

**Telling Tales Out of School:  
Pragmatic Reflections on Philosophical Storytelling**

[Working Draft]

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Introduction: Mapping the Terrain

It is perhaps pertinent to begin by pointing out the obvious. By *modern philosophy*, we unreflectively mean modern *European* philosophy and, moreover, by *pragmatism* we mean a philosophical movement originating in the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century. The modern period of European philosophy stretches from Francis Bacon (1561) and René Descartes (1596-1650) to some indeterminate or (at least) contested point, perhaps in the nineteenth century (or even before) *or* in the future. Whether the project launched by Bacon and Descartes is an ongoing (cf. Jürgen Habermas, “Modernity: An Unfinished Project”) or rather an exhausted affair is, to some extent, still an open question. This makes a difference for our topic, since situating pragmatism in the context of modernity might mean *either* seeing it as primarily carrying forward the impetus of modern European philosophers *or breaking*

*decisively* with the dominant ethos of European thought during the modern epoch. Just as Bacon and Descartes carried forward far more of the scholastic tradition than either realized, Peirce and James might also have carried forward more of the modern ethos than either appreciated. Even so, Bacon and Descartes instituted a break with medieval thought (at least, we have tended to accredit their self-understanding in this regard), just as Peirce and James (along with a host of others) inaugurated a truly novel approach to philosophical inquiry.<sup>1</sup> However dramatic the rupture in both cases, there is of course *continuity* with the past. So, one question is whether we devote ourselves to tracing the threads of continuity or we try to ascertain wherein the American pragmatists definitively broke with the dominant traditions of European philosophy. Of course, we can, in principle, do both. But, in practice, we tend to be *either* historical *synechists*, interpreters of the histories in which we are caught up who are devoted to tracing the threads of continuity, *or* rupture theorists. I imagine that there might be cultural and even nationalistic biases operative here, with Europeans disposed to see American pragmatism as continuous with European thought and Americans inclined to think the pragmatic movement marks a decisive break. Hence, situating pragmatism in the context of modern philosophy is itself a philosophical, not merely historiographical, task; for it requires us to interpret our own histories in terms of their philosophical vitality and, in turn, this requires us to assess that philosophical vitality in terms of their putative power to advance

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<sup>1</sup> It is worthwhile to note, if only in passing, that Descartes tends to eclipse Bacon, so he is often identified as *the* father of modern philosophy. It is also worthwhile to recall Richard J. Bernstein's comment on the Cartesian origin of modern philosophy. In *Praxis and Action* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), he wittily observes: "Descartes is frequently recalled the father of modern philosophy. If we are to judge by philosophy in the last hundred years, this title can best be understood in the Freudian sense. It is a common characteristic of many contemporary philosophers that they have sought to overthrow or dethrone the father" (p. 5).

philosophical inquiry. Put more simply, historical importance is bound up with contemporary concerns.

Far from being innocent or uncontroversial, *American pragmatism* and *modern thought* are (to use W. B. Gallie's expression) essentially contested concepts. In addition, the relationship between the two is an essentially contested matter ("Essentially Contested Concepts" in *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding* [1964]).<sup>2</sup> This means that there is no possibility of decisively answering the question of the relationship between American pragmatism and modern (European) thought. I and indeed Gallie would be misunderstood, however, if that characterization were taken to mean that it is useless to debate the question. We *can*, by debating this question, come to a fuller, richer, deeper understanding of the relationship between the pragmatic movement and modern thought. And we can do so by attending painstakingly to the details of history (Gallie,

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<sup>2</sup> Gallie wrote an early and still instructive book on C. S. Peirce. The reception of Peirce in Great Britain owes much to Gallie's efforts to interpret Peirce to an audience prejudiced against according the originator of pragmatism his due. If I recall correctly, Christopher Hookway, one of Peirce's leading contemporary expositors, came to that elusive genius through Gallie. A philosophical tradition is, at bottom, an ongoing series of personal encounters in which genuine mediation occurs. Moreover, a sign is anything that puts another thing in touch with yet another thing (cf. Peirce). In the life of any tradition, persons often function as signs ("sign is," as Peirce astutely observes in a letter to Victoria Lady Welby, dated. October 12 1904,"something by knowing which we know something more"; also, "the essential function of a sign is to render inefficient relations efficient"). Finally, Gallie is an important philosopher in his own right. In addition to "Essentially Contested Concepts," it is especially pertinent to recall that he is the author of "The Idea of Practice" (*Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, volume 68 [1967-68], 63-83. While in *Peirce* and other writings, Gallie proves himself to be an insightful expositor of Peirce, in "The Idea of Practice" he puts Peirce to work in helping him deepen our understanding of practice. Regarding the importance of the concept of tradition for understanding the history of philosophy, see John Herman Randall, Jr., *How Philosophy Uses Its Past* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1963); also John E. Smith, *America's Philosophical Vision* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). "The history of a tradition ... is," as Smith notes, "an indispensable resource for philosophical understanding" (86).

“Essentially Contested Concepts”). Even though there is, in such cases, no incontestable truth, there can be fruitful debates.

Let me return to the obvious. We tend to use the expression *American philosophy* in a manner analogous to *modern philosophy* and to use this expression especially so in reference to the pragmatic movement. Indeed, pragmatism is often characterized as a distinctively American tradition. Sometimes this is done for the purpose of disparaging pragmatism, sometimes for the purpose of exalting pragmatism. The unmarked signifier needs to be marked as such. So, it is worthwhile to note that American philosophy means *North American philosophy* (cf. Scott Pratt). Finally, any attempt to situate pragmatism in the *context of modern philosophy*, understood exclusively in terms of modern European philosophy, is likely to begin – and, not infrequently, to end – with a consideration of pragmatism in reference to *German* thinkers who are imagined to be especially relevant to the task of understanding Peirce, James, Dewey, Mead, and other figures in this tradition. More than any other figure, this tends to privilege the importance of Kant and his progeny (however remotely scattered and effectively disguised) vis-à-vis our understanding of pragmatism. This tendency is, at once, certainly understandable, partly justifiable, but ultimately unfortunate. For we miss the depth and significance of pragmatism if we interpret this orientation as primarily a transformation of Kant’s project (see, however, C. B. Christensen, “Peirce’s Transformation of Kant,” *The Review of Metaphysics*, volume 48, issue 1, 91-120; also Gabriele Gava). As important as the continuity between Peirce and Kant is (and, in my judgment, it *is* important, truly important), the philosophical revolution inaugurated by Charles Peirce marks a radical rupture with European modern. Or so the story goes, at least as I am inclined to unfold it.

On this occasion, however, I am more interested in reflecting upon our habits of storytelling than in unfolding any specific story.<sup>3</sup> Even so, I might be accused of smuggling one or more stories onboard the ship U.S.S. Meta-Story. The charge would not be entirely unjust. But, in truth, I am not smuggling any story onboard; I am brazenly carrying onto the ship goods I have not purchased. Simply to render, for example, plausible my story or account of Kant's relationship to pragmatism, I would have to go into far more detail than I can, given what else I want to say. Like the cook on the U.S.S. Meta-Story, I have other fish to fry.

