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Vulgar Rortyism

by [Susan Haack](#)

Review of *Pragmatism: A Reader*, edited by Louis Menand

How quickly the visions of genius become the canned goods of intellectuals.

—Saul Bellow

Perhaps you know the old joke about the soldiers passing a message down the line— first man to second, “send reinforcements, we’re going to advance”; next-to-last man to last, “send three-and-fourpence, we’re going to a dance.” Well, the history of pragmatism is like that—only more so.

C. S. Peirce, working scientist, pioneer of modern logic, and founder of pragmatism, envisaged a reformed, scientific philosophy which would use “the most rational methods it can devise, for finding out the little that can as yet be found out about the universe of mind and matter from those observations which every person can make in every hour of his waking life.” His philosophy was informed by the pragmatic maxim, identifying the meaning of a concept with “the conceivable practical consequences,—that is, the consequences for deliberate, self-controlled conduct,—of the affirmation or denial of the concept.” Peircean pragmatism is “prope-positivism,” but, unlike the narrower positivism of Auguste Comte, “instead of merely jeering at metaphysics, ... extracts from it a precious essence.”

Richard Rorty, most influential of contemporary self-styled neo-pragmatists, proposes a revolutionary shift in which the metaphysical and epistemological territory at the traditional center of philosophy is abandoned and not re-occupied; the old preoccupation with method and argument is given up as we acknowledge that “there are no constraints on inquiry save conversational ones”; and philosophy disassociates itself from science and remakes itself as a genre of literature.

Peirce urged that philosophy be undertaken with the “scientific attitude,” from the “Will to Learn,” a genuine desire to discover the truth—which “is so ... whether you or I or anybody thinks it is so or not.” But Rorty tells us he does “not have much use for notions like ... ‘objective truth’”; to call a statement true “is just to give it a rhetorical pat on the back.” It would take serious inquiry to discover what is conducive to the interests of society, Peirce points out, declaring himself one of “that class of scalawags who purpose ... to look the truth in the face, whether doing so be conducive to the interests of society or not.” But Rorty tells us that pragmatists see philosophy as “*in the service* of democratic politics.” Peirce wanted to “rescue the good ship Philosophy for the service of Science from the hands of the lawless rovers of the sea of literature.” But Rorty tells us that “philosophy is best seen as a kind of writing.”

Does Louis Menand, editor of the new anthology *Pragmatism: A Reader*, try to help us understand how this extraordinary transmutation of pragmatism came about, or attempt a sober assessment of

the old message and the new?[1] Hardly. *His* purpose is to promote a Rortyesque neo-pragmatism.

Menand's "pragmatism" is "an effort to unhitch human beings from what pragmatists regard as a useless structure of bad abstractions"; the idea that "what people believe to be true is just what they think it is good to believe to be true"; that "the whole force of a philosophical account of anything ... lies in the advertised [*sic*] consequences of accepting it"; that "if we do what is right, the metaphysics will take care of themselves." Rortyism is vulgar pragmatism; this is vulgar Rortyism.

Rorty dismisses Peirce as having merely given pragmatism its name. Menand offers his readers, for all the world as if it were the full authoritative story, a slanted history of a Rortyesque "pragmatism" founded by William James and Oliver Wendell Holmes, continued by John Dewey and George Herbert Mead, and gloriously revived by Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.

But when James introduced pragmatism to the philosophical world in 1898, he described it as "the principle of Peirce," first enunciated "at Cambridge, in the early 70's." So Menand discounts both Peirce's and James's direct testimony: "James was, characteristically, doing a favor for a friend"; Peirce, already largely forgotten in the philosophical world, deceived himself about his own role in hopes of jumping on the pragmatist bandwagon James had set rolling. In fact, Menand assures us, the evidence that there even *was* a Metaphysical Club in Cambridge—where Peirce claimed he introduced the key ideas of pragmatism—"is thin."

