

# The Metaphysical Club: *Two Views*

## I. A Pragmatic History of Pragmatism

LOUIS MENAND'S *The Metaphysical Club* is a history of ideas, or as he characterizes it in the subtitle, *A Story of Ideas in America*. The subtitle suggests a humility presumably lost on a previous generation of writers, those who half a century ago could write about "the American mind" or "the conservative mind." Menand writes "a story," not "the history," of his subject. And the ideas that form the subject of his study hardly constitute a reified "mind." The language of a story

is useful here, as the author recognizes that one might tell many kinds of stories about the same subject relative to one's questions, one's interests, one's perspective. But while Professor Menand avoids asserting the kind of authority that comes from claims to a comprehensive history, he nonetheless accepts the canons of historical truth-telling that govern the discipline. This book is a pragmatic history of pragmatism, not a reckless and criterion-less postmodern story.

However revealing the subtitle, the book's title is misleading. While a small group of people met episodically in Cambridge, perhaps even bearing the label "The Metaphysical Club," we know little

about their meetings and this book is not about that club. Moreover, the subjects of this book all tended in a rather anti-metaphysical direction.

Loosely understood, Menand's story is about the evolution of an American philosophical tradition called *pragmatism*. Menand chooses to tell this story by way of a collective biography of four thinkers: Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.,

Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey. Underlying the stories that Menand interweaves about these men and their contemporaries

is a larger claim about America and modernity. Menand writes: "The Civil War swept away the slave civilization of the South, but it swept away almost the whole intellectual culture of the North along with it. It took nearly half a century for the United States to develop a culture to replace it, to find a set of ideas, and a way of thinking, that would help people cope with the conditions of modern life."

This is a startling claim. Menand sees a great rupture in northern intellectual culture that takes place just as the forces of modernity take hold of a previously agrarian nation. Menand does not properly characterize the culture that is sun-

*The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America*, by Louis Menand, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001.

dered, nor does he wonder if the destruction of the southern culture might have allowed the unfettered growth of certain tendencies in northern culture. Rather, he emphasizes disillusionment, springing from failed ideas, and the creative efforts to craft a new intellectual system to make sense of a new environment.

Of course the new environment was a modern, urban, industrial society where the old habits, verities, and gods of the village no longer “worked.” The very speed of change in this new age suggested a mutability that warred against older experiences of constancy. Survival in this new context required an ability to change, an ability to anticipate, and a readiness to jettison worn and obsolete ideas. This much is familiar (if debated) territory to historians, but what is unusual about Menand’s account is where he finds the origins of this new intellectual enterprise. The American Civil War destroyed an old and now outdated northern intellectual culture. Really?

In order to tell this part of the story, Menand introduces the reader to his first subject, Oliver Wendell Holmes. Holmes represents the moral certainty of northern abolitionism and of a more comprehensive intellectual order that presupposed the intelligibility of their moral code. In antebellum northern culture, science rested comfortably alongside a Protestant (even decayed Puritan) moral passion. For them, the universe was orderly and purposeful. Young Holmes “had gone off to fight because of his moral beliefs, which he held with a singular fervor. The war did more than make him lose those beliefs. It made him lose his belief in beliefs.” The horrors of the war, fought for high-minded principles, left Holmes with one lesson: “certitude leads to violence.” Thus, the war destroyed his principles and replaced them with one universal claim and fear—

moral certainty is immoral because it leads to violence. Holmes’s rejection of claims to moral certainty went beyond a sense of pious limits to human understanding—indeed, it suggested a hubris that went so far as to assert the absence of universal purpose and thereby of any abstract meaning to truth, to right and wrong.

No matter the source of this dogmatic anti-dogmatism (and I doubt the singularity of the Civil War in its development), Menand is clearly correct to assert an enduring legacy for this idea or disposition. Today, we live in a culture (both popular and high) saturated by a naïve skepticism of all things real. Existence has replaced reality as our intellectual and moral touchstone and, consequently, one is quickly labeled dangerous for even mentioning unchanging principles. Moral idiots hold the moral high ground, utterly certain about the uncertainty of everything else.

