**Prose**

**The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America**

Louis Menand

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by John H. Summers

Biography's contribution to intellectual history depends on its ability to express relationships among formal ideas, personal qualities, and historical circumstances. Louis Menand's *The Metaphysical Club*—a collective biography that traces the origins of American pragmatism to a set of "changing assumptions" that defined American life in the four decades after the Civil War—merits close inspection as a contribution to such a history.

In its pursuit of "changing assumptions," the book explores a stunning array of late nineteenth and early twentieth century topics: Darwinism, American Transcendentalism, German Idealism, Statistis, Astronomy, abolitionism, assimilationism, nativism, labor actions, and the emergence of research universities, to name a few. Yet the narrative core of the book centers on the Ives and ideas of four men: jurist Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., and philosophers Charles Peirce, William James, and John Dewey. These four shared and promoted a new attitude to human inquiry, captured, Menand says, in "an idea about ideas": "They all believed that ideas are not 'out there' waiting to be discovered, but are tools—like forks and knives and microchips—that people devise to cope with the world in which they find themselves." Knowledge, according to this way of thinking, is socially produced by groups of individuals, and the "survival" of ideas in a culture depends not on their correspondence with the world, but their "adaptability to prevailing circumstances.

How and why did Holmes, Peirce, James, and Dewey come to these conclusions? Menand's answer takes the form of a series of highly nuanced intellectual portraits, which give each of the four an idiosyncratic (but partly convergent) march of development that feature their personalities alongside their ideas. The book contains a multitude of anecdotes—always interesting, sometimes fascinating—involving familiar background, social rank, political viewpoint, institutional position, professional jealousies, personal tastes, private haunts, and so on. For Menand, such individuals are a matter of intellectual method, not personal prudence. By presenting ideas as deeply embedded in circumstances—and through the personal and social situations in which we find them—and not in splendid intellectual isolation, Menand has attempted to reframe the "history of pragmatism on its own terms. The pragmatists, he contends, "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." Menand's interpretation of this claim puts special emphasis on "human carriers." His "story of ideas in America" is a record of distinctive personalities and biographical experiences. This dramatization of human culture helps account for *The Metaphysical Club*'s popular appeal: its biographical portraits make for terrific reading, and its success as popular history is already assured. Lavished with critical praise, the book will soon be appearing on audiocassette. Heretofore, most of the discussions surrounding the "rebirth of pragmatism" in modern American thought have remained within the universities. That Menand's book has already brought this complicated philosophical movement to a broader cultural field is no small achievement.

As an exercise in public reason however, *The Metaphysical Club*'s greatest strengths are also its signal weaknesses. Because he roots pragmatism's development in the idiosyncratic personalities of its progenitors, Menand has trouble explaining how and why these different thinkers converged on a set of tightly related ideas. He strains to emphasize two biographical experiences that all four men are said to have shared—the American Civil War and the brief-lived "metaphysical" discussion club of the title—yet the convergence is compelling. Moreover, by so thoroughly localizing pragmatism in specific personae and biographies, Menand diminishes his ability to explain it as a set of ideas with broad historical and contemporary significance.

Dramatic episodes of the Civil War introduce *The Metaphysical Club*, and lay the groundwork for Menand's interpretation of pragmatism as a philosophical reaction to the conflict's abolutions. "Holmes, James, Peirce, and Dewey wished to bring ideas and principles and beliefs down to a human level because they wished to avoid the violence they saw hidden in abstractions," Menand insists. "This was one of the lessons the Civil War had taught them." Thus Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., a Union soldier, came to regard the war as the "central experience" of his life and the fulcrum of his philosophical obligations to uncertainty. A participant in some exceptionally bloody battles, the thrice-wounded Holmes thereafter carried deep physical and emotional scars. Eventually, Menand puts it, the war "changed his view of the nature of views," and made him lose his belief in beliefs.

Menand's subsequent efforts to keep alive the moral tension of the war and its intellectual impact frequently seem forced. When the youthful William James decided to accompany Harvard zoologist Louis Agassiz on an expedition to Brazil in 1876, according to Menand, actually choosing to serve in the war, in "a sense," joining with Agassiz, who was briefly constructing a polygonal hierarchy of the races, means, furthermore, that James had chosen the "wrong side." Menand likewise strains for links between John Dewey's ideas and the Civil War, and finds little more than the fact that his father, Archibald Dewey, enlisted on the side of the North, served for the duration, and remained a committed Republican throughout his life.

