

“Many Geniuses Coming Together...”: Placing William James in Context

by Bill DeLoach

When you're trying to study a thing—photon, atom, finch, or person—one of the more useful questions you can ask is: Does this thing participate in any larger systems? What *else* is going on with this thing, beyond what I see in front of me this instant? I may seem to have a solitary item, but others may know where it was earlier, or whether it has kinfolk or connections of some kind.

1705 • In 1705 Edmond Halley, using an insight of his friend Isaac Newton — “All paths in the heavens are conic sections”—re-described a bright spot in the night sky as not random, not a solitary item at all, but a recurrence of an event we now call Halley's Comet.

1836 • Charles Darwin, when he carried some bird specimens from the Galapagos back to England, discovered that they were called finches. He also discovered that his finches did indeed participate in a larger system—what today's researchers call a dynamical system, or a complex adaptive system. One could say that Darwin spent the rest of his life trying to spell out the nature and functions of such a system. By now we can safely say that all the king's horses and all the king's men (so to speak) who followed Darwin in this endeavor still have not finished this task. Not that the Riddle of Evolution was entirely insoluble—quite the contrary. But there was a sort of domino effect, so that as partial solutions began to unfold, their ramifications began to spread (that is, to be discussed by Darwin-aware thinkers) through adjacent realities; until it was hard to be sure just where the ripples would stop, or when the unfolding would end.

1880 • In 1880, one such worker in the Darwinian vineyard spoke to the Harvard Natural History Society. He was a young (38) writer and professor named William James. He was interested not in finches nor in comets, but in a certain subset of humans: Great Thinkers. In his talk on “Great Men and their Environment,” he wondered not only about (A) Why do they occur at all?, but also about the related question: (B) Why do they seem to arrive in groups, in bunches?

“Sporadic great men come everywhere,” said James. “But for a community to get vibrating through and through with intensely active life, many geniuses

coming together and in rapid succession are required. This is why great epochs are so rare— why the sudden bloom of a Greece, an early Rome, a Renaissance, is such a mystery. Blow must follow blow so fast that no cooling can occur in the intervals. Then the mass of the nation grows incandescent, and may continue to glow by pure inertia long after the originators of its internal movement have passed away” (*Will to Believe* 242-243, cited hereinafter as *WB*). His conclusion, in short, was that the same kind of dynamics that help to account for the interactions over time between finches and the environments of the Galapagos Islands can also account for the interactions between “Great Men and their Environment.” As he said, in two now-famous sentences: “The community stagnates without the impulse of the individual. The impulse dies away without the sympathy of the community” (*WB* 232).

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We 21st Century folk can say with hindsight: “Well, it takes one to know one.” That is, not only was William James an historical observer of great epochs like Ancient Greece or the Renaissance; he was also a very active participant in just such a group himself. Now we all know that prophets are without honor in their own countries—and that has certainly been the case with the six Classic American Philosophers. Maybe that's why it took a relative outsider to the United States and to Harvard, the transplanted British mathematician (by training) and metaphysician (by inclination) Alfred North Whitehead, to give the best early hint as to the existence, in America, of philosophers fit to stand beside the greats of the past.

1936 • In a letter written just before his 75th birthday, Whitehead predicts that “...in the oncoming generation, America will be the centre of worthwhile philosophy.” Then he adds:

My belief is that the effective founders of the American Renaissance are Charles Peirce and William James. Of these men, W.J. is the analogue to Plato, and C.P. to Aristotle, though the time-order does not correspond, and the analogy must not be pressed too far (Lowe, Vol. II, 345).

The “American Renaissance” in philosophy that Whitehead refers to was spelled out in more detail some fourteen years later in Max H. Fisch's anthology, *Classic American Philosophers*:

1951 • “It is increasingly apparent that American philosophy has had its classical period, corresponding to the Greek classical period from Democritus through Aristotle, the medieval Christian from Abelard through

Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus, the British from Bacon through Hume, [from Descartes through Leibnitz on the continent at about the same time,] the German from Kant through Hegel.

