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America talking to itself: A note on "American" philosophy

Steven Schroeder looks at uniquely "American" philosophy and argues for a more mature body of thought that ceases to be concerned only with America itself. Instead, new philosophy must reconnect again with the great philosophical questions, he argues.

In *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, published in 1989, Cornel West described an intellectual renaissance driven by three concerns: "disenchantment with philosophy as a transcendental inquiry adjudicating matters of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty; preoccupation with the relationship of knowledge with power, cognition with control, discourse with politics; and concern with human agency." Tracing the genealogy of American pragmatism back from this renaissance through Richard Rorty and his pragmatist critics to Ralph Waldo Emerson, West notes a philosophical evasion of epistemology that transforms philosophy into a broader and more literary cultural criticism. In this quintessentially American philosophical practice, public intellectuals articulate the meaning of America in response to distinct social and cultural crises. American pragmatism is not a narrowly defined tradition that proposes solutions to perennial problems of Western philosophy so much as a continuous cultural commentary that attempts "to explain America to itself" at particular historical moments. This image of America talking to itself at particular moments in particular places will be my guidepost in this discussion, which is itself preliminary to a more extended exploration: my intention here is merely to point the way. Since my concern is not limited to pragmatism, I will take the image back a little further than West didÑback to Jonathan Edwards, who wrote in "America" before the United States came into existence, and to writers often referred to in the United States as "founding fathers"ÑThomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine, and James Madison. This is an essay in American philosophy, but one of the things West's description makes clear is that American philosophy is not strictly limited to the work of professional philosophers: in this essay, I will explore not only pragmatism and professional philosophers but also poets, playwrights, essayists, preachers, and writers of fiction who have contributed to uniquely "American" ways of looking at the world.

I begin by highlighting themes that have been of particular interest to "American" philosophers and approaches that have shaped the ways in which American philosophy thinks of itselfÑand ways in which the rest of the world has thought of both America and American philosophy. West's focus on pragmatism is important here, because that is the philosophical approach most often identified with "America," meaning, usually, the United States. Before there was pragmatism, though, there was a characteristically American variation on themes of concern to European, particularly British, philosophy.

This is not surprising, since "America" began as a project of European colonization. Though indigenous voices are not often heard in the "mainstream" of philosophy identified with this project, that mainstream is indelibly marked by their silences (a reminder that we need to learn to read between the lines and listen carefully to silences, which are as important as sounds in communication, equally essential to speech). Jonathan Edwards, for example, takes up Locke's image of "America" as a sort of "natural" state prior to the effectsÑgood and badÑof civilization. (This is what Locke had in mind when he said that "in the beginning, all the world was America," a phrase picked up by the playwright Suzan−Lori Parks in her decidedly critical "The America Play.") The inhabitants of such a state are of interest as "pre−civilized" and uncorrupted examples of what human beings look like in a state of nature. That is a caricature, but it is not unusual for settlers to caricature the inhabitants of the places they occupy. Such caricature is a kind of defense mechanism that avoids interacting with the real people who are already there, already shaping cities in the "empty" places colonizers propose to fill. (There are repeated examples of this in U.S. historyÑboth during the westward expansion that eventually carried the United States from the Atlantic all the way to the Pacific Ocean, sweeping over many indigenous peoples in the process and forcibly seizing land from Mexico in a war that followed annexation of Texas, and in response to waves of immigrants, where caricature is directed at newcomers rather than indigenous peoples.)

Colonialism and the contradictions it involvesÑthe unsettling character of settling, Mark Taylor calls itÑmay well be the first of the distinct social and cultural crises in West's image of American philosophy. Edwards is concerned with "freedom" and "will" because Locke was concerned with those things and both write against the immediate backdrop of the English civil war and the so−called "Glorious Revolution" that redefined the relationship between Parliament and King, when Parliament called William and Mary to jointly occupy the throne rather than (as had been the case up to that point) being called by the Sovereign. But Edwards is also concerned with these issues because of the theological influence of Calvinism, in which "will" is a particular emphasis at least in part because God's sovereignty is taken to be absolute, meaning that human sovereignty is always limited and, at best, relative. And Edwards is concerned with these issues because he is a reflective settler for whom settling is unsettling and for whom colonialism raises questions about the human agency of those who colonize and those who are colonized. It is worth noting here that slavery poses similar questions and is the crisis that drives American philosophy from the eighteenth through the nineteenth centuries, overlapping with the origins of pragmatism. The impact of both slavery and Westward expansion on American political philosophy cannot be overestimated. The Constitution of the United States, for example, includes compromises that attempt both to maintain the institution of slavery and to enshrine "universal" human rights. It is telling that these compromises enter in allocation of representation, one of the issues around which the American Revolution coalesced. A slave society confronts serious obstacles when it begins to think about "freedom" in more than strictly localized terms.

