

CHAPTER 1

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY IN THE 1920S: THE YOUNG RADICAL PHILOSOPHERS

E.A. Burt belongs in the tradition of Pragmatism and Naturalism, which developed in the United States in the early twentieth century. The so-called golden age of American philosophy was marked by the belief that philosophy was the guide to life and that a proper philosophical approach would yield answers to social, political, ethical, and religious questions. Science was taken for granted as an important key to the future, although some Naturalists with a more idealistic bent were concerned about the negative effects science could have on the human spirit.

The center for pragmatic naturalism during the 1920s was Columbia University in New York City. Ideas which go under the heading of Pragmatism have diverse sources but, are generally associated with Charles S. Peirce, William James, John Dewey, and, later, George Herbert Mead. Peirce and James were classmates at Harvard and continued as friends all their lives. Mead and Dewey first met as colleagues at the University of Michigan and were colleagues again at the University of Chicago. A lesser-known group of Pragmatic Naturalists included the young radicals around Columbia University in the 1920s, mostly disciples of John Dewey. Although unacknowledged by Burt, it is Dewey's reconstructed philosophy, to be explained below as genetic history and reflective thinking, which stands behind *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Physical Science*.

Pragmatic naturalism grew out of two more or less conflicting trends in American culture, a religious world-view coupled with a decidedly practical attitude toward the concerns of daily life. Concerns about reconciling the here and now with speculation about the hereafter generated an anti-philosophic, anti-intellectualist trend among American academics. The naturalists, inspired more by Charles Darwin than by Isaac Newton, turned away from the supernatural and toward the natural and material. They abandoned the dogma of Calvinism, but not the Puritan emphasis on right living and thus became practical moralists, concerned with ethical behavior which could square itself with free-thinking, individualism, and principles of the American Enlightenment, a belief in the power of faith and the power of reason.

American naturalism holds that whatever there might be is entirely an aspect of nature and can be approached scientifically. Twentieth-century American naturalism has tended to hold on to the Spinozist conception that nature includes more than simply matter in motion, and whatever such nonmaterial aspects of nature there might be, they are not reducible to matter nor explainable in material terms alone. According to John Ryder in the introduction to *American Philosophic Naturalism* two traditions developed out of this basic belief. One is that although nature consists of both material and non-material phenomena, matter is the more fundamental on the basis of the fact that anything that is non material emerges from the material. Ryder attributes this view to Roy Wood Sellars, John Dewey, Ernest Nagel and Sidney Hook. Dewey, Nagel and Hook were connected with Columbia University during Burt's years there (1916-1923).

The other view, Ryder attributes to John Herman Randall, Jr. and Justus Buchler, both of them at Columbia in Burt's day. This is what might be called metaphysical pluralism. It holds that there is more to be found in nature than simply matter, and it refuses to acknowledge primacy to any aspect of nature. As a close friend and colleague of John Herman Randall, Jr., Burt is allied with this second view.

The influence of natural science, especially Darwinian evolution and American Enlightenment "free-thinking," have been currents which blend easily with elements found in Spinoza and the philosophy of David Hume. Spinoza rejected Descartes' distinction between material and mental substances and proposed, instead, the existence of a single substance which he described interchangeably as God and Nature or thought and extension. In this way Spinoza made the natural and the supernatural indistinguishable; all is in nature and all is in God. Nothing, therefore, is outside of nature. By treating matter and mind as alternating parts of the same thing in nature, Spinoza asserted the continuity of the mental and the physical, dissolving Descartes' dilemma.

If all is nature and we have scientific methods for inquiry into nature, we have, or should be able to develop, methods for inquiry into the processes through which mind knows nature and then knows itself. Burt was impressed by the possibilities here, and he continued read Spinoza, finding new meaning there, all of his life.

The naturalists were anti-reductionist, and unlike Spinoza, anti-determinist. They regarded the world as being open to chance and randomness as well as describable by principles or laws of nature. Generally, the Naturalists reject Cartesian dualism and emphasize experience as continuity between human beings and nature. The implications for our understanding of nature, as it is in itself, objectively, apart from us, but through our experience of it alone, presents unresolved questions. Burt

intended to reconcile some of these questions through his proposal of a new philosophy of mind. He hoped to work out a philosophy to explain our experience of nature without making any claims for the correspondence between that experience and objective reality, whatever that might be.

In 1935, he was working on a new theory of perception and cognition, which he called a science of metaphysics or theory of metaphysical categories. The manuscript, called *The Genesis of Hypothesis*, was never completed.

Ever since Descartes and Newton the project of modern philosophy has been to work out how we can understand an objective and absolute reality, wholly independent of mind. Borrowing from the scientific method, the philosophical enterprise has been concerned with the discovery of that reality, with what is truly the case as opposed to what merely appears to be the case. Here lies the central problem of modern philosophy. How is this to be done? Is knowledge of objective reality possible? How is it possible? With respect to material nature, the answer has been to apply the methods of science. But with respect to other less tangible matters philosophers have generally turned to one or another of the two main foundations of knowledge, reason or simple sense perceptions. Most of American twentieth-century philosophizing, especially since the 1930s, has been a variety of technical distillations of seventeenth and eighteenth-century ideas. At the bottom of these approaches in whatever form or mix they appear is the basic presupposition that an objective reality exists and can be discovered and known by mind. This, of course, is the position bequeathed to us by modern science, as we conceived the legacy from Descartes, Newton and Hume.

