They acted as an insulating curtain, a sort of gauze strip separating Communist reality from the universe of innocent well-wishers. But today no obvious purpose is served by such credulity. So *cui bono*?

The only possible purpose of all such efforts to hide from the truth about the past is to spare ourselves moral discomfort. This is emotionally understandable, but it is not historically prudent. We do better to accept the many uncomfortable and even incompatible truths about the twentieth century, including the incontrovertible evidence of our own gullibility and worse, than to add another lie in the search for ease. There are, after all, many true stories about the twentieth century that we can still tell without embarrassment, because the truth today is what it always has been: the truth about Franco, the truth about Hitler, and so on.

But we need to learn to add to these the truth about communism—not truisms about Stalin, or even Lenin, or Moscow, or the *nomenklatura*, or Russians, or foreigners, but the truth about *communism*: that it was a singularly dishonest confidence-trick whose consenting victims include its distant apologists in England and America, who enthusiastically sent others on the road to hell with the very best of intentions. In the terrifying confusion of the 1930s, in the all-or-nothing choices of Hitler's war, in the looking-glass ethics of the cold war, those who thought they could save the essence of the Communist "dream" by separating it from its rotted Soviet penumbra were, I suppose, useful idiots, if only to that rotted penumbra itself. Today they are just idiots. ■

The Gospel of Relaxation

By PAUL BOGHOSSIAN

The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America by Louis Menand

(Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 546 pp., $27)

PRAGMATISM IS AMERICA'S distinctive contribution to the history of philosophical thought, though there has always been some dispute about exactly what doctrine it is supposed to name. The philosopher and psychologist William James, in a lecture given at Berkeley in 1898, attributed the view to

> a philosopher whose published works . . . are no fit expression of his powers. I refer to Mr. Charles S. Peirce, with whose very existence as a philosopher I dare say many of you are unacquainted. He is one of the most original of contemporary thinkers; and the principle of practicalism—or pragmatism, as he called it, when I first heard him enunciate it in Cambridge in the early '70s—is the clue or compass by following which I find myself more and more confirmed in believing we may find our feet upon the proper trail.

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James was at the time one of America's pre-eminent intellectuals, so his advocacy of this new outlook provoked a great deal of attention and debate.

Charles Sanders Peirce, by contrast, was very much down on his luck. A brilliant logician and scientist, he had been fired from his academic position at Johns Hopkins for living in sin with his wife-to-be, and he had lost his job at the Coast Survey. At the time of James's lecture, he was penniless, unemployed, and surviving largely through the generosity of his friends. It was natural for him to see, in James's promotion of his thought, a unique opportunity to reclaim the prominence that was his due. On looking more closely at what James had written, however, Peirce was so repelled by its substance that he began calling his philosophy "pragmaticism," to distinguish it from what everyone else was talking about, and to discourage, through the ugliness of the chosen label, any further misappropriation.

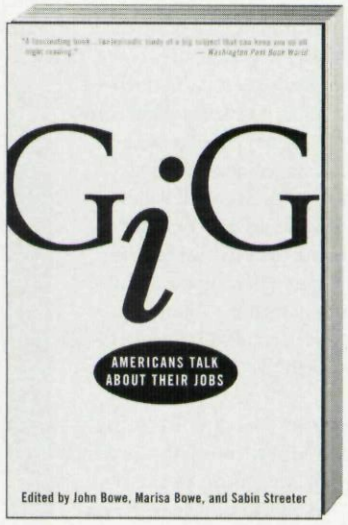
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view, for worse—it is the pragmatism that derives from James, and from his follower John Dewey, that goes by that label today, and that is hailed as America's great gift to modern thought. It is this pragmatism to which Louis Menand subscribes, and whose history he seeks to tell in his new book (though he often writes as though he is recounting the history of an idea that is common not only to James and Dewey, but also to Peirce and Oliver Wendell Holmes). What, then, is this variety of pragmatism? Menand offers the following characterization of the core idea:

> If we strain out the differences, personal and philosophical, they had with one another, we can say that what these four thinkers had in common was not a group of ideas, but a single idea—an idea about ideas. They all believed that ideas are not "out there" waiting to be discovered, but are tools—like forks and knives and microchips—that people devise to cope with the world in which they find themselves.