Bereft of principles, Holmes came to value skills and expertise. He admired experimentation and the capacity to shape some part of the world to human desires. As one of the leading jurists of his day, he defended civil liberties not because they reflected some inherent right but because they facilitated the “democratic” process of change and adaptation. Whereas freedom had long been a high ideal because it allowed human beings to act in such a way as to fulfill their (better) natures, Holmes and others now defended freedom relative to one’s will—freedom to do as one wants and to use that freedom to reshape the world to better suit human desires. The older freedom presupposed an order to which human beings belong while the newer freedom glorified human will-to-power in the absence of any transcendental meaning.

If Menand is able to trace Holmes’s transformation to the shock of the Civil War,

he has a much more difficult time making the connection for his other three protagonists. None of them fought in the war, and Menand supplies little evidence to suggest that it was the war that sent them along intellectual trajectories akin to Holmes's. Nonetheless, Menand tells a powerful story about the confluence of ideas and beliefs among these very different thinkers and men.

What is most fascinating about this book is the staggering concreteness of the narrative, the utter particularity of the influences and motivations of his subjects. Interwoven with their stories are a wide variety of well-known individuals who figure in the evolution of pragmatism in the most amazing ways. At times the reader wonders if the tale of Charles Peirce's sexual escapades or an account of the development of the law of errors in astronomy belong in this story. But mostly, one simply does not care—so full of wonder are the stories wedded together by this accomplished stylist. And while Menand sometimes dwells on the tangential, he does an admirable job of weaving the eclectic strands into a single cloth.

This form of storytelling is not simply a matter of style, but part of the philosophy that Menand both explains and employs. This is, as we discovered in the subtitle, a story of "ideas," and in this book, ideas matter greatly. But these ideas are neither the reified expressions of reality—which suggests a metaphysical orientation—nor the simple creation of an abstracted individual. Rather, ideas have two salient characteristics for Menand and his pragmatists: they are "tools" ("like forks and knives and microchips") that help people cope with an ever-changing reality, and they are essentially social products.

In Menand's hands, the working out of this conception of ideas in history is endlessly fascinating. Ideas emerge out of particularity. William James's person-

ality, his choices and opportunities, all make possible the ideas he crafts. These ideas are expressions of the individual, but the individual is far from discrete or isolated. Presumably, what is believable to him is shaped by his experiences with others and is always in the process of changing. James expressed ideas as only he could, but only because he participated in a social organism that shaped him and his ideas. The ideas that thereby emerge persuade others, shape their thinking, and get adapted or rejected ultimately with regard to their applicability, the degree to which these "tools" do some work.

So to tell the story of pragmatism as a pragmatist should requires that "pragmatic" ideas not be treated as doctrines or as abstract principles, but as expressions of an evolving set of responses to a complex and ever-changing context. Oddly, the story of pragmatism is rarely told this way. Menand's approach suggests that one understands pragmatism well only by understanding it historically.

Ideas matter. Or more precisely, it matters greatly how one understands ideas (*qua* ideas) to function. The pragmatists were hardly original in their belief that ideas are tools rather than expressions of some reality "out there." But no matter how singular the pragmatists in this area, the transformation in the belief about ideas exposed in this story points to one of the greatest transformations in Western thought and culture. Clearly, the story of the West includes the persistence of essentialism or realism, from Jewish and Christian beliefs in the God beyond the cosmos to the Platonic forms to Enlightenment glorification of human knowledge (and control) of a created reality.

Essentialism stresses the unchanging form behind the constant mutability of existence and holds "ideas" to be ex-

pressions of abstract or non-particular truths. Essentialism holds that the universe has a purpose which limits human creativity within a larger cosmos of purpose. The pragmatists rejected this “uni”-verse, and with it the belief in essences or forms or generalized truths. Ideas deal only with particulars—and particulars are in constant flux. For these pragmatists, ideas matter because they assist in change or evolution, not because they point to the unchanging.

The greatest revolution—the revolution that sundered the Semitic cosmology of Genesis—came in the mid-nineteenth century most powerfully and creatively with Charles Darwin. Even limiting oneself to the story as told by Menand, a reader might therefore ask if Darwin is a more substantial starting point than the Civil War. Menand characterizes Darwin’s motives for writing *Origin of Species* (1857) as to “debunk the concept of supernatural intelligence—the idea that the universe is the result of an idea.” The introduction of natural selection as the mechanism for evolution, and therefore the explanation for variation and change, forced a reorientation in thinking that was cosmos-shattering. Applied broadly, Darwin’s ideas suggested that the universe and all its parts have no stable essence and no unified purpose; therefore, while the abstract language employed by humans may order their experiences, it does so without any genuine reference to a stable reality.

