


Ibid.

Ibid. 186.

“Help for the Perplexed (in the New World).”

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Over the past sixty years or so, there have been a number of books that have surveyed the history and scope of American Philosophy, from Herbert Schneider’s *A History of American Philosophy* (1946) to Morris Cohen’s *American Thought* and Joseph Blau’s *Men and Movements in American Philosophy*, both published in the early 1950s, to the writings of John E. Smith and Andrew Reck in the 1960s. A now-classic survey is the two-volume *A History of Philosophy in America*, by Elizabeth Flower and Murray Murphy, which came out in 1977. While these were all single- (or double-) authored monographs, in the mid-1980s Marcus Singer edited *American Philosophy*, a collection of essays written by many of the leading American Philosophy scholars of that generation, John McDermott, Vincent Potter, H. S. Thayer, T. L. S. Sprigge, Susan Haack, and Singer himself, among others. This volume consisted primarily, though not exclusively, on essays that focused
on important figures (the usual suspects!) in the history of American Philosophy. It, along with Barbara McKinnon’s edited volume of primary readings (American Philosophy: A Historical Anthology), provided the philosophical community with superb primary and secondary coverage of American Philosophy scholarship. Now, twenty years later, Armen Marsoobian and John Ryder have provided the rest of us with another such excellent survey, with essays from a new generation of leading scholars. The latest in the Blackwell Philosophy Guides series of volumes, Marsoobian and Ryder’s guide to American Philosophy is truly an excellent overview. The volume consists of twenty-three essays, divided into three sections, plus an editors’ introduction and a concluding epilogue, John McDermott’s previously-published, “The Renascence of Classical American Philosophy.” The volume’s contributors are a Who’s Who of the present generation of American Philosophy scholars and these essays are a testimony to their expertise. If there is any flaw in this book, it is, for me, one of omission, not commission (more on this below).

In their introduction, the editors emphasize that “American Philosophy” is not the same thing as philosophy practiced in America. Much philosophical work in America has been in conceptual and linguistic analysis (e.g., John Searle) or in phenomenological and existential thought (e.g., Marvin Farber), but such work, for Marsoobian and Ryder, has not been motivated by or even addressed the history and themes of mainstream American Philosophy. Indeed, much of that work has been, tacitly or explicitly, in opposition to American Philosophy. Such work, then, is not included in this volume. In addition, to keep the book within manageable limits, the editors made the decision to exclude, among the major figures covered here, important American philosophers who are “currently writing” (e.g., Rorty).

As noted above, the volume is separated into three main sections: (1) Historical Traditions, (2) Major Figures, and (3) Major Themes, with the “Major Figures” section being by far the largest (fourteen of the twenty-three essays, over two hundred of the book’s four hundred pages). The first section consists of four essays. The first of these essays, John Ryder’s “Early American Philosophy,” gives an overview of seventeenth century colonial thought through the American Revolution and up to the end of the eighteenth century. Identifying a basic,
overriding theme in early colonial thought of building a new world, Ryder, of course, notes European intellectual influences, but does not dwell on them. Rather, he stresses three central concepts: the distinction between visible and invisible "churches," the nature of covenant and freedom, and the character of community (Congregationalism). Following a discussion of particularly important individuals (including Cotton Mather, Jonathan Edwards, and Cadwaller Colden), Ryder shows how these central concepts evolved in the late seventeenth century into similar, more secular, concerns of the nature and purpose of government, along with the issues of natural rights and popular sovereignty. This is a story often told, and it is told well here.

The second essay is Douglas Anderson's "Idealism in American Thought." Anderson gives a very fine survey of idealist thought in America from the Berkeleyan epistemic concerns of Jonathan Edwards through Transcendentalism, the St. Louis Hegelians, Royce (of course!) and up through the twentieth century's most renowned American idealist, Brand Blanshard. A particularly helpful aspect of Anderson's essay is his distinction of various kinds of idealism, including "objective idealism" (the belief that the cosmos is essentially mind-like) and "social idealism" (the effort to realize ideals in human practice), and showing how these kinds of idealism are genuinely part of the American Philosophy tradition (e.g., by showing how they translate theory into practice).

