

*Native
Pragmatism*

RETHINKING THE ROOTS
OF AMERICAN PHILOSOPHY

SCOTT L. PRATT

INDIANA
UNIVERSITY
PRESS

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CHAPTER ONE

The Problem of Origins

IN MOST HISTORIES OF American thought in general and in histories of American philosophy in particular, people indigenous to America are viewed as having made no contribution to the intellectual, moral, and social progress of immigrant European peoples. From this perspective, the immigrants invariably viewed America as an obstacle to be overcome, a resource to be used, or even an opportunity to be exploited as part of the progress of a European vision of humankind. One version of this story sees American thought as the development of distinctive conceptual responses of European science, religion, and philosophy to the wilderness of North America. America makes no intellectual contribution, only a material one. As Frederick Jackson Turner put it in his famous 1893 address “The Significance of The Frontier,” “Our early history is the study of European germs developing in an American environment” (Turner 1996, 3). Another version sees American thought as a combination of European ideas with ideas that emerged spontaneously from the minds of European-descended thinkers in America. In either version, America’s native inhabitants matter little. While America’s plants, animals, water, and minerals all are viewed as the raw material for humanity’s future, Native American peoples are taken as an insignificant group of primitive people who are neither raw materials (except as slaves) nor possible contributors to the rich intellectual life of immigrant Europeans.

Histories of American philosophy, in fact, face a problem of origins. Although most provide good reasons to see American thought as dependent upon and as a further development of European philosophical resources, they are significantly less clear about what makes American philosophy something more than just European philosophy in America. As a result, histories of American philosophy tend to tell either a version

of the frontier story in which ideas from Europe adapt to the trials of the wilderness or a story of genius in which what is American springs from the minds of talented European Americans. The first leaves the source of recognizably different American thought a mystery, and so the story of origins remains incomplete. The frontier story focuses on why different aspects of European thought might have been called up by the very non-European circumstances faced in America, but it still leaves apparently “new” ways of understanding and acting in the world unexplained. The second strategy locates the origins of distinctive aspects of American philosophy in the remarkable insights of extraordinary men breaking free of age-old limitations. In this case, the problem of the origins of distinctively American thought is explained, but only by converting the problem into a mystery of human genius. Both approaches have value, but there is another alternative. I will argue that the problem of origin can also be addressed by recognizing the origin of distinctive aspects of American philosophy in Native American thought.

When American philosophers in the late nineteenth century first began to reflect on the history of philosophy, they boldly declared their dependence on European ideas alone. Noah Porter, president of Yale College and one of the first American philosophers to describe the history of American philosophy, identifies the major influences: English, French, and German philosophy. The American tradition as he presents it “followed the lead of England, her mother country . . . and has, in some cases, outrun the scholars of England in a readiness to follow the processes and to appropriate results of speculation on the continent” (Porter 1894, 443). Absent from Porter’s assessment is recognition of any distinctly American influences, and indeed he rejects the idea of an American genius. “America,” he concludes, “cannot boast of many writers of pre-eminent philosophical ability or achievements, [though] it can show a record of honorable interest on the part of not a few of its scholars” (Porter 1894, 443). In this case, American philosophy is European philosophy in a wilderness America.

Herbert Schneider, the great historian of American philosophy, seems to agree with Porter. He prefaces his 1946 history with the flat assessment that “in America . . . it is useless to seek a ‘native’ tradition, for even our most genteel traditions are saturated with foreign inspirations.” The list of inspirations he provides is not brief. Immigrants came laden with ideas from their homelands, and America was an ideal stage for these developments. Schneider concludes, “America was intellectually colonial long after it gained political independence and has been intellectually provincial long after it ceased being intellectually colonial.

We still live intellectually on the fringe of European culture” (Schneider 1946, vii–viii).

This story of American philosophy echoes the story of American progress told by Turner. “The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought.” At first the wilderness “strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and moccasin. . . . [because at] the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man.” Using his imported resources, however, European man is able to “transform” the wilderness, “but the outcome is not the old Europe, not simply the development of Germanic germs. . . . The fact is, that here is a new product that is American” (Turner 1996, 4). While the material contribution of America is made clear, America’s intellectual contribution is obscure. Turner asserts that “from the conditions of frontier life came intellectual traits,” but it remains unclear how distinctive American “traits” could emerge in the intellectually closed society he portrays.