Darwin’s impact on the pragmatists was profound, suggesting that ideas are part of an evolutionary process that allows organisms to adapt to, and change, their environment. As things change, one is forced to abandon old ideas and find new ones. The pragmatists crafted a philosophical perspective appropriate for a people who could no longer believe in a closed universe. By emphasizing the constant experimentation with ideas to find those that work, they believed they

were preparing themselves and others to live “forward” in a rapidly changing society. These ideas took peculiar forms relative to each thinker.

James, the sensitive soul, sought to find a utilitarian ground for religious beliefs, emphasizing that for many people religious beliefs help them to adjust to the world they experience. The shockingly well-adjusted Dewey, having no spiritual longings, focused more on the capacity of a democratic society to experiment with new ways of thinking and organizing. For Dewey and all his followers, mass education became the primary means of helping a democratic society gain the capacity to adjust to novel circumstances.

Menand’s great strength rests in his power to weave many stories into an engaging narrative. His work is much weaker with regard to analysis. His portraits of the three philosophers—James, Dewey and Peirce—invite correctives from specialists who will dispute nearly every specific about their beliefs. Menand attempts critical distance when discussing each of his subjects, and again here his work is admirable. Dewey is fairly but lovingly portrayed, engendering in this reader a deeper antagonism and even fear (not the author’s intention). But, all of the many and substantial challenges by specialists aside, Menand more clearly than any author I know tells the story of these men and their ideas.

But what is one to do with pragmatism? Menand is not entirely sure, though he writes as a warm friend of this approach to ideas and he clearly accepts the assumption of a universe without cosmic meaning. Still, it appears that pragmatism itself requires a certain kind of context. Menand argues, persuasively, that pragmatism has dramatically shaped the world we have inherited—from legal theory and judicial practice,

to educational theory and practice, to a revolution in epistemology. But the pragmatists and their ideas have also been out of favor, particularly in the years after World War II. In the ideological struggle with the Soviet Union, Menand suggests, universal principles had a special utility. Moreover, in the Civil Rights movement, led by Martin Luther King, meaningful change came from taking a stand on natural rights, not pragmatic adjustment.

The return of pragmatism since the late 1970s might suggest a utility appropriate to our age. Menand hints that the pragmatic tolerance of cultural pluralism and of competing claims to truth fits the more chaotic post-1989 world. We live without universally accepted standards and the great dangers of our world are, Menand again hints, the result of people who believe something is always true and right—that is, principled people. The author is far from unambiguous in these areas, but one cannot help believing that Menand concludes his book thinking about the point with which he began it—certainty leads to violence.

But what are we really to think about that claim? Does Menand wish us to doubt the worthiness of fighting the Civil War? What moral crusades are acceptable and why? Is violence the thing most to be avoided, and should we willingly jettison our principles in order to eliminate it? If so, then we have no principles in the first place. Pragmatism offers no assistance for those who pursue moral crusades, as they need an unalterable Good by which to reckon.

Pragmatism may help us live together in a pluralistic society—so long as that society contains only those who accept the values of tolerance. But it is far more likely that a democratic society can only survive if it rests on principles the citizens accept as universal. Pragmatism may encourage freedoms, but only because wide latitude in beliefs and ac-

tions provides more opportunities to find expressions of workable ideas for emerging contexts. Pragmatism offers another kind of freedom, to humans as such, since it makes us agents of our destiny, suggesting an escape from the determinism of a closed universe. But to accept this freedom is to accept a petty world where purposes change with the wind and meaning is lost in the swift stream of objectless history. Pragmatists, it seems, want to liberate us from our highest potentials.

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## II. Sham Scholarship

THE 2002 PULITZER PRIZE for history went to Louis Menand's *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America*.<sup>1</sup> The book, highly praised in the press for its scholarship, is an amusingly written account of the philosophy named "pragmatism." It is popular history, but that is what the Pulitzer Prize is for. So, what better recipient? The only problem is that Menand's scholarship, even granted its nonspecialist aim, is an empty pretense. What is worse, the emptiness of its pretense is, in several ways, obvious. It appears, then, that educated, intelligent, and informed people, charged with responsibility for reviewing and judging books, can no longer tell the difference between scholarship and sham, or do not care to.

