CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Thirteen ways of looking at pragmatism

> "All things converge on feelings," the Buddha says.... Feeling is the past being taken up into the present. It is the vector character of many things being synthesized as the fulfilled reason.
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> NOLAN PLINY JACOBSON, *Understanding Buddhism*

> There is still an air of provincialism about pragmatism.... [But Donald] Davidson may have been right when he wrote that "a sea change" is occurring in recent philosophical thought – "a change so profound that we may not recognize that it is occurring." If the change of which Davidson spoke is someday recognized as having occurred [then] Peirce, James, and Dewey may cease to be treated as provincial figures. They may be given the place I think they deserve in the story of the West's intellectual progress.
>
> RICHARD RORTY, "Pragmatism as Anti-Representationalism"

> Pent in, as the pragmatist more than anyone else sees himself to be, between the whole body of funded truths squeezed from the past and the coercions of the world of sense about him, who so well as he feels the immense pressure of objective control under which our minds perform their operations? If any one imagines that this law is lax, let him keep its commandments one day, says Emerson. We have heard much of late of the uses of imagination in science. It is high time to urge the use of a little imagination in philosophy.
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> WILLIAM JAMES, *Pragmatism*

1. WHAT'S IN A WORD?

Early in January 2012, National Public Radio in New York City (WNYC) reported that *pragmatic*/*pragmatism*/*pragmatist* were the terms most searched on engines and most used in the various national media during 2011. While the commentator did not extrapolate, I think it is clear to most that this broad interest and appearance are connected with the

fact that Barack Obama and his agenda have consistently been described, from the time of his first campaign for the presidency, as "pragmatic" or "pragmatist."[1] Indeed, one of Obama's deeply valued guides on how to live, what to do is the work of Reinhold Niebuhr, perhaps the purest second-generation inheritor of the aspirations and practices of William James and John Dewey – though, importantly, he unsettled the Deweyan faith in progress with his foregrounding of human limitation and imperfection. During a famous 2007 interview with then-Senator Obama, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks asked Obama whether he had ever read Niebuhr. Obama replied, "I love him. He's one of my favorite philosophers." Brooks followed up by asking what Obama had "taken away" from the pragmatist theologian. Obama responded, as Brooks described, "in a rush of words":

> I take away the compelling idea that there's serious evil in the world, and hardship and pain. And we should be humble and modest in our belief that we can eliminate those things. But we shouldn't use that as an excuse for cynicism and inaction. I take away the sense we have to make these efforts knowing they are hard, and not swinging from naïve idealism to bitter realism.[2]

Reflecting this indebtedness, *The New York Times Magazine* printed on its cover early on in Obama's presidency (May 3, 2009) a photo of him holding the same pose in which Niebuhr is figured on the cover of the reissued 2008 paperback edition of his *The Irony of American History* published by the University of Chicago Press, which features Obama's aforementioned response to Brooks on its back cover. (The portrait of Niebuhr originally appeared as the "Man of the Year" cover of the March 8, 1948 issue of *Time* magazine; see illustrations.)[3] Niebuhr's 1952 incisive meditation on America's coming of age as a world power during the turbulent but triumphant post–World War II years is an eloquent modern jeremiad warning against the "arrogance of virtue" and unexamined idealism. This warning is coupled with a reminder of the pragmatist understanding of beliefs as platforms for action; that is, of the necessity of considering as carefully as possible effects that will and might ensue from our beliefs. *Washington Post* columnist E. J. Dionne, remarking recently on Niebuhr's importance and centrality, has suggested that the following quotation from Niebuhr "should hang over all seminars": "We must always seek the truth in our opponents' errors and the error in our own truth." It has been noted that Obama – having learned important lessons from Niebuhr – wants

politicians, including Democrats, to accept "the possibility that the other side might sometime have a point."[4]

In addition to voicing his admiration for Niebuhr, Obama has also noted Ralph Waldo Emerson, for whom his maternal great-grandfather was named, as inspiration. In his response to a question about his vision for America just before the closing statements of the second presidential debate in October 2012, Obama named "self-reliance" as the quality he would want each citizen to embody. Emerson has been claimed variously, as will be discussed in the chapters following, as a source or influence for American pragmatists. Obama also appointed to his cabinet Cass Sunstein, self-described as a pragmatist, to lead the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (OIRA), a post he held until August 2012.

