

KEN LOKENSGARD
Gettysburg College

NATIVE AMERICAN PRAGMATISM

A review of Scott L. Pratt, *Native Pragmatism: Rethinking the Roots of American Philosophy*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002.

In *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache* (1996), ethnolinguist Keith Basso laments that “missing from the discipline” of anthropology “is a thematized concern with the ways in which citizens of the earth constitute their landscapes and take themselves to be connected to them” (Basso, 106). He adds, “Missing is a desire to fathom the various and variable perspectives from which people *know* their landscapes, the self-invested viewpoints from which (to borrow Isak Dinesen’s felicitous image) they embrace the countryside and find the embrace returned” (Basso, 106).¹ There is missing, Basso claims, “an interest in how men and women dwell” (Basso, 106). Basso laments this absence in scholarly investigations of culture because he understands that our place in the world impacts our understanding of the world. Place, for Basso, and for the Western Apache people he writes about in *Wisdom Sits in Places*, has epistemological significance.

Philosopher Scott L. Pratt reveals the epistemological significance of place quite clearly in *Native Pragmatism: Rethinking the Roots of American Philosophy*. In so doing, he not only helps fill the scholarly hole that worries Basso, he also offers meaningful investigations of Native American cultural survival, European American colonialism, and the philosophical tradition of pragmatism. Pratt’s book thus represents a significant contribution to such diverse fields as Native American studies, American history, and philosophy. This wide significance results from Pratt’s central thesis that an indigenous philosophical “attitude,” which was relied upon by various Native American peoples to mitigate European American colonialism, influenced key European American thinkers, who, in turn, influenced the classical pragmatists (Pratt, 77). While some aspects

¹ Basso’s italics. Basso, Keith H. *Wisdom Sits In Places* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996).

of Pratt's argument are speculative, his overall thesis is convincing. In the end, Pratt succeeds in revealing striking parallels between certain indigenous ideas and what he identifies as the "central commitments" of classical pragmatism (Pratt, 12). Moreover, he does show that, at least in some instances, those commitments may have indirectly been shaped by Native American concerns.

In the writings of the classical pragmatists, primarily those of John Dewey, William James, and Charles Pierce, Pratt identifies four definitive goals or "commitments." While their philosophies differ in many ways, Pratt argues that the pragmatists, as a whole, are committed to social interaction, pluralism, community, and growth (Pratt, 20-37). These are not merely epistemological commitments, Pratt argues. They also depend upon an established ontology, determining with whom one can interact. They therefore have cultural implications, as well. Pragmatism is, after all, a philosophical tradition devoted to human existence in the social world. This is evidenced in what Pratt calls the "pragmatic maxim," found in Pierce's essay "How to Make our Ideas Clear": Consider what effects which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole conception of the object. (Pratt, 20)

Here, Pierce tells us our knowledge of all "objects" and, I would add, subjects, of thought is determined by the actions and capacities of those objects and subjects. Pratt clarifies, "A thing known, or in this case a quality known, literally is the effects it has or, to animate the example, the way it acts or interacts" (Pratt, 21). In other words, our understanding of a thing is determined by its being. Thus, epistemology and ontology are intimately connected and potentially have cultural implications since knowledge of a thing depends upon a relationship – often a social relationship – between the self and other. Many Native American groups, Pratt shows, have also displayed commitments to interaction, pluralism, community, and growth. It is because these commitments were generally lacking in the "attitudes" of Christian, European American colonizers who sought to assimilate or eliminate cultural others that Pratt seeks to trace their presence in classical American pragmatism back to Native America.

Pratt does not spend any time exploring the possibility, but it may also be the case that the connection between epistemology and ontology implicit in classical pragmatism is partly attributable to Native American influences as well. Many scholars have noted the ways in which ontological categorizations of social things are largely shaped by language and environment. Anthropologist A. Irving Hallowell, for instance, was responsible for revealing to scholars that the languages of Algonquian Native Americans designate many things, even rocks,

as potentially animate that would always be considered invariably inanimate by European Americans. Hallowell's studies, and those of many later scholars, have further shown that Algonquian and other indigenous peoples also relate to these linguistically animate things as social actors.² There is thus a clear relationship between the epistemologies of Native American peoples, as expressed in their languages, and their ontological categorizations of the world, as evidenced in their social behaviors.