I shall examine Menand's book and its reception as illustrating the general phe-

nomenon of scholarship's loss of status and respect in our society. The causes of that phenomenon can be identified; its consequences for the health of a democratic polity should be contemplated. But those are larger questions into which I shall not enter.

*The Metaphysical Club*, as well as being amusing, has two apparent virtues: that it brings before a popular audience some important ideas—those of Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., and the three major philosophers of pragmatism, Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey—and that it places those ideas in their historical and social context, bringing them to life. However, as one reviewer noted, context in this case overwhelms text. A maze of stories about individuals and events surrounds the slender account of the pragmatists' ideas, like a great puff of cotton candy around a narrow cardboard core. As the contextual puff is, in fact, the major part of the book and the source of its attractions, I shall begin with it.

It is composed of digression from digression, resulting in arabesques of digression. For example, since John Dewey attended the University of Vermont, we are led to a discussion of the transcendentalism of James Marsh, a president of the University before Dewey's birth; to Coleridge's misreading of Kant, in an essay Marsh had edited for American readers; to the founding of Dartmouth College in 1769 and Daniel Webster's courtroom defense of Dartmouth in 1817, the date at which Marsh graduated therefrom; and much, much more. All of which bears remotely on Dewey's intellectual formation, but it does not help us understand his philosophy, which is never so much as summarized.

Earlier in the book, we are told a great deal that is interesting, if neither new nor germane, about the brilliant and eccentric fathers of Holmes, Peirce, and

James, and about their numerous associates, including especially Louis Agassiz, Harvard's anti-Darwinist naturalist, whose racism is examined relentlessly over some 60 pages. Menand devotes less than 13 full pages—all told, in dispersed fragments—to Peirce's philosophy. That compares to 35 pages on his father's career and attitude toward slavery, the mysterious origin of his second, French wife, and other Peircean scandals. Similar disproportions apply to the other figures discussed. William James's physical and psychological weaknesses and crises are examined at far greater length than are his ideas, which are treated as consequences of his maladies. Menand is more successful in relating Holmes's life to his ideas (*vide infra*), but here again the ideas get short shrift.

The most worthwhile digression is on the development of statistical theories from the eighteenth through the nineteenth centuries, providing context for Peirce's having made probability central to his philosophy—a revolutionary move. However, Menand's account is entirely dependent on secondary sources that he does not always understand. For example, he supposes that James Clerk Maxwell's statistical interpretation of thermodynamics meant that Maxwell held that all laws are merely statistical (222). But that is mistaken; he was a Newtonian determinist about the basic laws of physics. This is not a minor technical point: it shows that Menand does not know whereof he speaks. Peirce it was, not Maxwell, who first suggested that Newton's laws might be valid only as statistical approximations.

With a few such exceptions, the context is constructed at haphazard and does not illuminate anyone's philosophy. It appears to be driven more by a desire to tell amusing stories (which Menand does well: he writes with grace and wit) or to satisfy the academic's

most solemn duty, which is to unearth racism everywhere. Furthermore, while the range of the digressions has convinced some reviewers that the book is a dazzling display of erudition, others have noted that they tell us nothing new. Menand has tossed together materials culled from a variety of secondary sources, spiced with snippets from letters and diaries, etc. Let me illustrate the shallowness and the fragility of Menand's scholarship with another example, in addition to the Maxwellian gaffe.

There is no prior philosopher more important to the development of pragmatism than Kant. Menand's several references to Kant make it quite clear that he has never read him. No one who had would identify space as one of Kant's categories (270). Again, this is not a small, a technical, or an obscure point; it is basic and proves ignorance of Kant's philosophy. Nor is Coleridge's misreading of Kant (mentioned in secondary sources) nearly as gross as the reading which Menand attributes to him, cautiously calling it "somewhat erroneous" (246). That reading is not somewhat erroneous; it is totally ridiculous. But it is not Coleridge's.

In light of all this, what are we to make of Menand's quoting Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* at length in the original German? (Titles and short passages from French or German Menand always quotes in the original, followed by a translation; long passages appear in translation, the original language being relegated to a note.) The original language must of course be examined in any careful textual exegesis or nuanced interpretation; that is what scholars do. But in a popular work such as this one, even were the discussion less superficial and better informed, inclusion of foreign tongues is meretricious. It is to genuine scholarship what a harlot's painted charms are to true beauty.

