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This aim of this book is to describe what pragmatism does, what it has done, and what it may yet do. This does not amount to offering a definition or even a delineation of pragmatism. My intention is not to develop a determinative statement nor is it to summarize some list of supposedly essential features. Rather, I seek to loosen pragmatism up so that it can do even more work and do that work better. I want to open pragmatism out onto opportunities and potentialities yet underexplored.

What justifies this book—which may seem at first blush like yet another in a long line of books in which the author attempts to state what pragmatism is—is that the conception of pragmatism I here present is one as yet only inchoate in previous statements of pragmatism. I here present a conception of pragmatism that presses outward in decidedly new directions. My claim is not that these directions are nonexistent in the work of previous pragmatists—for were that the case, then what I here present would not be suitably dubbed pragmatism. Nor is my claim that one cannot find in the work of many other pragmatists the central themes around which my presentation of pragmatism focuses—I should hope that my work here indeed resonates well with the work of certain other writers who have been influential on the genesis of my conception of pragmatism. The particular emphasis and focus I here give pragmatism is one that has yet to fully crystallize in the work of my pragmatist predecessors. Although the writings of many previous pragmatists richly
inform the central idea around which my vision of pragmatism revolves—transition—no pragmatist has as yet focused their own philosophical work on this idea to the degree that I attempt here.

The vision of pragmatism that I work out in the following pages is that of pragmatism as a philosophical mode that takes as its central concern the process of transitioning. Transitions are those temporal structures and historical shapes in virtue of which we get from here to there. According to this transitionalist interpretation, pragmatism's most important philosophical contribution is that of redescribing the philosophical practices of thought, critique, and inquiry such that these practices take place in time and through history. Philosophy according to transitionalist pragmatism is best practiced as a process that takes time and is involved in history. I refer to this philosophical focus on temporality and historicity as "transitionalism" simply because other words that suggest themselves for this role happen to be either too cumbersome or too heavily weighed down in other philosophical debates. A list of such synonyms might include historicism, temporalism, evolutionism, developmentalism, eventism, and processism. While each of these words can stand for concepts that I believe more or less approximate transitionalism, they all also stand for much else besides that need to be distinguished from transitionalism. The basic theme of transitionalism is, to put it colloquially, getting through.

The transitionalist account of pragmatism I here develop and defend constitutes a renewed third wave of pragmatist philosophy. This third-wave pragmatism is needed both for reasons internal to the tradition of pragmatism itself and for wider philosophical reasons. Taking the internal motivations first, the primary impetus here is a certain frustrating impasse within pragmatism that has done much to block productive philosophical work in recent years, and in spite of the widely celebrated resurgence of pragmatism over the same period. The standard histories of pragmatism tell the story of pragmatism's emergence in the late nineteenth century, decline in the mid-twentieth century, and revival in the late twentieth century as a history that culminates, at least for the time being, in two seemingly divergent strands of thought: the classical pragmatisms of William James, John Dewey, and Charles Santiago Peirce, and the contemporary neopragmatisms of Richard Rorty and such of his interlocutors as Hilary Putnam and Robert Brandom. These two lineages of pragmatism have for the most part (notable exceptions always being the rule) failed to engage in productive dialogue. Although Rorty claims a Deweyan legacy for his thought, contemporary pragmatist scholars of Dewey often play the role of guardian by refusing to endorse Rorty's claim to the title of pragmatist. On the other side, those swayed by Rorty too often prefer to sweep aside his claims for the importance of Dewey, focusing instead on Rorty's other philosophical inspirations, such as Wittgenstein or Heidegger. In light of these and other blocked conversations, what is most needful for pragmatism today is a renewing third wave of pragmatism that is able to integrate what is best in the two distinctive waves of pragmatist thought that have preceded it.

This sundering of pragmatism in two has played out in a wide range of philosophical debates over which there is increasing distance between Rortyans and Deweyans, or neo- and classicoo. One of the most important of these concerns is the centering role played by the concept of experience in Dewey's pragmatism in contrast to the antixperiential linguistic turn in philosophy ushered in by Rorty's pragmatism. These experience-language debates have left pragmatism torn in two. Half of us are busy expounding Deweyan, Jamesian, and Peircean epistemologies that simply do not sit well with the driving questions that have emerged over the course of the intervening "linguistic century" of philosophy. The other half of us are busy developing neopragmatist insights tailored to thoroughly linguistic philosophical projects that have risen to prominence in the hundred years since Russell used Frege to oppose James's use of Peirce. These and other schisms make it increasingly clear that pragmatism is at an impasse with itself. Other pragmatist debates, such as that concerning the priority of a distinction between public and private spheres in liberal democracy, have been raging for more than a few decades now. Many of these debates have recently begun to show signs of exhaustion. This suggests that the time is opportune for proposing a resolution.

A renewed third wave of pragmatism is thus needful today for the continued vigor of the tradition itself. But not only is such a pragmatism needed; it is also fortunately quite possible. We are finally beginning to witness the emergence of a sensibility according to which we pragmatists have something to learn from both Dewey and Rorty, both James and Putnam, both Peirce and Brandom. This sensibility runs far deeper than a look at the latest scholarly journals would suggest. Indeed, such shifts in philosophical ethos almost always outpace the entrenched organs archiving the received wisdom of former
decades. Such shifts are generally most marked among younger generations of scholars. In the case of pragmatism, we are now beginning to witness the emergence of philosophers who came to Dewey and James by way of Rorty and Putnam, not the other way around. The pragmatists of this vintage do not have impressed upon them an initial motivation for prying apart classicopragmatism and neopragmatism. These newer pragmatists find in both lineages common themes, which they put to productive use in their own philosophical projects. This book offers a way of bringing these common themes into focus so that the next generation of pragmatists, but also those in prior generations who have sensibly resisted the quick separation of Dewey and Rorty by their peers, can confidently and cogently draw on a pragmatism that extends from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first.

These impasses, frustrations, and exhaustion now plaguing pragmatism are by no means pragmatism's alone. As such, a third-wave pragmatism should prove useful not only for the tradition itself but also for contemporary philosophy and the broader intellectual currents in which it swims. Widespread interest in issues dealing with experience and language are still at the center of epistemology, and widespread anxiety over public versus private fuels growing bodies of work in political theory and ethics. Other disciplines and subfields draw generously upon, and make their own important contributions to, this work. It is thus clear that it is not just within pragmatism that there is an increasing sense that some of these impasses result from problems having been falsely posed. It is not unreasonable to hope that a resolution of these problems in pragmatism might yet lead to a broader resolution rippling throughout other currents of philosophy. I here propose a possible way toward the resolution of some of these impasses in pragmatist terms. The hope is that this may help us more adequately address the core problems, arguments, and insights that have led us to some of the broadest philosophical crossroads we find ourselves at today.

The vista of transitionalism here explicated helps us gain a better understanding of themes common across the tradition of pragmatism. The hope is that this better understanding will better equip us to deploy these pragmatist themes with increased confidence. The transitionalist sensibility of historicity and temporality provides a lens for bringing into focus that which unites classicopragmatists and neopragmatists across a range of philosophical topics. Transitionalism also helps us understand how pragmatism has always been an engaged form of philosophical practice in which philosophy is best understood as meliorist cultural criticism. The project of cultural melioration is one of pragmatism's best contributions to modern philosophy. The theme of transitionalism helps us see that every major version of pragmatism is concerned, primarily, with the ways in which philosophy can help us improve those situations in which we already find ourselves. Whether this theme is read through work on epistemological, ethical, or political conceptions, these are deep affinities that unite otherwise diverse strands of pragmatist thought. These affinities, I argue, are no small matter, and they do much to establish pragmatism as a distinctive philosophical tradition that has much to offer to other traditions that have failed to take transitions seriously. If pragmatists today fail to cultivate the meliorating potential of transitions, then we shall lose what is best in pragmatism and we shall lose much of what is good in philosophy too.

This further explains not only why transitionalism has something to offer to pragmatism but also why pragmatism has yet something to offer to philosophy. One way of developing this thought is to consider what role pragmatism might play in the future of philosophy. My wager is that the day of philosophy as system is over. The coming century is likely to see philosophy taken up not for the sake of explanations of everything but rather for the purpose of contributing thought to our most critical moments. Philosophy in these conditions will be at its best as a means of orienting and adjusting our practices of critique and inquiry. For these purposes, the now-classic image of philosophies as clashing systems will come to seem increasingly antiquated. Philosophers will not impose upon the traditions and figures from which they draw a requirement that individual schools and singular thinkers be able to do everything we should want from a philosophy. We will rather turn to pluralities of philosophical thought in order to draw from them concepts, arguments, and other tools that may prove useful for the critical inquiries we will regard as our primary vocations. In these conditions, pragmatists will freely avail themselves of resources offered up by their nonpragmatist colleagues, including not only philosophers inquiring in the context of other problems but also historians, anthropologists, policy analysts, and engineers.

From the perspective of this future philosophy, the history of twentieth-century philosophy will likely come to be seen as playing out the final moves of an exasperated game of philosophy as system. Much of twentieth-century philosophy is indeed already recognizable in these terms. Consider the longtime
mutual incomprehension between so-called Analytic and Continental philosophy. I doubt that the familiar labels of Analytic and Continental philosophy refer any longer to anything as coherent as traditions or schools, but there is no doubt that the latter decades of twentieth-century philosophy were largely animated by trivial hostilities between those who took, say, Quine or Carnap seriously and those who preferred to read, say, Derrida or Heidegger. Now that these turf wars have finally begun to cool off, in recent years philosophy once again finds itself looking for ways of mediating among seemingly disparate approaches to critique and inquiry. One way in which pragmatists can offer their services as mediators in the midst of this metaphilosophical change of heart is to emphasize ways in which pragmatist philosophy can contribute to and draw nourishment from some of the best work by the leading lights of other philosophical traditions.

This is why I am particularly eager in what follows to point out some of the ways in which pragmatist thought can benefit from an engagement with and at the same time inform the work of a diverse crew of philosophers. I engage at some length with work by Bernard Williams, Stanley Cavell, Pierre Bourdieu, and especially Michel Foucault. I also discuss, though not in any extraordinary detail, other important contemporary thinkers including Amartya Sen, Michael Walzer, Paul Rabinow, Axel Honneth, and Iris Marion Young. I aim for a capacious pragmatism. Although none of these figures is a conventional philosopher on any tradition's reckoning, Williams and Foucault at least are taken often enough as representatives of so-called Analytic and Continental philosophy, respectively, at least by those on the other side of the yawn. Showing that pragmatism has much in common with representatives of diverse philosophical traditions helps us position pragmatism as potentially mediating certain unnecessarily prohibitive philosophical divides.

As a way of offering a fuller impression of how I understand transitionalism to function both within pragmatism and within philosophy more generally, I conclude this introduction with a brief summary of the major themes of each of the chapters that follow. Taken on the whole, the aim of these chapters is to show just how much is to be gained in theory and practice by reconstructing pragmatism as transitionalism.

I begin in chapter 1 by laying out a vision of pragmatism as a project of cultural critical philosophy. I explicate the central concepts of this vision: transitionalism, meliorism, historicity, and temporality. Transitionalism is charac-

tered in terms of passing through time and history from one situation to the next. Meliorism is characterized in terms of rendering these transitions into reconstructions, or processes of improvement, progress, and growth. Focusing pragmatism through both of these lenses leads to my conception of pragmatism as engaged cultural criticism. For the pragmatist, the work of philosophy takes place in time and through history such that philosophical melioration is best understood in terms of reconstructing the cultural present in which we find ourselves. I show how this leads to a redescription of the pragmatist canon such that the core of the tradition is best represented by usual suspects such as William James and John Dewey but also by previously neglected thinkers including Ralph Waldo Emerson and Richard Rorty. It is above all in Emerson, James, Dewey, and Rorty that we find evinced that practice of philosophy as transitional and meliorative cultural criticism that I take as the best part of the tradition.

