

The Construction of the American Mind

Societies and cultures tend to have certain dominant characteristics, and American society and culture are no exception. There is, for example, a theme that persistently runs through American history and, not surprisingly, American thought, which is the need to make and remake the world, or at least the social environment, and in the process remake Americans themselves. American thought, and the American self-conception, is characterized by an optimistic constructivism. This belief in the need to create something new is evident even in the efforts of the traditionally-minded Puritan colonists of the 17th century to build a new kind of society. It is clearer still in the more radical efforts of the intellectual and political leaders of the American Revolution, of Ralph Waldo Emerson's drive to recreate the self, Charles Sanders Peirce's revision of the nature of knowledge and the methods of rational inquiry, William James' conception of knowledge and truth, and in John Dewey's ideas of the reconstruction of the individual and society.

At the same time, however, there is also a persistent tension in American culture, one that finds its expression in the development of American thought and in American social and political policy. It is a tension within American optimistic constructivism, specifically between on the one hand a religious messianism that is deeply rooted in American history and self-understanding, and on the other a secular, rational understanding of problems and the means to their solution. American thought, policies, and culture tend to vacillate between a reliance on one or another of opposite poles, Absolute Divinity or nature. At times Americans have tended to understand themselves as fulfilling a divinely ordained mission, either to create a new world according to God's plan, as the 17th century Puritans thought, or to bring God's will to the world, as some contemporary national policy makers believe. At other times they have believed that it is the proper role of Americans to work with the conditions that nature provides and to build with them a better society, or a better world. This was the case during the latter half of the 18th century and through much of the 20th. Of course what counts as a better society or a better world is itself a debatable question, and here too Americans tend to vacillate. There are times when they seem to believe more strongly that their ideals are themselves of divine origin and absolute. At other times they are inclined to regard

themselves as the source of their own ethical principles, which themselves arise as responses to specific conditions and can change as those conditions change. For example, there are debates in contemporary American society about the extent to which it should honor the Ten Commandments as the source of law. For those who believe that American society is divinely grounded, it is a matter of importance to acknowledge the divine origin of law. On the other hand, there are many who understand American legal traditions and policy to be crafted in the face of problematic situations over the centuries of American experience. Part of that experience is the need to separate as much as possible religion from the state. Those who hold this view object strongly to providing a privileged place to the Ten Commandments as the source of law.

The American mind, then, is a split personality. It is therefore not surprising that the social institution that is most central to the ongoing development or construction of the American mind, i.e. education, would express this tension. In what follows we will look at the process of the development of American thought and its relation to the character of educational theory and practice.

The Origins of American Culture

The first British colonies on the part of North America that was to become the United States were established in the early 17th century, first along the Mid-Atlantic coast in what is now Virginia and soon after in “New England,” in what became the state of Massachusetts. It was the latter that had the more explicit and lasting effect on American cultural and intellectual development, though the descendents of the Virginia colonists were to play a central role in the American Enlightenment of the 18th century and the crafting of the American state.

Religious dissidents from England, who were called Pilgrims and who practiced a strict form of Calvinist Christianity, established the Plymouth Colony in 1620. Puritan settlers, also Calvinists, who established the Massachusetts Bay Colony at what is now the city of Boston, soon followed the Pilgrims.

Puritanism as it developed in North America has had a profound influence on American society. Like most other European settlers throughout the Americas, the

Puritans thought of themselves as settling a “wilderness,” despite the fact that there were already people living where they chose to settle. Nonetheless, the Puritans understood themselves to be creating something out of nothing, out of the wilderness a new, ideal society. Given their Calvinist fundamentalism, they believed that they had a blueprint to create an ideal, divinely ordered society, free from the corruptions of their homeland. Theirs was to be, as John Winthrop called it, a “city upon a hill,” a shining example of what man can do through God’s inspiration. It was to be more than a century and a half before the United States of America was born, but the Puritan idea of the exceptional nature of their creation came to inform American self-conception from the beginning. The image of the “city upon a hill” resonates for Americans to this day, and it continues to serve as an expression of both the presumed uniqueness of American society and culture, and its character as a potential example, a model, for the entire world.

The specific form of Calvinism that the Puritans practiced is called Congregationalism. The name derives from the fact that for the original Bay Colony, and for most of the other colonies that sprang up around New England, religious and therefore social and political life was based on the congregation, a particular church and its members. The various congregations were largely autonomous in their individual governance, a consequence of the Puritans’ suspicions of the organized churches of England and Rome. Authority lay in the individual congregations, not in a centralized authority. It is here that we find an early expression of the deeply felt American suspicion of government. This is also the root of the resonance for Americans in the late 18th century of the initial forms of federalism. The rebellious colonists of the 1770s and 1780s were as suspicious of central government as their ancestors had been, so they attempted to create a polity in which relatively little authority lay in the central government and more was held by the states or local communities. The distrust in centralized power that one still feels in contemporary America therefore has deep, and Puritan, roots. It is interesting to note, however, that for the Puritans the distrust in centralized authority did not coincide with individualism. The appeal to the individual, for example in the form of individual rights, was an 18th century development. For the Congregationalists authority lie in neither centralized power nor in the individual, but in the community constituted through a relationship with God. The relative priority of centralized, community or

individual authority has shifted many times in American history, and in American thought, but the importance of the relation among the three has been with us since the forming of the Puritan congregations of the early and mid-17th century.

