The Resurgence of Pragmatism

BY RICHARD J. BERNSTEIN

There is a familiar story about the development of philosophy in the United States that goes something like this. During the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, there was an outburst and flourishing of philosophic activity in America. The key figures drew upon a variety of European orientations (British empiricism, Kant, Hegel), but an important group emerged which included Charles S. Peirce, William James, John Dewey, and George Herbert Mead. Although there were sharp differences in their intellectual backgrounds, philosophic temperaments, training, and interests, nevertheless there were also sufficient “family resemblances” so that they—as well as others—began to think of themselves as constituting a distinctive philosophic movement. William James, a gifted stylist and an immensely popular lecturer, labeled the movement “pragmatism” and acknowledged Peirce as its founder. (Sometimes it is said that pragmatism was born from James’s misunderstanding of Peirce.) Peirce was so outraged by James’s popularization that he renamed his own doctrine “pragmaticism—a name ugly enough to be safe from kidnappers.”

For all their differences, there are common themes running through the works of the “classical” pragmatists. There is a persistent questioning of the very idea that philosophy (or any form of inquiry) rests upon secure, fixed foundations which can be known with certainty. More radically, the pragmatists challenge the tacit presupposition of much of modern philosophy that the rationality and legitimacy of knowledge require necessary foundations. Inquiry neither has nor needs
any such foundations. The pragmatists did not think that abandoning all foundational claims and metaphors leads to skepticism (or relativism). They stressed the fallibility of all inquiry. Every knowledge claim is open to potential criticism. It is precisely because of this intrinsic fallibility that, beginning with Peirce, the pragmatists focused their attention on the community of inquirers to test and criticize all validity claims. The pragmatists had a high regard for experimental science and were suspicious of any hard and fast distinction drawn between philosophy and the sciences. They sought to bring the fallibilistic and experimental spirit of the sciences to the study of philosophy. Peirce, who spent a large part of his life as a practicing scientist, wanted to bring “the laboratory habit of mind” to bear on philosophic issues. Dewey’s favored characterization of his own philosophic orientation was not “pragmatism” but “experimentalism.” At the same time, the pragmatists were critical of “reductivistic scientism”—the belief that it is the physical sciences alone that are the measure and standard for all “legitimate” knowledge. Against what they took to be the excessive subjectivism of modern philosophy, the pragmatists highlighted the priority of the intersubjective, social and communal dimensions of experience, language, and inquiry. With the pragmatists we find the beginnings of the challenge to what has been called “the philosophy of the subject” or “the philosophy of consciousness.” One of William James’s most famous and important papers is entitled “Does Consciousness Exist?”—where he debunked the very idea of a pure diaphanous consciousness. Peirce anticipated the intersubjective “linguistic turn” in philosophy in his comprehensive theory of signs. Peirce was also one of the founders of contemporary semiotics.

The classical pragmatists shared a cosmological vision of an open universe in which there is irreducible novelty, chance, and contingency. They rejected doctrines of mechanical determinism which were so popular in the late nineteenth century. Long before the development of quantum physics,
Peirce was developing a battery of arguments to show that a proper understanding of the physical universe required acknowledging indeterminacy and chance. The pragmatists were also convinced that, with the proper cultivation of self-critical habits of intelligence, human beings—while never escaping from unexpected contingencies—could influence their own destinies. Human beings are not passive playthings who are determined by forces beyond their control. With Dewey and Mead the social and political aspects of pragmatism came into the foreground. For both of them the ideal of democracy as a form of communal life in which “all share and all contribute” is central to their philosophic vision. While deeply skeptical of all “true believers” and never sympathetic with calls for “total revolution,” Dewey and Mead were committed to a program of radical democratic social reform. The pragmatists were not apologists for the status quo. They were among the most relentless critics of American society for failing to realize its democratic promise.

During the first decades of the twentieth century, Dewey exerted a powerful influence on many American progressive thinkers, even though his professional philosophic colleagues were critical of his pragmatism, instrumentalism, experimentalism, and naturalism. By the late 1930s pragmatism began to fade from the American scene. The movement seemed to have exhausted its creative potential. William James had characterized pragmatism as a philosophy that is both “tough-minded” and “tender-minded.” But increasingly, especially among professional academic philosophers, pragmatism was viewed as excessively “tender-minded”—diffuse, fuzzy, and soft at the center. A patronizing attitude toward pragmatism developed. The pragmatists may have had their hearts in the right place but not their heads. Their “sloppiness” and “diffuseness” simply did not meet the high standards of “rigor” required for serious philosophic investigation.

One cannot overestimate the quiet revolution that was transforming academic philosophy in America. This was, in
part, a consequence of the growing influence of the émigré philosophers who had escaped from Nazi fascism and joined American philosophy departments: Reichenbach, Carnap, Tarski, Feigl, Hempel (and many others). Several of these new émigré philosophers had been associated with the famous Vienna Circle. They all shared a logical finesse, a sophisticated knowledge of the physical sciences, a commitment to the highest standards of argumentation, and a precision that surpassed anything exhibited by the classical pragmatists (with the exception of Peirce). At first these logical empiricists sought to establish alliances with American philosophers who had been shaped by the pragmatic tradition. From the perspective of the logical empiricists, the pragmatic thinkers were viewed as having seen through a glass darkly what was now seen much more clearly and sharply. The myth developed (and unfortunately became entrenched) that pragmatism is primarily an anticipation of logical positivism—especially the positivist's verifiability criterion of meaning.