This is what Burt wanted to put to the question in *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Physical Science*. Here is where contemporary postmodern philosophy has a strong Burtian flavor. To put it simply, modern philosophy based as it has been on modern science has presupposed a truth independent of the inquirer and unaffected by the process of inquiry. Developments in science itself and in the recent philosophy of science challenge these presuppositions. It is now well known, at least in some instances, that the process of scientific study affects the objects being studied. In present-day philosophy of science the former belief that science methods are leading us progressively toward certain truth about the natural world is, at least, questionable. The idea that we can get a pure god's eye point of view has been discounted by a number of respected contemporary thinkers.

A useful postmodern insight is that inquiry is always conducted from some point of view, from a particular perspective, which we bring with us. We invariably approach a problem with a set of ideas and concepts which have helped us to identify the problem in the first place. In one way or another we always operate our minds with some purpose in mind or with

some interests which drive our finding the solution. We must come at the problem from some perspective. We can not find an objective point of view from which to attack the problem of finding an objective reality because this would be the equivalent of finding a perspective which is not a perspective.

Arguably, many thinkers have been prepared for this insight by E. A. Burtt. Burtt said it precisely: thinking without a perspective (Burtt called it metaphysics) is impossible. In one way or another, this is the challenge to modernity which runs through all the post-moderns from Foucault and the post-structuralists and from the pragmatists, like Burtt, to Richard Rorty and his antifoundationalism. There is, undeniably, a frightening implication in all of this--objective inquiry and consequently objective knowledge is impossible. The unsavory postmodern position which makes Burtt the enemy of the modernists and mathematical realists is that either nature is continuously constructed by human activity, or that whatever objective reality there is, we have not got the inquiry methods to know it, and it is therefore pointless to concern ourselves with it.

This is a position which has been attributed to John Dewey, but Dewey did not make much of physical reality or philosophy of science either. It is also a position that served the early twentieth-century American philosophers' fundamentally idealist motivations and religious concerns. They were at odds with modern science and its promises for truths outside of Absolute Truths, religiously revealed. Some of them, like Burtt, sought a new synthesis and reconciliation between science and religion. Their program required devaluation of science to achieve renewed value for religion. Burtt's early arguments were sometimes intended to put scientific and religious ways of knowing on an equal footing.

It was 1915 when E. A. Burtt moved to New York City and enrolled at Union Theological Seminary with the intention of preparing for the ministry to follow in the footsteps of his father and grandfather. In those days Union had an agreement with Columbia University that allowed for cross enrollments and he signed up for some courses there, too. At Columbia, Burtt was in the company of the intellectual giants of the age. F. J. E. Woodbridge, John Dewey, James Harvey Robinson, and Charles Beard. All were great names in the Golden Age of American Philosophy, a time when philosophy was the activity of college professors who performed a kind of ministerial function in cultured society. In the style of Emerson and the Unitarian clergy, these men wrestled with moral and religious problems relevant to American public life. Burtt found a niche among these thinkers, and, in time, he abandoned his early career goal in favor of pursuing the life of a university professor.

During the early part of the twentieth century an axis extended from Columbia to the University of Chicago along which the pragmatists and the

new realists were engaged in vigorous debate on a number of problems, such as the relationship between reason and nature, the distinction between mind and matter, the problem of respecting the spirit of science and the spiritual interests of humanity. On Dewey's head of steam they lectured and wrote in anticipation of radical changes in society to be brought about through general education. It was the period of America's great industrial expansion and the philosophers were trying to fashion the instruments for a moral criticism of their age. The level of discourse, in both its intensity and its range, was never before paralleled in America; nor has it been recovered since, in the sense that the topics up for philosophical discussion were accessible and intelligible to the ordinary educated person.

Pragmatic naturalism was more of a movement than a systematic philosophy. During the years that Burt was associated with Columbia, the leading ideas and methods of the movement were being analyzed and developed by its critics and followers. At Columbia the analysis was carried out by reflective thinking, a formal process recommended by John Dewey, which begins with specific doubt. The specific doubt was not universal doubt as Descartes had begun his philosophy because the pragmatic naturalists did not think that it was psychologically possible to doubt everything at once. They believed that intellectual activity can not take place unless some beliefs are taken for granted. The task is to know just what is taken for granted in order to put it to the test at some future time.

Pragmatic naturalism is really a problem solving method which takes its strength from treating problems within the context of specific, well-defined situations. All the same, the pragmatic naturalists were concerned with the problem of the unity of knowledge and all believed that scientific knowledge must be brought into harmony with other beliefs about the world, including values. All these themes were drawn together by E. A. Burt in his analysis of the Scientific Revolution and perpetuated in his later thinking.

In the preface to *The Metaphysical Foundations* Burt acknowledged F.J.E. Woodbridge, Morris R. Cohen and John Herman Randall, Jr. for their contributions to his work. Woodbridge, who was Chair of the Philosophy Department at Columbia, became Burt's thesis advisor. But there were other influences, not mentioned in the preface. John Dewey's *Reflective Thinking* and James Harvey Robinson's *New History* are central to the development of Burt's perspective. No one studying and teaching at Columbia University in the 1920s could have escaped these powerful influences.

The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Physical Science reflects a point of view deep-rooted within this special brand of philosophical Naturalism dominant at Columbia University in the 1920s. John Dewey and his followers, believed that science was powerfully shaping American culture

E.A. Burtt, Historian and Philosopher

A Study of the author of *The Metaphysical Foundations
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