The alternative history, the story of genius, is proposed by Vernon Parrington in his seminal *Main Currents of American Thought*.¹ Parrington affirms the European origins of American thought but suggests its distinctive qualities are not merely a product of encountering difficulties and opportunities in the process of colonizing North America. Instead, the difference is found in ideas created *ex nihilo*. Distinctive American thought—here American liberalism—was the product of three kinds of “materials.” The first was “the plentiful liberalisms” of seventeenth-century Europe; the second, British natural rights philosophy and French Romanticism; and the third, “the native liberalisms that had *emerged spontaneously* from a decentralized [immigrant] society” (emphasis added, Parrington 1927, 1: xii). The thesis of the spontaneous originality of European American thinkers is held by a variety of commentators. Lewis Mumford, in his 1926 book *The Golden Day*, helped to refocus interest

1. One of the earliest academic philosophers to discuss an American philosophical tradition was James McCosh, an Edinburgh-trained philosopher and president of Princeton University. Despite American dependence on European sources, McCosh shared Parrington’s commitment to the idea of an American genius. In an 1887 paper, “What an American Philosophy Should Be,” McCosh declares, “The time has come, I believe, for America to declare her independence in philosophy” (McCosh 1887, 3). Such a philosophy must, like other national philosophies (e.g., German, French, and English), somehow reflect the “national character.” “If a genuine American philosophy arises, it must reflect the genius of the people. Now, Yankees are distinguished from most others by their practical observation and invention. They have a pretty clear notion of what a thing is, and, if it is of value, they take steps to secure it.” The result, according to McCosh, is that an American philosophy will be “Realistic” (McCosh 1887, 4).

on nineteenth-century American literature and philosophy in part by declaring its originality. Affirming European descent, Mumford declares unambiguously that, "The settlement of America had its origins in the unsettlement of Europe. . . . The dissociation, displacement, and finally, the disintegration of European culture became most apparent in the New World: but the process began in Europe, and the interests that eventually dominated the American scene had their origin in the Old World" (Mumford 1926, 11). At the same time, the distinctiveness of the "New World" was the product of spontaneous creation exemplified in the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson. He was, says Mumford, "the first American philosopher with a fresh doctrine. . . . He was an original, in the sense that he was a source . . . a sort of living essence" (Mumford 1926, 94–95). American thought in general and American philosophy in particular, Mumford argues, are to be viewed as a new stage of human development, standing on the ruins of a disintegrated medieval culture and free of its alter ego European industrialism. For Mumford, American thought at its best stands with Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Walt Whitman as adolescent sons of European immigrants bright with potential but still trying to overcome their dependence.

In an important way, historians of American philosophy were simply stating conclusions already implied in the conception of America dominant in nineteenth-century European philosophy. When, in 1857, G. W. F. Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* was published in English, his conclusions reaffirmed a well-established expectation. "What has taken place in [America] up to now is but an echo of the Old World and the expression of an alien life; and as a country of the future, [America] is of no interest to us here, for prophecy is not the business of philosophy" (Hegel 1975, 171; also see 1861, 90). When American philosophers and historians framed the story of American intellectual development as progress from Europe westward to the American colonies and across North America they followed Hegel, who set the stage for such histories by framing the history of human consciousness in similar geographical terms. As American philosophers established strong ties with German philosophy in the early and middle nineteenth century, Hegel became a crucial influence. Lacking other ways to conceptualize their own history within the recognized tradition, American philosophers seemed willing to accept his.

