Genealogical Pragmatism
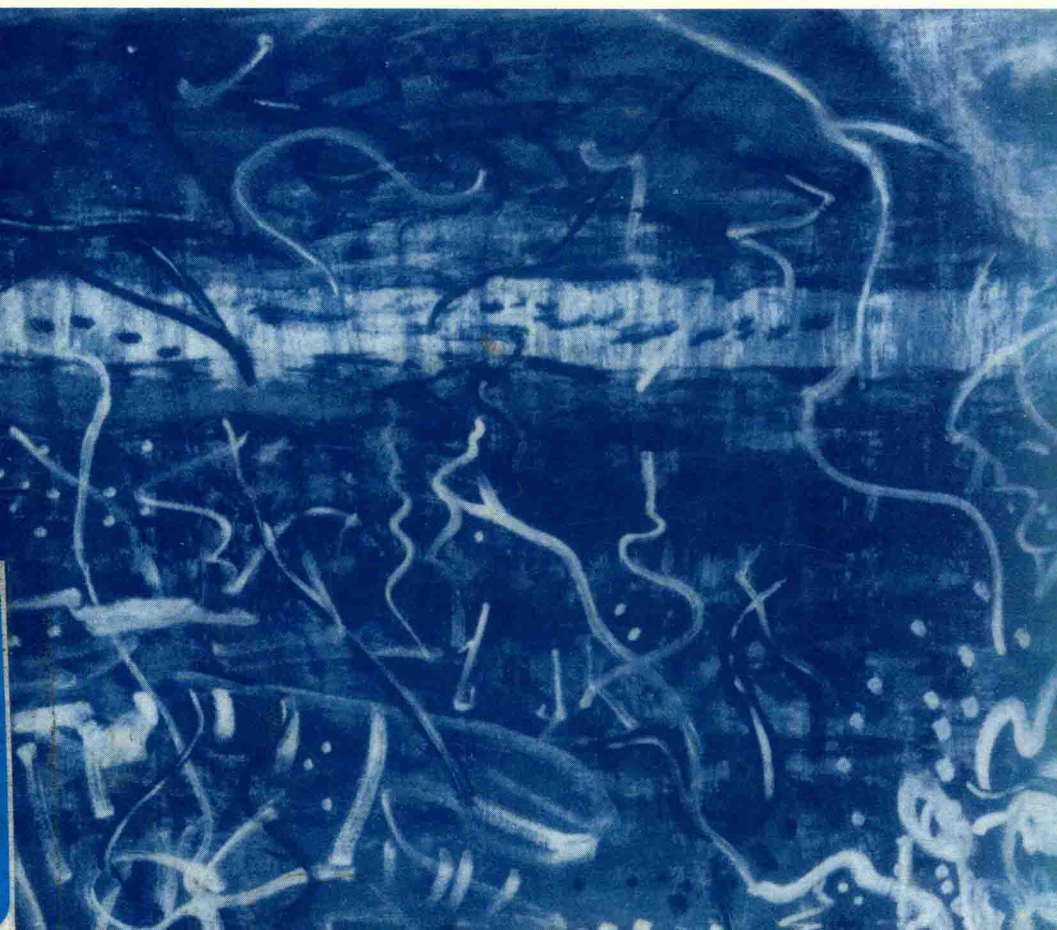
PHILOSOPHY, EXPERIENCE, and COMMUNITY

John J. Stuhr

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For Jennifer and Robert

I am a child, I last a while
You can't conceive of the pleasure in my smile

— Neil Young

There may be always a time of innocence.
There is never a place. Or if there is not time,
If it is not a thing of time, nor of place,

Existing in the idea of it, alone,
In the sense against calamity, it is not
Less real. For the oldest and coldest philosopher,

There is or may be a time of innocence
As pure principle. Its nature is its end,
That it should be, and yet not be, a thing

That pinches the pity of the pitiful man,
Like a book at evening beautiful but untrue,
Like a book on rising beautiful and true.

— Wallace Stevens

Good things change and vanish not only with changes in the
environing medium but with changes in ourselves.

— John Dewey

Preface

Can a book have a preface? Can it, unlike life and thought, begin before its start? And, is its start really a beginning? Isn't it always a rebeginning, a redirection, a reconstruction?

