Classical American Pragmatism and the Crisis of European Science

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Much research already examines historical and thematic connections between classical American pragmatism and continental philosophy, especially phenomenology. For example, there are numerous studies comparing and contrasting the phenomenologies of Edmund Husserl and Max Scheler with the radical empiricisms of William James and John Dewey. Pragmatism, however, advises philosophers to be mindful of the existential, problematic situations that motivate inquiry, and so it is surprising that relatively little has been said about similarities in the experienced concerns that motivated the inquiries of both phenomenologists and pragmatists. This paper examines what I take to be the central existential concern behind the phenomenological movement, namely, what Husserl famously termed "the crisis of European science,"[1] and it argues that a very similar concern motivated much of classical pragmatism, as seen at least in James and Dewey.

Talk of a "crisis" in Europe's boasted reason, upon which its edifice of science was built, appears significantly first in the writings of Friedrich Schelling. Western rational science, grounded firmly in the assumption of an absolute separation (*Scheidung*) of Nature from Spirit (*Geist*), is experiencing a "crisis" with respect to human self-understanding and freedom. How can the presumably utterly irrational impulse of life (*Seele*) give birth to mind and reason? How can spirit then become alienated from soul and take command over irrational life as its lord and master? And, once it does, once life is thoroughly subjected to mind's logic and laws of causal determinacy, what becomes of human freedom? As Schelling writes, "thoughts are doubtless born in the soul; but a thought once born is an independent power which works on it its own way,

[1] Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970).

and which indeed grows so great in the human soul that it masters its own mother and prevails over her."[2] (The casting of "soul" as a female, dominated by a masculine "mind" is enormously significant, as Scheler noted already in the 1920's, but we will not be able to explore the implications of this "crisis" for matters of gender in this essay.) The "crisis" created by this conquest of reason over life, of Spirit (*Geist*) over Nature, "first appeared [in] that conflict of mind and heart" and culminated in "Spinozism," to be condemned not for being fatalistic--Schelling did not think that it was--but for its utter lifelessness, for its absence of any soul. "All men were now warned of the abyss (*Abgrund*); it was clearly laid before all eyes [by Fichte]. The only remedy which still seemed possible was seized; only that bold utterance could bring on the crisis; it alone could frighten Germans away from this ruinous philosophy [of Spinozism] and lead them back to the Heart, to inwardness of feeling and to faith."[3]

Similarly Friederich Nietzsche spoke of a "crisis" that developed in the modern West, stemming from the separation of Apollonian reason from primal, creative, Dionysian life-energy.[4]

The phenomenological movement, too, was in large measure a response to a growing sense of a "crisis" in European rationality and science, as expressed in the very title of Edmund Husserl's most impassioned and provocative work, *The Crisis of European Science and Transcendental Phenomenology*. As for Schelling, the "crisis" for Husserl entailed a growing tension between metaphysical principles of Nature and Spirit, of Life and Reason,[5] but it was

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[2] Schelling, *Philosophische Untersuchengen ueber das Wesen der Menschlichen Freitheit und die damit zusammenhaengenden Gegenstaende* (1809), in Saemmtliche *Werke*, ed. K. F. A. Schelling, Vol. VII, p. 347; *Of Human Freedom*, trans. James Guttmann (Chicago: Open Court, 1936), pp. 19-20.

[3] *Das Wesen der Menschlichen Freitheit*, p. 348; *Of Human Freedom*, p. 21.

[4] Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golfing (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956).

[5] Husserl, "Philosophy and the Crisis of European Man," in *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy*, trans. Quentin Lauer (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 152.

more profoundly manifest in a growing existential chasm between scientific, theoretical accounts of the world and the experienced, everyday sense of the world, or what Husserl termed the life-world (*Lebenswelt*), wherein humans experience life as meaningful. Husserl identified Galileo's mathematical schematization of nature as a key event in the history of this crisis. The experienced world, in which the sun rises and sets, was displaced by a view in which such life-world experiences are rendered as mere illusions: the sun only appears, to the non-scientific eye, to rise and set. To this example we might add others that developed as Western science advanced: seemingly "free" persons became merely causally determined mechanisms. Love as a decidedly spiritual experience was described scientifically as a mere set of bio-chemical processes. The "real world," according to the new science, is not the one experienced first-hand through the senses but an array of circles, vortices, and forces, described best mathematically--a world of Platonic forms.