The blood of the war may well have washed away Holmes's early faith in the certainty of abolitionism, and ultimately any other certainty. "[T]ime," Holmes said in dissent in *Abrams v. U.S.*, "has upset many fighting faiths." But the "great lesson he thought the war had taught him" did not directly apply to the others, including his friend William James. Indeed, Menand points to the role of the Civil War is sometimes so scanty that it compels tattered analogies into service. On the trip to Brazil, James exclaims in "short soundless" smallpox. As for Dewey, Menand links his development as a pragmatic intellectual to the conceptions of reformer Jane Addams about the Pullman strike, another of the seemingly intractable political and moral conflicts faced by late-nineteenth century thinkers. That Dewey would be so interested in public affairs in the first place, Menand suggests, owes to a lesson issued by the Civil War. Only this lesson seems opposite Holmes's. Immediately after explaining Archibald Dewey's soldierly enthusiasm, Menand indicates that John Dewey was raised "in a family with a culture of social commitment." His father was a "die-hard Republican all his life." On Menand's evidence, Archibald Dewey not only appears to emit precisely the kind of principled certainties that Holmes most distrusted, but also appears to have transmitted these values to his son. Such complications make Menand's interpretative focus on the "uncompletedness" of the Civil War's legacy. The book's opening pages make Northern abolitionism "generally for the toxicity of grand narratives." By book's end, abolitionism stands not so much as an analytical construct as an uncertain literary trope. The war imbues the "story" with a sense of drama, though it seems less able to explain the emergence of pragmatism as a sustained, collective phenomenon.

If a shared reaction to the Civil War does not account for pragmatism's common appeal to thinkers with such distinct personalities and perspectives, neither does shared membership in a short-lived "metaphysical club" in Cambridge. The reader who flips through two hundred pages to find the contribution made by the club, will find that for two of the book's principal figures it had only slight intellectual significance. Holmes was "probably not a frequent participant in the Metaphysical Club discussions," and James did not need the Metaphysical Club to reach his conclusion about the nature of beliefs. The presence of Charles Peirce and fellow-philosopher Chauncey Wright (whose alcoholism is presented as the decisive factor in his philosophical failings) furnishes the most compelling reasons for Menand to present the 'ounding' of the club as a landmark in the long history of pragmatism. Yet even Peirce and Wright had "fought out near a thousand close disquisitions on regular set-out concerns of the philosophy of [John Stuart] Mill...before the Metaphysical Club had been starred." Perhaps, Menand finally says, the club never existed in the first place.