### Our Habits of Storytelling

This brings me to my main point. What James says in his *Pragmatism* is something I on this occasion would like to say *about* the movement so closely linked to his name. "The world is," he insists, "full of partial stories that [for the most part] run parallel to one another, beginning and ending at odd times. They mutually interlace and interfere at points, but we cannot unify them completely in our minds" (*Pragmatism*, 71). This text is to be found in the chapter devoted to "The One and the Many," not at all an insignificant fact. Our cultural worlds are, indeed, largely constituted by partial stories, intersecting in complex ways. In their intersections, these narratives in some respects can mutually support one another, but even more often they dramatically clash. The complexity of the relationships between (or among) these stories has no limit. In dramatically clashing, for example, stories can be mutually supportive: they need the rival narrative for their own narrative coherence or, at least, dramatic power. My interest

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<sup>3</sup> Though my focus is on meta-narrative, I will indulge here and there in storytelling. My story about storytelling invites me to pick up narrative fragments (e.g., James's meeting in Rome of Papini and other Italian thinkers) at opportune moments.

is not so much in charting a path through a labyrinth of complexity as it is making us more conscious of our habits of storytelling, our modes of narration. The largely unreflective modes of narrative understanding so integral to our various forms of identity – our philosophical no less than our national identity, our cultural no less than our cosmopolitan identity – [these *unreflective* modes of narration] need to be seen for what they are: a more or less integrated cluster of *unconscious* habits of human storytelling. The plurality of perspectives from which events are narrated is even more worthy of acknowledgment than the plurality of narratives themselves. Just as there are *many* ways of construing the problem of the one and the many, there are various ways of narrating the story of pragmatism, precisely in the context of modern European philosophy.

American Declarations of Intellectual Independence  
[Do We Protest Too Much?]

The American angle of vision (cf. John J. McDermott) is one from which the various stories told involve a philosophical declaration of independence. Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.,<sup>4</sup> judged Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “The American Scholar” to be our *intellectual* declaration of independence. Of course, he meant our independence from Europe. With Queen Gertrude in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, however, many (especially Europeans) might be disposed to interject, “The lady doth protest too much, methinks.”<sup>5</sup>

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4 It is relevant to recall that Holmes was a “member of the Metaphysical Club. See Max H. Fisch, “Pragmatism Before and After 1898,” *Peirce, Semiotic, and Pragmatism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986); also Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1992).

5 Please recall that she says this in response to her son Hamlet’s question regarding a play he has arranged to stage for his mother and her new husband (“Madam, how like you this play?”). While this is a question about the play within the play (that is, one story enfolded in another), my invocation of Gertrude’s interjection is intended to call into question my story *about* a story.

The more loudly Americans declare their intellectual independence, the less likely their declaration sounds convincing. Indeed, the very need to issue such a declaration at this point renders its truth suspect. But this cannot be the end of the story. Geographically and politically, the United States is independent. But culturally and intellectually, matters are far less straightforward. Our debt to Europe is so deep and vast that it cannot be calculated. We speak a variety of languages, most of them having their origin here. And this linguistic inheritance is only a single instance of a multitudinous bequest from our European forbearers.<sup>6</sup> In order to gain a perspective on our relationship to Europe (here and throughout this paper I am speaking *as an American*),<sup>7</sup> it is instructive to call upon observation made by someone who is neither from a European nation nor the United States. In *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (NY: Grove Press, 1985), translated by Lysander Kemp, the Mexican writer Octavio Paz<sup>8</sup> suggests:

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6 Of course, “we” also have indigenous, Asian, Arab, and other forbearers, but one cannot say everything in the same breath.

7 In addressing the question of how to look at pragmatism in the context of modern European philosophy, I find it necessary to step back and consider broader cultural issues. There are a number of reasons for this, not least of all

8 Enrique Kraus, *Redeemers: Ideas and Power in Latin America* (NY: HarperCollins, 2011), translated by Hank Heifetz and Natasha Wimmer, Chapter 5 (“Octavio Paz: The Poet and the Revolution”). Paz’s 1990 Nobel Lecture, *In Search of the Present* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990), is relevant to the topic of my paper. “The search for the present,” Paz writes, “is not the pursuit of an earthly paradise or of a timeless eternity; it is the search for reality” (16). “What is modernity? It is, first of all, an ambiguous term: there are as many types of modernity as there are types of society. Each society has its own. The word’s meaning is as uncertain and arbitrary as the name of the period that precedes it, the Middle Ages. If we are modern when compared to medieval times, are we perhaps the Middle Ages of a future modernity? Is a name that changes with time a real name? Modernity is a word in search of its meaning. Is it an idea, a mirage or a moment of history? Are we the children of modernity or are we its creators? Nobody knows for sure. Nor does it matter much: we follow it, we pursue it. For me at that time modernity was fused the present or, rather, produced it: the present was modernity’s final and supreme flower” (17-18). When Paz refers to “that time,” he means when he wanted so urgently to belong to his time and his century, confessing: “Later, this

The question that occupies [Edmundo] O’Gorman<sup>9</sup> is how to define the historical entity we call America.<sup>10</sup> It is not a geographical region, and it is not a past; perhaps it is not even a present. It is an idea, an invention of the European spirit. America is a utopia, a moment in which the European spirit becomes universal by freeing itself of its historical particulars and of conceiving itself as a universal idea. ... O’Gorman is correct when he sees our continent as an actualization of the European spirit, but what happens when to America as an autonomous historical entity when it confronts the realities of Europe?<sup>11</sup> (170)

He shortly thereafter adds<sup>12</sup>: “until recently America was Europe’s monologue, one of the historical forms in which its thought was embodied. Lately, however, this monologue has become a dialogue, one that is not purely intellectual but is also social and political” (ibid.). There is much that is one-sided in this account, not least of all that America was, at one point, Europe’s monologue. Would it not be more accurate to say that America is, among countless other things, Europe divided against itself and divided against itself in desire became an obsession: I wanted to be a modern poet. My search for modernity had begun” (17).

9 As his name suggests, Edmundo O’Gorman was an Irish-Mexican.

10 There is obviously slippage here, from America in the sense of the United States to America in a more inclusive and proper sense. But what Paz says about “America” in this context applies *mutatis mutandis*, to the United States.

11 Paz goes on to assert that: “This question seems to be Leopoldo Zea’s essential concern. As a historian of Spanish-American thought, and as an independent critic even when discussing everyday politics, Zea declares that until recently America was Europe’s monologue ...” (*The Labyrinth of Solitude*, 170).

12 It is not obvious whether Paz is here speaking in his own voice or simply offering an account of Zea’s position. My sense is that he is, perhaps qualifiedly, endorsing Zea’s position.

such a way that what is in no small measure other than itself (other than European) can insinuate itself in the flux of history?

Hegel is certainly perceptive when he notes that: “But the man who flees is not yet free: in fleeing he is still conditioned by that from which he flees” (*Logic: Part One of the Encyclopædia of the Philosophical Sciences* [1930], translated by William Wallace, #9, 138). America’s flight from Europe is, no doubt, in no small part Europe’s flight from itself, indeed, the flight of some humans (European and otherwise) from other humans. Especially for those descended from individuals who have been brought here as captives, it is, moreover, a place *from* which many feel compelled to flee (see, e.g., James Baldwin; also Richard Wright). America is a deeply and possibly irreparably self-divided place and culture, in part because Europe is such a place. An American cannot but declare intellectual independence but in that very act cannot but appear to be more like a rebellious adolescent than a mature person who has truly attained intellectual autonomy. But even the suspect stories of rebellious adolescents can hold their own fascinating. Beyond this, they can provide insights, if only into the psyche of that adolescent. For these and other reasons, then, I will retell one such story.

