

Pragmatism as a Philosophy of Hope: Emerson, James, Dewey, Rorty

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We must not worry
how few we are and fall from each other
More than language can express
Hope for the artist in America & etc

—Susan Howe, “Articulation of Sound Forms in Time”

Meliorism, or philosophical hopefulness, has long been acknowledged to be a genuine influence on pragmatist philosophy. In recent years there has been a surge of interest in this idea as an increasing number of books and articles are calling attention to the role that hope plays in the pragmatist way of thinking.¹ But despite this increase of interest in pragmatist meliorism and the near universal acknowledgment that meliorism is somehow central to pragmatism, it remains to be spelled out exactly *how* meliorism contributes to pragmatism. I here undertake the project of explicating the philosophical significance of pragmatist meliorism.

I understand pragmatism, and find it at its best, as a philosophical way of taking hope seriously. Pragmatism 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—such as truth—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 is left unexplained. The purpose of this article is to show both that pragmatism is plausibly understood as hopeful philosophy and that this philosophical call to hopefulness is a good successor to the long-standing quests for certainty that have dominated philosophy throughout modernity.

Pragmatist Meliorism, Pluralism, and Humanism

Hopefulness, which in its more philosophically robust moments can be called *meliorism*, combines *pluralism* and *humanism*, two central themes in the pragmatist vision. Pluralism is the thesis that the realities we inhabit are many. As 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” (123). What reality is depends on our active contributions, interests, and purposes.

Meliorism, holding together pluralism with humanism, is the thesis that we are capable of creating better worlds and selves. Pluralism says that better futures are possible, humanism that possibilities are often enough decided by human energies, and meliorism that better futures are made real by our effort. Meliorism, then, is best seen as humanism and pluralism combined and in confident mood. Melioristic confidence offers a genuine alternative to both pessimism and optimism. These two moods, almost universally proffered by modern philosophers, share a common assumption that progress or decline is inevitable. Meliorism, on the other hand, focuses on what we can do to hasten our progress and mitigate our decline.

As such, meliorism resonates with the central ethical impulse at the heart of pragmatism: democracy. Democracy is the simple idea that political and ethical progress hinges on nothing more than persons, their values, and their actions. Embracing what James called “the strenuous life,” democracy, like pragmatism, refuses reliance on all that is not of us: “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. It is tempting, then, to see pragmatism as developing the philosophical consequences of meliorism, while understanding democracy as developing its political and ethical consequences.

Truth in Pragmatist Meliorism

I would like to elaborate on some of the broader philosophical implications of pragmatist meliorism by considering the role that the concept of truth has played in the writings of four pragmatists I accept as exemplary: William James, John Dewey, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Richard Rorty.

In reconstructing the meaning that truth has in our lives, these four pragmatists eschewed the debilitating worship that most philosophers have paid to truth. Writes James, “*The Truth: what a perfect idol of the rationalistic mind!*” (1907, 115). James’s reconstruction of truth thus broke from the worn-down idea that possession of the truth places us in harmony with the way the world itself really is. This assumption renders us impotent because it credits an optimism regarding truth’s emancipating power, an optimism easily reversed by those skeptical of 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. Pragmatism refocuses attention on the possibilities of our efforts in holding that the truth does not make us free.

James’s concept of truth is fluid with his pluralism, humanism, and meliorism. In outlining “Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth,” he clears out of the way the intellectualist assumption that truth is “an inert static relation” before clearly stating the thesis he defends: “The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events” (97). Truths are shifting and plural. Beginning with this pluralism, James goes on to describe truth in terms of a belief’s capacity to work. Truth, on this view, names our accomplishments.

A familiar criticism of pragmatism at this point is that its conception of truth neglects the realities of which our ideas are true.² Yet James admits the “presence of resisting facts in every actual experience of truth-making” (117). And resistance and assistance are all that reality can, practically, come down to. It is pointless to conceive environmental resistance without human energies capable of being resisted. Likewise, human energies can only work within environments in which they may be effective. Reality resists, but does not transcend, effort. “You see how naturally one comes to the humanistic principle: you can’t weed out the human contribution” (122). Reality is not self-sufficient because reality, which can only be known as resistance or assistance, requires our energies. We are thus integral to what realities, in the plural, are. This is James’s humanism.