In chapters 2 and 3, I move on to efforts more erudite in ambition. These chapters lay out competing interpretations of the intellectual history of pragmatism. On the one hand, I am eager to show that my favored transitionalist themes are characteristic of every major pragmatist thinker. On the other hand, I am also keen to point out that all of these pragmatists have taken some other theme to be more at the heart of pragmatism.

The aim in chapter 2 is to feature the richness of transitional themes as they have surfaced in the writings of the great pantheon of pragmatists. I consider first the classical pragmatisms of James and Dewey and then two streams of midcentury pragmatism as these lead to the present. One stream was navigated by thinkers inflecting pragmatism with positivism, leading from Willard Van Orman Quine and Wilfrid Sellars to Richard Rorty and Robert Brandom. A second stream was explored in midcentury by many of Dewey's own students, carried forward by John Herman Randall and John McDermott, and culminates for the moment in contemporary classicopragmatism as represented by Joseph Margolis, Larry Hickman, and John Stuhr. This chapter is largely an effort in quotation. By quoting previous pragmatisms in such a way as to feature points of resonance across a diverse array of pragmatists from classic- to neo- and back again, I intend to seed the idea that there is much to be gained by emphasizing the deep continuities that run throughout these waters. Transitionalist themes of historicity and temporality play such a unifying purpose.
In chapter 3, I contrast my proposal for a third-wave transitional pragmatism with other items of conceptual emphasis that have tended to remain at the fore over the history of the first two waves of pragmatism. This chapter offers a review of those contentious debates over language and experience that continue to divide adherents of Jamesian and Deweyan classicopragmatism from advocates of Rortyan pragmatism. I am concerned to point out certain deficiencies that result from placing too much stress on experience or language rather than on the processes of transitioning in which both experience and language ought to be situated. But I am also keen to point out that there is something right in both approaches. James and Dewey were correct that a transitionalist philosophy like pragmatism must take experience seriously. But Rorty was correct to see that if we take experience too seriously we risk turning it into a foundation for knowledge, morality, or politics. This motivates a requirement for a third version of pragmatism that could blend classicopragmatist insights about experience with neopragmatist caution about foundationalism, representationalism, and givenism. I conclude this chapter by briefly considering two other recent attempts to lay out a path for a third-wave pragmatism: one of these I take as deeply misguided and the other I take as broadly inspirational.

In chapters 4, 5, and 6, I explicate transitionalism by showing how it provides the best way of bringing into focus the distinctive advantages of pragmatist contributions to epistemology, ethical theory, and political philosophy. The point of these chapters is not to show that pragmatism definitively resolves the crucial philosophical difficulties featured in these areas (for that would take at least three additional volumes). Rather, the point is to discern the specific orientation offered by pragmatism’s intervention in these debates such that we can begin to recognize why a transitionalist interpretation better focuses the distinctive advantages of pragmatism’s contribution than do the usual metaphors offered for these purposes. My aim is to show that the familiar pragmatist themes of experimentalism, pluralism, humanism, contextualism, fallibilism, and democratic liberalism yield their best philosophical advantages when inflected by the core pragmatist commitment to transitionalism.

Chapter 4 lays out a version of pragmatist epistemology that stresses the idea of knowledge as an evolving and developing practical process. I explicate the pragmatist theory of knowing as one in which knowledge is a process whereby past projections lead to future eventualities. Affirming this view requires some amount of metaphilosophical reconsideration of what sort of work we might expect from philosophical theories of truth and knowledge. But if these metaphilosophical shifts and their attendant philosophical reconceptualizations of knowledge can be accepted, then a transitionalist pragmatist epistemology can offer an improved conception of the relation between experience and language, which has proven so vexing for previous pragmatists. To make some of the points urged in this chapter, I explicate pragmatism in conversation with the work of the philosopher-sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.

Chapter 5 works toward a reinterpretation of pragmatist ethics. I argue that pragmatist transitionalism enabled James and Dewey to develop a new approach to ethical inquiry in which they suggested a way for integrating the crucially important concerns developed by the two great modern moral traditions of deontology and utilitarianism. In elaborating the idea of a pragmatist transitionalism about ethics, I also connect my conception of pragmatism to the moral philosophy of Stanley Cavell, whose Emersonian moral perfectionism shares much more with the pragmatisms of James and Dewey than is commonly recognized, even by Cavell himself.

Chapter 6 shows how pragmatist transitionalism can make a valuable contribution to political theory. A transitionalist conception of political theory finally enables philosophy to overcome the failings of the prevailing modes of utopian, dystopian, and conservative political criticism. In the place of these dominant modes, a transitionalist and meliorist political philosophy urges as its central idea that the situations in which we find ourselves already contain the resources requisite for improving those situations. After explicating this view in a diverse set of pragmatists including Randolph Bourne, Walter Lippmann, James, Dewey, and Rorty, I turn to another contemporary meliorist political philosopher not usually associated with pragmatism, namely Bernard Williams. I conclude this chapter by outlining the advantages of a transitionalist version of pragmatist democratic theory vis-à-vis other contemporary pragmatist approaches to democracy, including language-centric deliberativism and experience-centric communitarianism. This foray into democratic theory enables me to explicate connections between pragmatism and the critical theoretical work of Iris Marion Young and Axel Honneth.

Finally, in chapter 7 I turn to showing how pragmatism in a transitionalist key can equip us with models for critique and inquiry in a way that will prove crucial for future philosophical work no longer confined by the old paradigm of philosophies as systems. The first step in this argument is recognizing that
a pragmatism that takes transitions seriously is also a pragmatism for which philosophy and history must come together. Of course, pragmatists must not involve themselves in just any form of history. Rather, they must work with the sorts of histories that result from a distinctively pragmatist historiography. I show how pragmatism can benefit from involving itself with another tradition of thought that is also simultaneously philosophical and historical, namely genealogy, and especially as developed by Michel Foucault. My conclusion is that pragmatist transitionalism paves the way for a new hybrid model of critique and inquiry, which I call genealogical pragmatism. As I envision this hybrid philosophy, genealogy supplies the problematizations that then motivate the work of reconstructive problem solving supplied by pragmatism. This sort of collaboration with genealogy enables me to show how pragmatists can finally offer convincing responses to two criticisms that have been persistently pressed against pragmatism for well over a century now: namely, the related criticisms that, first, pragmatism is Panglossian in downplaying the place of the tragic in our lives, and, second, that it is Promethean in overemphasizing the prowess of instrumental means-end rationality. In pressing pragmatism beyond a position in which it is susceptible to these long-running criticisms, I propose a philosophical-historical genealogical pragmatism that offers ample opportunities for developing effective critical inquiries into the actual situations in which we find ourselves today. This helps us see how pragmatism can best engage the practical realities wherein critique and inquiry make their greatest difference.
epistemic or moral rightness, we should instead focus on epistemic or moral melioration, improvement, development, and growth.

Transitionalism as I here develop and deploy it gathers together a number of philosophically complex concepts, including temporality, historicity, evolution, development, process, and event. The concept of transitions, which I find central to pragmatism, serves as a focal point for making sense of this complex bundle. In some ways, transitionalism can be usefully thought of as a lens that brings into focus a fairly wide network of interrelated concepts and themes central to the pragmatist tradition. It might also be usefully thought of as a figure that establishes a connected coherence among a diverse array of elements.

Transitionalism, both the idea and the word, is an improvisation on an immensely generative insight offered by William James: “Life is in the transitions” (1904b, 212). I offer transitionalism for the purposes of providing a generous canopy under which a wide range of pragmatists and thinkers from other traditions can gather. It might thus be inadvisable to pick out any single pragmatist as guiding my vision, lest this lead to subtle exclusions of those to whom I wish to extend an invitation. But at the same time, it is immensely helpful to pick out a name that reaches back into the very tradition of which I am attempting a revision. If I must begin by following somebody’s lead, then, I think it best to follow James’s. In the pages that follow, I turn to James more than any other single thinker to make my points, though I certainly turn to plenty of others in addition (most notably Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Dewey, and Richard Rorty). Although my following James could indeed lead to the subtle sorts of exclusions that I wish to avoid, I believe that it will minimize the inevitable cliquishness if only for the reason that James is clearly the most intellectually and morally generous pragmatist in the tradition. It is that generosity which I wish to invoke in borrowing from James the title for the conception of pragmatism here offered. It is through such generosity that a renewing wave of pragmatism may yet prove capacious enough to gather philosophical work from across the entire tradition and from other traditions besides.

A more problematic way to court subtle exclusions at the outset would be to offer up a rigorous definition or logical account of transitionality at the fore. This way of proceeding would be quite distant from the spirit of transitionalism itself. It will nonetheless be helpful to begin by more carefully specifying the concept of transitionality. Doing so requires that I explicate without going all the way to logical or formal stipulating.

Transitionality, in the sense in which it is central for pragmatism, needs to be distinguished from mere change. Transitionality suggests temporally mediated development, whereas change suggests temporally mediated difference. The difference between development and difference, however, makes all the difference for transitionality.

The best way in which to state this difference is in terms of a distinction between purposive activity and undirected change. Transitionality connotes purposiveness and directedness such that change can be regarded as something more than just random or dumb difference. A conception of transitionality as purposive already places transitionality at the center of pragmatism, insofar as pragmatism follows Kant in conceiving of thought as a thoroughly purposive and directive activity. Mind for the pragmatist is act, effort, and deed. It is this active dimension that distinguishes transitionality from passive change. The way in which a boulder rolls down a mountain and the way in which a hummingbird and a human being strive toward the glory of the sun are two very different ways of transitioning. They are not entirely different, and there is much that these two processes share. But it is crucial to note that there are differences, the most important of which is the difference between development and mere difference. The boulder does not develop itself in rolling down the hill. But the hummingbird and the human being do, for better or for worse.

For better or for worse? Isn’t that the crucial thing? Of course it is. Everything within the vast spaces of the human heart and head, and perhaps also in the hummingbird’s, depends on whether or not our purposive transitions result in definite improvements or in definite degenerations. It is crucial to the pragmatist way of thinking that we not specify in advance the particular pattern or shape that will determine whether or not any given transition amounts to melioration or decline. We cannot say in advance what success will amount to. This is unsurprising, because it means that the emergence of new futures is not fully determined by the structures of old pasts. The past constrains but does not determine the future. For the new to be truly new, it must be able to develop out of the old without merely rehearsing the old. This suggests that the difference that purposiveness introduces between difference and development
cannot be strictly delimited in advance. While purposiveness, in the pragmatist way of thinking, connotes thought, intelligence, meaning, and rationality, it does not connote intellectualism, the view that rationality must conform to some pattern, method, or logic which precedes it. The very value of rationality, the pragmatist insists, is that it can introduce new differences where they did not formerly inhabit old structures. Thought must always respect the constraints of the situations in which it finds itself, but the difference between thoughtful transition and the dumb changes undergone by inert matter is that between a thought that develops a situation according to its constraints and a change that finds itself wholly determined by the past preceding it.

That purposive activity cannot be wholly determined in advance suggests that transitions are a kind of neutral field within which both progress and decay are possible. This is indeed the case. The fact of transitionality, the fact that we are thoughtful beings, does not mean that things will always get better, that improvement will always ensue, or that rationality is the destiny of humanity or of the universe. Whether or not purposive activity achieves progress or depletes itself is something that can only be worked out in the context of actual transitions themselves. There are no universal rules of rationality that we can specify in advance. We can work with the epistemic, ethical, and political resources already available to us within a given situation, but there is no point in insisting that these resources are the sure route to success in every context, in every time, and in every place. In this sense, purposive transitionality and the temporal structure of practice are neutral fields out of which we can with effort develop forms of epistemic and ethical success. Recognizing that our possibilities are constrained only by the historical and temporal contingencies that shape them, however severe those constraints might be, enables us to focus on how we might work toward our futures and then actually achieve them on the basis of the resources already available to us within the situations in which we find ourselves. It is characteristic of the four pragmatists I take as the best exemplars of the tradition (namely Emerson, James, Dewey, and Rorty) that they continuously worked to leverage their transitionalist sensibility into a meliorist hope with which they sought to turn the transitions toward which they found themselves flowing into processes of betterment.

