

Philosophy without borders

Filosofia sem fronteiras

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Abstract: This essay briefly explores suggestions by American pragmatists concerning the development of philosophical thinking. These include the need to learn from other disciplines modes of inquiry useful for understanding human experience, the need to hold conversations with the history of ideas both to prevent repetition and to suggest new directions of thought, and the crossing of cultural borders to avoid the dogmatic arrogance found within the borders of many dominant cultures.

Keywords: Anzaldúa. Dussel. James. Peirce. Pragmatism.

Resumo: *Este ensaio explora de maneira breve as sugestões dos pragmatistas americanos com relação ao desenvolvimento do pensamento filosófico. Entre estas, estão incluídas a necessidade de aprender de outras disciplinas os modos úteis de investigação para o entendimento da experiência humana, a necessidade de manter um diálogo com a história das ideias tanto para prevenir a repetição quanto para sugerir novas direções do pensamento, bem como a travessia das fronteiras culturais para evitar a arrogância dogmática encontrada no interior das fronteiras de muitas culturas dominantes.*

Palavras-chave: *Anzaldúa. Dussel. James. Peirce. Pragmatismo.*

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1 Introduction

Of the original North American pragmatists, only John Dewey was trained as a philosopher. Peirce trained primarily as a chemist and James as a physiologist. They all agreed that philosophy grows out of every day human experience and, at some point, needs to return to that experience. They also agreed that the professionalization of philosophy was problematic for philosophy itself. James resisted the development of the American Philosophical Association and in his essay *The Ph.D. Octopus*, he worried that doctoral degrees would become mere calling cards for teaching positions. In the initial stages of developing the APA, James

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Creighton argued that “philosophy of education” should be excluded, because it was not genuine philosophy (see CAMPBELL, 2006). And, of course, the primary focus of Dewey’s philosophy was education. That was the beginning of the various school-oriented “ownerships” that have marked the history of the APA. The pragmatists resisted closing the doors on any avenue of inquiry; Peirce most famously stated his maxim concerning philosophical pursuits.

Upon this first, and in one sense this sole, rule of reason, that in order to learn you must desire to learn, and in so desiring not be satisfied with what you already incline to think, there follows one corollary which itself deserves to be inscribed upon every wall of the city of philosophy: Do not block the way of inquiry (CP 1.135).

In like manner, James, in an early chapter of *Pragmatism* borrowed a description: “It has no dogmas, and no doctrines save its method. As the young Italian pragmatist Papini has well said, it lies in the midst of our theories, like a corridor in a hotel. Innumerable chambers open out of it.” (1977, p. 380).

In short, the pragmatists were interested in doing philosophy without borders. In what follows, I offer three brief sketches of the ways that philosophy can cross borders or simply work in between them. I begin with Peirce’s suggestion that every science, including philosophy, should learn from every other kind of science. The second sketch will discuss the importance of engaging the history of philosophy. The third sketch, dealing with creativity in philosophy, will begin with a return to the importance of experience as exhibited in the work of thinkers such as bell hooks and Gloria Anzaldúa, and will focus on the importance of looking to the borders or the peripheries of what is considered “central” or “mainstream,” as described in the work of Enrique Dussel.

2 Sketch 1: Stealing ideas

Much of the originality of pragmatism may be traced to the scientific backgrounds of Peirce and James. In discussing methods of inquiry, Peirce adamantly rejected Auguste Comte’s popular 19th century suggestion that “no science should borrow the methods of another.” The temptation to build walls and borders between disciplines was, for Peirce, simply another way to block the road of inquiry. If we pay close attention, we see that pragmatic philosophy stole many of its ideas from all corners of human thought.

The very idea of pragmatism as a theory of meaning was derived from a Scottish psychologist during discussions at the so-called *metaphysical club* of which Peirce and James were members. As Peirce recalled:

In particular, [Nicholas St. John Green] often urged the importance of applying [Alexander] Bain’s definition of belief, as ‘that upon which one is prepared to act.’ From this definition, pragmatism is scarce more than a corollary; so that I am disposed to think of him as the grandfather of pragmatism (CP 5.12).

