

PEIRCE, JAMES, AND A PRAGMATIC PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION by John W. Woell.
Continuum, 2012. 244 pgs. \$120 (hbk).

This is a deceptively slim, remarkably complex, and enormously ambitious monograph, the title of which is to some extent misleading. By his own admission Woell offers not a pragmatic philosophy of religion, but rather a preparation for and anticipation of such an enterprise. Of the anticipation, more to come. As for the preparation, this moves on a number of levels and accounts for the complexity and much of the argument of the book. Put simply, what Woell attempts is to disentangle from the work of Peirce his formulation of the pragmatic method in philosophy and to isolate in the work of James his endorsement and employment of this method. However profound their differences in other aspects of their work (Peirce's agapism and James's radical empiricism get mention), they are unified in their embrace of this method, or so Woell seeks to establish. He makes this case in the fourth and penultimate chapter of his book. What is definitive of early American pragmatists he maintains (in this context John Dewey makes a rare and fleeting appearance) is "a concern with the practical" so profound that it inspired them "to reformulate philosophy" in light of it (111). He proceeds to offer a detailed account first of Peirce's and then of James's approach to pragmatic inquiry. In the course of his exposition he devotes a good deal of attention to the nature of pragmatic "elucidation." He lobbies for "a more inclusive understanding of hypotheses open to pragmatic elucidation" (118). And he is keen to present truth on the pragmatists' understanding as "a regulative norm for properly pursued inquiry" (144). A primary aim of his own argument in this chapter is to extract from the writings of the two featured philosophers "a narrow and neutral pragmatism" that

William James Studies
2012, Vol. 9, pp. 193-198

neither assumes nor implies distinctive metaphysical commitments. James's well-known metaphor of a hotel corridor off which many rooms open, a metaphor to which he returns at various turns in his book, helps Woell to make vivid this aspect of his analysis.

Woell's journey to his fourth and penultimate chapter is arduous. What he sets about to do in the "critical" dimension of his larger project is both to present and to undermine readings of Peirce and James that have become all but standard in contemporary analytic philosophy. Common to these readings, by his account, is the tendency to view the work of these early pragmatists in terms of debate over the merits of metaphysical realism or antirealism, on the one hand, and over the prospects for Realism or Nonrealism with regard to truth, on the other. In his lengthy first chapter, Woell takes pains to explain the terms of this debate and to canvas the views of prominent disputants. This account provides the framework for his inventory of prominent interpreters of Peirce and James who disagree amongst themselves over how best to position each philosopher within the context of these related debates.

In each of the following two chapters, Woell undertakes two further tasks. He aims first to explain how contemporary analytic philosophers have been led to interpret Peirce's and James's work in terms of the metaphysical and epistemological debates he showcases in his first chapter. He hopes, second, to demonstrate the ways in which these interpretations are profoundly mistaken. In both chapters, the avenue into as well as out of the misreadings Woell alleges runs through the terrain of early modern philosophy. His fundamental strategy is to argue that contemporary interpreters have misunderstood Peirce's and James's critiques of the work of Descartes, Hume, and Kant. The early American pragmatists do not engage the debate over Humean skepticism (Chapter 2) or adjudicate the merits of Kant's transcendental metaphysics (Chapter 3). To position them as either champions or opponents of skepticism, or as siding for or

against metaphysical realism is to distort their work. Rather, they seek to expose concepts such as the Kantian notion of “the thing-in-itself” as incoherent in the very contexts in which they are employed. In making this case, Woell expends considerable effort in expository work. The payoff for his project is cashed largely in terms of metaphysical neutrality. It is wrong to view Peirce and James as either metaphysical realists or antirealists, he maintains, inasmuch as they reject the terms in which the debate has been and is currently framed. Resetting the terms of the philosophical enterprise is fundamental to the task of pragmatism, or so Woell would seem to suggest.

What has all this to do with religion in general and philosophy of religion in particular? Woell assures us in his introduction that the answer is a great deal. Inasmuch as “a concern with the human was always near the forefront in [the pragmatists’] thinking” (1) and because “the competencies and limitations of human beings” that the early pragmatists seek to identify extend to engagement with questions of religious truth, pragmatism is well-positioned to illuminate the religious dimension of human life. Yet assertions Woell makes at the outset of his book, not simply about the relevance of pragmatism for religious claims, but more surprisingly about the relevance of philosophy of religion for pragmatism, go considerably beyond observations on this order and are nothing short of bold. With respect to the former, he maintains that without attention to “the fallible and functional aspects of religious concepts and claims,” as well as recognition of their “continued contestability across a variety of contexts” – features of concepts and claims crucial to pragmatic inquiry more generally – “religious claims cannot be properly understood” (5). With respect to the latter, he writes, “Not only is a pragmatic philosophy of religion possible and desirable, it is central to a fuller rehabilitation of pragmatism and to a fuller understanding of early American pragmatism’s key insights” (6). In the course of these remarks

he ventures to assert, seemingly in support of his sweeping judgments of pragmatism's and religion's mutual relevance, that Peirce and James "shared an understanding of religion in general and of philosophy of religion in particular" (5) and that the "religious sensibilities of each author" were "deep" (5).