In *Native Pragmatism*, Pratt first identifies the Native American commitments to interaction, pluralism, community, and growth in the behaviors of Iroquoian and Algonquian Native Americans of the Northeast who, to their eventual detriment, "welcomed" European Americans to their lands (Pratt, 101-105).³ To help the reader understand why Northeastern Native Americans so often welcomed the very different and often very threatening European Americans, Pratt examines Iroquoian and Algonquian myths about contact with threatening cannibal giants. In many of these myths, the cannibal giants are treated civilly and sometimes even as kin in order to assuage their ravenous and damaging desires. The giants are often transformed through the kindness shown them. They then become members of human societies who, instead of acting selfishly and according only to their own desires, understand that community is based upon hospitality and reciprocal relations with others (Pratt, 90, 100). These myths, Pratt argues, provided models for dealing with the ravenous European Americans who consumed land rather than human flesh. Of course, some cannibals, and many more European Americans, remained ravenous and devastated Native societies. Thus, Pratt points out, both in the oral narratives and in the history of American Indian/white contact, violence was sometimes relied upon by Native Americans as a last resort to combat those who refused to appreciate hospitality and reciprocity and whose actions imperiled the lives and cultures of others (Pratt, 131).

Pratt suggests 17th century writer Roger Williams, who challenged the Puritan Christian's mistreatment of their Native American neighbors in the Northeast, was familiar with the Native American strategy of acting hospitably and generously toward those who threaten community. Pratt notes that Williams' "argument in the favor of toleration is quite different from those of the recognized liberal tradition" (Pratt, 82). He contends this argument was influenced by Williams' familiarity with Native traditions (Pratt, 84). Indeed,

² See A. I. Hallowell, "Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior, and World View," in *Teachings from the American Earth: Indian Religion and Philosophy*, ed. Barbara Tedlock and Dennis Tedlock, (New York: Liveright, 1975).

³ "Algonquian" and "Iroquoian" are terms for large language families, of which otherwise discrete culture groups such as the Narragansett and Delaware are respective members.

Williams' writings, especially his *A Key into the Language of America*, make it clear that his familiarity with Native traditions, specifically those of the Iroquoian Narragansett, probably included a familiarity with their first and last resort methods of dealing with threatening cultural outsiders (Pratt, 132). Williams, himself, was welcomed into Narragansett society when he was exiled by the Puritan leaders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony (Pratt, 111-112).

Williams serves as merely one example for Pratt, and for his readers, of a philosophically-minded European American who was influenced by regular contact with Native Americans. Williams is an important example, however. Even though he was not successful in changing the attitudes of the Puritan colonizers, his writings did help shape the views of later European American intellectuals and supporters of Native rights (Pratt, 220-221).

In the next section of *Native Pragmatism*, Pratt examines the Native American prophetic movement of the 18th and 19th centuries, arguing that key figures in this movement represented an increased influence upon European American thinkers. The Native American prophets, Pratt suggests, relied upon a "logic of place" to combat growing European American cultural hegemony and geographic incursions (Pratt, 145-147). Looking at the speeches of several well-known Native American prophetic orators, including Teedyuscung of the Delaware and Tenskwatawa of the Shawnee, Pratt again finds an emphasis upon interaction, pluralism, community, and growth. Pratt also finds implicit in their orations that these things are facilitated by "place" – that a people's identity and knowledge of the world are rooted in a particular geographic and cultural context. These Native Americans, who were being slowly pushed off their lands, believed having their own "places" was necessary for them to interact with other peoples, such as the European Americans, while still growing as distinct communities.

Many prominent European Americans had occasion to hear such orations and understood the "logic" behind the prophets' arguments fully. Foremost among these people was Benjamin Franklin, whom Pratt relies upon as his primary example in this portion of the book. Like many other early European American leaders, Franklin was not simply concerned with the diversity between American Indians and whites; he was also concerned with the diversity that was developing among the European Americans as well. As members of the colonies sought to unite themselves politically, Franklin looked toward the Native Americans of the Northeast, particularly toward the Haudenosaunee, for a model that allowed peoples to have their own places, both geographically and in a larger political system, while interacting in positive ways with peoples from

other places.⁴ The model of confederation that Franklin eventually proposed was rejected, but it did influence later unions of the colonies (Pratt, 175-176).⁵ Franklin's concern for the need to balance national unity with local autonomy and, more important, his concern for tolerance in the face of diversity were also influential upon later philosophers, including Ralph Waldo Emerson. Pratt writes of Emerson's importance to his thesis:

To the extent, then, that Franklin's commitments are an extension of the pragmatic commitments of the Delaware and Haudenosaunee, Emerson can be seen as a transitional figure, continuing the line of development connecting the indigenous attitude with the Native Prophetic movement on one side and the classical pragmatists on the other. (Pratt, 214-215)

Through Emerson and Franklin, Pratt is thus able to trace a very distinct if somewhat tenuous line from the 17th and 18th century Native Americans of the Northeast to the classical pragmatists (Pratt, 285).