The American Heritage Dictionary lists as the first sense of "pragmatism": "*Philosophy*. A movement consisting of varying but associated theories, originally developed by Charles S. Peirce and William James and distinguished by the doctrine that the meaning of an idea or proposition lies in its observable practical consequences." But it is the second sense – "A practical, matter-of-fact way of approaching or assessing situations or of solving problems" – that is almost without exception taken to be the meaning whenever one of the variants is used in connection with the Obama administration's practice or program.[5] This is most unfortunate, especially since Obama's education and experience – including his teaching at the University of Chicago, identified as it is with the inheritance of Dewey, George Herbert Mead, and other distinguished pragmatists – abundantly illustrate how profoundly he has understood the grounds and aspiration of the philosophy developed by Peirce and James and the other first-generation pragmatists.

As Obama knows, pragmatism was designed and practiced by its founders in response to the Darwinian information: realizing ourselves to be accidental creatures inhabiting a universe of chance. As Freud famously observed, there have been three great blows to our ideas about ourselves: (1) Copernicus's discovery that the earth is not at the center of the universe and so human beings do not necessarily enjoy a privileged place in the cosmos; (2) Darwin's uncovering of our descent from "a hairy, tailed quadruped, probably arboreal in its habits" and so not created "in the image" of an anthropomorphic "God"; and (3) Freud's own contribution to the continuing disturbance of our ideas of selfhood: that we are motivated largely by unconscious drives, making the question of the sixth-century monk of Sinai, John Climacus – "What is this mystery in me?" – part of the

common experience of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Westerners. Emerson's often-quoted opening to his essay "Experience" perfectly captures the tenor and mood of modern human being, the spiritual landscape out of which pragmatism grew:

> 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 over day in the boughs of the fir-tree. All things swim and glitter. Our life is not so much threatened as our perception.[6]

While pragmatists, of course, yield both the notion of special creation and the idea of an anthropomorphic God, they nonetheless, for the most part, remain curious about the great order beyond us and remain intent on honoring the possibility of perceiving ourselves "part or particle" of that order – to borrow a phrase from Emerson. As William James explicitly described pragmatism's function, figuring the new method as female and as "democratic" and "flexible" as "mother nature," "she widens the field of search for God."[7] In spite of this announcement, however, there is no mention of an idea of God or of any variety of religious experience in the work of the latest "new pragmatists."[8] This is surprising. As James noted in "The Present Dilemma in Philosophy" – the first lecture/chapter of *Pragmatism* (1907) – the following observation is as true today as it was then: "Our children, one may say, are almost born scientific. But our esteem for facts has not neutralized in us all religiousness. Our scientific temper is devout."[9] To my mind, this volume – one meant to serve as an introduction to pragmatism – would not be adequate to its task if it did not include in the story of how this method came to be an account of the ways that the residues of God were preserved and naturalized into James's expanded conception of the empirical, into Peirce's conception of community, and into Dewey's idea of democracy.