The Puritans believed themselves to have made a compact with God, a modern-day covenant, from which the congregations derived their legitimacy and authority. The social and legal foundations of Puritan congregations and communities received their legitimacy from an agreement made between the members of a congregation or community and God. The relation with the divine provided not only the source of religious belief and legitimacy, but it was the foundation of Puritan social and legal structures as well. This was the expression in practice of the fact, as we have already seen, that the Puritans regarded themselves as constructing a divinely ordained and therefore ideal polity, a “city upon a hill,” that was chosen by God to be an example to the world. It is interesting to note in this regard that to sustain the theological foundations of their society the Puritans early on, in 1636, created a theological school to train new generations of religious and community leaders. This is the school that became Harvard University.

The theological basis of the Puritans’ understanding of social and political life also informed their broader philosophical views. One of the dominant themes in the development of American thought concerns the understanding of nature. As we will see further on, an interest in nature was a prevalent feature of early 19th century American romanticism, that is the Transcendentalism of Emerson, Thoreau and others, as well as the important and influential 20th century tradition of American Naturalism. The understanding of nature in both of those later traditions will differ greatly from the commonly held views of the 17th century Puritans. Given their rather strict Calvinism, the Puritans tended to accept a view of nature that derived through medieval Western European Christianity from the ancient Greeks. On this view, nature is a hierarchical structure that emanates from God, and proceeds through decreasing degrees of perfection to more base matter. Nature on this conception tends to be contrasted with spirit, which is regarded as closer in character to God and therefore more perfect than matter. Understanding nature this way led the Puritans to regard matter as relatively unimportant, and even as a threat to the greater and more important needs of the spirit. Though the

American mind rebelled against this understanding of matter and nature in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, the Puritan deprecation of nature and matter continues to exercise a strong influence in American society. There is, for example, a strong movement in American education today to offer young people a view of their material natures, especially their sexuality, which the Puritans would have easily recognized.

By the early 18th century a number of factors led to the gradual moderation of the Puritan conceptions of nature, society and the individual. For example, political conditions changed considerably, and the old Puritan colonies of New England had come under more direct rule by the English crown and parliament. Furthermore, immigration had continued through the 17th and early 18th centuries, and people from other European societies, especially German, began to populate the colonies and brought with them different ideas and different traditions. Furthermore, what was called the “new learning,” which meant primarily the work of Isaac Newton and John Locke, began to permeate even the bastions of New England intellectual leadership, i.e. the theological schools of Harvard and Yale.

The ministers who would serve as leaders and preachers in the congregations of New England found themselves forced to confront Newton’s mechanical conception of nature, which differed greatly from the more traditional Puritan view, as well as Locke’s more liberal understanding of the individual, of society, and of the appropriate forms of political organization. At the same time the political influence of the English government brought with it the more liberal theological and political views of the Church of England. Within the span of only a few decades in the early 18th century this mixture of new ideas and new social and political forces transformed the Puritan communities and their view of the world. Even essentially traditional Puritan thinkers like Jonathan Edwards, the greatest colonial theological and philosophical mind of the early years of the 18th century, could not avoid the need to attempt to reconcile traditional Calvinism with Newton and Locke, ultimately without success. Another important figure of this period, Samuel Johnson, played a key role in bringing to the colonies the very much non-Calvinist theological and philosophical views then prevalent in the Church of England. Other Puritan preachers, influenced by the churning mix of ideas, began to write and preach about the importance of the individual and of individual rights, and some went so far as

to advocate more democratic forms of social and political organization. Other influential figures, such as the British colonial administrator, and prominent scientist and philosopher Cadwallader Colden, began to treat nature in an entirely new way, almost completely divorced from the older Calvinist approach. In addition, better known figures such as Benjamin Franklin took seriously the methods of modern science and the understanding of nature that it implied, and began to discuss the fundamental values of human life in largely secular terms.

The result of this intellectual turmoil was that traditional Puritanism quickly gave way to a more modern understanding of the world, a more secular approach to life and its basic values, and a more liberal, even revolutionary, conception of society and politics.

The American Enlightenment

Intellectual change in late 18th century Europe and America is often regarded as the triumph of reason over superstition, and in many respects this is true. Reason and experience, rather than tradition and revelation, came to be treated as the appropriate sources of knowledge. This applied to both the study of nature, which is to say to the natural sciences, and to the study of human being. Throughout the century the British Empiricists, building on the work of John Locke, studied human being on the basis of rational analysis applied to experience. In this way they developed new understandings of human psychology and sense perception, thus paving the way for a more experientially and rationally based approach to social, economic and political issues. In France the rationalists and materialists followed suit, and their work, especially that of Montesquieu, had a profound influence on the thinking of the emerging American intellectuals and revolutionaries of the later years of the century.

In fact the American thinkers of the late 18th century drew on a mix of influences, largely from Britain and France, to develop their views of the world, of human being, and of social and political ideals. This mixture produced one of the most practically profound periods in all of human history. The emphasis here must be on the “practical” application of their thinking, because American intellectuals in the late 18th century had little interest in abstract philosophical questions and even in natural science. With respect to the latter

they tended to take for granted the methods and results of the most recent developments in physics, optics, chemistry and mathematics, though they made few contributions of their own, the one outstanding exception being the work of Benjamin Franklin, especially in the study of electricity. With respect to traditional philosophical questions concerning the general nature of reality (metaphysics) and of knowledge (epistemology), they had their opinions, though they paid little explicit attention to them. There was, for example, no one in the North American colonies influenced by David Hume the way, for example, Immanuel Kant was in Königsberg, and American intellectuals articulated no grand philosophical systems. They were, nonetheless, very much products of the intellectual trends of their time. With respect to an understanding of the general nature of reality, they tended towards materialism, as is clear in some of the writings of Thomas Jefferson, and towards the mechanical, Newtonian view of nature. With respect to religion, they tended toward Deism, which is to say toward a view of nature as having been created by a Divine Intelligence, but then left more or less to operate on its own. To understand nature and human being, it was necessary not to know what the Divine had in mind, whether through revelation or individual insight, but rather to apply careful and systematic study to nature itself. This was a rational and secular age.