“Our classical period began just after our Civil War and ended just before the Second World War. Its canon is already nearly fixed. It includes six philosophers. They are Charles Sanders Peirce [1839-1914], William James [1842-1910], Josiah Royce [1855-1916], George Santayana [1863-1952], John Dewey [1859-1952], and Alfred North Whitehead [1861-1947].”¹

As Ketner and Kloesel point out, the scholarship of Max Fisch is “meticulous,” and this General Introduction in particular is “masterly.” We can’t bring you all 39 pages (with their 123 footnotes) at this point, but I do want to share enough of Fisch’s argument to make you restless until you’ve read the whole thing.

“The history of philosophy in western civilization,” Fisch begins, “has a general continuity from which no single thinker or local movement is quite cut off. There emerge, however, certain widely separated periods within which the continuity is more pervasive and intensive. Such periods are... “[here the five just mentioned—Greek, medieval Christian, British, continental, and German—are listed; to which this manifesto proposes to add a sixth ‘classic period’: American].

“We may call such a period classic in the sense that the leading philosophic tendencies of the culture in which it arises reach within it

- a fullness of expression,
- a mutual definition,
- a synthesis or equilibrium, and
- a permanent embodiment in texts which rapidly

acquire the status of a canon and which determine the directions in which further reflection moves for generations or centuries thereafter.”²

With these criteria stated, Fisch shows how the “more pervasive and intensive continuity” he refers to is manifested by his six American Philosophers, using three overall headings:

(A) Personal Relations (pp. 1-8)

In these pages Fisch traces the Harvard connections for five of his six philosophers (all but Dewey;

who nonetheless served as William James Lecturer in 1931, when he “was briefly a colleague of Whitehead, and delivered at Harvard the lectures from which his *Art as Experience* grew”) (2). Fisch also discusses the Johns Hopkins connection for four of his six, and makes note of “numerous cross-fertilizations” among the group (5). “Our classic period had also the continuity and the specious unity of... a long lifetime,” says Fisch. “Not only were all its major figures born before the period began [in 1868]... but two are still living and writing.” [Fisch published in 1951; Dewey and Santayana both died in 1952]. Around page six, Fisch begins to tell his tale “by setting down some of the more informal comments expressed in the letters of Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., who, though an active participant in the early formulation of pragmatism, felt himself thereafter a detached but interested observer of the philosophic scene” (5,6).

(B) The Climate of Opinion (pp. 9-19)

Here Fisch covers “the difference that science made” between the worldviews of Holmes Jr. (author and Supreme Court Justice) and Sr. (author and physician). “By far the most influential single idea was that of evolution” (10). Aiding this notion were “...the sciences of man and society that arose in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century: anthropology (physical and cultural), social psychology, comparative religion and folklore, ...economics, ‘the new history’ and ‘the sociology of knowledge’” (11). We hear about Darwin... Chauncey Wright, “a leading philosophic interpreter and defender of Darwinian theory” (12)... Alexander Bain... “the prediction theory of law” of Justice Holmes; and at page seventeen Fisch suggests that “Readers new to philosophy” might want to postpone the rest of his General Introduction, and start reading the selections from or the introductions to the six philosophers.

(C) Major Themes and Tendencies (pp. 19-39)

Let me just list the fourteen headings used by Fisch. If you are already well-informed about each of these issues, it may be that there is no need for you to read any further; but most of us, I suspect, will find fresh ideas and thoughtfully-assembled evidence in these pages.

1. The Damnation of Descartes
2. The Naturalizing of Mind
3. The Mentalizing of Nature
4. From Substance to Process
5. The Obsolescence of the Eternal
6. The Reduction of Yesterday to Tomorrow
7. Purpose in Thought
8. Exit the Spectator
9. The Theory of Signs
10. Laboratory vs. Seminary Philosophy

¹. Max H. Fisch, *Classic American Philosophers*, (New York: Appleton-Century Crofts, 1951; rpt. 1996, with an “Introduction” by Nathan Houser, by Fordham UP), v. Taken from the “Preface”; Descartes-Leibnitz phrase added from the “Introduction.” Dates and formatting added.