Before turning to the ways in which the meliorism of my four leading pragmatists describes the proper focal range for pragmatist transitionism, allow me to roll out a little bit further the two ideas at the core of transitionism: temporality and historicity. Transitionality connotes purposive change in light of the shifting circumstances of temporal and historical context. But what are temporality and historicity? I shall often use these two concepts more or less interchangeably. This is justified insofar as in many contexts these two concepts do function in more or less the same way. Nevertheless, there are occasions when it is helpful to distinguish temporality and historicity, and so I would like to offer a brief explication of my different use of these concepts. Distinguishing them in this way also enables me to better explicate how I take these concepts to function.

I understand temporality and historicity as implying one another in the sense that they are two aspects of the same underlying phenomenon of transitionality, development, or purposive change. Temporality refers to the form of transitionality itself. Historicity refers to the determinate contents through which transitions occur. It follows that historicity needs temporality as its form and temporality needs historicity as its content. While temporality is the general form that transitionality assumes, such form must always manifest in particular historical contents. And while historicity refers to the determinate content of transitionality, these contents must always be informed by the general structure of temporality. Take experience. Temporality refers to the flowing-ness of experience. Historicity refers to the actual ways in which experience flows. Temporality indicates that it flows, and historicity indicates how it flows. That I have an experience of something being before something else that is after it refers to the temporality of experience. But the particular way in which this thing is before that other thing that is after it invokes the historicity of experience. Temporality captures the structural relations of transitions, and historicity captures the actual situated occurring of transitions. Transitions always take place through the form of temporality as expressed in the historicity of particular contents. Given this account of the relation between temporality and historicity, we can say that transitionism focuses on knowledge, ethics, politics, and critique as temporally structured and historically situated.

This clarifies the often puzzling relationship between temporality and historicity. But there remains another puzzling pair of relationships between temporality and time on the one hand and historicity and history on the other. It is not my aim here to resolve longstanding philosophical questions
concerning these matters, but a few words are nonetheless in order. If temporality refers to a particular form of practice and historicity refers to the particular content of practices that accord with that form, we might say at first blush that this implies that practice takes place in time and through history. This is true enough. Historicity invokes the historical content that invests every practice, while temporality invokes the temporal form that every practice so invested takes on. My arguments in later chapters thus concern the way in which pragmatism enables us to focus on the thoroughgoing historicity and temporality of epistemic, ethical, and political practice. But as it turns out, this is to say something quite more than is revealed by the first-blush impression that our practices take place in history and time. For we can go further than this and say that the content of our practices is irreducibly historical and that their form is irreducibly temporal. We can say, in short, that historicity and temporality invest all of our practices with the form of real flowing time and the contents of actual flowing history. Our practices are not merely located in time and in history but are also themselves constituted in their entirety by practical content that is itself historical and temporal. Our practices not only flow through time and history but are also made up of material that is irreducibly historical and temporal. This is related to why I prefer "transitionalism" to "transitionism"—the latter states the fact of flow while the former invokes the process of flowing in action. Best, of course, would be "transitioningism," but that word is too ugly to want to invent.

Bringing Meliorism Into Focus

Transitionalism inflects our practical and theoretical activity with an interrelated family of notions including historicity, history, time, and temporality. When philosophy itself is interpreted through the lens of these transitional notions, it turns out that philosophy is best understood as a theory and practice of hopeful cultural criticism. One name that pragmatists have used to refer to such a conception of philosophical practice is meliorism. The central idea of meliorism is that a philosophically robust conception of hope can function as a guide for critique and inquiry. As put forth here, this melioristic conception of philosophy as hopeful cultural criticism is meant to be extensive enough to function usefully across epistemic, ethical, and political contexts. The function of philosophy on this melioristic view is to engage in the long labor of reconstructing and reorienting the epistemic, ethical, and political realities in which we find ourselves flowing.

This melioristic conception of philosophical hope helps focus the transitionalism that is at the heart of pragmatism. Although transitionalism is the centermost conception for the pragmatist way of thinking, the conception of meliorism helps clarify the specific value of the transitionalist perspective. I noted above that transitionalism easily appears neutral with respect to development or decay. Meliorism, by contrast, clearly connotes something valuable at the same time as it connotes something effective and workable. If transitionalism connotes merely purposive change, then meliorism connotes purposive change for the better. These two outlooks are obviously complementary: meliorism standing for the attitude of improvement, progress, and betterment at the heart of pragmatist cultural critique and transitionalism for the temporal and historical perspective within which this melioristic cultural critique is situated. Pragmatism, which is best focused in terms of this transitional perspective, is commonly summarized as offering a conception of inquiry in which human thought and action is an affair of traveling from hypotheses to their outcomes, or from conceptions to their effects, as Peirce originally put it. Those travels in which our conceptions successfully lead us to their objects are meliorative. Whether or not our travels are successful or not is something that must always be worked out in practice. The only general thing that the pragmatist is willing to say about them is that travels are successful where they offer a resolution of the problems we face in practice.

Pragmatism offers a technical term for such resolutions: reconstruction. Meliorism is successful transitionalism. Meliorist transitionalism is a philosophical practice of reconstruction. This is as summary a statement of pragmatism as I can muster. But such compact and glistening summaries, I hasten to remind, are often less illuminating than the grey and meticulous volumes meant to explicate them.

The characteristic attitude of the pragmatist is hope. The pragmatist engaged in reconstruction is at bottom a meliorist transitionalist. Hope expresses the faith that we can make a better future. Such faith posits its intended outcome before it has arrived. In doing so, it helps us work toward realizing that outcome. That the faith of hope braces our energies and efforts constitutes the difference between that attitude and the more passive optimism and pessimisms.

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that insist that our destiny shall arrive, be it for better or for worse. There is, of course, no way of guaranteeing the realization of the objects of our hopes before their emergence, but there is in almost every instance plenty we can do to assist them. Melioristic hope thus suggests a philosophical practice that is both fully situated amid the transitions in which we find ourselves and rightly confident that we can, through our effort, see these transitions through to better futures. Meliorism is a transitionalism that is confident, energetic, and generous toward our prospects.

When philosophy invests itself in transitionalist themes of historicity and temporality, it is best practiced as a melioristic project of reconstructing the cultural problems that we find ourselves facing in the present. Philosophy, according to the distinctively pragmatist methodology of reconstruction, is thus best understood as a practice of cultural criticism. This practice involves working toward the resolution of our most pressing cultural problems. Explicating this conception of pragmatism as a philosophy of cultural hope adds nuance and detail to the more general conception of pragmatist transitionalism that is my main concern in this book. The remainder of this chapter is focused on the crucial but too often neglected topic of what philosophy as a practice of cultural criticism might involve. On the basis of the paradigm offered in this chapter, later chapters can then explicate more detailed cases of what pragmatist reconstruction involves for core philosophical topics including knowledge, ethics, and politics.

Truth in Hope

In recent years, there has been an increasing surge of interest in pragmatism’s melioristic perspective, as attested by an increasing number of books and articles calling attention to the role that hope plays in the pragmatist way of thinking. But despite this increase of interest in pragmatist meliorism and the widespread acknowledgment that meliorism is somehow central to pragmatism, it remains to be spelled out exactly how meliorism contributes to pragmatism. I understand pragmatism, and find it at its best, as a philosophical way of taking hope seriously. Pragmatism, on this view, develops the philosophical resources of hope. One implication is that traditional philosophical categories look different when seen pragmatically, where they are inflected with, and interpreted through, hopefulness. It is thus that traditional philosophical concepts are widely understood to be severely reconstructed by pragmatism. Yet the motivations for, and philosophical significance of, these reconstructions remain obscure so long as the meliorism at the heart of pragmatism goes unexplained.

One way of looking at hopefulness, which in its more philosophically robust moments can be called meliorism, is as a combination of pluralism and humanism, two central themes in the pragmatist vision. Pluralism is the thesis that the realities we inhabit are many. As William James put it, “the world we live in exists diffuse and distributed” (1907, 126). There is no one way that things are. The world is dynamic and shifting. Pluralism takes contingency seriously by applying it to reality itself. The result is that things could always be different than they happen to be. The world is thus a pluriverse, not a universe. A corollary of pluralism, humanism is the thesis that we humans make definitive contributions to this pluriverse. Again in James’s words, the idea is that “the world stands really malleable, waiting to receive its final touches at our hands. . . . Man engenders truths upon it” (1907, 123). What reality is depends on our contributions, interests, and purposes. Meliorism, holding together pluralism with humanism, is the thesis that we are capable of creating better worlds and selves. If pluralism is the thesis that better futures are possible and humanism the thesis that possibilities are often enough decided by human energies, then meliorism combines the two in asserting that better futures are made real by our effort. Meliorism, then, is best seen as humanism and pluralism combined and in confident mood.

James conceptualized meliorism as follows: “Meliorism treats salvation as neither necessary [as would optimism] nor impossible [as would pessimism]. It treats it as a possibility.” Melioristic hope offers a genuine alternative to the familiar pessimistic and optimistic moods that are almost universally offered in modern philosophy. These moods share a common assumption that progress and decline are inevitable. Meliorism, on the other hand, focuses on what we can do to hasten our progress and mitigate our decline. Pragmatic meliorism thus posits possibilities for which we are “live champions and pledges.” These possibilities, said James, are “such a mixture of things as will in the fullness of time give us a chance, a gap that we can spring into.” This leads us to the crucial question of meliorism: “Does our act then create the world’s salvation so far as it makes room for itself, so far as it leaps into the gap?” James
transitionalism, meliorism, and cultural criticism

sees no reason why not: "Why may [our acts] not be the actual turning-places and growing-places which they seem to be, of the world, why not the work-shop of being where we catch fact in the making, so that nowhere may the world grow in any other kind of way than this?" (James 1907, 137, 138). Pragmatist meliorism, James here makes evident, is the view that our energies and efforts can make a definite contribution to the realities we inhabit. Our acts can change the world for the better—and indeed the improvement of the world may itself require our work for its sustenance. It is only with our acts, uncertain and hopeful, that the possibilities of improvement may be actualized. It is in this sense that James wrote that "the pragmatism . . . I defend has to fall back on a certain ultimate hardihood, a certain willingness to live without assurances or guarantees" (1906, 124). Meliorism is the name for that hardihood and willingness—that uncertain hope.

One way of further explicating the pragmatist conception of meliorism is to consider the way in which pragmatism reconstructs traditional philosophical conceptions. This would involve showing not only how pragmatism transforms the philosophical content of our lives but also how pragmatism expresses a commitment to philosophy as a practice of reconstructing the situations in which we find ourselves. For the timeless philosophical idol of contemplation, pragmatism substitutes a transitional philosophical practice of reconstruction. I begin by considering James's reconstruction of truth for ameliorative purposes before using his work as a platform for looking backward to Emerson and forward to Dewey and Rorty.

"The Truth: what a perfect idol of the rationalistic mind!" (James 1907, 115). James's reconstruction of truth radically broke from the debilitating assumption that possession of the truth places us in harmony with the way the world itself really is. This assumption renders us impotent because it authorizes an optimism regarding truth's emancipating power—but this optimism is easily reversed by those pessimistic about our qualification for possession of truth. The common assumption of optimists and pessimists alike is that freedom is truth's consequence. This thesis renders superfluous any effort in experimentation. But pragmatism refocuses attention on the possibilities of our efforts in holding that the truth does not make us free.

