

The Present Place and Purpose of American Philosophy

O Lugar Atual e Propósito da Filosofia Americana

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Abstract: American Philosophy has experienced a re-vitalization in the last 25 years. It has become so popular that it is sometimes appropriated by people who are not really familiar with the tradition at all. On the other hand, it is being utilized by many in new and exciting ways. This paper points to some of the ways American philosophy has been a publicly engaged tradition and argues that it should remain so if we care about the future of democracy. It then suggests that some of the possibly emerging themes that the tradition needs to wrestle with in the 21st century are conceptions of boundary and place, pluralism and agency, and fallibilism and hope.

Keywords: Agency. Bernstein. Democracy. Fallibilism. Hope. McDermott. Place. Pluralism. Resistance.

Resumo: *A filosofia americana sofreu uma revitalização nos últimos 25 anos. Tornou-se tão popular que, às vezes, pessoas não familiarizadas com sua tradição se apropriam dela. Por outro lado, está sendo utilizada por muitos em novas e excitantes formas. Este artigo aponta alguns modos pelos quais a filosofia americana tem sido uma tradição publicamente engajada, e argumenta que ela deve permanecer assim, caso nos importemos com o futuro da democracia. Sugerirei, então, que alguns dos temas possivelmente emergentes com os quais a tradição precisa lidar no Século XXI são as concepções de limites e de lugar, pluralismo e mediação, e falibilismo e esperança.*

Palavras-chave: *Agência. Bernstein. Democracia. Falibilismo. Esperança. McDermott. Lugar. Pluralismo. Resistência.*

In our new book, *American Philosophy*, we tell a new story of the philosophical tradition as a broad tradition of resistance that seeks to address the problems faced by people living in a richly diverse place struggling for community. We understand American philosophy as a tradition committed to a dynamic, pluralistic world of experience in which knowledge is a product of ongoing investigation, always limited in resources and scope, subject to failure, and liable to be overturned as the problems of the world change. As such it is a philosophical tradition that has the

resources to question, challenge, and change and is itself subject to change in who count as philosophers, what questions need to be asked, how answers are found and tried. In retelling the tradition, we hope to open up the conversation even as we help readers see the importance and role of philosophy in leading meaningful and purposeful lives, and recognizing that such lives require the material, social, and political conditions that make the freedom to do so a real possibility. American philosophy in its diversity reminds us of both our fallibilism and our need to seek resources for living lives of conviction in the face of uncertainty and sustaining the hope of making things better.

Richard Bernstein, in his book *The Abuse of Evil*, argued that the dominance of an absolutist and dogmatic mentality is a threat to democracy. In its place he suggested an approach that “questions the appeal to absolutes in politics, that argues that we must not confuse subjective moral *certitude* with objective moral *certainty*, and that is skeptical of an uncritical rigid dichotomy between the forces of evil and the forces of good” (2005, p. vii). He called this approach pragmatic fallibilism: that is, an attitude that allows for the possibility of being wrong. Bernstein found this attitude in the tradition of American philosophy and turned to Charles Peirce, William James, and John Dewey as thinkers who offered philosophical resistance through a call for pluralism and fallibilism. An important part of this view is the belief that ideas develop in a particular environment and context and are necessarily provisional.

When the pragmatists critically attacked absolutes, when they sought to expose the quest for certainty, when they argued for an open universe in which chance and contingency are irreducible, they were not concerned exclusively with abstract metaphysical and epistemological issues. They were addressing ethics, politics, and practical questions that ordinary people confront in their ordinary lives. (2005, p. 23).

The strand of American philosophy that is the tradition of resistance is one that helps to challenge the desire to respond to difference with fear, demonization, and distancing. Such work needs to be rooted in the historical sources of American philosophizing, but we must also be critical of these sources. Further we must also put them to use and develop new ideas out of them.

Much work has been and continues to be done in the realm of historical recovery and analysis of thinkers in the American tradition. In our book, we surveyed that work, but also tried to expand who gets counted as being part of the tradition. In addition to the most well known figures, we discuss philosophers such as Jane Addams, Alain Locke, Anna Julia Cooper, T. Thomas Fortune, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Mary Whiton Calkins, Emma Goldman, Mary Parker Follett, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, C. Wright Mills, Lewis Mumford, John Kenneth Galbraith, Martin Luther King, Jr., Richard Wright, Angela Davis, Vine Deloria, Jr., among others. We also looked at philosophy’s role in several important social movements in the United States: the civil rights movement, the women’s movement, the farm worker’s movement, the indigenous rights movement, and the environmental movement. We then explored contemporary examples of philosophers engaged in the public philosophical project of promoting critical thought and action in a

tradition of pluralism and resistance—thinkers such as Richard Bernstein, Cornel West, and John McDermott—and how historical recovery and analysis has enabled contemporary philosophical work on pressing issues of the day. New elements of American philosophy emerge in (among other areas) examinations of popular culture, environment and animals, biomedical ethics and issues of embodiment, feminism and gender, religion, race, politics and law, and Latin American philosophy.