While the intellectuals of the late 18th century had little to say about abstract philosophy and religion, they had very much to say about human nature, society and government, and it was in these fields that they made their lasting impact on American life and, one must add, on the world in general.

If the methods of natural science had shown that tradition is not a reliable guide to an understanding of nature, it is equally suspicious as a source of knowledge about society and government. One traditional assumption about human beings that came under suspicion, at least to some degree, is the idea that some people are by nature better, or more valuable, than other people. Aristocrats had believed that it was in the nature of things that they, more than average people, have the ability to organize and lead their society. But modern epistemology, especially through Locke, held that people develop their knowledge and to a large extent their abilities through experience. This view had several important implications: 1) no one is “by nature” superior to anyone else; 2) people require an appropriate environment for their capacities to flourish; 3) a society’s

most able leaders can come from anywhere in the population; and 4) education must be broadly available for the well being both of citizens and their society. From these few but radical ideas grew the intellectual edifice of the American revolutionary period and the subsequent creation of the American nation.

There were of course serious limits to the extent to which the intellectual and political leaders of the day would extend their views. Though they boldly asserted, in the face of nearly the entirety of European tradition, that people are by nature equal, they in fact did not extend equality to women, the native peoples of the continent, and of course the black inhabitants of the colonies and the new nation, whether slave or free. Nonetheless, their theoretical elaboration and practical pursuit of political liberty, of the separation of church and state, and of constitutionalism continue to reverberate even today.

It is important to understand the social and political views of the American colonists in a historical perspective. Most of the intellectual and political leaders of the time did not espouse democracy at all, in fact they were deeply suspicious of “common” people, regarding the mass of the population as too ill educated or too ill bred to act rationally in their own self interest, never mind in the interest of the greater good. There were some who were more democratically inclined, but even their democratic aspirations were limited. In the end, the political system they created did include the direct election of some public officials, but only male property owners were thought to be responsible enough to have a vote. Their great political contribution was to create a new kind of republic, not a democracy. In the late 18th century there were already republics in Europe, most notably in Switzerland and Holland, but the general assumption was that a republic could only function in a fairly small geographic area. In a large region, it was thought, communication was too difficult to allow for the interaction among citizens that a republic required. The colonists found a way, which they institutionalized in the Constitution of 1789, to organize a representative republic that could span the entirety of the 13 British colonies that broke away from the British Crown. The self-conscious advance of democracy came later.

The revolutionary leaders thought that there were two great obstacles in European social traditions that impeded the advancement of human liberty: inherited aristocracy

and state religion, and they were determined to do away with both. In one sense it was a rather easy task to develop a political system that did not rely on an aristocracy, because unlike nearly everywhere else in the world, there was no aristocracy in the colonies. There were to be sure landed gentry, especially in the Southern colonies, and wealthy merchants throughout, which formed a social and political ruling class, but they were not an aristocratic class as one would find in Europe. First, their rule was not centuries old; second, the vast Western expanses of the colonies offered opportunities for settlement and economic development to other segments of the population; third, and perhaps most importantly, as long as the colonies remained under the direct control of the British Crown and Parliament, the colonial ruling classes did not control even their own destinies, not to mention the future of the colonies as a whole. Under these circumstances it was not terribly difficult for many colonial leaders to appeal to principles of self-determination and liberty in their rebellion against the crown, and such an appeal meant that any sort of aristocracy was entirely untenable in the new republic.

The absence of an inherited aristocracy made it possible for the leaders to claim, as they did in the *Declaration of Independence* of 1776, the document in which they gave their justification for the break from England, that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” They could further claim, “that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.” These few lines express a conception of the purposes of social and political organization, i.e. the defense of individual liberty and individual development (“happiness”), as well as the basic principle that proper government derives its authority “from the consent of the governed” and that government exists to serve the well being of the governed.

Among the necessary features of a society and government so conceived, as the founders understood them, was its secular nature. This of course flew in the face of both the Puritan traditions of the New England colonies, which held that the ideal society should be constructed according to God’s will, and the prevailing view in England and elsewhere in Europe that a strong society required an official Church. On the contrary, the revolutionary founders of the United States held, and in this they were expressing

their Protestant backgrounds, that religious belief is a personal matter that should not be imposed upon anyone by the state. An official, state Church, they thought, presented the danger of unjustly imposing its principles on the population, thus potentially depriving individuals of the liberty to believe as they saw fit. Furthermore, an official Church also contained the risk of gathering to itself extensive power and wealth, which in turn could too easily distort the political and economic processes of the country. Consequently, the founders explicitly rejected any official religion or established Church, and went so far as to insist on what is called “a separation of church and state.”

By so doing the founders broke with worldwide tradition, and in the process they generated a social and political tension that continues to haunt American society. The basic question concerns the extent to which a society regards its fundamental principles and law to be grounded in religious tradition or religious belief. Since the 1970s the influence of fundamentalist Christianity has become stronger in the United States. This strain of American thought takes the view that America is a Christian nation and that it should publicly acknowledge that its social, political, and legal foundations are the principles of Christianity as understood by the fundamentalists. Contemporary Christian fundamentalism is in this respect reverting to the worldview of the 17th century Puritan colonists of New England. The fundamentalist view of the relation between church and state raises two serious structural issues. First, if the social, political and legal foundation of the society is Christian tradition, then it follows that in the face of specific problems the appropriate course of action is to consult religious tradition for solutions. This approach to the solution of problems, however, contrasts strongly with the view common in the late 18th century, and subsequently, that the best approach to any problem is the rational investigation of its causes and the likely effects of its possible solutions. The tension between religious tradition on the one hand and rational inquiry on the other was brought into focus during the revolutionary period and remains a prominent feature of the American social landscape today.