The third essay, Joseph Margolis' "The First Pragmatists," weaves a brief but fruitful look at the "patchwork" of foci and concerns of pragmatist themes and doctrines as they emerged from Peirce, James, and Dewey, as well as how these themes and doctrines were picked up by subsequent philosophers such as Lewis, Holmes, Mead, Quine, and others. Noting the significant differences among the classical pragmatists and acknowledging "how improbable the unity of pragmatism is," Margolis details a number of points in the thought of Peirce, James, and Dewey in which they were in serious disagreement with each other. Still, Margolis identifies a number of common tendencies, especially a commitment to fallibalism and the "animal" source of knowledge.

The final essay in the section on "Historical Traditions" is Michael Eldridge's "Naturalism." Bypassing
early American philosophers, Eldridge considers the understanding and role of naturalism beginning with Santayana. Starting with the notion that naturalism was seen in contradistinction with idealism, Eldridge discusses the early twentieth century work of Frederick Woodbridge and John Herman Randall in what he calls the "Aristotelian pluralism" and its reaction to naturalism, up through the mid-century "Columbia naturalists" (Hook, Nagel, and Buchler), and on to Quine and beyond. Citing Robert Audi's quip that naturalism is more often presupposed than stated (or, for that matter, than explicated), Eldridge provides a very fine overview of how the banner of "naturalism" (metaphysical as well as epistemic) has been waved by both proponents and opponents.

The second section of the book, on Major Figures, consists of essays on the following: Charles Peirce (written by Vincent Colapietro), William James (William Gavin), Josiah Royce (Frank Oppenheim), George Santayana (Herman Saatkamp, Jr.), John Dewey (Larry Hickman), George Herbert Mead (Mitchell Aboulafia), Jane Addams (Charlene Haddock Seigfried), W. E. B. DuBois (Shannon Sullivan), Alfred North Whitehead (John Lango), C. I. Lewis (Sandra Rosenthal), Suzanne Langer (Richard Hart), Willard V. O. Quine (Peter Manicas), Alain Locke (Leonard Harris), and Justus Buchler (Kathleen Wallace). There is little to say about each of the essays themselves except that they truly are superb summary presentations of these major figures. It is difficult, in ten to twenty pages, to construct substantive overviews of these prolific philosophers that are both rigorous enough for the professional academician, who will be a reader of a volume such as this and at the same time accessible enough for the novice student, who will also will be a reader. Each of these essays succeeds admirably well in achieving that balance. So, while there is little to say about each of the essays individually, there is something to say about them collectively. When comparing the major figures here with those in the 1985 Singer compilation mentioned above, several differences are noteworthy. First, the Singer volume included separate essays on Jonathan Edwards, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau. Marsoobian and Ryder made the explicit decision not to include figures prior to Peirce in the section on Major Philosophers, not because they were not seen as major figures, but because of space constraints. Discussion of them is interspersed throughout other essays (for example, in the essays on early American philosophy
and on idealism and in essays in the third section of the book. While this is true of Emerson (who receives sustained discussion in well over a dozen pages, comparable to the coverage of other major figures), it is not true of Edwards or Thoreau, each of whom are discussed in under five pages. Marsoobian and Ryder are not to be faulted, I think, for this editorial decision, but some readers might be disappointed. A second difference between this present volume and Singer's in the inclusion of seven figures who were not covered in the earlier compilation: Addams, DuBois, Whitehead, Langer, Quine, Locke, and Buchler. The inclusion of most of these figures is due to the belated recognition of the breadth and sophistication of their work and of their genuine (though sometimes subtle) impact on American philosophical thinking, both inside and outside of academia. (Of course, Whitehead and Quine have long-standing notoriety.) A new generation of scholars has helped us to be acquainted with and to appreciate the significance of these "new" major figures, who, of course, are not new at all. Nor is their inclusion in this volume tokenism; as these essays clearly demonstrate, these figures are finally receiving their due among the cast of influential and still-fecund American philosophers.