While the United States in the eighteenth secured its political independence from Great Britain, in the nineteenth it won its intellectual independence from its European inheritance inclusively understood. One of the wayward children of the European Enlightenment had supposed learned for itself, as a culture, the lesson of the Enlightenment, as taught by Immanuel Kant. [Octavio Paz] With Emerson, an upstart nation had in effect responded to the Enlightenment challenge and actually dared to think for itself. Quite simply, it exhibited the *courage* to speak and write, to assert and argue, in

its own name – that is, in the name of its own experience. The terms in which the disclosures of this experience were to be articulated [those terms] were henceforth to be drawn primarily from that experience itself. That is, they were *not* culturally inherited terms (at least not principally such terms), but rather experientially derived ones. Accordingly, the philosophical task cannot but be at the same time a poetic task (cf. William James, “Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results”; also Richard Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism* [1992]), for this task encompasses the crafting of a language not yet in our possession. This must be not only a language true to our experience but also one drawn deeply from that experience itself. Simply to be in the position to undertake this task presupposes, of course, an inheritance (cf. Stanley Cavell). But the *creative* appropriation of a cultural inheritance cannot but be, at least in this context, a dramatic transfiguration of that cultural endowment. Moreover, nothing less than creative appropriation is requisite for the historically situated undertaking of coming to terms with one’s own experience. If I try to come to terms with my own experience by means of terms drawn exclusively or primarily from others, I have almost certainly betrayed my experience. Finally, the motives animating my endeavor need, time and again, to be explicitly acknowledged and conscientiously examined (cf. Peirce). In particular, we need to be attentive to how our desires to secure power, privilege, and prestige tend to usurp the effective sway of more admirable motives. It may be the case (as James so eloquently suggested) that “[t]he ceaseless whisper of the more permanent ideals, the steady tug of truth and justice, give them but time, must warp the world in their direction” (“The Social Value of the College-Bred”), but it all more often *is* the case that the deafening shouts of the more brutal forces in human history define the world in the image of their own

brutality. In reference to pragmatism, however, respectability rather than brutality is likely to be a source of corruption. Indeed, the bid for respectability – in all too many instances, for the left over crumbs of disciplinary acknowledgment – tends to corrupt pragmatism today. From a Jamesian perspective at least, being an insider renders pragmatism suspect. One of the characters in *The Glass Menagerie*, the play by Tennessee Williams, suggests that when the unicorn loses its horn it becomes an ordinary horse. It is worthwhile to tarry here a moment. Allow me to recall the most salient details of this contemporary drama. [\[Add here synopsis\]](#)

We are of course in a double bind. To fail to secure a place for ourselves, by renouncing the feast itself, is to condemn pragmatism to be on the outside looking in (without anything to eat and to be eaten by resentment). To fight tooth and nail to win such a place, however, will almost certainly mean that we adapt our manners to those already at the table, rather than gathering at our own house, with its own culinary and social practices. This is a double bind and how we can most wisely respond to this bind is a delicate matter of ongoing renegotiations. What I most want to urge is that the disciplinary success of pragmatism carries the largely unseen danger of betrayal. That is, our bids for respectability have to some extent been successful (witness this conference, yet in turn our successes carry the danger of our own undoing, as pragmatists. There is even, at least, a hint of betrayal in the subtitle of James's own *Pragmatism – A New Name for Old Ways of Thinking*. Given the vagaries of the word, we might say rather that it is an unfortunate name for new ways of thinking. In any event, the quality of our thought is revealed first and foremost in the quality of our questions, so much so that thinking is itself as much a process of interrogation, including self-interrogation, as anything else.

Pragmatism is not so much a novel resource for addressing traditional questions (a new way of answering old questions) as it is a surprisingly untapped reserve for posing truly novel questions. The quality of our questions is to no slight degree a function of their novelty. More than any other contemporary thinker, Michel Foucault embodies the pragmatic sensibility, for he possessed an uncanny ability to ask the unasked questions (those questions we so embarrassingly failed to feel the urge to ask until he with an eloquence comparable to James's own and a doggedness equal to Dewey's helped us to discern their salience). Doing the done thing, in a traditional manner, is hardly evidence of having absorbed the defining lesson of the pragmatic movement. It is indeed rather clear evidence of the unchecked inertia of unreflective habits. Doing something new, in a manner which avoids returning us too quickly and completely to traditional modes of inquiry or inherited forms of narration, would seem far better evidence for having *practically* taken the pragmatic turn.

Cheap bids for independence are as dangerous as debasing bids for respectability. So, let us turn back to the Emersonian theme of intellectual independence and consider this danger in reference to this thinker. Ironically, the opening paragraph of Kant's "What Is Enlightenment?" was in effect rewritten by Emerson, time and again, but nowhere more memorably than in "Self-Reliance": "There is a time in every man's education [i.e., in every person's intellectual development] when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that *imitation is suicide*; that he must take himself for better or worse as his portion; and though the whole universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given him to till" (*Ralph Waldo Emerson: Selected Essays*, edited by Larzer Ziff, 176; emphasis

added). In the arresting figure of this Concord sage, the United States won intellectual maturity by asserting its intellectual independence. Or so the story goes.

The bias of modernity against the classical period (the ancient no less than the medieval epoch) is built into the title of this session. European philosophy might have been expansively conceived to include at least the medieval period. In my judgment, Peirce, precisely as a pragmatist, is *far* more of an Aristotelian than a Kantian, far more a Scotist than even a Hegelian. Max H. Fisch, whose work on Vico is arguably as important as his contributions to our understanding of Peirce and, more generally, pragmatism, would have endorsed at least the first of these claims (the claim that Peirce is more Aristotelian than Kantian).

To be even more polemical, the bias of Europe against American philosophy, both as *American* philosophy and American *philosophy* (cf. Hitler; also Heidegger), might be detected in the title of this session. There is certainly no necessity to do so; indeed, given the individuals involved in the organization of this session, there is almost every reason to resist such an ungenerous interpretation. Quite apart from conscious intentions, however, there are unwitting effects. The ironies of history are bound up with the effects of our actions mocking our intentions. So, I want to consider one possible effect of the present arrangement (*despite* the admirable intentions of admirable individuals). I am all too mindful that in doing so I run the risk of offending my hosts, both proximate ones (those most directly involved in the organization of “Pragmatism in the Context of Modern Philosophy”) and virtually all of the Europeans involved in this gathering. Yet, I am equally wary of a pitfall here – the philosophical re-colonization of American philosophy.

The *logical* point needs certainly to be stressed. It is logically impossible to appreciate the novelty or uniqueness of pragmatism except in reference to both the historical context from which it sprang and the contested field in which it has forged a distinctive identity vis-à-vis rival positions. But the *political* point should not be overlooked, especially among friends (Is not part of the definition of friendship that we can dispense with too exacting norms of politeness and too finely calibrated an attunement to possibilities of being offensive?).