The second problem raised by the appeal to the Christian foundations of American society, government and law is the question it poses of the status of citizens who are not Christian. The revolutionary leaders of the late 18th century appeared to think that their nation can and should be the home equally of any sort of Christian, of anyone

from another religious tradition, and of non-believers as well. Their attempt to base fundamental law and the principles of government on secular, rational grounds was an effort to allow such equality of citizenship for any and all citizens regardless of religious tradition or belief, or the lack thereof. Many Americans continue to hold this view, or some version of it, and as a result the contemporary struggle between secularists and fundamentalists is a tense reflection of two long standing, and inconsistent, traditions in American culture.

Resistance to the dominance of aristocracy and of the church led some American thinkers to begin to pay more serious attention than previously to education. In this respect they again were following intellectual trends in Europe, where from the early to the later 18th century, most notably in the persons of John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau, the proper aims and processes of education were receiving careful analysis. Prior to the gradual transition from aristocratic to republican government, and the general turn to reason and science, several assumptions about education had been common: first, that the mass of people need no education other than the training necessary to undertake their expected labors; and second, that the education appropriate to the ruling classes is one steeped either in traditional theological treatises or in whatever skills are necessary to maintain their prominent position in their society. However, if government is to be more or less republican rather than aristocratic, and if knowledge and understanding are to be derived through experience, reason, and scientific inquiry, then clearly a new approach to education was called for.

The American who most directly addressed these questions was Thomas Jefferson, who had written the first draft of the *Declaration of Independence* in 1776 and who in 1800 became the third President of the United States. As a matter of theory, Jefferson argued that when we take seriously the Lockean view that all knowledge derives from experience, we must therefore conclude that no set of individuals simply by virtue of social status is inherently more intelligent or more suited to rule a society than any other. From this it follows that those individuals who are in fact most capable of providing intellectual, social and political leadership in a society, the “best and the brightest,” we might say, may emerge from anywhere in the society. It is therefore a matter of social or national interest that strong public education be available to all citizens

of the country, and it must be a system that will allow the most intelligent to emerge and pursue their studies as far as possible.

Jefferson also made a second theoretical point that continues to appear in American educational thinking, which is that in a political structure where political authority is based on the consent of the governed it is essential that the voting population be well enough educated to consider responsibly and knowledgeably the relevant issues that the society faces. To achieve this goal it is necessary that there exists an extensive system of public schools, and that the schools teach children throughout the country both the knowledge they need to make their way in the world and the skills necessary to analyze and understand important issues.

Both of Jefferson's theoretical points lead to the same conclusion, i.e. the necessity of a strong public school system. Toward this end he developed a plan to divide the country into regions each of which could be responsible for primary and secondary education for the entire (free) population. Furthermore, he created in his home state of Virginia a public university where the most talented children from across the state could receive higher education. One might in fact contrast Jefferson's purpose in founding the University of Virginia with the rationale, mentioned earlier, for the founding of the Harvard school of theology in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1636. What is now Harvard University began in 1636 as an institution the purpose of which was to train leaders, a ministerial elite, who would sustain for future generations the theological truths of which the Puritan founders were certain and the congregational polity that developed from them. By contrast, the role of the University of Virginia, even at its founding, was to provide an opportunity for the brightest children of the state to develop their potential and to explore the boundaries of knowledge.

The tension between these two approaches to education remains a driving force in American education today. Harvard University is now one of the leading universities of the world, but the vision of its Puritan founders continues to guide other religious, social and educational leaders in the country, those who understand the role of education to be simply the perpetuation of fundamental truths that are not to be questioned. The University of Virginia is also one of the stronger universities in the country today, and Jefferson's model, with local variations, was repeated across the country in the

subsequent 200 years. The result is not only the extensive public school system we see today, but also a vast network of state-funded public universities that provide higher education to most of the university students in the country. Furthermore, Jefferson's educational ideas and innovations would serve as an inspiration for later educational thinkers, most noteworthy of them, as we will see below, John Dewey in the early 20th century. The conception of education that Jefferson shares with Dewey and in contrast to that which one finds in the Puritans of the 17th century and Christian fundamentalists and others today, is driven by the idea that the citizenry of a healthy republic requires a strong education. More specifically, education in this view is not so much an effort simply to master and pass on received truths, as it is concerned with mastering and advancing current knowledge for the development of individuals and social life.

The rational and decidedly secular worldview of the American intellectual leaders of the late 18th century, notwithstanding its many social, political, legal and educational accomplishments, was itself eclipsed in the first several decades of the 19th century. American intellectuals, like their European counterparts, began to take a different approach to an understanding of nature and human being, one very much like the emerging Romanticism of Europe.

Transcendentalism

It is an interesting fact about the development of American intellectual history in the early 19th century that the heirs to the politically progressive, rational humanism of the Enlightenment period themselves emerged from the religious tradition of Unitarianism. Unitarianism was, and remains, a religious phenomenon with roots in Europe that expanded in New England in the middle and latter years of the 18th century. It is, in a sense, the religious, in fact Christian, expression of Enlightenment rationalism in that it merges social progressivism with the Christian tradition of morality. This in itself is not unique, in that even Enlightenment leaders such as Jefferson maintained a respect for Christian moral traditions and teaching, and they regarded Jesus Christ as a profound moral teacher. Unitarianism, however, went one step further by incorporating a

sense of the importance of the spiritual dimension of human life, a sensitivity that one does not find in the writings of the revolutionary leadership.