Menand has an arrestingly original story to tell about why this idea caught on in the waning years of the nineteenth century. It arose, he says, as a response to the horrors of the Civil War. To hear Menand tell it, the Civil War was fought in the name of certitude in an abstract principle: that slavery was wrong and had to be abolished. But the grim reality of what a defense of this principle entailed led many a committed abolitionist to question whether any idea could be worth that sort of cost. "The lesson Holmes took from the war can be put in a sentence," Menand observes. "It is that certitude leads to violence."

This prompted Holmes, and his intellectual peers in mid-nineteenth-century Cambridge, to look for a conception of belief and judgment that would eschew certainty. The challenge facing the young post–Civil War intellectuals was "to devise a theory of conduct that made sense in a universe of uncertainty." And "pragmatism," says Menand, was their answer:

> it was designed to make it harder for people to be driven to violence by their beliefs.... Holmes, James, Peirce and Dewey wished to bring ideas and principles down to a human level because they wished to avoid the violence they saw hidden in abstractions. This was one of the lessons the Civil War had taught them.

At another point in his book, Menand makes it clear that, in his view, pragmatism did not just make it "harder" to fight for a belief, it made it impossible to do so: "Pragmatism explains everything about ideas except why a person would be willing to die for one."

There is no denying the interest of Menand's thesis, or the narrative flair with which he constructs his account. Bringing a fluid, journalistic style to the history of ideas, he treats his reader to lively, often amusing, and always informative biographical sketches of some of the nineteenth century's most influential American thinkers. We learn a great deal not only about Holmes, Peirce, James, and Dewey, but about a host of less central figures with whom their lives intersected, among them the naturalist Louis Agassiz, the brilliant conversationalist Chauncey Wright (he was dubbed the "Cambridge Socrates"), the social activist Jane Addams, and the union organizer Eugene Debs. While Menand makes some effort to explain these vivacious digressions and detours as throwing light on his central theme—the origins of pragmatism—his reader often comes away with the impression that the judgment as to what to pursue and for how long to pursue it was made on purely narrative grounds: would it make for a good yarn?



COURTESY FARRAR, STRAUS & GIROUX

Charles Peirce with his wife Juliette, 1907

It usually does. The anecdotal entertainments aside, though, there is a real problem making sense of Menand's argument. Even before we engage the inevitable philosophical complexities, we are puzzled. If pragmatism really did make it impossible for us ever to fight for something we believe in, shouldn't that be a cause for concern rather than a cause for celebration? Doesn't virtually everyone agree that some beliefs are so important that one ought to be willing to risk one's life in their defense? And isn't it easy to understand how the conviction that no one may enslave another human being should be one of those beliefs? And is it really plausible that such socially conscientious thinkers as James and Dewey should have wanted to box themselves in, devising a philosophical view that would make it impossible for them ever to advocate the use of force in defense of basic values—freedom, equality, justice, self-defense? Didn't Dewey argue for America's entry into World War I?

And since when do we need a corrective to an excess of certitude in philosophy? Philosophical thought has undeniably been obsessed with certainty; but it has been obsessed with the difficulty of achieving it. It could hardly be accused of having made glib claims to having achieved it, claims that would then stand in need of correction. Finally, if the aim is to make it impossible for people to be certain of the truth of grand moral abstractions, why do we need a general theory of belief and not just a skeptical theory of moral belief? In an increasingly atheistic nineteenth century—fascinated by the thought that if God is dead, then anything goes—the commitment to the very existence of moral truths (let alone to our indubitable knowledge of them) had already lost much of its grip. Did anyone really see the need for a general theory of belief with which to dislodge excessive moral certitude?