Other instances abound throughout Peirce's work. In his essay *The Fixation of Belief* he compared the establishment of one's beliefs to the "fixing" of a chemical compound. The analogy is crucial insofar as the "fixing" is an ongoing "stabilizing" that occurs in experience. There is no ultimate, final fixation; we are always engaged in the process of fixing or stabilizing our beliefs. This is precisely how the pragmatists viewed the history of science and of inquiry generally.

In *The Law of Mind*, Peirce described human personality as an evolving "general idea" along the lines of a natural species or law. As with the evolution of species, human personalities grow and change while remaining in an historical or temporal continuum. In considering the freedom and spontaneity of personality—the sources of change and evolution—Peirce described humans as "unstable compounds," able on occasion to burst forth from their routine habits and begin the making of new habits. And perhaps the most extensive crossing of boundaries to appear in Peirce's work occurred in two essays from the 1890s: *A Guess at the Riddle* and *The Architecture of Theories*. In these essays, Peirce begins by delineating his now well-known universal categories: firstness, secondness, and thirdness. These are derived by him not only from Plato and the history of philosophy but also from his work in logic, mathematics, and phenomenology. He then takes these categories and applies them to cosmology, physiology, biological evolution, physics, and psychology. The effect is the development of an open philosophical system in which philosophy is melded with a variety of other kinds of human inquiry.

This system, in its ultimate mixing of chance and natural order, was, for Peirce, heavily under the influence of Charles Darwin's work: "Indeed, my opinion is only Darwinism analyzed, generalized, and brought to the realm of ontology" (EP 1:222). Moreover, Darwin himself had been the beneficiary of stealing ideas from other sciences: "Mr. Darwin proposed to apply the statistical method to biology. The same thing had been done in a widely different branch of science, the theory of gases" (EP 1:111). Peirce's point is that the intermixing of methods is key to the creative development of thought.

The pragmatists' relation to Darwin was taken up again several years later by Dewey in his essay *The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy*. Dewey elaborated on Darwin's own appropriation of ideas from outside biology: "Without the methods of Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, or their successors in astronomy, physics, and chemistry, Darwin would have been helpless in the organic sciences" (DEWEY, 1910, p. 8). For Dewey, part of this influence was substantive. That is, pragmatists began to see the world as transitory and unfinished in contrast to the popular idealism of Royce, T. H. Green, and F. H. Bradley in which philosophy was simply deducing the historicized effects of an already fixed and final cosmos. The other effect was that the philosophic method of philosophers moved from deduction and reductive or transcendental arguments to experimental—or in Peirce's terms abductive/inductive—methods. The so-called "quest for certainty" of the moderns was abandoned by the pragmatists in favor of the probabilistic and developmental process Peirce described in *The Fixation of Belief*. As Dewey put it, "[...] the 'Origin of Species' introduced a mode of thinking that in the end was bound to transform the logic of knowledge, and hence the treatment of morals, politics, and religion" (DEWEY, 1910, p. 2).

The upshot, to be clear, was not a reductive scientizing of philosophy as was positivism, but a synthetic blending of ideas and methods from other arenas of human inquiry. This was made clear by James who, despite employing methods from other sciences, rejected what he called the “medical materialism” that aimed simply to deny the reality and significance of our phenomenal experiences. In a way, the recognition of science’s own fallibility made it more akin to moral and aesthetic discourse, not less so.

James spent ten years writing his *Principles of Psychology*. In 1865, he joined Louis Agassiz on an expedition to Brazil to study the biology and botany of the Amazon region. In 1869, he received a medical degree from Harvard University. And in the 1870s, during the initial development of pragmatism, he taught anatomy and physiology at Harvard. In 1902, he published *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, a descriptive social-psychology of human religious practices. He also founded the first experimental psychology laboratory in the U.S. His overall philosophical work was shot through with analogies to his work in a variety of sciences. Moreover, in his youth, James had apprenticed to be a painter, and his artistic and aesthetic sensibilities also permeated his work. James resisted the narrowness of the philosophical practice of his day and was widely ridiculed for his attempts to study psychic phenomena. His basic principle of method was the same as the other pragmatists—philosophers should look for “truths” in every corner of human experience. In writing *A Pluralistic Universe*, he made this principle explicit:

It is high time for the basic discussion [of experience and the universe] to be broadened and thickened up. It is for that that I have brought in Fechner [speculative cosmology] and Bergson [intuition], and descriptive psychology and religious experiences, and have ventured even to hint at psychical research and other wild beasts of the philosophical desert (JAMES, 1977, p. 149).

