

Notes on *American Philosophy before Pragmatism*. By
Russell B. Goodman. Oxford: Oxford University Press,
2015. 281 pp. \$50

Russell B. Goodman's *American Philosophy before Pragmatism* provides an *elementary* survey of its broad subject matter, though it is certainly not in any way facile or insipid, as this term all too often implies. Rather, Goodman's comprehensive project traces the primary *elements* of early American philosophy, the recurring figures, examples, themes, and problems that, while in no way born from the soil of the New World, require a minimum of reckoning on the part of anyone who wishes to comfortably call themselves a scholar of American intellectual history.

The book is structured chronologically, with five of the six individual chapters devoted to titanic figures of American thought. There are no surprises here: Jonathan Edwards, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau each come in for thorough treatment, and an interlude devoted to the "strands of republican thought" in America distills the central principles of — and contradictions within — its ongoing Constitutional enterprise. Goodman ends this survey with an epilogue that traces a few central continuities in the era of American pragmatism, touching briefly on the relation between his representative men and William James, Charles Sanders Peirce, John Dewey, W.E.B. DuBois, and Walt Whitman.

Goodman attempts — quite rightly I believe — to fill in the gaps that render many prior histories of American thought incomplete. Paul Conkin's *Puritans and Pragmatists*, for instance, does not include Jefferson or Thoreau; William Clebsch's *American Religious Thought* neglects all but Edwards, Emerson, and James; and Elizabeth Flower and Murray Murphey's *History of Philosophy in America* does not treat the Transcendentalists in any significant

way. Most timely, however, is Goodman's effort to include in every chapter the significance of race and slavery on the thought of each writer and school of thinkers. While steering clear of polemic, his genealogy attempts to understand and historicize rather than naively praise or angrily condemn, taking as his guiding light James' insight into moral progress — repeated in some form several times throughout — as the overcoming of successive “equilibria of human ideals” (46).

Goodman achieves a careful balance of biographical material and metaphysical, ethical, theological, political, and literary glosses on a massive philosophical archive. His scholarly chops are always on display. Though he sometimes polices the limits of his genealogy by hesitating to go very far in the Continental direction, he nonetheless avoids chauvinism and provincialism by crossing the Atlantic when necessary and moving backwards beyond the cusp of American life (particularly through the English Puritanical tradition, as is certainly required). Though Goodman sometimes expends a bit too much energy defending some of the more maddening aspects of these thinkers' writings — that he takes pains to defend Franklin from D.H. Lawrence's critique of the *Almanack's* role in repressing the vitality of American life, for instance, may be to simply fight a losing battle — the *care* he takes to contextualize both their triumphs and errors is inspiring to anyone who believes that the practice of criticism and scholarship should begin in real affection.

If Goodman often repeats himself, to paraphrase the old gray poet who makes his way into these pages at their very end, he also demonstrates that American philosophy contains — and always has contained — multitudes. Sprinkled within the more obvious touchstones of American intellectual life (for it is not as if Goodman provides startlingly new readings of the Declaration of Independence, Emerson's *Nature*, or *Walden*) are references that prove the eclecticism of that life, from Edwards' troubled links to the British Empiricists, to Jefferson's Epicurean syllabus, to the Greek, Romantic, Idealist, and Eastern influences on the Transcendentalists. If this survey proves anything, though, it's that American philosophy has always been mixed up with existential,

aesthetic, political, and ecological praxis, and that it has been at its strongest when and where it has been most so. If there is continuity in the wildness of American thought, it may be in its emphases on futurity, evolution, and the yoking of creativity and receptivity, which keeps the archive open for endless revision, as well as other books like this with new philosophical nodes to consider.

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