Pragmatism is a reconstruction. It reconstructs philosophy, experience, and community. This reconstruction is piecemeal, multiperspectival, uncertain, and always unfinished. This book seeks to analyze and advance this reconstruction.

As reconstruction, pragmatism's intellectual orientation is intrinsically critical and its subject-matter is irreducibly moral. As criticism, pragmatism faces forward and identifies itself as the future of philosophy. It is instrumental: a criticism of the present on behalf of possibilities for the future inherent in the present; an inquiry into today in the service of more enduring and extensive values tomorrow. At the same time, as criticism, pragmatism also faces backward and presents itself as the history of the future of philosophy. It is genealogical: a history of the present on behalf of future possibilities that are not inherent or imagined in this present; a detection of the past and its effects in a struggle against today's supposedly more enduring and extensive values.

As criticism both instrumental and genealogical, pragmatism must also face the present, and face itself in the present's possibilities and limitations, creations and deformations, empowerments and subjugations. It is only through this process that pragmatism becomes fully instrumental—intelligence directed at the problems of men and women rather than the problems of philosophers—and genuinely genealogical—a destabilization of the present rather than the chewing of historic cud long ago reduced to woody fiber. In the phrase of John Dewey, this sort of pragmatism is an "intellectual disrobing"—a critical inspection at times of some of the intellectual habits that clothe us as members of a particular culture at a particular time and particular place.

This activity constitutes a major break from most traditional philosophy and from business as usual in contemporary philosophy. Pragmatism does not even attempt to solve the problems of these philosophies. Instead, studying both their ends and the means by which they have cloaked these ends in their self-proclaimed problems, methods, and systems, it localizes and abandons these

philosophies. This is revolutionary, but nothing brand-new: Dewey called it a return to the Socratic view of philosophy as moral search for wisdom to guide life.

Except in name, perhaps, this pragmatic view of philosophy may not appeal to many persons. It is not likely to become the philosophy of persons characterized by Emerson as meek young scholars growing up in libraries. It is unlikely to satisfy the individuals labeled by William James as sick-souls with fundamentalist demands, other-worldly longings, and absolutist temperaments. Nor is it likely to attract the professional philosophers whom Dewey identified as skilled technicians of the merely abstract and the purely formal, defeatists without the courage to recover a philosophy or theory relevant to actual life or practice. Finally, it will find few customers today among the culture industry's theory producers and consumers who demand something more entertaining, more shocking or confrontational, and less demanding in day-to-day practice.

As a result, pragmatism may not turn out to be the philosophy, or even the professional philosophy, of the future, as James once predicted. However, as Dewey often pointed out, while it is crucial that this pragmatic reconstruction of philosophy, experience, and community—itself just one aspect of a much-needed larger reconstruction of social practices, institutions, and associations—supplies the future work of intelligence, it is not important from the standpoint of culture that it do so in the name of philosophy. Of course, as Dewey added, it may be vital to the self-esteem and popular respect of philosophers that this work be undertaken in the name of philosophy. When philosophers fail to address in the name of philosophy the reconstruction of philosophy, experience, and community, their failure does not render their work or their culture post-philosophical. Instead, their efforts simply ensure that philosophies and their cultures remain pre-pragmatic. Today we do not live after pragmatism; with imagination, however, we may live before it.

In any event, imagination by itself is not enough. Intellect and will are required also. The pragmatic reconstruction of philosophy, experience, and community must be understood, extended, and acted on. In part, this requires a grasp of its relations to other philosophies and larger cultural arrangements in, and through, which philosophies operate. Accordingly, the five chapters that form the first part of this book begin to address this complex of issues. In "The Humanities, Inc.," I examine the spread of a business culture and corporate mentality in America, the increasing interpenetration of business, government, and education, and the impact of these developments on the self-understanding, mission, and critical possibilities in philosophy and the humanities. I argue that the available critical responses to these developments are few and inadequate, and that philosophy increasingly confronts a postcritical containment within universities and a wider system of corporate/university/government knowledge

