

# American pragmatism: Towards a geographical introduction

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## Abstract

The purposes of the paper are to provide a historical and thematic review of some of the variants of American philosophical pragmatism (old and new), and to point to its potential relevance for geography. The paper is divided into three sections. The first, discusses the origins of American pragmatism focussing on four figures: John Dewey, Oliver Wendell Holmes, William James, and Charles Sanders Peirce. Following the argument of Louis Menand (2001) in *The Metaphysical Club*, I will suggest that pragmatism took on its peculiar American character as a response to the deep fissures and wounds caused by that country's Civil War. That war produced a loss of faith, undermining notions of universal progress and absolute truth. Pragmatism was the reaction. The second section brings pragmatism to the present, by focussing on three connected contemporary American pragmatists: Richard Rorty, Richard Bernstein, and Richard Shusterman. The hallmark of their work, and which justifies treating them as a group, is a willingness to stretch pragmatism: first, by making linkages with other anti-foundational, practice-based philosophical traditions, especially those within Continental European philosophy, and which had been shut out of Anglo-American philosophy after the Second World War by the rise of analytic philosophy; and second, by applying pragmatist ideas to issues like the body and popular culture to which it had never been applied. Finally, in the conclusion the paper reflects on the prospects of tethering pragmatism to the work of human geographers. Given the anti-architectonic impulses of pragmatism, such a project cannot simply be one of holus-bolus transferring pragmatism to geography. A different approach is needed, and which is schematically outlined and briefly illustrated using the idea of place.

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## 1. Introduction

In Colm Tóibín's novel, *The Master*, about the later life of Henry James, Henry reflects on his friend Oliver Wendell Holmes, as well as other American pragmatist philosophers who included John Dewey, Charles Peirce, and his own brother William. Henry James says, they "did not believe in anything and [yet] had managed to make the view seem both reasonable and popular" (Tóibín, 2004, p. 115).

Perhaps this is the general conception of pragmatism. Bertrand Russell (2004 [1938], p. 210) was certainly a critic who took this tack, suggesting that pragmatism "gives freedom to creative fancy, which it liberates from the shackles of the supposed 'real' world." Similarly, the most well-

known living American pragmatist philosopher, Richard Rorty, has been the continual butt of often excoriating criticism directed at his supposedly "anything goes" philosophy. The Cambridge philosopher Simon Blackburn (2001, p. 42), for example, writes in an article titled "The professor of complacency" that such is Rorty's lack of conviction that his "world [is one] in which a walk around the concentration camps is no more disturbing than a walk around the [the US Master's golf] course at Augusta."

As someone who has also argued for philosophical pragmatism, I have sometimes faced similar charges (although never with the same vitriol). Andrew Sayer at an AAG meeting in San Francisco asked me: If pragmatists don't believe in anything, why did I enter the room through the door and not try coming in through the wall? Or, Dick Peet at a Miami AAG asked me that given pragmatists don't believe in anything why was I standing in front of him in a

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Miami hotel conference room rather than sunbathing on South Beach. Despite that alluring possibility I decided to stay, and at the end of the session I even resisted walking through the wall, tempting as that was.

Given these responses, and from geographers who have written good, informed works on philosophy in geography and the social sciences (Sayer, 1984; Peet, 1998), it is clear that there is a need to say more about the nature of philosophical pragmatism. For pragmatism is not equivalent to crude epistemological relativism: every view is as good as every other, and so there is no point in believing anything. And neither is it equivalent to crude ontological relativism: we make the world as we see fit, defying gravity at whim and flouting the molecular structure of building materials at will. Rorty (1982, p. 166) says that “no one except for the occasional co-operative freshman” would ever argue either of these positions. But the fact that Sayer and Peet think that pragmatism may fall prey to them illustrates how much work of explication remains. In part, this special issue, and my paper takes up such explication.

In the United States, at least at the beginning, there was a potential relationship between human geography and pragmatism. But it was never realised, and the subsequent history of pragmatism within the discipline has been sporadic, patchy, and fragmented. Robert Park, the central figure within the Chicago School of Sociology, was taught as an undergraduate by John Dewey at the University of Michigan in the 1880s. Dewey went on in 1894 to the newly opened University of Chicago, taking his colleague and fellow pragmatist George Mead with him. By the time Park himself arrived in Chicago as a faculty member in 1913, Dewey had been gone for almost a decade, although Mead remained. Given Park’s and Mead’s presences, and the legacy of Dewey’s, there was a possibility that geographers at the newly minted University of Chicago’s Department of Geography (founded in 1903) would be influenced by pragmatism. But there is no evidence that they were (see Harris’s, 1979, thorough history of the early Chicago Department, and Enrikin’s, 1980, equally thorough discussion of Park’s work and influence). Pragmatism explicitly surfaced in human geography only in the late 1970s and early 1980s as one component of an eclectic humanistic geography concerned with recouping human intentionality and meaning (Duncan, 1978; Jackson and Smith, 1984, Chapter 4). Since that time there have been intermittent engagements with particular pragmatists especially Dewey (Westcoat, 1992; Mitchell, 2001; Cutchin, 2004a,b), but also some neo-pragmatists such as Rorty (Barnes, 1991) and Hilary Putnam (Sunley, 1996). Recently, Bridge (2005) has also drawn on the larger canon of pragmatism, both classical and new, to understand the contemporary city.

But for a philosophical school that dominated American academic departments before the Second World War, and which has enjoyed a considerable revival since 1980, this is not a lot of engagement. In providing an introduction to American pragmatism, the paper is divided into three sections. First, following Menand’s (2001) lead, I sketch the