These are some of the puzzles that make one suspect Menand's story even before examining its details. And such an examination only bears them out. Thinking of ideas not as "out there," but rather as "tools": how, exactly, does such a notion deprive belief of its capacity to motivate force? We know from Menand's description what we have to look for. The Civil War was fought in the name of certitude in

a moral abstraction, in this case the moral abstraction that "all men are born equal." If pragmatism is to secure its pacifying effect, it must either undermine certitude or undermine abstraction or both. Menand clearly thinks it does both. But in this he is multiply confused.

There are two distinct ways of reading the claim that ideas are not "out there" but are rather tools, depending on whether one takes it to be making a point about what beliefs are or a point about how beliefs are caused. Menand never sufficiently recognizes the ambiguity, and consequently he trips over it. On the first reading, pragmatism's central claim would be that beliefs are tools, and hence can be evaluated coherently only in terms of their utility and not in terms of their "agreement with reality" (with what's "out there"), at least as that is classically understood. According to this view, a belief is good if—like a hammer or a microchip—it gets the job done, and satisfies the concrete need for which it was devised; and no other sort of evaluation of beliefs could be appropriate. Call this the metaphysical thesis.

On the second reading, to say that beliefs are not "out there" is not to make some claim about what beliefs are; it is rather to make a historical claim about how they come into existence. The thought is that what we believe is not to be explained by the way the world is or by the available evidence, but rather by the fact that some of our beliefs turn out to be more useful than others in helping us cope with our environment. We are caused to have the beliefs that we have by our perception of their utility. Call this the causal thesis.

Which of these does Menand think pragmatism is? For the most part, he writes as though he has the causal thesis in mind. In other words, he construes pragmatism to be merely an account of the criteria that we use to determine—our ways of telling—that some belief is true, and not an account of what it is for it to be true, of what its truth consists in. Thus he observes that "pragmatism is an account of the way people think—the way they come up with ideas, form beliefs, and reach decisions." And: "It does not follow that it is meaningless to talk of beliefs being true or untrue. It only means that there is no noncircular set of criteria for knowing whether a particular belief is true, no appeal to some standard outside the process of coming to the belief itself." One can certainly understand why Menand fixates on the causal thesis, for it is only this thesis that has the slightest chance of connecting with his favored explanation of pragmatism's genesis. Unfortunately, it is the metaphysical thesis that is at the distinctive heart of pragmatism; and it has no bearing at all on the question of whether beliefs can motivate force.

SUPPOSE WE SAY, in line with the causal thesis, that our beliefs are caused by considerations of utility rather than by truth or evidence. This has two important consequences. First, we commit ourselves to the distinctness of the properties of truth and utility: if our beliefs are caused by A and not by B, that can only be because A is not B. Second, we invite the sort of skepticism about belief made famous by Hume in the eighteenth century.

Hume was struck by the difficulty of substantiating that any particular method that we might use for forming beliefs is the method most likely to lead to true beliefs. After all, he argued, any case that we might make for one of those methods over another would presuppose the integrity of some method, about which a similar question would then arise. It looks as though we will eventually reach a point at which all we can say is: This is simply what we do. Hume concluded that we can have no substantial reason to think that what we believe about the world is true. All that we could be actually doing, in forming some beliefs as opposed to others, is following through on certain brute inclinations or habits.

Pragmatism, construed merely as the causal thesis, adds to this Humean picture only the thought that the brute inclination that controls our beliefs is the inclination to find some beliefs useful in coping with our environment and others not. Interesting as this addition may be, it does not substantially alter the epistemic picture inherited from Hume. We are still portrayed as seeking something—truth—that we cannot hope to claim to achieve, for what our beliefs track is utility, and there seems to be no obvious necessary connection between being useful to us and being true.