James's conception of truth, which he described in transitionalist terms as something that "happens to an idea," can be appreciated in terms of the meliorism internal to that conception. What specifically happens to an idea when it "becomes true, is made true" is that the idea successfully leads us from one part of the temporal and historical field of experience to another part of that field that we find improved—"the truth of a state of mind means the function of a leading that is worth while." James was clear that the transitions that the pragmatist refers to in terms of truth are precisely those transitions that meliorate or improve the situations in which we find ourselves. It is in this sense that James situated truth as a good, or, as he put it, "truth is one species of good" (1907, 97, 98, 42). In this sense, the what of truth and the why of truth are not dichotomous for the pragmatist. This is why James was not only interested in a logical conception of truth but was instead committed to a broader inquiry into how truth functions and what truth means in our lives. James's pragmatism thus co-locates truth as simultaneously epistemological and axiological. He offers a specification of truth, a concept of obvious epistemological significance, in terms that specify truth as a species of improvement, a concept of obvious axiological significance. This suggests that he takes neither epistemology nor axiology as prior to the other. Rather, his pragmatism indicates that epistemology and axiology enhance one another and can be made sense of only insofar as they are regarded as interactive. This deep-running philosophical rejection of the classic dichotomy between facts and values is essential to the pragmatist vision of knowledge, ethics, and politics as reconstructive enterprises.

A crucial aspect of James's meliorism involves thinking of truth in terms of processes though which we free ourselves so as to break away from the classical assumption that the truth makes us free. James abandoned the most problematic tendencies of the philosophic tradition that we should want him to, most notably the idea that truth is the name of a power that we ought to hook ourselves into. Truth is nothing we can rely on, for it is not the name of a power extrinsic to human action. Truth is human action in potent phase. Truth names our power, our success, our accomplishment—contrast this to a concept of truth as an external force bestowing its blessings upon us. It is notable that commentators have generally failed to realize the most important implications of this view. As an example of this unfortunate misinterpretation of pragmatist truth, I take a passage from an otherwise invaluable book on the subject where Harvey Cormier explicates James's conception as follows: "the value of truth lies in its power to make the world and our human lives in it better" (2001, 28). This claim is representative of a quite typical misinterpretation of the pragmatist approach.
to truth that is deeply rooted in the very philosophical tradition that pragmatism works its way out of. My alternative view is that truth for James is not powerful in itself but is rather a name for our being powerful. Any supposed effectiveness commonly attributed to truth is really our effectiveness. This is what it means to take a melioristic perspective on truth. Meliorism focuses on improvements that are due to our energies and efforts. Truth, understood melioristically, is an improvement resulting from our work. Richard Poirier sounds the crucial element in this pragmatist meliorism: “James, like Emerson, foregoes any supports for the self that are extrinsic to its own workings” (1987, 196). The innovation of pragmatism is the inscription of truth within the circle of human work. This reverses the old philosophical picture of the success of our work as an effect of truth. Here is how Herman Melville put this quintessentially pragmatist point in one of his grand inaugural works of American literature: “it is not for man to follow the trail of truth too far, since by doing so he entirely loses the directing compass of his mind” (1852, 231). I have long had the hunch that one can mine Melville for nearly all the riches of pragmatism. But this would, of course, be another project.

Emerson, if not also Melville, was long a preoccupation of James’s. As a young student in Europe, James looked forward to a time “when Emerson’s philosophy will be in our bones” (James, in Matthiessen 1947, 432). Nearly thirty years later, at a 1903 Emerson Centenary, James sounded the quintessential pragmatist themes of pluralism and humanism: “The world is still new and untried. In seeing freshly, and not in hearing of what others saw, shall a man find what truth is” (1903b, 455). The good that James and Emerson recognize as truth is the good of innovation. Truth renews traditions and thus neither insidiously repeats nor impudently abandons them. Truth, James would write a few years later in Pragmatism, is “a go-between, a smoother-over of transitions. It marries old opinion to new fact so as ever to show a minimum of jolt, a maximum of continuity” (1907, 35). This central idea of pragmatist transitionalism holds that melioration consists in simultaneously accepting and criticizing our inherited traditions. Melioration occurs at the confluence of old and new.

At the heart of pragmatist philosophy is a resolute hopefulness in the abilities of human effort to create better future realities. James finds this too in Emerson. It is not a cheap optimism, an “indiscriminate hurrahing for the Universe,” but rather a firm belief that “the point of any pen can be an epitome of reality.” This democratic meliorism James named “Emerson’s revelation,” lauding it as “the headspring of all his outpourings” (1903b, 455). And while it may seem an embellishment to describe Emersonian tendencies as deeply democratic, I take courage for this thought in the precedent set by pragmatism’s most respected visionary of democracy. Dewey hoped, also in 1903, that “the coming century may well make evident what is just now dawning, that Emerson is not only a philosopher, but that he is the Philosopher of Democracy . . . when democracy has articulated itself, it will have no difficulty in finding itself already proposed in Emerson” (1903b, MW3.190–3.191). Dewey further noted of Emerson that “he finds truth in the highway, in the untaught endeavor, the unexpected idea” (1903b, MW3.189). In this view Dewey found a melioristic conception of truth consistent with his own.

Dewey wrote of truth: “The adverb ‘truly’ is more fundamental than either the adjective, true, or the noun, truth. An adverb expresses a way, a mode of acting.” Truth, for Dewey, looks forward to consequences and thus anticipates a meliorism that “arouses confidence and a reasonable hopefulness.” Dewey thought of truth in this way because he understood truth as performing a “reconstruction” (1920, 156/MW12.182). Truth, in Dewey’s lingo, names a form of success in which we reconstruct problematic situations into ones that are more secure. In thinking of truth as an achievement in this way, Dewey agreed with James that “verification and truth completely coincide.” The crux of the view is that the truth can for us have no practical meaning until the beliefs that may be true lead us to the realities of which they are true. Following James, belief for Dewey is “hypothetical until the course of action indicated has been tried.” This is because “the event or issue of such action is the truth or falsity of the judgment” (1915a, 346/MW8.21). Truth for the pragmatist is thus thoroughly reconstructive. It names our working well in the situations in which we find ourselves by instituting changes in those situations on the basis of the resources furnished within them. It is thus that Dewey conceived of truth in terms that are decidedly melioristic. A melioristic philosophy of growth as “the only moral end” (Dewey 1920, 177/MW12.181) is emphasized throughout Dewey’s pragmatism, in his work on truth and science as much as in his work on ethics and democracy.

These are all Emersonian echoes. Emerson held that truth, like life, is a transitional sort of thing: “Life only avails, not the having lived. Power ceases in the instant of repose; it resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state, in the shooting of the gulf, in the darting to an aim” (1841, 144). A world
completed yesterday cannot be infused with value today. Only if the world is in the making can our acts make a difference. These and other anticipations of pragmatism are evident throughout Emerson's work. I shall consider the pluralism, humanism, and meliorism in just one essay, "Self-Reliance."

Here is Emerson's pluralism in that essay: "If you are true, but not in the same truth with me, cleave to your companions; I will seek my own. I do this not selfishly, but humbly and truly. It is alike your interest, and mine, and all men's, however long we have dwelt in lies, to live in truth." Emerson does not refute those who counter his own truth—truth is plural, there is room in it enough for all, only we must hold fast to ourselves, else we cease to live in truth. Self-reliance also connotes humanism because it involves a recentering of the soul around the self's successful creations and away from the powers supposedly possessed by independent truth. Emerson's humanism is thus this: "You take the way from man, not to man." This pluralism and humanism balance on the melioristic invocation of confidence and hope that are at the heart of Emerson's melioristic faith in our own energies: "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men—that is genius" (1841, 146, 143, 132).

Unfortunately, Emerson's melioristic vision of what he once called in his journals "the infinitude of the private man" (April 7, 1840, in Emerson 1960, 7342) is regarded by too many of his readers as expressing an elitist and egoistic individualism. Countering this influential misinterpretation, I agree with those who read Emersonian personality as an accomplishment not of isolation but of better worlds between persons. For Emerson, as for James and Dewey, the democratic contribution is thoroughly personal. This means that it is simultaneously individual and social just insofar as all persons find themselves simultaneously individuating from and associating with other persons: "It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude" (Emerson 1841, 136). The kind of ethical commitment consonant with this vision of democracy is exemplified in Emerson's famously puzzling remark on charity: "Then again, do not tell me, as a good man did to-day, of my obligation to put all poor men in good situations. Are they my poor? I tell thee, thou foolish philanthropist, that I grudge the dollar, the dime, the cent I give to such men as do not belong to me and to whom I do not belong" (1841, 135). Emerson's ethical commitment is to other persons as they are in their actuality, my poor, not to other persons in the abstract according to idealized principles, the poor. So it is that democratic melioration occurs between persons, not between persons and principles.

Emerson wrote of personality as "art": "The difference between persons is not in wisdom but in art" (1844, 267). Art is Emerson's name for acts of renewal: creation in relation to tradition, living new ways by breathing life into old ways. His essay "Art" meditates on this line with which it opens: "Because the soul is progressive, it never quite repeats itself, but in every act attempts the production of a new and fairer whole" (1844, 274). 'The old is made new; mere repetition is no novelty. Art for Emerson best captures that transitional combination of recurrence and variance. It is the production of a new whole that is new only in relation to what precedes it. Emerson's "art" is a counterpart to James's "truth"—both flow fastest at the confluence of old and new. Art and truth are in this way understood by pragmatists as transitional reconstructions. Truth is like art in that it makes no provisions for us. The provision is our doing, our art, our hope. Truth and art are the effectiveness of human effort, not powers that inform it from some great glory beyond.

Writing on Dewey's essay on Emerson quoted above, Rorty re-sounds the quintessential pragmatist theme of hopefulness: "For Dewey, Emerson's talent for criterionless hope was the essence of his value to his country" (1998b, 120). Rorty's own pragmatism similarly evinces a "willingness to substitute imagination for certainty, and curiosity for pride" (1994a, 88). Rorty offers neither bland optimistic reassurance nor pessimistic suspicion but a unique hopefulness that we can create better selves and worlds without "prophecy and claims to knowledge" but only with a "generous hope" which "sustain[s] itself without such reassurances" (1998c, 209).

Few commentators stress the centrality of hope in Rorty's philosophical outlook, and even fewer engage with it as a philosophical concept worthy of attention in its own right. Yet what is most abidingly valuable in Rorty's intellectual career are not his by now familiar rails against essentialism, universalism, representationalism, givennism, and foundationalism. Important as these criticisms remain and as much as I draw from them in what follows, there is clearly something of more enduring worth in Rorty's work than his having launched the latest salvo against the increasingly insolvent cottage industries that continue to define the entire scope of the intellectual agenda of more than just a few professional philosophers. This something of greater worth emerges
when we read Rorty as he recommends we read others: "we should skip lightly past the predictions, and concentrate on the expressions of hope" (1998e, 205).

Read in this way, we can begin to discern in Rorty's pragmatism an expression of the hope that we can make the difference between a world sustained by our values and a world to which our values are irrelevant. Rorty thus places pragmatism in the service of meliorism's enabling mood. Describing Dewey more or less as a figure for himself, Rorty writes that "Dewey urges that the quest for certainty be replaced with the demand for imagination—that philosophy should stop trying to provide reassurance and instead encourage what Emerson called 'self-reliance.'" The meliorist view Rorty finds central to the pragmatist tradition is the view that "one should stop worrying about whether what one believes is well grounded and start worrying about whether one has been imaginative enough to think up interesting alternatives to one's present beliefs." The same point was again put by Rorty in a somewhat different way when he wrote that "substituting hope for knowledge, substituting the idea that the ability to be citizens of the full-fledged democracy which is yet to come, rather than the ability to grasp truth, is what is important about being human" (1994a, 34; 2000a, 3). In these and other passages, Rorty gives expression to the hope that we can make the difference between a world cultivated by our values and one to which our values are irrelevant. It is basic to the vision of pragmatism I am calling meliorist that human values and interests are understood to occupy the center of our pluriverse.