historical origins and philosophical substance of classic American pragmatism focussing especially on four of its original practitioners: John Dewey (1859–1952), Oliver Wendell Holmes (1841–1935), William James (1842–1910), and Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914). Second, when the last of this group died, John Dewey in 1952 at the age of 93, pragmatism was in decline. It was overtaken by analytic philosophy which was disdainful of pragmatism’s metaphysics and slack thinking. Dewey, for example, was regarded by one analytic philosopher as “a nice old man who hadn’t the vaguest conception of real philosophical rigor or the nature of a real philosophical problem” (quoted in Gouinlock, 1972, p. xi). In 1979, however, Rorty (1979), hitherto a card carrying analytic philosopher himself, came out of the pragmatist closet and published *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. It shook the establishment, and paved the way for a revivification of pragmatist philosophy that continues to the present. In particular, Rorty expanded on who counted as a pragmatist philosopher. Apart from the usual American suspects (Rorty’s favourite was Dewey), they also included in his view European philosophers like Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Foucault, and Derrida. While this group may not have regarded themselves as pragmatists, for Rorty they could be treated as unprofessed members. While Rorty’s writings were the first to draw this connection between pragmatism and strands of European philosophy, it was a union subsequently developed and discussed by Richard Bernstein and Richard Shusterman. In the second section, I review the writings of at least this branch of neo-pragmatism. I am concerned to show both how this version of neo-pragmatism is a continuation of classical pragmatism, but also in the ways in which it diverges, especially through its more expansive definition, and the broader range of issues it covers, such as the body and popular culture as in Shusterman’s work. Dewey knew that for pragmatism to continue it would need “to be redone and undone and taken up differently” (Stuhr, 2004, p. 94). This is what neo-pragmatism represents. Finally, in the conclusion I briefly consider the prospects of tethering pragmatism to the work of geographers. Given space limitations, this last section provides only a schematic outline using as an example the idea of place. Other papers in the special issue will provide fuller accounts of the possibilities of pragmatism’s usefulness for geography.

## 2. Classical pragmatism

Menand’s (2001) compelling history of American pragmatism, *The Metaphysical Club*, argues that the movement emerged as a reaction to the traumatic experience of the American Civil War. The Civil War shot a hole through American society and its institutions, cutting the nation to its quick, revealing the failure of existing conceptions of democracy, culture, and even ideas themselves. Pragmatism, Menand (2001, pp. x–xii) argues, was one of the responses. It was an attempt to repair the damage, offering

renewed justifications and re-imaginings of democracy, culture, and ideas.

Several of the original pragmatists were directly exposed to that war. Oliver Wendell Holmes fought in it and was wounded three times including by a bullet that hit him just above the heart (Menand, 2001, Chapter 2). And two of William James's brothers – Wilky and Bob – were sent to the war by their father. Wilky was so severely wounded it took him a year and half to recover. William, in contrast, because he was first born, and presumed the most intellectually gifted, was spared, and Henry just disappeared into his room to read French novels. Of the other early pragmatists, Charles Sanders Peirce was protected by his over-protective father, a Harvard Professor of mathematics, and John Dewey was born too late (or maybe at the right time).

All four pragmatists were concerned to offer a distinctly American philosophy that while taking into account the nation's past would prepare it for a post-bellum life of an emerging modern industrial democracy. A philosophy made in America, it was conceived as the means for national ameliorative change. Dewey (1917, p. 65) famously said, “philosophy recovers itself when it ceases to be a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers and becomes a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems of men.” The framework of ideas by which Americans had made sense of themselves had failed, producing a horrific conflagration. This was the problem to which philosophy as method now needed to be directed. Pragmatism's method was to fashion a different grid of ideas; one in which the cruelty of the American civil war could never again be conceived, and hence could never reoccur.

There were sometimes large differences in opinion and interests among the four, though. Holmes as a jurist was less interested in pure philosophy than in making it work through the court cases on which he ruled first in Massachusetts, and later at the US Supreme Court, and on which he sat for 30 years (1902–1932). Peirce, who James credited as the originator of pragmatism and which was first presented as a series of lectures in the early 1870s (Menand, 2001, p. 350), was so upset by how James and Dewey interpreted his philosophy that he made up his own neologism for what he did, “pragmaticism.” It was a name he thought sufficiently “ugly to be safe from kidnappers” (Bernstein, 1992a, p. 813). Even James and Dewey, who were closest to offering a united front, had their differences. James remained intensely interested in matters of the spirit, and indeed, spiritualism. Knowing he was dying, William left instructions for Henry to remain in Boston for six weeks after his death so that William might contact him from the other side of the grave. Dewey, in contrast, was concerned with more material matters, *real politick*: forms of racial discrimination (he was a founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), injustices to the working class (he helped create both the League for Industrial Democracy and the New York Teachers Union), and infringements on free speech (he was involved in form-

ing both the American Civil Liberties Union and the American Association of University Professors).

The differences among the four were real, and which are well illustrated by other papers in this special issue concerned with particular pragmatists and their specific beliefs. That said, there were also a set of common themes and emphases, and for the purpose of this review paper I focus on them.

### 2.1. *Anti-foundationalism*

Perhaps the most important shared belief was that ideas did not exist in the firmament or as timeless pre-existing perfect forms. This was the position that much of Western philosophy had taken from Plato to Descartes to Kant. Bernstein (1983, p. 199) calls this the “Platonic urge,” the desire “to escape from conversation [in the here and now] to something atemporal which lies in the background of all possible conversations.” For the pragmatists, though, it was precisely Platonic thinking cast in terms of abstraction, correctness and certainty that had produced the terrors of the Civil War in the first place: the Unionist Platonic truth versus the Confederate Platonic truth. For pragmatists, however, Plato's cave was empty. Conversations in the here and now were all that we have or need. Ideas didn't already exist in perfect form but emerged contingently and experimentally in response to the particular needs and practices of people as they lived out their lives in a given place and time. Ideas were like knives and forks, implements to accomplish particular tasks, and not transcendent truths. If they no longer delivered the goods, or worse, delivered the cruelty of war, those ideas needed to be dropped, and new ones adopted. This is what made pragmatism. It was a philosophy of practical achievement. Ideas were labelled true when they enabled us to get things done, when they coped effectively with the world.

This was clear from William James's definition of truth. James wrote in 1907 in *Pragmatism* – a work he modestly “rated as ‘epoch making’ ... something quite like the protestant reformation” (James, 1920a, Vol. 2, p. 279) – “the true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief” (James, 1907, p. 30). Truth was not inherent in the world. Nor was it a reflection of the world. That was a “spectator theory of knowledge” as Dewey (1929a, p. 19) called it. Rather, under pragmatism truth was assigned to beliefs that allowed us to achieve what we wanted to accomplish practically. In this sense, it was our own interests, values and purposes that helped make truth. “The knower is an actor and coefficient of the truth” as James (1920b, p. 67) put it. Only those beliefs that succeeded pragmatically in meeting those interests, values and purposes were called true. In this sense, “truth happens to an idea. It becomes true, it is *made* true by events” (James, 1907, p. 77). Given James's definition, you can also see why pragmatists have no difficulty in saying it is true you walk through doors, and not walls. Don't believe them? Try it. See how you cope with the world then.