For Hegel, human history is the process of *geist* or spirit becoming aware of itself by manifesting itself in the real world. Since this concrete actualization occurs in actual locations, geography plays a crucial role in the process (Hegel 1975, 152ff.). The physical environments that pro-

vide the context for the development of *geist* are of three types: mountains, valleys, and coasts. These environments are distributed in such a way that the three continents of the pre-Columbian tripartite world play particular roles in the process. African geography and its particular climate, viewed as mountainous and hostile, provides a physical environment for “natural” human beings. According to Hegel, indigenous Africans have not yet “reached an awareness of any substantial objectivity—for example, of God or the law—in which the will of man could participate and in which he could become aware of his own being” (Hegel 1975, 177). Since native Africans lack self-consciousness, they also lack history. Africa thus serves as a fixed point against which the progress of *geist* can be seen. Asia, on the other hand, provides a geography of mountains and wide river valleys where human beings begin to become conscious of themselves. Transactions between people of the mountains and people of the valleys provide the first thesis and antithesis necessary to generate the synthesis of consciousness. And with consciousness, history begins. Just as “the sun rises in the Orient,” Hegel observes, “world history travels from east to west.” (Hegel 1975, 196–197). Yet, while the native people of Asia are the beginning of history and consciousness, they are nevertheless hampered by a kind of “self-oblivion” which comes with the first moments of awareness. Hegel compares these first moments with the experience of “someone watching the moment of daybreak, the spreading of the light, and the rise of the sun in all its majesty. Descriptions of this kind tend to emphasize the rapture, astonishment, and infinite self-oblivion which accompany this moment of clarity” (Hegel 1975, 196).

As history and consciousness move westward toward Europe, the “astonishment” diminishes, and human beings progress from “passive contemplation to activity, to independent creation” (Hegel 1975, 196). Europe, then, becomes the place where *geist* achieves self-consciousness. Here the land is characterized by mountains, valleys, and coast and forms a rich interactive environment—here the physical potential of the European continent combines with the potential of *geist* to generate the endpoint of progress. The progress of humankind, then, is at once geographical, moving with the sun from east to west, and spiritual, moving from the unconscious, animal-like native African to the self-aware, intellectual European. “Europe,” Hegel concludes, “is the absolute end of history, just as Asia is its beginning” (Hegel 1975, 197).

America’s place in Hegel’s scheme is necessarily less clear. Given that the logic of the development of *geist* was already exhausted by the three-part Old World and its people, he was forced to conclude that “the only principle left over for America would be that of incompleteness or con-

stant non-fulfillment” (Hegel 1975, 172). It is no surprise then that America is viewed by Hegel and many of his successors as having no important intellectual contribution of its own to make to the development of humanity. Without giving Native Americans a role in the dialectical story of the progress of *geist* of the sort granted the native people of the tripartite world, Hegel simply concludes that the American peoples “were destroyed” through contact with the Europeans. At best, the Americans could be thought of as “a purely natural culture that had to perish as soon as the spirit approached it.” He summarizes, “America has always shown itself physically and spiritually impotent, and it does so to this day” (Hegel 1975, 162). Despite this sweeping conclusion, America as a land does find a place in the three-part story of the development of *geist* whose “absolute end” is Europe. “Since the original American nation has vanished—or as good as vanished—the effective population comes for the most part from Europe, and everything that happens in America has its origin [in Europe]” (Hegel 1975, 165). In short, America is an all but empty land ready to serve as a resource for the further development of humankind whose most advanced stage is found in European peoples.

The story of American intellectual dependence on Europe was reasserted after World War II by a new generation of historians of American thought. Philosophers such as Joseph Blau and Morris Cohen retold the old story of the origin of American philosophy in English and French thought, its distinctive qualities largely a matter of the peculiarities of conquest and colonization.² In 1972, Morton White took up the task of recovering the origins of American philosophy in his *Science and Sentiment in America*. Although critical in the end of the American tradition’s reliance on “sentiment” and its resulting anti-intellectualism, White traces the origins of such thinking directly to European sources. “In the beginning,” he intones, “American philosophy was a colonial philosophy—as derivative and unoriginal as one might expect it to be in an outpost of civilization” (White 1972, 9). Literally sustained by philosophical development in Europe, America’s “philosophical subservience” continued after the Civil War when the work of Charles Darwin and J. S. Mill set the boundaries for philosophical investigation. “From the beginning then,” White concludes, “American philosophy was dominated by transatlantic philosophy, until pragmatism, the first original American philosophy, emerged in the writing of Charles Peirce and William James” (White 1972, 9–10). Pragmatism, when it finally entered