American philosophy has always been, and continues to be, active and publically engaged. Though sometimes unsuccessful and occasionally misguided, the tradition we trace is one that is committed to expanding conversations and opening discourse in order to sustain possibilities for individuals and communities, capable of thoughtful participation, to shape their individual and social lives.

Such engagement, however, cannot be sustained without the constant attention and efforts of those working in this tradition. As noted, Bernstein worried that in the wake of 9/11 the U.S. was in danger of slipping into a kind of anti-pluralism that could endanger the discourse needed to sustain democracy. Having finished his book *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation* just days before the attack on 9/11, Bernstein considered revising it but realized that what concerned him about the response to 9/11 was not the concept of evil, but the use and abuse of the concept. Reflecting on *Radical Evil* in the introduction to his later book, *The Abuse of Evil* (2005) Bernstein explains that “*Interrogating evil is an ongoing, open-ended process* [...] because we cannot anticipate what new forms of evil or vicissitudes of evil will appear” (2005, p. vii). Generally, talk of evil has spurred critical argument and debate among religious and philosophical thinkers. The abuse of evil is talk about evil intended to shut down discourse and block critical thought about complex issues.

For Bernstein the responses to 9/11 represented a “clash of mentalities.” One mentality “is drawn to absolutes, alleged moral certainties, and simplistic dichotomies.” The other, which he called “pragmatic fallibilism,” “argues that we must not confuse subjective moral certitude with objective moral certainty” and is “skeptical of an uncritical rigid dichotomy between the forces of evil and the forces of good” (2005, p. viii). Responses that stifle thinking are dangerous given the uncertain nature of the world, but some see complex and subtle thinking as indecisive and therefore dangerous in the face of concrete problems. On the contrary, Bernstein argued that pragmatic fallibilism is both open to correction and decisive. Such fallibilism, and the engaged pluralism it requires, demands the courage to test ideas in public and to listen to others and to set aside the desire to hide behind simplistic and rigid responses.

Although one might worry that this approach falls into dangerous relativism, Bernstein argued that it does not. There are limits to tolerance; recalling the work of Alain Locke, Horace Kallen, and Sydney Hook, (among others), he says, “We cannot tolerate those who are actively intolerant—those who seek to undermine the very possibility of discourse, dialogue, and rational persuasion. But how are we to decide when these limits have been reached?” (2005, p. 60). The curtailing of civil liberties often appears to be an attractive immediate response, but such action is dangerous. More openness, not less, is the better response—whether to the ‘cold war’ or the ‘war on terror,’ whether to civil rights activism or anti-war protesters. The same goes for listening to dissent: labeling dissenters ‘unpatriotic’ or ‘evil’ hurts discourse.

Further, when one is so certain about being right, there is no need for questioning or further analysis. How decisions are reached, and how they are held (tentatively or absolutely) is as important as the decisions themselves. Bernstein notes that after 9/11 there were responsible defenders of military intervention, but they did not appeal to absolutes, certainty, or a crusade against evil. They did not corrupt politics by using the fear of an enemy to manipulate people and curtail liberties. There is no grand solution to human problems, Bernstein concludes, only the call for all to oppose the abuse of evil.

So what is to be done? Ordinary citizens must stand up to and oppose the political abuse of evil, challenge the misuse of absolutes, expose false and misleading claims to moral certainty, and argue that we cannot deal with the complexity of the issues we confront by appealing to—or imposing—simplistic dichotomies (2005, p. 121).

He goes on to say that “There is a role for public intellectuals, educators, journalists, and artists to help guide the way—just as Holmes, James, Peirce, and Dewey did at a different time under radically different historical circumstances” (2005, p. 121). Democracy, Bernstein concludes, is fragile and requires critical fallibilism and engaged pluralism at all levels of society. Such an approach does not guarantee or even suggest that those committed to pragmatic fallibilism and engaged pluralism will always get things right. It only allows for the possibility of open discussion and self-correction.