The third section of the book, "Major Themes," consists of five essays, covering the broad gamut of philosophical and intellectual topics: social/political philosophy, epistemology, religion, education, and art. James Campbell's "Community and Democracy," details the notion of community, both in a descriptive sense and a normative sense, beginning with the Mayflower Compact up through Dewey. Starting with community as not simply a place or group (though these are aspects of community), Campbell speaks of Community as a sharing of experiences and values. From here he looks at democracy as the practices of Community (again, Community being not merely an aggregation), with education as a means to Democratic Community. This is an admirable essay, though I suspect some readers will note a lack of discussion of any controversy about the nature and role of community in American culture. As we all know, there has been a strong libertarian sentiment in American thought and practice, often with philosophical, theoretical underpinning. There is no discussion of this view or of the long-standing tension in American life about the limits of community vis-à-vis the individual.
Scott Pratt, in his "Knowledge and Action: American Epistemology," gives a very fine survey of epistemic and meta-epistemic concerns in American philosophy. Focusing on knowledge as a "process of interaction between knowers and their environments," Pratt appropriately includes in this survey the classic pragmatists and later epistemologists such as Quine, but also discusses the relevant work of Cadwallader Colden, Benjamin Franklin, the Transcendentalists, as well as Addams and DuBois. Pratt notes that already in the early eighteenth century, Colden enunciated a Principle of Interaction: "We have no knowledge of substances, or of any being, or of any thing, abstracted from the action of that thing or being. All our knowledge of things consists in the perception of the power, or force, or property, or manner of acting of that thing." This, along with its ontological corollary, viz., "Every thing, that we know, is an agent, or has a power of acting: for as we know nothing of any thing but its action, and the effects of that action, the moment any thing ceases to act it must be annihilated as to us: we can have no kind of idea of its existence," not merely foreshadows the pragmatic maxim of the next century, but sets the tone of epistemology of most of American philosophy. Pratt nicely demonstrates how this principle of interaction plays out in scientific practice and broader contexts of practical reason, including issues of embodied knowers and their social, cultural situations.

William Dean’s essay, "Religion," identifies three elements of American religious thought, which, he states, "grew out of the Americans' experience of displacement:" pragmatism, radical empiricism, and constructivism. Pragmatism carried a message of the significance of a belief as being in its consequences and practical action; radical empiricism rejected a spectator view of us as passive knowers and instead emphasized the nature of experience itself, including spiritual or religious experience; constructivism added the doctrine and ethos that we can help construct, or add to, the realities to which we are related. Following a brief overview of how these three elements played out in American religious thought, Dean argues that a waning of American philosophy of religion ensued in the mid-1900s. This was the result of (1) American philosophers of religion failing to recognize and respond to the tragic element of the American experience (here Dean cites Reinhold Niebuhr’s disputes with Dewey) and (2) American philosophers rejecting radical
empiricism and its starting point of experience itself (so that religious experience could not be taken as a given, but needed to be justified).

Nicholas Burbules, Bryan Warnick, Timothy McDonough, and Scott Johnston, co-authors of the essay, "Education," argue that in American philosophy the institution of education has been proposed as an answer to four tensions (or themes): (1) attempts to (re)define the origins and identity of America, (2) our encounters with and attitude toward nature (or Nature), (3) our confidence in science, technology, and progress, and (4) our struggles with pluralism within American culture. Having identified these tensions, the authors survey four important philosophers – Emerson, Dewey, Richard Rorty, and Martha Nussbaum – as a way of showing how education has played a role in our collective attempts to balance and reconcile these tensions. These representative philosophies of education have wrestled with issues of doctrine (e.g., what the curriculum is), method (e.g., what counts as teaching and learning), and values (e.g., what the proper function is of the institution of education).