2. See Blau 1952 and Cohen 1962.

the scene, was a product of intellectual resources descended from John Locke, the Scottish Enlightenment, and the ingenuity of Peirce and James as they attempted to “clarify language in which claims to knowledge are made and to hasten the day when scientific and philosophical disputes would be settled by the use of a more rational method” (White 1972, 150).³

While White recalls the vision of European thought in America, John Smith, in *The Spirit of American Philosophy*, follows Parrington and Mumford by recalling the story of original genius. “American philosophical thinking in the past three-quarters of a century,” he says, “has exhibited its own original and unmistakable spirit” (Smith 1963, xi). As for Mumford a generation before, the promise of originality has more often surrendered to the parent thinking of British and continental philosophy, but such surrender, like the adolescent afraid to strike out on her own, is merely a stage to be overcome. For Smith, American dependence will be overcome by recovering the spontaneous genius of an earlier generation of European American philosophers.

Neither the story of dependence told by White and his predecessors nor the story of genius told by Smith and his predecessors provides an adequate account of the origin of American thought. The former, while it denies a distinctive intellectual origin, nevertheless affirms a distinctive intellectual outcome, American pragmatism. The mystery of origin is made more perplexing when the basic commitments of pragmatism emerge in the work of philosophers such as Roger Williams, Benjamin Franklin, Cadwallader Colden, Lydia Maria Child, and others more than a century before the classical pragmatists began to present their views. The latter story attempts to fill the gap by explaining how European philosophy could become so transformed. But even this story has difficulties. First, while stories of spontaneous emergence may satisfy those who seek a kind of American exceptionalism, when the emergence of a distinctive tradition is considered in its rich historical context, it is at least as possible that what appears to be spontaneous emergence could be the product of a well-funded collaboration. While it is possible that ideas emerge from nothing, such an account is also a way to overlook a much more complex origin as well as a way to avoid giving credit where it may be due. It is unlikely that such an approach would be acceptable in a history of European thought. To claim, for example, that John Locke’s empiricism was solely a product of Locke’s genius, or perhaps his genius in the face of the troubles of civil war, would at once be far

3. Flower and Murphy’s *A History of American Philosophy* (1977) shares similar expectations.

too simple and would disconnect Locke's work from its significant relationship to the development of modern science and continental rationalism. Our understanding would be diminished, as would the value of Locke's thought as a way to think of human knowledge that attempts to be consistent with Newtonian physics and that tries to serve as an alternative to other philosophical approaches.

The second problem with both the frontier story and the story of American genius is that they lead to a narrow and exclusive history. Committed in advance to a tale of European descent, those aspects of American thought which do not fit the story can easily be set aside as unimportant or anomalous. In European philosophy, if one is convinced of Locke's originality and value, other philosophical alternatives could easily be set aside as inconsequential or mistaken. Rather than being seen as a viable alternative and catalyst, rationalism could be dismissed, its arguments lost, and its countervailing insights overlooked. If one believes that modern European philosophy descended solely from the Greeks, then a philosopher like Spinoza, whose work was strongly influenced by Jewish thought, must be viewed as an anomaly without precedent. While historians of philosophy are necessarily selective in their accounts, such selectivity can also be tested. The apparently unimportant and anomalous can sometimes be the key to generating a better, or at least a potentially more useful, account. Years of one sort of approach to the history of philosophy can make trying alternatives difficult, but the difficulty diminishes neither the possibility nor the value of the alternatives. In this case, opening the question of the origin of American philosophy to the possibility of Native American influence will allow a more general reconsideration of American thought and its potential to help address new problems.

The response I propose to the received history of American pragmatism is not intended as a comprehensive history, but rather as an additional perspective. For example, H. S. Thayer's history of pragmatism, *Meaning and Action* (1981), develops in detail many of the connections between classical pragmatism and the European philosophical tradition. For Thayer, pragmatism is a distinctive answer to the long-standing questions that motivated eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophy in Europe. An account of the development of pragmatism that locates it relative to another tradition does not invalidate alternatives like Thayer's but provides new angles of vision on American thought, some of which lead to tensions and critique and some of which lead to new connections and possibilities. My account of the beginnings of pragmatism joins two other reexaminations of the tradition, one by Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (1989), and another by Charlene Haddock Seig-

fried, *Pragmatism and Feminism* (1996). West rereads a significant portion of the American tradition as a philosophy of social transformation relevant to the issues of culture, gender, and class difference. Seigfried examines the connections between feminist philosophy and pragmatism both to raise critical concerns about the classical pragmatists and to provide a way to enrich both feminism and pragmatism by understanding their points of convergence. Similarly, my reconstruction of the early history of American philosophy also shows pragmatism in a different light and, at the same time, opens a door to a broader American philosophical tradition.

