"Shows the general reader that what contemporary philosophers do truly matters."
—**John Lachs**, Vanderbilt University

Philosophy & This Actual World

AN INTRODUCTION TO PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY

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For my teachers and students

"It is far too little recognized how entirely the intellect is built up of practical interests."

—William James, "The Sentiment of Rationality"

"Language—I want to say—is a refinement, 'in the beginning was the deed'."

—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*

Preface

In 1907 William James spoke of the "seriously inquiring amateur in philosophy" who turns to philosophy professors but finds them wanting. The problem is not with the serious amateur, James explained, but the professors. Philosophy should do more than exercise our "powers of intellectual abstraction." It should also "make some positive connexion with this actual world of finite human lives."

If the problem was bad then, it's worse now. A shortcoming of much academic philosophy is its having lost sight of the seriously inquiring amateur—an educated person seeking answers to philosophical questions that, as James puts it, "fit every part of life best and combine with the collectivity of experience's demands, nothing being omitted." What, in the light of contemporary neuroscience, is the relation of mind to brain? How do we reconcile the freedom presupposed by law and ethics with the determinism presupposed by the brain and behavioral sciences? What are the origins and basis of ethics? To what extent can reason resolve or contain moral conflict? Is someone who is totally and permanently unconscious, but breathing without the aid of a machine, alive or dead? Is religious conviction compatible with scientific understanding? Can our lives have meaning if there is no God? And whatever the answers to these and similar questions, how do they all connect with each other?

My aim in this book is to develop, defend, and illustrate an approach to philosophical questions and answers that speaks to James's seriously inquiring amateur and makes some positive connection with this actual world of finite human lives. At the same time, I hope to draw on important advances in recent academic philosophy. In so doing, I combine the spirit, if not the letter, of two thinkers who are in

many respects as different as night and day: William James and Ludwig Wittgenstein.

James (1842–1910), an American psychologist and philosopher, wrote on a wide variety of topics for a broad audience. Whatever the subject, James comes across as genial and plainspoken. Reading James, we feel we are listening to a friend who speaks our language and has interesting and important things to say. While James sought and acquired a readership that extended well beyond academic psychologists and philosophers, Wittgenstein (1889–1951), an Austrian who spent much of his life teaching philosophy in England, is little known outside academic philosophy. Where James seems open and friendly—the kind of person you'd like to spend an afternoon with—Wittgenstein seems (and actually was) private and prickly, an exceedingly difficult man. Where James's writing is colloquial and accessible, Wittgenstein's writing is, like the man himself, forbidding. Wittgenstein's first important book, *Tractatus Philosophicus*, was highly compressed and technical. His second great book, *Philosophical Investigations*, was equally difficult, but written in a radically different aphoristic style. It is an unusual reader who will be able to make much sense of Wittgenstein and appreciate his insights and writing without great effort, extensive philosophical background, and formal course work.

Despite these differences, Wittgenstein greatly admired certain of James's writings and read them more than once. Even when he disagreed with him, Wittgenstein felt James's work on psychology and religion had unusual depth and was, for that reason, worth taking seriously. Though each wrote only a single essay with 'ethics' or 'moral' in the title, nearly everything each of them wrote reflected ethical concern. For my purposes the most important similarity is the extent to which each rejected "intellectualist" conceptions of philosophy—conceptions like that of René Descartes (1596–1650), who thought it possible that the asker of philosophical questions could be a *pure* intellect, what I characterize in chapter 1 as an isolated, disembodied spectator. Both James and Wittgenstein emphatically reject this possibility. Askers of philosophical questions, they maintain, are and must be conceived as language-using, social animals. *Embodied social action* is at least as important to philosophical inquiry and understanding, James and Wittgenstein each insist, as *abstract thought or contemplation*.

At one point James put it this way: "The knower is not simply a mirror floating with no foot-hold anywhere, and passively reflecting on an order that he comes upon and simply finds existing. The knower is an *actor*, and coefficient of the truth which he helps to cre-

ate. Mental interests, hypotheses, postulates, so far as they are bases for *human action—action* which to a great extent transforms the world—help to make the truth" (italics added). Nearly seventy years later Wittgenstein wrote, "Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end;—but the end is not certain propositions' striking us immediately as true; i.e., it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language game." This emphasis on action, agency, and practice is echoed by the contemporary philosopher Hilary Putnam: "The heart of pragmatism, it seems to me—of James' and Dewey's pragmatism, if not of Peirce's—was the insistence on the *supremacy of the agent point of view*. If we find we must take a certain point of view, use a certain 'conceptual system' when we are engaged in *practical activity*, in the widest sense of 'practical activity', then we must not simultaneously advance the claim that it is not really 'the way things are in themselves'" (italics added). James, Wittgenstein, and Putnam are, I think, right about the importance of action, agency, and practice in addressing philosophical questions. In this, they share a *pragmatic temperament*—one that speaks to the whole person, embodied social agent as well as intellect. Philosophical questions are raised by people who have to act as well as think—and satisfactory answers must be responsive to the demands of both.

