

Review of *William James, Pragmatism, and American Culture*. By Deborah Whitehead. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015. 194 pp. \$28.00

The borders of pragmatism, like those of any “ism,” have long been sites of protracted disputes. Deborah Whitehead’s *William James, Pragmatism, and American Culture* takes these disputes as its subject matter. With nationalism and gender as her primary lenses, Whitehead considers pragmatism not as a historical phenomenon with a discrete essence, but as a contested term that is deployed in particular contexts and for specific purposes. Therefore, despite what its title implies, this book is as much about the neo-pragmatist revival as it is about James—and its primary subject is pragmatism’s future. Pragmatism in this book is a “bricolage” (8), “a way of explaining America to itself at critical moments in U.S. history” (6); and Whitehead’s purpose is to synthesize a century of claims regarding pragmatism in order to remind those who would deploy it that “the pragmatist tradition is and has always been heterogeneous” (136). Her hope is that “pragmatist scholars might reflect more critically on the specific histories of pragmatist narratives and discourses being offered as theoretical resources” (137).

Because its goal is to spur inquiry and its secondary purpose is to participate in that inquiry, this volume makes fewer arguments of its own than one may expect. Yet it raises considerations that are essential for any careful steward of pragmatist methods and concepts. In particular, Whitehead builds upon the work of other scholars to critically read the ambivalent claim to “Americanism” that has been present in pragmatism since its inception, and she

shows how James's gendered presentation of pragmatism as mediator has been taken up by feminist theorists. Thus, she tackles pragmatism's primary claim to historical importance—its status as an American philosophical tradition—and one of its most productive sites of present-day (re)formulation—feminist pragmatist theory. In so doing, Whitehead attempts her own Jamesian “unstiffening” of pragmatism's meaning within the academy. In short, this book attempts to radically contextualize narratives of pragmatism so the term can remain productively contested, open to all “voices with a stake in the pragmatist narrative” (140).

William James, Pragmatism, and American Culture begins by situating itself among recent narratives of pragmatism. The book's first chapter rejects attempts, such as those by John J. Stuhr, John E. Smith, and Louis Menand, to provide a single, historically-driven definition of pragmatism. Instead, Whitehead follows those like Cornell West in incorporating the neo-pragmatic renaissance of the 1980s and 1990s into her assessment of pragmatism's meaning. But while those like West, Giles Gunn, and James T. Kloppenberg argue that pragmatism is popular because its epistemology is uniquely suited to unite people and ideas across the identity-based divides that preoccupied the 1990s, Whitehead asks how and why pragmatism gained its reputation as a *via media* in the first place. Her quotations show her approval of both David Hollinger, who note the importance of cultural resonance in determining pragmatism's popularity, and feminist theologians like Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Rebecca Chopp, who portray textual interpretation as sites of contestation and dialogue in order to argue that pragmatism's definition not only is, but ought to be an ongoing project. Whitehead seeks less to capitalize upon pragmatism's supposed uses than to demonstrate the varied uses to which it has been put. This is especially important, she argues, given the recent concentration of scholarship on pragmatism and rhetoric, including the work of Stephen Mailloux, Robert Danisch, and Paul Stob. If pragmatism is a “mode of rhetoric” (22), then

understanding what that rhetoric does is essential for a clear picture of pragmatism's past and future role in American intellectual life.

This discussion is continued in the book's second chapter, in which Whitehead aptly demonstrates the uncertainty that was baked into pragmatism's definition from the start. Ever since Ralph Barton Perry's first biography, scholars of both James and Peirce have long debated whether James was telling the truth when he credited Charles S. Peirce with pragmatism's conception, or whether that assertion was simply one more of James's attempts to rescue his ne'er-do-well friends through intellectual (and fiscal) generosity. Whitehead clearly favors the view that Peirce contributed less to the early formulation of pragmatism than James gave him credit for, but her ultimate claim is not one of intellectual biography. Instead, she stands back from that argument in order to remind readers that the so-called essence of pragmatism has always been contested. After continuing her discussion with an overview of the term's more recent contestations, Whitehead engages Richard Bernstein's work to argue that no narrative should be elevated above another, whether it be James's, Peirce's, Rorty's, Seigfried's, or West's. Instead, the book promises to move beyond Bernstein and use social and historical context to explain the emergence of these competing narratives.

The book's remaining chapters take up this task, first in regard to nationalism and then to gender. While these discussions are brief, the author does an excellent job raising key issues for historians of pragmatism and pragmatic theorists alike, fragmenting the putatively unified body of thought that scholars would examine. Chapter 3 traces metaphors of Americanism, the frontier, and empire in James's work, ultimately concluding that pragmatism has a "mixed heritage" (58). Building on the work of Scott Pratt in *Native Pragmatism*, Whitehead demonstrates the clear influence of manifest destiny and its metaphors upon James's descriptions of pragmatism. Rife with imagery of the frontier and the pioneer, James's lectures on pragmatism from 1898 onward depict the philosopher as "a kind of Columbus figure whose watershed discovery . . . signals the beginning of a new era" (67).

This imperial claim to Americanism, Whitehead declares, sounds a cautionary note to those who would claim pragmatism as America's signature inclusive philosophy. This is true despite James's anti-imperialism and infamous disgust with bigness, with which Whitehead also engages. Even from 1895 onward, Whitehead argues that James was tempted by American superiority, expansion, and jingoism; yet, she concludes, he did ultimately turn against the ideal of a "big" America. But given the evidence assembled for these discussions, one must ask whether this heritage is as mixed as Whitehead claims. Are pioneer-driven images of the individualist American frontier and imperial claims to the Philippines truly two competing narratives present in James's work, or are they, in fact two, sides of a Jamesian nationalism? While this chapter raises the crucial issue of pragmatism's implication in narratives of American power, it does not go far enough to explain how James's work welded together some of these seemingly competing narratives, even though he was well-known for declaring his distaste for the Philippine War. Missing, too, is a discussion of Kristin Hoganson's *Fighting for American Manhood*, which would have aptly connected James's views on character and the nation to the book's subsequent analysis of gender.