More generally, the position adopted by the early pragmatists toward knowledge was anti-foundationalist. Unlike philosophical theories of knowledge that succumbed to the Platonic urge by positing “fixed, unquestionable grounds” (Shusterman, 1997, p. 157), pragmatists believed that indubitable epistemological foundations neither existed nor were necessary. Further, when foundational principles were (mistakenly) invoked, the consequences could be tragic, unravelling the world, producing a sometimes grisly form. The pragmatist attitude, in contrast, as James (1907, p. 22) wrote in *Pragmatism*, was “of looking away from first things, principles, ‘categories,’ supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, and facts.”

## 2.2. Social character of knowledge

Knowledge for the early pragmatists was constitutively social; the social went all the way down. Beliefs were collective products, hammered out on the social anvil, a response to the peculiar conditions and human needs found within a given social environment.

To say that knowledge was social doesn’t mean it was monolithic and singular. There was still room for individuality and diversity (and diversity was critical to the pragmatist project). It meant, though, that we should see seemingly lone geniuses, say, someone like the relentlessly secretive and solitary Isaac Newton, as still thoroughly enmeshed in a set of social relations. In fact, even Newton recognised that he stood “on the shoulders of Giants” who preceded him (quoted by Gleick, 2003, p. 98); that is, he was part of a larger tradition that was as much social as it was intellectual (even supposing that the two can be separated). The problems on which Newton worked, the techniques on which he drew, the scientific instruments he used, the logic he deployed, and the reception accorded to his findings, were the consequence of a set of explicit and implicit social agreements. For Newton’s theory of gravity to become true, and for gravity to be recognised as real, it was necessary that there was an accord within the community in which he worked that his formulation coped better with the world than anyone else’s. The point is that such an agreement involved a set of inherent social processes. It was exactly this conclusion that was later championed by Kuhn (1962) in his notion of “paradigm” that appeared in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (and maybe the most famous, certainly the most cited, academic book of the 20th century; Fuller, 2000, Chapter 1). But it was more than a century earlier in 1878 that Peirce (1982, vol. 3, p. 273) wrote: “The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate, is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real.”

Claiming that knowledge was social did not mean it was free floating, that anything counted as truth. For knowledge to be true under the pragmatist definition, it needed to be useful, that is, to enable humans to accomplish their purposes. If it did not, there would be no social agreement.

Newton’s formulations of gravity was accepted as true because it enabled the community of natural philosophers of which he was part to understand terrestrial and heavenly movement better than any other formulation available. And it continued to be true until Einstein devised his General Theory of Relativity. Afterwards it was Relativity that better allowed humans to meet their practical ends, that is, it proved itself “good in the way of belief.” The historian and philosopher of science, Galison (2004, p. 288 and footnotes 105 and 106, p. 351), provides a striking example. In the 1970s the US military for a brief period programmed their new communication satellites using the Newtonian formulation (even though the Einsteinian one was also available on board). Those satellites were used for GPS, but which as a technique relied critically on Einstein’s Theory of Relativity. Unsurprisingly, within three weeks, the GPS estimates were wrong, off by up to six miles for any pair of location co-ordinates. Only when the Einsteinian formulation was activated on the satellites was the US military able to provide precise locational co-ordinates; that is, was able to cope again with the world.

## 2.3. Darwin and radical contingency

Clearly influenced by Darwin (and whose work loomed large in the pragmatist project), was a belief in the importance and role of radical contingency, as well as recognition of the need for adaptation in the face of unpredictability. The early pragmatists believed humans were continually buffeted by chance, accident, and serendipity. Humans should always expect the unexpected. For this reason, Dewey (1922, p. 79) argued for cultivation of a “reflective intelligence,” that is, a willingness to change our mind, to accept that truths are only ever makeshift, and to be willing to refashion ideas, even cherished ideas, for the new circumstances. This meant treating ideas as pliable and adaptable, and not inviolate Platonic ideals buried in the philosopher’s cave. Ideas didn’t have a separate innate life of their own, but were instruments that should be picked up, dropped, and modified at will to meet the exigencies of our changing life condition. As Menand (2001, pp. xi–xii) writes, pragmatists:

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 believed that since ideas are provisional responses to particular and unreproducible circumstances, their survival depends not on their immutability but their adaptability.

It was Peirce who first emphasised the overwhelming power of chance and probability. In 1884 he wrote, “Chance is the one essential agency upon which the whole process depends.... Everything that can happen by chance, sometime or other will happen by chance. Chance will sometime bring about a change in every condition” (Peirce, 1982, vol. 4, p. 544). Even tiny random variations given enough time

might produce consequences of immense import as in the case of the origins of life itself.

For the pragmatists, the central implication of living in a probable world, of what Dewey (1929b, p. 43) variously called “the precariousness of existence,” “a scene of risk,” and the “uncannily unstable,” was inherent ignorance about the future. People never knew with assurance what was going to happen. All philosophical talk of necessity, certainty, and inevitability was at base hubris. Instead, argued pragmatists, our beliefs were merely bets about the future, “guesses about how things w[ould] behave most of the time” (Menand, 2001, p. 127). Some of those bets turned out to be wrong, occasionally with disastrous consequences. Other bets were more successful. The larger point was that rather than denying probability by using words like necessity, inevitability and certainty, or by trying to cordon it off and to tame it by making it a separate branch of study, i.e., as in the science of statistics, pragmatists argued contingency should be seen as an opportunity. We should aim to make chance work for us rather than against us. So, while the Civil War was a contingent event, rather than letting it destroy the Union, it should be used as an opportunity to turn the Union into something better. But this was possible only if all Americans were prepared to adapt and to change; to relinquish hitherto sacred verities and to try new ideas that, while in some cases might seem crackpot and cloud cuckoo-like, might save the nation and even improve it.

#### 2.4. *Experimentation, democracy and hope*

To deal with radical contingency, and also to find means for amelioration, required for the pragmatists continual experimentation. Not that every experiment would be successful; in fact, most would not. But the ambition is that some new arrangement, technique, device, institution, method, or scientific or artistic endeavour would be successful, “breaking the crust of convention” (Dewey, 1944, Chapter 22), and enabling human flourishing. To do so requires openness, a willingness to listen, and a democracy of hope. It is a democracy because it welcomes everyone to participate in the conversation, encouraging them to experiment by pointing it in new directions, shaping it into new forms. And it is hope because while the resulting experimentation and adaptation offer no guarantee of success, there is the aspiration of a better world, where hurt is lessened, and the virtues of a good life are possible. The alternative is inflexibility, sclerosis, dogma, and much worse: the Spanish inquisition, the Ayatollahs, Nazism. Goering used to say, “when I hear the word culture I reach for my revolver.” Culture with its connotation of liveliness, contestation, innovativeness, experimentation, and porousness was the problem. Holmes (1953, vol. 2, p. 1291) wrote to his friend Harold Laski, “I detest a man who knows he knows.” And clearly, Goering was one of those men. The alternative was receptivity, a willingness to say I don’t know, a keenness to try out new things, creativity, and a parliament of ideas.