Menand repeatedly strains historical and philosophical interpretation in the service of personalized animation. While he provides an ample account of Charles Peirce's struggle with the "intermediary of meaning and the fallibility of convictions, Menand's faith in personalized context leads him to push Peirce's published writings on the topic...
aside, in search of a biographical mo-
ment or a metaphorical cohesion. "What does the mean?" Manet asks, "to say that a statement is true in a world always suscep-
tible to a certain swerving?" But this is an entirely speculative an-
swer: "Peirce got a hint of how this question might be answered from an-
other member of the Metaphysical Club, Nicholas St. John Green." Car-
ried along by Green's critique of the legal concept of "proximate cause" - so the story runs - Peirce was inspired to write a paper about the "practical bear-
ings" of human inquiry that he read during the final meeting of the club. Or
did he? Manet cannily says we are not sure, yet he indicates that the reading of that pa-
er came to occupy the center of prag-
matic thinking, its content - elaborated in Peirce's "How To Make Our
Ideas Clear" - quickly spreading to the others through channels not all that
indirect. That no record exists to doc-
ument the club's activities - other than Peirce's own fragmented recollection-
accounts for means, however, for Manet
may have read virtually anything.
More important than the specific
conclusions that Manet draws from
the war or from the presumed exis-
tence of the metaphysical club, the
burden of the book's biographical ar-
gument - which locate causal rela-
tionships from within the immediate spheres of these thinkers' lives-
makes personal epiphany a motor of
intellectual development. Such person-
al revelation is fine as it goes. But
often it fails to move ideas far enough away from the individual thinker to al-
low them free play.
The most satisfying moments in
The Metaphysical Club occur when the
emotional arc of one of the characters
meets the articulation of an idea. When Holmes is discovered mor-
phining his war-time experiences into
a philosophy of jurisprudence, for in-
stance. Or when Charles Peirce and his father, the Harvard math-
ematician Benjamin Peirce, partner as
expert witnesses in a celebrated trial, Rob-
inson v. Mandell. (The Peirces, ac-
cording to Manet, used the occasion of
their 1867 testimony to test and pro-
claim the "law of errors," the same
analytic tool that would become cen-
tral to Bayes's theory of knowl-
edge.)
Even during such moments, how-
ever, the general reader is pulled
back and forth between edification and
enlightenment. Manet's effort to contextualize pragmatism in a web of
personal, social, and intellectual
relationships is of itself the reader's
challenge: to understand pragmatism as a body of ideas that evolves, en-
lights, and succeeds (or fails) on its
own terms. Manet often seems too
pressed by the intimate cockpit party of
the mid-nineteenth-century inquir-
yard, with all its coincidences and con-
nections, and insufficiently attentive to ar-
gument. A typical passage begins: "In
1888, on a train to Cleveland to atten-
d a scientific meeting, [Franz] Boas got
into a conversation with the man in the
seat next to him, who, as at the end of
the trip, offered him a job. The friendly
passenger was G. Stanley Hall, recruit-
ing for the newly opened Clark Univer-
sity. Boas taught at Clark for four
years, and so on. Serendipity adds to
the book's aesthetic feel, little to its explanatory power.
No doubt, by recasting some of the
action in pragmatism's development
from its abstract philosophical inheri-
tance to odd personalities, wars, and
lawsuits, Manet renders readers a story
that is sometimes both thrilling and il-
luminating. Equally certain though,
this "story of ideas" is often over-
whelmed by the sheer overload of personali-
ty and circumstance. Consider, for ex-
ample, Manet's portrayal of the animos-
ity between critic Randolph Bourne and his former teacher, John Dewey.
Manet observes that Dewey became
angry over Bourne's review of a book to
which Dewey had contributed an intro-
duction, then records Dewey's support
for war in 1917 (the occasion for their
feud). He says in summary of both topics: "They'd maneuvered
to avoid the exposition of violent
means during the First World War is a
peculiar episode in his career, but the reaction to, though it is
the "Alexander review is even more pecu-
liar." His displeasure at Bourne may
seem "peculiar," given Dewey's mild-
manered disposition, and his evasion
realize that Alexander's book might af-
front Bourne for personal reasons. But
do Dewey's support for the war and his
own personal insensitivity issue from the
same kind of "peculiar"? Are these two
instances of Dewey's intellectual char-
acter really to be commensurate? Engag-
ing with his pragmatism in its own
right is vital to judging its merits, not
least because Dewey's support for the
First World War can hardly be understood as "momentary." Manet could have
represented the relationship between
Dewey's pragmatist philosophical com-
mittments and his wartime politics in
any number of ways. A contradiction?
A logical entailment? An elective affini-
ity? Almost anything would improve
"peculiar," a characterization that per-
mits no real response.
Not only do broad, historical expla-
nations become more difficult to
sustain as Manet descends to the id-
iosyncratic details of private life, but
his focus on those details does not aid evaluation of pragmatism as a philo-
sophical outlook. To be sure, such blur-
ing of contexts constitutes a
purposeful aspect of Manet's contrib-
ution to intellectual biography, his
"posing" points of view in the more in-
tellectual culture. But there are other
ways to historicize pragmatism, equally
attentive to its contextual scruples, that
see more conducive to the task of in-
tellectual assessment.
In 1942, C. Wright Mills, then a
26-year-old sociologist fresh from the
University of Wisconsin, completed an
intellectual history of pragmatism from
a perspective that also emphasized the
social character of knowledge. Mills
considered the pragmatists to be his in-
tellectual "godfathers." Indeed, the
major gestures and problems of his