

Pragmatism as the American Philosophy

Isaac Torcellini

Pragmatism can be described as homegrown in America. The United States is a distinctly Western country, marked by European influence. Pragmatism, too, has elements of European thought. Nevertheless, the philosophy of pragmatism has made American politics markedly different than European politics. Pragmatism is influenced by European thought, but nevertheless can rightfully call itself a homegrown philosophy. What, then, makes pragmatism a distinctly American philosophy? At some level, the American experience has made it distinct. The *ethos* of cultural myth and an optimistic outlook characterize the transformation of contemporary European philosophy to the distinctly American pragmatism.

The Roots of the American Experience and its *Ethos*

America, as a collection of colonies of Europe, had an early philosophy that was markedly Western, yet distinct in an overarching optimistic attitude. Rather than the tradesman or an academic, America founds its model of the virtuous citizen in the yeoman farmer *philosophe*, who was independent of external restraints and cultivated nature by himself. A. J. Beitzinger, in *A History of American Political Thought*, notes that the model of a yeoman farmer *philosophe*, such as Thomas Jefferson, marks early American thought as distinct from European counterparts.¹ In line with the European tradition, Jefferson rested his views of society upon the empiricist thought of Bacon and Locke. Through contractual consent, laws receive their justification.² Beitzinger expounds upon Jefferson's thought, however, with two distinctives which differentiate it from its comparable European thought. First, Jeffersonian thought embodies the principle of contract theory with historical mythos.³ As a disciple of empiricism, Jefferson wished to avoid universal abstractions regarding first principles and natural law. These principles were only known through tangible and concrete society, not through speculation. Hence, rather than abstract reason, the history that articulated the English birthright made a right properly just. By extension, America had a right to create its own government because its people inherited English histories and customs.⁴ Second, Jeffersonian thought embodied an optimism for societal success.⁵ European empiricism and contract theory, especially in the thought of Hume and Hobbs, began with despair and ended with despair; the solutions were provisional, not truly remedial. For Jefferson, however, the development of the contract allowed humanity to pursue "happiness."⁶ The contract was seen as the beginning of human advancement and flourishing.

Amid a shift from agriculture to industry, the American philosophy shifted from optimistic contract theory to pragmatism. The model of the yeoman farmer could only last as long as farming

¹ A. J. Beitzinger, *A History of American Political Thought* (New York: Dodd, Mead, & Company, Inc., 1972), 267, 271, 283.

² Beitzinger, 267-268, 270, 279.

³ Beitzinger, 284-285.

⁴ Beitzinger, 284.

⁵ Beitzinger, 285.

⁶ Beitzinger, 283.

marked the American economic landscape. Beitzinger notes, “Just as Jefferson is the philosopher of American democracy in its rural phase, so Dewey is the philosopher of its industrial phase.”⁷ The rise of technology as the political question indicates an underlying philosophical shift. George Grant interprets this as the shift towards contemporary philosophy. Technology weds “*techne*” and “*logos*” into one, reflective of Kant’s assertion that “the mind makes the object.”⁸ While the yeoman farmer was able to supply himself independently, the post-Jefferson industrial American was set to live in a society of constructed, rather than contractual, *mores*. Nevertheless, the *ethos* of myth and optimism remained.

Pragmatism as a Distinctly American Philosophy

The philosophy of Emmanuel Kant marks the foundation for contemporary thought; the imposition of the American *ethos* then developed this into a distinctly American philosophy. On one hand, contemporary philosophy cannot be understood without the influence of Kant. On the other hand, American philosophy is distinct from European philosophy, such that those influenced by Kant or claiming the tradition of Kant will still find themselves purporting a distinctively American philosophy. Such is the difficulty with the pragmatism of William James and John Dewey, and the ensuing positivism of John Rawls. Kant’s thought can be marked by two pioneering principles. First, Kant separated the noumenal and phenomenal realms, thus marking all knowable reality as made by the mind.⁹ Second, since universal metaphysics had been rejected, Kant salvaged ethics by arguing that morally right action was that which was conceived of as becoming a universal principle.¹⁰ George Grant summarizes this helpfully:

The good will is the only good without restriction is both the traditional doctrine of the timeless factuality of the moral law; but also the new idea that as makers of our own laws we are called upon to realise justice progressively in history.¹¹

For Kant, the mind makes the object, but it must make it according to timeless selflessness. American thought, however, was not so quick to adopt a truly timeless and truly selfless philosophy, keeping in line with its propensity towards mythos—which is within time—and optimism—which anticipates self-success.

The philosophy of William James’s pragmatism marks the shift in American thought from contractual morality towards constructed morality. There is a fine distinction between contract and construct. Both suppose that morality is created in society by humans. They do not submit to a law inherent in metaphysical nature. Rather, both assume that law which is “natural” is derived from human interaction. The distinction between the two is found as to whether the imperatives of justice precede or follow the creation of society. In Jeffersonian thought, the contract is created once the

⁷ Beitzinger, 469-470.

⁸ George Parkin Grant, *English-Speaking Justice* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 1. Grant’s work is a sort of history. It traces the philosophic and historic principles that lead to the shape of justice in English-speaking worlds today. Notably, Grant traces how pragmatism led to modern American legal positivism.

⁹ See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 360.

¹⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. James W. Ellington, third edition (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.), 1993, 41-42.