James’s pluralism and humanism ultimately lead to meliorism. He writes: “Meliorism treats salvation as neither necessary [as would optimism] nor impossible [as would pessimism]. It treats it as a possibility” (137). This is a possibility for which we are “live champions and pledges,” a possibility that consists of “such a mixture of things as will in the fullness of time give us a chance, a gap that we can spring into. . . . 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?” (138). James sees no reason why not—pluralism and humanism have cleared the way for meliorism.

Consistent with these views, James thinks of truth in terms of processes through which we *free ourselves* and so breaks from the traditional assumption that the truth *makes us* free. He thus abandons many problematic tendencies of the philosophical tradition, 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, rather, is human action in a potent phase. Truth names our power, our success, our working—contrast this to a concept of truth as an external force bestowing its blessings upon us. Richard Poirier states the idea with clarity: “James, like Emerson, foregoes any supports for the self that are extrinsic to its own workings” (1987, 196).³ Truth gets reinscribed within the circle of human work. This reverses the typical philosophical picture of our success as an effect of truth. This Emersonian approach merits fuller consideration.

Emerson was long James’s preoccupation. As a young student in Europe, James looked forward to a time “when Emerson’s philosophy will be in our bones” (quoted 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” (1903, 455). The good that James and Emerson recognize as truth is the good of innovation. Truth renews traditions and thus neither insipidly repeats nor impudently abandons them. Truth, for James, 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 idea, call it pragmatist transitionalism, is essential to pragmatism even though it is often overlooked.⁴ It is the idea that melioration consists in simultaneously accepting and criticizing our inherited traditions.

At the heart of pragmatism is thus 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.” James thought of this deeply democratic meliorism as “Emerson’s revelation” and he lauded it as “the headspring of all his outpourings” (1903, 455). And while it may seem an overstatement to say that Emerson is 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” (1903, 190, 191).

Dewey further noted of Emerson that “he finds truth in the highway, in the untaught endeavor, the unexpected idea” (189).⁵ In this view Dewey found a pragmatism about truth consistent with his own: “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 looks forward to consequences and anticipates a meliorism that “arouses confidence and a reasonable hopefulness.” The melioristic idea that growth is “the only moral end” is central for both Dewey’s conception of truth and his pragmatism more generally (1920, 156, 177, 178). In thinking of truth as a way, Dewey defends a pluralism and humanism fluid with this meliorism.

Emerson's similar view is that there are many ways in truth: "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" (1841, 146). 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. These and other such anticipations of pragmatism are evident throughout Emerson's work, but I will focus on the meliorism, pluralism, and humanism in the essay just quoted, "Self-Reliance."

Pluralism reverberates throughout: "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." A world completed yesterday cannot be infused with value today. Only if the world is in the making can our acts make a difference. 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 this: "You take the way from man, not to man" (144, 143).

This pluralism and humanism balance on melioristic confidence and hope. Near the end of "Self-Reliance," in a brief passage thematizing America and its hopefulness, Emerson finds a way to hold together these many strands of pragmatism: "if the American artist will study with hope and love the precise thing to be done by him, considering the climate, the soil, the length of the day, the wants of the people, the habit and form of the government, he will create a house in which all these will find themselves fitted" (150). Truth by itself makes no provisions for us. This provision is our doing, our art. Truth is the effectiveness of human effort, not a power that informs it from beyond.

Rorty re-sounds this pragmatist hopefulness. Of Dewey's essay on Emerson quoted above, Rorty writes: "For Dewey, Emerson's talent for criterionless hope was the essence of his value to his country" (1989b, 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 with only "generous hope" that "sustain[s] itself without such reassurances" (1998e, 209).

Few commentators stress the centrality of hope in Rorty's philosophic outlook, and even fewer engage with it as a philosophical concept worthy of attention in its own right.⁶ But I propose that we read Rorty as he recommends we read others: "skip lightly past the predictions, and concentrate on the expressions of hope" (1998c, 205). His philosophical hope thus renews an aspect of pragmatism too much neglected in contemporary philosophical circles, including much work in pragmatist philosophy.