Other influences also had a deep impact on the character of philosophy in mid-century America. Whereas philosophers from Dewey and Mead's generation turned to Germany for philosophic inspiration, beginning in the 1930s England—in particular Oxford and Cambridge—became the places where young American philosophers made their intellectual pilgrimage. There was a fascination with and importation of the type of philosophizing initiated by G. E. Moore, Bertrand Russell, the later Wittgenstein (at least the Wittgenstein filtered by his Anglo-American students), Gilbert Ryle, and John Austin.

After the Second World War, during a period of rapid growth of American universities, academic philosophy in the United States was completely transformed (except for a few pockets of resistance). Virtually every major "respectable" graduate department reshaped itself in the new spirit of "tough-minded" analytic philosophy. The classic American pragmatists were marginalized, relegated to the dustbin of history. To the extent that the pragmatists were studied, it was
primarily in "American studies" programs and not in philosophy departments. Even though professional philosophers occasionally paid lip service to the pragmatic tradition, there was a prevailing sense that there wasn't much that a "serious" philosopher could learn from the pragmatists. From that time until today, most philosophy students at the "prestigious" graduate schools have not even bothered to read the works of the classical pragmatists.

Now, of course, the story I have just told is an oversimplification. Nevertheless, some version of it is still the dominant understanding of how philosophy developed in America. For some, the triumph of analytic philosophy, which must continue to be vigilant against the intrusions of the "obscurantism" of Continental philosophy, is a narrative of progress and enlightenment. For others, it is a sad story of decline from the grand speculative spirit of American philosophy to a thin, emasculated concern with trivial technical issues that do not really matter to anyone except professional philosophers. But however one judges what has happened, the basic narrative structure of the story of this development of philosophy in the United States is the same.

Recently, things have begun to change dramatically. There is not only a resurgence of pragmatic themes and a growing interest in the classical pragmatists which extends far beyond the boundaries of academic philosophy departments, there are the beginnings of a more subtle, complex narrative of philosophy in America that brings out the continuity and persistence of the pragmatic legacy. One of the central figures for changing our interpretation is Richard Rorty. The aspect of Rorty's work that I want to emphasize here is not his own extremely controversial version of a playful aesthetic pragmatism, but rather the way in which he has argued that such key "analytic" philosophers as W. V. O. Quine, Wilfrid Sellars, and Donald Davidson can be read as developing and refining motifs which are present in the classical pragmatists. Rorty is not alone in stressing the persistence and continuity of
pragmatism. Hilary Putnam (whom Rorty calls the leading pragmatist of our time) tells us in his most recent book, *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 long been associated with the American pragmatic tradition. Realizing this has led me (sometimes with the assistance of Ruth Anna Putnam) to make the effort to better understand that tradition from Peirce right up to Quine and Goodman.¹

I want to pursue three themes. First, I want to show what Rorty and Putnam mean when they argue for the continuity of the pragmatic tradition—how their narratives challenge “the received view” that analytic philosophy broke sharply with classic American pragmatism. Second, I will give a sketch of the recent resurgence of pragmatism. And finally I will show how this resurgence can be related to recent debates about “modernity” and “postmodernity.” Contrary to the widespread belief that pragmatism is passé, I argue that the classic pragmatic thinkers were ahead of their times. I argue for an even stronger thesis, viz., that a properly developed pragmatic orientation can lead us beyond many of the sterile impasses of so-called “modern-postmodern” debates.

*The Persistence and Continuity of the Pragmatic Legacy*

To begin my first task, I will use Rorty as a guide. In the central chapter, “Privileged Representations,” of his *Philosophy*

and the Mirror of Nature, Rorty examines the pragmatic themes in the writings of Quine and Sellars. He tells us:

I interpret Sellars's attack on "givenness" and Quine's attack on necessity as crucial steps in undermining the possibility of a "theory of knowledge." The holism and pragmatism common to both philosophers, and which they share with the later Wittgenstein, are lines of thought within analytic philosophy which I wish to extend. I argue that when extended in a certain way they let us see truth as in James's phrase "what is better for us to believe" rather than as "the accurate representation of reality." Or to put the point less provocatively, they show us that the notion of "accurate representation" is simply an automatic and empty compliment which we pay to those beliefs which are successful in helping us to do what we want to do.²

The "lines of thought" that Rorty extends are intended to undermine the notion that there are "privileged representations" that mirror nature and also to undermine the hidden presuppositions of analytic philosophy. For according to Rorty, analytic philosophy rests upon Kantian foundations which presuppose that we can make a sharp distinction between intuitions and concepts—between what is "given" by the outside world and what is contributed by the mind—as well as a sharp distinction between analytic and synthetic judgments. But the consequences of the lines of thought initiated by Quine and Sellars call into question both these distinctions:

It is as if Quine, having renounced the conceptual-empirical, analytic-synthetic, and language-fact distinctions, were still not able to renounce that between the given and the postulated. Conversely, Sellars, having triumphed over the latter distinction, cannot quite renounce the former cluster. . . . Each of the two men tends to make continual, unofficial, tacit, heuristic use of the distinction which the other has transcended. It is as if analytic philosophy could not be written without at least one of the two great Kantian distinctions and as if neither Quine nor

Sellars were willing to cut the last links which bind them to Russell, Carnap and "logic as the essence of philosophy."³

However we evaluate Rorty's controversial interpretation of Quine and Sellars, he is surely right in stressing the pragmatic holism that characterizes their work. In his classic paper, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," Quine announced that he was advocating a "shift toward pragmatism." For all Quine's indebtedness to Carnap, Quine's critique of a sharp analytic-synthetic distinction and his critique of reductionism did successfully challenge central dogmas of contemporary logical empiricism. Even though Quine modestly claimed that he was extending the pragmatic tendencies already present in Carnap, it would be difficult to underestimate the subversive consequences of Quine's arguments. He concluded his paper by saying:

Carnap, Lewis and others take a pragmatic stand on the question of choosing between language forms, scientific frameworks; but their pragmatism leaves off at the imagined boundary between the analytic and the synthetic. In repudiating such a boundary I espouse a more thorough pragmatism.⁴

Quine's critique of the analytic-synthetic distinction had a much more general significance. It encouraged others to begin to question the fixity of a variety of distinctions that had been taken as "epistemological givens," e.g., the fact-convention distinction, the fact-language distinction, the conceptual-empirical distinction. We can and indeed must make distinctions for specific philosophic purposes. But that is just the point—we make or introduce these distinctions for a variety of purposes and reasons. It is not as if these are fixed distinctions which are "discovered" by pure reflection or intuition. And as our purposes change, so do our distinctions. What Quine meant by "pragmatism" is far more limited than what Peirce,
James, or Dewey meant by “pragmatism.” But this should not obscure the fact that the gist of Quine’s arguments in “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” and in such related papers as “On What There Is” is not only compatible with, but added linguistic sophistication to, themes that we already find in the classical pragmatists.

Pragmatic motifs are also quite manifest in Wilfrid Sellars’s important article, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,” which can be read as a series of footnotes to a set of papers that Peirce published in 1868, and which form the basis for the entire pragmatic movement. These are the papers in which Peirce attacked what Sellars calls the entire “framework of givenness.” (In Peirce’s language, this is what he labeled “immediate knowledge” or “intuition.”) When Sellars tells us that the metaphor of a “foundation”—which has been so dominant in modern philosophy at least since the time of Descartes—“is misleading in that it keeps us from seeing that if there is a logical dimension in which empirical propositions rest on observation reports, there is another logical dimension in which the latter rests on the former,” he is reiterating and developing a thesis that we find in Peirce. Furthermore, when Sellars declares 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,” he epitomizes a thesis that all the classical pragmatists would endorse. Sellars’s intellectual affinity with Peirce (and Wittgenstein) is also evident when he argues that “concepts pertaining

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7 Ibid.
to such inner episodes as thoughts are primarily and essentially intersubjective, as intersubjective as the concept of the positron, and that each of us has a privileged access to our thoughts—constitutes a dimension of the use of these concepts which is built on and presupposes this intersubjective status."8

Highlighting the pragmatic holistic tendencies in Quine and Sellars enables us to understand why Rorty also wants to appropriate Davidson to the pragmatic legacy. If we accept Rorty's thesis that analytic philosophy is parasitic upon the Kantian intuition-concept and analytic-synthetic distinctions, then what underlies both these distinctions is the "conceptual scheme/content distinction." This is the distinction—the third dogma of empiricism—that Davidson criticizes and challenges in his paper "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme."9 Rorty—in his typical way of reading philosophers against the grain—gives a historicist Deweyan interpretation of Davidson's argument. He sees Davidson as developing more sharply focused criticisms of ideas that we already find in Dewey, especially "Dewey's dissolution of the Kantian distinctions between receptivity and spontaneity, and between necessity and contingency."10 Rorty also argues that when we follow out the consequences of Davidson's deconstruction of "truth," we can also see Davidson's affinity with pragmatism. Davidson's repudiation of the "dualism of scheme and content" and his slogan "correspondence without confrontation" are "reminiscent of pragmatism, a movement which specialized in debunking dualisms and in dissolving problems created by these dualisms."11 Although Davidson is wary of this pragmatic embrace, he does concede the following in his reply to Rorty:

8 Ibid., p. 189.
Rorty urges two things: that my view of truth amounts to a rejection of both coherence and correspondence theories and should be properly classed as belonging to the pragmatist tradition, and that I should not pretend that I am answering the sceptic when I am really telling him to get lost. I pretty much concur with him on both points.\textsuperscript{12}

