

What is American in American Philosophy?

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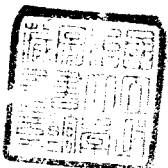
"What is American in American Philosophy?" Of course, in some ways, it is harder for an American to see what is American than for a Chinese. Many years ago in Germany, I heard a German named Count Keysuling lecture on "What is German?" He said: "It is hard for me as a German to know what is German. I can tell what is French and Spanish and Italian. But I don't know what is distinctively German just because I am a German myself." So I think I may be handicapped but I would like to present an American's idea and let you supplement it with your own special insight as Chinese. Of course you may say: "Why should we want to know what is American?" What we really want to know is what is universal. Yet I think that in our efforts to find what is universal today, we are very much alive to the special contribution made by what is distinctive. And so in asking about the particular contribution of one culture, we are really asking how it fits into the total universal picture.

The thing that is most distinctive about American thought is its emphasis on will and purpose. For example, the great American philosopher Josiah Royce, who was a philosophical idealist, believed, as all idealists do, that what is real is mind or thought. Yet Royce modified his idealism so as to interpret what is real as not only mind, but will. Any mind, he said must have a driving purpose. In this respect, he was very different from the British philosophers. They held that the absolute mind, the total world-consciousness cannot be a self it must be a not-self. But Royce insisted that all minds including the world-mind, is characterized by will; every idea has a purpose.

Another illustration comes from Professor Santayana. He was a philosopher who would have nothing to do with will or purpose. Yet as a spectator, which was what he called himself, and as a non-participant, he could not feel at home in America. He was in continual revolt against his American surroundings.

There are four ways in which this American feeling for the importance of will and purpose shows itself.

The first American philosophy was what we call Puritanism or Calvinism. You will say that was not American at all, but European. Yet I think that



America developed it in a special way so as to show its sense of mission. The early Puritans who cut down the trees and cleared the forests were driven by a sense that they were a group of people with a special task to perform. They read the Old Testament in the Bible and they compared themselves with the Jews, thinking of themselves as a chosen people who had found the Promised Land and had a particular obligation to redeem it for the Lord. Now, if a nation has a sense of mission and feels that it is the chosen people, it may find that other nations are not very hospitable to its idea of its own importance. For example, the Europeans have always laughed at Americans for being so evangelical, so sure of their own mission. Europeans say Americans are always crusading against alcohol, against cigarettes, for women's suffrage or for world peace. After the first World War, Clemenceau, the French premier said: "Woodrow Wilson preaches at us too much." But the truth is that I think Clemenceau needed to be preached at. Here was an idea of Europe needed a new approach to the question of world peace. So this has been the American predicament. The American has held certain important truths, but has not always known how to preach them acceptably. For example, all through the speeches of American statesmen you can find the theme that America must develop democracy so that all men may enjoy its benefits. And of course, the great lesson Americans must learn is that the best way they can preach democracy is to live it themselves. This is a truth Americans are trying very hard to learn and to put into practice today.

This philosophy of Puritanism gave Americans the feeling that they were the elect because God had chosen them, and back of this idea is the notion of God as the Sovereign Creator. As I read oriental philosophy, I don't find the same emphasis on God as the creator of the world, or on the attitude man should show to God as Creator. I am not saying the idea of creation is superior. Indeed I think in many ways it raises serious problems. I am just saying if you feel strongly that God is the creator and that all depends on His will, then you have certain ideas about yourself and your purpose that you would not have otherwise. One result for the early Americans was they had a very low opinion of human nature. They thought man was a sinful creature who could not save himself. As Santayana has said they believed sin existed, sin must be punished, and it was beautiful that sin should be punished. In such a system, all that is important belongs to God whereas man has nothing that is good and can only bend to God's will. You can see how after a time, people became tired of this point of view,

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and by the end of the 18th century, the time of the American Revolution, there was great dissatisfaction with this type of supernaturalism.

The American Revolution brought the age of the American Enlightenment, the spokesman of which was Thomas Jefferson. This was the second great period in American philosophy. It was characterized by the belief in democracy. This again expressed an American trait in that it showed a kind of openhearted, generous tolerance of the other men. It rested back on a conviction that there are certain self-evident truth which everyone can know and certain inalienable rights which everyone has. This belief in rights common to all and laws that apply to all was, you see, a reaction against the belief in miracle and supernaturalism and the exclusive will of God characteristic of Puritanism. For the Enlightenment what is important is man's reason. Jefferson felt that if you would appeal to man's reason, all would be well since all men by nature are endowed with rational faculties education can develop. For Jefferson, the great aim to strive for was freedom--freedom of speech, freedom of belief, freedom of trade, freedom of communication, freedom of assembly. I think you will see that this belief in natural rights provide a wonderful foundation for the beginning of a new national life. When you read the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution and these magnificent phrases about equality and freedom and inalienable rights thundering at you to remind you what a fundamentally reasonable world you are living in. The assumption is that men are equal and that government must strive to provide the equality of opportunity that men deserve. Even with all their mistakes and in the midst of all their problems, Americans have never really lost that sense of the basic equality of all men and the rights of all to the same opportunities.