Yet even with commitments to fallibilism and pluralism, fear is not unfounded. We live in a precarious world that is made more precarious by human technology, greed, and inattentiveness. It is not a mistake to be afraid, but it is important to decide how to respond to the fear. The American tradition we charted has advocated a response of openness and tolerance that leads to the possibility of amelioration and hope—but there are no guarantees. By recounting its past and its present character, we believe that we have made a case that the tradition is still alive and well. But we also need to think about how the tradition moves forward. We believe that there are at least six broad thematic conceptions that continue the work of the tradition and deserve more attention. What follows is not an exhaustive list but rather a list of those that come readily to mind at this point. These themes are expressed as commitment to conceptions of boundary and place, pluralism and agency, and fallibilism and hope. We start with boundary and place.

Boundary and Place

Peruvian philosopher Anibal Quijano observed in 2000 that “Even though for the imperialist vision of the United States of America the term ‘America’ is just another name for that country, today it is the name of the territory that extends from Alaska in the North to Cape Horn in the South, including the Caribbean archipelago” (2000, p. 574n2). It is not a surprise that Quijano and others from North, South and Central America see themselves as Americans, especially in light of their shared colonial past. Given globalization, or at least north/south economic, labor, and cultural interactions, it is becoming apparent that peoples throughout

the Western hemisphere face related problems of economic depression, racism, sexism, and environmental destruction. It is also apparent that the shared history of the hemisphere is one framed by the dual tragedies of genocide and slavery, both of which are a part of the legacy of the European invasions of the last 500 years. Indigenous people north and south were displaced, died of disease, and were killed by Europeans through slavery, rape, and war. In 1491, about 145 million people lived in the western hemisphere. By 1691, the population of indigenous Americans had declined by 90-95%. Slavery began almost immediately following the arrival of Europeans, first by enslaving Native Americans in South and Central America, and continued with the arrival of African-born slaves in Cuba in 1501 and in Virginia in 1619. Lands obtained from America's first peoples and slave labor from African peoples provided the economic foundation for the 'new' European world being established in all of the Americas. In philosophy a greater awareness of this shared history of place will demand greater attention to the shared problems and the shared conceptual frameworks that seek decolonization and the construction of new ways of life in the Americas.

Recalling the conception of boundaries offered by Gloria Anzaldúa, as well as earlier philosophers including Peirce, James, Dewey, Mary Whiton Calkins, Horace Kallen, and Alain Locke, boundaries at once define individuals and groups and at the same time are porous and provide the possibility of new ideas, resources, and ways of life. Boundaries are not abstract and they are not simply the meeting of one thing with another. A boundary creates a new space "a vague and undetermined place," as Anzaldúa described it, in a state of constant transition. The boundaries in and between North, Central and South America mark distinct cultures, histories, lands, and ecosystems. At the same time, they mark "border *lands*," concrete places where people live and work, love and die. Across these borderlands, through the efforts of the people of the place, Alain Locke observed, "cultural exchange passes in reciprocal streams from the conquerors to the conquered and from the conquered to the dominant groups" (1946, p. 10). The special character of boundaries affords such exchanges. As Peirce pointed out, boundaries are logically indeterminate spaces. They mark the meeting of two sides, but cannot be reduced to either. They are, as Anzaldúa says, "neither one nor the other but a strange doubling" (1999, p. 41).

The resistance tradition of American philosophy placed the issue of boundaries at the center of questions of identity and community. These spaces served as a means for understanding the pluralism of experience and the possibility of border-crossing as a tool for cultural advancement and cultural stability. Boundaries and borders should not only be understood as they commonly are in discussions of immigration as obstacles and walls, but as ever-changing places that constitute who we are as individuals and members of communities, nations, and the world. These borderlands are a means of understanding difference and sameness and the possibilities of the future. The future of American philosophy must involve the affirmation of this complex understanding of borders and boundaries.

Theories of place that recognize boundaries and that address the problems of plurality through a notion of community mirror in key ways Martin Luther King's vision of the 'world house' and Royce's idea of 'Beloved Community.' The fluidity of boundaries and borders demonstrate the importance and complexity of community, but do not undermine the importance of place. Once framed by a historically rooted

conception of place, notions of boundaries and borders take on new meaning and become resources for addressing problems in new ways. Place is more than a location on a map, it is where and when experience happens. As a result, places are formative of one's sense of self and one's sense of community. Places include the land on which one depends, the built environment, and systems of education, politics, and economy. Places also include people and other forms of life and the languages they speak and understand.

