

## TRUTH OR CONSEQUENCES?

George Cotkin

**Cornel West.** *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989. 279 pp. Notes and index. \$42.50 (cloth); \$16.95 (paper).

**Daniel J. Wilson.** *Science, Community, and the Transformation of American Philosophy, 1860–1930.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990. x + 228 pp. Notes and index. \$29.95.

The great age of American philosophy, dominated by the figures of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Charles S. Peirce, William James, Josiah Royce, and John Dewey, consistently draws the attention of scholars from a variety of disciplines. These philosophers serve as a source of inspiration, a tradition to be appropriated, and a subject for sustained analysis. As debate about the nature of truth, the role of language, and the relationship between theory and practice rages in the humanities—occasionally drawing even historians into this thicket of controversy—the responses of an earlier generation of philosophers to these problems are increasingly interesting and important. Indeed, for those working in a postmodernist vein, American pragmatists immediately present themselves as formidable precursors. Those more comfortable with a traditionalist approach to meaning are drawn to the *via media*, or sweet reasonableness, in the formulations of American pragmatists, especially in contrast to the rough waves that break from the sea of recent French theory. Nevertheless, viewed from any vantage point, the golden age of American philosophy, from Emerson through Dewey, stands as the foundation upon which much of our present-day intellectual assumptions rest, sometimes comfortably, sometimes precariously.

The rich soil of thought in this period of American philosophy has been well tilled, but Cornel West and Daniel J. Wilson, each in his own fashion, seeks to coax yet another crop from it. Wilson's is the more traditional work, building upon and invariably seconding the analyses of Bruce Kuklick and James T. Kloppenberg.<sup>1</sup> Wilson focuses on the engagement of American philosophy with the power of science and the desire for a community of inter-

pretation, all played out within the context of professionalization. West's book is both challenging and enlightening, but also frustrating and diffuse. It pushes the edges of our understanding of the American philosophical tradition, with much that will be fascinating to historians, and especially to philosophers. West's alliterative characterization of the contours of American philosophy could be used to designate his own work's "preoccupation with power, provocation, and personality" (p. 5).

Beginning in the final decades of the nineteenth century, American philosophy, like a host of other disciplines, entered into its professional phase. Once the exclusive preserve of moralists and theologians, philosophy in the academy became a more specialized and scientific pursuit. The academization of philosophy opened up positions for secular thinkers, promoted a sense of community, and allowed for a technical and specialized discourse to rise to prominence. Whereas thinkers as important as William James and G. Stanley Hall had faced a barren plain for professional careers in the late 1860s and early 1870s, by the 1880s the philosophical enterprise had become a staple of academic life. Yet even as philosophy became a subject freed from theological pretensions, its status as the "queen of the sciences" came under increasing attack from the harder sciences. Psychology, once the stepchild of philosophy, rose to prominence by basing its approach solidly upon a scientific footing. In the view of one of its most vociferous proponents, J. McKeen Cattell, "the twilight of philosophy can be changed to its dawn only by the light of science, and psychology can contribute more light than any other science" (Wilson, p. 106). Sentiments such as this, tied to the cultural and intellectual hegemony then exercised by science led, by the turn of the century, to a crisis of faith among philosophers. Resolution depended upon how successfully philosophers incorporated the scientific point of view within their discourse and upon how well philosophers were able to develop the autonomy of their discipline within the university system.

The two problems were not distinct, for the success of philosophy within the academy often seemed to be a function of philosophers' ability to convince others, as well as themselves, of philosophy's congruence with science. The first generation of American philosophers had successfully, through the doctrine of pragmatism, steered a middle course between the presumably contending forces of science and religion. The generations that followed faced the rapacious appetite of the scientific ideal. In the emergent university system, where prestige and power were closely wedded to one's scientific credentials, the "cash value" of philosophy appeared to be paid out in a deflationary currency. Wilson carefully demonstrates how philosophers attempted to make science a centerpiece in their thought process. In a sense, this imperative was undertaken with less ease of operation than it had been

by an earlier generation of thinkers. After all, both James and Peirce had brought to philosophical study a firm training in the sciences; they well understood both the promises and dangers of a scientific frame of mind. Although less well trained in the practice of science, John Dewey and Arthur O. Lovejoy, for example, were paradigmatic of those philosophers who attempted to install scientific method into the philosophical enterprise. Philosophers deferred to the ideal of science because it offered a method of research and potential for an agreed upon subject matter, but also because it promoted a notion of a community that might arrive at common conclusions, and hence flirt with the apprehension of truth.

