Civil War

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As a watershed event in American history, the Civil War likewise marked a salient turning point in American philosophy. The manner in which philosophy had been practiced in the antebellum United States, the very structure of the discipline, and, indeed, its place within Nineteenth Century intellectual culture were utterly transformed. What exactly was the nature of this transformation and why did it occur? Moreover, in what respects did the Civil War act as a catalyst in this regard? In order to gain insight into these most pertinent questions, we must first get a sense of the character of American philosophy prior to the war.

Pre-War American Philosophy

During the first half of the Nineteenth Century, Bruce Kuklick notes, "American colleges were small, sleepy institutions, peripheral to the life of the nation," (2001, p. 2). Philosophy courses often were taught by holders of chairs or college presidents at the behest of divinity-school theologians, mainly Unitarian in affiliation, and the most serious of (primarily New England) parish ministers. They centered upon supporting natural theology, whereby a reconciliation of faith with science was sought to explain how nature, as the unfolding of a divine idea, could be understood through the acquisition of empirical knowledge. Also covered were questions of ethics, with Unitarianism stressing humanity's inherent goodness. Outside the academy, Emerson popularized Boston Transcendentalism, or the doctrine that truth transcends the physical world and is realizable only through intuition or an appeal to individual conscience, rather than through the dogmas of established religion or empirical investigation.[1]

Not only did the horrors of the Civil War lead to the rejection of the Unitarian ethic and the Transcendentalist appeal to conscience. They also made the intellectual ground of the time exceptionally fertile for the reception of an entirely new way of conceiving of the relationship between religion and science. So too did the unleashing of industrialism and national expansion, held in check for decades by the debate over slavery, bring entirely novel questions with which to deal and the need for a new mode of thought to deal with them. It is thereby unsurprising that the structure of the academy was to undergo a drastic change.

Professionalization of the Discipline

Union soldiers often went to war with every intention of upholding Northern values. Yet, among the most useful lessons they learned was that soldiers who understood the mechanics of battle fought more effectively and more bravely than those who were motivated chiefly by enthusiasm for the cause. The war, that is, brought about a newfound admiration for professionalism at the expense of purity of faith. The former saved lives and brought victories.

This push for professionalization deeply penetrated academia after the war. The primacy of divinity schools in the scholarly world ended, and the explicitly Protestant thought that governed American philosophy all but disappeared. Theologians lost control of education to academic administrators. The founding of a litany of private universities and public land-grant institutions, along with the rise of discipline-specific academic journals, played a significant role in this regard. Philosophy came into its own as a technical discipline in distinction from theology and the natural and social sciences. The

professional philosopher gained a level of esteem within intellectual circles once reserved for clerics. In the process, the first form of philosophy native to American academia—Pragmatism—was born.

Pragmatism

Pragmatism emerged just after reconstruction. While it took several decades to coalesce into a discernible philosophical form, it was designed from the first, Louis Menand states, to "put Americans into a better relation with the conditions of modern life," (p. xi). This included, notably, responding to the reception of Darwinism into the scientific landscape.

If the Civil War represented anything to the American mind, it represented a fundamental failure of prevailing ideas to cope with immediate events. This explains at least in part why, after the war, the intellectual community was highly receptive to an entirely new conception of the nature of ideas. This conception arose from Darwin's theory of natural selection, whereby species are to be understood not as immutable kinds. Most noteworthy about species are the processes of adaptation to environmental conditions that lead to their variation. Changes in nature occur in accordance with the reproductive success of the better adapted rather than with a supernatural plan.[2]

Darwin offered an innovative way to regard the interaction between living things and their environment. Correspondingly, the central theme of pragmatism is that ideas themselves operative like species. They reflect human adaptation. As such, they are not 'out there' waiting to be discovered. Ideas "are tools […] that people devise to cope with the world in which they find themselves," Menand remarks. They are "provisional

responses to particular and unreproducible circumstances, [and] their survival depends not on their immutability but on their adaptability," (p. xi-xii). Beliefs, then, are to be treated as modes of action geared toward adapting to a changing and, at best, semi-hospitable world. The mind is not an entity but a function, not that which has being but a form of doing. And experience is nothing other than the ongoing test of the adaptability of our beliefs.[3]

To regard ideas as fixed instead of malleable not only represents a failure to understand the place of humanity in the world. It threatens to allow ideas to crystallize into ideologies that can become the basis for causes defended by a call to arms. Ideologies all too easily breed violence and even lead to national suicide.

Conclusion

"If the war taught us anything," Menand notes, "it was that beliefs have consequences," (p. 213). Among the most significant consequences of the beliefs cultivated by American intellectuals in the wake of the Civil War were that science rightly superseded religious authority as the dominant discourse inside the academy, universities could serve as the primary repositories of knowledge in an increasingly complex society and train persons to serve those seeking to cope with this complexity, and philosophy had an independent role to play in this regard. By the close of the Nineteenth Century, American philosophy in particular had achieved an identity of its own—one intended to prevent the nation from driving itself to the brink of extinction ever again.

Bibliography

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[1] An alternative strain of Transcendentalism did much to introduce German idealism to the United States. New England Transcendentalism was the brainchild of James Marsh. It emphasized intuitive access specifically to spiritual insight.
[2] The belief that species evolve is not itself incompatible with intelligent design. Evolution might be the mechanism the supernatural has selected to fulfill divine intentions. This is the position maintained by both Lamarck and Spencer. What was radical about natural selection, Menand argues, thereby is not its appeal to evolution but to materialism: that species "were created by, and evolve according to, processes that are entirely chance-generated, and blind," (p. 121). This precludes the sort of compromise sought by advocates of natural theology.
[3] Pragmatism, as James in particular notes, did reinstate the merit of religious belief—albeit in a manner far more muted than the antebellum Protestant variety. Religious beliefs, like any beliefs, are true if they work: if they prove malleable and adaptive enough to help people cope with the risks and contingencies of life.