Thus far, using Rorty as a guide, I have tried to give some indication of the persistence, continuity, and refinement of pragmatic motifs in the writings of such “analytic” philosophers as Quine, Sellars, and Davidson. To substantiate this claim of continuity would require not only a much more detailed analysis but also a broader one that encompasses the contributions of other philosophers (e.g., C. I. Lewis, Nelson Goodman, and Morton White) to the pragmatic legacy. It may be objected that this appropriation of Quine, Sellars, and Davidson to the pragmatic tradition is not persuasive. It is a variation of the kind of argument that would suggest modern atomic theory was already anticipated by the classical Greek atomists. But it is neither Rorty’s nor my intention to suggest that Quine, Sellars, and Davidson are only “repeating” what we can already find in the classical pragmatists, and that there is nothing really new or original in their work. On the contrary, to highlight continuity and refinement is to show there has been genuine development. There are more subtle and carefully crafted arguments that articulate the hunches, suggestions, and insights of the classical pragmatists. My primary thesis is that, rather than viewing the analytic movement as representing a sharp rupture with pragmatism, we should understand that its most enduring significance is contributing to an ongoing pragmatic legacy. I suggest that when philosophers in the twenty-first century tell the story of the development of philosophy in America it is the continuous

development and honing of pragmatic themes that will stand out in their narratives. We will then see much more clearly what we are already beginning to see—that the story of development with which I began this paper is not just an oversimplification, it is a myth.

At the same time, we must be careful not to underestimate the heterogeneity, diversity, and sharp internal conflicts which have always characterized the pragmatists. I have already mentioned the differences between Peirce and James. It is difficult to imagine two philosophers differing more than Peirce and James (who nevertheless were lifelong friends). Peirce thought of himself as a logician, an experimental natural scientist and a student of the foundations of mathematics. He had a deep interest in scholastic debates about realism and universals. James—despite his training as a medical doctor and his interest in psychology—had little understanding of or appreciation for Peirce’s logical and semiotic concerns. I don’t think James ever understood what was so important and pathbreaking in Peirce’s logical studies, or why Peirce was so fascinated with Scotistic realism. Both temperamentally and intellectually, James was the sort of nominalist that Peirce was always attacking. Indeed, a close examination of all the major classical pragmatists would reveal just how much they disagreed with each other. We gain a much richer and thicker conception of the pragmatic tradition if we view it as an ongoing conversation in which there are very different and sometimes dissonant “voices.” The conflicts among the pragmatists are as important as anything that they share in common.

The types of difference that we find among the classical pragmatists persist today among those who identify themselves with the pragmatic legacy. Consider the sharp differences between Rorty and Putnam, both of whom think of themselves as carrying on the pragmatic tradition. For Rorty, the great heroes of pragmatism are James and Dewey (or rather, some would say, Rorty’s invention of two fictional characters which
he calls "James" and "Dewey"). Rorty in his early work did call attention to the importance of Peirce, but more recently—in his insouciant and ironic manner—Rorty declares that Peirce's contribution to pragmatism was merely to have given it a name, and to have stimulated James. Peirce himself remained the most Kantian of thinkers—the most convinced that philosophy gave us an all-embracing ahistorical context in which every other species of discourse could be assigned its proper place and rank. It was just this Kantian assumption that there was such a context, and that epistemology or semantics could discover it, against which James and Dewey reacted.\textsuperscript{13}

Rorty never seems to tire of debunking Kantian "foundation-alism"; Kant is Rorty's \textit{bête noire}. What Rorty wants to eliminate from his "purified" playful pragmatism is just what Putnam wants to preserve. Putnam writes—echoing Peirce's own starting point in philosophy which began with reflections on Kant—"For me, at least, almost all the problems of philosophy attain the form in which they are of real interest only with the work of Kant."\textsuperscript{14} Putnam has written perceptively about James and Dewey, but he has deep intellectual affinities (and sharp disagreements) with Peirce. Like Peirce, a concern with logic and the foundations of mathematics and physics have always been central concerns. And although recent formulations of "realism" differ significantly from Peirce's formulation, there is a direct lineage between Peirce's realism and Putnam's defense of what he has called "internal reason" and more recently "pragmatic realism"—realism with a small \textit{r}. This is where Putnam takes his stand against Rorty.

In the title essay, "Realism with a Human Face," of his recent book, Putnam lists five principles that he endorses and he says

\textsuperscript{14} Putnam, \textit{Realism with a Human Face}, p. 3.
“from Peirce’s earliest writings they have, I believe, been held by the pragmatists. . . .” They are:

(1) In ordinary circumstances, there is usually a fact of the matter as to whether the statements people make are warranted or not.

(2) 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.

(3) Our norms and standards of warranted assertability are historical products; they evolve in time.

(4) Our norms and standards always reflect our interests and values. Our picture of intellectual flourishing is part of, and only makes sense as part of, our picture of human flourishing in general.

(5) Our norms and standards of anything—including warranted assertability—are capable of reform. There are better and worse norms and standards.\footnote{Ibid., p. 21.}

Putnam gives a gloss on these five principles that is intended to show how he distances himself from Rorty. He argues that Rorty cannot really account for the crucial pragmatic idea that we can \textit{rationally} discriminate between “better and worse norms and standards.” Rorty, as Putnam sees it, is always slipping into “bad” relativism—despite Rorty’s protests to the contrary. The reason for Rorty’s waywardness is that he fails to appreciate and accept “internal” or “pragmatic realism”—a failure which Putnam argues has disastrous consequences that undermine Rorty’s version of pragmatism.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 21–29.} (There are many parallels between Putnam’s arguments against Rorty and Peirce’s arguments against James.)