². Fisch, 1.

11. Science as Cooperative Inquiry
12. The Supremacy of Method
13. Science and Society
14. The Great Community

Oof! Even if my attempted summary, necessarily over-brief, points to a powerful document... it makes for dry reading. We've talked about James in 1880; Whitehead in 1936 (he'd just finished reading Ralph Barton Perry's two-volume biography *The Thought and Character of William James* (1935), and found it "just like the Dialogues of Plato..."); and Fisch in 1951. To bring the story forward, here are Stanley Cavell as a reader of two cross-fertilizing geniuses, Emerson and Thoreau; and John E. Smith as a reader of another such pair, James and Peirce.

Two Readers, Two Tag-Teams

My first acquaintance with Stanley Cavell came from reading his essay "Thinking of Emerson," which Russell B. Goodman included in his excellent anthology *Pragmatism: A Contemporary Reader*. The two sentences that caught my attention come at the beginning:

1978 • "Thinking of Emerson, I can think of my book on *Walden* as something of an embarrassment, but something of an encouragement as well, since if what it suggests about the lack of a tradition of thinking in America is right, e.g., about how Emerson and Thoreau deaden one another's words, then my concentration on understanding Thoreau was bound to leave Emerson out. He kept sounding to me like secondhand Thoreau" (Cavell, in Goodman, ed. 298).

Hmm. What a colorful way to describe two writers, two thinkers—working pretty much the same territory, but from complementary perspectives, so that each occupies the wake, or the shadow, marked out by the omissions of the other. Who else, do you suppose... what other pairs or small groups of writers have a similar pattern of dovetailed interests... such a rich cross-fertilization of ideas, lectures, books? Of course, I can't help thinking of America's Plato and Aristotle, William James and Charles Peirce.

How do I describe the tacit division of labor that James and Peirce enacted in their lifetimes, and still carry on, in many ways? William was always a people's philosopher, quite willing to acknowledge the insights he had learned by listening to "an unlettered carpenter of my acquaintance" (*WB* 256). Charles was always a philosopher's philosopher, strengthening the toolkit of professional thinkers in ways they would (eventually) recognize— even if his radical revisions were so far ahead of his time that many of his otherwise intelligent colleagues could not decipher exactly what he was driving at.

This list of contrasts could go on, but my point is that in many ways, they operated as a tag-team. Like Emerson and Thoreau, they covered more ground, or covered it more thoroughly, than either could have done working alone. That point is made much more specifically by John E. Smith in his recent book *America's Philosophic Vision*. In Chapter Three, "Two Defenses of Freedom: Peirce and James," Smith sets up his thesis with these words from his headnote:

1992 • "James's 'The Dilemma of Determinism' and Peirce's 'The Doctrine of Necessity Examined' are noteworthy in that they represent a striking contrast in approach while essentially arguing for the same conclusion. Both thinkers are defending real possibilities, spontaneity and chance in the scheme of things, but whereas James uses the dilemma to force the determinist to confront two undesirable consequences of the view, Peirce proceeds directly to examine and ultimately reject six reasons that have been advanced in support of determinism. The approach in each case is characteristic of their mode of thinking, something that James would have put down to 'temperament'" (Smith 53).

Towards the end of his essay, Smith concludes:

I suppose that in the end the contrast in the approach of these two thinkers should not be at all surprising. Peirce made a considerable investment in logic, while James was repeatedly affirming the belief that where logic and life collide, it is so much the worse for logic. Their orientations, moreover, are decisively different; Peirce's is cosmological and ontological, while James's is clearly anthropological. Peirce thinks from a theoretical distance and addresses himself to the rational public; James speaks from within and to the total experience of the individual person.... I see no reason, especially in connection with problems like that of freedom, why both approaches may not be legitimate...(69-70).