So I have spoken of two movements, each of which represents an American trait--first, Puritanism and the sense of purpose and mission, second, the Enlightenment with its feeling for equality and its readiness to accept others on their own terms.

After the Revolution there came a change. It was a time not so much of adventure and pioneering as of consolidation. It was an age of prosperity and men wanted to settle down to enjoy it. They were afraid of the excesses of French revolution. Hamilton said: "The great danger is not tyranny but anarchy." Philosophy reached out to Scotland for what was called "the common sense philosophy" and it borrowed from Germany a form of romantic individualism.

This was what we call the age of transcendentalism. As Emerson taught transcendentalism meant a self-reliant, independent, optimistic confidence in one's self. This buoyant assurance of the rightness of one's own point of view is again an American characteristic.

Now let me compare the different uses of the word "transcendentalism" in Europe and America. For Immanuel Kant in Europe, the word "transcendentalism" meant "critical" or "a priori". It referred to an intellectual form by which experience must be molded. For Emerson, it meant something much more emotional and intuitive. Emerson said: "Trust yourself and your own intuitions. Seek a direct acquaintance with God." So these transcendentalists studied themselves. They were great writers of diaries and journals and were concerned less with facts than with these reactions to facts. They were introspective just as the Puritans were, but the Puritans were pessimistic in their introspection, whereas the transcendentalists were optimistic. But notice that both kinds of introspection, Puritan and transcendentalist, accepted the demands of conscience. Neither was irresponsible. Neither cut itself off from obedience to the moral law. Emerson, for example, opposed slavery vigorously. Emerson's advice can be summed up in two statements: know thyself and study nature. How are these to be combined? If you turn within yourself, how do you ever get out again to find what Nature is like? Emerson solved the problem as the Indian Brahmanism solves it. Just as the Indian Brahmins said: "Look within yourself, you find God", Emerson said: "Look within yourself and you will find the key to nature." As Emerson bequeathed this problem to American philosophy so it was posed in two different ways by the two philosophers, Royce and James. Royce said: "If you look within yourself you will find the laws of mind which are eternal and universal." James said: "If you look within yourself you will find driving instinctive purposes which must offer a clue to what is real in outer nature." Both are attempts to explain how the self is a key to the riddles of the outer world. I think one can also compare Emerson to both Confucius and Laotze. Emerson like Confucius spoke in aphorisms. He called them thunderbolts of the mind where Confucius spoke of "reciprocity", Emerson talked about compensation. At the same time, Emerson was a mystic, absorbed in the great way of the universe. It is clear that he had read a great deal about Taoism.

I have spoken, thus, of three movements corresponding to three American interests: Puritanism, with its will and purpose; the Enlightenment, with its

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concern for democracy and acceptance of the others; transcendentalism with its stress on self-reliance. But Emerson's romanticism was too dreamy to satisfy the active drives of his fellow countrymen. In the middle of the 19th century, the American was pushing westward across the continent, building railroads and factories and mines and cities. He needed a philosophy which would express the creative activity of the intelligence. He was bringing to bear on practical problems. This need was met by pragmatism. Pragmatism was a protest on behalf of the relevance of thought to action and emotion. Throughout history, you find that when philosophers have become too abstract, there is a swing of the pendulum back to an emphasis on practice. In America, at the beginning of the 20th century, there were many movements which expressed this. For example, Oliver Wendell Holmes, the great jurist was saying that law consists of the actual things men do and the relations they actually establish rather than on some eternal law in the heavens. As historians, Robinson and Beard were saying that history is not concerned with a skeleton outline of battles, dates, and dynasties. The context of human experience is much richer than this. Veblen was saying power resides in economic institution which must be studied as practical working forces. The background in each case was that provided by Darwin's idea of evolution. From Darwin, pragmatic philosophers took the idea of reality as process, being as becoming, existence as change. Thought or mind or intellect is a tool in the development of species. Mental life is a tool or instrument, useful for survival.

I have time for only one question about pragmatism. We say: Ideas must express purposes. But the question is: Whose purposes? Two pragmatists, Dewey and James, answered this in two different ways. Dewey said: "The purpose we are interested in arose simply as a chance variation in the evolutionary process." James said: "I think we can go deeper." The purposes we discover as our inheritance from evolution may represent something much greater than ourselves. So if we express our own highest purposes in the right way we may well find that they echo the purposes of the universe itself. So I would like to leave this thought with you. You often hear it said pragmatism is merely materialistic, concerned only with science, interested simply in material development. It is true that in some hands it makes just this emphasis and it has in some of its forms led to logical positivism and operationalism. But as treated by James and some of his followers, it has had a profoundly religious influence.

So here are four American philosophies representing four American traits: Puritanism, emphasizing will and purpose; the American Enlightenment, stressing equality of opportunity and acceptance of the other men as having equal rights; transcendentalism, with its optimism, confidence and self-reliance; finally pragmatism, with constant appeal to the practical test and its insistence that thought shall not lose itself in irrelevant abstractions.