Rather than seeing Native American thought as irrelevant, I propose that we see it as the starting place of some of the distinctive aspects of the American philosophical tradition, as a way to answer the problem of origin. By tracing the career of the central commitments of pragmatism beginning in Native American thought, through their use in resisting exclusion, racism, and sexism, to their emergence in the work of the classical pragmatists, these ways of understanding and acting in the world can become renewed resources. While alternative stories of the origins of American pragmatism can and will be told, this story of origin serves as both a history and a response to the ongoing problem of the coexistence of different cultures in American society.

The classical American pragmatists, Peirce, James, and Dewey, provide a useful perspective from which to begin this reconsideration of the history of American philosophy. As historians of their own tradition, they appear to be troubled by the same problem of origin that later historians display. At the same time, they suggest a strategy for the reconstruction of this history beginning with recognition of what is distinctive about pragmatism and recognition that its intellectual influence is not only a product of abstract discourse, but also a product of ordinary lived experience. William James presents a version of the frontier story in the best-known account of the origins of pragmatism. In his 1898 address to the Philosophical Union of the University of California at Berkeley, James credits Charles S. Peirce with originating the central idea of pragmatism, the so-called pragmatic maxim, in the 1870s. In this case, James makes Hegel's general discounting of indigenous America more precise when he suggests that Peirce's innovation developed from the empirical commitments of "English-speaking philosophy." "Mr. Peirce," he says, "has only expressed in the form of an explicit maxim what [the English philosophers'] sense for reality led them all instinctively to do. The great English way of investigating a conception is to ask yourself right off ' . . . What is its *cash-value* . . . ?'" (James 1967, 360). Peirce dis-

agrees with the account. Despite James's claims of an empiricist origin, Peirce himself reports that pragmatism came out of his reflections on methods of inquiry, particularly in his study of Kant. The term pragmatism itself, he says, derives from Kant's distinction between *praktisch* and *pragmatisch*, "the former belonging in a region of thought where no mind of the experimentalist type can ever make sure of solid ground under his feet, the latter expressing relation to some definite human purpose" (Peirce 1955, 252). Although they disagree in the details, Peirce and James agree with the general historical perspective proposed by Hegel and conclude that pragmatism is a further development of European thought.

Dewey, in his 1925 summary of the origins of pragmatism, restates Peirce's version of the story and argues explicitly for the European roots of pragmatism. According to Dewey, pragmatism is what happens to European philosophy when it encounters the "distinctive traits of the environment of American life" (Dewey 1925a, 19). Dewey concludes, "American thought continues European thought. We have imported our language, our laws, our institutions, our morals, and our religion from Europe, and we have adapted them to the new conditions of our life. The same is true of our ideas" (Dewey 1925a, 19).

Despite his apparent commitment to the European origins of American thought, however, in an article written in 1922 Dewey suggests that his account of the origins of pragmatism is not complete. Here he restates James's conviction that pragmatism follows the empirical philosophy initiated by Bacon, Locke, and Hume, but he follows the claim with the observation that the empirical tradition was "revived and then made central by Peirce and James" as a philosophical response to a disposition peculiar to the American tradition. This disposition may be, he says, "as obnoxious to ultimate philosophic truth as it is repellent to certain temperaments." Dewey describes the disposition this way:

It discourages dogmatism and its child, intolerance. It arouses and heartens an experimental spirit which wants to know how systems and theories work before giving complete adhesion. It militates against too sweeping and easy generalizations, even against those which would indict a nation. . . . It fosters a sense of the worth of communication of what is known. (Dewey 1922, 308)