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Of course there are other groupings in which James can be considered. To cite only three:

EXISTENTIAL

1958 • According to William Barrett, writing in *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy* (1958), "Of all the non-European philosophers, William James probably best deserves to be labeled an Existentialist" (p. 18). [It was this hint, by the way, which led me to choose WJ as a dissertation topic... but that's another story.]

CONTINENTAL

1971 • Along similar lines, when Bruce Wilshire edited an anthology titled *William James: The Essential Writings* (1971), his “Introduction” ran to 49 pages and noted that “the faulty recognition of James” comes in part from the unexpected intellectual company that WJ keeps. “Through a reading of such European thinkers as Husserl, Bergson, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Wittgenstein,” writes Wilshire, “we are, somewhat ironically, helped to capture the centered vision of the American philosopher” (p. xviii).

PROCESS PHILOSOPHY

1992 • And finally, Nicholas Rescher maintains, in his essay on “The Promise of Process Philosophy,” that “As Whitehead himself thus emphasized, process philosophy does not represent the doctrines of a particular thinker, but reflects a major tendency or line of thought that traces back through the history of philosophy to the days of the pre-Socratics. Its leading exponents were Heraclitus, Leibnitz, Bergson, Peirce, and William James, and it ultimately moved on to include Whitehead and his school (Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss, as well as Andrew Paul Ushenko), and also others such as Samuel Alexander and C. Lloyd Morgan” (Rescher 75).

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But you can’t read everything; so for me the next step (beyond reading about James himself) has been reading about his close friend Charles Peirce. For one thing, I find the recently updated biography of Peirce by Joseph Brent an excellent book and a good read, with much in it for fans of WJ to ponder. Highly recommended. For another thing, I have an especial respect for the scholarship of the late Max Fisch (1900-1995). I only met and chatted with Professor Fisch a few times, but he was always gracious and charming.

Not only did Fisch virtually invent Classic American Philosophy as a field of study; he has done more than any other scholar to retrieve the written legacy of Charles Peirce. I only became aware of this project in 1974 or ‘75, when my studies in the James Papers at the Houghton Library were enlivened by the regular Parade of the Texas Peirceans, led by Professor Fisch. He knew of me through his friend Ed Davidson, my dissertation advisor; and after a few words were exchanged, we managed a way to chat outside the hushed confines of the library.

Best of all was an afternoon gathering for wine and cheese, sort of a scholars’ TGIF, to which Max Fisch invited both me and another Jamesian, Ignas K. Skrupskelis. I was and remain largely a neophyte in philosophy; my Ph.D. (1973) is in English, and my

interest in William James is biographical. I fondly thought of this “Peirceans meeting Jamesians” event as an homage to the Metaphysical Club of the 1870s, as well as a continuation of the kind of “community of scholars” that both James and Peirce believed in. I got to ask Max himself about his research interests, and to hear about his early work with Vico, and his current work both as the designated Peirce biographer and as the lead investigator in what has become The Peirce Edition Project. His answers let me know that the Peirce Edition, to his mind, had to take precedence over the biography. Then he turned the tables on me.

“You have asked ‘Why Peirce?’” he said. “Now maybe you can explain: ‘Why James?’” I like to think that now, some twenty-five years later, I could give a better answer than the one I fumbled through then. Certainly Fisch was not impressed—he reminded me, as I vaguely recall, of James’s shortcomings as a systematic thinker: the popular tone, the diversity of projects (some unfinished), the aversion to logic.... I tried to say something about “enough data-points to mark out a fairly definite curve,” but I knew I was in over my head. Max smiled.

Let me include here a story that points to the inter-relatedness of the philosophical work done by James and Peirce. The kinship and connectedness that I have in mind runs far deeper than the surface frictions that may take place between two thinkers. Charles Peirce was less than happy about a gesture of praise from William James, when James mailed him a pre-publication copy. I’m referring to WJ’s “Appendix C: On the Notion of Reality as Changing,” which he attached to *A Pluralistic Universe*, the book publication of his 1908 Hibbert Lectures at Oxford. This led to an exchange of letters that reveals both the surface friction and the deeper cooperation between two thinkers with differing temperaments.