New England Unitarianism was the soil from which grew Transcendentalism, the distinctively American form of romanticism, and Transcendentalism's most profound figures, especially Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, grew up and were educated in a Unitarian environment. Emerson and Thoreau, especially Emerson, were well known and respected figures in their day, and their writings remain influential today. Their influence is due more than anything to the profundity of their philosophical and literary accomplishments. However, one can add that Transcendentalism has been as influential as it has because it is the one instance in all of American intellectual history in which the two sides of American culture, its secular rationalism and its religiosity, were merged to great effect.

Emerson's was a synthetic view of the world, a point we can see in one of his more famous aphorisms. "A foolish consistency," Emerson wrote, "is the hobgoblin of little minds." Philosophers often find this remark objectionable because they see in it a failure to understand the value of systematic rational analysis, a process that relies at the very least on consistency. But to object on these grounds is to miss Emerson's point, and to fail to see the larger picture. He was not objecting to garden variety consistency, a fact that is clear enough when we see that his writings and his thoughts are certainly not a jumble of unrelated observations or inferences. He was objecting to "a foolish consistency," by which he meant a process of analysis that, whatever other value it might have, too often serves to tear apart its subject matter and thus do its object a disservice. This concerned Emerson because in his view we can understand the world and human nature only by appreciating the synthetic unity of what our experience, perception and reason present to us.

That unity is most readily seen in Emerson's approach to nature, mind and spirit. With respect to the latter, Emerson thought that his intellectual forebears missed it more or less entirely. With respect to nature and mind, European rationalism and empiricism of the 17th and 18th century had managed to so divorce them from each other that their obvious integration became a philosophical problem. Rene Descartes, for example, the "father" of modern scientific rationalism, treated nature as material substance and mind

as mental substance. On this view, nature as material is subject to the investigations of mathematics and the scientific method, but mind, as something wholly other, is not. This tearing apart of nature and mind was the source of the so-called “mind-body problem,” which exercises philosophers to this day. Similarly, the more empirically minded philosophers of the 18th century tended to write mind out of nature either by claiming that it is nothing but material processes or, as David Hume put it, “bundles of perceptions.”

For Emerson and his colleagues this is all nonsense, the result of a faulty method, a “foolish consistency,” that serves to impoverish nature, mind and spirit rather than reveal them. Mind presents itself clearly enough in the fact that we not only think or reason, but we also dream, imagine, create and intuit. To reduce mind to brain processes or to bundles of perception is to ignore the depths of our own experience. And in his first book, titled simply *Nature* (1836), Emerson rang a chord that would reverberate throughout his writings, which is that nature is itself shot through with spirit. In this he expressed a view common among European romantics. For those with eyes to see and ears to hear, nature is the source of spiritual insight, and it is in the integration of the individual with nature that mental and spiritual development occurs. Clearly, nature in Emerson’s hands means something quite different from the mechanism of the Newtonian worldview. Nature is not a machine but more of an organism, and to appreciate its organic, living character requires as much the intuitive sensibilities of the poet as it does the analytic rigor of the scientist.

It is interesting that intuition as Emerson understood it is an individual matter, that is to say it is a capacity of individuals, and it is up to each individual to develop his or her capacity to its fullest. Such development is a process that should to a large extent be the responsibility of education, though he knew well that on the whole schooling failed miserably in this respect. In this regard Emerson, like Thoreau, was very much an individualist, and very much not a communitarian. Value and insight did not reside in the principles of the community, as his Puritan ancestors believed, and certainly not in an unthinking embrace of tradition. The insight into nature made possible by an intuitive sensitivity is a matter of the relation of the individual to nature. In two of his most famous works, the essays “The American Scholar” and “The Divinity School Address,” Emerson makes the case clearly. The first of these essays was an address he gave to an

academic society in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1837, and the second to the graduating class of Harvard Divinity School in 1838. Together these essays provide a clear injunction that if one wants to live a life of insight it is necessary that one develop an original, individual relation to the world. To the scholar he warns that books, as valuable as they are, are no substitution for a life lived with eyes wide open. To the divinity school graduate he warns, somewhat scandalously, that spiritual insight is not to be found in the traditions, but in one's own relation to the spiritual depths of nature and mind.

Emerson's was a profound sense of things, and his ideas and writings along with those of many like-minded colleagues had a strong influence throughout the 19th century, and they linger today. Schools appeared throughout New England and elsewhere in the country that embraced their conception of knowledge and insight. Transcendentalist ideas also merged with budding socialist theories to spawn any number of utopian communities, most of them short lived, that attempted to develop forms of social organization based not on the acquisitive materialism of emerging bourgeois society but on the sense of the spiritual value of nature and human being that pervaded American romantic thought. In many respects those same thoughts and insights have informed counter-cultural movements in American society throughout the 20th century.

Pragmatism

One of the most important features of 18th century rationalism that had energized the romantic reaction was the mechanical view of nature as expressed through Newtonian physics. Notwithstanding the extraordinary practical success of Newtonian principles, the idea of nature as a machine left many people cold, and they turned for an alternative to religion, or to a more mystical sense of nature. In the mid-19th century, however, a radical shift in the conception of nature, or of biological nature at any rate, occurred within the ranks of natural science itself. In 1859 Charles Darwin published the *Origin of Species*, in which he argued that biological nature is not a machine that simply reproduces the same processes time and again. On the contrary, nature changes, it evolves, it in a sense develops. The Darwinian turn from a mechanical to a more organic conception of nature

was one of the factors that made possible the development in the latter years of the 19th century the intellectual movement that came to be called American pragmatism.

