

PRAGMATISM AND AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

Pragmatism and American Experience provides a lucid and elegant introduction to America's defining philosophy. Joan Richardson charts the nineteenth-century origins of pragmatist thought and its development through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, focusing on the major first- and second-generation figures and how their contributions continue to influence philosophical discourse today. At the same time, Richardson casts pragmatism as the method it was designed to be: a way of making ideas clear, examining beliefs, and breaking old habits and reinforcing new, useful ones in the interest of maintaining healthy communities through ongoing conversation. Through this practice we come to perceive, as William James did, that thinking is as natural as breathing, and that the essential work of pragmatism is to open channels essential to all experience.

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AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

An Introduction

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
 978-0-521-14538-1 — Pragmatism and American Experience
 Joan Richardson
 Frontmatter
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CAMBRIDGE
 UNIVERSITY PRESS

Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom
 One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
 314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India
 103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment,
 a department of the University of Cambridge.

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www.cambridge.org
 Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521145381

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First published 2014

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data

Richardson, Joan, 1946–

Pragmatism and American experience : an introduction / Joan Richardson.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-521-76533-6 (hardback) – ISBN 978-0-521-14538-1 (pbk.)

1. Pragmatism. 2. Philosophy, American – 20th century. I. Title.

B832.R53 2013

144'.30973–dc23 2013036433

ISBN 978-0-521-76533-6 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-14538-1 Paperback

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Preface

If this life be not a real fight, in which something is eternally gained for the universe by success, it is no better than a game of private theatricals from which one may withdraw at will. But it *feels* like a real fight – as if there were something really wild in the universe which we, with all our idealities and faithfulnesses, are needed to redeem; and first of all to redeem our own hearts from atheisms and fears. For such a half-wild, half-saved universe is our nature adapted. The deepest thing in our nature is . . . this dumb region of the heart in which we dwell alone with our willingnesses and unwillingnesses, our faiths and fears. As through the cracks and crannies of caverns those waters exude from the earth's bosom which then form fountain-heads of springs, so in these crepuscular depths of personality the sources of all our outer deeds and decisions take their rise. Here is our deepest organ of communication with the nature of things . . . here possibilities, not finished facts, are the realities with which we have actively to deal.

This famous passage near the closing of William James's 1895 address, "Is Life Worth Living?" lies at the heart of pragmatism and of American experience. The address was collected in a volume published two years later entitled *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, which James dedicated to his "Old Friend, Charles Sanders Peirce," whom he had named as the founder of pragmatism, and of whom Ian Hacking has said, "He finished nothing, but began everything." Pragmatism springs from the realization that each of us has a real stake in what the world is to become, "that our own reactions on the world, small as they are in bulk, are integral parts of the whole thing, and necessarily help to determine the definition."¹ James stressed *feels* in his address because of all he had come to know over the previous quarter-century from his investigations and experiments in the nascent field of psychology. "The mind feels when it thinks," Jonathan Edwards, one of James's studious ghosts, had observed a century and a half earlier. In *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), James's monumental contribution to the field he helped establish, he offered the

evidence confirming Edwards's perception. James's *Principles* continues today to be the source of material animating the researches of neuroscientists, cognitive scientists, philosophers, linguists, and language theorists, as well as psychologists. Alfred North Whitehead called James "that adorable genius" with good reason, as the pages here devoted to him will amply demonstrate.

Barack Obama is a direct inheritor of the pragmatism of Peirce and James, grounded as it is in the realization that "possibilities ... are the realities with which we have actively to deal." It is the story of pragmatism and American experience that has brought Obama to understand where he and we find ourselves, a situation Ralph Waldo Emerson adroitly captures in the opening of "Experience," arguably his most important essay:

Where do we find ourselves? In a series of which we do not know the extremes, and believe that it has none. We wake and find ourselves on a stair; there are stairs below us, which we seem to have ascended; there are stairs above us, many a one, which go upward and out of sight ... Sleep lingers all our lifetime about our eyes, as night hovers all day in the boughs of the fir-tree. All things swim and glitter. Our life is not so much threatened as our perception.²