Chapters 4 and 5 connect James's presentation of pragmatism as a feminine mediator between opposites to the present-day resurgence of feminist interest in pragmatism. Chapter Four centers on a key paragraph from *Pragmatism* in which James provides a lengthy description of his philosophy while using the feminine pronoun. "She 'unstiffens' our theories," James writes; "She is completely genial" (83). Yet, while this female-gendering of pragmatism remains constant, Whitehead argues that James's other designations move fluidly between genders: tough- and tender-minded, healthy and sick souls, and rationalism and empiricism all fluctuate between male and female depending on the context and mood of the text. In one of the book's most exciting arguments, this chapter concludes that James's use of gender generally implicates the differences between the competing

ideals of manhood that clashed at the turn of the twentieth century, rather than the differences between men and women. In turn, James's emphasis on mediation between these fluidly-gendered notions acknowledged the reality of extremes and yet the rarity of their existence, thus implying that "existing gender ideals are far too thin to encompass the whole of reality" (110).

The book's final chapter addresses the same themes of gender and mediation in a different light. Beginning with a sustained critique of Richard Rorty's insistence on secularism, the chapter argues that Rorty treated religion as a feminized other—a derogation of both femininity and religion which, Whitehead argues, Rorty's feminist interlocutors have thus far overlooked. This gendered depiction continued even after Rorty's attempt to reach out to feminism in his 1990 Tanner Lectures. While Rorty's portrayal of a feminized pragmatism as the prophet crying in the wilderness inverted the usual Romantic dynamic of the virile, strong poet, it still cut the feminized discourse off from society at large, as the feminist critic Nancy Fraser argued (116). Yet, Whitehead claims, what is interesting here is that these varied views all see pragmatism as "neutral theoretical terrain," (127)—the sole space upon which rapprochement could occur between different interpretive systems. Whitehead concludes that even for feminists, pragmatism has gained rhetorical power as a seemingly viable *via media*.

The author succeeds in her attempts to destabilize pragmatism's meaning and make its heterogeneity productively obvious for future claimants upon the tradition. The book is a concise, richly sourced, and essential reminder that pragmatism has always been many-voiced. Whitehead deals deftly with many of the central figures of the neo-pragmatist renaissance and her main arguments are compelling and detailed—especially those regarding James's fluid idea of masculinity and Rorty's feminized otherization of religion. This book will prove useful to scholars looking for a perceptive, concise angle on the debate over pragmatism, and it will add innovative points to discussions on its specific subtopics, especially nationalism in James and gender in

James and Rorty. It deserves especial credit for treating pragmatism's central truism as a question: why and how has pragmatism claimed its role as mediator, and what images of mediation have played into—and been furthered by—those claims?

While Whitehead definitively establishes that the history of pragmatism is full of live debates, this book's tendency to leave important questions unanswered may dissatisfy some readers. For example, why is James's pragmatism presented as female, and what are the effects of this portrayal upon the discourses of both philosophy and gender? How does this gendered depiction relate to the kind of mediation that either James or others desire? One wonders whether this feminine vision of mediation relates to the sentimental Victorian ideal of the genial, comforting wife and of the home as the place where males go to relax, perhaps even to "unstiffen." Yet it also calls to mind James's persistent characterization of his moral theory in terms of heterosexual love, most memorably at the start of "What Makes a Life Significant?", which was delivered around the time of the 1898 Berkeley lecture in which James first defined pragmatism in terms of the solitary male explorer.¹ Is pragmatism a system in which mutual recognition occurs on equal footing between loving members of different sexes, or is it a cosmology in which a female mediatrix works behind the scenes to draw together reluctant men? Similar questions could be asked of Chapter 3, which provocatively assembles a myriad of pioneer metaphors from James's lectures and correspondence but does not inquire into the implications of those metaphors within James's text. For example, one wonders whether Whitehead's analysis of James's use of the frontier myth could be combined with David Leary's recent work on James and Wordsworth in order to assess the relevance of Romantic primitiveness James's understanding of truth, as well as the complicated hierarchies it implies.²

Given the author's comfort with these open questions, her tendency to foreground other historians and theorists, and her generous use of block quotations, this book can at times feel like a

long literature review. As such, as well as for the original arguments it puts forth, it is certain to be of use to pragmatic theorists and intellectual historians alike. Whitehead's dissection of James's rhetoric and imagery is especially timely given the current interest in James and literary studies. The book may be timely in another sense, as well, since pragmatism "has historical ties to periods of great cultural change" (21); we may be due for another high water mark in the constant flood of neo-pragmatist thought. The old refrains regarding division and its threat to democracy have begun to sound again. As we bemoan our inability to communicate across social chasms, will the Trump era spur wholly new forms of intellectual innovation? Or, as Whitehead hopes, will its challenges lend new vigor and diversity to this old way of thinking?

Abigail Modaff
Harvard University
amodaff@g.harvard.edu

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Fraser, Nancy. *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.
- Hoganson, Kristin L. *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.
- James, William. "What Makes a Life Significant?" In *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals*. 130–46. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1962.
- Leary, David E. "'Authentic Tidings': What Wordsworth Gave to William James." *William James Studies* 13, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 1–26.