For Dewey, philosophy was an important member of that parliament, and it too should move towards experimentation, and away from hard and fast vocabularies. The Laboratory School he founded at the University of Chicago was in part a site of philosophical experimentation. It was a hands-on experiment in trying to turn philosophy away from foundational talk to practice. Specifically,

Dewey hoped to enlist [philosophy] for practical reform, directing its critical acumen and imaginative energy to the resolution of concrete social and cultural problems. Since they could be hardened through the ideology of past philosophies, new philosophical thinking is needed to help resolve them: by making room for new solutions that do not fit with established ways of thinking. Philosophy should be transformational rather than foundational (Shusterman, 1997, p. 157).

To complete this task required listening to everyone, even, and maybe especially, to people with whom one disagreed. This marks another feature of pragmatism. The belief that democracy and free speech was not justified on the basis of individual rights, but on the need to allow as many people free expression to maximise the possibilities of experimentation. As Holmes wrote in a minority opinion at the Supreme Court (but within 10 years was to become the majority view):

...all life is an experiment. Every year if not every day we have to wager our salvation upon some prophecy based upon imperfect knowledge. While that experiment is part of our system I think we should be eternally vigilant against the attempts to check the expression of opinions that we loathe .... (quoted in Menand, 2001, p. 430).

Holmes averred this sentiment for good pragmatic reasons, not because of a conviction of the existence of inalienable individual rights. He believed in the right of free expression because “the more individual variations, the greater the chance that the group will survive. We do not permit ... the free expression of ideas because some individual may have the right one. No individual alone can have the right one. We permit free expression because we need the resources of the whole group to get us the ideas we need” (Menand, 2001, p. 431).

#### 2.5. *Pluralism*

Finally, one should not expect that ideas should cohere, all of a piece. There is nothing that ensures final coherence. In particular, Dewey and James were very critical of Hegel’s notion of “*Aufhebung*,” defined by Bernstein (1992b, p. 8) as the “final reconciliation ... [of] all difference, otherness, opposition, and contradiction.” For them the notion embodied exactly the wrong intellectual impulses. This was because, as James ([1910] 1977, pp. 321–322) wrote, “... nothing includes everything, or dominates over

everything. The word ‘and’ trails along after every sentence. Something always escapes.” Instead, Dewey and James offered the concept of pluralism (and coined by James in 1909 for his Oxford Hibbert lectures). Difference, otherness, opposition, and contradiction rather than being reconciled, as Hegel suggested, should be juxtaposed, contrasted, brought together in opposition, made to groan and protest in their adjacency. James ([1910] 1977, p. 26) wrote:

philosophers have always aimed at cleaning up the litter with which the world is apparently filled. They have substituted economical and orderly conceptions for ... tangle .... As compared with these rationalizing pictures, the pluralistic empiricism which I profess offers but a sorry appearance. It is turbid, muddled, Gothic sort of affair without a sweeping outline and little pictorial nobility.

But for James, and the other pragmatists, it is all we have. A contemporary of James, and briefly a competitor West End London playwright to his brother Henry (Tóibín, 2004), Oscar Wilde, quipped “truth is rarely pure, and never simple.” That was what radical pluralism was pointing towards. Ideas don’t add up to an ultimate, single truth, pure and simple. It was more complicated, messier, more contingent. It would be nice if the world was straightforward, neat and determined, but that is not the world in which the early pragmatists lived (nor ours either).

The world doesn’t hook together as one single, unified whole because there is no Archimedean view point to see it. Instead, the pragmatists “insisted on the validity of different ways of viewing and reporting the world as a function of our different contexts and purposes in dealing with it” (Shusterman, 1997, p. 132). “Philosophically, pluralism is the view that the world consists of independent things. Each thing relates to other things, but the relations depend on where you start. The universe is plural: it hangs together, but in more ways than one” (Menand, 2001, p. 377).

### 3. Neo-pragmatism

#### 3.1. *The rise of analytic philosophy and the decline of American pragmatism*

Of course, the pragmatists did not go unchallenged. And sometimes they were challenged on more than just what they said and did as philosophers. Critics of Peirce, for example, caused his spectacular mid-life decline and fall. He was dismissed from positions at both Johns Hopkins and the US Coast Survey for living with another woman while separated from his wife, and quickly was reduced to sleeping on the streets of New York blagging food. It was James who rescued him, organising a subscription fund yielding a thousand dollar annuity.

Within philosophy Russell (1910, pp. 123–124) was an early intellectual critic arguing in 1910 that if pragmatism had its way then “ironclads and Maxim guns [would] be the ultimate arbiters of metaphysical truth.” In contrast to the

pragmatists, Russell believed in epistemological foundations; in his case, the inviolable purity of logic. The deductive syllogism guaranteed Truth. This analytic view became increasingly adopted and debated especially among philosophers in Europe, and which culminated in discussions of the Vienna Circle from the early 1920s on logical positivism. Organised by Moritz Schlick (and as a sign of things to come, shot dead by a deranged anti-semitic student in 1936), the group also included Rudolf Carnap, Herbert Feigl, Phillip Frank, Otto Neurath, and someone who was to be important later to human geography, Gustav Bergman (eventually appointed at the University of Iowa where he influenced Fred K. Schaefer). As a philosophy, however, logical positivism represented everything that pragmatism was not: it was foundational, derogated the social, was obsessed with certainty, necessity, and universality, believed in a single truth and a single method, and possessed an unequivocal faith in one world (Neurath’s “Unity of Science;” Reisch, 2005).

Maybe the analytic approach<sup>1</sup> would have spread to America anyway, but the combination of the contingent facts of the rise of Nazism, and the Jewish heritage and socialist inclination of many Vienna Circle members, resulted in it arriving more quickly than it might have done (and fulfilling Peirce’s dictum, “everything that can happen by chance ... will happen by chance”). The majority of the Vienna Circle, along with several other Germanic and Central European philosophers with similar intellectual penchants and ethnic origins, such as Alfred Tarski, Hans Reichenbach, and Carl Hempel, fled to America as refugees during the 1930s, subsequently gaining positions in some of the country’s most prestigious university philosophy departments such as at Harvard, Princeton, and Chicago.