The issue behind the displacement of the life-world by such theoretical formalisms, according to Husserl, was not one of truth: it was not a question of whether or not such scientific accounts provide "correct" or accurate depictions of the world as it is in itself. Rather, the question, for Husserl--someone primarily trained as a mathematician--was, "*What is the meaning of this mathematization of nature?*"[6] As he wrote, in perhaps his most pointed description of the crisis of European science, which we quote at length because it provides a key link to American pragmatism:

> Merely fact-minded sciences make merely fact-minded people.…In our vital need--so we are told--this science has nothing to say to us. It excludes in principle precisely the questions which humanity, given over in our unhappy times to the most portentous upheavals, finds the most burning: questions of the meaning or meaninglessness of the whole of this human existence….What does science have to say about … us humans as subjects of … freedom? The mere science of bodies has nothing to say; it abstracts from everything

[6] Husserl, *Crisis*, p. 23.

> subjective….Scientific, objective truth is exclusively a matter of establishing what the world, the physical as well as the spiritual world, is in fact. But can the world, and human existence in it, truthfully have meaning if the sciences recognize as true only what is objectively established in this fashion, and if history has nothing more to teach us than that all the shapes of the spiritual world, all the conditions of life, ideals, norms upon which relies, form and dissolve themselves like fleeting waves, that it always was and ever will be so, that again and again reason must turn into nonsense, and well-being into misery? Can we console ourselves with that? Can we live in this world, where historical occurrence is nothing but an unending concatenation of illusory progress and bitter disappointment?[7]

As European science became more and more sophisticated in explaining the mechanisms by which we exist and the universe operates, it became increasingly inept in addressing the question of the meaning of our existence. The issue was not one of the "truthfulness" of science but a question of whether or not human existence, with all its suffering and despair, could find such a world-view bearable. Europe, Husserl proclaimed, was spiritually "sick": "Europe … is in critical [spiritual] condition."[8]

Husserl's remedy for the crisis of European science was transcendental phenomenology, whose generative method traces the growth and development of theoretical scientific abstractions out of their life-world origins, thereby retrieving the life-world meanings of those abstractions from their obscurity and revealing the organic connection between them and scientific theorizings.

Max Scheler described the crisis as a perversion of the relationship between life and the machine: "With the development of modern civilization, … *the machine* has grown to dominate life. 'Objects' have progressively grown in vigor and intelligence, in size and beauty--while humans, who created them, have more and more become cogs in their own machine….The mere means are developed and the goals are forgotten. And that precisely is decadence."[9] Western

[7] Husserl, *Crisis of European Science*, pp. 6-7.

[8] Husserl, "Philosophy," p. 150.

[9] Scheler, *Ressentimant*, trans. William W. Holdheim, ed. Lewis Coser (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1961), pp. 172, 174.

science had succeeded in keeping alive longer human life that experienced itself as less and less worth living: Western man was in danger of dying--spiritually if not biologically--not from a shortage of food but from spiritual malnutrition, a lack of meaning. "[E]verything living and vital is eliminated from this strange picture [in the modern scientific account]. This world is an accumulation of logicians standing in a huge engine-room--bloodless, emotionless, without love or hate."[10]

Martin Heidegger, in turn, located the crisis of European science in technology, understood not so much as a collection of gadgetry but as a mode of "enframement" ("*Gestell*") that allows Being to disclose itself (*poiesis*) only through static, predetermined categories, not in itself, as *physis*, but only in accordance with prevailing, a priori formalisms, that is, as *techne*.[11] As with Husserl, the crisis of European science was one of meaning: the technological enframement of the world obscured the meaning of Being; Western technology had forgotten the meaning of Being, which Heidegger's whole life-long project aimed to recover.

The body of literature in continental philosophy and literature that speaks of this crisis in Western science is huge--we have not even mentioned Kierkegaard, Berdyaev, Ortega y Gasset, Durkheim, or, more recently, Habermas--but the examples above are sufficient for our purpose of showing a similar concern in the beginnings of American pragmatism.

Classical American philosophy gave its own renditions of this crisis in meaning and its own remedies to it, sometimes in ways strikingly similar to those of its European counterparts. Ralph Waldo Emerson already expressed concern about a growing tendency to experience the world in second-hand ways. In "The American Scholar" he famously opens by asking, "Why

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[10] Scheler, p. 164.