Pragmatism both draws on and diverges from its Enlightenment and Romantic precursors. Like the Enlightenment thought of the American revolutionaries, it takes seriously the human capacity to alter the world of experience. And like Transcendentalism, Pragmatism takes a unified view of nature and spirit, mind and matter, and the human being and the social world. As we will see, however, it has also been a radical departure from both traditions in that it embodies a more thoroughgoing constructivism than either of its predecessors. Basically, the pragmatist view is that experience is something that emerges in the ongoing interaction of persons with one another and with their natural environment. Experience in this sense is not something that we simply “undergo,” rather it is what we construct throughout our lives, and it can be constructed either haphazardly or intelligently. For experience to be enriching for individual and social life it must be intelligently constructed and directed, and for that, knowledge and inquiry are necessary. In this regard knowledge becomes not the “reflection” of an existing reality, rather it is a set of tools we use to direct intelligently our experience, and to construct our individual and social lives.

While philosophy and literature took their romantic turn, American scientists remained in close touch with their counterparts in Europe. They paid particular attention to developments in mathematics, physics, chemistry, geology, biology and psychology. By the 1870s, not long after the end of the American Civil War, a group of scientifically minded philosophers had gathered at Harvard University. Together they began to debate emerging ideas, especially in biology and psychology, and to add their own interpretations. The most prominent of these scientists/philosophers were the logician Charles Sanders Peirce and psychologist William James, and it was Peirce who first articulated the basic ideas of pragmatism.

There were two assumptions that had dominated philosophical thinking for centuries. The first was that ideas are reflections of reality and that an idea, and by implication a word, derives its meaning from the reality it reflects, or in the case of a word, the reality to which it refers. The second assumption was that human inquiry is a largely passive affair, wherein the inquirer observes the world as it occurs and reflects or

expresses it in ideas or concepts. Peirce challenged the first of these assumptions and James the second, and by so doing they created a more active conception of knowledge and an understanding of nature more rich with possibility and open to reconstruction. Perhaps, as the recent book *The Metaphysical Club* (2001) proposes, such a conceptual revision as pragmatism was motivated by the disastrous consequences of the moral certainties that drove the nation into its recently concluded Civil War. Or perhaps the more traditional conceptions of nature and knowledge had been sufficiently exhausted to allow for the pragmatists' creative revision. In either case, the result of Peirce's and James' work was a radically new and conceptually pregnant view of the world, though one fully in the spirit of American constructivism.

In two famous essays from the 1870s, "The Fixation of Belief" and "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," Peirce laid the foundation of the pragmatist frame of mind. In the first of these essays he raised the question what it means to think, and why we do it, as fundamental a question as any a philosopher might ask! The traditional assumption is that thinking occurs in order to answer a question, or to discover some bit of knowledge or understanding. Thought, on this view, is an effort to develop a clear picture of something. Peirce, however, rejected this assumption. On his account, thought is not an effort to mirror or reflect the world; rather it is an effort to establish belief. The motivation for thought is not so much curiosity but doubt, and thought ceases with respect to any particular issue when the doubt is removed and belief is attained. Furthermore, belief, as Peirce understands it, is not a mental state but a set of habits. To say that I believe "x" is to say that I will act in certain ways under certain conditions. The crucial implication of Peirce's approach to these issues is that ideas become not reflections of reality but tools that we use to enable action, and ideas have meaning in so far as they enable action of this or that kind. Meaning is not some sort of mysterious relation between ideas and objective reality, but the effects in action that ideas as tools in principle have.

Peirce addresses the latter point again in "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," where he argues that the meaning of a concept does not derive from the concept mirroring or reflecting reality. Rather, the meaning of a concept is to be found in the effects or consequences of action. He uses the example of "hardness." What, he asks, does it mean to say that an object is hard? The traditional answer is that hardness is a property of an

object, for example a result of the arrangement of its molecules. Peirce argued, however, that this sort of answer has led both philosophers and scientists astray by prompting a search for properties and essences that often leads to dead ends. We are better served, Peirce said, to say that the concept “hardness” simply means the effects an object has when certain things happen. An object may be said to be hard, in relation to another object, if when the two come into contact the first leaves a mark or indentation on the second. Peirce generalized this insight in what he called the “pragmatic maxim”:

“consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object.”

On the face of it this may seem rather inconsequential, but Peirce’s claim that ideas are tools that enable action, and that the meaning of a concept is to be found in effects and consequences, amounted to a conceptual revolution. William James saw the revolutionary implications of Peirce’s ideas, and he took them a giant step further, in fact in ways that Peirce himself did not approve. If ideas are to be understood as tools, James reasoned, then we must ask about other traits, in addition to meaning, that we attribute to ideas. For James the most important of these is truth. What does it mean to say that an idea is true, that it is a good idea? If ideas are tools, then we might answer this question by analogy with other kinds of tools. A hammer, for example, is a good one if it functions properly, if it achieves the task to which it is put, if it *works*. James said much the same thing about an idea: an idea is true, it is a good idea, if it does the job it is supposed to do. To put the point in Peirce’s terms, an idea is true if it allows us to achieve belief.

In his analysis of the concept of truth James used a curious phrase: he said that asking about the truth of an idea is to ask for the idea’s “cash value.” For many readers of James at the turn of the 20th century, and perhaps still today, this phrase had a peculiarly American ring. James meant simply that the truth of an idea is a matter of what it will accomplish for the person who holds the idea, of what, so to speak, the idea will “purchase.” The more an idea will accomplish, the more it is, in that respect, true. But to speak of the “cash value” of an idea seemed to some commentators to reduce the noble enterprise of philosophy to the crass interests of American commercialism. This was, after all, the age of the so-called Robber Barons, the influential entrepreneurs, inventors,

industrialists, and bankers, such as Andrew Carnegie, Thomas Edison, Henry Ford, Henry Clay Frick, J. P. Morgan and others, who moved America into a new stage of technological innovation, capital formation, industrial production, and consumption. By using such a phrase as the “cash value” of ideas, James united the language of philosophy with the push and pull of American economic and social life. Bertrand Russell, the great British philosopher, objected on both technical and rhetorical grounds. Even much later, during the Cold War, the Soviet specialist on American pragmatism Yuri K. Melvil’ argued that James was in this way merely expressing in philosophical terms the class interests of monopoly capitalists. The reader may make of these objections what he will.