Armen Marsoobian’s "Art and the Aesthetic," provides a rich survey of the history of aesthetic philosophy in America not simply to give an overview, but to offer a reminder of the centrality of philosophy of the arts to American philosophical thought. Experiencing art (both in the sense of producing it and “receiving” it) is not just a tag-on to other philosophical concerns, but is itself a means of action and of knowing; it is epistemic as well as metaphysical and axiological. Beginning with a look at Emerson’s view of nature as art perfected, Marsoobian details the work of Santayana and Dewey, again emphasizing art as process and not merely as product. He then explicates the aesthetic writings of more contemporary American philosophers, Monroe Beardsley, George Dickie, Nelson Goodman, Arthur Danto, and, finally, Justus Buchler, all the while not simply describing their views, but showing how they reflected and carried forward the themes and traditions of American Philosophy that have been noted in the book’s previous essays.

The book is rounded off with its epilogue, a republication of John McDermott’s "The Renascence of Classical American Philosophy," which details the waning of the study of classical American philosophers throughout
much of the twentieth century and then its re-emergence and
growth in the past several decades (due in large part,
though he graciously does not take credit for it, to the
work of McDermott himself). It is a thoughtful and useful
reminder for us, now that American Philosophy has regained
the respect and influence it rightly has earned.

At the start of this review, I said that this volume
is an excellent survey. It is and I certainly recommend
highly. I said also that if there is any flaw, it is one
of omission. In addition to the fine essays compiled here,
I wish there had also been at least three more, one on
political philosophy, one on science, and one on language.
Of course, there are editorial constraints on any volume
such as this and, yes, these three topics are touched on in
a number of ways in several of the included essays. For
example, community and democracy are discussed explicitly
in Campbell’s essay and are mentioned in others. But, I
believe, a more focused discussion of how American
philosophical thought saw social, political, and legal
issues as in the forefront of our individual and collective
experience and identities rather than as being derivational
from epistemic concerns would have been useful. (We aren’t
knowers who then become agents!) The eclipse of so much
social, political, and legal philosophy in mid-century by
logical empiricism, and its resurrection by John Rawls and
others in the 1970s, is not unrelated to the broader
eclipse of American Philosophy and its subsequent
resurrection (and, yes, I take Rawls to be akin to American
Philosophy in much the same way that Quine was).

A second omission for me was a fuller treatment of the
relationship between philosophy and science. Again, this
issue is touched on in various ways in a number of the
essays, but a more direct approach would have been
appreciated. From the importance of Newton to Jonathan
Edwards to Darwin for many thinkers (John Fiske and
Chauncey Wright are not even mentioned in this book) as
well as understanding the relationship between naturalism
(or, better, naturalisms) would have benefited by a more
explicit essay on how American Philosophy has dealt with
the sciences. This could include an overview of both
science within American Philosophy (remember Peirce’s call
for “scientific philosophy” and James’ work in psychology)
as well as American philosophical views about science.
Morton White’s Science and Sentiment in America comes to
mind, but is now more than thirty years old.
Finally, I think an essay on language and its treatment by American Philosophy would have been important. It is clear that Peirce, Dewey, Mead, Lewis, Quine and others took language to be a fundamental element in not just our philosophizing, but in our everyday experience. The fact that much of the philosophical literature on language was co-opted by analytic philosophy (but not only by analytic philosophy) does not detract from the additional fact that language was a serious concern to many of the major figures and themes in American Philosophy.

These are my three pet omissions. Others could be identified; there is virtually no mention of native American philosophy and very little on the impact and importance of race or gender. Obviously, no book can be all things to all readers. My mentioning of these omissions is not intended in any way to detract from the genuine high quality of the essays here or the value of the book as a guide to American Philosophy. It is both an exemplar and a testimony to the breadth and depth of American Philosophy and to the fine scholarship within and about American Philosophy that is now occurring.