On the contrary, the evidence is that Peirce's recollection was quite accurate.[2] Pointless nitpicking, Menand would reply; for "James and Holmes (and ... Chauncey Wright and Nicholas St. John Green ...) had already formulated what is distinctively pragmatic in their views before 1872. Peirce may have given James the name, but he could not have given him the idea." Menand has, however, conveniently omitted from his list of "classic pragmatist essays" Peirce's articles in *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* for 1868–9, which Richard J. Bernstein rightly describes as the first articulation of the key anti-foundationalist themes of the pragmatist tradition.

And Menand's grip on "the idea" of pragmatism is feeble at best. Sometimes he runs pragmatism together with James's doctrine of the Will to Believe. But both Peirce and Dewey repudiated this doctrine, and James himself, in a letter to Horace Kallen, struggled to distinguish it from pragmatism. Nor, apparently, is Menand aware of the differences between Peirce's logical, realist conception of pragmatism and James's more psychological, nominalist conception—nor of James's uncomprehending and disturbingly uncharitable reaction to Peirce's 1903 Harvard lectures articulating *Pragmatism as a Principle and Method of Right Thinking*.

After cutting Peirce out of the pragmatist family portrait, Menand cheerfully caricatures James and Dewey as Rorty's philosophical ancestors—fudging James's pluralistic metaphysics into a trendy cultural pluralism, for example, and Dewey's concept of experience into culture. Who would dream, from Menand's account, of James's assurance that "pragmatism has no objection ... to ... abstractions, so long as ... they actually carry you somewhere," and that "when ... we give up the doctrine of objective certitude, we do not thereby give up the quest or hope of truth itself"? Who would guess that Dewey, noting how deeply social Peirce's theory of inquiry was, had described Peirce as "more of a pragmatist than James"?

Yes, but is this a good anthology with an infuriating introduction, you will be asking, or what? In brief, "what." Surprisingly, Menand includes quite a lot of Peirce—two pages, even, from those 1868–9 papers criticizing the Cartesian philosophy. But his selections are too scrappy to give readers much sense of that remarkable mind. Mead is here, and Hilary Putnam, and the paper of Bernstein's cited earlier. But there is nothing from Ramsey, C. I. Lewis, White, Quine, Goodman, Rescher—too analytic, perhaps; nothing from Sidney Hook; nothing from Louise Rosenblatt's transactional/triadic theory of reading, with its themes from Dewey and Peirce.

Even from the perspective of his own skewed history of pragmatism, Menand doesn't do a good job. He includes more from Peirce than from Holmes, and nothing from Holmes indicative of anything like Peirce's philosophical horsepower; nothing from Wright or Green; nothing from F. C. S. Schiller—whom Bertrand Russell described as the “literary protagonist of pragmatism,” and who misread James in some of the same ways as Rorty; nothing from Kallen, Alain Locke or Randolph Bourne, to whom Menand credits the shift from metaphysical to cultural pluralism; a long paper of Rorty's on Jacques Derrida (where the only connection with classical pragmatism is that James's name is dropped once, amid scores of others), but nothing from Rorty's Introduction to *Consequences of Pragmatism*, nor anything from Rorty after 1983. Nor, despite Rorty's breezy observation that “it suits my purposes to define pragmatism as the attempt to do something Davidson approves of,” is there anything from Donald Davidson. (And a reader wanting to fill such gaps will not find Menand's bibliography much help.)

The priority is to make room for “pragmatist” writings from other disciplines: e.g., Richard Poirier reminiscing about “Hum. 6” at Amherst College; Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels urging the impossibility of a theory of literary interpretation; Richard Posner on legal “pragmatism”—including this gem: “If there is no objective truth, . . . this makes it all the more important to maintain the conditions necessary for the unforced inquiry required to challenge and defeat all those false claims to have found the truth”; Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob seeking “a philosophical grounding compatible with” their advocacy of “the democratic practice of history.” Perhaps this bit of revisionary philosophy of history—quite a come-down from Dewey's long-winded but sometimes subtle and savvy reflections on democracy earlier in the book—is included by way of justification for Menand's revisionary history of philosophy.