By looking at ideas and truth in this way James further extended the pragmatist sense of things. Ideas, like other tools, serve to change the world, they are efficacious. This in turn suggests that the world is more malleable, more a product of human thought and action, than had been previously thought. In other words, human thought and action do not merely describe or reflect the world; they change it. James fully embraced this idea, and in so doing he extends into the realm of metaphysics a characteristic American trait. The Puritans, as we have seen, understood the land to which they came as a “wilderness” ready to be remade according to their understanding. Similarly, the revolutionary leaders of the late 18th century set out to remake their society. In both historical periods, the prevailing view of the environment in which people found themselves was as raw material out of which to construct a world of their own design. This is basically how James understood nature as a whole, i.e. all of reality. The world, reality, nature, is a work in progress, in James’ language “a booming, buzzing confusion” out of which we individually and collectively form our experience. Furthermore, if the world is inherently unfinished, then the future is open-ended. Pragmatism in James’ hands is a forward-looking philosophy in that nature is understood as possibility as much as actuality. In a world characterized by possibility, the future is to some extent an open question, and as actors within the process of the gradual unfolding of the world, human beings have a hand in the construction of that future.

Together Peirce and James created an understanding of the world radically different than those that came before. However, they were both also steeped in traditional sensibilities, especially religious. In the end Peirce developed a decidedly theistic

conception of nature, though one rather different from traditional theisms. For his part, James was throughout his life haunted by the question of God's existence, and whether it is reasonable for a man of science, a rational person, to believe in God. This was a problem because James saw that in fact there is insufficient evidence to accept the proposition that God exists. The way he ultimately handled the question introduced another central aspect of pragmatist thought, i.e. its embrace of volition. In an essay titled "The Will to Believe" James argues that under certain circumstances, which he carefully elaborates, it is entirely justifiable for a rational person to believe a proposition for which there is insufficient evidence. Volition, then, is a natural component of thought, and an ingredient in, as Peirce had it, the "fixation of belief."

Late 19th century pragmatism, then, was on the one hand steeped in the religious concerns of its time, and on the other it launched a point of view that would in its subsequent development feed a primarily secular philosophy.

Pragmatic Naturalism

The dominant philosophical development in America in the first half of the 20th century was philosophical naturalism. Its most influential and long lasting variation was a merging of pragmatism and naturalism, the most prominent representative of which was John Dewey.

Naturalism basically is the view that whatever exists is fully a part of, a constituent of, nature. To put the point negatively one can say that for the naturalist there is no realm of the divine. This means that whatever we encounter in experience, whether the natural processes studied by science, or mathematical constructs, or human experience, or human creations, or society in all of its complexity, all are natural phenomena. This is a broadly stated point of view, and there have of course been many versions of naturalism, including, perhaps unexpectedly, religious and theistic naturalism. On the whole, though, the naturalist point of view has been the dominant secular intellectual expression of American life throughout the 20th century.

As one might expect, the central question for naturalism has to do with the concept of nature, or how we are to understand what nature is. Is nature entirely material,

or are there ideal or mental or spiritual aspects of nature? And how are we to study nature? Do natural science and mathematics provide the only access we have to an understanding of natural processes, or are other means such as art, poetry, literature, or for that matter engineering, available to us? And is there a need, or even a place, for the divine in nature? Not surprisingly, various naturalist philosophers have answered these questions differently.

John Dewey, whose career spanned the latter decades of the 19th and the entire first half of the 20th centuries, developed what he called an “instrumentalist” philosophy, which was a conscious extension of the pragmatist ideas of Peirce and James. Dewey agreed with both that ideas are best understood as tools or instruments, and that ideas are acceptable or adequate to the extent that they help us solve the problems that motivated the ideas in the first place. He developed Peirce’s idea that thinking begins with doubt into a more elaborate conception. Dewey thought that we could best understand the relation of human being to the rest of nature in terms of what he called “situations.” A situation is a complex interaction of constituents, somewhat analogous to an ecosystem. In any kind of situation, that is in any kind of complex, the constituents influence one another. Nature, Dewey thought, is relational in this respect. Probably more often than not situations function smoothly, the interactions among their constituents do not create any difficulties. But sometimes something goes wrong, and such a case is what Dewey called a problematic or indeterminate situation. A problematic situation is what motivates thought, and the purpose of thought is to solve the problem, to make an indeterminate situation determinate, resolved.

Unlike Peirce and James, Dewey’s primary interests were not religious but social, and he applied his instrumentalist methods to a wide range of problems as they confronted the society of his time. Of the many issues that Dewey dealt with during his long life, two that dominated his thinking, and that connect him to the strain of American thought from the 18th century, were democracy and education.

Dewey has been called “the philosopher of democracy,” and indeed he developed the theory of democracy more than any other American philosopher or political thinker had since the American Revolution. In one of his most important books, *Democracy and Education*, which was published in 1916, he expressed the basic ideas of an expansive

conception of democracy. Dewey realized that to many people democracy means little more than a political system whereby citizens can vote to choose leaders from among more than one candidate. However, he thought that political democracy in this sense was merely a necessary but not a sufficient condition of a healthy democratic society. A strong, valuable democracy, he argued, is not so much a political system but a way of life. More specifically, it is a way of life in which social, economic and political factors are organized and coordinated to meet the interests of individual and social development.