Given this reading of pragmatism, it is possible—sort of—to reconstruct how Menand might have come to find his account of its genesis compelling. According to this idea, we are moved to belief neither by truth nor by anything that could be certified to be correlated with truth, but rather by perceptions of utility. If that is the basis for all our beliefs—including our beliefs in moral principles—then it is understandable why, in a case in which we are locked into an irresoluble conflict with some other party, we would be reluctant to impose our view upon them. Since we can have no confidence that our own view has any greater claim to truth than theirs does, with what right would we try to get them to change their mind, let alone force them to do so if they resist?

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It is an interesting question why, if Menand has the basic motivation for pragmatism right, any thinker would have needed to invent a new form of skepticism, rather than simply relying on Hume's account. But, putting aside the previously noted reservations, at least the explanation seems to be in the right neighborhood. The trouble is that the causal thesis is *not* pragmatism. And so Menand's explanation does not explain what he sets out to explain.

In a well-known lecture titled "The Pragmatist Account of Truth," William James, listing the various misunderstandings to which his view had been subjected, arrives at the "*Sixth misunderstanding: Pragmatism explains not what truth is, but only how it is arrived at.*" His reply leaves no doubt as to his intent:

> In point of fact it tells us both, tells us what it is incidentally to telling us how it is arrived at—for what *is* arrived at except just what the truth is?

In this passage, and in many others, James makes it crystal clear that, according to pragmatism, utility is not merely what explains how we arrive at our beliefs, but also—and crucially—what their truth consists in. Indeed, few things could be more inimical to the pragmatist outlook than the gap between truth and what we can actually claim to attain. This is the gap in which skepticism lives.

Pragmatism distinguishes itself from skepticism precisely in its insistence that the useful in the way of belief is not some second-class substitute for the true, something for which we have to settle because we cannot get what we really want. Its whole point, on the contrary, is that there is simply no intelligible goal other than what is useful in the way of belief, no independent substance to calling a belief "true" as opposed to "useful." As James put it elsewhere, "the true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief." In other words, pragmatism is not merely the causal thesis, it is the metaphysical thesis as well. It is not just an account of how we arrive at our beliefs, but also an account of what beliefs essentially are. Menand does not seem sufficiently to understand the distinction between the causal claim and the metaphysical claim, and so he sees no need to treat them separately.

THE PROBLEM IS that it is not possible to tell Menand's story about pragmatism's origins based on a correct reading of what the pragmatist doctrine amounts to. In Menand's account, again, the impetus for pragmatism arises out of the desire of post–Civil War intellectuals to make it harder for anyone to be driven to violence over an idea, by making it harder for anyone to be certain of the superiority of his beliefs over someone else's beliefs. And while it may be possible to see how to make sense of that claim on a skeptical reading, it is very hard to see how to make sense of it on a reading that is faithful to pragmatism's intent: namely, on a reading that closes the gap between truth and utility on which skepticism depends.

If utility is the property that inclines us to hold a belief and also that which makes the belief true, what is to prevent us from claiming that some belief that is now clearly known to be useful—for example, the belief that the sun will rise tomorrow—is known with certainty? Or consider the committed slaveholder who has come to be persuaded of Jamesian pragmatism. Couldn't he argue that he knows with certitude that owning slaves is a God-given right? After all, he could be as confident as he could possibly wish to be that believing that slave ownership is a God-given right is a useful belief for him to have. And given pragmatism, there is no further open question about whether that belief is true.

Pragmatism, correctly understood, does not undermine certitude in the way that Menand's smooth story requires. But perhaps it undermines the possibility of believing in abstract moral principles, and could that be enough to yield the pacifying effect that he says its founders sought? Could one argue that human beings can only be motivated to fight for truths (understood non-pragmatically), but never to fight for a mere tool? I fear not. This, too, would be an absurd argument to make. No one thinks that just any truth—even an "abstract" one—is worth fighting for, but only one whose importance outweighs the evils that fighting for it will entrain. And there is surely no difficulty in imagining that some tool could assume that sort of importance, too, so that it would be better to risk one's life than to lose it. If I have only one spearhead and it is essential to my survival, wouldn't it make sense for me to fight to keep you from taking it from me?