Rorty's pragmatism expresses the hope that we can make the difference between a world sustained by our values and a world to which our values are ir-

relevant. Rorty places pragmatism in the service of meliorism's enabling mood. Writing of Dewey as a figure for himself, Rorty claims:

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.” . . . To say that one should replace knowledge by hope is to say much the same thing: 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. (1994a, 34)

Concerning truth, then, Rorty follows 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).⁷ Rorty reverses traditional formulas of truth's liberating power in arguing that “if you take care of freedom, truth will take care of itself” (1989b, 118).⁸

Rorty has thus always held that we do not stand in need of a theory of truth.⁹ He urges instead that we understand truth when we understand what we take to be justified. “True,” for James and Dewey, was a name for the satisfaction of felt interests and doubts. For Rorty, this satisfaction is better glossed as “justified,” but the project of redefinition remains the same: there simply is no craving for truth itself taken apart from any human interest. Rorty's ambiguous idea that hope should *replace* truth, rather than *reconstruct* it as other pragmatists insist, may be troubling. But more important is his broader resonance with the earlier pragmatists on the incapacitating results of any attempt to see in truth or knowledge a super-human power commanding our allegiance.¹⁰ It is in this vein that Rorty in good pragmatist fashion rails against concepts of truth as a “nonhuman authority to whom we owe some sort of respect” and describes his own work as “trying to move people away from the notion of being in touch with something big and powerful and non-human” (1998d, 150; 2002b, 75). I see this redefinition as an attempt to credit our hopes that we may increasingly actualize our democratic values by our own lights.

Pragmatism holds that true beliefs are sustained by the nourishing energy we give them—this reverses the pretence that the truth nourishes us. The truth will not set us free—our efforts, not inhuman energies, are what free us. Pragmatism thus refuses to offer up prayers of obedience to a most hollow philosophical idol. Pragmatism instead refocuses philosophy on the differences we humans can make. Hope is the mood in which we expect that we can make the requisite differences.

The Value of Understanding Pragmatism as Meliorism

Explicating pragmatism as philosophical meliorism clarifies ways in which pragmatism is a substantive, viable, and valuable alternative to long-standing philosophical paradigms. But seeing pragmatism as meliorism is also useful in at least two other ways. I conclude by briefly exploring each.

The first occurs within the context of contemporary pragmatist scholarship. One impasse facing current scholarship concerns the problem of who is, and who is not, a pragmatist. Almost everyone acknowledges that William James and John Dewey are at the center of pragmatist philosophy. But other figures, those more distant and more contemporary, remain marginal: most notable are Ralph Waldo Emerson and Richard Rorty.¹¹ By redescribing pragmatism in terms of hope I have indicated ways in which Emerson and Rorty are as quintessential pragmatists as James and Dewey. The advantage of this view is that it enables us to understand pragmatism as a philosophical practice flexible enough to be employed by thinkers as different as Emerson, James, Dewey, and Rorty without diminishing its strength. This combination of strength and flexibility inheres in hope itself.

This brings me to a second way in which explicating pragmatism in terms of meliorism can be useful. A consequence of my view is that pragmatism seems more akin to forms of cultural criticism than to philosophical traditions such as logical positivism or phenomenology. I am happy with this consequence and suggest that we read Emerson, Rorty, James, and Dewey as concerned in the first place with America and its futures, and then, only secondarily, with topics such as truth, verification, and embodiment.¹² While pragmatism's meliorist cultural criticism resonates with philosophical positions such as metaphysical pluralism and epistemological humanism, pragmatism is better understood as a project of making these pluralisms and humanisms relevant to the culture at large. Understood in this way, differences amongst these four pragmatists over traditional philosophical concepts such as experience and language pale in comparison to their deeper agreements about America and their hopes for its future. This is why Emerson and Rorty are as important for pragmatism as are James and Dewey.

The advantage of reading pragmatists as philosophers of culture or cultural critics is that we can then see pragmatism's meliorism as relevant to our current cultural problems. In the American context to which pragmatism is addressed, for example, there appears to be a growing loss of faith in an increasingly imperiled democratic experiment. We stand in need, today, of hope, most especially the strong and flexible form of hope we find in pragmatism. It is hope that credits the confidence necessary for melioration. If America is a symbol of hope, as we commonly believe, then it follows that a loss of hope is a loss of America itself. Pragmatism's prioritization of hopefulness thus offers a much-needed response to the unique challenges presented by the increasing malversation of American hope in our United States.

Pragmatism is often observed to be, though it is not often understood why, a distinctively American form of philosophy.¹³ I find value in this aspect of pragmatism's lineage. Rorty summarizes it in describing James and Dewey as "Americanizing philosophy" by "replacing certainty with hope." He goes on to claim that "both pragmatism and America are expressions of a hopeful, melioristic, experimental frame of mind" (1994a, 32, 24).¹⁴ If pragmatism is American, this is because America, like pragmatism, is an emblematic vision of hope. Pragmatism is thus best understood as a philosophical practice corollary to the experiment of American democracy.

