

American Thought Before 1900: Introduction *

Prior to 1900, European reaction to American thought was generally disdainful. Alexis de Tocqueville observed in 1835 that: “. . . in no country in the civilized world is less attention paid to philosophy than in the United States. The Americans have no philosophical school of their own; and they care but little for all the schools into which Europe is divided . . .” America, it was widely held, was the receiving port for European men and ideas, but contributed little that was original to philosophical thought.

This indictment of American thought, though overstated, was justifiable if one took as the standard of excellence the kind of academic philosophy practiced in Europe. For academic philosophy did not fully develop in America until the mid and late nineteenth century; and America produced few, if any, outstanding technical philosophers. Yet America was far from being an intellectual wasteland; creative thought was present, though it was usually related to practical interests.

Is there any quality of “American” thought which distinguishes it from that developed elsewhere?

One peculiar and all-pervasive characteristic is its pluralism. For any single generalization about it, a counter-generalization is usually possible. Thought in America has developed in response to external influences and to internal problems and challenges. America has been receptive to many cultures and to a variety of intellectual themes. There is, for example, both a liberal and a conservative tradition throughout American history. There is the America of radical democratic individualism and equalitarianism of Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine, Ethan Allen, Benjamin Rush, Henry Thoreau, Abraham Lincoln and John Dewey—an America in which liberal causes are espoused or in which a dominant secular and naturalistic outlook prevails. But there is also a conservative stream in American history, represented in the religious interests of the Puritans, Jonathan Edwards, and Samuel Johnson, in the defense of orthodoxy by the Scottish realists and speculative idealists, and in the conservative politics of Cadwallader Colden, Alexander Hamilton, John C. Calhoun, and even George Santayana. America is thus the meeting place of divergent ideas and movements: Puritanism, deism, materialism, Unitarianism, transcendentalism, idealism, realism, and pragmatism—and most recently of naturalism, positivism, analytic philosophy, Marxism, Thomism, phenomenology, Zen Buddhism, and existentialism. Any simple formulas designed to reduce these diverse elements into a uniform tradition are bound to be distorted.

Nevertheless, one characteristic theme seems to distinguish the American tradition: *ideas are evaluated pragmatically, and their significance is most frequently determined by reference to their practical contexts, their political, religious, moral or social purposes. Thinking is a form of activity; and there is great confidence and optimism in the ability of knowledge to solve the problems of men.*

Philosophical thought may be approached in either of two ways: (1) as technical philosophy, abstracted from its broader contexts of origin and application, or (2) as it is related to the actual problems encountered within the sociological and cultural setting. The relationship between (1) and (2) is not always clear, and we do not know with any accuracy what kind of philosophy a given set of historic conditions will produce. Does philosophy reflect the culture as we generally assume? Or is it at times an escape from it? Although philosophy is related to socio-cultural conditions, it claims not to be solely a local or temporal affair. In American thought prior to 1900, at least, there was not much philosophizing in the first, strict, sense. Hence American ideas must be examined primarily—although not exclusively—in terms of their institutional contexts. But this does not mean that these ideas are without philosophical content; only that they are embedded in the very way of life. Indeed, de Tocqueville himself notes “. . . almost all the inhabitants of the United States use their minds in the same manner, and direct them according to the same rules; that is to say, without ever having taken the trouble to define the rules, they have a philosophical method common to the whole people. There is a national bias, according to Ralph Barton Perry, which is hidden underneath the level of formal expression, an unarticulated set of premises which govern not only the judgments of everyday life, but to some extent color scientific, literary, and philosophic expression, in the problems considered and in the solutions accepted.

Rather than pre-twentieth-century America be judged harshly for its failure to develop technical philosophy, let it be noted that what happened here is perhaps inevitable in a frontier community. It is rare that colonial or virgin territories equal mature and settled lands in their creative cultural expression.

However, the problems which confronted young America did raise fundamental issues—metaphysical, religious, political and ethical—that were philosophical in character. And the origins of American thought show that the roots of the pragmatic method lie deep within the American experience. Pragmatism as a philosophic doctrine was not formally enunciated and explicitly defended until the end of the nineteenth century, by Charles Peirce (1839-1914), William James (1848-1910) and John Dewey (1859-1952)—long after it had been unconsciously practiced. According to the pragmatists, the meaning of an idea is to be discovered by reference to its bearing on practice and conduct. Ideas are inextricably connected to their consequences in behavior, and they are to be judged by the differences they make in concrete contexts. With Peirce, James, and Dewey, pragmatic philosophy was heralded as the unique American

* Kurtz, Paul. *American Thought Before 1900: A Sourcebook, from Puritanism to Darwinism*. New York: The MacMillan Company, 1966.

contribution to the history of philosophy, although it seemed to many foreign critics to be merely the rationalization of a way of life, a philosophical expression of the American inclination to judge ideas by their uses and functions.

