

Preface

I recall attending an annual meeting of the American something-or-other society for the study of the classical world (“in all respects”) sometime in the middle ’60s, in Cincinnati, Ohio. The University of Cincinnati had a first-rate classics department. My friend, Hamish Cameron, a colleague at the University and a member of the department, thought it would amuse me to see how things were done. We found ourselves at one point in a largish conference room ready for cocktails. It seemed as if everyone could have taken a seat in an easy chair in that one room. Cameron began to identify some of the luminaries. “Do you remember that debate?” he asked. I don’t really remember the precise topic, but it must have been related to an up-to-date version of the Quarrel-between-the-Ancients-and-the-Moderns. He then defined two “positions” which seemed to collect two great legions of academics pitted heroically against one another over what might have been an age. “Well, the first is the opinion of that man over there”—pointing him out—“and the other is the view of that man”—now pointing to the other end of the room. Suddenly the scale of the sort of debates one only reads about quickly shrank to their actual size. I started thinking that even Plato’s *Dialogues* were really based only on chance remarks in fortuitous conversations on a very small number of occasions. Cameron had identified the editors of two learned journals, who pursued their personal harangue in the pages of their own properties.

The philosophical academy is not quite so small, I admit; but it *is* still rather on the small side, if you compare it with other university disciplines. For example, it takes three or four very large hotels, in the largest cities, to house the meetings of the American Psychological Association, whereas the professional philosophers tend to fit nicely into one moderately sized hotel even in the smaller cities. The United States itself is an immensely large country that has supported a professoriat (in philosophy) that runs into the thousands. Nevertheless, when you read the leading disputes, or reports and analyses of what they are said to have accomplished, which seem to engage

the attention of the entire guild, you cannot help noticing that a very small handful of figures dominate the entire discourse—they appear to be everywhere—possibly stitching together the general drift of all the conversations we might collect in a way not terribly different from the way the figure we know as Socrates unifies the *Dialogues*. One needs some such mechanism to catch the unity of the changing fashions of debate, especially where the issues are somewhat abstruse and often threatened by an uncertain logic. That is what I have sought to define in *The Unraveling of Scientism*.

American philosophy achieved its best standing and greatest influence only in the second half of the twentieth century. It was hardly more than a minor, respectable presence in Eurocentric philosophy in the first half of the century, largely through the reception of the classic pragmatists—chiefly, when all is said and done, as a result of John Dewey’s enormous energy and productivity. Charles Peirce was undoubtedly a greater figure and William James was plainly more magnetic. But Peirce was all but unknown, and James was disinclined to be systematic in his philosophy. There would have been no well-formed movement known as pragmatism were it not for Dewey’s indefatigable labors.

That’s not unimportant to my story, because, in the second half of the last century, American philosophy divides oppositionally along the lines of pragmatism and what we now call analytic philosophy. The same cast of characters dominates the narratives of both movements but with very different weightings. As far as pragmatism goes, as that has come to be understood, the leading pragmatists of the “second wave” (self-styled and flawed) are surely Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam; but you cannot understand what happened from the 1970s to the end of the century and what the resurgence of pragmatism meant (in the period in question) without examining the relationship between Rorty and Putnam and the leading American analysts, Donald Davidson and W. V. Quine. For related reasons, the altered energies of American analytic philosophy, after mid-century, came to be dominated by Quine’s large presence and, increasingly, though also more quarrelsomely, by Davidson’s more cautious efforts. You cannot really penetrate what their work signifies without at least reviewing *their* reception by the latter-day “pragmatists” Rorty and Putnam and the late resurgence of new versions of the scientistic reading of the philosophy of science.

I concede that it is something of a distortion to advance the idea that the entire fifty years of the end-of-century and a bit of the twenty-first should be occupied primarily with the work of no more than four men. And although I myself don’t think it’s true, I also don’t think anyone could give a rounded sense of the significance of what was accomplished (in the period,

which has just been made part of the past) if one didn't feature just these four philosophers. Certainly, they are hardly figures of equal standing. Quine is assuredly the most important, viewed in terms of the permanence of his contribution. I have no doubt that his paper "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" (1951), together with *Word and Object* (1960), will influence the technical treatment of strategic topics long after the other three settle into footnotes. But even Quine's fortunes come under severe fire in the period in question, and it remains to be said what of permanent importance Quine finally contributed. The entire span of American philosophy in any sense close to contemporary taste hardly goes back before the end of the Civil War. So it is worth noting that it might not unfairly be claimed to have reached its zenith among the most salient Eurocentric currents only in the second half of the twentieth century. All the more reason to ask how compelling its best work really is.