Presumably, Menand's selections were made in the spirit of his fulsome admiration for Rorty's self-transformation from professional philosopher to “intellectual,” no longer relying on a paradigm but on his genius. The fuzziness of Rorty's contrast of “pragmatism” versus “professional philosophy” serves Menand well. Though the range of Peirce's thought, as well as its depth, was enormously greater than Rorty's, and Peirce's brief career at Johns Hopkins ended in disaster, he can be dismissed—his pragmatism became “quite technical.” Like Rorty, Menand can't, or won't, distinguish between necessary, useful technicality, and jargon or pseudo-mathematics substituting for genuine rigor; nor between the laudable goal of broadening philosophy professors' intellectual horizons beyond the narrow confines of the *Journal of Philosophy*, and the intoxicating illusion that “I don't see why we need/how we can have a theory of ——” constitutes a real contribution to our understanding of ——.

The “pragmatism” Menand admires is not only anti-philosophical; it is also, though more covertly, profoundly anti-intellectual. Repudiating the idea that beliefs are objectively true or false, evidence objectively better or worse, Rortyism induces a factitious despair of the possibility of real inquiry of any kind, misprizes the truths that literature can teach us, and undermines the hope of knowing what would truly improve the condition of society.

The cover design—a book, largely destroyed, with “PRAGMATISM” printed on the remains—makes this covert anti-intellectualism clearer than Menand is willing to do. He seems pleased that “pragmatism . . . suggest[s] that the real work of the world is being done somewhere other than in philosophy departments”; but leaves it conveniently unclear where he thinks that real work *is* being done—in departments of literature, history, etc.? in the pages of the *TLS*, *The New York Review of Books*, and such? in the real world?

Rorty, in Menand's judgment, “is a far more exciting writer than Dewey, and his work has served for many people as a model for the kind of wide-ranging engagement with art, ideas, and public affairs that pragmatism might make possible.” Perhaps unaware of Mussolini's enthusiasm for a “pragmatism” subordinating intellectual life to politics, Menand seems to take for granted that such

engagement would inevitably be benign.

And, while his biographical notes on Dewey mention Dewey's work with Jane Addams's settlement house, in the founding of the ACLU, on the commission to investigate Stalin's charges against Trotsky, his notes on Rorty mention only academic books and honors; as do his notes on Cornel West, who, however, tells us that "prophetic pragmatists" like himself are different from those "traditional intellectuals ... comfortably nested in the academy." The effect—presumably unintended, and for all I know quite unfair—will surely be to put some readers in mind of James's shrewd words about the "nerveless sentimentalist and dreamer, who spends his life in a weltering sea of sensibility and emotion, but who never does a manly concrete deed."

But I'm not worried about *those* readers, the ones with the discernment and determination to winnow out the good stuff from the rest. Though hoping against hope that Peirce was wrong that "in the matter of ideas the public prefer the cheap and nasty," I worry about the readers, especially the students, who will naïvely suppose that Menand has fairly represented what is worthwhile in the tradition of classical pragmatism—and conclude that that tradition is worthless, or, even worse, that vulgar Rortyism *is* what we should learn from it. It's a shame.

Notes

[Go to the top of the document.](#)

1. *Pragmatism: A Reader*, edited by Louis Menand; Vintage, 524 pages, \$16. [Go back to the text.](#)
2. See Max H. Fisch's "Was There a Metaphysical Club in Cambridge?" in *Studies in the Philosophy of Charles Sanders Peirce, Second Series* (1964). [Go back to the text.](#)
3. For James's reaction, see Patricia Ann Turrisi's edition of the lectures (1997). [Go back to the text.](#)

Susan Haack is the author, most recently, of *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate: Unfashionable Essays* (Chicago).

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