Concerning truth, Rorty followed Emerson, James, and Dewey in disclaiming traditional identifications of truth with emancipation: "Truth is not the name of a power that eventually wins through" (1994c, 226). Like the earlier pragmatists, Rorty reversed traditional formulas of truth’s liberating power in claiming that "if you take care of freedom, truth will take care of itself" (1989b, 118). Barry Allen makes this point in a passage that qualifies him as a pragmatist under Rorty’s influence: "Truth has no power of its own, no utopian potential, no affinity for good, and will not make us free" (1993, 182). It is an old faith that the truth emancipates us—it is the new pragmatist hope that we emancipate ourselves. The crucial contrast is between a philosophy that preaches obedience to a greater glory that may yet subsume us and a philosophy that provokes the courage and confidence of our humble human hopes. Anti-alethism was for Rorty but a species of a more crucial antiauthoritarianism.5

Rorty always held that we do not stand in need of a theory of truth if we can get an adequate theory of justification.6 "True," for James, was a name for the satisfaction of felt cravings and doubts. For Rorty, this satisfaction was better glossed as "justified," but the project of redefinition remains the same. Despite superficial differences, the common upshot of both views is that there simply is no craving for truth itself taken apart from any human interest. Rorty's idea that hope may suitably replace truth rather than reconstruct it, as other pragmatists have claimed, may indeed be terminologically troubling, but more important is the broader resonance of his view with the earlier pragmatist rejection of any attempt to puff up truth as some superhuman power commanding our allegiance. Rorty was in good pragmatist fashion when he railed (as he frequently did) against any concept crediting a "nonhuman authority to whom we owe some sort of respect" (1998d, 150). Rorty's redescription of truth under the auspices of justification is best seen as his way of attempting to credit the more meliorist hope that we may improve our living by our own lights.

I can now sum up my discussion with the suggestion that there is a common pragmatist meliorism running from Emerson through James and Dewey to Rorty according to which truth is sustained by our effort and energy. These pragmatists all reverse the old philosophical pretense that the truth sustains us. Their view is that the truth will not set us free—our humble human efforts, not supreme inhuman energies, are the only forces of freedom. These pragmatists all reject the worship of truth and refuse to offer up prayers of obedience to this most hollow and august philosophical idol. They use pragmatism to refocus philosophy on the differences we humans might make. Hope is the mood in which they expect that we can make the requisite differences. This is the mood of meliorism.

Pragmatism as Cultural Criticism

In melioristic transitionalism, it falls on us to better the flows in which we find ourselves. It follows from this that a primary task of philosophy ought to be to participate in this betterment. A philosophy that insists on the irreducible transitionality of our lives, that is, ought to see its primary task in terms of contributing to the ameliorative improvement of these transitions in their
evolution. This implies a conception of philosophy that is close to the most pressing cultural issues of its day.

The point I wish to stress is that melioristic cultural critique remains the best legacy of pragmatism for contemporary philosophy. According to this view, the work of philosophy should steer clear of the ponderous and the profound. Philosophy should not dive to the depths—it should travel widely with intensity and flair. We philosophers should see our commission as that of articulating, problematizing, and reconstructing the plural publics and cultures in which we find ourselves. According to this view, the best work in philosophy is public thought or cultural critique. This vision of philosophy has been most ably developed in our tradition by the American pragmatists, although there is no reason to think or hope that we pragmatists might have exclusive license here.

I could draw on all four of my pragmatists to make this point. Emerson, James, Dewey, and Rorty were all leading intellectual voices of their years. Each of them occupied that once prominent but now relegated role of the public intellectual or, to use terms I much prefer, public thinker or philosopher of culture. It is undeniable that Emerson is best read as an American cultural critic in this sense—he is perhaps the paradigm of our concept of an American public intellectual. And though they have been read otherwise, it is quite difficult to make sense of much of what James and Dewey did and wrote without regarding them as cultural critics after an Emersonian example—thus I follow others in asserting that James and Dewey are best read as cultural critics in this Emersonian sense. Rorty too is best read in this light—though this has not been recognized nearly so well.\(^7\)

Rather than drawing on all of my pragmatists to illustrate my point, however, I shall focus only on Rorty. The reason I do so is because there remains an ongoing difficulty among Rorty’s audience, particularly philosophers, concerning how to best understand his work. Philosophers are too often exasperated and baffled, rather than challenged and edified, by Rorty. This kind of resistance on the part of philosophy to Rorty also occurs, though less severely, in the case of James and Dewey, and it is perhaps even more pronounced in the case of Emerson. Explicating just how it is that Rorty’s philosophy should be understood can assist philosophers in coming to terms with the project of pragmatism as a whole insofar as this project is in its best instances an effort in cultural criticism. The idea is that the ensuing discussion of Rorty as cultural critic will stand as somewhat representative of the cultural-critical impulse of pragmatism on the whole.

I understand Rorty’s work as operating in three spaces or domains. He writes histories of philosophy, metaphilosophy, and what I will call cultural philosophy, by which I just mean cultural criticism. Corresponding to these three spaces, Rorty can be read as a historian-anthropologist of philosophy, as a metaphilosopher who also draws upon the history and sociology of philosophy, or as a cultural philosopher who often expounds upon the historical and contemporary relevance of philosophy. I understand these spaces not so much as hierarchically higher or lower than one another but rather as extensively broader or narrower than one another.

Rorty as a historian of philosophy is exemplified by *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. In this book, Rorty was not so much striking out in his own direction as he was weaving together various strands in twentieth-century philosophy that had been left dangling. The story he told went as follows: the criticisms of the tradition of modern philosophy authored by Dewey, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein finally demonstrated the obsolescence of the great problems devised by Descartes, Locke, and Kant. What Rorty helped us see were the intellectual conditions within which the great modern philosophers had formed the research program of the last two hundred years of philosophy. By the middle decades of the twentieth century, these conditions had clearly expired. Two other underannounced heroes of Rorty’s book, Quine and Sellars, showed the need for fully breaking from the leading assumptions and dichotomies of high-modern philosophy. Rorty drew together these rather diverse strands of argumentation and showed how they all converge on a single undeniable point: philosophy in the form of foundationalist epistemology and metaphysics no longer had anything of intellectual value to offer to the rest of culture. The familiar old problems simply no longer itched anybody except philosophers.

This controversial argument led Rorty to turn his sights to the important metaphilosophical implications of the conclusions he had reached. These implications concerned the fate of professional philosophy in a culture that no longer took the profession’s proclaimed problems very seriously. Rorty had convinced himself that the tradition had exhausted its own relevance to wider problems. But if the research agenda of philosophy is seen as having outlived its usefulness, then the inevitable next question is “What is a philosopher to do?” This aspect of Rorty’s work is exemplified in such early essays as “Philosophy in
America Today" and "Method, Social Science, and Social Hope" as well as some of his most important later work, including the central portions of the book that is the most quintessentially Rortyan text (by both my accounting and Rorty's), namely Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity. In all of these pieces, Rorty's claim was that philosophers should enjoy the freedom to keep on doing what they have always done but that they should no longer think of their activities in their remote academic corners as the intellectual and moral center of the universe. Philosophy has its own history and its own set of problems, but we have no better reason for thinking that solving these problems will save humanity than we do for thinking that writing a really good poem or making a really good film will do the trick. In light of this rather gloomy metaphilosophical conclusion, Rorty began the long project of retooling his thought by means of refashioning himself into a more capacious humanist intellectual. The implicit assumption of this retooling was that philosophy could reestablish itself only by moving its province to a more theoretically interdisciplinary and practically engaged effort.

In his contributions to this wider metaphilosophical space, Rorty's thought was always plagued by a tension that many of his readers, especially philosophers, have found entirely frustrating. On the one hand, there are Rorty's gloomy predictions about the fate of professional philosophy as an isolated and insulated form of highbrow kibitzing. Most philosophers have been guarded about Rorty's predictions, and rightly so, even if in many cases this guardedness was purchased with the valuable instrument of denial. On the other hand, however, there is Rorty's own intellectual practice of ranging well outside of the familiar disciplinary matrices in order to critically engage his culture and its potentialities in generous terms. This tension is one of the longest-running divisions at the core of Rorty's relationship to philosophy—it persisted until his very last writings and it can be traced back as far as the early sixties to an unpublished essay entitled "The Philosopher as Expert."8

This early essay nicely frames some of the most persistent tensions in Rorty's metaphilosophy, and it is worth considering here even if Rorty never saw it through to publication. In this short piece, Rorty attempted to explain to himself how the academic philosophy establishment in which he was finding himself increasingly ensconced in the early 1960s might find a way of legitimating itself in the face of the rude questions that skeptics so often pose to established academics. This attempted explanation led him to two thoughts that are not easy to reconcile. On the one hand, Rorty admits in the essay that "professional philosophers do, by and large, talk only to each other," such that they invite the skeptical question about whether or not we could ever know if "the whole profession" is "on the fix." Rorty admits that there is no easy way of answering this skeptic. He entertains the possibility that perhaps it is for the best that only philosophers are entitled to pass judgments on philosophy. If this breeds disciplinary insularity, then so be it. Rorty concludes not only that "professional philosophers in America are doing, by and large, about what they should be" but also that "they receive about the right amount of attention," which is, of course, very little. This seems to be an admission that philosophy ought to model itself on other specialized disciplines such as science or art. If this means that philosophy might, like science, descend into arcane technicalities that only scientists understand, then so be it. Or if this means that philosophy might, like art, retreat into private enclaves increasingly separated from the most pressing problems of the day, then so be it. In short, we find in this essay an early statement of a view that Rorty would later become quite well known for: the view that philosophy is best understood as a private pursuit with its own processes of self-certification and self-legitimation that need not concern themselves with the wider public good. However, there is another side to Rorty's metaphilosophy already evidenced in this early essay but never quite foregrounded enough in his subsequent metaphilosophical musings. On this other hand, Rorty explicitly claims in his early essay that the models of science and art are "equally misleading and unfruitful" for coming to grips with philosophy's prospects in the present. He suggests instead that "philosophy's product can only be dialogue," in anticipation of his later Gadamerian brief in Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature on behalf of philosophy as the conversation of culture. He even suggests that philosophy's only responsibility is to the "continuance" of its dialogue or conversation. Now even though this dialogue that is philosophy is self-legitimating, it is inevitably articulated in terms drawn from the culture in which it is suffused. In its mode of rigorous questioning, philosophy constantly finds itself dealing with cultural crises that arise in other disciplines, other practices—in short, other arenas of its culture. Rorty concludes the essay by asserting that "although philosophy is formally autonomous, it is not materially self-sufficient." This clever little formulation concisely captures the tension that would from that point on haunt Rorty's metaphilosophy. For according to this formulation,
philosophy is both an isolated academic enclave and a practice of thought that must draw its nourishment from the cultural contexts that afford philosophy its initial invitations.

Rorty would never convincingly resolve this metaphilosophical tension. But this does not mean that there is not to be found in his work a distinctive contribution to contemporary thought that takes place in that wider space of cultural criticism that manages to encompass both the history of philosophy and metaphilosophy. Although Rorty is better known among philosophers for his downbeat portrayals of the profession, it is undeniable that his work also at times features a more upbeat tone of hopeful cultural criticism, for which he is perhaps better known among those more accustomed to other disciplines. It is my view that Rorty's thought is at its most quintessentially pragmatist wherever he breaks out of the narrower spaces he often occupied in order to stake out a position on a wider intellectual plane, where he lets himself play the role of the cultural philosopher. When occupying this space, Rorty saw what he did as less continuous with Ludwig Wittgenstein and Martin Heidegger and as more continuous with the work of thinkers like John Stuart Mill (the parts that most philosophers do not bother to read), Matthew Arnold, Thomas Carlyle and, more recently, Isaiah Berlin and Irving Howe. The best models of this sort of engaged public criticism for Rorty's money were always William James and John Dewey. Like James and Dewey before him, Rorty's work in this wider cultural-critical space is certainly involved in the history of philosophy and metaphilosophy, but it is also an attempt to offer up a more capacious vision of what our liberal democratic culture is up to around here just now. This aspect of Rorty's work is best exemplified in his later work, especially the latter chapters of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, in essays such as "Trotsky and the Wild Orchids" and "Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism," and in editorials and reviews for *The New York Times*, *The London Review of Books*, *The Nation*, and *Dissent*. This side of Rorty is best illustrated in his self-definition as a "moralist of knowledge" and a "cultural critic" (1995b, 225n11 and 1989, 81) and in the title he chose for his final volume of collected papers, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*. Neil Gross, in his valuable sociological-historical portrait of Rorty, illuminatingly refers to Rorty's work as increasingly informed by a "self-concept" of "leftist American patriot" (2008, 320). The important thing about being a leftist patriot, for Rorty, was a dedication to the American democratic experiment and the hopeful meliorism implied therein. This dedication was most fully expressed in Rorty's own contributions to the American project in the form of his cultural-critical coups. I will return below to the distinctively American context that has for more than a century now played host to the cultural-critical philosophy of the pragmatists.