#### Contextualizing Pragmatism and Troubling Contexts

It is imperative to return, time and again, to a critical consideration of the pragmatic movement in reference to the historical contexts indispensable for understanding, also appreciating, the uniqueness of this movement. First and foremost, this means the immediate context of American culture in its broader sweep, but inseparably the still broader context of European culture, including of course modern European philosophy. It is, however, permissible (at least, I hope it is permissible!) to interrogate the limitations and dangers of situating the pragmatic movement in the context of European thought, especially when *in practice* this means elevating Kant to the status of patriarch. This status is implicit in the very title of Murray G. Murphey's still influential essay (even if it is unknown to younger thinkers, their thinking has been shaped by those who have been directly influenced by this account of pragmatism). That title is "Kant's Children: The Cambridge Pragmatists" (Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society, volume 4, number 1 [1968], 3-33). Regarding this essay, I want above all else to make two points. *First*, one can glimpse the distance between the historiographical bias of the time when he wrote this essay and that of our own time. The essay opens by

helping to make this patent<sup>13</sup>: “One of the difficulties which besets the historian of American philosophy is the apparent discontinuity [Why merely *apparent*?] of the subject, and nowhere is this continuity more evident than with respect to pragmatism” (1968, 3).<sup>14</sup> Murphey takes as his task dispelling this apparent discontinuity by showing in detail the previously overlooked continuity between American thought (at least, the philosophical writings of the Cambridge pragmatists) and European philosophy. As important as it is to discern such continuity, many of us today have been taught by Michel Foucault<sup>15</sup> and other contemporary theorists to be suspicious of historical accounts in which an unbroken chain of intellectual development is the dominant note. Second, it is important to recall the substance of Murphey’s story. A distillation of this is contained in this passage:

... the pragmatists drew heavily upon the heritage of Scotch realism and idealism which had served the purpose before Darwin. But, while a Berkeley-type idealism had sufficed for Johnson and [Jonathan] Edwards,

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13 Of course the distance is not discernible or discoverable except in reference to contemporary historiography. But the very formulation of Murphey’s concern cannot but be somewhat jarring to contemporary ears and that experience itself is indicative of the distance between the bias present at that time (1968) and that operative in our own. I am using bias here in mostly a neutral sense.

14 In *The Philosophy of History* (NY: W. W. Norton & Co., 1981), John William Miller suggests: “The besetting fallacy of history is anachronism, the descript of the past in terms of an abstract present. History writing that is not a imaginative reconstruction of a past *on its own terms*, indeed the very discovery of such terms, leaves the past a mystery or else reduces it to the ahistoricity of scientific nature, to psychological atomism or theological incomprehension” (186-87; emphasis added). Miller is especially instructive for illuminating the complex interplay between continuity and rupture in both historical events themselves and responsible narrations of those events.

15 See especially Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, edited by Donald F. Bouchard and translated by Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977)

it was Kant who as the dominant influence upon the pragmatists. Indeed, Cambridge pragmatism was, and is, more indebted to Kant than to any other single philosopher. Other pragmatists, such as Dewey, came this position not through but through Hegel, and so represent a somewhat different phase of the movement than the one discussed here. But the work of the Cambridge pragmatists has an internal coherence of its own which justifies isolating it for special consideration. (8-9)

If these thinkers are Kant's children, then that obviously accords him the status of father. My own sense, however, is that it practically accords him the status of nothing less than a *patriarch*, since he is, by the good graces of these *dutiful* (!) interpreters, allowed to dictate the terms in which the position(s) of the pragmatists are explained and evaluated. In his Presidential Address to the Eastern Division of the APA ("Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism"), given just over a decade after the publication of Murphey's essay, Richard Rorty told a dramatically different story, one wherein Peirce alone figured as the child of Kant:

His contribution to pragmatism was merely to have given it a name, and to have stimulated James. Peirce himself remained the most Kantian of thinkers – the most convinced that philosophy gave an all-embracing ahistorical context in which every other species of discourse could be assigned its proper place and rank. It was just this Kantian assumption that there was such a context, and that epistemology or semantics [or the theory of signs] could discover it, against which James and Dewey reacted. (*Consequences of Pragmatism*, 161)

If Peirce truly remained such a Kantian, then he ought to be both discounted as a pragmatist and (more generally) disparaged as a philosopher. But he was different and other than this. While Rorty is right about the criterion, he is wrong about its applicability to Peirce. One needs to save Peirce as much from his Kantian friends as his Rortyeen enemies.

### Polemical Suggestions and Genial Recollections

No philosophical movement – better, no *intellectual* movement – has done more to bring the modern epoch to a decisive close than American pragmatism, though the qualifier *American* was shortly after 1898 already misleading (see especially Fisch). In fact, I am disposed to say that, in this respect, pragmatism *surpasses* all other movements. This is not intended as American Salesmanship though it must sound as such in many of your ears! Just as jazz is more alive in Europe and Asia than in the US, arguably pragmatism is more alive here than in my own country. Whatever the contemporary sites of its irrepressible vitality, nothing at the time of its origin was quite comparable to the impetus traceable to Peirce’s founding essays and James’s later reaffirmation of these brilliant insights (“Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results” [1898]; see Fisch, “Pragmatism Before and After 1898”). When William James wrote to his brother Henry that the pragmatic movement was something comparable to the Protestant Reformation,<sup>16</sup> we should not take this as hyperbole. The efforts at philosophical reconstruction launched

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<sup>16</sup> “I shouldn’t be surprised,” wrote William to Henry, “if ten years hence it should not be rated as ‘epoch-making,’ for the definitive triumph of that general way of thinking I can entertain no doubt whatever – I believe it to be something quite like the protestant reformation (R. B. Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James*, volume II, 453). As Perry stresses, James took the success of pragmatism, like humanism, to be due to “its historic timeliness”: it was, in James’s own words, “like one of those secular changes that come upon public opinion overnight as it were, borne upon tides ‘too deep for sound or foam’” (The Meaning of Truth).

by Peirce, James, and Dewey were as far-reaching and deep-cutting as those demands for religious reform made by Luther, Calvin, and Wesley. Just as the latter carried reverberations far beyond institutional religion, so the former exerted influence far beyond academic philosophy. Indeed, the pragmatic movement is a cultural phenomenon of a complex character, the significance of which we are still struggling to ascertain, the depths of which we have not yet sounded. It was almost from the outset an international movement, at least a European one.

The Scottish psychology Alexander Bain was acknowledged by Peirce as “the grandfather of pragmatism” (The Essential Peirce, volume 2, 399).<sup>17</sup> Early in the history of the *Transactions* (hence, early in that of the Charles S. Peirce Society itself), Murray Murphey published a characteristically \_\_ essay entitled “Kant’s Children: The Cambridge Pragmatists” (1968). But it is also fundamentally misleading. For the Cambridge pragmatists are more accurately seen as *Darwin’s children*. They conceived themselves as much in reference to scientists as philosophers (indeed, they – especially Peirce – tended to conceive themselves as scientists engaged in the task of drawing out the cultural implications of their own scientific practices). While this is most evident in the case of Dewey, it is no less true in that of either Peirce or James. The philosophical revolution known as American pragmatist owes as much to the Darwinian account of biological evolution as it owes to any strictly philosophical antecedent.