Let us turn, then, to the core, which consists of an account of what pragmatism is and an historical explanation of its rise, its fall, and its alleged recent rebirth. It might seem that we should know what Menand thinks pragmatism is before examining his history of it. However, his only substantive account of what pragmatism is (five sentences on pp. xi-xii) is brief and cryptic. What Menand meant in those sentences can be discovered only by looking at the historical account he offers; so we shall begin with that.

The Metaphysical Club was an informal affair which may have existed for a few months in Cambridge, Massachusetts, sometime in the early 1870s. Although the club is not mentioned until page 200, nearly half-way into the story, it is the place where Charles Peirce supposedly first spoke of pragmatism. One of the few pieces of evidence for its existence is a brief reminiscence of Peirce's, about 35 years later, in which he mentioned Holmes as one of its members. That is important to Menand's argument, as it allows him to include Holmes as a pragmatist, despite the latter's denial that he had ever understood the doctrine. But there is reason to doubt that Holmes had attended many meetings of the club, if it met at all.

Menand needs Holmes because Holmes is the only plausible example on which he can hang his thesis, that pragmatism was a reaction to the Civil War's unexpected bloodiness. That war, he claims, discredited the "abstractions" that led to it (374, 440). The others did not serve in the war, and Menand cites (and can cite) no evidence of the war's having affected their opinions. Holmes, however, left some literary traces of antebellum idealism, served in the Union infantry bravely, being severely wounded thrice, and was notoriously realist, perhaps cynical, in the legal philosophy he

afterwards developed. The war, Menand says, made Holmes lose not only his beliefs but also “his belief in beliefs,” resulting in “cynicism” (4). Cynicism, as Menand understands it, is the belief that no ideal is worth dying for. “Pragmatism was designed to make it harder for people to be driven to violence by their beliefs” (440; see also x). “Fear of violence,” he says, is “at the bottom” of it (373).

Menand’s accounts of the remaining three figures, though they provide zero support for his Civil War thesis, are similarly reductive, as in the case of James. Menand substitutes psychological explanation of theorists for logical explication of theories. In the same vein, the demise of pragmatism in the 1950s is attributed to an alleged Cold War demand for belief in “absolutes,” which Menand interprets as intolerance. “The reason [for pragmatism’s demise] has to do with the difference between the intellectual climate after the Civil War and the intellectual climate of the Cold War. The value at the bottom of the thought of Holmes, James, Peirce, and Dewey is tolerance” (439).

Now, why does tolerance require a denial of absolutes, and what does Menand intend by the latter term, anyway? He does not say, but it is easy to fill in the gap. By “absolute” he means “true.” Menand is one of those who assumes that you cannot be tolerant unless you believe that no belief is true. That, I suggest, is the essence of intolerance: I will tolerate disagreement only if it does not matter. In short, Menand understands pragmatism as a form of relativism. After the Cold War, these ideas “have re-emerged as suddenly as they had been eclipsed” (441). With the end of the Cold War, the world has once again been made safe for relativism.

Now we can understand what Menand meant by his definition of pragmatism:

...what these four thinkers had in com-

mon was not a group of ideas, but a single idea—an idea about ideas. They all believed that ideas are not “out there” waiting to be discovered, but are tools—like forks and knives and microchips—that people devise to cope with the world in which they find themselves. (xi).

That is a seductive passage. Who would want to be guilty of something as ridiculous as believing that ideas are “out there” waiting to be discovered? Since Menand does not say who is guilty of that absurdity, we are left to assume that all pre-pragmatic philosophers were. So we are happy to join with the pragmatists, whose philosophy is made to seem at once sophisticated and obvious. However, there is in fact no one who ever claimed that ideas are “out there” waiting to be discovered, not even Plato. So, what is it that Menand thinks pragmatists rejected? Well, we have seen what the answer is. By ideas being “out there” Menand must mean not ideas themselves, but the objective existence of that which ideas are intended to represent. The claim that ideas are tools is thus a proxy for relativism: it is to be understood as a denial that ideas can be true. They are *merely* tools.