When Edwards takes up the question of "freedom," he steps into a tradition that reaches back in Christian theology through Jean Calvin, Martin Luther, and Augustine. (Luther, for example, defined the Christian asÑsimultaneouslyÑa perfectly free lord subject to none and a perfectly bound servant subject to all.) This doesn't mean that Edwards leaves philosophy behind. It does mean that, like many philosophers and theologians in the West, he explores territory that is common to philosophy and theology, territory that has traditionally been thoroughly entangled with religious beliefs. In this case, the paradox that interests Edwards and his theological predecessors is that of a "fallen" and "sinful" humanity simultaneously free and unable to do the right thing. More important philosophically, though, is the attention he gives to the tension between a "natural" order in which things simply are as they are and a "moral" order in which things might be otherwise. That "might be" is critical for freedom, and Edwards sets the tone for an American tradition that (as West noted in his description of a contemporary renaissance) is concerned with human agency. Edwards didn't give up on "transcendental inquiry," but he certainly took a turn toward the connection of power with knowledge and toward the human agent. One of the interesting things to watch in American philosophy is the disconnection of those concerns from transcendental inquiry. Americans often think of themselves as entirely "practical" peopleÑconcerned with what "works" and impatient with anything else; but this way of thinking often leads to unexamined assumptions about what "is." Abandoning "transcendental inquiry" or "metaphysics" may mean simply leaving what "is" unexamined. So we will want to watch carefully what happens in the development from Edwards through Emerson toward Rorty.

Assumptions about what "is" are particularly noticeable in the Jeffersonian language of the Declaration of Independence. "We hold these truths to be self evident," that document confidently proclaims. Those "self evident" truths (about equality, rights, and a Creator capable of endowing human beings with them) provided the basis for more than a century of human rights language and human rights legislation, language and legislation that continues to influence international dialogue on rights today. Given the fact that Edwards, who has not always been adequately appreciated as a philosopher, attends so carefully to perception and its relation to freedom, a second look is in order. We may have overlooked Edwards's argument and, as a result, failed to adequately understand the import of arguments offered by thinkers like Paine and Jefferson. Paine, for example, was acutely aware of the confusion that exists between "custom" and "morality"Ñas well as between "custom" and Nature. "The long habit of not thinking a thing wrong," he wrote, "creates the superficial impression of its being right." Custom carries a kind of momentum that may become so strong that it looks like "necessity." Edwards might well suggest that we consider this necessity particular, then locate the problem in a confusion between this particular necessity and necessity that is general or absolute. It may be that custom erects barriers to change that are insurmountable here and nowÑbut does that mean they are insurmountable in every place and time? Paine, Jefferson, and Madison are most interesting philosophically because they respond to this question experimentallyÑlooking at possibilities rather than simply assuming impossibilities. Reading Paine, Jefferson, and Madison, we encounter specific economic and political proposals that continue to have significance beyond the boundaries of the United States. (While writing the first draft of this article in the People's Republic of China, I was mindful that it might be particularly interesting to think together about why the practical political proposals articulated by Jefferson and Madison were adopted as "mainstream" in the United States, while Paine's economic proposals were largely forgotten or suppressed. Might that be one key to facilitating conversation about human rights between ChinaÑwhich has tended to emphasize economic rightsÑand the United StatesÑwhich has tended to emphasize political rights?)

I used the word "experimental" a moment ago, and that is critical to American philosophyÑparticularly to pragmatism. The roots of American philosophy lie in Locke and a variety of British empiricism that grew increasingly skeptical of claims about the way the world "is." In his treatise on human understanding, Locke articulated an epistemological theory, a theory of knowledge, in which knowledge is constructedÑwe might say the mind is constructedÑin interaction with the world. Now, that has sometimes been interpreted as an entirely passive thingÑthe mind as a *tabula rasa* on which the world writesÑbut it is most interesting when it is understood as an interactive thingÑmind and world writing one another. I certainly don't want to claim that American philosophy has always taken that direction, but there is an experimental strand in which attention to what "works" is motivated as much by possibility thinking as by a crass materialistic drive to accumulate. Watch American philosophers beginning with Edwards think about what it means for an action to "work." Not all of them will judge that by economic payoff (though it is important to keep in mind that the underside of American philosophy has been a tendency to think it works if it makes you rich.)

West speaks of an evasion of epistemology, but American philosophy looks more like an evasion of metaphysics. It is perhaps most accurate to think of it as an evasion of both that takes the form of an obsession with pragmatics. There has often been little attention to theory, particularly theory concerned with knowledge and/or the "isness" of the universe. Perhaps that explains why so much American thought gets poured into "managerial" studies: what "is" is not subject to critical reflection, though it may be put to use; and how we know is of far less interest than that we have practical skills enabling us to get things done. A close reading of the origins of pragmatism, though, will reveal just how far this managerial thinking has departed from its supposed roots.