These differences between Rorty and Putnam bring into the foreground another important aspect of the renewed interest in pragmatism. They remind us of a point forcefully made by Alasdair MacIntyre about traditions. He writes that a tradition “not only embodies the narrative of an argument, but is only
recovered by an argumentative retelling of that narrative which will itself be in conflict with other argumentative retellings."17 Conflict and disagreement have always been endemic among the pragmatists. There are also deep conflicts in the "argumentative retellings" of the pragmatic tradition. So with Rorty and Putnam, the different ways in which they interpret the pragmatic tradition—the themes that they foreground and those that they push into the background—are as consequential for understanding their own philosophic positions as they are for understanding the pragmatic tradition itself.

_The Resurgence of Pragmatism_

Now it may be objected that although I have spoken of the resurgence of pragmatism, thus far I have been arguing for the continuity and persistence of the pragmatic tradition rather than its resurgence. Furthermore it might be objected that when we compare the scope, breadth, and imaginative range of the classical pragmatists with what might be called "analytic pragmatism" there has been a considerable narrowing and limiting of focus. Questions concerning meaning, reference, truth, interpretation, translation, and language have been the dominant—obsessive—concerns. In these "analytic" developments, we scarcely find any discussion of ethics, politics, social philosophy, religion, aesthetics, and cosmological evolution which were so central for the classical pragmatists. This disparity of scope and range has led many philosophers, who are champions of the classical pragmatists, to be extremely suspicious of and even hostile to the appropriation of pragmatic themes by analytic philosophers. This development is seen as a betrayal of the grand intellectual vision of the classical pragmatists where exciting speculative

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ideas are turned into dusty, dry, technical problems which are of interest only to academic philosophers. I am not sympathetic with those who want to damn all of analytic philosophy, although there is no doubt that many analytic philosophers have been—and continue to be—extremely intellectually narrow, parochial, and arrogant. I also think it reflects a kind of defensive parochialism to suggest that the contributions of Quine, Sellars, Davidson, Rorty, and Putnam have nothing or little to do with the grand tradition of American pragmatism. But during the past decade there has been a broadening of scope in the resurgence of pragmatism—where the connections with the philosophic vision of the classical pragmatists are becoming much more pronounced.

For example, in Rorty’s writings since the publication of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, he has increasingly turned his attention to the themes of play, irony, metaphor, contingency, self-creation, and politics. He has sought to “redescribe” and defend the virtues of liberal democracy and to envision what a postphilosophical culture might look like. Rorty thinks of himself not only as working in the pragmatic tradition but as furthering Dewey’s liberal democratic aspirations. Recently, Rorty has been engaging in a type of cultural and social criticism that is addressed to a much broader audience than the narrow circle of professional philosophers. Rorty wants to speak to his fellow intellectuals, not merely as members of the academy but as citizens of a viable although deficient democracy. Putnam too is increasingly turning his attention to questions of obligation and the good in a democratic society. I have already cited his claims that “philosophy is an attempt to achieve the good” and that “our picture of intellectual flourishing is part of, and only makes sense as a part of, our picture of human flourishing in general.”

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18 Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face*, p. xi.
To extend the scope of my own narrative and to provide further evidence of the resurgence of pragmatism, I want to consider the contribution of Cornel West. West, in *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, develops still another “argumentative retelling” of the pragmatic tradition—one that digs back to the Emersonian sources of pragmatism. West’s canvas is much larger than those of Rorty or Putnam. He tells us:

It is no accident that American pragmatism once again rises to the surface of North Atlantic intellectual life at the present moment. For its major themes of evading epistemology-centered philosophy, accenting human powers, and transforming antiquated modes of social hierarchies in light of religious and/or ethical ideals make it relevant and attractive. The distinctive appeal of American pragmatism in our postmodern moment is its unashamedly moral emphasis and its unequivocally ameliorative impulse. In this world-weary period of pervasive cynicisms, nihilisms, terrorisms and possible extermination, there is a longing for norms and values that can make a difference, a yearning for principled resistance and struggle that can change our desperate plight.  

As West develops his genealogy of pragmatism, he begins with the Emersonian motifs of power, provocation, and personality, traces the emergence of pragmatism in Peirce and James, sees its “coming of age” with Dewey, outlines the dilemmas of pragmatic intellectuals in the mid-twentieth century, sketches its decline and resurgence. He triumphantly calls for a new revitalized “prophetic pragmatism.” As an engaged black intellectual with strong Christian and Gramscian tendencies, West is not an uncritical apologist for pragmatism. He gives a penetrating critique of its all too comfortable middle-class biases and its persistent blindness to the endemic racism and sexism of American society. The

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20 For West’s Emersonian interpretation of “power, provocation and personality,” see *ibid.*, pp. 11–35.
pragmatists never really developed an adequate public discourse for dealing with the tangled issues of class, race, or gender. Nevertheless, West deeply admires John Dewey and claims that American pragmatism reaches its highest level of sophisticated articulation and engaged elaboration in the works of John Dewey:

John Dewey is the greatest of the American pragmatists because he infuses an inherited Emersonian preoccupation with power, provocation and personality—permeated by voluntaristic, amelioristic, and activistic themes—with the greatest discovery of nineteenth-century Europe; a mode of historical consciousness that highlights the conditioned and circumstantial character of human existence in terms of changing societies, cultures and communities.\textsuperscript{21}

West admires Dewey because he was an engaged intellectual who combined his active involvement in the affairs of everyday life with a philosophic reflective awareness of the intellectual context and horizon of his interventions.