In practice, while nearly all philosophers paid obeisance to science, each thinker came up with a different solution about how science might influence philosophy or how philosophy might become more scientific. Some philosophers, such as James and Dewey, while recognizing that philosophy could benefit from the method and communal nature of science, never went so far as to suggest that philosophy become a science. Peirce, in contrast, pushed hard for a more scientific philosophy, willingly jettisoning literary elegance for technical terminology. Philosophy would, for Peirce, come to resemble the natural sciences, with investigators inching toward truth defined as a developing community of agreement. Morris R. Cohen believed that science would "cure speculative excesses" common to metaphysical inquiry, and that science offered philosophers a model of self-criticism. Yet Cohen rejected the increasingly technical and specialized flavor of philosophy, and maintained that philosophers must "never lose sight of the macrocosm" (p. 164).

The story that Wilson narrates is not necessarily one of success or progress. He readily admits that the evolution of philosophy from its theological and moral foundations to its scientific imperative and language was neither complete nor without a downside. Technical precision became more common and enticing but its social power declined—no longer would philosophy command a wide public audience. And, as Wilson indicates in a concluding precis of recent debates about the nature of philosophy being waged by Richard Rorty, Richard Bernstein, and others, it is uncertain whether ideals of truth and logical precision adhered to by earlier philosophers who embraced the scientific model have yielded results worth celebrating. But credits and debits notwithstanding, "the impact of science was clear. Science had affected both the development of their [philosophers'] ideas and the intellectual and social matrix within which they worked" (p. 182).

It remains uncertain, however, what consequences the ideal of science had upon the everyday practice and teaching of philosophy throughout America, at least through the 1930s. Did a technical approach to logic and epistemology replace the traditional philosophical engagement with moral and religious

questions? Had these new concerns gained the status of a philosophical paradigm by 1920? Certainly the fullest evaluation of this shift to a technical and professional philosophy, as revealed in Kuklick's statistical analysis of the Ph.D. program at Harvard, indicates that the glory days of morality as the chief concern of philosophers in America had passed by the first decades of the twentieth century. "Scholarly pursuits and professional careers," in Wilson's similar perspective, became the defining marks of the new generation of philosophers. Philosophers would find in the methodology and highly technical language of logical positivism and later analytic philosophy a domain that allowed them to cohere into a self-reproducing community of philosopher-scientists with little or no concern for the general intellectual problems that had perplexed philosophers in the final decades of the nineteenth century.

Yet Wilson demonstrates that a number of leading philosophers were agitated by the scientific-technical turn of philosophy. Their voices may be read as lonely, disgruntled testaments to the triumph of technical philosophy in the academy by 1920. But more research is required to determine the extent of such protests: How strong was the imperative for philosophers to address public issues in the years before the Second World War? How many philosophers, scattered in academic programs around the country, continued in their philosophy to propose Deweyan social reconstruction in a time of cultural crisis, thereby continuing the earlier tradition of the philosopher as public intellectual?

Although many philosophers' texts dealing with the issue of science are examined by Wilson, his work remains marred by a certain sense of abstraction at two different levels. First, from a Foucauldian perspective, one must inquire how philosophy functioned to produce knowledge and truth that exercised power and thereby defined the limits and possibilities of thought. Second, Wilson seems to forget the intimate relation between philosophy and the Darwinian revolution. Evolutionary thought was critical to the philosophy of James, Dewey, and even Peirce. James's espousal of religion, in part, was made possible by his clever use of the Darwinian ideal of survival value in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), while Dewey moved easily from Hegelianism to a historically-based philosophy by recourse to Darwinian ideas of process and change. By barely touching upon the impact of Darwinism on philosophical discourse, Wilson's discussion of science and philosophy becomes needlessly reified.