West locates the roots of pragmatism (accurately, I think) in an Emersonian "prehistory." He doesn't include Emerson in the category of "pragmatism," but he considers turns Emerson took to be essential precursors to that style of philosophy. In this regard, it is interesting that Emerson repudiated an obsession with memory that he thought tied American philosophy to its European past. It would be a mistake to take that too far, particularly since Emerson's memory was pretty good. But it may partly explain the curious disconnectedness of much American thinking, its ability to simply leave the past behind and blunder into a future that is always entirely new. At the same time, it may partly explain a different variety of obsession with the pastÑthe kinds of intricate explorations of memory that one finds in the tradition of American memoir, which begins with slave narratives such as those of Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Jacobs and is continued in contemporary work of writers like Toni Morrison (particularly in *Beloved*, but also in *Paradise* and in her earlier work), Houston Baker, Octavia Butler, and Suzan−Lori Parks (whom I mentioned above). So, we are confronted with a simultaneous repudiation of memoryÑparticularly the memory of EuropeÑand a struggle to recover a violent past that distorts both present and future.

Add to this Thoreau's repudiation of authorityÑinsisting in the best American tradition that "that government is best which governs least." This repudiation has had an effect parallel to the repudiation of memory. American thought has been marked by simultaneous rejection of authority and obsession with it. By leaving both the past and authority unexamined, it has often underwritten a remarkable degree of conformityÑa sort of parody of the "invisible hand" in which the touch is so light that those touched are not even aware of the hand's existence. This, in fact, is what Thoreau argued against in his treatise that came to be called "On Civil Disobedience." Thoreau advocated a critical perspective on all authorityÑthe kind of "perpetual revolution" also favored by Jefferson and Mao Zedong. It is perhaps surprising to find that right at the heart of

American philosophy, and we will want to watch carefully how it has been transformed. What begins with Emerson as a call to break with Europe and with Thoreau as a call to relentlessly question authority may be distorted into a call simply to forget and do whatever you want to do. Reading the history of American philosophy with care will make the philosophical legitimacy of any such call suspect.

In this regard, it's important to keep in mind that Americans (probably like everybody else) routinely turn our "heroes" into subjects of controversy. Is Thoreau a champion of radical individualism or of revolutionary criticismÑor was he just an old misanthropic crank who really couldn't handle being around people, the first in a long line of American environmentalists who thought of Nature as wilderness devoid of people? Is Tom Paine a libertarian or an early advocate of democratic socialismÑor just a trouble maker (Ronald Reagan referred to him as a "dirty little atheist") who liked to wander the world picking fights?

The way Americans have done this is not absolutely unique (I suspect that something similar is going on in China and Taiwan, for example, with Sun Yat Sen), but we have made it identifiably "American"; and I think West has it right when he characterizes this way as America explaining itself to itself. Speaking as an American, I can say with confidence that "we" talk nonstopÑand mostly to ourselves. Reading American philosophy, then, feels a little like eavesdropping. When Jefferson goes through his long list of reasons for the revolution in the Declaration of Independence, he is not trying to convince King George or some court of world opinion. He is appealing to a people who at the time of the Declaration don't think of themselves as a people. In an odd way, that has continued to mark philosophical discourse in the American tradition, making "America" simultaneously uncertain of its identity and willing to assert it whenever and wherever it pleases. (Listen to both the current President Bush and his father justifying U.S.military action against IraqÑor the current enemy *du jour*. Over and over, the question "why" is answered with "because we are Americans" Ñwhich, of course, is not an answer at all, certainly not to that question.)

"We" take our name from that of an Italian explorer and mapmaker (Amerigo Vespucci) that was applied to a "new" world so conceived because it was new to Europe. (This is a reminder, by the way, of the power of maps: people who make the maps get to name the world.) The name originally applied to that whole worldÑexploration of which would carry us deep into philosophical territory that I can only skim hereÑhas been largely appropriated by a single nation that (as Emerson was aware) has struggled with its European past. No wonder Americans are simultaneously assertive and insecureÑtypically adolescent, as my Ghanaian friend Kofi Opoku used to remind me.

There's nothing wrong with being adolescent, of course; but getting stuck there is a problem, and that's a problem that should always be borne in mind in reflecting on "American" philosophy. I am reminded of Chairman Mao's response when he was asked whether he thought the American Revolution was a success: he said "It's too soon to tell." In my reflection on American philosophy, I want to be on the lookout for a maturing body of thought that is still quite young by global standards, a body developing out of a nation that (as John Cage suggested at the time of the U.S. bicentennial) is one nation among others in the worldÑnothing more, nothing less. My hope is that if we can get to that point, we can stop talking incessantly to ourselves and make a real contribution to a conversation that is bigger than all of us.

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