1909 • Appendix C, excerpt:

“Volumes i, ii, and iii of the *Monist* (1890-93) contain a number of articles by Mr. Charles S. Peirce, articles the originality of which has apparently prevented their making an immediate impression, but which, if I mistake not, will prove a gold mine of ideas for thinkers of the coming generation. Mr. Peirce’s views, though reached so differently, are altogether congruous with Bergson’s. Both philosophers believe that the appearance of novelty in things is genuine.... Peirce’s ‘tychism’ is thus practically synonymous with Bergson’s ‘devenir réel.’” [James *Essays / Pluralistic* 283]

CSP to WJ, March 9, 1909:

[Peirce studied the proof sheets James had sent him (about 4 pp. in print); found several “points of

logic” to discuss...] “and when I had filled forty sheets [in reply] and when I was going on to the forty-first, I concluded that the matter would not interest you....

“I thought your *Will to Believe* was a very exaggerated utterance, such as injures a serious man very much, but to say what you now do is far more suicidal. I have lain awake several nights in succession in grief that you should be so careless of what you say.... [I]t is not very grateful to my feelings to be classed along with a Bergson who seems to be doing his prettiest to muddle all distinctions....”

WJ to CSP, March 10, 1909:

“Before whom have I cast that pearl of an Appendix? I imagined it to be in the purest spirit of your synchistic tychism, and I think still that my only mistake was in sending it to you without the whole text that introduced and justified it.... Forty sheets! Lord help us!...”

Now if I were a Compleat Jamesian, as I someday hope to be, I could show you just how Peirce’s ideas dovetail nicely with those of Bergson; and how both sets of ideas fit into and help to fulfill the Pluralistic Universe of James. But that day is not yet. Let me conclude with a simple anecdote, and an intriguing project by a recent French philosopher who was a disciple (in a sense) of both Bergson and Peirce. As you may know, both James and Peirce participated, off and on, in an informal study group in Cambridge called the Metaphysical Club. No dues were collected, no officers were elected, and the club was forbidden to take any stand on any issue. Here’s “an account by one of James’s students, reported by Fisch,” to suggest what went on:

In conversation James told of a philosophical club of which Chauncey Wright, John Fiske and others were members, at which Peirce was to read a paper. They assembled; Peirce did not come; they waited and waited; finally a two-horse carriage came along and Peirce got out with a dark cloak over him; he came in and began to read his paper. What was it about? He set forth, James said, how the different moments of time got into the habit of coming one after another [for Peirce, all regularity is the result of taking habits]. (Brent, p. 86)

In his list of fourteen “Major Themes and Tendencies” which characterize “The Classic Period in American Philosophy,” Fisch takes up as #5 “The Obsolescence of the Eternal.” In discussing “The shift from eternalism to temporalism, the cult of ‘taking time seriously,’” Fisch points out that “As there are no immutable species since Darwin, so there are no eternal laws of nature since Peirce and Whitehead” (Fisch,

Classic, p. 23).

Despite his reluctance to be “classed along with Bergson,” then, Peirce did share with James’s French friend and correspondent, a strong interest in “taking time seriously.” Bergson’s first book was titled *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (1889). Bergson always insisted on a sharp distinction between time-as-experienced, or *duration*, and time as a concept, or mere “clock time.” If “taking time seriously” is indeed a cult, it is a big one; along with the six American philosophers and Henri Bergson, one would have to include Martin Heidegger, who became a major figure following the publication of his big book: *Being and Time* (1927).