As the bounded contexts of experience, places also lead to an alternative conception of knowledge consistent with the epistemic theories of the classical pragmatists and their successors. Universal claims, whether of philosophy or biology or practical matters, are themselves of a place and their reach is always less than universal. Such claims can, again, never be certain for all time, but are nevertheless useful, relevant, leading principles that guide the inhabitants of a place. As the guiding ideas change, the place changes as well, altering values and borders, even as the guiding ideas themselves remain limited in their reach. As addressed in the indigenous American philosophical tradition by persons such as Luther Standing Bear and Vine Deloria, Jr., place (and its framing boundaries) are first principles of philosophical reflection requiring both recognition and respect. Ontologically, places are necessarily bounded and so the ideas and ways of life that emerge from them are necessarily limited as well. Even though much of the American tradition leaves the notion of place in the background, its presence is nevertheless implied in the fallibilist conception of knowledge and the resistance to universal claims.

When American philosophical thought affirms the idea that experience is always placed somewhere and some-when, it can consider again ideas received from the dominant tradition and reconceive them. As Du Bois proposed in *Dusk of Dawn*, for example, capitalism and its universal economic motivations, when seen from the place of black communities in the mid 20th century, can be reconstructed around the need for economically self-sufficient communities connected by larger reciprocal exchanges with other small communities. Rather than requiring uniform economies, such a view calls for diverse economies that are balanced in their work and needs with other places. Recent examples of other place-based revisions to capitalist economies include the 'buy local' movement (especially in food production and distribution), barter economies (the online marketplace 'Craigslist,' for instance), and 'free' economies that rely on the refuse of modern urban life. On a global scale, systems of 'fair trade' production provide alternative modes of exchange that begin with a respect for economic differences rather than the sameness of global capitalism. Micro-lending systems established throughout the Americas and other parts of the world provide money to businesses too small for support from global banks. The resulting small loans can transform local communities and, through repayment, can pass such support to other places. Practices that at once reaffirm differences and support interaction function as boundaries that foster places as sites of resistance and growth.

Pluralism and Agency

The affirmation of place also implies new methods of thinking and new understandings of pluralism and agency. Just as thinkers such as Jane Addams,

John Dewey, Mary Parker Follett, Rachel Carson, John Kenneth Galbraith and Noam Chomsky sought cooperation with scholars outside philosophy in order to address the problems of their times and places, new philosophical efforts emerging from the tradition are likely to be interdisciplinary efforts interested in addressing the lived problems of present communities. For example, while some combine philosophy with animal studies and anthropology, others use a pragmatist informed method to bring together neuroscience and cognitive science to understand long standing philosophical problems.

Philosophy must resist isolation both in the theories it discusses and the actions to which it leads. Just as this pluralism of disciplines will be important to the future of philosophy, pluralism of both theories and experiences will be important as well. For example, gender and sexuality have exploded into a vast array of ways to understand the character of human life. One can encounter heterosexual monogamous and polyamorous sexuality, bisexuality, and homosexual monogamous and polyamorous sexuality all in the space of a single community. Multiple genders are increasingly accepted in various communities. The scientific community has come to acknowledge a variety of transgendered individuals and technology makes it possible for people physically to change their sex.

Pluralism of experience makes it clear that there are also different conceptions of agency (of *who* acts). Different notions of gender, for example, imply different ways of acting, different interests, and different consequences. Cultural differences provide alternative means for understanding who agents are and where they come from. Conceptions of agency in Christianity and Islam often hold that selves—agents—are a divine gift. Contemporary naturalists often hold that agents are a biological product of evolution. Some confine recognized agents to a certain range of beings, human beings, or beings of a particular race or gender. At the center of concern in all of these understandings of agency is the recognition that theories of who agents are intersect with the experience of agency to define individuals. The received account from Western philosophy recognizes human beings alone as agents, individual and autonomous. At the same time, indigenous American philosophy recognizes human beings and other non-human beings as agents. Within the American tradition philosophers including Peirce, Royce, Addams, and Deloria (among others) recognize both individuals and communities as agents.

