

## **INTELLECTUAL TRENDS IN 19TH CENTURY BOSTON**



Courtesy of Harvard University Archives Asa Gray in 1875

Boston's Jubilee 350 celebration is a marvelous opportunity to reflect upon some of the great changes in thought which arose in Boston during the last half of the nineteenth century. Christian Scientists are familiar with events in the history of the Christian Science movement that occurred in the Boston area during this period: Mary Baker Eddy's healing from the effects of a fall on the ice and her discovery of the rules of spiritual healing as taught by Christ Jesus; the culmination of her years of Bible study in the writing of Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures; her teaching, and the steps leading to the founding of her church. This article focuses on other changes in thought at that time.

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Following the end of the American Civil War in the mid-1860's, there came a burst of energy which transformed American life. The list of social changes is staggering, including "the industrialization and urbanization of American society; the spreading and merging of railroad and other systems of transport and communication; the surge toward bigness in industry, business, capital, labor, and education; the management problems of large-scale organization; the drift toward specialization in all occupations; and the rise of an administrative and managerial class."1

It is interesting to be aware of the many forces for change that were centered in Boston at that time. Two events of a strictly intellectual nature can be examined as symbols of the shift in thought then taking place: the impact of Darwinism, and the rise of Pragmatism.

Most people do not realize that Charles Darwin and his theory of evolution received their fairest hearing in the United States, specifically in the Boston area. Asa Gray, professor of botany at Harvard College and a personal friend of Darwin, knew of the coming publication of On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection (1859) and introduced Darwin's theory of evolution into the United States. His colleague at Harvard, Louis Agassiz, professor of zoology and founder of Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology, had an established international reputation as an expert on fossil fish and was the first to claim and prove that there had been an ice age. Agassiz's belief in special creation (the notion that species were created in their current form and distribution by God) made him Gray's chief opponent on evolution.

Between December 1858 and October 1860 there were nineteen public



Courtesy of Harvard University Archives Louis Agassiz, ca. 1872

meetings at which Agassiz or Gray or both spoke on issues associated with evolution. Two common forums were The Boston Society of Natural History and The Cambridge Scientific Club.<sup>2</sup> Religious figures sided with Agassiz, and most scientific figures with Gray. Two of Agassiz's codefenders were John A. Lowell, a wealthy, politically powerful Bostonian who was a member of the Harvard Corporation board; and Francis Bowen, Alford Professor of Moral Philosophy at Harvard. Leading within the Gray camp was William Barton Rogers, American geologist, who was instrumental in the founding of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

What was the controversy about? Superficially, the origin of species. Gray, taking Darwin's position, claimed that present species descended by means of biological mechanisms from preceeding species which were different in character. Agassiz said that God created each individual species as it is now found.

A point often ignored is that Agassiz and Gray were both skilled naturalists who were acutely aware of their facts. Seldom did they dispute a question of fact. They agreed on all the fundamental biological, geographical and paleontological facts. Discussions centered on what these facts meant, on matters of interpretation.



The Boston Society of Natural History

Because they were both concerned with the meaning of the data, their debates became philosophical, although most people thought they were scientific. The debates were about scientific theories and the philosophical issues underlying those theories. Gray defended a view of science which claimed that natural processes can only be explained in terms of natural processes. He argued that if one moves beyond concepts grounded in natural phenomena, one is outside science. Although he was a religious man and attempted to translate evolution theories into God's way of creating, Gray sought to divorce science and religion in an effort to keep science pure. Agassiz, on the other hand, looked upon the study of nature as a way "to become acquainted with the ideas of God himself."<sup>3</sup> He thought that scientific thinking could only take place within a greater conceptual framework, only within a religious view of life.

The underlying issue, then, was philosophical and theological. The nature of science and the question of what constitutes legitimate scientific reasoning were the focus, although many at the time did not see that. Not surprisingly, Gray and Darwinism won the battle. When Agassiz died in 1873, debate ceased and Agassiz's name has since almost been lost from the history books.<sup>4</sup> However, at the time of these debates, Agassiz was one of the giants of Boston's intellectual life. He had been lured from his native Switzerland by Harvard, and was one of the most loved and revered men of the city, numbering Longfellow, Whittier, Lowell and Emerson among his literary friends.