In short, the pragmatic lesson was not to narrow and enclose philosophy but to let it bleed through to all features of human experience and to allow it to steal good ideas from any quarter in which they might be found. As James suggested: “The union of mathematician with the poet, fervor with measure, passion with correctness, this is surely the ideal” (JAMES, 1969, p. 130).

3 Sketch 2: Conversing with history

Ironically perhaps, the novelty of pragmatism seemed to many to suggest that it had given up on the history of philosophy. John Dewey emphatically defended his process of “reconstructing” thought, and in *The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy* he lamented that the professionalization of philosophy had led to a heavy-handed conservatism that led to the teaching of the canon of western philosophy as if it were a gospel. And, on the surface, the scientific backgrounds of Peirce and James appeared to make them unsuited for professional philosophy. Indeed, by today’s standards, without Ph.Ds. in philosophy, neither Peirce nor James would be hired by a philosophy program in the United States. This is precisely what worried James about the professionalizing of philosophy. But I say “ironically” because when one

looks closely, all three were fully engaged with the history of philosophy. But they were not engaged in a conservative way.

Dewey spent his early years writing extensively about Leibniz and Hegel. But by the 1890s his work clearly transformed from historical description to synthetic conversation. The rest of his career can be seen as an ongoing synthetic reconstruction of ideas from Plato, Aristotle, Hegel, and others brought into the realm of contemporary experience and culture. He documented this transition in his essay *From Absolutism to Experimentalism*. His aim was to re-establish philosophy as an engagement with one's own experiential and cultural problems. The Greeks worried about justice as did North Americans in the early 20th century. But the historical differences between the cultures meant that the specific problems of justice were different. Athenians were not contending with racism in the aftermath of the U.S. Civil War nor with the onset of suffrage for women in a developing democratic republic.

The focus on one's own problems, however, did not entail abandoning engagement with the history of philosophy. For Dewey, it simply meant criticizing professional philosophers when their attachment to history led to abstracted considerations that failed to find their way back to contemporary culture. It also meant appropriating and transforming ideas from the history of philosophy when they were important and useful for dealing with contemporary problems. In this vein, Dewey's own notion of "reconstruction" was a naturalized appropriation from Hegelian dialectic, and his down-to-earth ethics owed a good deal to his study of Aristotle.

James was somewhat less familiar with the history of philosophy than were Peirce and Dewey, but he nevertheless entered into conversation with a variety of thinkers. His own existential crisis concerning human freedom was answered when he was reading essays by Charles Renouvier whose work led James to an interest in a variety of 18th century French thinkers. His own empirical work was in part inspired by his reading of John Stuart Mill among others. And, perhaps most interestingly, despite his criticisms of Hegel's system and its apparent determinism, he found in Hegel an insightful observer of human experience:

Great injustice is done to Hegel by treating him as primarily a reasoner. He is in reality a naively observant man, only beset with a perverse preference for the use of technical and logical jargon. He plants himself in the empirical flux of things and gets the impression of what happens (JAMES, 1977, p. 44).

In this dimension of Hegel's work, James found an ally for his own radical empiricism.

Peirce, too, was attracted to some aspects of Hegel's work late in his career, and he too had misgivings about the structure of the dialectic, particularly in Hegel's *Logic*. On the whole, Peirce was an excellent historian of philosophy and read most authors in their original languages. In particular, he was well acquainted with the history of medieval logic and was, we might say, a "fan" of Aristotle. He made his own translations of several of Plato's dialogues; he was fascinated by the work of Duns Scotus; he occasionally compared his style of philosophizing to that of Leibniz; and he considered his own system to be a kind of "Schellingeanism." In short, Peirce was in constant conversation with the history of ideas not only in

philosophy but also in mathematics, logic, and science. Briefly, I offer two specific instances of his conversation.