If Wilson, the historian, focuses on the internal history of philosophers in search of a method and community, Cornel West, the philosopher, chooses to examine how American philosophers and thinkers as diverse as W. E. B. DuBois, C. Wright Mills, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Lionel Trilling, working in a pragmatic mode, have functioned as "cultural critics." Alongside many

close readings of particular texts, West's spirited examination of the familiar names of American philosophers evaluates the political repercussions of how their thought both supported and questioned the realities of American life. In essence, West's view of pragmatism finds "profound insights and myopic blindnesses, enabling strengths and debilitating weaknesses all resulting from the distinctive features of American civilization" (p. 5). These features of American society and culture are paradoxical in the extreme—slavery and freedom, tradition and change. In this historical and contextual account, American pragmatism's power and promise rests in its willingness to engage "distinct social and cultural crises" in a future-oriented manner (pp. 5–8). Emphasis upon the duality or paradoxical nature of American pragmatic thought allows West to at once celebrate the power and provocation that Emerson, James, and Dewey offer while also noting, without pulling any punches, that their ideas were supportive of the underside of America, its racism, imperialism, sexism, etc.

There is a breathless quality to West's pace and prose. In the space of a thirty-page treatment of Emerson, West attempts to compare Emerson with Marx, evaluate Emerson's preoccupation with power, analyze Emerson's complex views on race, imperialism, the market economy, war, and fate. In the same pages, Emerson is characterized as, at turns, a spokesman for a particular class formation, an organic intellectual, as well as a quintessential American rebel! The bravura inherent in West's analysis is apparent. Historians will probably find much of what he says quite acceptable, perhaps even less than controversial and they may also consider West's contextualization of these thinkers a gesture rather than an example of thick historical description.

Philosophers will not be as comfortable with West's sustained social reading of the history of American philosophy. This is not West's fault. Philosophers generally prefer the tea of their precursors' thought without the added sugar of class or social analysis. In contrast, West recognizes Dewey as a social and cultural critic who evaded the traditional problems that are expected to be the primary concern of professional philosophers. However, he acknowledges, but only in passing, Dewey's professional concerns and his allegiance to a naturalistic, Aristotelian view of knowledge. What interests West in Dewey and other pragmatists, is their evasion of philosophy, their rejection of foundationalist or essentialist notions of knowledge and truth, and their forthright espousal of philosophy as a conversation and mode of continuous inquiry. Following the path blazed by Richard Rorty, albeit with a different political agenda, West discovers in the evasion of philosophy and the adoption of cultural criticism a beneficent defining mark of the American pragmatic tradition.

Some will find West's attempt to wrestle a meaningful, sustained tradition

out of a diverse group of thinkers a heroic reconceptualization of the past. It is not always clear how useful the created tradition is, since so much of it, in West's own view, founders on the shoals of racism, naive individualism, and class constraints. This is not a book for those faint of heart at the thought of a historian-philosopher employing the past for present-day political concerns: this is a leftist political work without apologies. In his concluding chapter, "Prophetic Pragmatism," West fires off a jeremiad, in the tradition of those thinkers he has been studying. The prophetic pragmatist perspective, the political position that West adopts, combines aspects of Emersonian democracy, Deweyan historicism, and Peircean ideals of community, to name only a few of its sources. Neither utopian nor pessimistic, prophetic pragmatism, in the tradition of William James and Reinhold Niebuhr, "promotes the possibility of human progress and the human impossibility of paradise" (p. 229). Nonetheless, West's view is more than a variant of "chastened liberalism" or political quietism. On the contrary, he contends that prophetic pragmatism will creatively join thought and action in a postmodern fashion. The evasion of epistemology-centered philosophy that stands as the centerpiece of the American philosophical tradition will function as a call to "serious thought and moral action" under the sign of the best that exists within religious and secular modes of interpretation and experience (p. 239).

One need not share West's political perspective to find his book an intriguing example of a historical-philosophical text that attempts to reconcile two opposing approaches to historical study. If the lines between a contextualist approach enunciated by David Hollinger and a textualist analysis promoted by David Harlan in their *American Historical Review* debate seem at times too rigid, then West's book commendably attempts to combine the approaches.<sup>2</sup> He is certainly enthusiastic in placing his philosophers within the context of society, while also using history in a creative sense, to develop a tradition that speaks less to firm notions of static historical meaning than to the development of a historical past that is intended to lead its readers to a heightened awareness of the power of thought and tradition. And, perhaps, that is one of the critical consequences of history if not of truth.

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1. Bruce Kuklick, *The Rise of American Philosophy: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1860-1930* (1977); James T. Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870-1970* (1986).

2. David Harlan, "Intellectual History and the Return of Literature," and David A. Hollinger, "The Return of the Prodigal: The Persistence of Historical Knowing" and Harlan's "Reply to David Hollinger," in *American Historical Review* 94 (June 1989): 581-626.