2. WHAT'S THE STORY?

When Cambridge University Press editor Ray Ryan asked me to undertake a second volume about American pragmatism, I was, of course, honored, but also especially pleased since, as I indicated in the Preface to the previous volume (*A Natural History of Pragmatism: The Fact of Feeling from*

Jonathan Edwards to Gertrude Stein [2007]), I could not there cover all I had come to see and understand about this signally important philosophical method. *A Natural History of Pragmatism* traced the emergence of this form of thinking from the accidental combination of the theological impulse motivating the Puritan "errand into the wilderness" with the actuality of that wilderness, where the language brought by the settlers to this "new world" was inadequate to describe all they found and felt. I did not have space there to provide the "backstory" – or, better, to use Henry James's famous phrase, *the story of the story* – of pragmatism, a "redescription" or "renarration" that, it is to be hoped, will provide a handle with which to grasp the slippery nature of this most protean subject.[10]

A recent review of Simon Schama's *The American Future: A History* (2009) recalled Jacques Barzun's observation that "of all the books it is impossible to write, the most impossible is a book trying to capture the spirit of America."[11] Even more than democracy, our inherited political ideal and practice, pragmatism, America's defining philosophy, breathes this spirit. And the first thing to remark about this philosophy is that its name belies it, as it is not an *-ism* in any sense, but a *method* – a tool, an instrument, a way of thinking about thinking that gets us from where we find ourselves to somewhere we want to go, even if only a step closer to "this new yet unapproachable America," as Emerson so powerfully described the aspiration for a society envisioned by his friend Henry James, Sr. as "the redeemed form of man." The important part played by the elder James not only in the thinking of William James, but also in that of Charles Sanders Peirce, belongs to the story of the story of pragmatism that unfolds in the pages of this volume.

3. METHOD

A recent translator of one of Martin Heidegger's texts comments on the philosopher's reminding us of the derivation of the word "method" from the Greek *methodos* – literally, "with(in)-a-path" – and notes that the word means more particularly "to-be-on-the-way … not thought of as a 'method' man devises but a way that already exists, arising from the very things themselves, as they show themselves through and through."[12] As William James put it in one of his many lucid descriptions of the method that would come to be identified with his name:

> New truth is always a go-between, a smoother-over of transitions. It marries old opinion to new fact so as ever to show a minimum of jolt, a maximum

> of continuity. We hold a theory true just in proportion to its success in solving this "problem of maxima and minima." But success in solving this problem is eminently a matter of approximation.... The point I now urge you to observe particularly is the part played by the older truths. Failure to take account of it is the source of much of the unjust criticism leveled against pragmatism.[13]

James's complete title for his defining 1907 volume is *Pragmatism, A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, and it is comprised of what he called in his subtitle "Popular Lectures on Philosophy" (of which there are eight), which were originally delivered in Lowell, Massachusetts and at Columbia University in 1906 and early 1907, respectively. As indicated by his title, James's aim was to foreground that the method he was delineating was nothing other than *thinking* itself and that what he was doing was making explicit what the Greeks first conceptualized in their word for "thinking": *stochasmos* – literally, preparing for and taking aim at a target. What does this mean as a figure for thinking?

James would have known that *stochasmos*, the "old way of thinking" of the Classical and Hellenistic Greeks, inherited by the Romans, designates "conjecture," its form expressed in the questions it poses: "Does the thing at issue exist?" "Is there an act to be considered?" "Is there evidence for the case?" And as James would have known from his study of medicine, *stochazesthai* – the reflexive verbal form of *stochasmos* – in the Hippocratic corpus means the search for "the right measure" as an "individual" measure, and that a shift in the meaning of *stochazesthai* to "the right *mean*" was first made by Aristotle. James also would have known that it was Galen (ca. 130 CE–ca. 210 CE), the most famous doctor of the Roman Empire, who, out of attempts to define pain, made conjecture (*stochasmos*) "a conceptual tool in its own right along with reason and experience."[14] Finally, framing all of these uses is Plato's observing in his dialogue *Philebus* (56a) that harmony is discovered by "conjecture [*stochasmos*] through skillful practice." In connection with this passage, a recent commentator, drawing on the etymology of *stochasmos*, observes:

> One hits upon harmony like an archer hits his mark. The path leading to the actual success of the archer remains in the final analysis mysterious and elusive. There can be no comprehensive account why and how an archer hits the mark; there can be no comprehensive account how harmony is established between things at variance except to say that the *homologos* [shared logos, agreement] is aimed at, guessed and established through skillful practice.[15]

In a piece collected in Cheryl Misak's *New Pragmatists* reader (2007), titled "On Our Interest in Getting Things Right: Pragmatism without Narcissism," Jeffrey Stout uses the figure of the archer once again to clarify both what is at issue for pragmatists and what is at stake in thinking:

> It may be true … that the goal of getting something right should not be considered *apart* [Stout's emphasis] from – in complete abstraction from – the goal of holding beliefs one is entitled to hold. Return to the case of the archer [which he uses earlier in his essay]. Surely somewhere in the list of things she is expected to do, if she is to count as an excellent archer, is to take dead aim at her target. This aim is embedded, so to speak, in the standards of competence and excellence that have arisen in the practice of archery. Trying to shoot well involves adopting this aim. Archers who generally fail to take aim, who do not have hitting the bull's eye as one of their goals, are not excellent archers. But putting the point in this way allows us to see how important it is to continue referring to this goal if we want to capture the target-directedness of the practice. If we let this goal slip out of the picture, we are bound to lose track of one dimension of success and failure that matters to anyone actually participating in the activity.[16]

Grounded in the knowledge that we belong to a universe of chance and accordingly relinquish any notion of foundational or *un*-changing truth, pragmatists use "getting something right" in the place of an explanation of what truth is. Truth remains instead, in the felicitous phrasing of Donald Davidson (one of the important second-generation pragmatists),[17] *an unexplained primitive*, like the word for "truth," *a-letheia* in the "old way of thinking" of the Greeks, which literally means "what is not or cannot be forgotten"; it is a constantly renewed activity of perception, not dogma or an *-ism*. The title of a late poem by Wallace Stevens beautifully captures this sense: "Reality Is an Activity of the Most August Imagination." As Stout explains, borrowing from Davidson, with truth conceived in this way, "the approach to [it] is 'to trace its connections to other concepts' that are equally basic, not to define it." Or, quoting Richard Rorty – perhaps the most prominent of the second-generation pragmatists – Stout adds, "There is no such thing as Reality to be gotten right – only snow, fog, Olympian deities, relative aesthetic worth, the elementary particles, human rights, the divine right of kings, the Trinity, and the like."[18] As James established in "What Pragmatism Means," the second lecture/chapter of *Pragmatism*, using one of the phrases that was to become intrinsically associated with the method: "[I]f you follow the pragmatic method, you cannot look on any such word [such as 'God,' 'Matter,' 'Reason,' 'the Absolute,' 'Energy'] as closing your quest. You must bring out of each

word its practical cash-value, set it at work within the stream of your experience."[19]

It is easy to see that if the aim of thinking about truth is "to trace its connections to other concepts" – a nutshell description of James's "radical empiricism," where the *relations between* things are as "real" as the things themselves – then the larger the sample of "other concepts" of what is "true," of what has not been, or cannot be forgotten leads to a greater chance of "getting something right." This takes us back once more to Aristotle, who observed that "the best thing by far is to be master of metaphor" as he is the one most able to see the *homologues* (the agreements or shared features) among things. Borrowing a term from today's cultural lexicon, we could describe pragmatism's method as beginning in what I will call *intellectual sampling* – or, perhaps better, *perceptual sampling* – where we relax stringent conceptual boundaries and/or prescribed formats to allow for and attend to associative, metaphorical firings to create *a field of search* for whatever it is we have set as target or aim, ranging from an idea of God to the Higgs boson. This relaxation is the intellectual equivalent of an archer's releasing tension from the body as she focuses attention on the target, takes a stance, draws in breath as she stretches the bow before – finally – releasing the arrow. Feeding that relaxation are "the standards of competence and excellence that have arisen in the practice of archery." In the case of thinking, it is "the part played by the older truths" that feeds the opened field of perception. Into this space of relaxed mental vigilance come – as, in fact, *in-spiration*, in drawing breath – perceptions associated with the end held in mind: the target. This particular "way of thinking" James learned from Emerson, who described it in *Nature* (1836), the anonymously published azure-covered volume that sparked the revolution in thinking about thinking that James's *Pragmatism* would complete seventy years later. In his "Language" chapter, Emerson offers the following in describing the aim of communicating our thoughts in conversation:

> The moment our discourse rises above the ground line of familiar facts, and is inflamed with passion or exalted by thought, it clothes itself in images. A man conversing in earnest, *if he watch his intellectual processes* [emphasis added], will find that a material image, more or less luminous, arises in his mind, cotemporaneous with every thought, which furnishes the vestment of the thought. . . . This imagery is spontaneous. It is the blending of experience with the present action of the mind. It is proper creation. It is the working of the Original Cause through the instruments he has already made.[20]

Henry David Thoreau, following Emerson, describes how "With thinking we may be beside ourselves in a sane sense":

> By a conscious effort of the mind we can stand aloof from actions and their consequences; and all things good and bad, go by us like a torrent. . . . I only know myself as a human entity; the scene, so to speak, of thoughts and affections; and am sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another. However intense my experience, I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me, which, as it were, is not a part of me, but spectator, sharing no experience, but taking note of it; and that is no more I than it is you.[21]

It is not difficult to recognize in these observations anticipations of what Sigmund Freud would devise as the psychoanalytic method in the next half-century. And we will see in Chapter 5 that Stanley Cavell has aligned these early lessons from Emerson and Thoreau with psychoanalytic procedures to enlarge through his style in writing and speaking the scope of philosophy's practice – one of the prime reasons for considering Cavell a pragmatist, in spite of his demurrals about being so designated. Contemporary psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas calls the kind of mental activity described by Emerson and Thoreau and characterizing the "free association" informing analytic sessions "grazing," noting that it is "a very different form of thinking from cognitive thought" and provides "food for [cognitive] thought that only retrospectively could be seen to have a logic."[22] In any case, it is important to register pragmatism's birth alongside that of psychology; their coming into being at the moment when the nature and behavior of mind had, in the absence of God in his heaven, to be looked at and accounted for in themselves. What once would have been attributed to divine inspiration, these methods search for in the answers we provide to the question "Where do we find ourselves?" – taking our stance, after "grazing" or "sampling," to ground our aim for the future in all we've learned or found. Just as Isaac Newton made the invisible nature and behavior of light – our most constant and necessary element – visible to the mind's eye through his meticulous experimental accounting of its process, breaking it into its spectrum with a prism, pragmatism breaks our invisible train of thought, making us stop to *watch our intellectual processes*, and so *find ourselves beside ourselves in a sane sense*, understanding where we are, taking a stance on our "platforms for action," our beliefs, before we act: "only an attitude of orientation is what the pragmatic method means," James noted;[23] and elsewhere, "Thinking is the only morality." Having made thinking the subject of thinking, pragmatism brought

philosophy into the field of high modernism. It has, since, taken as many forms as there are minds using it.

4. EXAMPLE

THIRTEEN WAYS OF LOOKING AT A BLACKBIRD

I
Among twenty snowy mountains,
The only moving thing
Was the eye of the blackbird.

II
I was of three minds,
Like a tree
In which there are three blackbirds.

III
The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds.
It was a small part of the pantomime.

IV
A man and a woman
Are one.
A man and a woman and a blackbird
Are one.

V
I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after.

VI
Icicles filled the long window
With barbaric glass.
The shadow of the blackbird
Crossed it, to and fro.
The mood
Traced in the shadow
An indecipherable cause.

VII
O thin men of Haddam,
Why do you imagine golden birds?
Do you not see how the blackbird