The genius of these lines informs all that American pragmatism as understood by its founders and its later practitioners, like Obama, means and offers. As the pages here given to Charles Sanders Peirce will make clear, this meaning and offering have as their aspiration the idea of society conceived as – in the words of Peirce's friend and mentor, father of his friend William, Henry James, Sr. – "the redeemed form of man," redemption understood to be the condition of individuals working, "all mean egotism vanishe[d]," in and as a community in ongoing conversation with contemporaries as well as with the shades inhabiting our histories. As Obama observed in *The Audacity of Hope* (2006), the Constitution is an instrument "designed to force us into a conversation," offering "a way by which we argue about our future" by making explicit what is at stake in acting one way or another, in, for example, *enacting* the passage of a law or the repeal of an amendment. As political theorists have shown, pragmatism is ideally suited to the process of democracy. Being a method devised in response to what I call "the Darwinian information," grounded in the knowledge that we inhabit a universe of chance, pragmatism offers the tools needed to take account of where we find ourselves in this ever-changing "environment of fact," examining our beliefs as we set aims. *A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, James subtitled *Pragmatism*, his 1907 framing document, a

secular sacrament naturalizing grace for the spirit continuing the pluralist experiment in the aftermath of Darwin's news.

It was John Dewey among the first-generation pragmatists who made the lines connecting the method with democracy and with Darwin most explicit. It was also Dewey who named Emerson a philosopher, a designation still resisted by many within the profession. It has been Stanley Cavell's almost singular effort among philosophers to justify Dewey's naming. In lecturing and writing over the past several decades Cavell has shown Emerson not only to have influenced pragmatism but also, through Nietzsche – Emerson's strongest European reader – to have anticipated both Heidegger and the later Wittgenstein. As I discuss in Chapter 4, Dewey, in his 1903 essay, "Emerson – The Philosopher of Democracy," contextualized Emerson's enlarged understanding of "logic" – evidenced in the idiosyncratic, variously disjunct and aleatory nature of his style – presenting it as a necessary recalibration of this most basic instrument of thought, adequate to what Emerson evocatively described as "this new yet unapproachable America," "America" realized *unexceptionally*, not as a "place" but as an "event," an idea unfolding in time, an "extended duration" in Whitehead's phrase, a new name for an old idea, democracy. The work of the pragmatists, following Peirce, was and is to map and implement this new logic, stretching the logic of sequence inherited from Aristotle to accommodate both probability – the engine of our universe of chance – and the different shapes and tempos thought might take once the open, random nature of our habitation and being is admitted; non-linear geometries and algebras were born out of the same accommodations. Dewey, who had studied logic with Peirce, was exemplary in taking on this work, explicating and illustrating in everything he wrote the whys and hows of the new method's selective breeding of ideas in its application to the various fields of human endeavor: politics and political theory, education, art, and aesthetics.

Moving on from Dewey, Cavell and Richard Rorty abundantly illustrate in their work, each in his distinctive way, what happens to the idea of philosophy when it opens itself to "the use of a little imagination," as William James had urged. Cavell and Rorty set themselves to use imagination to expand the grammar and syntax of philosophical language in order to make room for what they both describe as a "therapeutic" purpose, creating a virtual space in which the texture of thinking itself can be observed. "Therapeutic" derives from a Greek word that means healing by giving attention, as a physician does, by listening – not only to what is said but to what is felt, sensed by palpation, by observing gestures and