In the next major portion of his book, Pratt examines the Native American reaction to the early 19th century U.S. policy of "Indian Removal," which relocated Native Americans to lands farther west and helped spawn the later reservation system. Here, Pratt shows that the "logic of place" was rearticulated as a "logic of home" (Pratt, 221). Native American leaders tried to make clear to European Americans that the health of their communities in an increasingly diverse world was not simply dependent upon having their own places; the health of these communities was dependent upon having their own homes. Indigenous peoples, after all, live in environments inhabited by many beings other than human, and they maintain important and meaningful relationships with these other beings through religious rituals. For the Native Americans of the early 19th century, to be removed from their lands was to be removed from these other beings who offered them aid, taught them about the land, helped them understand the ideally reciprocal quality of nature and society, and so on. "Place" for these Native Americans was not simply an area empty of European Americans in which they could hide. Rather, it was an area rich with life, knowledge, and history. This concept of "home," Pratt argues, was easily understood by many European American women and by African American intellectuals, who also understood the oppression suffered by Native Americans.

⁴ The Haudenosaunee are known in English as the "Iroquois Confederacy." The full extent to which the Haudenosaunee served as a model for American democracy is debated. For a treatment of this issue, see José Barreiro, ed., *Indian Roots of American Democracy* (Ithaca: Akwe:kon Press, Cornell University, 1992).

⁵ Vine Deloria, Jr. is a member of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe.

In the early 1800's, European American women, whose ideas had traditionally been considered inferior and restricted to the private sphere, began increasingly to express their concerns in public. They now sought suffrage and other forms of independence. Pratt explains, and indeed it is well known, that many figures in the women's movement at this time had contact with Native American peoples and were impressed with the statuses of women in Native American societies. Pratt contends that some of these women were also attracted to Native American cultures because of the importance of place and home. These women understood that an ideal home is a place of interaction, pluralism, community, and growth, even if they felt that most women did not receive as much freedom to interact and express different views in the home as they should have. Pratt finds this logic in the highly narrative writings of Maria Sedgewick and Catharine Maria Child. About this latter writer, Pratt states the following:

Child, standing at the border between Native and European America, also stands as a pragmatist whose work served as a starting point for the line of pragmatist thought that developed in the work of nineteenth-century feminists and helped form the context from which classical pragmatism emerged (Pratt, 271).

Pratt then proceeds to discuss the later "feminist pragmatists" of the early 1900's and the direct influence they had upon the movement of pragmatism, in general (Pratt, 282-286).

Pratt also finds the "logic of place" in the writings of African Americans, combating racism in the late 1800's and early 1990's and who "opposed submission designed to minimize conflict with whites" (Pratt, 276). These black intellectuals – intellectuals such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Pratt argues, turned instead toward "a conception of difference and a logic of place of the sort used by Native prophets." (Pratt, 276). They declared that their historical experiences as peoples of African descent and as slaves to European Americans shaped their identities and their knowledge of the world. To submit to European American society completely once slavery had ended would be to give up their "place" in history and the "home" they had built for their communities in America. Instead, they wanted to be accepted as unique. Like the Native Americans and early feminists discussed by Pratt, they sought simply to be themselves in a pluralistic nation. Pratt leaves unexplored, however, just how much impact Du Bois and similar figures may have had upon classical pragmatism.

So, with the historical research that Pratt presents in *Native Pragmatism*, the author does succeed in showing that the central commitments of classical pragmatism *may* have been influenced indirectly, via such figures as Williams and Franklin, via early feminists, and, perhaps through some African American

intellectuals, by Northeast Native American philosophies. All of the former individuals and groups sought to create an attitude of tolerance in the British Colonies and later in the United States.

To show that the commitments of pragmatism were *definitely* influenced by Native American philosophies, though, would take a great deal more research than what Pratt is able to present in his already very dense book. Also, the *extent* of influence that Native philosophies might have had upon the classical pragmatists is left for the reader to ponder. Certainly, the Native American figures discussed by Pratt were not very successful in fostering tolerance for their peoples among the wider European American public. This public, descended from immigrants, insisted upon viewing the world through a universalizing and usually Christian lens, in which place had little significance at all, other than being something to be occupied and consumed.