So how does all this help us interpret Rorty? Most contemporary philosophers tend to read Rorty as little more than a brilliant historian of philosophy who also happens to offer up a provocative set of metaphilosophical challenges. According to this familiar reading, Rorty was busy hawking a pragmatism that never aspired to, in William James's pregnant phrase, "the most completely impressive way" (1907, 25) of practicing philosophy. Against the grain of this common misreading, I urge that we should read Rorty as having the characteristically pragmatist ambition to impressiveness. Seeing his work as primarily and increasingly an effort in cultural philosophy enables us to engage with him on that most important level. Seen through this lens, Rorty's criticisms of philosophy will no longer appear as metaphilosophical betrayals, because they will be recognized as thoughtful suggestions for what contemporary liberal democratic culture ought to try if it wants to become even more liberal and more democratic.

Today, there remain only a dwindling handful of public intellectuals among us hanging around a few increasingly remote corners of our increasingly remote academic establishments. The great age of the public intellectual has passed. Gone are the legion of scholars who aspire to adjacency and connectedness when they enter graduate programs—of this small lot remaining, only a few harbor these grandiose ambitions after they pass through the dangerous professionalizing trials of dissertation defense, academic publication, and the higher-education job market. What caused the great decline in our public thought? I cannot here venture an answer to this enormously difficult question. The story and its possible causes have been recited before by others who have broached these thorny topics in impressive detail. I have nothing to add to existing accounts. I simply wish to invoke the important role played by public thought in bygone years so as to indicate the capaciousness of what was once uncontroversially accepted as a cultural-critical conception of pragmatism. That philosophers today might even conceive of denying that James and Dewey were in the first place public thinkers and only in the second place professional academics is but a mark of the distance of today's academic pragmatism from yesteryear's engaged pragmatism. Pragmatism as I am presenting it
developed as an impressive contribution to a wider tradition of public thought or cultural criticism in America. Indeed, the American variant of this tradition largely followed the examples first offered by Emerson, and then James, and then Dewey, though there were plenty of nonpragmatists, nonphilosophers, and nonacademics with whom all three were in competition. How quickly all that changed. The ideal of the American scholar rapidly shifted from the figure of the public intellectual to the model of the professional intellectual. Today, we Americans do not really have our Emembers, our Jameses, and our Deweys, nor do the English have their John Stuart Mills and their Bertrand Russells (at least not in their former abundance). It is thus that contemporary public intellectuals like Rorty are rightly disconcerted by the fact that "hopelessness has become fashionable on the Left—principled, theorized, philosophical hopelessness" (Rorty 1998b, 37). Rorty traces this sudden shift to the ascendancy of the new leftism during the sixties. I do not wish here to engage supposed answers to difficult questions about the causes of these changes. Without risking explanations, we can still affirm the obvious: today our public thought is far narrower both in scope and output than it was during the golden years of early pragmatism.

Rereading pragmatists such as Rorty, Dewey, James, and Emerson as public thinkers might perhaps help usher along a renewal of the once proud tradition of public thought. At the very least, such a rereading should enable us to understand the relevance of their pragmatism to our contemporary cultural problems as well as to the epistemic, ethical, and political problematics within which these problems can often be located. The result of pragmatism's transitionalist reconstruction of philosophy is a form of melioristic cultural criticism that gathers together most of the traditional philosophical concepts within the orbit of hopeful projects of reconstruction. In this sense, pragmatist transitionalist philosophy reworks knowledge, ethics, and politics such that the true, the good, and the just are together reconstructed as conceptualizing melioration. The point of truth and good and justice, the fact that they constitute valuable work performed, is to improve the realities in which we find ourselves in some definite way. Their point is not, as philosophers obsessed with certainty and ill disposed to hope have long argued, to gain an accurate picture of some reality that transcends our mere powers such that we might chain ourselves to that power and thereby gain our freedom—the old and untenable picture of freedom as obedience to the profound. Truth, good, and justice are our achievements—not some gift bestowed upon us by some reality or power that works on our behalf regardless of the work we do.

This proposed rereading of pragmatism under the guidance of the once prominent vision of philosophy as cultural criticism is enabled by emphasizing the centrality of meliorist transitionalism for all the great pragmatists. These two conceptions of philosophy—meliorist transitionalism and cultural criticism—are tuned to one another. The crucial upshot of both of these conceptions is that they enable us to see philosophy as a reconstructive response to our cultural, scientific, moral, and political predicaments. When approached as a distinctively philosophical project, this cultural-critical pragmatist meliorism is at once traditional and innovative. It is traditional insofar as it focuses attention on the deep problems forming obstacles to cultural growth. It is innovative insofar as it does not address these problems as universalistic issues but rather as pragmatic difficulties rooted in the experience of historically situated cultures. This exercise in conceptualizing new possibilities for philosophy helps us recognize the distinctive advantages of pragmatist philosophy and the persisting problems it must continue to address.

Despite my proposing a rereading of pragmatism as a project of philosophical cultural critique, the present book does not offer all that much in the way of the sort of philosophical cultural criticism I am cheering. I do not here engage the pressing epistemic, ethical, and political issues of our day: globalization, geneticization, Internetization, new social movements, the fragile balance of environmental and industrial technologies, and the other shifting sands of our political, ethical, and scientific landscapes. This is because my purpose here is of a different order. I aim to explicate both what a philosophical cultural criticism might look like when taken up through a pragmatist sensibility and what that pragmatist sensibility might look like when deployed for the purposes of a philosophical cultural criticism. The result is a conception of the practice of reconstruction. I take it as an important task to describe with rigor what the practice of reconstruction involves even if I take it as an even more important task to actually undertake the work of reconstruction itself. Accordingly, in this and the following two chapters, my aim is to locate this conception within the history of the tradition of pragmatism. In the middle chapters, I describe how pragmatism departs from traditional philosophical inquiries in epistemology, moral philosophy, and political theory by approaching our epistemic, ethical, and political practices as transitional in a way that
calls for close cultural-critical reconstructions. And in the final chapter, I describe how pragmatism might integrate itself with other transitionalist philosophical traditions for the purposes of engaging in connected and adjacent critical inquiries that would clarify the contours of our cultural landscape. But throughout, I do not aim to explicate or orient any particular critical re-constructions of our contemporary cultural moment. That would be a rather different project(s) yielding a rather different book(s). The best I can do at present is to admit that some of the old tensions haunt me too. (But I can clue the reader in that I am at work on one such project concerning the quintessential liberal distinction between public and private with a focus on how certain contemporary practices, including some of those mentioned above, are rendering such a distinction increasingly fraught.)

Adjacency and Connectedness in Cultural Criticism

So that my conception of philosophical cultural critique might not appear as provincially pragmatist, I now briefly turn to two other contemporary thinkers in whom I discern similar visions of the work of thought as a project of cultural melioration. This helps me provide a broader cultural-critical platform on which to base my interpretation of pragmatism. The reason for increasing the breadth of my conception is that it helps emphasize the rich harvest yielded by bringing pragmatism into conversation with other traditions of thought. This is a central aim in later chapters, where I intend to show how a transitionalist interpretation of pragmatism enables us to develop connections to the work of some of the centermost figures in late twentieth-century Analytic and Continental philosophy. And insofar as the public thought of cultural criticisms is now on the wane, it must be admitted that the handful of thinkers in whom I detect an engaged cultural criticism are an embattled minority. This is all the more reason for airing their distinctive voices.

I begin by situating my construction of meliorist cultural criticism by reference to a conception that some may regard as located on rather surprising terrain. The hope is that surprise will lead to provocation and then provocation to experimentation. Experimentation, in any event, is how I found myself situated in this terrain. I was led to it by experimenting with a conjunction: I was engaged simultaneously in the work of reflection on the thought of the pragmatist philosophers and in the work of collaborating with a small group of genealogical anthropologists. These anthropologists were themselves engaged in reflection on the thought of the pragmatists, and that is more or less how I became engaged with them. This led to our occupying positions in our research that can be described as adjacent to one another. We were not quite inside of one another's intellectual cocoons, but we were clearly adjacent to one another's intellectual instrumentalities. This adjacency resulted in the familiar experiences of surprise, provocation, and experimentation. All of these experiences have left an inerasable impression that the work of thought is an enormous challenge.

This little introductory narrative illustrates the concept of adjacency. It is in relation to this concept that I want to situate meliorism as the form of pragmatist cultural criticism. I borrow this concept from one of the anthropologists at the center of my little narrative. Paul Rabinow is an anthropologist whose work and thought are firmly planted in both traditions of pragmatism and genealogy. He has over the past decade been focused on the elaboration of an ethos of the contemporary that I find remarkably valuable for situating meliorism: “The ethos of the contemporary contrasts with that of the modern; it is not fascinated with the new per se but concerned with the emergence and articulation of forms within which old and new elements take on meanings and functions” (Rabinow 2008, 24). This is the transitional space at the confluence of old and new also occupied by pragmatism.

A crucial concept for Rabinow's work on the contemporary is that of adjacency. Adjacency, for Rabinow, is "a distinctive double reversal, a kind of ethical and epistemological conundrum in which and through which many of us find ourselves perpetually seeking our way—and giving form to our selves and to our work" (2008, 34). I follow Rabinow in understanding adjacency as signaling an ever-shifting space that our critical inquiries might inhabit. It is a space whose time is emergence, and so a space where old and new confront. Adjacency is a process of provocation, and it provokes by holding to the characteristically pragmatist position of being in between. Being in between means being in transition. How might we describe this philosophical, historical, and anthropological adjacency? Rabinow's answer: “Neither the overdrive of the universal intellectual nor the authoritative precision of the specific. Rather: a space of problems. Of questions. Of being behind or ahead. Belated or anticipatory. Out of sync. Too fast or too slow. Reluctant. Audacious. Annoying” (2008, 39). I think of adjacency as somewhere between universal and specific
but also as somewhere between outside and inside or external and internal. This location is one from which thought can be offered up as experimental. The adjacent critic gains distance from their object of criticism—but not too much distance. Theirs is the distance of William James's "margin" or "fringe." The adjacent critic lives on edges.

Here is, for my purposes at least, the most useful of Rabinow's descriptions of his concept of adjacency: "[Anthropological inquiry's] goal is identifying, understanding, and formulating something actual neither by directly identifying with it nor by making it exotic. Rather, it seeks to articulate a mode of adjacency" (2008, 49). One way of thinking about adjacency is in terms of a metaphorical image of the relation between the critic and the cultural object of their criticism. Imagine the critic's culture as occupying the space of a room. Then picture this critic as neither inside the room, though they came from the room, nor outside the room, though they are heading there. Picture the critic in those fleeting moments during which they are passing through the threshold from one room to whatever lies beyond. This critic occupies a vague space of adjacency, both physically on the edge of the room and temporally on the edge where the culture might transition from the past that is their little room to some better future outside that little room. The adjacent critic is a figure who stands on thresholds as liminal. They open the door through which the light of some possible future begins to suffuse the present. This light is not the truth of the best possible future. It is the light of some better future that is actually visible for those within the room. The work of the adjacent critic is thus that of provoking those within the room to find their way into some better room that is connected to the room they already inhabit. The adjacent critic opens doors that lead between all those little boxes we love to inhabit. Adjacency is like pragmatism in that it provides inviting corridors that enable movement, interaction, and engagement.