There’s a problem with relativism. If ideas are just tools, then we have no ideas by which to judge any tool’s usefulness. What are they good *for*? If we have no idea of what is good as an end, then we cannot know what is good as a means. Oddly, Menand himself brings this charge against pragmatism (375), betraying ignorance of the fact that Peirce, James, and Dewey provided answers (whether convincing or not) as to how values and ends are rightly established. They were not quite the crude relativists Menand takes them to be. That aside, why does Menand in all the rest of the book espouse a doctrine whose “deficiencies” (his word) he recognizes on this one page?



On the preceding page Menand wrote, "...a philosophy that warned against the idolatry of ideas was possibly the only philosophy on which a progressive politics could have been successfully mounted" (374). So pragmatism has substantive content after all! Toward the end of the book, Menand illustrates that thesis by describing Dewey's relations to various social reformers and radicals, such as Jane Addams and Eugene Debs. The tolerance that Menand's version of relativism teaches is tolerance for "progressive" politics—anything else, you see, is intolerant.

There is another problem with relativism. Tools must have properties that fit them to their tasks. A hammer must be hard, and an idea must be true, or true enough. Try driving a truck over a bridge about the strength of which you have a false idea. James seemed to say that an idea's truth just *is* its working. Even so, as some ideas work and others do not, the distinction between truth and falsity remains objective. And Peirce held that there has to be something—he dared to call it reality—that explains why one idea works and another does not. To be sure, there are deep and difficult issues about the nature of truth and reality, about which the pragmatists had much to say. But their emphasis on practicality does not lead ineluctably to relativism.

I will not say more in criticism of Menand's interpretation of pragmatism or of the relativism he derives from it. I do not need to. In the best review of this book that I have seen, Paul Boghossian, a philosopher at New York University, does a wonderful job of that.<sup>2</sup> He can be faulted only for taking Menand's philosophical theses more seriously than that author himself does, and for neglecting other aspects of the book. After a devastating dissection, Boghossian concludes, brutally, "All of this book's problems can be traced to its author's weak command

of the philosophical ideas whose history he wishes to recount."

But that is not the worst of it. The book is permeated by Richard Rorty's interpretation of pragmatism. Rorty was the first to push the relativistic tendencies in James and Dewey to an extreme, "postmodern" relativism. (Rorty, however, admitted that Peirce defended objectivity; Menand, one brief passage aside, is less careful.) Why, then, is Rorty never cited? Why are none of his books listed in the bibliography? In an earlier essay (the introduction to an anthology of pragmatic writings that he edited)—a trial balloon for this book—Menand cited Rorty effusively.<sup>3</sup> In any case, Menand's misinterpretation of pragmatism does not have even the virtue of being original. In a review of Menand's earlier book, the philosopher, Susan Haack, described Rorty's views as "vulgar pragmatism" and Menand's as "vulgar Rortyism"<sup>4</sup>—a formulation on which I cannot improve.

If philosophy is not Menand's strong suit, perhaps it is history. I have not read any review in which his historical arguments are questioned. Yet they do not bear a moment's scrutiny. Menand writes that "the Civil War discredited the beliefs and assumptions of the era that preceded it. Those beliefs had not prevented the country from going to war;..." (x) But abolitionism and preserving the Union and the doctrine of states' rights were not meant to prevent war! That was not their point. So how could a war fought over those great principles discredit them? To be sure, the abolitionists were faulted—perhaps more before the war than after—for rushing things to an unnecessary and bloody crisis. But where is the evidence for a general postbellum revulsion against principles? Menand provides no evidence at all that the North after the war felt that it had been a mistake to preserve the Union or to free the slaves, no matter the cost in blood,

or that the South, in defeat, regarded states' rights as not having been worth defending. Holmes is Menand's only example—one that is highly ambiguous, merely plausible, and of doubtful bearing on pragmatism—but Holmes did not typify the age.

Besides, Menand's politically correct belaboring of this person's and that person's racism goes up in smoke, when we read (374) that the abolitionists had "marched the nation to the brink of self-destruction in the name of an abstraction." Was freeing four million human beings from cruel bondage an *abstraction*?

Menand's Cold War thesis is even weaker. It is only another version of the old canard that McCarthyism shut down all freedom of thought. Thus the Left scapegoats its failure. In truth, throughout the Cold War, socialism and Marxism were freely debated and often espoused in American universities. Therefore: if philosophy departments at the time retreated from engagement with social and political issues, that cannot have been due to any national imperative. Relativism was the orthodoxy of cultural anthropologists during that period, and they flourished in academia. Therefore: it was not an alleged Cold War absolutism that made pragmatism unpopular. How silly!