Although West was a student of Rorty, he claims that Rorty's anti-epistemological radicalism and belleuristic anti-academicism are refreshing and welcome in a discipline deeply entrenched in a debased and debilitating isolation. Yet, ironically, his project, though pregnant with rich possibilities, remains polemical (principally against other professional academics) and hence barren. It refuses to give birth to the offspring it conceives. Rorty leads philosophy to the complex world of politics and culture, but confines his engagement to the transformation in the academy and to the apologetics for the modern West.\textsuperscript{22}

I do not think this judgment is entirely fair—and I suspect that West might even applaud some of Rorty's recent interventions. For Rorty, like West, chides his fellow intellectuals for abandoning "real politics." He criticizes so-called

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., pp. 69–70.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., p. 207. For my criticisms of Rorty, see The New Constellation (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992).
"radical" postmodernists not because they abandon reason or stain the purity of academic disciplines but because they have "given up on the idea of democratic politics, of mobilizing moral outrage of the weak, of drawing upon a moral vocabulary common to well educated and badly educated, of those who get paid for analyzing symbols and those who get paid for pouring concrete or dishing up cheeseburgers."\textsuperscript{23} When Rorty writes in this manner, when he calls upon journalists and intellectuals "to function as citizens of a democracy," "to use the mechanisms of democratic government to help prevent the rich from ripping off the poor, the strong from trampling on the weak,"\textsuperscript{24} and to keep alive the social hope for democratic reform, he is echoing the radical democratic impulses of Dewey. Even though West's "prophetic pragmatism" is at once eclectic and programmatic—and occasionally sounds more like a Baptist sermon than a sober philosophic analysis—he is also drawing upon the radical democratic potential in the pragmatic tradition. "Prophetic pragmatism calls for reinvigoration of a sane, sober and sophisticated intellectual life in America and for regeneration of social forces empowering the disadvantaged, degraded and dejected. It rejects the faddish cynicism and fashionable conservatism rampant in the intelligentsia and general populace."\textsuperscript{25}

I do not want to underestimate the differences among Rorty, Putnam, and West as well as other participants in the resurgence of pragmatism in the United States. I reiterate that conflict and disagreement have always been vital among the pragmatists. But these conflicts have taken place against the background of shared, tacit, common understandings. All of the pragmatists—old and new—have always been sharply critical of any and all appeals to absolutes. They have insisted

\textsuperscript{23} Richard Rorty, "Intellectuals in Politics," Dissent, Fall 1991, p. 489.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., p. 490.
\textsuperscript{25} West, American Evasion of Philosophy, p. 239.
upon a robust plurality of experiences, beliefs, and inquiries. They have rejected fixed fact-value and descriptive-prescriptive dichotomies. As Rorty, Putnam, and West remind us, there has been a deep ethical-political commitment to the amelioration of human suffering and humiliation, and a positive commitment to ongoing egalitarian democratic social reform. All of the pragmatists have a strong sense of what Rorty calls "contingency," the precariousness of human existence. The pragmatists resisted cynicism and fashionable forms of despair. They also resisted all forms of totalistic critiques which tend to foster a sense of social and political impotence. They had an almost visceral reaction against all types of "true believers" and fundamentalists (religious and nonreligious). The prevailing spirit of pragmatism has been (pace Rorty) not deconstruction but reconstruction.

I have been focusing on the ethical-political strand in the pragmatic legacy which is once again coming into the foreground in the resurgence of American pragmatism. But there are also other important dimensions of this resurgence. A tradition lives when it is not simply honored or embalmed but when it is constantly reinterpreted and provides new sources of inspiration. There have always been those who have sought to keep alive the spirit of pragmatism—even when it seemed to reach its nadir. Sidney Hook, John E. Smith, John McDermott, and Sandra Rosenthal are among those who dedicated themselves to articulating and defending pragmatism at a time when very few philosophers would listen. Recently, other philosophers like Joseph Margolis and Richard Shusterman have provided fresh interpretations of pragmatism. There has been a revival of interest in a pragmatic aesthetics. There is now a new generation of intellectual historians, including David Hollinger, James Kloppenberg, and Robert Westbrook, who provide insight into the broader historical and cultural context of pragmatism in American culture. Today we are witnessing the renaissance of pragmatism in the humanities, the social and political disciplines, and
legal theory. In political theory, we can see this in the work of Benjamin Barber, William Sullivan, and Timothy V. Kaufman-Osborn. In sociology, there are novel contributions by Dmitri Shalin and Eugene Rochberg-Halton. In literary theory, pragmatic motifs are manifest in the works of Frank Lentricchia, Richard Poirier, Barbara Herrstein Smith, and Giles Gunn. In feminist theory, Nancy Fraser's voice has a distinctive pragmatic nuance. In religious studies, Jeffrey Stout has made creative use of the pragmatic legacy. Recently, Steven Rockefeller has brought out some of the religious themes in the work of John Dewey. Law reviews are filled with articles that draw upon both the classical and new generation of pragmatists. Scarcely a month passes without the appearance of a new book or article that deals with some aspect of the pragmatic legacy or that draws its inspiration from this legacy. For someone like myself who started "working on" the pragmatists more than thirty-five years ago when the conventional "wisdom" among professional philosophers was that pragmatism was dead (and deserved its death), the recent resurgence is a confirmation of what I have long believed—that the pragmatic legacy has a richness, diversity, vitality, and power to help clarify and to provide a philosophic orientation in dealing with the tangled theoretical and practical problems that we are presently confronting.