As a result, the complexion of post-war American philosophy changed. After the War, “virtually every major ‘respectable’ graduate department reshaped itself in the new spirit of ‘tough minded’ analytic philosophy” (Bernstein, 1992a, p. 816; see also Kloppenberg, 1996). Moreover, the same attitude came increasingly to be adopted more broadly across the human sciences in a movement that Schorske (1997) calls the “new rigorism.” Social sciences, including geography, and even some humanities, turned “from range to rigor, from loose engagement with a multifaceted reality historically perceived to the creation of sharp analytical tools that could promise certainty where description and speculative explication had prevailed before” (Schorske, 1997, p. 295). It seemed as if all of American academia was going analytic (on the relationship

<sup>1</sup> The analytic approach in philosophy founded by Gottlob Frege in the late nineteenth century is a complex philosophical movement, and difficult to define. Logical positivism formed one of its phases (Frege was an original member of the Vienna Circle), although after the Second World War the movement morphed in America into logical empiricism. Its hallmark characteristics are the stress on breaking down philosophical problems into smaller, more manageable sized pieces, and scrutinizing by an undiluted logic (Giere and Richardson, 1996).

between the intellectual shift to analysis and larger context of the Cold War, see, Barnes and Farish, 2006). When Dewey died in 1952, he had not only outlived his colleagues, and even his students, but it seemed “also that he outlived his philosophy and his time and its usefulness” (Stuhr, 2004, p. 81). Not that he would have said so. He wrote partly in response to Russell that analytic philosophy was “an affront to the common sense world of action, appreciation and affection” (Dewey, 1916, p. 60). But the tide had turned. American pragmatists were ever more marginalized, and by the mid-1950s, according to Bernstein, they had been “relegated to the dustbin of history” (Bernstein, 1992a, p. 816). Or even more damning, Stuhr (2004, p. 82) writes that after Dewey died “almost no one in professional philosophy wanted to be called, or would put up being labelled, Deweyan or a pragmatist or even an American philosopher.”

### 3.2. Pragmatism revived

Such negative assessments seem exaggerated, though. Pragmatism enjoyed at least an underworld existence during the 1950s and 1960s. In fact, Bernstein’s (1965, 1966) first two books published in the mid-1960s were respectively on Peirce and Dewey, and even analytic philosophers like Willard V. Quine supported a form of pragmatism (Quine, 1951, p. 43, said in his famous essay “Two dogmas of empiricism,” “I espouse a more thorough pragmatism”). However, works that were explicitly based upon and extended the classical pragmatists didn’t really resurface until 1979 when Richard Rorty published *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. It broke a log jam. The interest in the book was so intense that the publisher, Princeton University Press, could not keep up with the demand (<http://www.pupress.princeton.edu/einstein/centgreeting.html>).

The subsequent emergence of neo-pragmatism has produced some unlikely bedfellows, however. It includes on the political right Richard Posner, a devotee of Holmes, and a Ronald Reagan appointed judge on the US Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit, and on the political left, Cornel West, an academic and activist concerned with issues of race, who draws on Dewey, but also on Marx and various progressive theologians. In between, there is an array of different political positions, and substantive interests: Stanley Cavell in comparative literature, Hilary Putnam, Susan Haack and Robert Brandom in philosophy, Charlene Seigfried in feminism, and Paul Kurtz, founder of the Council for Secular Humanism.

Given such diversity, but also the need for brevity, the rest of this review is confined to examining just three neo-pragmatists: Rorty, Bernstein, and Shusterman. I focus on them because they form a coherent group engaging in similar arguments, beginning from similar sources, and committed more or less to similar objectives. Not that they always agree (far from it), but they are engaged in conversation, and which each believes is critical to the larger pragmatist project.

### 3.3. Richard Rorty

Rorty says about the success of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* that launched neo-pragmatism: “I still don’t understand it” (<http://www.unc.edu/%7Eknobe/rorty.html>). His only explanation is that people thought that “it was sort of a follow-up to Kuhn” (<http://www.unc.edu/%7Eknobe/rorty.html>). But that doesn’t seem right given that Kuhn plays only a minor role within the volume. The real stars are the later Wittgenstein and Heidegger, and the all-American boy, John Dewey.

Rorty, in fact, met Dewey as a child. Dewey visited his home, and Sidney Hook, Dewey’s star student at Columbia, was a family friend, and gave Rorty advice about becoming a philosopher (Rorty, 1998a). In spite of that advice, or maybe because of it, he trained and practiced in the analytic tradition. Appointed at Princeton in 1961, Rorty’s Pauline experience did not occur until the 1970s. Up until that point, he saw analytic philosophy “as the wave of the future and that my job was to find out all about it so that I could get in on it” (<http://www.unc.edu/%7Eknobe/rorty.html>). But then the disenchantment, and in 1979 publication of the book that turned the rigour of analytic philosophy against itself, and, in doing so, challenged contemporary mainstream American philosophy. In playing this role, Rorty was, as Kloppenberg (1996, p. 109) calls him, “the Trojan horse of analytic philosophy.”

This metaphor doesn’t quite work, though, because the Trojan horse came at the end of the War. Rorty’s *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, however, comes at the beginning of his long campaign against the analytic tradition. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* is his opening shot, and later followed by series of sustained assaults found in a succession of monographs and collections of philosophical papers (Rorty, 1982, 1989, 1991a,b, 1998a,b, 1999). Rorty is now perhaps American’s best known philosopher, but also the most contentious (a “lightning rod” as Guignon and Hiley, 2003, p. 1, call him; Bernstein, 1992b, p. 260). He is reviled by the Right for his liberalism and presumed relativism (*The Intercollegiate Review*, an American conservative journal, lists *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* as one of the 20th-century’s 50 most dangerous works; Guignon and Hiley, 2003, p. 38, fn. 18). He is damned by the traditional Left for his rejection of Marx (someone Rorty thinks commits Holmes’s sin of a man who knows he knows). He is condemned by the New Left for charging them with a “politics of despair” (when hypocritically, they argue, Rorty’s own approach represents an extreme privatisation of philosophy). And he is abused by other pragmatists for assorted philosophical, textual, and political transgressions (Bernstein, 1992b, p. 233, a former classmate at the University of Chicago, says his version of pragmatism is “little more than an *apologia* for the status quo,” and Shusterman, 2000, p. 65, says parts of Rorty’s work are a “glorification of neoliberalism”). On top of that, there are the analytical philosophers who are none-too-pleased either. Given the immense literature, both Rorty’s own and that of his critics

and commentators, I can give only the briefest of outlines. I want to show first, how Rorty represents a continuation of the pragmatist tradition, but second, also how he pushes it into new directions.