In addition to Wittgenstein and Putnam, I draw on Richard Rorty and other contemporary philosophers to respond to the questions and concerns of today's seriously inquiring amateur. Taking advantage of the "linguistic turn" in twentieth-century philosophy, they are able to state and defend some of James's important insights more cogently than he could himself.

Though I draw heavily on the insights of academic philosophy, my focus is the questions and concerns of seriously inquiring amateurs. To this end the writing is direct and occasionally conversational—imitating insofar as possible the spirit if not the letter of James's own *Pragmatism*, a set of lectures delivered to educated nonspecialists in the early part of the twentieth century. Technical terms are restricted and, when used, briefly explained. To limit distraction, endnotes are restricted to references. Readers more interested in the thread of the argument than sources of quotations may safely ignore them. Scholarly controversies, further questions, historical background, and additional references are identified in an accompanying bibliographical essay, the structure of which parallels individual chapters and section headings. I presume many readers will not, at least initially, be interested in such matters and

including them in the main text would be a hindrance for them. Nothing of scholarly importance is lost by including all such references in an accompanying bibliographical essay that both credits sources and provides guidance for further reflection and research.

For too long academic philosophers have ignored the questions of serious, intelligent, well-educated men and women from all walks of life who do not have the time for concentrated study in philosophy. My aim is to bridge this gap by combining the style and focus of a public philosopher like William James with the insights and discoveries of a philosopher's philosopher like Ludwig Wittgenstein. The result, I hope, is a book that speaks to the general reader while incorporating important developments in recent academic philosophy.

In a review of a book I'd written on moral compromise, Jonathan Moreno said it was unfortunate that I hadn't cited William James. The explanation was that at that point I hadn't actually read much of James. Stimulated by Moreno's comment, however, I began reading more of James. Then I turned to the other two classical pragmatists, Charles S. Peirce and John Dewey. Before long, I realized that most of my teaching, thinking, and writing was a reflection of what I'm calling a pragmatic temperament. The same was true, I thought, of much of the best work in practical and professional ethics. I wanted to share this discovery by recommending a book on the topic to my students and friends, but I discovered there was no short volume that combined the accessibility of James's *Pragmatism* with advances in academic philosophy and current issues in practical ethics, particularly bioethics. So I decided to write such a book myself.

I am grateful to my students for reading and commenting on drafts of individual chapters as they pertained to individual courses. These included graduate seminars on contemporary pragmatism and on Wittgenstein, a senior seminar on contemporary pragmatism, sections of an advanced ethics course, and an introductory course for honors students. I cannot recall or identify each student who made helpful comments. Some graduate students, however, made extensive written comments that resulted in a number of important changes. Mike Squillace's criticisms of the first draft of the first four chapters led to extensive substantive and stylistic revisions. Skott Brill's exceptionally close reading of various chapters did the same. And Scot Yoder, who was writing a dissertation on pragmatism and practical philosophy, taught me as much as I taught him. Like many others, Mike, Skott, and Scot were students who became my teachers.

In 1997–98 I was fortunate to have graduate student M. Lendsey Melton as a research assistant. What helped me most was Lendsey's careful reading and probing questions of various chapters. I learned a great deal from our lengthy conversations over coffee at Espresso Royale. Lendsey was another student who became my teacher.

On various matters I turned to my colleagues for help. Steve Esquith gave me guidance on matters of political philosophy, Fred Gifford on evolutionary biology, Rich Hall on philosophy of mind, Don Koch on classical pragmatism (especially Peirce and Dewey and related bibliographical materials), and Tom Tomlinson on ethics. Friends who read parts of the manuscript and provided useful comments include David Donovan, Carl Hedman, Richard Momeyer, Dolores Rauscher, and Gene Smith. John Arras read the entire manuscript and made a suggestion that led to my emphasis on the pragmatic temperament. As always, Ronna Benjamin read each chapter with her customary good sense and eye for philosophical obscurity.

I received invaluable aid in preparing the manuscript from graduate student Robert Brice and undergraduate Kristen Jarvis Johnson. I am grateful, too, for the useful suggestions from Eve DeVaro and Reid Hester of Rowman & Littlefield. Production editor Julie E. Kirsch and copy editor Luann Reed-Siegel were also very helpful.