*Pragmatism and "Modern/Postmodern" Debates*

I have been concentrating on the development and resurgence of pragmatism in an American context. There are good reasons for this. Pragmatism is the most distinctive philosophic movement to emerge in the United States. It is important—for a subtle understanding of the pragmatic movement—to appreciate how this movement is at once rooted in American culture and also sharply critical of the failures of American society. The resurgence I have been describing is
primarily (but not exclusively) an American phenomenon. But perhaps the most important reason for stressing the rootedness of the pragmatic tradition in American culture is because I share with Rorty and West the conviction that responsible intellectuals who are concerned with present injustices, seemingly intractable social problems, and the failures of our political processes desperately need to reach beyond the academy, to draw upon a moral and political vocabulary that is shared by the educated and the uneducated. The pragmatic legacy provides the resources for such a vocabulary. Dewey, for all his faults, did speak such a language—in which he could address his fellow humans as citizens of a democratic experiment. Today many of our so-called “radical postmodern” intellectuals have become so “sophisticated” and “transgressive” that they speak a jargon which is barely intelligible to their fellow academic colleagues.

There is, of course, the danger that when one emphasizes the “American” rootedness of the pragmatic movement, this opens the way to “bad” ethnocentrism and provincial nationalism. For then one is playing into the hands of those who are convinced that pragmatism is nothing but an ideological expression of the crassest and most vulgar anti-intellectual aspects of American society. But there is also the opposite danger where we completely ignore the cultural context in which a philosophic movement develops, where we think that a philosophy consists solely of contextless universal propositions. We can be sensitive to the cultural context of American pragmatism and its universal thrust, without succumbing to a provincial ethnocentrism. Pragmatism, at its very core, has a *universalistic* thrust. The central idea of a critical community of inquirers is incompatible with nationalistic or cultural limitations on such a community. The pragmatists always emphasized how concrete inquiry is grounded in a specific existential and cultural context, a specific lifeworld, and at the same time endeavors to *transcend* the limitations of context.
But the influence of pragmatism has not been limited to American philosophy. One of the most creative developments in pragmatism has been its profound influence in shaping the thought of such German philosophers as Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas. Apel, who has been primarily responsible for introducing Peirce to German readers, has also written one of the best books on pragmatism. Even more relevant, his own philosophical program of a transcendental pragmatism builds upon the work of Peirce (and Royce). Jürgen Habermas has himself been influenced by Peirce, Dewey, and Mead.26 His critical interpretation of Mead is basic for his own understanding of intersubjectivity and his theory of communicative action. Some of the most perceptive critical discussions of Mead are to be found in the works of such German thinkers as Hans Joas and Ernst Tugenhat.27 It is ironical that we have to turn to German philosophers and social theorists to “rediscover” our own tradition. What distinguishes Apel, Habermas, Joas, and Tugenhat from many of their American counterparts is that they do not “patronize” the classical pragmatists. They critically draw on the pragmatists in order to further our philosophic understanding of sociality, intersubjectivity, communication, and practical rationality. These creative appropriations of pragmatic motifs are further evidence that pragmatism speaks to and is relevant to more universal normative concerns.

How is one to account for this resurgence of pragmatism? Why is there now so much vitality and diversity in both retrieving and giving a new impetus to the pragmatic legacy? What does the pragmatic resurgence tell us about our present cultural situation? Part of the answer is related to recent


"modern/postmodern" controversies. To explain what I mean I want to cite a remark made by Habermas in his *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Speaking of Heidegger, Adorno, and Derrida, Habermas says:

They all still defend themselves as if they were living in the shadow of the “last” philosopher, as did the first generation of Hegelian disciples. They are still battling against the “strong” concepts of theory, truth and system that have actually belonged to the past for over a century and a half. They still think they have to arouse philosophy from what Derrida calls “the dream of its heart.” They believe they have to tear philosophy away from the madness of expounding a theory that has the last word.  