This disposition, he suggests, has its origins outside the confines of European thought and in lived experience. In his 1904 commencement address at the University of Vermont, Dewey distinguishes between conceptions of philosophy which are interested in system-building and those

which aim “at a philosophy which shall be instrumental rather than final, and instrumental not to establishing and warranting any particular set of truths, but instrumental in furnishing points of view and working ideas which may clarify and illuminate the actual and concrete course of life” (Dewey 1905, 77). The conception that takes philosophy as a method is the one appropriate to “the logic inherent in our America.” From this perspective,

Philosophers are not to be a separate and monopolistic priesthood set apart to guard, and, under certain conditions, to reveal an isolated treasury of truths. It is theirs to organize—such organization involving, of course, criticism, rejection, transformation—the highest and wisest ideas of humanity, past and present, in such fashion that they may become most effective in the interpretation of certain recurrent and fundamental problems, which humanity, collectively and individually, has to face. (Dewey 1905, 77)

For Dewey, then, despite the importance of the intellectual resources gleaned from European philosophy, there remains a clear but unexplained disposition or attitude which forms the ground for American philosophy in general and pragmatism in particular.

This unexplained disposition and commitment to philosophical method was apparent to other commentators, including Alexis de Tocqueville in his 1835 commentary *Democracy in America*. Tocqueville, in terms more unequivocal than Dewey’s, suggests that American philosophy ought to be sought outside the European tradition. In his discussion of “the philosophical approach of the Americans,” he writes:

Less attention is paid to philosophy in the United States than in any other country of the civilized world. The Americans have no school of philosophy peculiar to themselves, and they pay very little attention to the rival European schools. Nevertheless, it is noticeable that the people of the United States almost all have a uniform method and rules for the conduct of intellectual inquiries. So, though they have not taken the trouble to define the rules, they have a philosophical method after all. (Tocqueville 1969, 429)

According to Tocqueville, despite a lack of attention to European thought, Americans nevertheless developed a distinctive philosophical method which, he finds, is characterized by opposition to dogma, an interest in the past and present as resources, and strong individualism. This last characteristic, Tocqueville suggests, contributes to developing other “mental habits,” including a commitment to find meaning in present experience, not in a supernatural world nor a remote past nor even

a distant future. "So the Americans," he concludes, "have needed no books to teach them philosophic method, having found it in themselves" (Tocqueville 1969, 429). The implicit question is, of course, from whence, if not Europe, did this distinctive philosophical method arise. Where Hegel and others saw an American intellectual life drawn solely from European roots, Tocqueville saw a distinctive, though perhaps mysterious, perspective well worth the attention of his European audience. Ironically, while Tocqueville suggests that the experience of Americans was crucial to the development of their way of thinking, even to the exclusion of systematic European influence, he never considers the possibility that important sources of American thought were already flourishing when the Europeans came ashore.

Tocqueville's conclusion and Dewey's suggestions are echoed by John E. Smith in the 1992 introduction to his collection of essays, *America's Philosophical Vision*. Although this assessment recalls his earlier claim for the spontaneous emergence of American philosophy, his wording ironically recasts its meaning. He observes that "pragmatism clearly represents an indigenous and original philosophical outlook" (Smith 1992, 2). Originality here seems reassigned, implicitly taken away from thinkers descended from Europe and assigned to those indigenous to America. Just how pragmatism is "indigenous" remains unexplored by Smith, but pragmatism, and what he takes to be a still broader philosophical vision, are nevertheless deeply connected with "American experience." "These ideas and ideals," he says, "to be sure, show the influence of past thinkers from Plato and Aristotle to the philosophers of the nineteenth century; the important point, however, is that they were reshaped in the light of the experience of American life aimed at the resolution of problems that arose within that experience" (Smith 1992, 2; also see Dewey 1905, 76). In short, while one kind of American thought descended from European forebears, another kind may be indigenous to America. It is this second way of thinking that is at the center of what is distinctive about American philosophy.