The two central arguments of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* are that there are no foundational bases for asserting Truth, and that philosophy should move away from the very project of epistemology towards what Rorty variously calls hermeneutics, edification, kibitzing, or conversation.

The first argument is an elaboration on Dewey's and James's lack of enthusiasm for a "spectator theory of knowledge." Rorty (1979, p. 12) says that in Western philosophy it has been "pictures rather than propositions, metaphors rather than statements, which [have] determin[e]d most ... philosophical convictions." In particular, it was the two ocular metaphors of "our glassy essence" and "the mirror of nature" that allowed Western philosophers to believe it was possible to represent the outside world perfectly in our mind's eye (our "glassy essence"): the mind as the mirror of nature. Using his analytic training, in particular, drawing upon the formal philosophical analysis of Wilfred Sellars and Willard Quine, Rorty shows that there are no foundations for this belief; that is, there is no enduring entity, or timeless set of rules, or universal form of logic that guarantee a reflective correspondence between the world itself and our ideas of the world. In this sense, the very project of epistemology that has preoccupied Western Philosophy, and couched as identifying foundational conditions for true knowledge, is misdirected. Knowledge claims are not justified by an outside philosophical foundation, but through only the customs and beliefs found inside a community. Knowledge "is not a matter of a special relation between ideas (words) and objects, but of conversation, of social practice" (Rorty, 1979, p. 170).

The second argument turns on what philosophy should become once epistemological foundationalism is abandoned. Rorty develops the pragmatist line by casting around for other practice-based philosophies, and which he finds among Continental European philosophers, particularly those engaged in hermeneutics. By hermeneutics Rorty means the study of interpretation and meaning. Once foundational epistemologies are discarded, he argues, the meaning of a knowledge claim is no longer immediately apparent. One cannot rely on just the facts themselves, or rationality, or Platonic essences. Instead, meaning is the product of interpretation, a consequence of the different assumptions, background conditions, and practices brought by different geographically and historically situated individuals and communities. This is where Kuhn fits. Different individuals and communities in effect operate within different, incommensurable paradigms, resulting in potentially radically different interpretations. Those different interpretations following Kuhn do not need to converge, and even if there is convergence, it might take different forms at different places and times. The important point for Rorty (1979, p. 318) is that we should not take

fright at the existence of these different interpretations, but, in following hermeneutics, "see the[ir] relation ...a[s] ... strands in a possible conversation, a conversation which presupposes no disciplinary matrix which unites the speakers, but where the hope of agreement is never lost so long as the conversation lasts." So, one should not give up in the face of difference, or suppose as analytic philosophy does that difference is either a mistake or not yet properly analysed. Instead, one should recognise the potential opportunities and gain from interaction and exchange, through kibitzing and conversation. The gain is not only political and moral, but intellectual and material. Rorty's larger point, then, is to re-think the purpose of philosophy, to move it away from narrow epistemological concerns (defining the conditions for truth) and on to a larger social canvas. His purpose is to make philosophy deal with "the problems of men" [sic].

Rorty diverges from Dewey in his conception of that better world, however. This is clear in Rorty's later works (Rorty, 1989). There, human fulfilment or flourishing is defined as a private affair: "what should I do with my aloneness?" (Rorty, 1991a, p. 13). This explains why Rorty defines liberty negatively as the avoidance of individual restriction and constraint, rather than positively as the potential for larger social empowerment and enrichment. The importance of liberalism for him is "its ability to leave people alone, to try out their private visions of perfection in peace" (Rorty, 1991a, p. 194). So, while Rorty recognises radical contingency, anti-foundationalism, pluralism, and the value of experimentation, they are to be mobilised for primarily private ends. In this he goes against Dewey, who maintained a keen public social conscience, and an incorruptible belief about the importance of the collective. Moreover, for Dewey, it was imperative that philosophers speak up, that they be public intellectuals, that they offer an agenda for social betterment. For Rorty, though, the history of the 20th century is littered with bad, and sometimes horrendous statements made by philosophers in the name of the collective good. The world would have been a better place, Rorty thinks, if they had focussed on providing vocabularies "for the pursuit of private perfection than for any social task" (Shusterman, 1997, p. 81). Reading Marcel Proust or George Orwell, Rorty thinks, would be much more useful for achieving private perfection than reading a 20th-century philosopher (and which partly explains why Rorty is now Professor of Comparative Literature at Stanford).

### 3.4. Richard Bernstein

Richard Bernstein, unlike Rorty, never underwent a road-to-Damascus experience. He was a true blue pragmatist from the beginning. Perhaps for that reason, he cleaved to the Deweyan social agenda, accounting for his occasional anti-Rortyan outbursts (Bernstein, 1992b, pp. 230–257). Bernstein's contributions to neo-pragmatism are first, in contrast to Rorty, to emphasize pragmatism's social

ameliorative impulse. We might be living in the age of Rorty's (1991a, p. 197) "postmodern, bourgeois liberalism," but the concern for social justice and action is just as great. It is hardly that economic iniquity, and forms of social discrimination have disappeared in the interim. Second, Bernstein, even more than Rorty, draws pragmatism into conversation with Continental European philosophy, and especially with members of that community who have disagreements with it.

Bernstein stresses above all "the grounding of pragmatism in social, political and ethical experience" (Kloppen-berg, 1995, p. 539). Rorty, in contrast, doesn't want to have anything to do with experience as a category which he thinks connotes some kind of outside essence. As Rorty (1982, p. xl) says, "there is nothing deep down inside us except what we have put there ourselves." But for Bernstein, following the Deweyan line, experience is critical because it is socially constituted, and as such from the start connects private and public worlds (and which in contrast Rorty sees as irredeemably separated). The result for Bernstein is that "our private selves cannot be cordoned off ... from our ethical or political responsibilities. Any lasting individual fulfilment must be the product of engaging in communal conversation" (Kloppen-berg, 1995, p. 539). For Bernstein the task of pragmatism is to cultivate that conversation, which means going beyond the groves of academia. It means *Praxis and Action* (Bernstein, 1971). Dewey is the paradigm case who throughout his life was ceaseless in his public commitment. Even at age 78 he established and chaired a committee investigating the charges brought against Trotsky at the Moscow trials, proving that they were baseless. Pragmatists, argues Bernstein, must facilitate exactly this kind of public conversation, and not provide the basis for private revelry.

