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The Metaphysical Club and the Question of Truth

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The American mind has been shaped by many intellectual forces throughout the past three centuries. Christendom and Western Civilization have provided foundational principles of our national worldview, especially in the most formative stages of our nation. Subsequently, intellectual twists and turns have continued to mold and shape the American mind.

Given the ideological confusion of our present day, a close look at one of the most formative eras in our nation's intellectual history would be most helpful. In a time of moral confusion, it will do us well to look at one of the historical movements that produced that confusion.

In *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America*, Louis Menand offers key insights into the development of pragmatism in America. Menand serves as Distinguished Professor of English at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. A former professor at the University of Virginia School of Law, Menand also taught at Princeton and Columbia. He currently serves as a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, one of the trend-setting magazines of the contemporary American mind.

The "club" to which Menand refers was established by some of the most significant minds that helped bridge the American intellect as the nation shifted from the 19th into the 20th century. As he makes clear, the background to this period of American history was the tragedy of the Civil War. The aftermath of the Civil War allowed a powerful generation of northern intellectuals to shape the American mind.

The major figures considered in Menand's work include Oliver Wendell Holmes, William James, Charles S. Peirce, and John Dewey. As he explains, "These people had highly distinctive personalities, and they did not always agree with each other, but their careers intersected at many points, and together they were more responsible than any other group for moving American thought into the modern world."

These four figures, along with others who shared their worldview, shape the American mind even now. Most significantly, their philosophy represents a conscious break with a Christian or theistic worldview and a tremendous change in the way ideas themselves are understood.

The philosophical movement known as pragmatism emerged in America, largely through the influence of these four figures. At the core of pragmatism's worldview stands a belief that ideas are primarily instrumental.

As Menand summarized the thinking of these four men: "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. They believed that ideas are produced not by individuals, but by groups of individuals—that ideas are social. They believed that ideas do not develop according to some inner logic of their own, but are entirely dependent,

like germs, on their human carriers and the environment. And they believe that since ideas are provisional responses to particular and unreplicable circumstances, their survival depends not on their immutability but on their adaptability.”

With that simple paragraph, Menand offers what might be the quintessential definition of American pragmatism. The pragmatists did not believe that ideas exist as true representations of external realities, but argued to the contrary that ideas are produced out of experience and should be seen primarily as ways of coping with the reality—rather than as descriptions of what is objectively true.

Of course, pragmatism emerged out of patterns of thinking presented to the post-bellum generation by those who had preceded them. In particular, the pragmatists were influenced by Ralph Waldo Emerson, perhaps the most significant New England thinker of the early 19th century. Emerson, a transcendentalist, rejected orthodox Christianity in favor of Unitarianism. Later, he basically abandoned Unitarianism for his own custom-designed philosophy of life. At the core of Emerson’s philosophy was a call for individual thinking and a life of “self-reliance” that consciously rejected all tradition and claims of objective truth.

In a famous address delivered to the Harvard Divinity School in 1838, Emerson denounced organized Christianity and shifted his faith to personal revelation. Consistent with his new worldview, Emerson rejected the deity of Christ and any need for human redemption. In the intellectual emptiness left by Emerson, the ground was cleared for a new philosophy to emerge.

The men involved in the “Metaphysical Club” were towering intellects and men of prestige. They came from privileged backgrounds and, torn by the moral crisis the Civil War, they came face to face with the reality of human tragedy. Having left the Christian worldview behind, the reality of human evil left these thinkers without an adequate explanation.

Oliver Wendell Holmes wanted to achieve heroic status through his intellect. He rejected the notion of absolute truth and even argued that ideas should not be measured by whether or not they correspond to an external reality. “Men to a great extent believe what they want to,” Holmes once claimed. As Menand explains, Holmes “did not think that the absence of a higher authority made it pointless to talk of beliefs as good or bad, true or false, right or wrong. The only thought that rightness and wrongness are functions of the circumstances in which our lives happen to be embedded.” Or, as Holmes explained to a friend, “All I mean by truth is the path I have to travel.”

Clearly, this idea of truth as merely instrumental comes with enormous consequences. Oliver Wendell Holmes would serve on the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts for a generation and later would serve as one of the most significant justices of the United States Supreme Court. Under his influence, the court would move from understanding right and wrong as fixed moral concepts and, toward a vision that would measure all claims and ideas by whether or not they are judged to lead to human happiness and welfare. In other words, judges would decide cases on the basis of what “works” in a given situation.

William James, born into one of the most famous families of New England, would become one of the formative figures in the development of psychology in America. James did not see human beings primarily as moral agents, but rather as people trying to make sense of a social reality in which they are deeply embedded. As Menand explains, James believed that beliefs, including religious beliefs, “Are only tools for decision making, one of the pieces people try to bundle together with other pieces, like moral teachings and selfish interests and specific information, when they need to reach a decision.” But, if beliefs are merely “tools for decision making,” then there is no absolute truth or falsehood to any moral or theological claim.

C.S. Peirce was the most eccentric of these thinkers, and may have been the first great mathematician to emerge in the United States. As Menand describes him, he “cultivated a certain wizardliness of manner.” According to Peirce, mathematics was the supreme science and mathematics alone “is the science which draws necessary conclusions.” Therefore, all other forms of thought were necessarily less precise. When it comes to matters of morals, we can know nothing conclusive.

In terms of direct application to the American mind, the most important of the pragmatists was John Dewey. Dewey called for a rejection of all theistic belief in favor of what he called “our common faith” in democracy. Rejecting all theistic and supernatural truth, Dewey pressed his agenda for the homogenization of the American mind.

Dewey became the most influential figure in the development of the modern public school system in the United States. His firm belief in the necessity of a common school led him to argue that parental authority must be overcome, in order that children could be raised by the state to share a secular worldview that would lead them to be good citizens in modern American Republic.

Through influential teaching posts at the University of Chicago and Columbia University, Dewey influenced an entire generation of educators. Beyond this, Dewey became the founder of the American Association of University Professors [AAUP] and one of the most significant forces for the development of political liberalism in the 20th century.

Christians should understand the influence of pragmatism as a philosophy and worldview that continues to shape the American mind today. In reality, the most insidious forms of post-modern philosophy are variants of pragmatism. The roots of our modern moral confusion can be traced directly to these four figures and the worldview they constructed.

From lofty perches of privilege and power, these four individuals shaped the American mind while most Christians were complacent in intellectual slumber. Even today, our failure to understand the influence of pragmatism on the American mind will lead us to misunderstand the real challenge we face.

Menand's book is a signal contribution to American intellectual history. His focus on the pragmatists is well-timed and serious. As Menand summarizes: "Their ideas changed the way Americans thought—and continued to think—about education, democracy, liberty, justice, and tolerance. And as a consequence, they changed the way Americans live—the way they learn, the way they express their views, the way they understand themselves, and the way they treat people who are different from themselves. We are still living, to a great extent, in a country these thinkers helped to make."

This is no overstatement. Menand capably describes the worldview of pragmatism, but also appreciates the fact that this philosophy comes with inherent liabilities. Most significantly, pragmatism "explains everything about ideas except why a person would be willing to die for one."

The reality is that no one will be willing to die for an idea that is understood as nothing more than a "tool" for decision making and coping with life. Christianity asserts a truth claim that is not a coping mechanism, but an assertion of absolute truth. Yet, we face a culture that is steeped in pragmatic thought that almost intuitively attempts to change the question from Is it true? to Is it meaningful?. When it comes to the most important questions of life, meaningful is just not enough. Without truth, nothing else really matters.