In the closing pages of his book Woell makes what is best viewed as a down payment on the promise of his introductory chapter. While he declines to undertake "a thorough rehashing of the traditional issues in the philosophy of religion" (148), he finds it "obvious" that pragmatism "provides a viable resource for traditional topics" given that both Peirce and James "took religion quite seriously" (153). However this may be, what Woell envisions in connection with a pragmatic philosophy of religion is not an inquiry into the truth of religious beliefs, but an elucidation of "what it might mean for them to be true in the manner suggested by pragmatism" (148). Yet in order to set the stage for such an enterprise, he feels compelled to establish the very susceptibility of religious belief to pragmatic inquiry. In so doing, he raises difficulties for his project cast up by Peirce and James themselves, each of whom presents religious belief on occasion in seemingly non-cognitive terms. Indeed, a good deal of Woell's concluding discussion is dedicated to exposition and analysis of Peirce's 1898 Harvard lectures and James's "The Will to Believe" designed to resolve precisely these difficulties. His considered view on this matter is that Peirce's and James's "occasionally explicit rejections of the application of the pragmatic maxim to religious belief" are "in some tension with the resources actually provided" (168).

In this own attempt to tap these resources and to suggest what he modestly characterizes as "a prolegomena to a pragmatic philosophy of religion" (152), Woell aims to navigate a course between two extremes that divide contemporary interpreters and/or appropriators of pragmatism:

he hopes in some future work to provide an account of religious belief that does not view its object as “some power beyond ourselves to which we are answerable” (149), on the one hand, and that does not reduce it to a merely human affair, on the other. His concern is not to establish foundations for or to provide explanations of religious belief, he explains, because pragmatism applies to existing belief that has been “put into doubt by some surprise that arises in our experience,” no matter its origins or grounds (161). Pragmatic inquiry aims to resolve such doubts and to return belief to a settled state.

Germane to the project in philosophy of religion Woell envisions are first, the pragmatic account of differences among objects of inquiry; second, Peirce’s understanding of what it is for such an object to be real; and finally, the pragmatic approach to the question of truth. The differences among objects of investigation on a pragmatic account, be they scientific, mathematical, or religious, are to be understood in “functional” rather than in “metaphysical” terms – in terms of “their roles in inquiry” (163). What it is “to be real,” in Woell’s understanding of Peirce’s view, “is simply to be capable of impinging upon experience and to be recalcitrant to our expectations while being no less susceptible to discovery and investigation” (167). In the case of religious belief, “error or affirmation can only be seen in the consequences that the belief has in the life of the believer” (164-165). Finally, “the regulative assumption” of pragmatic inquiry is that if it “were pursued as far as it could fruitfully go” it would terminate in agreement (165). This last assumption in particular suggests deep problems for the projected enterprise, however, as Woell himself is the first to register in the conclusion of what he characterizes as a “preliminary sketch” (154). Given what he terms “the ambiguous character of religious belief and religious truth,” he feels compelled to “introduce the possibility that there

may be religious realities without their being final pragmatic truths about these realities” (167). If this possibility is actual, some would argue, “we would be forced to say that there is no truth,” as Woell recognizes (166). Leaving his reader with this problem very much in view and with no indication of the sorts of religious realities or truths he would investigate, he closes with an appeal to the authority of Peirce and James, a strategy prominent in his argument more generally. “In the end,” he writes, “I would argue that for both Peirce and James, religious beliefs are no less susceptible to doubt and inquiry than other beliefs, and are, at the very least, capable of being true in the same sense as all other beliefs” (168).

As the foregoing account will likely suggest, this book is not for the casual reader. It is perhaps best conceived as addressed to those already familiar with a broad range of recent interpretations and appropriations of the work of Peirce and James, much of which has been either inspired or provoked by Richard Rorty’s revitalization of American pragmatism. Yet for those seeking an inventory of figures participating in this conversation, Woell’s first chapter together with his extensive notes throughout may prove valuable resources.

Rose Ann Christian
Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies
Towson University