[11] Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," trans. William Lovitt, in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), pp. 293-95.

should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?"[12] This decrying of the loss of "an original relation to the universe" bears especially striking resemblance to Heidegger's talk of our forgetfulness of the meaning of Being, the loss of an original relationship to Being, as a result of technological enframement.[13]

The relationship of spirit to nature was no necessarily dichotomous one for Emerson, although the former was commonly experienced as alienated from the latter in the present age, without Emerson having the benefit of that word made famous by Marx ("alienated"). "Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts," Emerson told us, and "Nature [in general] is the symbol of spirit [in general]."[14] Modern humanity, however, had somehow forgotten how to "see" this ontologically analogical relationship: Nature appeared as mere sensuous surface and had lost its power to signify spiritual realities. The problem for Emerson, as Stanley Cavell well points out, was one of skepticism, but a skepticism that expresses itself not merely in epistemological uncertainty. Rather, the skepticism was existential, a felt distrust of one's relationship to the world, a feeling that one's senses could not be trusted and that the world was hence no longer one's home.

So, too, Henry David Thoreau ventured to Walden Pond to recover an "original relation to the universe" that had somehow become lost. In proclaiming, "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation,"[15] he chillingly announced this crisis of meaning, and in going to the woods he offered a remedy for it: "I went to the woods because I wanted to live deliberately …. and not,

[12] Emerson, "Nature," in *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Stephen E. Whicher (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), p. 21.

[13] Stanley Cavell, too, sees striking similarities between Emerson and Heidegger on these matters. "Aversive Thinking: Emersonian Representations in Heidegger and Nietzsche," in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*, The Carus Lectures, 1988 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 33-63.

[14] Emerson, "Nature," p. 31.

[15] Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience: The Variorum Editions*, ed. Walter Harding (New York: Washington Square Press, 1968), p. 5.

when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; … I wanted … to know [life] by experience."[16] Through such a deliberate act Thoreau aimed to cut through the alienation from life that, he thought, plagued his age, and like Heidegger he, throughout *Walden*, suggested that recent technologies had something to do with this alienation.

It is perhaps William James, though, who, among both Europeans and Americans, best personified and embodied the crisis of European science. Once an aspiring painter, he was educated in the biological sciences of the day, only to discover that those sciences had nothing to say to him about the *meaning* of the life that they explained and classified. Indeed, note the stunning similarities between the following, biting commentary from James's "The Will to Believe" and the lengthy passage from Husserl quoted above:

> When one turns to the magnificent edifice of the physical sciences, and sees how it was reared; what thousands of disinterested moral lives of men lie buried in its mere foundations; what patience and postponement, what choking down of preference, what submission to the icy laws of outer fact are wrought into its very stones and mortar; how absolutely impersonal it stands in its vast augustness …. Can we wonder if those bred in the rugged and manly school of science [we again note the gendered language] should feel like spewing [all] subjectivism out of their mouths? The whole system of loyalties which grow up in the schools of the science go dead against its toleration; so that it is only natural that those who have caught the scientific fever should pass over the opposite extreme, and write sometimes as if the incorruptibly truthful intelllect ought positively to prefer bitterness and unacceptableness to the heart in its cup.
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> > It fortifies my soul to know
> > That, though I perish, Truth is so--[17]

And elsewhere:

> This systematic denial on science's part of the personality as a condition of events, this rigorous belief that in its own essential and innermost nature our world is a strictly impersonal world, may conceivably, as the whirlgig of time

[16] Thoreau, p. 67.

[17] *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition*, ed. John J. McDermott (New York: The Modern Library, 1968), p. 720.

> goes round, prove to be the very defect that our descendents will be most surprised at in our boasted science, the omission that to their eyes will most tend to make it look perspectiveless and short.[18]

Much of James's personal depression stemmed from a sense of hopelessness that, whatever his own organic disposition, was fueled by modern science's account of the world as a causally determined mechanism, which, to James, made a joke of human longings for freedom and meaning. James, as he recounted, felt paralyzed and crushed: as he recorded in his journal: "Hitherto, when I felt like taking a free initiative, like daring to act originally, without carefully waiting for contemplation of the external world to determine all for me, suicide seemed the most manly form to put my daring into."[19] Why struggle, why bother to assert oneself boldly when, according to modern scientific accounts, all is causally determined: freedom is but chimera and all human quests for meaning are greeted by a cold, indifferent universe, which, frankly, doesn't give a damn? James, like Husserl, pondered, how are we to console ourselves with such a view of the universe and of life?