Still, the *possibility* that Native traditions influenced pragmatism is important, because it suggests that epistemology, as traditional Native Americans have always asserted, is conditioned by a people's place in the world. Regardless of the reason, the classical pragmatists recognized this. Like Native American traditionalists, they recognized that place may even have an ontological impact. In the concluding chapter, Pratt quotes Dewey from his introduction to anthropologist Paul Radin's *Primitive Man as Philosopher*, a book dealing directly with Native America: Those who assert in the abstract definition of philosophy that it deals with eternal truth or reality, untouched by local time or place, are forced to admit that philosophy as a concrete existence is historical, having temporal passage and a diversity of local habitations (Pratt, 284-285).

This same point was illustrated earlier with Pierce's "pragmatic maxim." Pratt offers an even more explicit illustration of the pragmatists' understanding of the epistemological and ontological significance of place with second quote from Dewey, this time from his *Art as Experience*:

The world we have experienced becomes an integral part of the self that acts and is acted upon in further experience ... In their physical occurrence, things and events experienced pass and are gone. But something of their meaning and value is retained as an integral part of the self. Through habits formed in intercourse with the world, we also in-habit the world. It becomes a home and the home is part of our every experience. (Pratt, 285)

The places we "inhabit" may shape who we are and how we act, or, at the very least, they may impact our perception of ourselves and others. This is what the "colonial attitude" discussed by Pratt has always failed to recognize (Pratt, 76).

But the importance of place also reminds us that our knowledge and our very sense of self will change in the future as we continually reorient ourselves in a changing world. This means that philosophy will change – that pragmatism, for instance, will continue to be shaped by other philosophical traditions and peoples in the future; it will continue to “grow.” Yet, if Pratt is correct in identifying the central commitments of classical pragmatism, the interaction with other traditions and the constant reshaping of its methods will be embraced and regarded as necessary to live effectively in a diverse world. Truly, this is an “attitude” that other non-indigenous traditions, still embracing the “colonial attitude” would benefit from adopting.

With *Native Pragmatism*, Pratt clearly makes a contribution to European American philosophy and to pragmatism, in particular. In revealing its commitments to interaction, pluralism, community, and growth, Pratt affirms its real value in the world as a philosophy that can help societies negotiate diversity. As diversity only increases in the United States, despite the universalizing perspectives and homogenizing actions of many of this nation’s founders, the potential value of pragmatism increases as well. Of course, through his extensive research, Pratt also makes a contribution to the study of American history, especially to the histories of those few European Americans who dissented colonialism and Puritanism, of early feminist writers, and of African American intellectuals.

In this reader’s mind, however, Pratt’s greatest contribution, even if he did not intend it to be so, is his contribution to Native American studies and to the study of culture, in general. His treatment of Algonquian and Iroquoian culture is limited, and the sources for his quotations of Northeastern Native American prophets and other figures call for greater scrutiny. There are also issues of translation and the possibility of interpretive bias on the part of the early European American authors who supply Pratt’s quotes. Still, Pratt’s scholarship begins to fill the void lamented by Keith Basso; Pratt clearly understands the epistemological and ontological significance of place. Furthermore, because he understands this, he does an excellent job of representing Native American epistemologies, in which place is always emphasized, no matter what local differences might otherwise exist between individual places. Native American scholar Vine Deloria, Jr., has repeatedly addressed the social and religious importance of place for Native Americans while bemoaning the failure of both academic and nonacademic European Americans to recognize it.⁶ Deloria writes: “By recognizing the sacredness of lands..., we place ourselves in a realistic

⁶ Deloria, Jr., Vine. “Worshiping the Golden Calf: Freedom of Religion in Scalia’s America,” *For this Land: Writings on Religion in America*. Ed. James Treat (New York and London: Routledge, 1999).

context in which the individual and the group can cultivate and enhance the experience of the sacred. Recognizing the sacredness of lands on which previous generations have lived and died is the foundation of all other sentiments" (Deloria, 212).

What is "sacred" about land, to Deloria, is precisely that it is a home or "context," in which interaction and growth can occur. In *Native Pragmatism: Rethinking the Roots of American Philosophy*, Scott L. Pratt succeeds in setting both Native American epistemologies and classical pragmatism in "realistic," historical and geographical "contexts." In so doing, he does a great service to Native American studies, and he helps scholars of other academic backgrounds understand that *all* communities must have a place in a truly pluralistic society.

KEN LOKENSGARD is an assistant professor of American religions at Gettysburg College. His primary interests are Native American religions, the religious consequences of cultural contact.

©2003 Ken Lokensgard. All rights reserved.
Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory 4.3 (August 2003)