I sensed the importance of writing a manageable sketch of both pragmatism and analytic philosophy (for the period in question) sometime during the last five years of the last century. It's risky, of course, to report in a detailed way on one's own time even if, as Hegel believed, philosophy, like art and history, is the expression of an age remembered in its own time. The validity of such a tale normally requires a much greater temporal distance. Though I think much of its detail and interest would have been lost if the sketch had waited politely for another generation to pass.

In any event, the original plan took the form of two separate studies: the first, *Pragmatism Reinvented*, appeared earlier (2002); the second, *The Unraveling of Scientism* (2003), now joins the first, which colors and is colored by the other. I don't know of any similarly sustained attempt, and I admit that, in offering my assessment, I am hardly a disinterested party. But then, philosophy is a partisan matter, which the recent history of American philosophy amply bears out. I would say that "objectivity" is a function of an ongoing contest between informed partisans. Here we are not very far from what Cameron noted in the conference we visited. But of course this doesn't mean that we cannot distinguish between good and bad arguments. Nevertheless, it does suggest that the effort is not as easy as it may seem.

I felt the need, I should add, to work quite quickly, to catch all the important philosophical beads on a reliable string before they were scattered like the exceptional ephemera that they really are. I felt the need particularly in writing about the "second wave" of pragmatism—about Rorty's and Putnam's papers. But it proved impossible as well to make sense of Davidson's continuation of, and reaction to, Quine's new leadership among the American "analysts" without capturing the sense in which Davidson played a

mutated role in the seemingly independent quarrels between Rorty and Putnam. That very qualification could not have been reliably identified without demonstrating just how Davidson's own philosophical program really counts Quine as its principal target, despite the fact that it seems at first to be so very close to Quine's project.

You can imagine how complicated the final story would have to be, hostage as it was to the peculiar transience of all the philosophical turns of the period. Davidson tries to steer Quine in his direction, but Quine resists; Quine engages the important scientisms of the first half of the century (distantly, it's true), but Davidson hardly discusses them at all; Davidson and Rorty never find more than uncertain common ground (which Rorty makes much more of than Davidson), though you cannot finally say just who is cannibalizing whom; Putnam is closest to Carnap's original concerns and those of the early strands of the philosophy of science, but American analytic philosophy increasingly marginalizes its original questions without abandoning or legitimating its insistent scientism; Rorty attempts to characterize Quine as a postmodernist of sorts, but Quine publicly demurs. The entire tale demands a careful reckoning. Yet that reckoning could not have been attempted, so soon after the event, without relying on a sense of a very small number of very small conversations overheard by an entire continent—as well as abroad. Through it all, one begins to hear American voices speculating about the prospects of ending their isolation, of forming alliances with Europe.

Now that I've completed the labor, I venture to say—in a friendly way—that the record of the last half-century is, philosophically, largely a record of the dawning exhaustion of an impressive vision (scientism) and the incompletely developed, still somewhat inchoate, possibilities of a promising alternative philosophy (pragmatism). The strength of the latter lies, I think, in being closer to the corrective lessons of the post-Kantian and post-Hegelian world that never lost sight of the inescapable strategy by which to escape the paradoxes of pre-Kantian philosophy. The analytic tradition has, of course, a longer and more brilliant record. But, truth to tell, it has never managed to overcome the nagging *aporiai* of what is now read as Cartesianism.

My sense is that only the combined talents of the pragmatist and analyst could possibly make a reasonably complete American philosopher and that only such a figure would be comfortable enough to reestablish communications with the important work of the continental European world or promote discussions with the Asian world. The exhaustion I speak of is, surely, also Eurocentric, as much British as continental. I'll make no prophecies of

what our century may now expect. Except to say that perceived exhaustion is not a bad thing to spot when it is really there. For then, reasonable philosophers, like reasonable politicians, will try to think more carefully of the now-global setting of their future labors.

I must, before I begin, thank Ruth Brooks for her usual skill and reliability in putting my manuscripts in good order; also, Roger Haydon at Cornell University Press, whom I count a friend and reliable adviser; finally, an anonymous reader for the Press who gave me some very good suggestions about improving the book.

J.M.

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