James, like Husserl, proposed, already in his *Psychology*, a genetic method, whereby abstract scientific concepts are traced back to concrete, everyday experience. More importantly, though, James turned to belief as the remedy to the crisis. Belief for him, however, was not merely a matter of cognitive assent: belief was a commitment to action, a willful determination to *make* some human aspiration real. Humans are no mere observers of coldly indifferent facts: they are active players in the universe, with a say, a vote, in what is to be and not to be. As James argued in "The Will to Believe," "*faith in a fact can help create the fact*."[20] Through willful acts of belief human agents break through the impersonal façade of the universe, as

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[18] James, as quoted by Lewis Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine: The Pentagon of Power* (New York: Harcourt Brace Javanovich, 1970), p. 434.

[19] Diary, April 30, 1870, in *Writings*, p. 8.

[20] "Will to Belieive," p. 731.

described by the sciences of his day, and humanize the world, make it theirs: through belief, "The universe is no longer a mere *It* to us, but a *Thou*."[21] As James described his own recovery from debilitating depression through willful, active belief: "My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will…. and voluntarily cultivate the feeling of moral freedom, by reading books favorable to it, as well as by acting…. For the present then remember: care little for [metaphysical] speculation; much for the *form* of my action." Rather than suicide, "now I go a step further with my will, not only act with it, but believe as well; believe in my individual reality and creative power…. I will posit life (the real, the good) in the self-governing *resistance* of the ego to the world. Life shall [be built in] doing and suffering and creating."[22]

Although not speaking with the same existential urgency as Husserl and James, Dewey was no less attuned to the crisis they described. Dewey, too, criticized how the sciences of his day--natural and social sciences alike--anchored in an array of false metaphysical dichotomies, had grown increasingly detached from everyday, practical experience. This tendency manifest itself first and foremost, perhaps, in philosophy: philosophy had become increasingly concerned with the solving of logical puzzles created by professional philosophers and decreasingly with the actual, concrete problems of life--social as well as personal.[23] One of Dewey's remedies was nothing less than a radical redefinition of the very meaning of philosophical rigor: philosophical rigor was to be defined, not so much in terms of formalized procedures whereby one moves from premises to conclusions, increasingly with the aid a symbolic logic indistinguishable from mathematics, but in terms of fidelity to experience. Such rigor was anchored in Dewey's

[21] "Will to Believe," p. 733.

[22] Diary, pp. 7-8.

[23] I have in mind here Dewey's famous dictate: "Philosophy recovers itself when it ceases to be a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers and becomes a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems of men." "The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy," in *The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899-1924*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston**.** Vol. 10: 1916-1917. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), p. 46.

"postulate of immediate empiricism," whereby "things--anything, everything, in the ordinary or non-technical use of the term 'thing'--are what they are experienced as,"[24] by contrast to the tendency in modern science that Husserl described, to displace the world as experienced in everyday life with its own abstract, formalized accounts . Following this postulate, philosophical theorizing and that of the other sciences in turn "recover" and "reconstruct" themselves in a double-barreled manner. In the name of philosophical rigor, Dewey insisted, first, that every intellectual inquiry begin with clear articulation of the concrete problem that motivates it: why is this an existential, *human* problem, rather than merely an intellectual puzzle for the professional scholar? Second, once we arrive at our theoretical conclusions, we return to the existential problem that motivated the inquiry, to be certain that our conclusions do not provide merely intellectual satisfaction but contain practical value in solving the problems of life that motivated the inquiry in the first place.

In addition to and more profoundly than this method of recovery and reconstruction, though, Dewey followed Emerson and Thoreau (and also his anarchist friend Emma Goldman[25]) in suggesting that the crisis of modern life, whereby scientific reason feels increasingly detached from matters of the meaning of life, might be overcome through a renewal of what Cavell describes as an aesthetic sense of the ordinary.[26] A further symptom of the crisis of modern technological life was the growing reduction of the aesthetic and of what is termed "art," to objects and performances confined to museums and concert halls, and Dewey was greatly disturbed by "the chasm between ordinary and esthetic experience" that this created, the growing

[24] Dewey, "The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism," in *Middle Works*, vol. 3 (1977), p. 241.

[25] On the possible influences of Goldman upon Dewey, see Lynne M. Adrian, "Emma Goldman and the Spirit of Artful Living: Philosophy and Politics in the Classical American Period," in *Frontiers in American Philosophy*, ed. Robert W. Burch and Herman J. Saatkamp, Vol. I (College Station: Texas A & M University, 1992), pp.191-99.