Why did the Darwinians win? First, the age was becoming specialized and sophisticated in its thinking. Darwin's ideas were tied directly to observable phenomena, were narrow in scope, and were closely reasoned. They could easily be verified using the canons of scientific reasoning then being developed. On the other hand, Agassiz's ideas were cosmic; he freely philosophized about his biological discoveries. Second, the definition of what constituted science was changing; the philosophical or broad theoretical discussions which characterized earlier ages were disappearing. In an age of increasing industrialization and specialization, Agassiz's views were doomed.

All the reasons which doomed Agassiz's views were the very reasons that caused the rise of pragmatism, the uniquely American contribution to the history of philosophy. Pragmatism was an attempt to bring scientific rigor into philosophy by demanding that concepts be tied to experience. Instead of looking for a perfect, eternal universe, they, like the Darwinians, looked at a changing, finite world. Instead of looking beyond a limited human experience to speculative theories for answers, the pragmatists sought to look more carefully at what is found directly within human experience. Pragmatism, then, can be viewed as an effort to carry the scientific attitudes embodied in Darwinism into philosophy, and was a reform of philosophy similar to the Darwinian reform of biology. The Darwinian controversy was the major intellectual event within the lives of the early pragmatists.

Pragmatism first appeared, according to its originator, Charles Peirce, when sometime around "the earliest [eighteen] seventies . . . a knot of us young men in Cambridge, calling ourselves half-ironically, halfdefiantly, 'The Metaphysical Club,' - for agnosticism was then riding its high horse, . . . used to meet, sometimes in my study, sometimes in that of William James."5 The Metaphysical Club's exact membership is not clear, but the list of those who attended meetings is quite impressive: Charles Peirce, William James, Francis Ellingwood Abbot, Charles Everett, Nicholas St. John Green, Joseph Warner, Chauncy Wright, Francis Bowen, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., John Fiske and Thomas Davidson.

The first appearance of pragmatism in print, without benefit of name, was in 1877-78 in The Popular Science Monthly. (It was the same magazine that is on newsstands today, but at the time it was more like the present Scientific American.) A rather important appearance of pragmatic ideas occurred in 1881 when a professor of law at Harvard published a book entitled, The Common Law. On the first page he states,



Left, Charles Peirce, ca. 1900; right, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., 1899, while Supreme Court Justice of Massachusetts. (Courtesy of Harvard University Archives)

"The life of the law has not been logic: it has been experience.... The law embodies the story of a nation's development.... The substance of the law at any given time pretty nearly corresponds, so far as it goes, with what is then understood to be convenient."<sup>6</sup> These few sentences encapsulate the philosophy of law which their author, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., held throughout all his years on the Massachusetts and the United States Supreme Courts.

The term "pragmatism" was first used, with the idea being attributed to Charles Peirce, on August 26, 1898 when William James, then Professor of Philosophy at Harvard, delivered a talk at the Philosophical Union of the University of California on "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results."

William James carried the pragmatic gospel to all of North America and Europe. He was loved by one and all, and his writings were read widely, even by people not terribly interested in philosophy. Unfortunately, he wrote in what for philosophers is a racy style, speaking, for example, of the "cash-value" of the consequences of an idea. Bertrand Russell, the noted British philosopher, after reading American philosophy, said, "I find love of truth in America obscured by commercialism of which pragmatism is the philosophical expression."7 Yet, as already noted, pragmatism was philosophical; it imbibed the spirit of the sciences, required the careful analysis of concepts, and took seriously human experience. It was more than a mere attitude; it embodied some major changes in our collective intellectual life.

The general effect of pragmatism was not to change the outward facets of life, but to alter the way in which they were understood. Greater emphasis was put on the scientific view of life. Methods became more important than results; the process of achieving a goal became as significant or more significant than the goal itself. Constant change along with the here-and-now became accepted as the focus of thought. Fixed ideas, absolutes, transcendentals, all began to pass from thought. Great shifts in thinking were appearing in the intellectual scene of the late nineteenth century. The results of these changes are just beginning to become apparent.



William James (left) and Josiah Royce, ca. 1908

Courtesy of Harvard University Archives

One change, for example, correlated with the sciences rising to become the describers of reality. Philosophers, prior to the pragmatists, were trained in seminaries, and were, on the whole, religious thinkers. With pragmatism, philosophers became more influenced by developments in the sciences than in religion. In the early nineteenth century, intellectual questions were taken to clergymen; now the news media consult with scientists on the chief intellectual issues. What clergy have to say does not seem so important any more.