Finally, I want to express my gratitude to Gene Cline and his students at Albion College. For three semesters Gene taught an honors seminar that worked through a version of my manuscript. Then, as each seminar came to a close, he invited me to meet with his students. I was impressed with the students' preparation, knowledge, and thoughtfulness and learned a great deal from their hard questions and constructive criticisms.

Some parts of the book are adapted from material published elsewhere. Chapter 7, "Determining Death," includes material from "Pragmatism and the Determination of Death" in *Pragmatic Bioethics*, 2d ed., ed. Glenn McGee (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003). Some paragraphs of chapters 1 and 6 are adapted from *Splitting the Difference: Compromise and Integrity in Ethics and Politics* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1990) and are reprinted with permission of the University Press of Kansas. Parts of chapters 5 and 6 appeared in a different form in "Between Subway and Spaceship: Practical Ethics at the Outset of the Twenty-first Century," *Hastings Center Report* 31, no. 4 (July-August 2001): 24–31.

Contents

Introduction

In a passage worth quoting in full, William James tells of a student who drew a sharp line between the world of philosophy and that of the street.

> The two were supposed, he said, to have so little to do with each other, that you could not possibly occupy your mind with them at the same time. The world of concrete personal experiences to which the street belongs is multitudinous beyond imagination, tangled, muddy, painful and perplexed. The world to which your philosophy-professor introduces you is simple, clean, and noble. The contradictions of real life are absent from it. Its architecture is classic. Principles of reason trace its outlines, logical necessities cement its parts. Purity and dignity are what it most expresses. It is a kind of marble temple shining on a hill.[1]

Variations of this distinction have long been a part of philosophy. From Plato to Descartes to the present day, philosophers often seek refuge from the multiplicity, pain, and confusion of the street in rarefied temples of their own making.

The publication in 1859 of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* challenged this understanding of philosophy. First, the idea of evolution by natural selection made it more difficult to draw a hard and fast line between human beings and (other) animals. This posed problems for more ethereal conceptions of the human mind and of human knowledge. Second, the world could no longer be conceived as fixed or immutable; it was constantly, if slowly, changing due to the blind force of evolution by natural selection. This, too, raised serious difficulties for traditional approaches to knowledge and reality. Finally, the

likelihood that our existence is a chance outcome of various contingencies cast doubt on "marble temple" answers to questions of ethics, religion, and life's meaning.

The American philosophers Charles S. Peirce (1839–1914), William James (1842–1910), and John Dewey (1859–1952) were among the first to take this challenge seriously and to develop a conception of philosophy to accommodate it. It came to be called pragmatism (from the Greek word for action) and Peirce, James, and Dewey are generally regarded as the three classic pragmatists. Peirce criticized radical skepticism and the idea that we acquire knowledge of the world as individuals rather than as members of communities. While Peirce focused on language, logic, and science, James extended pragmatism to questions of everyday life, including free will, ethics, and religious belief. An engaging writer and lecturer, James attracted a wide audience. Dewey's pragmatism, which he preferred to call "instrumentalism," combined Peirce's interest in logic and science with James's larger humanistic concerns, especially with respect to education and democracy. Dewey's direct involvement in education and his regular contributions to magazines and newspapers on social issues made him, like James, a "public philosopher."[2]

Peirce, James, and Dewey agreed that the asker of philosophical questions is not a pure subject of consciousness or intellect, but rather one of a number of language-using, higher animals seeking meaningful survival in a complex and occasionally hazardous world. Though united in their opposition to philosophy as "a kind of marble temple shining on a hill," they differed among themselves about the exact nature and scope of pragmatism. In fact Peirce, who coined the term 'pragmatism' in the 1870s, was so offended by James's use of it in 1898 that seven years later he renamed his version "pragmaticism," which, he explained, "is ugly enough to be safe from kidnappers."[3]

Louis Menand's *The Metaphysical Club* is a recent social history of classical pragmatism. The title of the chapter on philosophy—"Pragmatisms"—neatly reflects the differences among Peirce, James, and Dewey.[4] The differences are emphasized, too, by Richard J. Bernstein who writes, "I do not think there is any 'essence' to pragmatism—or even a set of sharply defined commitments or propositions that all so-called pragmatists share."[5] Bernstein warns against what he calls "the danger of nostalgia and sentimentality" among philosophers who regard the works of Peirce, James, and Dewey as definitive of pragmatism. "We may continue to draw inspiration from the classic pragmatists," he adds, "but I cannot think

of a more unpragmatic attitude than focusing exclusively on the past rather than on the present and the future. We must also take seriously our commitment to pluralism—even a pluralism in what is appropriated from the pragmatic legacy."[6] In so doing, Bernstein is recommending, in the spirit of James, that pragmatism remain inclusive and receptive to change rather than limited to those who pledge allegiance to the letter of its founding fathers. This, in turn, permits us to acknowledge as pragmatists philosophers like Richard Rorty, who combine the insights and spirit of classical pragmatism with advances in contemporary philosophy of language.