Matters get stranger still when, toward the end of the book, Menand seeks to explain pragmatism's alleged eclipse in the aftermath of World War II and its apparent resurgence in recent times. The cold war, apparently, was fought over firmly held principles—the values of a free society—and so could not easily be reconciled with a pragmatist outlook; but now that the cold war is over, and "there are many competing belief systems, not just two, skepticism about the finality of any particular set of beliefs has begun to seem to some people an important value again." And so "the idea of Holmes, James, Peirce and Dewey reemerged as suddenly as they [*sic*] had been eclipsed." This aspect of Menand's historical picture inherits all the puzzles that we have been noting, and it generates a new one: why, if we had been persuaded of pragmatism before World War II, does certitude in abstract principles suddenly reassert itself once it is over?

ALL OF THIS book's problems can be traced to its author's weak command of the philosophical ideas whose history he wishes to recount. This leads him not only to come up with a somewhat fantastical account of pragmatism's origin, but also radically to overestimate its plausibility as a philosophical doctrine.

Intuitively, it seems quite clear that a belief could be as useful as one could wish it to be, and yet be false. The belief that the earth is flat presumably passed the utility test in the Middle Ages. But the earth is not flat. What should we say then, on a pragmatist view? That it was true that the earth was flat in the Middle Ages but that it is no longer true now? But the earth has not changed shape. James tried to deal with this problem with vague talk of a belief's proving useful "in the long run," but he never adequately explained how that is to work, or what "the long run" is. In any event, the maneuver does not sit well with the pragmatist's desire to close the gap between the truth of a belief and what we can actually be seen to be aiming for in coming to believe it: I have no good way now of judging whether a belief currently found useful will also be so judged in the long run.

Indeed, it is hard enough to make a judgment of the current utility of a belief, as Bertrand Russell pointed out in his trenchant attack on James's view in 1908:

> Let us consider for a moment what it means to say that a belief "pays." We must suppose that this means that the consequences of entertaining the belief are better than those of rejecting it. In order to know this, we must know what the consequences are of entertaining it and what the consequences are of rejecting it; we must also know what consequences are good, what bad, what consequences are better, what worse. Take, say, belief in the Roman Catholic Faith. This, we may agree, causes a certain amount of happiness at the expense of a certain amount of stupidity and priestly domination.... But then comes the question whether, admitting the effects to be such, they are to be classed as on the whole good or on the whole bad; and this question is one which is so difficult that our test of truth becomes practically useless. It is far easier, it seems to me, to settle the plain question of fact:

> "Have the Popes always been infallible?" than to settle the question whether the effects of thinking them infallible are on the whole good. Yet this question, of the truth of Roman Catholicism, is just the sort of question that pragmatists consider specially suitable to their method.

Russell's powerful point is that the distinction between truth and utility is clearly visible in the fact that it is often much easier to make a judgment of truth than a judgment of utility.

But there is a deeper point buried in Russell's observation, one that has a more general bearing. In understanding truth to be a function of human utility, pragmatism takes its place in a long line of anti-objectivist conceptions of truth, conceptions that deny that there can be any self-standing facts, and admit only facts that obtain as a result of some judgment on our part. But any such view can be shown to face a very general difficulty, namely, that its own coherence seems to assume the availability of a notion of truth that it cannot hope to capture.