¹¹ Grant, 27.

desires and needs of law are known by the individual. As a result, it ought to be renewed with each generation.¹² The freedom to create must *precede* the creation of the contract. In pragmatism, free will is decided to be true because of its usefulness.¹³ Rather than come freely to negotiate a contract with needed rights, pragmatism defines the freedom to act rightfully in terms of what is useful to society. The negotiation of rights no longer creates the first society, it simply develops the already existing society. For this reason, James declares that truth is “plastic.”¹⁴ The tenants of justice are not negotiated, but synthesized. Rather than draw truth from a state of nature, truth transcends nature.

Although pragmatism borrows the contemporary European assumptions about the shortcomings of metaphysics, it is distinctly American in that it embodies the myth and optimistic outlook of American life. Beitzinger quotes John Dewey saying that pragmatism “is a kind of political watered-down version of the Hegelian dialect, with its synthesis arrived at by a union of antithetical conceptions.”¹⁵ So it is. Just as Jefferson modified contractual abstractions with mythos of English history and an optimistic outlook for the future of society, so pragmatism is marked distinct by modifying Kantian thought in the same vein.

First, pragmatism’s outworking in the legal tradition is decidedly more “messy” than German though, reflecting the American principle of historical myth preceding abstraction. This is why Lon Fuller in his argument against positivism explained that positivism has become the prominent American theory.^{16,17} Customs and common law, by virtue of being “messy,” looked unscientific and irrational to the contemporary mind. Rather than demolish the law for one built upon abstraction, the legal positivists affirmed the words of the law, not the underlying metaphysical principles.¹⁸ This employs a categorical imperative by denying extralegal notions in the mind while preserving societal customs. It is pragmatic in that it creates law that can be accepted by the scientists and philosophers, yet will maintain a workable and content order within society. Hence, pragmatism birthed legal positivism. America thus drew its post-Kant legal tradition from its history, not from complete legal reconstruction according to the categorical imperative.

Second, if a “pursuit of happiness” is not an individual prerequisite for society, but rather a useful instrument for the preexisting society, then the object the minds of society make will be positive and forward-looking. James believed that,

If you follow the pragmatic method, you cannot look on any such [metaphysical] word 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.

[...]

¹² Beitzinger, 279.

¹³ William James, *Pragmatism*, ed. by Bruce Kuklick (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1981), 56.

¹⁴ James, 31-33.

¹⁵ Beitzinger, 475.

¹⁶ Lon L. Fuller, “Positivism and Fidelity to Law: A Reply to Professor Hart” in *Harvard Law Review* 71, no. 4 (1958): 630–72, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1338226>, 659. Fuller’s essay speaks mostly to the issue of legal positivism. At some level, the metaphysical philosophies (or philosophies that attempted to do away with metaphysics but ironically continued to make metaphysical assumptions) all birthed their own legal theories. Thus, the influence of national and regional philosophies can be traced to different national and regional legal methods.

¹⁷ Grant also notes that there is a certain “absence of philosophy” in the English-speaking world that leads to less uniform and less systematized moral and legal principles. Grant, 66-68.

¹⁸ Fuller, 659.

Theories thus become instruments, not answers to enigmas, in which we can rest. We don't lie back upon them, we move forward, and, on occasion, make nature over again by their aid.¹⁹

While Kant's thought drove Europeans to despair religion, metaphysics, and pursuits of truth generally, American pragmatism saw an opportunity to cultivate optimism. The independent spirit of the yeoman farmer was not fully lost in the philosophic transformation during the industrialization of America. Rather than contract with his neighbors so he could work the land, the contemporary American's task became to construct society's truth so that industry and technology could be worked. While Europe lamented that truth had no foundation, America declared truth was "plastic" and created it to its liking.

This discussion regarding the transformation of American thought would not be complete without mentioning George Grant's description of John Rawls's influence and divergence from Kant. Rawls was a positivist following in the pragmatist tradition. Grant notes that he, along with the other American philosophy, transformed Kant's thought into something distinctly American:

Rawls' difference from Kant is seen in his account of "the free and rational person."

According to Rawls, rationality is analytical instrumentality; freedom means we cannot avoid choices. This is different from Kant's account of our free moral self-legislation as participation in the very form of reason itself.²⁰

Rawls postulates that moral principles must be made in "the veil of ignorance."²¹ For him, this is akin to Kant's categorical imperative. However, as a pragmatist, he sees this imperative as creating, not sustaining, the *mores* that rule society. As an American thinker, he rests his imperative on the need to develop law for the sake of human triumph. Once again, the *ethos* of optimism pervades the Americanization of European thought.

Conclusion

American philosophy is unique; it accepts the precepts of contemporary philosophy but avoids the despair; in the process, it develops a "messy" tradition. The "messy" nature of American morals and laws is drawn from a propensity to find first principles in American mythos. Rather than strip away society to develop first principles, the American sees his history as paramount for beginning any inquiry. Americans are fond of speaking of natural rights, yet these are held with pride as American distinctives because Jefferson declared them in the Declaration of Independence. The American mythos is also characterized by innovation. America is, above all, a futuristic country. While other countries believe they are futuristic for their dogmatic and uniform adherence to proper philosophy, leading them to reconcile the wrongs of the past, America believes they are futuristic for their innovation. Rather than see truth as broken and begin afresh, America picks up its pieces and makes something it believes is better. This is the essence of pragmatism. As a contemporary philosophy, it holds that the world is made, not discovered. When America makes the world, it rests its greatness on its history and sees this as the way to an age of hope and prosperity.

¹⁹ James, 28.

²⁰ Grant, 32.

²¹ Grant, 19.

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