In *Democracy and Education* Dewey provides two general traits of a democratic society. The first is that the members of such a society make every effort to identify and pursue common interests. This does not mean that the members of a democratic society strive to become more or less like each other. It does mean that in the end what members of a democratic society have in common is, or should be, more important than what differentiates them. It is only by focusing on common interests, he thought, that members of a society can adequately marshal their social resources to solve their common problems and provide for individual and social improvement. The second trait of a democratic society is that its members seek to identify common interests beyond the borders of their own experience. Dewey had in mind here borders of all kinds – racial, religious, gender, class and national. No democracy can maintain itself by attending only to the concerns of its own narrow community experience. A religious group, for example, cannot develop a democratic form of social organization while treating members of other religious groups in non-democratic ways. The same is true for members of racial groups, or economic classes, or genders. Most interestingly, Dewey believed that the point is equally applicable to other nations. A healthy democratic society should pursue the development of common, shared interests beyond its national borders, and in the process seek to develop mechanisms for a democratic approach to international problems. If a democracy does not have this outward looking mentality it will ultimately fail to sustain democratic relations at home as well.

For Dewey the reason democratic development is so important is that it provides the best form of social organization for providing the means of both individual and social development and the fulfillment of individual and social potential. For him, the most critical social institution for creating and sustaining democratically minded individuals

and a democratic society is the schools. Dewey shared the view we have seen expressed by Thomas Jefferson that democracy requires well-educated citizens because people cannot be expected to govern themselves without it. For Dewey, though, there is much more to the importance of education than this. First, a democratic society needs democratically minded people, and a public school system is the one place in a large society where all or nearly all children can be introduced to the habits of mind that characterize a democratic individual – creativity, understanding and sympathy.

Second, a democratic society is an ongoing construction, a work in progress. Citizens are never born into a fully operational democracy wherein they simply live its advantages. On the contrary, a healthy democracy is always in need of further construction; there are always new problems to solve, new accomplishments to achieve. To be an active, contributing member of such a society requires a set of skills that the schools are especially well placed to provide. A democratic citizen must be predisposed to creative thinking in the solution of problems. The greatest lesson we can learn from the success of modern science, Dewey thought, is the advantage of experimentalism. We will never be able adequately to address the many individual and social problems we face if we take a rigid, ideological view of things. On the contrary, we are best served by a willingness, even an eagerness, to be experimental, to try new ideas and new approaches to problems, and to be willing to abandon an idea, even a favorite one, if it does not prove to be effective. These are not predispositions that we are born with, and in fact there are many factors in modern societies that militate against them. We are more typically taught simply to believe certain things, often but not only by religious leaders, than we are taught to be critical, creative and experimental. The latter are the skills necessary for democratic construction, and they can best be taught to children in the schools.

A third reason for the critical importance of education is that the schools serve in a sense as the “equalizer” in a society. Modern societies, and American society in Dewey’s day and ours has not been an exception, are characterized by a wide disparity of wealth, which translates into a wide disparity of opportunity. Children from wealthier families have more opportunity than those from less well off backgrounds. Dewey thought that while some such disparity is inevitable, a democracy should be characterized by as little as possible, primarily because every child in a society deserves the maximum

opportunity and resources that the society can make available. The school, in particular the public schools, is the one social institution that can most effectively provide the resources, intellectual and emotional, that all children need.

Dewey's reasons for emphasizing the centrality of education for a democratic society consciously echo Thomas Jefferson's plans for the development of a public school system and the creation of the University of Virginia. In his sense of the appropriate character of education for individual development one also hears the strains of Emerson's "Divinity School Address" to the graduating class of Harvard. Indeed his ideas about the importance of education and schooling reflect the general constructivist, forward-looking theme that we have seen running through all of American intellectual history. It would not be surprising, then, to find that the same sense of the need to build the future appears in his ideas about the proper methods of teaching. Dewey believed that learning is more effective when it takes place actively and constructively. Children will learn best, and they will most effectively achieve the goal of developing a creative, experimental frame of mind, if they are taught through a method of problem solving. In this respect he was urging that the artificial environment of the school and the classroom be constructed so as to mirror the outside natural and social environment in which we find ourselves faced with countless problematic situations that require, if we are to deal with them effectively, knowledge and a range of creative skills that we can and should learn in the schools.

Dewey's ideas about education, and most everything else, were widely discussed in his day, and in the United States they were to some small degree put into practice. He was also invited to several other nations to study their schools or to make recommendations about educational reform. As a result his ideas found their way into educational theory and practice in the 1920s and 1930s in, among other places, the Soviet Union, China, Japan and Turkey.

Conclusion: America in the Making

In the latter half of the 20th century pragmatic naturalism was eclipsed in the United States by other intellectual traditions, though it never disappeared. By the end of

the century pragmatism was reinvigorated by the work of Richard Rorty, who adopted John Dewey's instrumentalism if not his more full blown naturalism. In Rorty we find again the insistence that thinking is a tool with which we solve problems, not a way to reflect a preexisting world. In Rorty's hands it is primarily a cultural tool by which we work through our current social and cultural challenges. Though Rorty avoids Dewey's naturalism for technical philosophical reasons, his is nonetheless like Dewey's a secular, humanist understanding of thought and of the most important contemporary cultural values.

It may be that pragmatism most explicitly expresses the American tendency toward constructivism, but that tendency has been apparent in every major stage in American intellectual history – Puritanism, the American Enlightenment, Transcendentalism, Pragmatism and Naturalism. As we have seen, American constructivism tends to vacillate between secular and spiritual expressions, and the two often do not reside comfortably together. In early 21st century America the intellectual mood is largely secular, but the cultural forces are increasingly religious. This has created a tension in American social institutions, the short- and long-term outcomes of which remain to be seen. However it turns out, the dialogue between these two contrasting strains of American culture is yet another stage in the ongoing optimistic construction of the American mind.

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