Go back to Russell's question about Roman Catholicism. On a pragmatist view, to figure out whether belief in Roman Catholicism is true requires us to determine what the likely consequences are of holding it, and whether those consequences are on the whole better or worse for us. But a judgment of consequence is just a factual judgment like any other: it is a judgment to the effect that this will accompany that. But to figure out whether happiness and domination are the likely consequences of belief in Roman Catholicism cannot itself be a matter of figuring out whether the likely consequences of believing that those are the likely consequences are themselves better or worse for us, since in that direction lies an infinite regress. To get the pragmatist picture off the ground, then, we need to presuppose the very notion of truth that pragmatism sets out to abolish.

Menand is clearly aware of Russell's criticisms, but he must not have been impressed with them. He mentions Russell only to note that his attacks were so strident that they moved the unflappably mild-mannered John Dewey to remark: "You know, he makes me sore." No doubt Russell did. Menand is also aware—though he is less forthright about the fact—that Peirce would have nothing to do with the equation of truth and utility:

> I must confess that I belong to that class of scalawags who purpose, with God's help, to look the truth in the face, whether doing so be conducive to the interests of society or not.

And Menand is also aware that, with the notable exception of Richard Rorty, himself alienated from mainstream philosophy and currently employed by a comparative literature department, pragmatism is rejected by virtually all of the most important philosophers working in the United States today. Yet Menand does not take any of this to reflect on pragmatism's plausibility. In his mind, pragmatism's poor philosophical reputation is a measure only of the doctrine's suitability for academic professionalism. "Efforts within American universities to make the pragmatism of James and Peirce into a research program for philosophy professors," he writes apologetically, "were sidelined by work in philosophical traditions more obviously suited to academic modes of inquiry."

This is all very disappointing; but it is what we have come to expect. In the end, Menand's book is just another depressing document of the immense popularity of anti-objectivist conceptions of truth within vast stretches of the humanities and social sciences. All these varieties of hostility to objectivity would be much easier to take were they not accompanied by such a blithe indifference to the difficulties that have been exposed for them. But perhaps intellectual blitheness is required, for it is difficult to see how an allegiance to these ideas would survive an honest engagement with their substance.

The real problem is to explain why the pragmatist conceptions have achieved such widespread acceptance in our day. One source of their appeal is clear: they are hugely empowering. If we can be said to know up front that any item of knowledge counts as true only because it satisfies some of our contingent social values, then any claim to knowledge can be dispatched if we happen not to share the values on which it allegedly depends. But that only postpones the real questions. Why this fear of knowledge? Whence the need to protect against its deliverances? Those are the questions that we need to understand if we are to command a clear view of what has happened to the contemporary American university. ■

Ghosts at the Table

By DAVID ROSAND

Leonardo: The *Last Supper*
by Pinin Brambilla Barcilon
and Pietro C. Marani
translated by Harlow Tighe
(The University of Chicago Press, 440 pp., $95)

Leonardo's Incessant *Last Supper*
by Leo Steinberg
(Zone Books, 320 pp., $43)

IN THE RANCOROUS modern history of art conservation, no project has seemed more debatable than the recent restoration of Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper*. This most venerated mural of the Renaissance long ago established itself as the canonic image of the subject, fixing Christ's paschal meal forever in the Western imagination—an iconic status confirmed in modern times by its cinematic rehearsal in Luis Buñuel's *Viridiana* and its graphic appropriation by Andy Warhol, as well as by more commercially motivated travesties (such as the New Jersey billboard that adorns the cover of Leo Steinberg's book). In the much-celebrated psychology of its dramatic action, Leonardo's representation has come to seem truer than any other pictorial rendering, closer to the event itself.

The work was commissioned about 1494 by Ludovico Sforza, the duke of Milan known as "Il Moro," for the Dominican refectory of Santa Maria delle Grazie, and it was completed early in 1498. It was

DAVID ROSAND is Meyer Schapiro Professor of Art History at Columbia University. His books *Myths of Venice: The Figuration of a State* (University of North Carolina Press) and *Drawing Acts: Studies in Graphic Expression and Representation* (Cambridge University Press) will be published this fall.