Peirce's novel conception of abductive inference was, according to him, rooted in Aristotle's *Prior Analytics* as an example of a non-deductively binding syllogism. Later in his career, he modified this claim somewhat and, as Professor Alejandro Florez has demonstrated, the source of Peircean abduction might be more clearly established in the *Posterior Analytics*. Nevertheless, the point is that this creative development in philosophy grew out of Peirce's engagement with Aristotle's thought. A second occasion of important historical engagement occurred in the development of pragmatic meaning in *How to Make Our Ideas Clear*. In studying the history of "definition" in modern thought, Peirce traced the ideas of "clarity" and "distinctness" through the work of both Descartes and Leibniz. The result was that, despite some usefulness, these two fundamental concepts were inadequate to produce definitional clarity:

It is easy to show that the doctrine that the familiar use [clarity] and abstract distinctness make the perfection of apprehension has its only true place in philosophies which have long been extinct; and it is now time to formulate the method of attaining to a more perfect clearness of thought, such as we see and admire in thinkers of our own time (CP 5.390).

This better grade of clearness Peirce thought could be found in his pragmatic maxim, and the thinkers he admired were those who worked experimentally not deductively. Whether or not one agrees with Peirce, it is clear that for all the pragmatists, the generation of new philosophical ideas involved an ongoing dialogue with the history of philosophy.

4 Sketch 3: Philosophy along the borders

My final sketch of how creative philosophy develops again focuses on the dangers of professionalizing philosophy. Professionalizing has created the tendency, as we noted, to "police" the "authenticity" of philosophizing, creating borders where writings are considered to be either partly philosophical or not within the realm of philosophy at all. This tendency was already at work in the early 20th century and James noted its dangers:

The first thing to keep in mind (especially if we ourselves belong to the clerico-academic-scientific type, the officially and conventionally 'correct' type, 'the deadly respectable' type, for which to ignore others is a besetting temptation) is that nothing can be more stupid than to bar out phenomena from our notice, merely because we are incapable of taking part in anything like them ourselves (JAMES, 1917, p. 109).

As one of these academic types who was trained in European style in the history of philosophy, I have often been asked why I have any interest in feminism,

philosophy of sport, race theory, philosophy of education, and so forth. For many in the profession these are less than authentic philosophy even today. The answer is quite simple: philosophy grows out of human experience and I do not have everyone's experience. I cannot even imagine the experiences of thinkers like bell hooks and Gloria Anzaldúa—women of color challenged by class, language, and sexual orientation. I am a good athlete but not an elite athlete and I am not sure how they experience the world. In fact, I have never had the experiences of someone who has lived life in Manizales, Colombia or northern Finland. So, I turn to others to read of their experiences and their reflections on those experiences. This, after all, is where Greek philosophers began—by reflecting on the experiences of their own culture.

To give this final sketch a little more systematic approach, I turn briefly to the work of Enrique Dussel, a philosopher born in Argentina who has spent most of his career in Mexico. He is well-known for his careful and thorough reading of Marx's manuscripts and also for his "liberation philosophy" which is his own creative development of Marx's thought in the context of a post-colonial world. But here I only wish to focus on one small insight he presents: that philosophy often, if not always, in James's phrase, "grows by its edges"—that philosophical creativity emerges at the margins or borders of whatever is mainstream.

In his philosophical training, Dussel learned, as I did, that the history of philosophy was constructed of clearly marked epochs and cultural types: Greek philosophy, Hellenism, Medieval philosophy, Modern European, French, German idealism, and so forth. It is not that such categories may not hold some truth and be useful, but they were taught to us as hard and fast categories. "It was [Dussel says] a substantialist view of cultures, seamless, chronological, from the East towards the West as demanded by the Hegelian vision of philosophy" (DUSSEL, 2012, p. 28). It was a story of pedigree and purity in which there was always a center and a periphery. And the center inevitably worked to absorb, excommunicate, or destroy the periphery. For him this was easy to see in the history of colonialism—there were the oppressed and the oppressors. For example, it was easy to say in the U.S. that the thought of indigenous peoples could never be philosophical—it had to be something less.

In a much tamer and less violent, though equally problematic, way, a version of this story developed in the professionalizing of philosophy in North America. The American Philosophical Association, over the course of the 20th century, developed a mainstream of "real philosophy" and a variety of peripheral outlooks—often called satellites—that live at the borders of what was considered real philosophy. At the center was what we have come to call analytic philosophy with its focus on linguistic analysis, its rejection of history, and its emphatic dealings with mathematical logic. On the inner periphery were continental existentialism and phenomenology, "American" philosophy and pragmatism, and "Asian" philosophies. On the outer periphery were feminism, critical race theory, philosophies of love and sport, applied ethics, and the like.