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17 As a member of the Metaphysical Club, the lawyer Nicholas St. John Green “often urged the important of applying Bain’s definition of belief as “that upon which a man is prepared to act.’ From this definition, pragmatism is scarce more than a corollary; so that I am disposed to think of him [Bain] as the grandfather of pragmatism” (Essential Peirce, volume 2, 399)

In any event, no intellectual movement at that critical moment in Western history (I am referring to the second half of the nineteenth century) took the Darwinian revolution with greater *seriousness* than the early pragmatists (see, e.g., Philip P. Wiener, *Evolution and the Founders of Pragmatism*, with a Foreword by John Dewey).<sup>18</sup> Part of the significance of pragmatism is precisely its response to Darwin, the *seriousness* with which it took the publication of *Origin of Species* (1859).. The word is actually James's own: in notes for one of his courses, we encounter this directive to himself, "Take evolution *au grand serieux*" (*Manuscript Lectures*, 367; also in Perry, II, 444). When he was writing the *Principles of Psychology* (1890), he revealed (once again) to his brother Henry, "I have to forge every sentence in the teeth of irreducible and stubborn facts" (cf. Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, pp. 2-3). No facts were, especially for minds, however plastic, shaped in no small measure before 1859 (as were the minds of Peirce and James), irreducible and stubborn than those brought to the attention of the philosophers by Darwin.

In "Design and Chance" (1883-1884), Peirce reveals that "Darwin's view is nearer mine" than that of Epicurus.<sup>19</sup> He immediately adds: "Indeed, my opinion is only Darwinism analyzed, generalized, and brought into the realm of Ontology" (*Writings of*

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18 Though Murray in "Kant's Children: The Cambridge Pragmatists" (1968) highlights the importance of Darwin for an understanding of pragmatism, he tends to interpret this movement in a narrowly philosophical way. Hence, Kant rather than Darwin is seen by Murray as the pivotal figure in the historical origination of Cambridge pragmatism. Just as Fisch in "Pragmatism Before and After 1898" told the story of this movement in reference to James's lecture at the University of California at Berkeley ("Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results"), I am inclined to tell the story of philosophy itself in reference to 1859, the year in which Darwin belatedly brought his theories forth.

19 "Epicurus makes the Gods consist of atoms but their superiority is due to the finer material out of which they are composed. Thus, divineness comes from a special cause & does not originate by chance from elements not containing it" (W 4, 552).

*Charles S. Peirce: A Chronological Edition*, volume 4, 552).<sup>20</sup> Andrew Reynolds goes so far as to suggest that “Peirce wished to *Darwinize* physics – to biologize it, to challenge the dogma of the fixity of [even] atomic and molecular ‘species’” or structures (*Peirce’s Scientific Metaphysics: The Philosophy of Chance, Law, and Evolution*, 95).<sup>21</sup> In a sharp rebuke of Herbert Spencer’s indefatigable efforts to conjoin mechanistic determinism and evolutionary theory, Peirce insists: “Now philosophy requires thorough-going evolutionism or none” (“The Architecture of Theories” in *The Essential Peirce*, volume 1, 289; also *CP* 6.14). While Peirce was to some extent a half-hearted Darwinian (again see Wiener), he was unquestionably a thoroughgoing evolutionist.

In one of his notebooks, Darwin wrote: “To study Metaphysics, as they [sic.] have always been studied[,] appears to me like puzzling at astronomy without mechanics. – Experience shows the problem of mind cannot be solved by attacking the citadel itself. – the mind is function of [the] body. – we must bring some *stable* foundation to argue from” (Notebook N 5, October 3, 1838; see Howard E. Gruber, *Darwin on Man*, 217). This stable foundation is nothing other than an evolutionary approach to the human animal. The most advantageous course is not to attack the citadel of the mind itself, but to

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<sup>20</sup> In his review of volumes I-VI of *The Collected Papers*, published originally in *The New Republic* (3 February 1937), John Dewey noted: “Peirce lived when the idea of evolution was uppermost in the mind of his generation. He applied it everywhere. But to him it meant, whether in the universe of nature, of science or of society, continual growth in the direction of interrelations, of what he called continuity.” *The Later Works of John Dewey* (Carbondale, IL: SIU Press, 1991), volume 11, 482-83. Dewey’s suggestion about the relationship between Peirce’s evolutionism and synechism is perceptive and illuminating.

<sup>21</sup> There are, however, various texts in which Peirce expresses his deep reservations about the Darwinian account. In MS 318, he even calls Darwin’s theory “incredible.”

study the *somatic* agency of human beings intricately caught up in the ongoing processes of their ambience and, indeed, their own lives.

There is arguably a disciplinary blindness exhibited by professional philosophers to the radical novelty of an intellectual revolution such as that inaugurated by the American pragmatists. Without intending to disparage such philosophers, their tendency to narrate the history of their disciplinary exclusively in terms of philosophers both distorts that history and impoverishes their practice.

What is especially ironic, there has been a marked tendency to interpret pragmatism in terms drawn extensively (sometimes exclusively) from the very traditions the pragmatists were committed to superseding – one might say *deconstructing* (cf. Jacques Derrida, *Positions*).<sup>22</sup> This is nowhere more evident than in reference to Kant. Despite its vogue, especially among Europeans, *transcendental pragmatism* is an oxymoronic expression. In his succinct critique of a magisterial formulation of this impossible position, Klaus Oehler shows just why and where Jürgen Habermas is mistaken in portraying Charles Peirce as a transcendental pragmatist (Oehler, “Reply to Habermas,” and Habermas, “Peirce and Communication” in *Peirce and Contemporary Thought: Philosophical Inquirers*, edited by Kenneth Laine Ketner). The implications of

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<sup>22</sup> In an interview with Julia Kristeva, first published in 1968, Derrida suggested: “Like the concept of the sign ... it [that of structure] can simultaneously confirm and shake logocentric [pragmatists, please hear here rationalistic] and ethnocentric assuredness. It is not a question of junking these concepts, nor do we have the means to do so. Doubtless it is more necessary, from within semiology [or from within structuralism], to transform concepts, to displace them, to turn them against their presuppositions, to reinscribe them in other chains, and little by little to modify the terrain of our work and thereby produce new configurations; I do not believe in decisive ruptures. ... Breaks are always, and fatally, reinscribed in an old cloth that must continually, interminably be undone” (*Positions* [1981], translated by Alan Bass, 24).

this critique extend far beyond Habermas; they reach to this manner of interpreting pragmatism, not just Peirce.

So, once again, I want to insist that the pragmatist approach is not a variant of Kant's transcendental approach, simply with *a priori* conditions being replaced by natural and historical ones. In this instance, this is an exceedingly limited and imperceptively limiting mode of interpretation. The pragmatists (save Lewis at certain points in his intellectual development) simply were not Kantians; they were – pragmatists. The insistence upon interpreting them as children of Kant, as though this is an *especially* effective way of illuminating their philosophical projects, dooms us to significantly misinterpret Peirce, James, Dewey, Mead, and many others in this tradition.

The extent to which embodiment, sociality, history, tradition, agency, normativity, and a host of other considerations need to be *acknowledged*<sup>23</sup> exposes the bankruptcy (or insolvency) of modernity, including the monumental achievement of Immanuel Kant in synthesizing the defining features of the modern epoch. To recall Bruno Latour's observation, there is a sense – perhaps a multiplicity of senses – in which we have never been modern.<sup>24</sup> But, of greater moment, there have been forces afoot guaranteeing that we are no longer modern. In certain respects, modernity is (as Habermas claims) an unfinished project, an ongoing task. But, in other respects, it is a lost cause. There are moments when I am tempted to think that modernity is thoroughly spent and even its unrealized possibilities are destined (as repetition compulsions) to assume novel forms,

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23 "Knowledge is," Ludwig Wittgenstein suggests, "in the end based on acknowledgment" (*On Certainty*, # 378). Cf. Stanley Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging" in *Must we Mean What We Say?* and also in *The Cavell Reader*, edited by Stephen Mulhall.