But my placement of pragmatism in the American grain should not be mistaken for self-congratulatory nationalism. America is but a conceptual shadow haunting extant political geographies. An essentially prospective concept, America is a challenge that we can meet only with the confidence inspired by hope. Emerson wrote of such an America as a never-fully-present future creation: "I am ready to die out of nature and be born again into this new yet unapproachable America" (1844, 320). Pragmatist meliorism encourages a renewal of our America and in doing so counters the prevailing tendencies of our United States. Hope renews American democracy. Hope names the effort of prospective energy, self-creation looking forward, reliance on ourselves, trust that we shall manifest better values in the world. Hope is Walt Whitman's America: "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" (1867, 488). This kind of American and democratic hope is the crucial philosophical innovation urged by pragmatism.¹⁵

Notes

1. Exemplary texts include Rorty (1989a, 1994a, 2002a); West (1989); Stuhr (1997, 2003); Green (1999 and forthcoming); Shade (2001); McKenna (2001); Stout (2004); Saito (2005); and Westbrook (2005).

2. Cf. Russell (1910).

3. Following this thought, I find mistaken the claim that for James "the *value* of truth lies in its power to make the world and our human lives in it better" (Cormier 2001, 28). Truth, for James, is not powerful in itself, but is rather a name for our being powerful.

4. This aspect of pragmatism has been best emphasized by historians and literary critics; cf. Hollinger (1981); Poirier (1987); Livingston (1994); and Levin (1999).

5. Cf. Emerson (1844, 315).

6. Recent attempts to address Rorty's meliorism are usually circuitous and uncomfortable with taking hope seriously; cf. Festenstein (2001); Marshall (2001); Peters (2001); and Talisse (2001).

7. Barry Allen, agreeing with Rorty's pragmatist mood, writes similarly: "Truth has no power of its own, no utopian potential, no affinity for good, and will not make us free" (1993, 182).

8. Cf. Rorty (2006).

9. Cf. Rorty (1982, xiii; 1986, 1995a, 1998a).

10. Judith Green has rightly pointed out to me the difference between Rorty's problematic call for replacing truth with hope and the earlier pragmatist call for reconstructing truth through hope. I think, however, that Rorty would agree that truth, as formulated by earlier pragmatists (call this "pragmatic-truth"), is quite consistent with his meliorism. Rorty only wishes that hope will displace

truth and knowledge as these latter were conceived by modern foundational epistemology (call this “foundational-truth”). My claim is that James, Dewey, and Rorty all urge that meliorist hope replace “foundational-truth” while perhaps slight differences remain in how much emphasis is given to the role of “pragmatic-truth” in meliorist hope.

11. And what of other pragmatists I have not addressed? The obvious exception from my list is Charles Sanders Peirce. To be sure, Peirce himself described truth in terms of a progressive inquiry that seems to fit well with pragmatism’s meliorism. However, his conception was still ultimately reliant upon extra-human 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, 18), a theme that contemporary Peirceans emphasize in calling truth “something stable and independent of what this or that person or community might think” (Misak 2004, 15); cf. Misak (2000); Talisse (2004, 2005). A letter from Peirce to James anticipates his distance from my melioristic view of pragmatism: “No doubt truth has to have defenders to uphold it. But truth creates its defenders and gives them strength.” Peirce to James, June 12, 1902, in Perry (1935, 286).

12. This explains why most philosophers are frustrated with Rorty: they expect from him much less than he gives. Rorty is not simply writing about truth and contingency, he is writing about the cultural role that these concepts once played and continue to play (cf. 1995b, 225n11). Consider as exemplary the way that most readers understand Emerson as writing commentaries on the American experiment. Concerning taking James and Dewey in this way, convincing arguments that they are philosophers of American culture are given in Cotkin (1990) and Ryan (1995).

13. Cf. Commager (1950, 97); Hollinger (1980, 43); Bernstein (1992, 834); Mounce (1997, 1); Westbrook (2005, 139ff.).

14. Rorty is thus disconcerted that “hopelessness has become fashionable on the Left—principled, theorized, philosophical hopelessness” (1998b, 37; cf. Rorty 1994b, 254).

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