So much for history. So much for philosophy. What we are left with is a large number of interesting stories, unfamiliar to most readers but none new, amusingly retold.

What, then, are we to make of the book's reception? Janet Maslin, writing in *The New York Times*, described the book as "unmistakably brilliant" and "a landmark work of scholarship."<sup>5</sup> In the same *Times* Sunday Book Review section, Jean Strouse, author of a biography of Alice James, sister of William and Henry, also declared the book "brilliant" and praised

its "richly nuanced reading."<sup>6</sup> Let us suppose that Maslin, Strouse, and the three historians on the Pulitzer Prize committee for history know nothing about philosophy. Are they not able, nonetheless, to see that a book that devotes such a small portion of its pages to a philosophy, cannot give a "nuanced," or probably even an intelligible, account of it? (And it is really four philosophies that are in play, since the four major figures discussed said very different things.) Well, perhaps it is the history that they liked. But could they have thought that Menand's historical account of the pragmatists' ideas—reductive as to ideas and implausible as to history—is nuanced or brilliant?

What is going on here? One hypothesis is suggested by a further comment of Strouse's, that Menand's account of pragmatism's reemergence "will join the current scholarly debate." What scholarly debate? This is an example of the journalistic hype, generally leftist, that is helping to distort academic life. Let me explain. When Menand speaks of pragmatism's reemergence it is to the unmentioned Rorty that he alludes. But Rorty, though he is fond of using phrases like "we pragmatists," leads, among professional philosophers, a parade of one. If you count Cornel West a philosopher, the parade is of two. Rorty's disciples are mainly in departments of literature; Menand, for example, professes English at the City University of New York. To speak of a scholarly debate over pragmatism is misleading. What we have, instead, is a journalistic buzz that has elevated a few left-leaning professors to celebrity status and won them inflated salaries for doing very little. Cornel West, famously quitting Harvard because he had been "disrespected" by its president, who dared to ask him to do some scholarly work, is only the latest example.

Scholarship of high quality survives

in various pockets of the academy, but it is its politicized simulacra that grab attention in undergraduate education and in the press. This debased coin drives out the good money. Even conservative journalists increasingly follow the Left's lead in reducing intellectual issues to an ideological pro-and-con. As that requires less mental effort, it makes their jobs easier.

In consequence, scholarship no longer commands respect. If it is all an ideological tussle anyway, then surely anyone who is bright and right-thinking can review any book, regardless of its subject. A particularly risible example was supplied by the *National Review's* book review editor, Michael Potemra, who assigned Menand's book to himself. Potemra professed himself "pleasantly surprised" that the left-wing polemic characteristic of Menand's earlier writing is absent from *The Metaphysical Club*.<sup>7</sup> But it is not. Menand's interpretation of pragmatism is tendentious from top to bottom. Potemra missed that because, being ignorant of the subject, he took Menand's word for what pragmatism is.

Scholarship's debasement is part of what Ortega y Gasset referred to as the

revolt of the masses. In this revolt, the masses do not rise; they bring everything else down to their level. A distinction between ignorance and knowledge is perhaps allowed, but it is denigrated as unimportant. Take, for example, Adam Begley's glowing review in the *New York Observer*. Begley gushed, "...he dips (help!) [sic] into Hegel and probability theory...."<sup>8</sup> But if mere dipping (an accurate word in this case) is cause for the reviewer to cry for help, then why does he think he is fit to review the book? Here is why: when scholarship is reduced to ideology, entertainment, and the culture of celebrity, then incompetence is no disqualification. If it is all sham anyway, what's the difference?

—Thomas Short

Chairman of the Board of Advisors  
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1. Page references parenthetical in the text are to this book. 2. *The New Republic*, Sept. 10, 2001, 35-39. See also Bruce Wilshire's highly critical review in the *Times Literary Supplement*, July 26, 2002. 3. *Pragmatism: A Reader* (New York, 1997). 4. *The New Criterion*, Nov. 1997, 67-70. 5. June 4. 6. June 10, 2001, 10. 7. July 9, 2001, 44-46. 8. August 12, 2001.



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