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forms increasing the distance between the aspirations and ideals of Bacon, Descartes, Locke, and Kant, on the one hand, and *our* aspirations and ideals, on the other. However that might be, American pragmatism marks the sharpest break with European modernity.

It seems so ungracious – even rude – to insist upon this point in this context. So, in the interest of geniality, allow me to turn from my polemic regarding philosophical historiography concerning American pragmatism, in order to turn to one of the most delightful stories in the history of pragmatism. On this occasion, in this city, it seems especially appropriate to recall a series of events important for a historically nuanced understanding of the pragmatic movement. When James attended, in 1905 in this city, the Fifth International Congress of Psychology, at which time he met Giovanni Papini and other admirers of pragmatism,<sup>25</sup> he was at the height of his career. He had given in 1898 the address at Berkeley; he had .... He would soon give, first at the Lowell Institute in 1906 and then at Columbia University in 1907, his lectures on pragmatism. In 1909, he would meet Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and \_\_\_ at Clark University in Worcester, MA. While here at that time he wrote home to his wife

To repeat a sentence from his letter to his wife Alice: “It has given me a certain new idea of the way in which truth ought to find its way into the world” (*The Letters of William James*, edited by his son Henry James, volume II, 227; also in Perry, II, 570).

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25 “I lunched at the da Vitis .. and,” he wrote to his wife Alice on April 30, 1905, “I have been having this afternoon a very good and rather intimate talk with the little band of ‘pragmatists,’ Papini, Vailatic, Calderoni, Amendola, etc., most of whom inhabit Florence, publish the monthly journal; ‘Leonardo’ at their own expense, and carry on a very serious philosophic movement, apparently really inspired by [F. S. C.] Schiller and me ...” *Letters of William James*, volume II, 226. Though he went to the conference simply to attend it, he went to Europe for a variety of reasons, apparently most of all to visit the birthplace of philosophy, not having ever been to Athens before.

How do ideas make their way into the way? Is it altogether different today than it was in 1905?

James arrived at the conference here in 1905 solely for the purpose of attending it, but upon arrival he pressed into service.<sup>26</sup> For the next several days, James worked on his presentation, writing it in the language in which he would present it – French! (Letters, volume, II, 226). It was entitled “*La Notion de Conscience*” and published later that same year as the lead article in *n Archives de Psychologie* (volume V). James sent Peirce a copy of this article and Peirce responded by confessing:

When you write in English .. I can seldom satisfy myself that I know what you are driving at ... But now that you are tied down to the rules of French rhetoric , you are perfectly perspicuous; and I wish ... that you would consider yourself so tied down habitually. (Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James*, volume 2, 433)

James responded to this suggestion with one of his own: “Your encouragement to me to become a French classic both gratifies and amuses. *I* will if *you* will – we shall both be clearer, no doubt. Try putting your firsts, seconds, and thirds into the Gallic tongue and see if you don’t make more converts!” (Perry, II, 435).

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<sup>26</sup> “This morning [April 25] I went to the meeting-place of the Congress to inscribe myself definitely, and when I gave my name, the lady who was taking them almost fainted, saying that all Italy loved me. Or words to that effect, and called in poor Professor de Sanctis, the Vice President or Secretary or whatever, who treated me in the same manner, and finally got me to consent to make an address at one of the general meetings, of which there are four, in place of Sully, Flournoy, Richet, Lipps, and Brentano, who were announced but are not to come. I fancy they have been pretty unscrupulous with their program here, printing conditional futures as categorical ones” (Letters, II, 225).

As this delightful exchange reveals, philosophical friendship can be a thorny affair, even when it is tempered with gentle chiding. The concrete realization of philosophical community – for a number of reasons, I am more inclined to say, philosophical *friendship* – cannot but take the form of a personal exchange. It need not be a face-to-face conversation; it might – and in our time it most likely will – take the form of an electronic conversation. Philosophical truth inserts itself into the historical world in and through intimate relationships between (or among) human beings.

Personal relationships are however always forged in the context of overlapping cultural matrices. Such a context is much like the stories partly constitutive of it, often thwarting the very energies and innovations it generates. Concerning the topic of this session, cultural and institutional inertia all too often works effectively *against* the creative and effective appropriation of the reorienting insights of a philosophical movement, especially one so radically novel and as the pragmatic orientation. What Dewey noted in “Philosophy and Civilization” (1927) needs to be recalled on this occasion:

If American civilization does not eventuate in an imaginative reformulation of itself [and such a reformulation is philosophy in its pragmatic sense<sup>27</sup>], if it merely re-arranges the figures already named and placed, in playing an inherited European game, that fact is itself the

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27 “In philosophy,” Dewey claims, “we are dealing with something comparable to the meaning of Athenian civilization or of a drama or a lyric. Significant history is lived in the imagination of man, and philosophy is a further excursion of the imagination into its own prior achievements” (*LW* 3, 5). “Philosophies which emerge at distinctive periods define the larger patterns of continuity which are woven in effecting the enduring junctions of a stubborn past and insistent future” (*LW* 3, 6). “Philosophy . . . is a conversion of such culture as exists into consciousness, into an imagination which is logically coherent and is not incompatible with what is factually known” (*LW* 3, 9).

measure of the culture which we have achieved.<sup>28</sup> [*Later Works of John Dewey*, volume 3, 9]

One of the most singular cultural achievements in human history is the European philosophical tradition, including the intellectual revolution wrought by early modern thinkers. For those exiled from modernity as much by the forces of modernity itself as anything else, however, the “inherited European game” is properly seen as a somewhat optional one. No one should be chastised for devotion to mastering its intricacies, just as no one (especially an American) should be condemned for being no longer preoccupied with re-arranging “figures already named and placed.”

#### Explicit Acknowledgment – and Unpragmatic Diversions (Noted Once Again)

I am not unmindful of my own Oedipal impulses in the present context, also of conveying the inevitable impression of being engaged in an embarrassing act of adolescent rebellion. There is, no doubt, truth on both scores. Make no mistake about it: I *am* trying to kill the father, *as father* (i.e., Kant as father). My motive is however not altogether malevolent. I am engaged in this attempt at patricide in order to make it possible to love the old man, to take him *on his own terms* and, moreover, to help him and his more dutiful children to see me as something more than an extension of him. That is, I want my siblings even in their devotion to see me as irreducibly different from anything that has gone before. If he were a musical patriarch and we were initiated into music by playing in his orchestra, who would be the more faithful children after he died – those who play the old man’s music in the old man’s way or those who transfigure their inheritance? Does not philosophy as much as music suffer from those who themselves

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<sup>28</sup> He immediately adds: “A deliberate striving for an American Philosophy as such would be only another evidence of the same emptiness and impotency” (*LW* 3, 9).