even fleeting moods as they register in pauses, punctuations of breath. Within the movement of Cavell's sentences we experience him wrestling with expression itself: stopping, listening for echoes, straining to capture words in their sites, turning around them, examining them to find whether they can render adequately the various moods prompted by his thinking about thinking. It is as though his sentences stage dramas in which the characters performing are words themselves. Rorty's experimentation, in turn, extends the range of philosophical engagement by trying out different vocabularies, multiplying the possibilities of adaptation somewhat in the manner of the evolutionary process itself. Both Cavell's and Rorty's methods aim to heal the rift between thought and language. They know at the same time that a perfect match is impossible, that we are all immigrants in language, but that this irony – another way of describing skepticism – belongs to the human condition: "Life itself is a bubble and a skepticism, and a sleep within a sleep," as Emerson went on to observe in "Experience." To become aware of this actuality of our condition frees us from the collective neurosis of believing that there is a one-to-one correspondence between words and things, words and ideas, and so of the repetition compulsion, as it were, of persisting to think that we will eventually get things absolutely right and see *the truth*. As A. O. Lovejoy observed in 1908, of what he characterized as the thirteen varieties of pragmatism then on offer, the common feature of all was to cultivate "the habit of self-analysis."³ Pragmatism is a cure of the mind. Emerson had given the clue, the thread leading out of the labyrinth: if we conceive our habitation in language, the condition of human life, as only "a tent for the night," then the very sense of habitation, of abode, changes to become the sense of being always on the road – experience itself.

As I outline in the first chapter, my involvement with and understanding of pragmatism began many years ago when I was an undergraduate majoring in philosophy. I am indebted to those I mention and to others, then contemporaries, whose contributions to class discussions and later conversations around cafeteria tables stimulated and sharpened my thinking. In more recent years, leading graduate seminars in pragmatism together with Jack Diggins and Luke Menand while they were both at The Graduate Center (CUNY) refocused my early preparation and more than brought me up to speed in the late-twentieth-century currents charging the method. Jack's death in 2009 saddened me more than I could have anticipated – we were and continue to be diminished by his loss. Luke's move to Cambridge figures as an equal, if not final, loss. More immediately, I am especially indebted to the participants in the graduate

seminars I have been conducting over the last several years at the Center. Running under the rubric of “American Aesthetics,” these seminars have had as their content, in varying combinations and with different additions, the work of the figures who are the subjects here. My sense of the significance and effectiveness of pragmatism as the precisising instrument it was devised to be has been consistently reinforced by the ways I have seen my students put the method to work in the streams of their own experience. Their thinking and their writing have greatly enriched my own. To name only a few of them would be to misrepresent the unfinished symphony of our engagement. They will, I know, recognize themselves individually in these pages.

Also contributing to shaping the ideas presented here has been my participation at various conferences and symposia to which I had the good fortune to be invited, as well as the singular and stirring experience of spending a day in February 2010 interviewing and simply talking with Stanley Cavell at his home in Brookline, Massachusetts. This meeting with Cavell was pivotal in allowing me to revisit aspects of his work that I had been addressing over the previous few years; the results of this encounter were presented as a lecture under the title of “Return of the Repressed: Cavell and Emerson” at a conference in his honor held in Edinburgh in 2008 and as a paper, “Emerson and Cavell,” at the American Literature Association meeting in 2009. I was later to put this material in conversation with the longer history of Cavell’s development as it was offered in his autobiography published in August 2010 under the title of *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory*. The chapter here given to Cavell was seeded by these experiences as well as by what I learned in framing an essay for James Loxley and Andrew Taylor’s *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy, Literature and Criticism* (2011); this piece, “Thinking in Cavell: The Transcendentalist Strain,” grew out of the “Return of the Repressed” talk. My chapter is also informed by the essay on Cavell and his autobiography that appeared in the Winter 2012 issue of *Raritan*, “It’s About Time: Stanley Cavell’s Memory Palace.”

Similarly, the shape of the first chapter, as well as features of the chapter given to Richard Rorty, developed from talks I was asked to give at Modern Language Association meetings in 2008 and 2009: the first, “Pragmatism and Moral Perfectionism: Emerson, William James, and Barack Obama,” at a Pragmatism Round-Table; the second, “‘Conversation is a game of circles,’ or, Thirteen Ways of Looking at Richard Rorty” at a special session – Richard Rorty, Pragmatism, and Criticism. Exchanges with fellow panelists and comments offered by members of the audiences for these

sessions that I recorded on the reading copies of my presentations have inflected what I offer in the pages following.