In fact, the central commitments of American philosophy, especially as represented by the work of the classical pragmatists, can also be found in the philosophical perspective of Northeastern Native peoples and can be traced through a history of cross-cultural contact to the work of important European American thinkers. The problem of the origins of a distinctly American philosophy can be addressed in a significant way by reconsidering the influence of Native thought. But such reconsideration will not be easy, since that influence is not explicit in the classical pragmatists or the already well-known histories. Following the suggestions of Tocqueville and Dewey, we need to look again at the moments of cultural

contact in the lived experience of those who served as examples and resources for the philosophers who came later. In effect, this alternative history will be grounded in the possibilities of lived experience.

John McDermott, whose work has gone far to expand the range of what is recognized as American philosophy, helps to frame this approach. What he finds distinctive about American philosophy, and especially its manifestation in classical pragmatism, is its notion of experience. It is, McDermott argues, the deep and consistent commitment in the American tradition to learn from and enrich experience that sets the American philosophical perspective outside the European. Even though one can find an interest in the things of experience in European empiricism, it is only in America and in the unique conditions prevailing there that experience is taken seriously as the source and product of human action. McDermott cites Santayana, among others, as recognizing but failing to develop this distinctive American conception of experience. In his survey of the “Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy,” for example, Santayana describes the earliest New England colonists this way:

As much as clearing the land and fighting the Indians they were occupied, as they expressed it, in wrestling with the Lord. The country was new; the race was tried, chastened, and full of solemn memories. It was an old wine in new bottles, and America did not have to wait for its present universities, with their departments of academic philosophy, in order to possess a living philosophy—to have a distinct vision of the universe and definite convictions about human destiny. (Santayana 1912, 171)

For McDermott’s purposes, Santayana properly focuses on the particular character of the experiences of the earliest European immigrants, but further points are worth noting in Santayana’s description.

First, Santayana views early American experience as aggressively colonial. The immigrants cleared the land, evidently converting it from a useless wilderness to productive farms and cities, and fought Indians—presumably to defend against, Christianize, civilize, and finally eliminate from the rapidly diminishing wilderness. While this is clearly the received impression of the early European American experience, it is perhaps too quickly accepted by Santayana and McDermott. In fact, when we consider the records left from the earliest period of European American history, we find that the experience was far less clearly focused. The land was surely being cleared, but to an extent little different from the clearing that had routinely taken place for centuries in clearing places for the fields of the Haudenosaunee, Pequot, Narragansett, and other

Native peoples of the Northeast. The immigrants fought the Indians, but they also ate with them, hunted with them, laughed and joked with them, made love with them, bore children with them, and learned with them. Second, while Santayana's European "race" is "tried, chastened, and full of solemn memories," the European immigrants, in their lived experience, came to join with another "race" also tried, chastened, and as full of solemn memories. To focus on experience as the ground and product of American thought as McDermott suggests is to focus in the right place, but going beyond Santayana's proposed borders to an experience which includes both European immigrants and Native Americans and all the dimensions of that interaction seems a more honest starting point.

If one is serious about looking toward American experiences for the sources of American thought, then it makes sense to consider even these early experiences as comprehensively as possible. If one is serious about a conception of experience which is not abstract but rather rooted in present difficulties and joys, concerns, and surprises, then to understand the American experience as it bears on philosophy is to examine also the variety of viewpoints and voices that played a role in its ongoing character. Such an approach is consistent with McDermott's view of the importance of located experience in the development of American thought. While he accepts that "philosophy was all but nonexistent" in early European American history, he nevertheless concludes that

reflection was intense and self-conscious, primarily as a response to a pressing and omnipresent collective experience of a situation that was novel at every turn. And although that period in American history offered no articulation of the notion of experience as such, there was a correspondingly rich awareness of the significance of the situation over against inherited "wisdom." It was a period that dealt with philosophical themes without recourse to a formal philosophical language. In effect, the American seventeenth century realized a broadly based cultural "experience of experience." (McDermott 1976, 3)

From this perspective, one can explore the possible origins of the ways of thinking suggested by Tocqueville and the philosophical method described by Dewey.