suffer from nostalgia? Milan Kundera reminds us that: “The Greek word for ‘return’ is *nostos*. *Algos* means ‘suffering.’ So nostalgia is the suffering caused by an unappeased yearning to return” (“The Great Return” in *The New Yorker* [May 10, 2002], 96). He adds: “In that etymological light nostalgia seems to be something like the pain of ignorance, of not knowing. You are far away, and I don’t know what has become of you. My country is far away, and I don’t know what is happening there” (ibid.). Even more pertinent to our purpose, Stanley Cavell notes in *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), nostalgia “is an inability to open the past to the future, as if the stranger who will replace you will never find what you have found” (218).<sup>29</sup>

I would now like to make a *constructive* suggestion, though itself one with a polemical implication. If we do turn to, say, Kant or Hegel, in our effort to understand the pragmatists, would we not be better off at this point in the reception and interpretation of pragmatism to consider what has rarely, if ever, been considered – for example, Kant as the author of *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* or Hegel’s own treatment of anthropology? It is crucial to see that modern European philosophy is far from an insular affair, in particular, far from the insular affair which contemporary philosophers with their typical preoccupations make of “modern philosophy.” The conception of philosophy in place was inclusive of fields of inquiry other than philosophy. As exemplified by Kant

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29 This point is made in the context of an essay (in part) about H. D. Thoreau (“Thoreau Thinks of Ponds, Heidegger of Rivers”). The quotation in the body of my paper continues: “Such a negative heritage would be a poor thing to *leave to Walden’s* readers, whom its writer identifies, among many ways, precisely as strangers” (218). By implication, the positive heritage is the animating faith (or is it hope? Or is it love? Or is it all three) that the strangers who will come after us will be able to find what we have found.

and Hegel, the philosopher *as philosopher* was required to keep abreast of developments in disciplines other than philosophy. This is everywhere manifest in Hegel's writings, but also everywhere discoverable in Kant's corpus. Philosophy is a site wherein a plurality of disciplines and discourses intersect. If we are to consider pragmatism in the context of modern European philosophy, and if we are to do so in the manner of such paradigmatic figures within European thought as Kant and Hegel, then we need both, in reference to their time and ours, look beyond philosophy.

#### A One-Sided Diet of Discipline Boud Narratives

In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein insightfully observed: "A main cause of philosophical disease – a one-sided diet: one nourishes one's thinking with only one kind of example" (# 593). But we might, prompted by this observation, suggest another cause of such disease – a different form of one-sided diet: one nourishes one's thinking with only one kind of reading. At present, nothing might prove to be more nourishing than the texts of such philosophically literate anthropologists as Tim Ingold and E. Valentine Daniel or similarly literate sociologists as Hans Joas and Margaret Archer. In particular, Daniel's *Charred Lullabies: Chapters in an Anthropology of Violence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996) and Ingold's *Lines: A Brief History* (Routledge, 200\_).

Hegel was a champion of *Vernunft* who, because of this commitment as well as events in his life, made a point of exploring the phenomenon of madness (see Hegel's Theory of Madness). Despite his sharp distinction between the strictures of transcendental logic and the disclosures of empirical inquiry, Kant was keen to know what experimentalists were discovering about the heavens, the earth, the elements, plants,

and animals. Philosophical thinking nourished exclusively by the excessively restricted diet of philosophical texts was evident no more in the case of Kant, Schiller, and Hegel than in that of Peirce, James, and Dewey. To situate the pragmatists in the context of modern European philosophy, then, might mean seeing them as continuing a philosophical tradition we have failed to honor adequately – seeing them as painstakingly attentive to the actual developments in experimental fields from cosmology to medicine, from cartography to anthropology. Hegel might have been, as Peirce was occasionally – and disparagingly – disposed to say, “a seminary-trained philosopher,” but very quickly he evinced the orientation of “a laboratory-trained philosopher,” at least, a thinker who valued the hard-won discoveries of observation-based investigations.

We can tell the story of pragmatism in terms of Cambridge old and new, of (say) Peirce and James, on the one hand, and Putnam and Goodman, on the other. Much might be learned from such a narration. Or we can tell the story of Peirce’s pragmatism in terms of a transformation of Kant’s project or Hegel’s. Much too can be learned from such a construal. Or we can take the *logic of inquiry* as our theme and, then, see how various stands of specific inquiries into the general nature of responsible inquiry have been woven together into an utterly fascinating tapestry. With respect to such an undertaking, we might focus on a typically neglected figure – for example, Heinrich Hertz (1857-1894) – and see how this trained physicist’s account of the physical sciences compares with that of Peirce, another trained physicist, also see how his influence upon Wittgenstein shaped that immensely influential philosopher’s understanding of science compares to the influence of like-minded German theorists on another truly influential thinker, William James (see Allan Janik, *Wittgenstein’s Vienna Revisited*, especially

Chapter 7). It would be hard for me to imagine a more exciting or fruitful inquiry, though this might simply be an indication of the poverty of my imagination!

I have no doubt that I am here engaged in a process of *acting out* and *working through* a complex inheritance (cf. Theodor Adorno, “The Meaning of Working Through the Past” in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* [1998]). The personal dimensions of philosophical reflection *philosophically* merit attention. Culture is philosophy writ large, while our psyches themselves are (among other things) one of the loci in which the contradictions and conflicts of our cultures play out. But, then, philosophy itself is such a site.

#### Conclusion: The Largely Unacknowledged Pragmatics of Philosophical Storytelling

How do we understand our philosophical traditions vis-à-vis one another, especially when we are variously situated? At bottom, the task of understanding these traditions is inseparable from that of simply understanding one another as human beings. Allow me, at this juncture, to cede space to the voice of James Baldwin. [*Giovanni's Room*] He after all came to Europe to think, not least of all to think about America, because the atmosphere in the country in which he was born was asphyxiating. While Thoreau retreated to the woods to front life, Baldwin and a significant number of others from the United States journeyed here to undertake the same mission. While James might write home ... In “Fifth Avenue, Uptown” (1960), Baldwin wrote:

Negroes want to be treated like men: a perfectly straightforward statement, containing only seven words. People who have mastered Kant, Hegel, Shakespeare, Marx, Freud, and the Bible [however] find this statement utterly impenetrable. The idea seems to threaten profound,

barely conscious assumptions. A kind of panic paralyzes their features, as though they found themselves trapped on the edge of a steep place. *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction 1948-1985*, 211-12)

In the essay from which I have already quoted, Baldwin suggests – more precisely, *insists*: “A Ghetto can be improved in one way only: out of existence” (*The Price of the Ticket*, 210). Some ghettos originate as such; other ones come into being by a process of devolution, a vibrant, open space degenerating into an impoverished, insular one. However a ghetto originates, there is only one way to improve it. A vast, varied country can become a ghetto. A vibrant, multifaceted discipline such as philosophy can also devolve in this direction. Lest I be seen more as a partisan than a philosopher, it is crucial to add: even a movement such as pragmatism can prove to be a ghetto.

Situating pragmatism in the context of modern European philosophy is an indispensable way of working *against* the possibility of pragmatism devolving into a ghetto. But, alas, it also can all too easily become a way of unwittingly contributing to the realization of this possibility. Pragmatism purports to be a philosophy of the streets and (were there very many in the United States) the café, not principally one of the study or classroom. James is quite explicit and, indeed, emphatic about this: “The world of concrete personal experience to which the street belongs is multitudinous beyond imagination, tangled, muddy, painful and perplex. The world to which your philosophy-professor introduces you is simple, clean and noble” (*Pragmatism*, 17-18). Philosophers more often than not have constructed “a classic sanctuary in which the rationalist fancy may take refuge,” making of philosophy itself “a refuge, a way of escape” (18). “But I ask you in all seriousness,” James continues, “to look abroad on this colossal universe of

concrete facts, on their awful bewilderments, their surprises and cruelties, on the wildness which they show ...” (18).