Bernstein's second theme is to widen the community of inquiry. It begins with his *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Bernstein, 1983), and comes to full fruition in *The New Constellation* (Bernstein, 1992a). Bernstein argues that since at least the 17th century, Western philosophy presented the philosophical choice as between either order or chaos. This is the "Cartesian anxiety." "Either there is some support for our being, a fixed support for our knowledge, or we cannot escape the forces of darkness that envelop us with madness, with intellectual and moral chaos" (Bernstein, 1983, p. 18). Not surprisingly most Western philosophers have chosen order over chaos (and in doing so succumbed to "the Platonic urge"). But Bernstein argues that the dualism is a false one. It is not a matter of choosing either/or, but bringing together difference, and engaging in dialogue. The pragmatist mission, he suggests, is to convene a plurality of philosophical voices, and to provide conditions that nurture conversation among them. Bernstein (1992b, p. 338) uses Hans-Georg Gadamer's definition of conversation: "One does not seek to score a point by exploiting the other's weaknesses; rather, one seeks to strengthen the other's arguments as much as possible so as to render it plausible. Such an effort seems to me to be constitutive of conversation."

It is this kind of conversation that Bernstein tries to assemble. Apart from American pragmatists it includes Hannah Arendt, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jurgen Habermas, Martin Heidegger, as well as Gadamer. Certainly these philosophers have their differences, and especially with Rorty's version of pragmatism. The Europeans are much more prone to emphasize issues of power differentials (on the pragmatist view of power see the useful essay by John Allen in this special issue). But there are also epistemological differences as well. Rorty and Bernstein have both clashed with Habermas: Habermas's "ideal speech situation" for them is just a sophisticated variant of the "Platonic urge." And Rorty is also critical of Gadamer's hermeneutic methodology that he thinks is only another disappointing quest to find the Truth. But such differences make up the conversation; they are its point; they constitute *The New Constellation* as a decentred and pluralist approach to philosophy. The metaphor of constellation is important because it "challenge[s] the very idea of [Hegel's notion of] *Aufhebung*" that Dewey and James also reacted against, and which "explicitly or implicitly valorizes unity, harmony, integration, wholeness and totality" (Bernstein, 1992b, p. 309). Constellation, in contrast, connotes the opposite, "a juxtaposed rather than an integrated cluster of changing elements that resist reduction to a common denominator, essential core, or generative first principal" (Bernstein, 1992b, p. 309). Constellation embodies the pragmatist vision. Diversity is not the problem, but the basis of any solution. For Bernstein, more than Rorty, pragmatism itself must continually engage other philosophies, to be a constellation in motion rather than fixed.

### 3.5. Richard Shusterman

Richard Shusterman, more than Rorty and Bernstein, is concerned to take pragmatism outside of its original context, certainly outside of America, and even Continental Europe, and also to make it speak to practices to which it has never been directed (Shusterman, 2004). Following James, Shusterman (2004, p. 11) says we should not take pragmatism as the "final answer 'in which we can rest,' but rather as 'a program for more work.'" Shusterman's programme of more work extends pragmatism by emphasising its relevance to the "art of living" (Shusterman, 1997, p. 3).

That phrase the "art of living" signals the aesthetic character of Shusterman's project. The same impulse was also found in Dewey (1934) who presented an experience-based philosophy of art and better living. Shusterman differs from him, though, by focussing less on experience than the somatic body, and less on high art than popular culture. Nonetheless, Shusterman shares with Dewey the pragmatic concern that aesthetics be conceived as a tool, an instrument, for improving both oneself and society.

Let me begin with the art of self improvement, and which connects for Shusterman to a neglected topic in pragmatism, the physicality of the body. For Shusterman (2000, p. 64) "there is a non-propositional somatic dimen-

sion of experience,” and which lies “beneath interpretation” (Shusterman, 1992, p. 117). That theme is ignored both by Rorty who thinks that nothing lies outside language, and by Bernstein who, while concerned with the collective body, is not interested in individual bodies. In contrast, Shusterman thinks that once all interpretation is complete there remains a somatic residual, irreducible to language (contra Rorty), and that the pragmatist charter of amelioration should apply as much to an individual body as to the collective one (contra Bernstein).

Shusterman makes his argument by a case study of the lives and works of three (under his definition) pragmatist philosophers: Dewey, Foucault, and Wittgenstein (Shusterman, 1997, Chapter 1). He shows the pains (often literal) to which each went to link their larger philosophies to their own bodies. Each of the three perfects the art of living by aligning their philosophical life to the life of their physical body. Even Wittgenstein, the most tortured of the three both by his philosophy and his body, said just before he died, “Tell them I had a wonderful life.” That is, he found a way to reconcile aesthetically his corporeality and his thought. His body went all the way down. Monk (1990, p. 243), says that Wittgenstein could only communicate new philosophical ideas when somebody held his hand. Or again, Foucault (1989, p. 191) said, “The essence of being radical is being physical.” In Foucault’s case, the art of living was made physical on his torso by S&M sexual practices. His radical philosophical conception of emancipatory self-realisation, the “limit experience,” was realised through the pains and pleasures of the flesh (Miller, 1993). In every sense, he lived and died for the art of his philosophy. Even the much tamer, certainly less tortured, John Dewey, practiced the Alexander Technique, an exercise of the upper body that increased bodily control and awareness. That technique, said Dewey, not only allowed him to be a nonagenarian but was integral to his philosophical life (Shusterman, 1997, pp. 31–32). Shusterman’s larger point here is that pragmatism as a philosophy of practice must concern itself with the art of living, including the recognition of the body in which that life is lived. We are not just brains in vats. Our thinking selves and corporeal selves need connecting.