McDermott's account of the origins of American thought shares a language common to other received accounts that identify the frontier as the central fact of American development, the central resource, and the central image. "What is crucial here," McDermott says, "from the philosophical side, is that the press of environment as a decisive formulator of thought about the basic structures of the world became the outstanding characteristic of the American temperament" (McDermott

1976, 4). Following the story of European dependence, English colonists responded to their circumstances by transforming the inherited ways of thinking to cope with the "New World." This transformation became a new sort of philosophy grounded in experience. McDermott concludes, "Openness to experience [is a product of] an anthropocentric view of nature and a sense of frontier as human imaginative horizon" (McDermott 1976, 17). At first, it appears that this account differs little from the received view of American intellectual dependence on Europe and the exploitation of America itself as a resource. But the conclusion is undermined by his implicit reconstruction of the "frontier" along pragmatic lines.

In his chapter on art, "To be Human Is to Humanize," McDermott reminds us, following James, that experience includes both ends and "transitions." These transitions are the primary sources of meaning and are a matter of relations, not just objects. In trying to describe this Jamesian notion of experience in relations, McDermott talks about the aesthetics of jazz. What is significant is that the meaning or aesthetic quality of a work is not found in the efforts of single performers, nor in the composer's vision, nor in the audience, but in the complex interaction of individual performances, composer, instruments, and audience. "Outside of a relational setting, jazz is meaningless, for it proceeds by a series of interwoven tensions" (McDermott 1976, 38). In effect, the jazz performance is not a "thing" or something passively beheld, but an open-ended, dynamic interaction which brings together diverse elements, a shared purpose, and a sense of responsibility. When McDermott talks about the frontier it is not as a thing to be used or admired or crossed, but rather, like jazz, as an interaction. Just as jazz is not usually a performance carried out according to a fixed plan, as though the players were following a detailed score, the frontier is not a part of manifest destiny or some inevitable stage of human development. McDermott's frontier, understood as an interaction, is better viewed as a borderland and a region of complex relations that manifest new and changing meaning. If "life is in the transitions" as James and McDermott suggest, then the life of American thought is to be sought along borders, including the one between European immigrants and their descendants and America's Native peoples. This suggestion applied to a critique of received histories directs one to look not only at the composition being played out by the recognized figures in well-known events, but also to the experience of the borderlands, geographical and intellectual, where American thought gains its character and complexity.

In short, to account for the development of American thought, we may refigure the frontiers as borders, as regions of interaction, exchange, and transformation. Some aspects of the border are surely as-

pects of conquest, that is, “frontiers” of European expansion and the accompanying destruction of Native life and culture. But this does not exhaust the character of the border. If we take McDermott seriously, experience is a matter of relations, and relations involve the potential for mutual influence and resistance as well as for assimilation and destruction. Borderlands are regions of colonization, but they are also regions of decolonization. Things are learned and resisted as well as forgotten and overwhelmed. Following McDermott and the suggestion implicit in the assessments of Tocqueville, Dewey, Smith, and others, I will argue that much of what American philosophy is known for can be traced to its origins in the borderlands between Europe and America and its “originality” to well-established aspects of Native American thought.

This approach to the history of philosophy, grounded in lived experience even as it challenges established histories, is nevertheless consistent with a central commitment in the history of American philosophy. For example, while Herbert Schneider views American thought primarily as a descendant of European thought, he does not view influence as a process of the abstract exchange of ideas, but rather as the by-product of the very human, lived experience of immigration. The development of a distinctive American philosophical tradition is neither the product of historical necessity nor spontaneous emergence on this account, but the product of influence at particular times and places. Schneider explains, “But the imported goods are not being swallowed raw; they must be blended with those homegrown ideas, for which an established taste and preference exists” (Schneider 1946, viii). Philosophical history in this sense is just the ongoing process of doing philosophy in the American tradition. As a process, it is context-dependent, but there is no single context in which to establish final answers or a single authoritative history. “The variety of contexts at our disposal gives us many handles by which to take hold of novelties. But we do take hold of them as much as they get a hold on us” (Schneider 1946, ix). In the light of new contexts at the beginning of the twenty-first century, this work recalls the past in order to bring it to bear on present problems and to help frame future possibilities. In a sense, this very project of reconstructing the origins of American philosophy is itself the practice of American philosophy. Schneider concludes, “the many ways we resist, distort, adapt, revise new importations is the best evidence that an American tradition lives” (Schneider 1946, ix).⁴

4. Also see Randall 1958 for another version of pragmatist philosophy of history.