The critic occupying the space of adjacency is in between the rooms of the past and the rooms of the future. Their aim could be to assist the difficult political work of getting from here to there. Rabinow refers to adjacency as "a mode of virtual untimeliness" (2008, 49). I am not sure how to take this remark, because I find this form of untimeliness particularly timely. But so, apparently, does Rabinow: "if one is committed to untimely anthropological work then being a bit late may well be timely; and being ahead of things, or slightly beside the point, is worth our while" (2008, 50).13 As I understand and use it, then, adjacency is a temporal location occupied by the transitional critic. This temporality enables a certain form of critique, inquiry, and reconceptualization that pragmatists might find valuable. Adjacency is thus a mode of critique that enables what Dewey calls reconstruction or what Rabinow, following Dewey, here calls remediation. Adjacency is that untimeliness in which cultural critique, understood as a meliorist project, is best situated.

I can further situate my conception of an engaged pragmatism with a model of critical inquiry that bears some resemblance to the practice of adjacency just considered. I take the notion of criticism as connectedness from Michael Walzer as explicated in his history of what he calls connected criticism. As Walzer explains it, the connected critic is someone who is not quite apart from the social practices they criticize and yet also not quite wholly inside of them either. Walzer says of his critic that "he never quite stands free and freely chooses his commitments, but struggles instead to sort out the commitments he already has" (1998, 226). The critic is not best thought of as impartial or neutral. The critic, rather, is already situated, which is to say that their criticism is adjacent. It is both internal to practices in which the critic finds himself or herself and at the same time external to those very same practices in achieving the distance needed for sorting them out. Connectedness is not identification and adjacency is not internality. But connectedness is not wholly apart nor is adjacency wholly external. Their mode is that of being between, both conceptually and temporally.

Walzer stresses that the connected critic is an oppositional figure but one that does not descend to the bad faith of absolute opposition: "He is in opposition here, and here, and here; he is never in absolute opposition." This is because criticism can only be effective if it stands with some particular set of people and against some other particular set of people who are acting unjustly toward them. The opposition of connected criticism is, in short, a connected or adjacent opposition: "For criticism will never shake the world unless it is directed against specific features of the world that other people besides the critic recognize as wrongful, oppressive, brutal, or unjust" (1998, 237). The critic is thus situated between not only conceptually and temporally, but they are also between different groups or forces or factions. They are connected both to the group to which they are committed but also to the group to which they are opposed. Their oppositions and their commitments, in short, must matter to someone and must maintain connection to the groups to which it is directed.
Particularly notable for my purposes here is the connection Walzer draws between the connected critic and the attitude of hope, referring at one point to "critical occasions" as "occasions for hope." As first elaborated by the pragmatists, meliorism was simply another name for the philosophy of hope, that is, for the philosophy of human effort and energy in the here and now directed toward the improvement of our political and ethical realities. Walzer similarly states this "one common mark of the critical enterprise" in terms of the historicist implications of ameliorative criticism: "[Criticism] is founded in hope; it cannot be carried on without some sense of historical possibility" (1998, 239, 17). Connected criticism, in other words, is criticism with a historicist sensibility. The connected critics attach, or connect, themselves to actual political conditions by locating their criticism along the precise historical trajectories that define these conditions. They do not stand against historical reality in the name of some ahistorical ideal. They stand against some specific historical reality in the name of some specifiably better, and actually possible, historical reality. Melioristic connected criticism occupies historical time and as such assumes a temporal form. It reaches out of the present both backward into the past and forward into the future. In this way, it manages to be both connected to the present yet also adjacent to it, so as to gain that fine edge of critical distance.

Centers and Margins of Pragmatist Cultural Criticism

I have been urging that we regain a focus on pragmatism as a practice of philosophy that is adjacent and connected to the cultural present in which it finds itself. I now want to consider how this way of bringing pragmatism into focus might help me respond to lingering questions raised by my selection of Emerson, James, Dewey, and Rorty as exemplars of transitionalist pragmatism. These questions concern certain rather prominent exceptions from my selection of exemplary pragmatists. Among these prominent exceptions we must include a small handful of important classic pragmatists, including Jane Addams, Randolph Bourne, Walter Lippmann, W. E. B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, and George Herbert Mead, as well as a small number of important neopragmatists, including Cornel West and Robert Brandom. I have no intention of denying that all of these thinkers are relevant to the wider project I am here announcing, and I happily bestow the title of pragmatist on each of them. Yet despite their undeniable importance for the vitality of pragmatism, all of these thinkers remain more marginal to my particular conception of pragmatism than do the four pragmatists I reckon as central. My four pragmatists offer a unique, because difficult to achieve, combination of cultural critique and theoretical reflection on the status of philosophy as cultural critique. Other pragmatists have forged similar combinations at times, but none have done so with quite the depth and breadth exhibited by my four pragmatists. Other pragmatists thus remain more marginal for me in that their work does not often attain both pitches of cultural-critical engagement and philosophical rigor, which I am arguing constitutes the central strength of the tradition.

Similar reasoning motivates my explicit marginalization of the figure who is surely the most glaring exception from my mantle of canonical pragmatists. Charles Santiago Peirce assumes on my accounting a far more marginal status in pragmatism than is counseled by prevailing wisdom. This is justified by my conceptualization of transitionalist pragmatism as a philosophical project of cultural critique. But many will no doubt contest this marginalization and its supporting conceptualization, so allow me to explain.

Peirce was simply not invested in the philosophical project of cultural critique to anywhere near the degree evident in the work and writings of Emerson, James, Dewey, and Rorty. If Peirce addressed himself at all to issues of his day, then he did so only obliquely, in contributing to the raging debates over the increasing prominence of scientific worldviews in the midst of the still religious culture of late nineteenth-century New England. But even here Peirce did not address these debates as a cultural problem so much as a tangled philosophical perplexity. So it is that Peirce almost nowhere directly engaged what Cheryl Misak (2004c) calls, riffing on a quip James made to Peirce in a letter, "vital matters." Misak's discussion is meant to help motivate the project of using Peircean insights for the purposes of moral and political philosophy. It strikes me as quite an odd move to try to construct a moral and political theory on the basis of the epistemological writings of a philosopher who never seriously devoted himself to moral or political melioration (I return to this issue in Misak in chapter 6). Such a move seems even odder in light of the superabundance of philosophical resources provided by other thinkers who have engaged these topics. Peirceans are entitled to make of his work what they will, of course, but we are entitled to point out that they are the ones making the moral and political theories, not Peirce, because he never...
attempted such a thing. But what troubles me much more than minor manners of pedigree is that even where scholars have extended Peirce's thought along these rails, they have often done so very much as Peirce himself might have. The result is too often a treatment of vital matters not as pressing cultural problems but rather as abstracted instances of philosophical systems. Surely such work is worthwhile, but it too often and too easily turns matters brilliantly vital into dim and lifeless statues. Such work is not, in short, in keeping with a conception of pragmatism as a project of engaged cultural criticism. I suspect that most Peirceans would in fact agree with me in this assessment, for their work is generally more classically philosophical in comparison to the engaged cultural criticism offered by Emerson, James, Dewey, and Rorty.

To get a sense of the relatively ill fit of Peirce's thought for vital matters, we need only gain a glimpse of the systematic impulse that ever pervaded his thought. No one has ever faulted Peirce for not being an ambitious thinker. But too often Peirce's ambitions were too precisely ordered to enable him to engage with vital matters as topics in their own right rather than as exemplary instances of a complex system. In some of his earliest writings, we can indeed discern a Peirce whose ambitions are less systematic, more modest, and thus much more inviting, at least to a pragmatist such as myself. But even in these writings Peirce neglected to turn his thought toward the pressing issues of his day. Cultural melioration was simply not on Peirce's agenda. And if early Peirce freely chose not to engage in cultural criticism, then later Peirce practically forbade himself from descending to the tangled roots of reality. As time pressed on, Peirce became more resolutely modest as he spun out one of the most fascinating intellectual cocoons a philosopher has ever attempted. Here is a sampling of vintage Peirce at the height of his systematic ambition:

In this recommendation is concealed the dangerous bravado of a philosopher all puffed up and raring to go. Needless to say, I favor the early and more modest Peirce. The later Peirce is just too breathtakingly big. But in both periods Peirce never saw fit to engage the realities in which his thought was suffused and so he never directly contributed to the melioration of the cultural vistas informing his invention of pragmatism.

To bring some of these differences into focus, consider Peirce on truth, since this is the topic I used above to discuss the melioristic contribution of my four pragmatist exemplars. In contrast to Emerson, James, Dewey, and Rorty, it is undeniable that Peirce was more preoccupied with a philosophical conception of truth than he was with a cultural critique of the role that truth plays in our lives. To be sure, Peirce did often theorize truth in terms of a progressive inquiry that seems to fit well with pragmatist meliorism. Even so, Peirce's conception was ultimately reliant upon extrahuman powers that pull inquiry toward its end. This is clear where Peirce describes truth as something “determined by nothing human, but by some external permanency” (1877, 120). Contemporary Peirceans have generously emphasized this theme in calling truth "something stable and independent of what this or that person or community might think" (Misak 2004a, 15). The problem with this view is that it employs a theory of truth that eviscerates philosophy of its meliorating impulse. A most telling instance of this is found in a June 12, 1902, letter from Peirce to James: “No doubt truth has to have defenders to uphold it. But truth creates its defenders and gives them strength” (Perry 1935, 286). This passage measures that long distance between Peirce's view on truth and those of the other pragmatists I have here considered. Peirce finds in truth stability, externality, independence, and a source of possible salvation. Emerson, James, Dewey, and Rorty, by contrast, all urged that we look to our selves for our salving and said that truth might be but one of the names for our self-saving.

Peirce once wrote that “if philosophy is to be made a science, the very first price we must pay for it must be to abandon all endeavor to make it literary” (1909b, 360). This is true enough, but more important is that it raises the question of whether or not philosophy should strive after a self-image as a nonliterary scientific endeavor or if it might instead cede its claims to being a full-blown science in order to achieve a more general relevance to its culture. This question is not easily settled, but it is easy enough to see how we could classify...
the pragmatists in its terms. Peirce's systematic and rigorous conception of philosophy left little room for countenancing those exercises of thought required to give philosophy vitality and currency in its culture. My four pragmatists craved at every turn that literary literacy requisite for turning severe thought into a philosophy of culture.

I suspect that most Peirceans will agree with my not counting him as a canonical pragmatist given my definition of pragmatism as primarily a project of cultural criticism. I also suspect that most Peirceans will then reply that pragmatism is hardly best stipulated in the terms that I would have. Those who admire Peirce often do so because they admire the classical philosophical ambitions of his pragmatism more than the seemingly base ambitions of a cultural-critical pragmatism. It is not clear how we might resolve this impasse between two prominent ways of conceiving the work of philosophy through pragmatism. On both views, in any event, the debate can only be resolved in the forthcoming hereafter, because our conceptions of pragmatism, like all our other conceptions, will only play out down the road. But allow me to at least sharpen the swords. I can do so by making use of a contrast between Peirce and Dewey offered by Joseph Margolis, who specifies the contrast between these two classicopragmatists as follows: "the Deweyan version is no more than an unguarded doctrine of hope regarding progressivism; the Peircean version is a metaphysics of inquiry" (1998, 539). If we accept the terms of this contrast, and I think we should, then the pressing issue becomes a matter of which pragmatism is the best pragmatism, which pragmatism we should take up in our philosophical work, and which pragmatism will yield the most copious, sane, gigantic offspring. On one side we have a hopeful cultural criticism and on the other a robust philosophical metaphysics. I am urging that we ought to prefer the former conception to the latter. This does not require that we dispense with all the robustness and rigor usually attendant in philosophy. Nor does it require that we evacuate philosophy of metaphysics. But it does require that our metaphysics, just like our epistemology, moral philosophy, and political theory, yield priority of place to our cultural-critical engagements. Metaphysics et al. ought to accept a more humble role as just one more way of ameliorating the pressing problems we find ourselves facing.  