Another change relates to the development of psychology. With the acceptance of Darwin's theory of evolution, man ceased being a special creation, a special creature. A subsequent development with many parallels to evolution was the naturalization of mind, which brought with it the rise of psychology. Once man became, in the eyes of scientists, a natural creature, the next logical step was to view his mind as just another evolutionary, natural phenomenon. Thus, we see a slow, but consistent, shift from talking about mind to examinations of brain.8

Another change in thought which was introduced with pragmatism was the idea of uncertainty. Because pragmatism so fully embraced change, no fixed ideas or conclusions were possible. With the pragmatists we see a shift from thinking about the universe as something fixed which can be understood, to seeing the universe as something undergoing constant change, whose nature we can only guess at.

All of the changes brought about by pragmatism resulted in a rejection of the eternal. Viewed pragmatically, from the standpoint of natural science, the eternal is considered beyond the ken of all known procedures, — beyond all human reasoning.

Probably the biggest change evident in Boston from the birth of pragmatism was the change in the philosophy curriculum at Harvard. William James in his lively way forced his students and colleagues to consider this way of approaching intellectual questions. The most famous sight in the Boston area associated with pragmatism was a series of neighborly debates between William James and Josiah Royce. Royce was America's greatest exponent of idealism, who James had brought to Harvard as a genuine mental giant, and who added much to the faculty. They were neighbors, and were regularly seen speaking over the back fence. On what? The greatest and deepest issues in philosophy and religion. The result was that Royce became more pragmatic, and James became more transcendental.



William James in 1901

William James was, of course, aware of the growth of the Christian Science movement during his time, and was interested in it from an intellectual and philosophical standpoint. Although he did not understand Christian Science, - and pragmatism certainly had no connection with the religion discovered and founded by Mary Baker Eddy - his public defense of Christian Science in the 1890's helped defeat a bill designed to restrict mental healers. Early in 1894 the medical profession introduced into the Massachusetts Legislature a bill to require all persons practicing mental therapy to pass a medical examination and be licensed. On March 24, 1894 the Boston Evening Transcript published a letter on the subject from James, which read in part: "I assuredly hold no brief for any of these healers, and must confess that my intellect has been unable to assimilate their theories, so far as I have heard them given. But their facts are patent and startling; and anything that interferes with the multiplication of such facts, and with our freest opportunity of observing and studying them, will, I believe, be a public calamity."<sup>9</sup> The bill was tabled, and revived in 1898. This time James appeared before a committee as well as writing a letter to the Transcript.

Viewed historically, the beginnings of the Christian Science movement coincided with the momentous changes of the nineteenth



The State House in Boston

century. What is particularly significant is that although Mrs. Eddy chose Boston — at that time the cultural and intellectual Athens of America as the headquarters for her worldreaching movement, she did not take part in the major intellectual events mentioned above. She states in No and Yes, "Christian Science is no 'Boston craze;' it is the sober second thought of advancing humanity."10 Though no doubt aware of the intellectual current of her day, which included the Darwinian controversy and pragmatism, from the vantage of history we can see she placed herself on what many historians would today call the "right side" of the issues, and she did it not with human reasoning, but on the basis of spiritual insight and revelation.

## David E. Pfeifer

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- 1. Max H. Fisch, Classic American Philosophers, Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1951, p. 9.
- David E. Pfeifer, "Louis Agassiz and the Origin of Species," Studies in Philosophy and in the History of Science, edited by Richard Tursman, Coronado Press, 1970, pp. 102-103.
- Louis Agassiz and A.A. Gould, Principles of Zoology, 1875, p. 138.
- 4. It is interesting to note that Mary Baker Eddy mentions Darwin and Agassiz several times in her writings, especially in the chapter on Genesis in Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures. See also Mary Baker Eddy Mentioned Them, pp. 9-10, 66-67.
- Charles S. Peirce, Collected Papers, edited by Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss, Harvard University Press, 1935, p. 7.
- Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., The Common Law, Harvard University Press, 1967 (reprint of 1881 edition), p. 5.
- Quoted from the Freeman in John Dewey, "Pragmatic America," Pragmatism and American Culture, edited by Gail Kennedy, D.C. Heath & Co., 1950, p. 57.
- It was William James who introduced physiological psychology into the United States.
- Gay Wilson Allen, William James: A Biography, Viking Press, 1967, p. 372. See also Robert Peel, Christian Science – Its Encounter with American Culture, and Robert Peel, Mary Baker Eddy – The Years of Authority.
- 10. Mary Baker Eddy, No and Yes, p. 19:7.

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