Dussel's insight, and I think it is an important one, is that the center, which is always in process of consolidating its power, inevitably tends to a harsh conservatism. It practices exclusion in order to dominate the various "others" it confronts—it oppresses. This is why Heidegger and James were for many years not thought to

be real philosophers in the U.S. (This is why only a generation ago, the Harvard philosophy department refused to host Jacques Derrida because he was not in their minds a “philosopher”). Members of the APA, in the past, have actively prevented people who taught these thinkers from becoming officers in the Association. It was not until 1970 that an actual resistance movement began; yet, even today the lingering traces of this history of intellectual oppression abound. At the borders, the periphery, the oppressed have very little to lose since in effect they are not empowered in their cultural context. As a result, it is natural for them to begin to engage in liberating activities that seek to free their own experiences. Thus, in short, the most creative developments of cultures, including philosophical thought, almost always occurs at the borders of cultural identity. For Dussel, “To create something new, you have to have a new word [a new *logos*] that bursts from the exteriority” (DUSSEL, 2012, p. 33).

Liberating philosophies grow in resistance to oppression. They aim to be free of domination, absorption, and eradication. They resist in order to be heard. That means, again, experiences of otherness resist the center in order to be heard and legitimized as human experiences. There is perhaps no better example of this in the U.S. than the writings of James’s student W.E.B. DuBois that gave voice and intellectual legitimacy to the experiences of African-Americans. And this is precisely the work that both bell hooks and Gloria Anzaldúa are engaged in. They do not feel any need to be authorized by the APA, but they desire for their experiences to be heard and to be liberated from the various forms of domination that have worked to keep them—and everyone like them—invisible. Theirs are liberating philosophies. Their biographies are, in a very important sense, their philosophies. “But the truth is,” Dussel argues, “[...] that the biography, among people like us coming from a post-colonial world, is constitutive of intellectual discourse” (GOMEZ, 2001, p. 21).

Dussel, however, does not leave liberation at the stage of resistance. Liberation moves from critique to the generation of new visions for personal life and for cultures. His claim—and it is a claim I believe the early pragmatists would have endorsed—is that we must keep our eyes trained on the borders when we are exploring for new and creative philosophical thought. This is why I am particularly fascinated with the work of hooks, Anzaldúa, Cornel West and others. For example, hooks creates a new vision of the relationship between aesthetics and politics when she takes readers into her grandmother’s kitchen to explore both beauty and political resistance. Her grandmother has made an artwork of the arrangements, colorings, and odors in her kitchen; and that same kitchen is the only fully safe place for African-American women to speak the truths of their oppressive situation. Anzaldúa, as I have tried to show more explicitly in other settings, develops her own sense of *mestizaje* and cultural border crossing that leads to the development of new identities and new visions of possibility for human flourishing. Both women develop genuinely new thinking, and they do so at a variety of cultural “borders”.

5 Conclusion

I do not take these three sketches of philosophy without borders to be a simple recipe for creative philosophy. I do not believe there is any such recipe. But if one is interested in entering the world of philosophical thinking, I take these sketches to be

road signs or reminders that we should not be overwhelmed by stories of pedigree and purity. We must explore as widely as we can to refresh our own ideas and to beg, steal, and borrow other good ideas from the diversity of human experiences. The crossing of conventional disciplinary boundaries to borrow methods, insights, and information has always been crucial for the development of thought. Working in conversation with the history of ideas always provides an orientation for new ideas and reveals the history of dead-ends as well as suggestive novelties. And working across cultural borders is a helpful antidote to the conservative and regressive thinking that permeates cultures when they arrogantly believe they have all the right answers. In short, crossing borders provides both methodological and substantive support for the development of creative thought. If someone accosts you and says that what you are doing is not philosophy, it may be that you are headed in the right direction. Not all of us will be cutting edge, creative philosophers, but I think we will become more interesting persons if we keep these sketches in mind. Philosophy, after all, is not a profession but a mode of self-reflection that is natural to the human animal. It is mode of thinking available to all cultures in all historical settings.

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