At the center of the meliorist mood and transitionalist perspective is a view of every human accomplishment—from our epistemic accomplishments we refer to as "truths" to our moral accomplishments of "goods" and "rights" to our political accomplishments of "justice"—as an achievement that develops in a field of practice whose form is temporal and whose contents are historical. Meliorism develops within this broader transitionalist perspective in a way that explicates the orientation toward practical success characteristic of pragmatist perspectives on knowledge, ethics, and politics. Transitionalism captures the philosophical orientation toward temporality and historicity at the heart of this perspective. Meliorism captures the cultural-critical mood of hope that enables us to better navigate these transitions.

America as a Context for Cultural Critique

To conclude my discussion of melioristic cultural criticism as a model of transitionalist pragmatism, I would like to offer a few thoughts about that experimental culture which forms the context for American pragmatism, what makes that context distinctive, and why pragmatism is particularly suited to it. This requires making explicit the interconnections between the projects of pragmatism and the projects of democracy as they have together evolved in America. These interconnections reveal an inborn American commitment to meliorism, a commitment that America is once again learning to take seriously, braced as many of us are by a prominent proclamation of that American creed: "Yes we can."

Another pragmatist cultural critic, Cornel West, puts the point I aim to make this way:

The evasion of epistemology-centered philosophy—from Emerson to Rorty—results in a conception of philosophy as a form of cultural criticism in which the meaning of America is put forward by intellectuals in response to distinct social and cultural crises. In this sense, American pragmatism is ... a continuous cultural commentary or set of interpretations that attempt to explain America to itself at a particular historical moment (1989, 5).

Contemporary pragmatists like West have rightly argued that pragmatism in the melioristic cultural-critical sense in which I am putting it forward here
can be usefully understood as a distinctively American project. I agree with this view, though it needs careful qualification. What is right about the view is that pragmatist meliorism is organic with the distinctive American context within which pragmatism originated and continues to find its most inspired contributors. Following the precedent set by Henry Steele Commager’s (1950, 97) declaration that pragmatism is “almost the official philosophy of America,” David Hollinger (1980, 43) describes pragmatism as an “emblem for America.” John McDermott (1965, 42) writes of a “philosophical revolution that is structured by the development of American culture,” H. O. Mounce (1997, 1) claims that “pragmatism is the distinctively American philosophy,” and Richard Bernstein (1992b, 834) stresses the “rootedness of the pragmatic tradition in American culture.” Robert Westbrook usefully summarizes the common thread running through all of these philosophers and historians of pragmatism: “What most distinguishes the American hope of the pragmatists from that of others—and makes it so intriguing—is that it is hope without transcendent foundations. It is underwritten by neither God, nor nature, nor providential history. It is, like pragmatic truth, wholly a human artifact” (2005, 139).

All of these commentators can be seen as suggesting that pragmatism is American insofar as America itself anticipates pragmatism in emblematicizing hope. It is thus far from idiosyncratic for contemporary pragmatists such as Rorty to write of James and Dewey as “Americanizing philosophy” by “replacing certainty with hope” (1994a, 32). For Rorty, “both pragmatism and America are expressions of a hopeful, melioristic, experimental frame of mind” (1994a, 24). In calling attention to America as the best context for pragmatism, thinkers such as Rorty and West strive to articulate a complex relation to their America as well as to their pragmatism. Their critics, unfortunately, have all too often mistaken this articulation for a myopic nationalism when it is in fact better seen as a potentially global democratic optic. We ought to note carefully that Rorty’s and West’s melioristic tone betray nothing incompatible with a plurality of modes of democratic self-governance taking place outside of the American orbit. West’s view is that “the deep democratic tradition did not begin in America and we have no monopoly on its promise. But it is here where the seeds of democracy have taken deepest root and sprouted most robustly” (2004, 68). It is neither contradictory nor confused both to affirm the value of a multiplicity of democratic projects and to devote oneself carefully to the democratic history in which one finds oneself flowing. In the case of Rorty and West, their history is the democracy of the American experiment. If this American experiment is so congenial to the pragmatist experiment, then it is because, as Westbrook notes, America is like pragmatism in its emphasis on a melioristic hope whose only home is its history.

Contemporary intellectuals, who by and large are more comfortable with national self-shame or national self-promotion than they are with national self-respect, can learn from Rorty’s and West’s example of drawing generously on our native democratic energies. This is in part because Rorty and West stand in a tradition of courageous public thinkers who have sought to retrieve from America’s past the requisite resources for America’s future. We all know the familiar litany of great names. Allow me to consider just one, James Baldwin, who has offered a particular inspiration to meliorist pragmatists in recent years. Rorty borrowed the title for his American meditations in Achieving Our Country from one of the last lines of Baldwin’s The Fire Next Time, West has described Baldwin as “the most fully Emersonian of democratic intellectuals in our history” (2004, 78), and other pragmatists have eagerly taken up Baldwin in their work.17 Baldwin’s importance for pragmatism is his steady knowledge that the American project in his day demanded neither scorn nor celebration but a careful and considered transformation. Baldwin’s cultural critique thus forms part of the roots of that transitionalist engagement with America so boldly celebrated by West and Rorty. This engagement is indeed bold, because for a very long time now it has been the fashion to opt for either a cheap self-congratulatory nationalism or an easy self-hating anti-Americanism. Confidence in America is dear today. It is only with well-chosen hopes that we shall build a better America, not a holy America nor an evil America, but simply a better form of our striking experiment in self-governance. Baldwin reminds us in The Fire Next Time that “freedom is hard to bear” in part because it requires a project of historical transformation that Baldwin calls “change in the sense of renewal.” Baldwin’s transformative criticism aims to re-new the past in the present: “To accept one’s past—one’s history—is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it.” Baldwin’s strength is that he recognizes in the past of his peoples a remarkable and necessary resource for the future of America: “this past . . . yet contains, for all its horror, something very beautiful.” Captured here is the characteristic melioristic
attitude toward America so needful again today. Baldwin's short book excellently exemplifies a strain of reflective engagement that neither denies the sins of our democracy nor feels the need to denigrate that democracy itself. Baldwin ends his book by noting that it falls only on us to make of ourselves what we will: "And here we are, at the center of the arc, trapped in the gaudiest, most valuable, and most improbable water wheel the world has ever seen. Everything now, we must assume, is in our hands; and we have no right to assume otherwise." (1963, 120, 124, 111, 132, 141). What we may yet make of ourselves can be carried only by a careful hope informed by a considered history.

When we pragmatists locate our work as a contribution to the ongoing American experiment in democracy, we situate ourselves neither provincially nor geographically but rather historically and temporally. Our America is not primarily a place so much as it a hope, a project, a generous past and a fragile future. It may have been Emerson (1844, 320) who first celebrated America as just such a never fully present process—"I am ready to die out of nature and be born again into this new yet unapproachable America." An essentially transitionalist concept, prospective in its being yet retrospective in its strengths, America is a challenge we can meet only with the confidence inspired by hope. Hope credits the effort required for self-creative and self-governing energies. Our America exists on margins of itself—pressing always for increase—ever spilling beyond the edges of its former selves. Hope, like Walt Whitman's America, always looks out from itself to some beyond: "Nor is that hope unwarranted. Today, ahead, though dimly yet, we see, in vistas, a copious, sane, gigantic offspring. For our New World I consider far less important for what it has done, or what it is, than for results to come" (Whitman 1867, 488).

Far from claiming pragmatism as a provincial philosophy, my approach is to seek in pragmatism's meliorism a unique and insightful tradition of cosmopolitan philosophy. Such a project is viable just insofar as America has itself always been an experiment in democratic pluralism, that is, an experiment in bringing together once disparate cultural strands so that they may mutually improve one another. My placement of pragmatism in the American grain should not be mistaken for a provincial self-congratulating nationalism. America is but a conceptual shadow haunting extant political geographies. The pragmatist idea of democracy encourages a renewal of American hope and in doing so counters prevailing tendencies in our United States. Pragmatism's prioritization of hopefulness thus offers a much needed philosophical response to the unique challenges presented by the increasing malversation of American hope in our United States.
NOTES

1. Transitionalism, Meliorism, and Cultural Criticism


3. For more on democratic freedom as “personal” in James, see Koopman (2005).

4. Work on Rorty’s meliorism is often quite circuitous, as instanced in Festenstein (2001), Marshall (2001), Peters (2001), and Talisse (2001); for a more fruitful treatment, see Voparil (2006).


7. That Emerson is best read as a cultural critic in this sense is widely affirmed. For an interpretation of my other pragmatists in these terms, see Cotkin (1990) on James, Ryan (1995) on Dewey, and in some respects Gross (2008) on Rorty. Broad interpretations of pragmatism in this cultural critical sense can be discerned in the work of other contemporary pragmatists besides Rorty, most obviously in West (1989) but also in McDermott (1976), Stuhr (1997), Hickman (2001), and Glaude (2007).
8. Draft copies indicate that Rorty began this piece while he was at Wellesley and continued working on it when he moved to Princeton. For further discussion of this piece, see Gross (2008, 162ff.). For generous permission to cite this unpublished draft, I kindly thank Mary Varney Rorty, who also informs me that this essay is scheduled for publication in a forthcoming edition of Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature with Princeton University Press.


10. See Jacoby (1987), Posner (2002), and Bertioni and Bower (2006). See also recent exchanges over the meaning of public thought by Jacoby (2008), Drezner (2008), and Hitchens (2008), and the neat summary in the Times by Gewen (2008).


12. For an early statement of just one aspect of this project in its philosophical perspective, where later iterations will involve ample historical and anthropological fora as well as much additional philosophical work, see Koopman (2007).

13. Rabinow continues to develop these notions in a direction that promisingly points toward both Foucauldian problematization and pragmatist reconstruction. See, for instance, Rabinow (forthcoming).

14. Among his major writings, Peirce’s “Evolutionary Love” (1893) comes closest to a cultural criticism of the science-religion impasse; for a more positive evaluation of Peirce on religion, see Anderson (2004).


17. See, for example, Glade (2007) and Green (2008).

2. Transitionalism in the Pragmatist Tradition


2. This idea permeates Dewey’s works from early (1888) to late (1939b).

3. See also Brandom (2002, 32, 52, 210); the fullest account of historicist pragmatism in Brandom is offered in the context of a discussion of Hegel (2002, 210–234).

4. More recently, Melvin Rogers follows Glade, and West before him, in discerning in Dewey’s pragmatist philosophy “an understanding of humility that does not extinguish hope” (2008, xii).

5. I would also insist that more valuable treatments of these issues can be found elsewhere, for example in Hoy (2009), on the phenomenology of temporality, and Turetzky (1998), on the philosophy of time.


3. Three Waves of Pragmatism

1. On these debates in political theory, see Bohman (1998) and Talisse (2005).

2. On these debates in history, see Toews (1987), Scott (1991), and Ankersmitt (1996); in anthropology, see the collection by Clifford and Marcus (1986).

3. It was Rorty (1979) who first convincingly drew out the pragmatist consequences of Sellars’s critique of givenism, representationalism, and antifoundationalism. For a lucid summary of the continuing relevance of this critique for pragmatism, see Talisse and Alkin (2008, 40ff.).

4. See Dewey (1925).

5. See James (1885, 31; 1904b, 203; 1904c, 51; and especially 1909b and 1911); cf. Putnam (1990a, 242ff.; 1997, 175ff.).

6. James (1907, 103; 1908a, 29; 1908b, 111) reveal three such isolated passages.

7. On transcendentalism in Peirce and Kant, see Pihlstrøm (2003) and Apel (1967).


9. This argument is summarized in Rorty (1977b). Note that although Donovan (1995) describes Rorty in similar terms, he does not tie his account into many of the broader themes in the intellectual history of pragmatism that I here discuss.


12. However, Rorty has on occasion endorsed the stronger view that all awareness is linguistic (1979, 182).

13. In addition to the penultimate section of chapter 6 below, see my earlier argument in Koopman (2004).


17. For a different view, see Pihlstrøm (2003).

4. Knowledge as Transitioning

1. On connections to Dewey, see favorable remarks by Bourdieu (1992, 122). Recent path-clearing work that deserves attention includes contributions by Shusterman...