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# Albert R. Spencer, "American Pragmatism: An Introduction."

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[See table of contents](#)

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**Albert R. Spencer.** *American Pragmatism: An Introduction*. Polity 2020. 224 pp. \$69.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781509524716); \$24.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781509524723).

Albert Spencer's *American Pragmatism: An Introduction* in a captivatingly complex take on pragmatism as it was, as it is, and as it can be. Readers will find much to consider in this highly readable book. Spencer includes a short preface laying out the framework for the book. That is followed by a brief preface. The body proper is comprised of an introductory chapter, followed by five additional chapters. The author also provides an extensive bibliography and a detailed index.

'An Introduction to American Pragmatism' is an interesting way to frame the chapters that follow. In successive order, Spencer discusses the contested nature of defining pragmatism, and its contours as a philosophy invested in notions of place, no less in conceptualizations of the embodied and the experiential. Within those sections, it becomes clear that he is working on a project that has a political/critical dimension. To wit, Spencer argues the introduction 'hopes to liberate the future of American pragmatism' by, in part, working to 'decolonize' it (11).

The first two chapters are the most decidedly introductory (in a good way) of the book. 'Fallibilism and the Classic Pragmatists' focuses on Charles S. Peirce and William James. Spencer does well in demonstrating their points of commonality, particularly their shared belief in the conditional and revisable nature of concepts (45). He is equally clear in recounting the different directions they took. Pierce focused more on the objective, as seen in his *pragmatic maxim*. James pointed towards the more subjective aspects of experience, especially in his conceptualization of *radical empiricism*. 'Meliorism and the Chicago Pragmatists' focuses on John Dewey and Jane Addams. Like the previous chapter, Spencer notes the differences and points of contact in working to 'engage and describe concrete social problems' (89). For Addams, this was done with the concept of *sympathetic knowledge* and the establishment of the charitable Hull House. For Dewey, it was in sloughing off the errors of Hegelianism, developing concepts like the reflex arc, and developing progressive approaches to educational reform. Spencer celebrates the more thoroughly *lived* practices of these two classic pragmatists, while also clearly articulating Dewey's debt to Addams.

'Pluralism and the Harvard Pragmatists' breaks with the organization of the previous two chapters to introduce several figures—George Santayana, W.E.B. DuBois, Horace Kallen, and Alain Locke—who served to apply pluralism as a way to combat 'ideologies that supported discriminatory practices' (118). The section on Santayana notes the tension between his largely conservative thinking and his more expansive views of individual spirituality and cosmopolitanism (125). The section discussing DuBois is by far the longest in this chapter. Spencer frames this as a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of adding DuBois to the canon. He ultimately argues in the affirmative, suggesting the continued resonance of DuBois's concept of *double consciousness* (133), no less than his recognition of the difficult and tentative path to 'racial equality' (140). The final two sections focus on how two of James's students, lifelong friends Kallen and Locke, expanded the cultural and democratic contours of his pluralism. The former argues against the myth of a monolithic culture, preferring to view America as an interactive 'choir where distinct voices contrast and complement one another' (146). The latter urges a form of democracy 'that relinquishes white supremacy at home and abroad, thereby allowing for the full participation of individuals' (152).

'Verification and the Analytic Pragmatists' provides a brief discussion of classical pragmatism's declining fortunes in the mid-1900s before turning to a discussion of three philosophers—Clarence Irving Lewis, Willard Van Orman Quine, and Richard Rorty—who adapted and expanded pragmatism's reach as against, and in support of, analytic philosophy. Spencer notes that Lewis's

training was at the hands of first generation pragmatists James and Royce. Further, his *conceptual pragmatism* leaned heavily on Peircian insights, all while urging that ‘judgments, even those based on logical implication, are affective, and therefore based on values’ (157). Quine, by contrast, was influenced by his studies with Alfred North Whitehead and directed his attention to science. Spencer argues that his *pragmatic holism* threw off the deficits of logical positivism, particularly the focus on a priori explanations, and instead demonstrated that all theories are fallible and subject to revisions (187). Rorty’s *neopragmatism* was directed neither to logic nor science, but to the pragmatic functions of language. Taking Ludwig Wittgenstein’s insight that meaning is contextual (193), Rorty rejects foundational approaches to philosophy as impossible (158).