production. In this situation, philosophy substantially has produced its own trivialization and contributed to its own marginalization. In "Do American Philosophers Exist?: Visions of American Philosophy and Culture," I contrast this development to the public mission and pragmatic self-understanding of philosophy present in classical American philosophy. This philosophical tradition, I suggest, provides a basis for rethinking philosophy, its vision and its stance toward different and opposed visions, and its institutional place in the academy. In "Re-Visioning Philosophy and the Organization of Knowledges," I explore these possibilities and outline broad intellectual and institutional changes that their realization would require. Above all, this re-visioned philosophy would be centrally a pragmatic philosophy. In "Pragmatism versus Fundamentalism," I set forth the outline of this philosophy, and identify its pragmatic character in terms of its irreducible commitments to practice, purpose, and pluralism—a pluralism with concrete implications for teaching, research, and educational administration. The genealogical character and critical aims of this pragmatism share much with many philosophies often classified (and often undertheorized) as postmodern. In "The Idols of the Twilight: Pragmatism and Postmodernism," I interpret and assess some of their differences and similarities, always attempting to sound pragmatism's strengths and weaknesses in the twilight of other, once-dominant intellectual traditions and in the ever more total eclipse of criticism. (This chapter, with chapters 9, 13, and 15, occupies a central position in my view of genealogical pragmatism.)

Pragmatism's future as effective criticism is tied to its capacity to reconstruct experience. In the five chapters of the second part of the book, I turn to this issue. Above all, pragmatism is a reconstructive theory of experience. Because this theory is radical and novel, it often has been misunderstood and neglected by both its friends and enemies, old and new. Today its recovery requires an analysis of these mistakes—mistakes that are common both to idealist dreams of language, narrative, and self, and to naturalist dreams of matter and independent reality. Thus, in "Rorty as Elvis: Dewey's Reconstruction of Metaphysics," I critically contrast Richard Rorty's linguistic "neopragmatism" with Dewey's experiential pragmatism. In "Experience and the Adoration of Matter: Santayana's Unnatural Naturalism," I carefully distinguish this pragmatism from George Santayana's naturalism, realism, and materialism (as well as from all versions of nonnaturalism, antirealism, and idealism). Finally, in "Socrates and Radical Empiricism," I demonstrate how this radically empiricist and relational account of experience allows pragmatists to reply successfully to a familiar line of Socratic questioning by identifying and rejecting its metaphysical assumptions. This view of experience, moreover, goes hand in hand with a pragmatic account of inquiry and makes possible an experiential ethics. This ethics is a temporal ethics, and it requires courage. In "Chronophobia," I trace the ways in which fear of time

undercuts this courage through its demand for epistemological, metaphysical and, above all, moral order. Philosophies that make this demand fail to take time seriously. In "Taking Time Seriously," I develop a pragmatic, experiential account of time and a pragmatic, temporal account of experience, and outline some of its moral and political implications.

The politics of a genealogical pragmatism is a politics of community, and its reconstruction of experience is one with its reconstruction of community. In the book's third part, I evaluate and extend pragmatism's reconstructive account of community in three ways: (1) by examining the successes and tracing the failures of this account as it is set forth in the work of Peirce, James, Royce, Santayana, Dewey, and Mead; (2) by critically comparing its view of individualism to different views in other philosophical traditions such as personalism, naturalism, and postmodernism; and, (3) by linking this account of community to contemporary political issues and proposals, and to actual economic and educational conditions that are prerequisites for the existence of community. Thus, in "Theory, Practice, and Community in Peirce's Normative Science," I investigate, criticize, and rework the practical implications for community of Peirce's account of the normative sciences of logic, ethics, and aesthetics. In "Bodies, Selves, and Individuals: Personalism and Pragmatism," I contrast personalist and pragmatist accounts of persons, demonstrating the reciprocal relationship in pragmatism between the development of individuality and community. I extend this analysis in "Education and the Cultural Frontier: Community, Identity, and Difference" through a critical interpretation of Royce's account of the Great Community, an articulation of an alternative account of community that stresses difference rather than identity among individuals, and an analysis of the role of education in the creation of this community. Some of the conditions upon which the creation of this sort of community depends are economic conditions. In "Community, Economic Growth, and Family Income: It's the Community, Stupid!," I present economic data in order to demonstrate the increasing erosion of these conditions in America. In turn, I argue that the pragmatic notion of community makes possible a moral critique of these conditions and justifies a moral demand for sweeping change. The possibility of just this sort of change lies at the heart of pragmatism's meliorism. In the final chapter, "Persons, Pluralism, and Death: Toward a Disillusioned Pragmatism," I analyze this meliorism and uncover its presuppositions about the nature of the individual, the capacity of the individual to live strenuously on behalf of goals and values that are not merely individual, and the moral significance of death. It is this critical recognition of unreconstructed personal death that must render pragmatism's reconstructive account of community disillusioned: In community there may be salvation, but there surely will be death. As disillusioned reconstruction, pragmatism is a genealogical philosophy, a philosophy dedicated to children.