Even more directly, the chapter devoted to William James grew from three talks on James and pragmatism that I was invited to give: the first, “The Varieties of American Religious Experience,” was a keynote lecture at the meeting of the European Association of American Studies held in Oslo, Norway, in May 2008; the second, “Pragmatism ... she widens the field of search for God,” also a keynote lecture, was delivered at the William James Commemorative Conference held in Hamburg, Germany, in June 2010; and the third, a lecture from which the chapter here draws its subheading, “Into the cosmic weather,” was presented at “The Uses of Pragmatism” symposium held at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in September 2010. A version of “Pragmatism ... she widens the field of search for God” appeared in Susanne Rohr and Miriam Strube’s volume, *Revisioning Pragmatism: William James in the New Millennium* (2011).

Conversations with colleagues during these various gatherings, many prompted by the responses to my talks and by the question and answer sessions on these occasions and others – with Norton Batkin, Gregg Crane, Herwig Friedl, Russell Goodman, Gordon Hutner, Heinz Ickstadt, James Kloppenberg, Sami Pihlstrom, Susanne Rohr, and Miriam Strube, among others – and ongoing conversations in New York and at other meetings with Ann Lauterbach, Steven J. Meyer, and Ross Posnock have textured what appears in these pages. I am, in addition, especially indebted to Ross Posnock for the invaluable combination of his acuity and critical generosity as a constant reader of my work.

In connection with continuing to increase the depth of field surrounding James as a subject, I am also grateful to John Irwin for inviting me to contribute an essay to the resurrected *Hopkins Review*. He asked for a piece on *Deadwood*, the three-season (12 episodes each) HBO series created by David Milch (of *Hill Street Blues* and *NYPD Blue* fame) set in the Black Hills of South Dakota during the late 1800s; the series was wildly successful and ran from March 2004 through August 2006. I was a fan of the series and had known about Milch’s deep involvement with William James and with the James family; he had during the 1980s worked with R. W. B. Lewis on what they conceived as a television series but ended up instead as Lewis’s volume, *The Jameses: A Family Narrative*, published in 1991 – cable broadcasting being still in its toddler stage. I had not realized, however, until carefully reading the scripts for all the *Deadwood* episodes together with Milch’s detailed commentary on each episode as I prepared

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to write the piece for the *Review* how directly Jamesian pragmatism, permeated as it is by Emerson's spirit, informed the Milchian experience of *what-was-not-yet-but-aspired-to-be America*, as presented in the series. Aspects of what I came to understand about pragmatism as I composed my essay, "*Deadwood: Unalterable Vibrations*,"⁴ have found their way into this volume. (I should also add that with this piece as credential, on the happy occasion of first meeting and speaking with David Milch in 2010, I had the good luck of being invited to spend some time at his Red Board Productions studio, where I began to learn the ropes of script-writing. I nurse the hope that cable might now be ready for something about "the James boys," as Emerson called them.)

Finally, I thank Ray Ryan for his persistence in urging me to undertake this volume and for his abiding appreciation of my work. I have been immensely rewarded by all I have learned on this adventure; I would not have had the experience were it not for him. I am, of course, grateful to the Cambridge editorial and production crews: here in New York City, particularly Louis Gulino, Marielle Poss, and Caitlin Gallagher; and in Chennai, India, the beautifully named Jayashree Prabhu, who was consistently prompt, attentive, and kind. My thanks, too, to The Graduate Center, CUNY, for a subvention that helped defray some of the costs of permissions; and to my research assistants: Amelia Greene, who negotiated the permissions for the Wallace Stevens material, and Justin Van Wormer, who aided me in compiling the index.

Abbreviations

The following works have been abbreviated for convenience. Quotations from them are identified by abbreviated title and page number. Complete citations can be found in the Bibliography.

<i>AE</i>	John Dewey, <i>Art as Experience</i>
<i>CPP</i>	Wallace Stevens, <i>Collected Poetry and Prose</i>
<i>EL</i>	Ralph Waldo Emerson, <i>Essays and Lectures</i>
<i>EN</i>	John Dewey, <i>Experience and Nature</i>