The centrality of agency has long been part of the American tradition of resistance. Agency was transformed in the mainstream in the wake of the civil war and redefined—or reasserted practically—as part of the work of philosophers as well as activists. Philosophers such as Simon Pokingon, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Jane Addams, Anna Julia Cooper, Mary Parker Follett, Horace Kallen, and Alain Locke sought to assert a new conception of who acts as a means of transforming their community. The reemergence of indigenous sovereignty reasserted the agency of communities and their places and reframed the idea of recognition in the present world.

The notion of agency that emerges as part of the resistance to colonialism and empire is one that recasts the character of experience as the interaction of many different agents. The result, as Deloria concluded, is a 'moral universe' in which other relations—epistemic, ethical, social, aesthetic—are relations between agents or persons. Agency—the ability to act with a purpose—demands the recognition of

porous boundaries so that agents are neither cut off from others nor indistinguishable from them. Agents require a locus of action, a place, and they are necessarily diverse. At the same time, to act, agents are temporal beings able at once to be partly determined by their past and able to act in terms of a future that is indeterminate.

This emergent conception of agency is at risk on at least two fronts. Ontologically, agency is under the long-standing threat of being reduced to the action of discrete beings, isolated except for their materiality. This takes the form of modern individualism. This risk of ontological reductionism risks reducing values and what matters to materiality. The second threat is that, politically, agency excludes communities and the other-than-human. The risk here is that in the setting of policies, the only things that can be taken into account are human centered, and often individually centered. Human desires and interests become all that count. On this view indigenous tribes and communities have no agency. Nor do other species, individual animals, and ecosystems.

For some in the American tradition, such agency is widely shared and applies as much to human society as to everything else, animate and inanimate. For others, agency is narrowed to human society alone, and for still others it is limited to individual human beings. The lesson of the philosophical tradition of resistance is that the narrowing of agency to humans has been bound up with the rise of industry, the desire for control, and the fear of what is to come. Widening the conception of who counts as an agent has been instrumental in the resistance and essential to the reconstruction of life in the Americas. Freedom, as even recent analytic philosophy has claimed, is tied to the autonomy of agents. The meaning of autonomy and the nature of agents, however, is greater than such theories have imagined. The future of American philosophy—as an extension of the resources and commitments of the last century of resistance—seems directed toward the affirmation of diverse agencies as a resource for resistance, but also as a ground from which new opportunities can arise. Attention to agents—individual and collective—refocuses consideration on boundaries and places and raises the question of the possibilities of failure and of hope. The failure of agents—their limitations and errors—seems at first to undercut a philosophical method aimed at amelioration. Yet, as we have seen, the American tradition has a longstanding recognition of the importance of integrating fallibilism with hope in moments of conflict and struggle.

Fallibilism and Hope

In addition to grappling with how to understand and respond to various other forms of agency, humans also need to continue to grapple with their fallibilism. Being finite and limited, no known creature has access to all ways of knowing. As a consequence, all limited creatures are subject to blindness and error. Ontology cannot be ignored—the ground of difference exceeds our ability to explain and compare from a single perspective the things that count. For example, animal studies that do not seek only to understand how the other animal being is and is not like a human being open up the possibility of discovering new things about the world we share. The study of birds reveals new understanding of the earth's magnetic field; new discoveries about how dolphins process their sonar signals provide new approaches for humans to consider. Pluralism thus becomes even more important

as an antidote to our potential individual and group blindness. It is by encountering other perspectives that new things can be seen and known.

While a pluralistic approach helps address what James called ‘a certain blindness,’ as limited creatures, humans remain inexorably subject to error. This is why Peirce insisted that inquiry, when properly done, is self-correcting. Unlike inquiry grounded in tenacity, authority, or imagined a priori principles, inquiry as the ‘method of science’ recognizes the necessity of making and testing hypotheses and adopting practices that are ‘error sensitive.’ Inquiry, in whatever form, always begins with a fund of ideas and practices already established and so must be ready to question not only possible solutions but the received ideas that set the problem in the first place. This is why a method of inquiry developed within the pluralist American tradition should be a self-correcting method based on experimentation and revision of ideas and actions.

The study of American philosophy requires this same method of inquiry. While some philosophers write without any apparent understanding of the history of the tradition, others write in a celebratory tone and seek to persuade others that American philosophers have important insights. In order to have a more critical engagement, it is necessary to find, name, and address limitations in the work and thought of these attempts to recover and use the tradition. On one hand, failure to engage the broad history of the tradition is misleading and undermines the tradition and its potential as a transformative resource in the face of present problems. On the other hand, it is not surprising that some focus on historical recovery alone. As a largely ignored and unfairly criticized philosophical approach, it is important to ‘set the record straight.’ However, there is also work to be done in confronting the ‘blindness’ and limitations of the earlier thinkers. We are all complicit in various prejudices and social habits that are only revealed when a community of inquirers challenges us to think beyond such limitations. Some contemporary thinkers are engaged in just this kind of work, but, as always, more needs to be done.

