

## CHAPTER 5

### THE CHICAGO SCHOOL OF PRAGMATISM

At the turn of the century, philosophy at the University of Chicago was something unique in the United States, an actual school of philosophy in its own right, according to William James. The special brand of Chicago philosophy was American Pragmatism, which shone brightly during the progressive era of the 1910s and 1920s and then faded into obscurity during the 1930s and 1940s. Part of Pragmatism's success was due to the fact that it captured the general anxiety of the age by confronting the tension between science and religion. Pragmatism attempted a kind of resolution. The scientific method was championed and elevated into a concrete ideal to be applied to societal problems through new applications in education, psychology, philosophy, and history. An integrated approach was advanced with the promise that a holistic view would lend new dimensions to what had been the domain of religion alone, such as ethical questions and prescriptions for responsible living.

Part of the explanation for the decline of American Pragmatism during the 1930s, and the rise of analytic philosophy in the 1930s and 1940s was the disintegration of the Philosophy Department at the University of Chicago under pressures brought to bear by President Robert Maynard Hutchins. Hutchins championed a bold revival of the classics at the expense of the modern, forward-looking, and science-based program put forward by the Chicago Pragmatic Philosophers.

Pragmatism did not hold up the past as a model for the present. For those intellectuals who rallied around Pragmatism, uncertainty and a universe of change were the only givens. To this they brought their faith in the integrity and durability of inquiry and, at the same time, their understanding of the tentativeness, fallibility, and incompleteness of knowledge. The pragmatists adopted the doctrine that knowledge was transient and as such just another aspect of the universe of change. In such a world the attitude of inquiry itself offered the most reliable and stable guide. The spirit of science, its method and openness toward the human experience, were welcomed as the new foundation for an advancing culture.

The scientific habit of mind, a favorite phrase summing up Dewey's perspective, was closely allied with skepticism about knowledge, both old and new. From the Pragmatists' point of view the process of inquiry was more

important than the facts discovered by investigation because the inquiry process was assumed to have been standardized by science, and thereby, made primary and enduring, while the facts of knowledge themselves were only temporal and subject to change.

The Pragmatists' theory of truth included the notion that truth is plural, and that it is more of a condition that happens to conscious beings experiencing the world than some absolute, rarefied entity standing above human apprehension. In this, the Pragmatists were placing empirical, but perhaps individual, or at least local, experience over and above classical notions of Truth as universal, the kind of truth that implies a special alliance with God and the Absolute. The Pragmatists rejected what they saw as stagnant truth, inherent in ideas already established, and sought truth instead in the process of the emergence of an idea in history as a cultural possession of the collective of human beings who produced it. For the Pragmatists the world was both socially and physically constructed. Moreover, they asserted that scientific inquiry, inter-married with democratic principles, could sustain culture and, over time, change the world. In Dewey's instrumentalism, for example, ideas become true when they function effectively in open inquiry. A measure of truth for ideas is that they have the power to transform the environment.

Here was a philosophy that harmonized with E.A. Burt's perspective in *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Physical Science*. John Dewey had guided the development of Pragmatism at Chicago and it was Dewey at Columbia since 1905 whose special influence reached Burt through his teaching assignments there. The University of Chicago had been founded by the American Baptist Education Society to be a national university for Baptists, although the Society exercised no financial control over the university, once it was established. Burt's Deweyan-style Pragmatism and his Baptist heritage fitted nicely into an academic post at Chicago and he became an instructor there in 1923.

Although the school was founded by a conservative religious organization, Chicago rapidly became a hub of scientific activity as the spirit of Pragmatism spread throughout the school. In addition to Dewey's educational and social theories, Chicago Pragmatism was fortified by the religious psychology of Edward Scribner Ames, who had received the first Ph.D. granted by the university in the Department of Philosophy in 1895, and the critical approach to the study of the Bible fostered by William Rainey Harper, Chicago's first University President. These two combined to produce one of the main trends of the new liberal Protestantism, which had attracted Burt while he was studying at Union Theological Seminary and associating with the Randalls of New York City.

The University of Chicago officially opened its doors for the first time in 1892, the same year Edwin Arthur Burt was born. Large sums of money had been poured into the project (\$35,000,000 from John D. Rockefeller alone, by 1910). President Harper, encouraged by a dedicated Board of Trustees, searched out and hired 120 of the country's brightest scholars to teach in the graduate school and various professional schools. The country's luminaries were lured to Chicago with high salaries and something more. Harper "promised them more freedom in developing their departments and their researches than they could find in older institutions."<sup>1</sup> T.V. Smith, who went to Chicago in 1921 as a graduate student and stayed on to retire from the faculty, commented on Harper in his autobiography, *A Non-Existent Man*:

William Rainey Harper had founded the University on what would now appear a shoestring of fact, but he maintained it upon an immensity of faith. He pioneered in many concrete ways but most outstandingly in creating morale for cooperative research. And except for the interregnum of President Hutchins, this creative harmony has characterized the University through-out its existence.<sup>2</sup>

Much of the credit for the Chicago outlook belonged to John Dewey, who had arrived there from the University of Michigan in 1894 to become head professor of philosophy. Dewey joined James Hayden Tufts, who had been head of the Philosophy Department from its earliest days. Tufts had been associated with Dewey at Michigan State University. It was Tufts who had recommended Dewey to Chicago in the first place. After his arrival Dewey brought in George Herbert Mead, also from Michigan, as assistant professor and James Rowland Angell, from the University of Minnesota. Angell was named assistant professor of psychology. These men formed the core of the Chicago School, and over the next decade they trained a group of disciples. Among these was Edward Scribner Ames, who did his graduate work with Tufts and Mead, and Addison Webster Moore, who came from Cornell and studied with Dewey. Eventually Moore took over the teaching of Dewey's logic courses completely when Dewey left Chicago for Columbia in 1905.