Habermas adds that what they forget and suppress is that “the fallibilist consciousness of the sciences caught up with philosophy, too, a long time ago.” Habermas is here touching on a tendency that runs deep in many so-called “postmodern” philosophic discourses. In their insistence and valorization of ruptures, fragmentation, difference, plurality, and “otherness” and in their relentless attacks on logocentrism, universality, rationality, unity and totality, many “postmodern” thinkers seduce us into a misleading (and disastrous) either/or. Much of the pathos and animus of “postmodern” critiques are parasitic upon the hidden presupposition that what must constantly be opposed is this strong sense of “theory, truth and system” which—when unmasked—turns out to be a disguise for “violence,” “brute power,” and “terror.” We see this “radical gesture” in the rhetorical flourish of the conclusion of Jean-François Lyotard’s essay “What is Postmodernism?” For he declares:

We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and the communicable experience. Under the general demand for slackening and for appeasement,
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we can hear the mutterings of the desire for a return to terror, for the realization of the fantasy to seize reality. The answer is: let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unpresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name.29

I think Habermas is right when he tells us that the fallibilistic consciousness caught up with philosophy a long time ago. The classical pragmatists began with deconstructing what Habermas calls the dream (or nightmare) of “the total and complete system.” But they were not obsessed with attacking over and over again the absolutism and foundationalism that they rejected. The primary problem for them was how to reconstruct philosophy in a manner that was compatible with a fallibilistic orientation and an appreciation of the radical plurality of experience. Once we give up what Dewey calls “the spectator view” of knowledge or what Putnam calls “the God’s-eye view,” then the task becomes one of developing an account of inquiry that is sensitive to human finitude, fallibility, and contingency. Oxymoronically the pragmatists were better “postmodernists” than many so-called postmoderns. One of the most significant contributions of “postmodern” critiques has been its skepticism about binary oppositions and rigid dichotomies. Derrida, for example, is a master at exposing the implicit and dubious valorization in these dichotomies—and also in showing how these “oppositions” are parasitic upon each other. In this regard there is a strong affinity with the pragmatic skepticism about all presumably fixed and stable dichotomies and distinctions. But many “postmodern” thinkers slip back into the crude form of binary thinking when they damn universality, identity, totality, and praise particularity, difference, fragmentation. They tacitly “inscribe” a new set of fixed hierarchical dichotomies. But for the pragmatists—who are more consistently “postmod-

29 Jean-François Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 81-82.
ern"—our task is to appreciate the role of both universality and particularity, identity and difference, wholeness and fragmentation, etc. This pragmatic attitude also has significant consequences for their ethical-political outlook and strong commitment to democratic ideals. For they conceive of our collective project as one where we have to live without absolutes, or as Hannah Arendt once phrased it "to think without banisters" and at the same time not to succumb to a narcissistic despair. The creative task is to learn to live with an irreducible contingency and ambiguity—not to ignore it and not to wallow in it.

It is my belief—which I have argued in another place—that there has been a dialectic at work in so-called "postmodern" philosophic discourses. Initially they were characterized by gestures of transgression, negativity, and rejection. Like Hegel's portrait of skeptical consciousness they delighted in the play of what Hegel calls "abstract negation":

This is just the skepticism which only ever sees pure nothingness in its result and abstracts from the fact that this nothingness is specifically the nothingness of that from which it results. . . . The skepticism that ends up with the bare abstraction of nothingness or emptiness cannot get any further from there but must wait to see whether something new comes along and what it is, in order to throw it too into the same empty abyss.

What Hegel describes might well be taken as depiction of "transgressive" postmodernism which waits to see if something new comes along in order to throw it too in the same empty abyss.

Recently a new mood—what Heidegger calls a Stimmung—is becoming evident in "postmodern" discourses which might be labeled "post-transgressive postmodernism"—or more simply a "pragmatic" orientation. For there is a growing sense

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30 See The New Constellation.
that we cannot simply dismiss ethical-political questions and throw them in the same empty abyss—that we must not only learn to live without absolutes and with ineradicable ambiguity, contingencies, and double-binds, but we must also be prepared to take, defend, and commit ourselves to responsible positions. Although we may abandon any claim to infallible rationality, we cannot give up on the demand for making reasonable discriminations. This is just what the pragmatists sought to do. And they were always intertwining this fallibilistic orientation with a strong commitment to democratic pluralism that privileged creative individuality and experimentalism. Many “postmodern” thinkers conceive of themselves as engaging in a radical critique. But we must continually ask, “What precisely is being criticized—and critique in the name of what?” This demands that we honestly and imaginatively articulate and defend the ideals that are the basis of critique. The gesture of totalizing critique that seeks to expose and mock all norms and standards is self-defeating and ends in what Habermas calls “performative contradiction.” I agree with Derrida when he writes, “I cannot conceive of a radical critique which would not be ultimately motivated by some sort of affirmation acknowledged or not.”32 This realization—that our critiques are motivated by some sort of affirmation—has been central to the pragmatic tradition. Because our affirmations do not rest upon fixed foundations and are not gratuitous “decisions,” it becomes vital that they be articulated, debated, and publicly discussed. The reason why I think there is now a resurgence of pragmatism and why we are learning anew to appreciate the classical pragmatists is because they were ahead of their times. They already had a deep sense of the aporias which are at the heart of contemporary “modern/postmodern” controversies. They sought to develop a creative response to those aporias. One of the primary reasons why—at this time—the pragmatists

are more relevant than ever is because the dialectic of "modernity-postmodernity" is catching up with the pragmatists. I do not think we can simply return to the pragmatists to solve our theoretical and practical problems. Nothing could be more unpragmatic than to engage in nostalgia for the "good old days" (that never quite existed). But I do believe that we can continue to draw inspiration from the pragmatic legacy and to develop it in creative ways.