Acknowledgments

Contents

III. Community

I

Philosophy

1

The Humanities, Inc.

Reason, Persuasion, and the Business Mind

Many philosophers today proclaim that the philosophy of the future—by which they usually mean just their own views at present—must be radically different from the philosophies of the past. Like many other scholars in the humanities, these philosophers have become impatient with much philosophy itself. They now make their livings, ironically, by professing over and over that we should stop doing philosophy, by offering us therapies for philosophy and the urge to philosophize, and by articulating alternatives to most or all existing philosophy. For example, Richard Rorty, one of the best known and most influential of these writers, urges us to complete a "rejection of metaphilosophical scientism." He explains: "That is, we should let the debate between those who see contemporary democratic societies as hopeless and those who see them as our only hope, be conducted in terms of the actual problems now being faced by those societies. . . . it would be well for us to debate political topics explicitly, rather than using Aesopian philosophical language."[1]

What follows from this advice? What are its implications? For his part, Rorty foresees a "post-Philosophical" future. From this perspective, he thinks, we may recognize at last that theoretical reflection is not likely to help us and that twentieth century theory (whether Marxism, analytical philosophy, or postmodernism) has not clarified actual problems or developed conceptual instruments superior to those made available to us by American pragmatists such as James and Dewey at the beginning of this century. This enables us, Rorty continues, to grasp that we are just where our grandfathers and grandmothers suspected we were: in the midst of a struggle for power between

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1. Richard Rorty, "Philosophy as Science, as Metaphor, and as Politics," *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 2 (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 25.

those who possess it and those who are suffering from it, terrorized by it, want it, and, I might add, for the most part do not have the luxury of theorizing about it. We would see, Rorty concludes, that the familiar vocabulary of social democratic politics probably does not require today any further sophistication, at least by philosophers.

This conclusion is both mistaken and dangerous. As he frequently does, Rorty here has drawn the wrong conclusions from his own analysis. Rorty's sound advice to debate political topics explicitly does not imply that concerned philosophical theorists should cease and desist, becoming, in his own terms, content post-philosophical "ironists" or "postmodern bourgeois liberals." Instead, Rorty's advice implies—indeed contains—a new set of marching orders that should transform theory in philosophy and across the humanities. The theory and the vocabulary of social democratic politics—here Rorty is simply mistaken, I think—*does* require further sophistication and a more fully self-critical, self-reflexive, self-aware character.

This transformation is necessary and timely because today the vocabulary of social democratic politics really is being stripped of its critical power—and stripped of its power in a manner not apparent to our grandfathers and grandmothers. Philosophers today face no more important problem.

I want to develop this claim—that the vocabulary of democratic politics is being stripped of its critical power—by means of three initial observations. I find all three observations terribly disturbing. The first comes from Rorty, again. Calling himself a pragmatist and berating philosophers who still cling to foundational, absolutist, realist, or scientistic notions of truth, Rorty succinctly states that "for us [pragmatists] 'rational' merely means 'persuasive,' 'irrational' can only mean 'invoking force.'"[2] To hold a rational view, as pragmatists realize, according to Rorty, is simply to hold a view that is persuasive.

The second observation comes from the well-known post-structuralist French philosopher Michel Foucault. Responding to an interviewer who suggested that his genealogical studies of systems of discourses and webs of power undermined rationality—and even the possibility of rationality—in human history, Foucault replied that no particular, given form of rationality constitutes reason and, thus, that no transformation from one form of rationality to another constitutes a collapse of reason or the end of reason. Because different "forms of rationality are created endlessly," Foucault concluded

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2. Richard Rorty, "Cosmopolitanism without Emancipation: A Response to Jean-Franois Lyotard," *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1 (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 220.