And finally, what about movies, arguably the major art-form of our own times. Aren’t movies—American, European, Asian, all movies—largely about time? That’s what French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995) contends. Among his last publications are two books about the theory, the philosophy, of movies: *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (1986), and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (1989). Now Deleuze had been from the first a close student of the writings of Bergson. His first book was titled *Bergsonism* (1966). As his translator explains, “For Deleuze, Bergson forms part of a ‘counter history’ of philosophy. He was a writer like Lucretius, Spinoza, Hume or Nietzsche ‘who seemed to be part of the history of philosophy, but who escaped from it in one respect or altogether’” (Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, p. 7).

So much for Bergson, but what about Peirce? In the author’s “Preface to the French Edition” of *Cinema 1* we read:

“We will frequently be referring to the American logician Peirce (1839-1914), because he established a general classification of images and signs, which is undoubtedly the most complete and the most varied. It can be compared with Linnaeus’s classifications in natural history, or even more with Mendeleev’s table in chemistry” (Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, p. xiv). Every college or even high school student who has ever taken chemistry can recall the large “Periodic Table of the Elements” that decorated laboratory walls and science textbooks. If film study can match or exceed the interest of students in chemistry, we may soon see comparable charts mapping Peirce’s triad of categories—Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness—against several of his other triadic classifications of signs.

I would be lying if I pretended to understand all this. But even to browse in these two books, or to scan their tables of contents, shows how thoroughly Deleuze has intermixed the ideas of Bergson with those of Peirce. Besides: Deleuze must have enjoyed years and years of movie-going to have at his fingertips all the best films by all the best directors—which he certainly makes generous use of in the pages of these

“Many Geniuses Coming Together...” by Bill DeLoach

two books. If you manage to rent and view—or find on cable—most of the films mentioned, it will constitute almost a second liberal education; or at least a thoroughgoing acquaintance with enough films, directors, cameramen, critics and the rest to form a world all its own.

There are worse ways to spend one's time: looking at the close-ups in Bergman films to see how they reflect “Firstness” according to Peirce; studying “Secondness” as reflected in large action films like John Ford's Westerns, or the the historical films of Griffith and Cecil B. DeMille; and watching the movies of Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton to see “Secondness” demonstrated in smaller forms. As for “Thirdness,” you will need to seek it in the movies of the Marx Brothers... and Alfred Hitchcock... and directors like Lumet, Cassavetes, and Altman. And this is just the tip of the iceberg, without even touching on the larger book, *Cinema 2*.

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In Conclusion:

If Peirce were alive today, I suspect he would be pleased to see his classification of signs “compared with Linnaeus's classifications in natural history, or even more with Mendeleev's table in chemistry,” as Deleuze puts it. Since Peirce's first paper on classification, “On a New List of Categories,” was published in 1867, his work predates that of Dmitry Mendeleev, who published his periodic table of the elements in 1869. Peirce might even be willing to admit that James was not entirely wrong in seeing a possible connection between Bergson's work and his own.

There are aspects of Plato's thinking that don't come fully into focus until you have read some Aristotle, and vice-versa; and similarly: you can't fully understand William James until you have read some Charles Peirce, and vice-versa. James had a gift for reaching the general public, both as listeners and as readers; Peirce made it his priority to fill in fully the systematic technicalities which specialists in philosophy require. James rounded up a large audience, which he tried to share with Peirce; Peirce, as we have seen, fussed at James for not minding his logical P's and Q's.

But over the long haul they trusted one another, and often they worked along parallel lines. After James published his talk on “Great Men and Their Environment” in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Peirce took up an extended study of Great Men, working with volunteers from among his students at Johns Hopkins to see whether great scientists and philosophers could be classified according to his categories of First, Second, Third (see Brent, p. 368). If I may borrow from Hilary Putnam a pair of terms which he uses to distinguish

between the Continental (philosophers of vision) and the Anglo-American or Analytical (philosophers of argument) schools of thought, I would say that James, like Plato, was a philosopher of vision; Peirce, like Aristotle, a philosopher of argument. Both are essential.³

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3. See Conant's “Introduction” to Putnam's *Realism With a Human Face*, fn. 42, p. xxxi; and *passim*.