Like Rorty, I believe the linguistic turn—"the switch from talking about consciousness and experience [as did James and Dewey] to talking about language"—is "an instance of genuine philosophical progress."[7] Insights into the relationship between words and the world developed by the twentieth-century Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein allow us to reformulate and defend the insights of the classical pragmatists in new and more convincing ways. I like to think Peirce, James, and Dewey would, as pragmatists, welcome this development.

If my approach differs from the letter of the classical pragmatists, however, it shares an important aspect—the *pragmatic temperament*. The pragmatic temperament refuses to accept the sharp line between thought and action assumed by William James's student. The worlds of the philosophy classroom and the street, the student supposed, were so different that "you could not occupy your mind with them at the same time." A pragmatic temperament, however, acknowledges that *genuine* philosophical questions are not a matter of intellect alone. They are raised by the whole person and involve both the street ("multitudinous beyond imagination, tangled, muddy, painful and perplexed") and the classroom. Action without thought, to adapt a phrase from Kant, is *blind*; thought without action is *empty*. If our minds cannot simultaneously occupy the worlds of the street and the classroom when we're doing philosophy, they must at least enact a dialogue between them. Philosophical questions worth asking must be responsive to the demands of both, as must our answers to them.

Chapter 1, "Agent and Spectator," identifies five standard philosophical questions and contrasts the standard intellectualist (Platonic/Cartesian) approach to them with one that is more practical or agent-centered. Chapter 2 then explains and draws on a number of Wittgensteinian insights and arguments to show that the presuppositions of the Cartesian tradition cannot be reconciled with what we now know about

the relationships between language, thought, and action. Chapter 3 illustrates this more practical or agent-centered approach as it applies to philosophical questions of knowledge and reality. Chapter 4 does the same for questions of mind and will. In chapter 5 I turn to the origins of ethics and the nature of ethical reasoning and justification. The conception of ethics developed in this chapter is extended in chapter 6, "Democratic Pluralism," to the fact of rationally irreconcilable moral conflict and the possibility of integrity-preserving compromise. Chapter 7 then draws on all the preceding chapters to address a new moral/metaphysical question: determining, in the light of contemporary medical technology, when a person is dead. This new problem provides an illuminating illustration of the approach to philosophical questions that is the subject of the entire book. The book concludes, in chapter 8, with an account of how life can be meaningful in the face of mortality, with or without belief in God and the supernatural.

NOTES

1. William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, in *William James: Writings, 1902–1919*, ed. Bruce Kuklick (New York: Library of America, 1992), 495.

2. George Cotkin, *William James: Public Philosopher* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).

3. Charles S. Peirce, "What Pragmatism Is," in *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, vol. 2 (1893–1913), ed. the Peirce Edition Project (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 335.

4. Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2001), 337–75.

5. Richard J. Bernstein, "American Pragmatism: The Conflict of Narratives," in *Rorty and Pragmatism: The Philosopher Responds to His Critics*, ed. Herman J. Saatkamp, Jr. (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1995), 61.

6. Bernstein, "American Pragmatism," 66.

7. Richard Rorty, "Response to Thelma Lavine," in *Rorty and Pragmatism: The Philosopher Responds to His Critics*, ed. Herman J. Saatkamp, Jr. (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1995), 53. Richard Rorty, ed., *The Linguistic Turn*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

Chapter 1

Agent and Spectator

> What *you* want is a philosophy that will not only exercise your powers of intellectual abstraction, but that will make some positive connexion with this actual world of finite human lives.
>
> —Williams James, *Pragmatism*

In the early 1970s advances in medical knowledge and technology were creating new ethical problems for doctors and nurses. Physicians were so troubled by debates over "pulling the plug," defining death, and related issues they sometimes turned to philosophers and theologians for help.

My colleague Bruce Miller was among the first academic philosophers invited to explore these questions with medical students and faculty. At first, many physicians were skeptical. How could a discipline as abstract and theoretical as philosophy throw light on the practical concerns of medicine? Miller was aware of these doubts. A hospital case conference, he realized, was no place for a scholarly account of the fine points of Kant's ethical theory. Yet by doing his homework and tailoring his remarks to the concrete reality of medical practice, he made useful suggestions and developed credibility with physicians.

Once, however, during a brown bag case conference at a local hospital, someone with an avocational interest in philosophy made a very obscure comment. When asked what he meant by it and what difference it made to the case under discussion, the person was incredulous: "You're expecting me, *as a philosopher*, to come down to earth?"

"When I heard that," Miller tells me, "I nearly choked on my sandwich." Despite having taken great care in connecting his philosophical