The work of the earlier thinkers in the tradition, strengthened by such critique, make valuable resources as philosophers try to address contemporary problems. In addition to needing the assistance of other disciplines, as mentioned above, it is important to approach contemporary problems with an attitude of humility rather than an attitude of mastery that expects problems can be solved once and for all. Philosophers need to be *partners* with other academics, practitioners, and activists and need to be open to having their positions ‘corrected’ by the experience and knowledge of the practitioners and activists with whom they engage. For example, Addams learned much from her engagement with workers, labor activists, and politicians. Contemporary philosophers need to open themselves to such experiences in order to address contemporary problems such as poverty, pollution, and power.

This is where hope for the present and future lies. It is important to remember that in this tradition, hope is not understood in terms of unfounded dreams. Rather, hope must be grounded in the realities of the present situation and critical consideration of the possibilities for the future. This requires that we face up to the limitations, blind spots, and prejudices in the cumulative history of the American philosophical tradition. It means we must acknowledge the ways in which the present and future possibilities are grounded in place and built upon an oppressive and genocidal past, and not just the more progressive story of increasing

inclusivity and equality. Richard Bernstein, John McDermott, and Cornel West are some examples of thinkers who embody this kind of challenging hope. It is hope with a tragic sensibility.

As Bernstein noted, “The essential fallibility of all inquiry is no cause for despair, but rather an incentive for openness and for testing as rigorously and critically as we can all hypotheses and theories.” Since meaning is social, he said, “[we] must not only countenance, but seek out intersubjective criticisms of all hypotheses.” The ideal to be sought was “the establishment of a free, open, self-critical community of inquirers” (1971, p. 199). West echoes both the caution and the hope when he points to the risks and possibilities of the American tradition of philosophy. “At its worst, it became a mere ideological cloak for corporate liberalism and managerial social engineering which served the long-term interests of American capital.” But at its best, West said, “it survived as a form of cultural critique and social reform” that sought to bring about a more pluralistic democratic process (1993, p. 103). As West concluded, hope is justifiable only if there is critical attention paid to the divisions, inequities, and violence of the past and the present.

Some examples of the divisions, inequities, and violence to which attention must be paid include genocide, imperialism, class exploitation, gender inequality, environmental devastation, and war. We tried to present the story of American philosophy as a struggle to address these issues. It is itself a conflicted story with moments of humor, courage, cowardice, and tragedy. For hope to remain a real possibility, it is important to take up the story in as complete a way as possible and use all of the philosophical resources made available by the ongoing conversations of American philosophy to work to ameliorate the present situation. It is important to avoid the temptation to think one has the final or complete answer as this often results in closing down inquiry and limiting community in the hope of ‘fixing’ a problem or providing a ‘final solution.’ This is the absolutistic mentality Bernstein (and others) worried about. Rather, an approach that seeks amelioration grounded in thoughtful inquiry and pluralistic discourse is presently the best hope.

McDermott amplifies this message when he points to the resources of a pluralistic, experiential, and experimental approach to amelioration. His essays on Emerson and Royce argued that imagination helps us deal with risk and instability; it can help us construct possibility. Further, pluralistic community can help us stay open to various and mediated interpretations that aim at amelioration. McDermott calls people to thoughtful action and says that if we believe in “our capacity to effect human healing of unnecessary suffering and in our responsibility to do so, then we shall, in time create a human community worthy of the rich human tradition of hope, aspiration, and wisdom” (2007, p. 155).

So, this is a story that is still in the telling. That means we do not provide an ending, but an opening to the future. We hope this account can help ground such an opening, and guide the future of American philosophy by the lights and shadows of its past, even as the tradition is embodied by a new generation of philosophers, scholars, and social activists engaged in addressing the pressing problems of the present and future. We hope that the story we present provides an opportunity for those who read it to consider not only their own roles in creating lives of meaning and purpose for themselves, but also the social and political conditions that make such lives of meaning and purpose a possibility for all.

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Data de envio: 21-01-2014

Data de aprovação: 28-02-2014