The world of concrete experience is that of human streets in their labyrinthine patterns but also that of at least seemingly empty spaces in both their promising solace and isolating cruelty. As the anthropologist Ingold suggests, to learn is to improve a movement along a way of life.<sup>30</sup>

Philosophy is not charged with the task of erecting an edifice to defy the vicissitudes of time (cf. Peirce). The Eternal City is, in truth, a transitory affair (cf. Freud, “On Transience”). Philosophy, at least as envisioned by the pragmatists, is rather preoccupied with the task *making our way* through the entangling circumstances of the historical present – *this* time seen as a site of confluence and conflict, ruin and reparation. In *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society*, Lionel Trilling,<sup>31</sup> however, offers a somewhat different characterization:

A culture is not a flow, nor even a confluence; the form of its existence is struggle, or at least a debate; it is nothing if not a dialectic. And in any culture there are likely to be certain artists who contain a large part of the dialectic within themselves, their meaning and power lying in their contradictions; they contain within themselves ... the very essence of the culture [or the historical present of their riven culture], and the sign of this is that they do not submit to serve the ends of any one ideological group or

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30 This is the title of a lecture Ingold apparently has given a number of times. One can listen to it on YouTube.

31 See Cornel West’s inclusion of Trilling in his story about pragmatism, “Lionel Trilling: The Pragmatist as Arnoldian Literary Critic” (*The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*, 164-81).

tendency. It is a significant circumstance of American culture, and one which is susceptible of explanation, that an unusually large proportion of notable writers of the nineteenth century were such repositories of the dialectic of their times; they contained both the yes and the no of their culture ... (“Reality in America” in *The Liberal Imagination*, 3)

About especially any such a time, wherein “yes” and “no” are both constitutive of the present, there can be only partial stories. Many of these simply “run parallel to one another, beginning and ending at odd times.” But as this meeting makes evident – indeed, makes possible – these stories often to “mutually interlace and interfere at points.” They are frustrated *and* facilitated by these intersections. There is, however, no perspective from which all of these stories might be unified without being distorted or disfigured. To repeat, there is an irreducible plurality of perspectives no less than a countless number of stories themselves. It is as important, if not *more* important, to acknowledge the plurality of perspectives as the innumerability of stories.

The story of pragmatism told in reference to the context of modern European philosophy is, in truth, a vastly extended family of stories bearing witness to irreducibly different lineages of query. History does indeed make bastards of us all; or, more accurately, a detailed knowledge of even the most *respectable* lineages reveals that putative fathers can be familial fictions.

Stories have legs. They travel. They even travel on ships (while crossing the Atlantic Ocean, Peirce wrote a draft of one of the most important documents in the history of pragmatism). Especially in the case of pragmatism, this is as it should be, for pragmatism is after all an ambulatory mode of philosophical thinking (cf. James, “A

Word More About Truth” in *The Meaning of Truth*). In a sense, it is an new name for a primordial activity – walking about, though doing so discursively rather than physically. It is a form of discourse – a way of talking – more akin to the movements of the body on a crowded street or overgrown path, a morning saunter or evening promenade, than to any other human activity. “Cognition, *whenever we take it concretely*, means ‘ambulation,’ through intermediaries, from a *terminus a quo* to, or towards, a *terminus ad quem*” (*The Meaning of Truth*, 247). The termini from which we set out are no more absolutely fixed than the ones toward which we move or at which we arrive. We can pick up the story from Kant – or, further back, from Locke or even Scotus, from Aristotle or even Socrates (cf. Peirce). We can, as Jorge Luis Borges so enchantingly demonstrates, re-arrange the books on the shelves of our libraries in such a way that alternative histories so themselves to be arguably more important than the actual course of historical events. The point from which we pick up the story is not utterly arbitrary, but it is arbitrary in the etymological sense of this word: We decide to begin here, to endow this figure with the status of father. The origins of, and statuses within, our stories are putative and, there, provisional: they may prove themselves to be indispensable for the realization of our purposes, but even more likely they will show themselves to be inadequate in some respects, at least as judged by “the typically perfect mind, the mind the sum of whose demands s greatest, the mind whose criticisms and demands are fatal in the long run” (James, *Pragmatism*, 23).

As you have no doubt noted, I have not so much told a story as engaged in a meta-narrative reflection, both gesturing toward a variety of possible stories and making a case for narrative pluralism. In doing so, I may justly be accused of *acting out*, of not

doing what I was assigned to do. How better to be a pragmatist than to take an assignment as an opportunity to do something different from what is expected from, or asked, of oneself? Antecedently fixed purposes are, time and again, transformed – even transfigured – in the course of being pursued. Historically emergent purposes, opening previously undervalued perspectives, stake a claim on our attention and imagination. And this is critical for any *pragmatic* narrative of the pragmatic movement, at least as I am most disposed to tell this story.

What are we *doing* when we tell the story of pragmatism in this way rather than that? What are the effects of stories in which the central concern is to trace the threads of continuity from a European past to a more recent yet still somewhat remote time in the history of the United States? What are the effects of focusing narrowly upon the work of professors at Harvard? Our stories do indeed begin and end at odd times. Why not pick up the story before Peirce – or before Kant? Why not begin with Socrates and Aristotle (see, e.g., Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, volume 2, edited by the Peirce Edition Project, 399<sup>32</sup>)? Why end the story with Dewey or Mead – or Lewis? Why end the story of pragmatism before the present? Why even tell the story? What moves us to construct these narratives in just these ways (cf. James, “The Sentiment of Rationality”<sup>33</sup>)?

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32 The portion of MS 318 included in this chapter from volume 2 of *The Essential Peirce* (Chapter 28) begins by noting: “The philosophical journals, the world over, are just now brimming over, as you know, with pragmatism and antipragmatism.

33 James begins this essay by asking two deceptively simple questions: “What is the task which philosophers set for themselves; and why do they philosophize at all?” The same questions need to be raised regarding what tasks we set for ourselves when construct stories about pragmatism and what motives animate and direct our efforts to unfold such stories.

The irritation of doubt, hence the irritable disruption of the effective operation of especially our definitive habits,<sup>34</sup> requires (Peirce suggests) an external source, an experiential obstacle. As the questions posed just moments ago suggest, my role here today has been, more than anything else, to serve as the source of doubt, to be an *irritant*. It is far more important for our more or less unconscious habits of philosophical storytelling to be arrested than for these habits to be allowed to operate without resistance. The account of inquiry offered by pragmatists is one in which unanticipated disruptions and cognitive arrest play a central role. Why should not a story about pragmatism itself dramatize and (in dramatizing) *enact*, not simply discuss, just these themes in this account? Are not the tales told out of school not only the more fascinating but also the more instructive ones?<sup>35</sup>

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34 In *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922), John Dewey asserts: “Character is the interpenetration of habits” (*Middle Works of John Dewey*, volume 14, 29). Our habits interpenetrate in such a way and degree as (in effect) to define us.

35 Of course, this might seem simply additional evidence that my stance is that of a rebellious adolescent, that here I am simply *acting out*.