‘Hope and the Contemporary Pragmatists’ focuses on pragmatism’s move toward philosophical pluralism and engaged practices in the late-20<sup>th</sup> and early-21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Spencer surveys the works of several philosophers—namely, Jürgen Habermas, Huw Price, and Gloria Anzaldúa—who speak to this broadened approach. Spencer argues that Habermas’s focus on the public sphere and democracy provides a theoretical framework ‘that merges the best insights of Marx and Dewey’ (211). Influenced by both the Frankfurt School and the classic pragmatists, no less than his own life experiences, Habermas suggests a path by which to craft better ‘democratic systems’ around the globe (202). The section on Price is initially focused on critical responses to Rorty by other pragmatists. The author uses this to introduce Price’s *pragmatic naturalism* as a way to resolve ‘the tensions between neopragmatism and science’ that Rorty created (214). Price’s resolution? Doing away with the ambiguity and smirking dismissal in some of Rorty’s writings. Instead, Price argues that reestablishing ‘truth as the practical norm that motivates ... inquirers in their attempts to uncover ... their differences reveals a richer understanding of inquiry’ (219). The final section is of a more predictive and suggestive nature. It is the former in the points of contact it suggests, particularly with indigenous cultures, scholars, and theories; it is the latter in the way it hints at future paths for pragmatism should we take those proactive and invigorating steps. Spencer ends with a discussion of Anzaldúa, noting that her claim that ‘there are no parts to one’s identity, since there are no borders within experience,’ has much to recommend itself to pragmatists past, present, and future. In the lead up to that, Spencer engages a host of thinkers who can/could/should inform future developments in pragmatism while also representing ‘the beginning of an indigenous pragmatism’ (227).

There is much to recommend Spencer’s book. It is exhaustively researched, bringing in evidence from across a wide spectrum (as noted in the aforementioned bibliography). Spencer also writes in a clear fashion, avoiding jargon while also doing justice to some of the more complicated parts of pragmatism’s historical canon. He provides relevant and engaging case studies to help show how one, a student perhaps, might apply theoretical concepts. Examples include the reclassification of the planet Pluto as an example of ‘fallibilism in science’ (49); the persistence of belief in Doomsday cults (56); or even the slightly out-of-date use of the film *The Big Lebowski* (1998) to explain the paternalistic approach to charity (92). Spencer also provides necessary balance when reviewing the positive and progressive socio-political viewpoints alongside the less emancipatory aspects of foundational pragmatists and their theorizing.

There are, however, some reasons for pause. The title is only a partial reflection of the depth of scholarship and overall thrust of Spencer’s thesis. Spencer suggests the book is meant to be ‘accessible to students and to curious readers’ (ix). His clarifying examples noted above most certainly suggest an attempt, and a good one, to show how pragmatic concepts work in an introductory fashion. Even the truncated extensions at the end of certain chapters—a nod to Josiah Royce in the fallibilism chapter, or the extension of the discussion to include George Herbert Mead in the chapter on meliorism—clearly trace out logical extensions of pragmatism’s historical record. Other attempts

to draw out connections also demonstrate that this is not merely an introductory book. It is a book aiming to introduce new voices while also challenging and reconstructing some of the traditional narratives related to pragmatism. Balancing those not entirely cross purposes is difficult. Some of the points of connection that Spencer attempts are lacking the necessary connective tissue. For example, the clearest links one finds to Spencer's introductory chapter are in the final section of the last chapter. Those connections, however, end as quickly as the book does. Which raises one final issue. In the preface, Spencer suggests he tried to remain 'politically neutral' in his 'commentary' (x). If anything, the book might have been better served if he had been *more* boldly political. In so doing, Spencer might have resolved the aforementioned gaps, perhaps providing a full-fledged concluding chapter rather than a one-paragraph summary at the end of the last chapter. As it stands, the first chapter—with its already noted calls to decolonize and liberate—remains at a distance from most of the rest of book, framing a project with a far more politically-minded point of view not in evidence, particularly in the middle chapters.

Spencer has done a remarkable job of bringing his own interests together in a book that is far more than an overview of pragmatism. While not all of those interests hang together as well as they perhaps might, *American Pragmatism* will reward multiple readings and is likely lead to lively conversations.

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