A remarkable thing about the Chicago School, besides the fact that it was philosophically homogeneous, was that it had succeeded in bringing ideas out of the academic setting and into the world where ordinary people studied or worshipped. But the School was always more interested in science than religion. It was Ames who brought the liberal religious ideas associated with Pragmatism out of his classroom and into church. In 1900, he became minister of the Hyde Park Church of the Disciples of Christ, which stood

adjacent to the school campus. Meanwhile Dewey's thinking penetrated into generations of school children. There was an experimental elementary school set up as a laboratory on learning where scholars from all over the university came to teach and observe. There they became familiar with the educational theories of Pragmatism. Mead, Tufts, and Angell were directly involved with the Laboratory School, which was under John Dewey's direction.

In 1905, the core group changed its configuration, but Chicago Pragmatism only grew stronger in conviction and better at defending itself as unique in the world. Angell moved away from the center of the group when a separate department of psychology was set up. Dewey left for Columbia University in the same year, following a disagreement with President Harper over staffing at the laboratory school. Ames was drifting away and devoting most of his time to his Hyde Park Church. During the changing of the guard Moore, more than anyone else, became the spokesperson for the Chicago Philosophy. He made a considerable reputation based upon his unique abilities in clarification and distinction which he applied to Dewey's thinking. By dealing with Dewey's instrumental logic Moore became "after Mr. Dewey the most important and most authoritative member of the so-called Chicago School," according to George Herbert Mead.<sup>3</sup>

Mead, Moore, Ames and Tufts all had long careers at Chicago and all retired from the school. In 1929, Moore retired and died unexpectedly the following year. Tufts retired as chairman of the department in 1930 under duress, but continued to teach half-time. Mead was eligible to retire in 1931, but did not plan to do so, until events forced him into it. He died shortly thereafter. Tufts retired completely after the Spring session in 1932 following the so-called crisis and collapse of the Chicago School of Philosophy.

E. A. Burtt was a key figure in the Chicago school from 1923 until December 1931, when he resigned, along with Mead, Tufts, Arthur E. Murphy and Everett Hall. Certain extant documents suggest that while Burtt was not in any administrative capacity in the Chicago Philosophy Department he acted as spokesperson for the disgruntled group during their final days. He was certainly the only young member of the Pragmatist group in the early years of a promising career. Therefore, Burtt had, by far, the most to lose when the department fell apart.

T.V. Smith had joined the faculty of the Chicago group as an assistant dean in 1923. He had been hired onto the faculty along with Burtt, who came in at the bottom and worked his way up the ladder over the next seven years. By the time Burtt arrived Smith had already been at the University for two years as a graduate student. According to his own account, Smith made a meteoric rise. A year after he and Burtt joined the faculty, Smith as Dean, Burtt as instructor, Smith was made assistant professor, and two years after that, a full professor. There is a hint of some tension between Smith and

Burt, although Smith makes no mention it directly; he does not even mention Burt anywhere by name. He does say this:

I began to get all the "breaks," until, [University President, Max Mason] ... called me into his office and broke the news that I was to be jumped at once to a full professorship, with salary doubled....Mason terminated the happy interview by remarking that I had "guts" and that he wanted men like that at the University of Chicago. So whatever criticism it brought to him, and whatever envy it subjected me to, the promotion was ordered and it stood.<sup>4</sup>

Burt might have been envious, or at least, privately injured. But Burt does not mention T.V. Smith anywhere, just as Smith never mentions Burt.

Smith was the only member of the Philosophy faculty who did not resign in 1931. Darnell Rucker explains Smith's position, staying on in the wake of mass exodus, this way:

T.V. Smith did not join the exodus since he had no close ties with the older members of the staff. In fact, by his own account he had been retained on the faculty at the request of members of the university administration rather than of the department.<sup>5</sup>

Arthur E. Murphy was hired into the Philosophy Department in 1927. Although he was not as committed to the major ideas of the Chicago School of Pragmatism as the others, he, too, resigned when the Department broke up in 1931. Everett Hall was hired into the Philosophy Department in 1929; he, too, resigned during the crisis of 1931. When Murphy and Hall were added to the faculty, they diluted what had been monolithic pragmatism at Chicago. But by that time, the school was very near the end of its era anyway.

Since Smith went to Chicago in 1921 as a graduate student and Burt came along two years later, the department Smith describes can stand for the one Burt joined. Smith says he transferred from the study of literature to philosophy, where, at Chicago, "one could more nearly follow the life of imagination without scholastic debating."

And what a department Philosophy was in those days! It had not the scholarship of a Yale, and certainly not the variety of a Harvard, where James, Royce, Santayana, and Munsterbery, not to mention Palmer, had held forth in friendly profusion. Chicago had enough scholarship, but had little ideological variety....

The four senior professors of philosophy at Chicago were all Pragmatists....

Of the four professors (all tall and personally imposing), Edward Scribner Ames was the most agreeable personally, and George Herbert Mead the most stimulating intellectually. In between was Addison Moore, a clever

E.A. Burtt, Historian and Philosopher

A Study of the author of *The Metaphysical Foundations  
of Modern Physical Science*

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