

Scott L. Pratt

Native pragmatism: Rethinking the roots of American philosophy

BLOOMINGTON: INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2002

Reviewed by Jerry H. Gill

ISBN: 9780253215192

Pratt's general purpose is to counter-act the standard way of looking at Pragmatism as an extension of European philosophy, particularly of British Empiricism by tracing the contributions to American thought resulting from Native American, Afro-American, and other indigenous sources.

This is a very interesting and important book. At a time when America desperately needs to rethink its own historical and cultural purpose in light of its increasing multi-cultural make-up, it is especially appropriate for us to rethink our own philosophical heritage as well. Those of us accustomed to thinking of and teaching American philosophy almost exclusively in terms of the Pragmatism formulated by Peirce, James, and Dewey may well be surprised as well as edified by this serious and thorough exploration of some additional and generally ignored roots of American thought.

Pratt's general purpose is to counter-act the standard way of looking at Pragmatism as an extension of European philosophy, particularly of British Empiricism by tracing the contributions to American thought resulting from Native American, Afro-American, and other indigenous sources. Not only did the leaders and cultural patterns of various Native groups have a greater impact on the development of American thought than is generally acknowledged, but the confluence of these influences with European thought resulted, in Pratt's view, in a fresh and unique understanding of the crucial notions of wilderness, place, and home.

The historical reconstruction offered by Pratt centers around three claims. The first is that the main themes of pragmatic philosophy can be found as already active in the lives and cultures of the Native peoples indigenous to the Northeast region of North America. Second, there is concrete indication that these Native emphases actually had direct influence on the thinkers who helped to shape American Pragmatism. Third, by virtue of its indigenous character, Native ways of thinking actually stood in opposition to those of the dominating European culture, resulting in the notion of "resistance" coming to play a prominent role in American philosophy.

Here is how Pratt focuses his approach to his overall task:

I argue that American pragmatism begins along the border between Native and European America as an attitude of resistance against the dominant attitudes of European colonialism. In order to clarify what constitutes pragmatism in this discussion . . . four commitments or interests can serve as a starting point. These commitments, what I call interaction, pluralism, community, and growth, mark lines of thought that ultimately connect North American philosophy with the emergence with classical pragmatism. (xiv)

After briefly defining the contours of colonial thought in the mind-set of the likes of Cotton Mather and Thomas Jefferson, Pratt shifts to an analysis of the way in which Roger Williams, the founder of Rhode Island, incorporated the Narragansett concept of “wunnegin,” or welcome and hospitality, into his approach to the development of a pluralistic society. Pratt then goes on to introduce the Native Prophetic Movement which produced a number of preachers and political leaders who stressed the role of autonomy within diversity. He specifically mentions Teedyuscung (Delaware), Tenskwatawa (Shawnee), and Sagoyewatha (Seneca). Pratt continues by tracing the influence of Native American ways of thinking on Benjamin Franklin working in Pennsylvania, and his influence in turn on the thought of Peirce and James. The focus here is on the Distinctive conception of a pluralistic democratic society, similar to that developed by the Iroquoian Confederacy.

Pratt concludes his survey of Native influences on American pragmatic thought by discussing the contributions of such 19th century figures as Jane Johnstone Schoolcraft, John Ross, and Lydia Maria Child. “In response to the triple crises of Indian removal, slavery, and the demand for women’s suffrage, some European American women followed the lead of native people and adopted both the indigenous attitude and its logic of home as a way of carrying out their own challenge to the dominant colonial attitude”(xvi).

This book should prove to be a valuable resource for those who seek to introduce students to American pragmatic philosophy in a manner that connects it up with current events and the issues of multiculturalism that confront our efforts to build a more open and diverse society.

Jerry H. Gill was raised in the Pacific Northwest, attended Westmont College, New York Theological Seminary, and Duke University (Ph.D. 1966). He has taught at several small colleges around the country, published a number of books and journal articles, and is now Academic Coordinator for BorderLinks in Tucson, Arizona. His latest books are *Native American Worldviews* and *Borderland Theology*. Jerry is married to Mari Sorri, a professional potter, and his avocations include basketball, travel, and sculpting.