with the interminable debates that went on in the 1920s and 1930s between Dewey and Lovejoy, Dewey and Arthur Murphy, Dewey and Russell, Dewey and C. I. Lewis—the sorts of debates one finds in the Schilpp volume on Dewey. A lot of first-rate philosophers, in the 1940s and
1950s, were saying that they could never figure out which side of a given issue Dewey wanted to be on. A consensus had grown up that Dewey’s terminology fudged, rather than clarifying, the realism-idealism issue as well as the issues between utilitarians and their critics.

One may think (though I do not) that that consensus was ignorant, or hasty, or wrong-headed. But it was nevertheless real. Along about 1945, American philosophers were, for better or worse, bored with Dewey, and thus with pragmatism. They were sick of being told that pragmatism was the philosophy of American democracy, that Dewey was the great American intellectual figure of their century, and the like. They wanted something new, something they could get their philosophical teeth into. What showed up, thanks to Hitler and various other historical contingencies, was logical empiricism, an early version of what we now call “analytic philosophy.”

The incursion of this kind of philosophy was neither a triumph of light over darkness and of intelligence over obscurantism nor a decade, in which the great tradition of American philosophy was mindlessly discarded in favor of unsavory foreign imports. It was, like all such incursions, a mixed blessing. In my judgment it represented a temporarily fruitful confusion of a very good idea (that language was a more fruitful topic for philosophical reflection than experience) with a couple of rather bad ones (that there was something worth preserving in empiricism; that deep philosophical significance could be found in the first-order functional calculus). The narrative I have tried to construct in my books tells how the bad ideas gradually, in the course of the 1950s and 1960s, got filtered out and thus made it possible for pragmatism to get a new lease on life by undergoing linguistification.2

As I argue in “Dewey between Hegel and Darwin,” the linguistic turn was essential if Darwin was to be taken seriously by philosophers. As I say in “Philosophy and the Future,” we are still engaged in coming to terms with Darwin—still trying to rework old, Greek ways of speaking about human beings, ways that are dualistic (in the pejorative sense that Dewey gave to that term) through and through. We are still trying to make these ways of speaking chime with Darwin’s account of human beings as complicated animals, containing no special extra ingredient. This is the sort of job that can hardly be done in less than a couple of centuries. My hunch is that, just as we see philosophy from 1630 to 1800 (“Descartes to Kant”) as an attempt to come to terms with corpuscularian mechanics, future historians will see philosophy from 1860 to (at least) 2060 as an attempt to come to terms with “the biological conceptions of the psyche” that Dewey found in James, and which James developed in response to Huxley and Darwin.3

Whereas Bernstein’s narratives about pragmatism usually put Dewey’s social thought, and its contribution to the self-consciousness of American democracy, at the center of the story, mine tend to center around James’s version (or, at least, certain selected versions out of the many that James casually tossed off) of the pragmatic theory of truth. I view the development of the modern democracies as one among many symptoms of a more general change in our self-image, a change as visible in literature as in politics. Darwin’s importance lies, ultimately, in having helped make this change occur faster and more smoothly.

One way to describe this change in self-image is to say that human beings (in the richer and more powerful parts of the world) have shown an increasing ability to put aside the question What is the meaning of human life? and to substitute the question What meaning shall we give to our lives? Men and women in the last two hundred years have become increasingly able to get along without the thought that there must be a deep truth about themselves, a truth that it is their job to discover. This has produced an increased ability to brush aside the suspicion that we are under the authority of something not ourselves: that there is a narrator (roughly, God or Nature) of our lives other than ourselves, a narrator whose description of us must necessarily be superior to any that we dream up on our own (because it describes our True Self).

To escape this latter thought is to think of human beings, either individually or in groups, as self-creators. So my preferred narrative is a story of human beings as having recently gotten out from under the thought of, and the need for, authority. I see James’s suggestion that we carry utilitarianism over from morals into epistemology as crucial to this anti-authoritarian movement of the spirit. For James shows us how to see Truth not as something we have to respect, but as a pointless nominalization of the useful adjective we apply to beliefs that are getting us what we want. Ceasing to see Truth as the name of an authority and coming to see the search for stable and useful beliefs as simply one more part of the pursuit of happiness are essential if we are to have the experimental attitude toward social existence that Dewey commended and the experimental attitude toward individual existence that Romanticism commended.