Aesthetics don’t only bear on the bodies of individuals, but also on the social body. Art possesses an instrumental potential to effect general social, cultural, political and ethical improvement. This is a different interpretation of art from Rorty’s narrow veneration of “great literature” that for him is useful only for promoting private perfection. Shusterman, in contrast, is interested in the entire canvas of art, from popular to serious, from punk rock to poetry, from opera house to street corner, and all of its effects from private visions of ecstasy to increased awareness of global poverty and planetary environmental destruction. Moreover, for Shusterman it is popular culture that is likely to have the most important role, and not by promoting private visions but by shaping social agendas. He says because:

popular art.... is understood by more people, [it] can be more effective in sensitizing our society to moral and political injustices .... Popular art has a pragmatic advantage in making real improvements to the ethical quality of our world.... [C]ompare *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to Henry James’ *Portrait of a Lady* (Shusterman, 2000, p. 67).

It is for this reason that Shusterman (1997, Chapter 5) has turned his attention to rap and hip-hop, art forms that offer both social commentary and critique, as well as a guide for the art of living, and even for the philosophical life (Shusterman, 1997, pp. 147–50).

#### 4. Towards a geographical end

While pragmatism might not be useful for walking through walls, I’ve suggested in this paper it has value in other ways. Those other ways, however, should not include a strategy that geographers in the past have sometimes deployed when importing existing philosophies into their discipline. That is, to assemble new philosophical hardware within the subject, and, as if it were a machine for explanation, to feed through relevant geographical cases. *Voilà!* Pragmatist geography.

It is not clear that any philosophy can be treated in this way, but certainly not pragmatism. Pragmatism is not a total approach, a philosophy with an answer to every question. That should be clear from its origins that were precisely as a reaction to the destructive power of total philosophies. Instead, pragmatism avers that philosophical judgments must always be made against the case at hand, dependent on the specific use, purpose, and result. Pragmatism might be useful to geography, but not by answering all of its questions ahead of time, or by expanding its disciplinary metaphilosophy, or by providing a foolproof method.

Menand (2001, p. xi) says that pragmatism rather than being a conventional “big idea” is instead “an idea about ideas.” It is not a machine for generating a pragmatist geography, but a means for thinking about thinking. When geographers deploy geographical ideas, like, place, but also space, landscape, and region, as well as a hundred others, they should understand them following pragmatism: (1) as tools, instruments for achieving particular purposes, and ask whether they are the best tools for the purposes at hand; (2) as gaining legitimacy from the larger community in which they are presented, and thus dependent upon their context of use; (3) as always provisional, never certain, and potentially subject to contingent change; (4) as opportunities for experimentation, and not simply for experimentation’s sake, but for the hope of realising a better world; and (5) as untidy, ruffled, never fully cohering, or capturing everything.

Pragmatism will not tell us the nature of geography. But it will tell us what we should look for in the ideas that we set out in geography. Take, for example, the idea of place, and which in one form or another has been found in geog-

raphy since the ancient Greeks (Curry, 2005). Pragmatism does not determine if place is an appropriate *geographical* idea, but it gives guidance about the kind of idea that place should be qua an idea.

First, under pragmatism there can be no essential definition of place, no Platonic ideal of “placeness.” Instead, place should be defined according to how it is used, by what it is being asked to accomplish. Over the last forty years the various definitional disputes that have occurred over place within human geography are clearly in large part a result of different geographers wanting to achieve quite different instrumental ends when using the term (see Cresswell’s 2004 review). For example, a humanistic perspective concerned to understand place as the embodiment of human meaning and experience was always going to have a different definition than a Marxist one concerned to understand place as a fulcrum point in capitalist reproduction and accumulation. The pragmatist response is not to determine the true definition (and in any case impossible to answer), but to ask to what extent does each definition, however it is set out, accomplish its purpose. And if it doesn’t, it needs to be redone or scrapped.

Second, pragmatism stresses that an idea of place will be sustained only as long as there is a community to support it. Once that larger community goes, the idea might just as well not have existed. A good example is what happened to Hartshorne’s (1939) ideographic conception of place. As long as academic American geography was linked to nineteenth century Germanic geographical scholarship, as it was during the inter-war period, then Hartshorne’s conception of place was plausible and secure (Butzer, 1989; Elkins, 1989). But once that relationship became tenuous in the post-war period, replaced by a notion of scholarship that was entirely different and associated with an alternative community, the Hartshornian idea of place was first marginalized, and then all but disappeared (Barnes and Farish, 2006). Geographers still talk about place, but not in Hartshorne’s terms. The community that supported his conception is now literally dead.

Third pragmatists would argue that in order for place as an idea to be taken up, used, and passed on it needs to be pliable and adaptable, to cope with unpredictability and change. In part, that was one of the problems with Hartshorne’s conception: it was sealed and airtight. Smith (1989, p. 92), for example, says that Hartshorne’s conception of place “committed geography to a museum-like existence.” As a result, it was always going to be problematic. In contrast, more recent conceptions of place attempt to allow within their very conceptual architecture openness, pliability, and change as in Massey’s (2005) relational view, or Thrift’s (1999) ecological one, or Doel’s (1999) postmodernist notion. They may not work either, but from the pragmatist perspective they have a fighting chance.

Fourth, from a pragmatist perspective experimenting with different notions of place, which Massey, Thrift, and Doel do, is all to the good because it may result in the good occurring. Ideas of place are never innocent, but can pro-

duce real effects. For example, Massey (2007) relates her relational approach to contemporary London, believing that if people apply “an outward-lookingness, [they will become more] consciousness of the wider geographies and responsibilities of place.” In this way, she thinks, her idea “could ... enrich the internal politics of place, multiply the lines of debate around which ‘place’ must be negotiated. It would challenge the current exoneration of ‘the local’ within a critical global politics, and begin to develop a local politics of place beyond place” (Massey, 2007). That is, following Holmes, Massey’s idea is one with which to experiment, that aims to improve the world.

Finally, the pragmatist idea of pluralism is a reminder that place is not the last word, but only the beginning of a trail of “ands”. Moreover, those “ands” such as space, landscape, scale, site, locale, do not necessarily cohere, do not necessarily fit inside one another like a set of nesting Russian dolls. The combination of different ideas with which geographers work may make for a “turbid, muddled, Gothic” sort of discipline, but for the pragmatists, like the world itself, that discipline is the one in which we inhabit.

For some, the approach that pragmatism offers, and which I tried to illustrate using the idea of place, will be inadequate. Why turn to philosophy if it doesn’t provide *the* answer? While pragmatism does not give *the* answer, it gives *an* answer. It is to keep on trying, not to give up, to experiment, and to hope. Samuel Beckett was neither a pragmatist philosopher, nor a geographer, but he offers good advice: “Try. Fail. Try harder. Fail better.” The papers that follow within the pragmatist tradition show the virtue of a geography in which we fail better.

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