[26] Dewey's indebtedness to Emerson on this point is apparent in his essay "Emerson—The Philosopher of Democracy" (1903), in *Middle Works*, vol. 3, pp. 184-92.

gap between the increased production of such objects, often funded by the wealth of the rising capitalist class, and the increasing ugliness in the lives of ordinary workers.[27] The remedy, Dewey suggested, in *Art as Experience*, was a reconception of art in terms of an aesthetics of existence: we must think of aesthetics less in terms of the production of art objects and increasingly in terms of the "art of living," wherein art objects work to enrich human experience; that is, we must rethink art in terms of the cultivation of human growth, the promotion of the human organism's capacity for new experiences, ever-increasingly complex and rich. Through a recovery of an aesthetic sense of the ordinary, the commonplace, the wounds of the crisis might be healed and a feeling for the meaning of everyday life restored. In this regard and as I have shown elsewhere,[28] classical American philosophy responded to the crisis of modern science in this manner well ahead of continental philosophers: only in the late 20th century, with thinkers such as Michel Foucault, does one find on the continent a similar concern with the aesthetics of everyday existence and the "art of living."

Another major aspect of this crisis of Western science, which we can only mention briefly here, is the crisis of community, articulated in Europe by the likes of Ferdinand Toennies,[29] Max Scheler,[30] Werner Sombart, and Emile Durkheim and in America by Josiah Royce and Jane Addams, among many others. What these thinkers point to is a growing gap between the norms of traditional community (*Gemeinschaft*), based in the *feeling* of a common life--family, custom, and tradition--and the growing demands of industrial society (*Gesellschaft*), rooted in rational principles of industrial efficiency and "scientific management." For example, throughout her

[27] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*, ed. Boydston**.** Vol. 10: 1934 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), pp. 14-16.

[28] Stikkers, "The 'Art of Living': Aesthetics of Existence in Foucault and American Philosophy," *Radical Philosophy Review* 12, nos. 1-2 (2009): 339-53.

[29] Toennies, *Community and Society*, trans. and ed. Charles P. Loomis (New York: Harper & Row, 1957).

[30] Scheler, pp. 165-67.

writings Addams was attentive to the growing, felt chasm between family life and work, as experienced by those with whom she dealt in the settlement house, the loss of an organic connection between family and work that was enjoyed by traditional agrarian communities.[31]

My aim here, then, has been to call attention to a common motivation behind the rise of classical American pragmatism and developments in European philosophy at the same time, especially phenomenology. On both sides of the Atlantic leading philosophers were responding to a perceived "crisis" of meaning, stemming from a growing chasm between Western science's theoretical accounts of the world and the concrete experiences of everyday life. What does this new age of science and technology mean in terms of the quality of concrete experiences of life? In light of such shared concerns, it should not be surprising, then, that numerous scholars have found striking similarities between American pragmatism and radical empiricism, on the one hand, and European phenomenology and existentialism, on the other: both are descriptions, diagnoses, and remedies of and for this crisis. Given that part of Dewey's remedy for this crisis was to insist, in the name of philosophical rigor, that inquiries begin with careful attention to the existential problems that motivate them, it is surprising that more attention has not been paid to this common existential motive behind the inquiries of American pragmatists and continental phenomenologists, although much has been written about similarities in the inquiries themselves.

Not only, though, need we look more carefully at the experienced problem--the crisis--that motivated classical pragmatism and classical phenomenology, but, in accord with the second part of Dewey's call for the recovery and reconstruction of philosophy and science, we might examine the extent to which pragmatic and phenomenological inquiries have adequately addressed the crisis that motivated them at their starts: to what extent is a sense of "crisis" still

[31] E.g., Addams, *Democracy and Social Ethics* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2001), pp. 94-95.

with us regarding our present-day sciences? To what extent is there still a perceived gap between the abstract inquiries and theorizings of science and everyday life-world experiences? As one who works especially in the philosophy of economics I can attest that a sense of crisis, in the way described above, is profoundly present in contemporary economic science,[32] and my sense is that work begun by classical American pragmatists and classical continental phenomenologists in healing the crisis is far from over.

[32] See my "Phenomenology and Economic Science," in *Descriptions*, ed. Don Ihde and Hugh Silverman (Stony Brook: State University of New York Press, 1985), pp. 211-22.