The history of American thought shows that although there has been extensive borrowing of foreign ideas (primarily European), these have been transformed in the light of American needs. European critics have attacked this adaptation of ideas to practical ends as crudely “materialistic.” But America not only conquered a vast unknown land and developed an advanced technological society, it also assimilated countless immigrants from all over the world, and created a democratic social order. And the energies which made this enormous achievement possible have their sources in certain philosophical and psychological beliefs, attitudes and values. These can be seen in the pioneer spirit of the first settlers, in the radical democracy of the Age of Reason and Revolution, in the continuing journey westward, in the renaissance that followed the Civil War, and finally, in the twentieth century, in the elaboration of a distinctive pragmatic philosophy.

I. THE COLONIAL PERIOD (1620-1776)

A continuing challenge to the American intellectual scene has been provided by the successive waves of immigration, and the resulting infusions of divergent ideas. No sooner did one wave begin to be assimilated than a new force appeared. Thus America constantly added the experience and thought of older traditions to its shore; yet at the same time these traditions were themselves profoundly altered by the new habitat. The settlements in America were established by European colonists: the Puritans of Plymouth, the Anglicans of Jamestown and Charleston, the Dutch of New York, the Quakers and Germans of Pennsylvania, the French of New Orleans, the Scotch-Irish of the advancing frontier communities, to mention only a few—and later the Negroes, Irish, Jews, Poles, Italians, and others exerted a significant influence.

The British influence on our institutions has been the strongest, however; perhaps the fact that we possess a common tongue is the chief reason for this. Thus the colonies of New England, particularly the Massachusetts Bay area, seem to have left the strongest impression; at least, historians have been particularly concerned with their influence and have emphasized our Puritan heritage. Curiously, America, partly Puritan in origin, has been strongly concerned with rejecting its Puritanism; but the mark left on American character still remains.

The Puritans (1620-1700)

The Puritans were united and motivated by religious conviction. Initially members of the Church of England, they wished to purge it of “Popish practices.” Dissatisfied with the meager reforms enacted by the Anglican Church, they settled in the unknown wilderness, hoping to build a New Zion. The Puritans were thoroughly British in culture and conventions; they differed from their contemporaries primarily in the degree of their religious dissent.

The New England Puritans were particularly characterized by their agreement with the principles of Calvinism. Even though they did not consider themselves to be literal disciples of John Calvin, they shared with him the belief in the absolute sovereignty of God and of the utter dependence of man upon Him. They believed that God was an all-powerful and arbitrary being whose ways were inscrutable to man. He had originally made a covenant with Adam, for which man was to receive immortal life. But Adam disobeyed God, and as a consequence merited damnation. All of Adam’s descendants inherited the curse of “original sin,” and were irresistibly given over to evil. But God made a second covenant enabling man to receive salvation through the intermediary of his Son, Jesus Christ. However, this salvation could not be earned by good works or moral excellence, for it was entirely foreordained by God’s will, and the elect (a “Society of Saints”) were totally dependent upon His grace. Man must offer God faith and obedience, but such devotion (seen in conversion and regeneration) was in response to God’s gift of grace and not possible without it. The Puritans, like Saint Augustine and Calvin, thus faced a dilemma between the doctrines of determinism and free will. It was this dilemma which Jonathan Edwards, in his book *Freedom of the Will* (1754), attempted to resolve.

For the Puritans, life was a moral process originating in sin, dedicated to faith, and culminating in the hope that ultimate salvation might be achieved. Certain moral virtues were typically emphasized: discipline, devotion, honesty, moderation, temperance, frugality, industry, simplicity. Theirs was an ethic of serious and hard work, an ethic of practical activity and enterprise—although one might expect that philosophical predestinationism would lead to passive inaction. Perhaps the dynamic activism of the American Puritan might better be explained, not by his religion or his philosophy, which he brought with him, but by the new geographical and economic necessities; here was a frontier to claim, a wilderness to conquer, a future to forge.

Much has been written about the fact that a form of individualism was implicit in the Puritan rejection of the authority of the medieval Church and in the claim that man’s relation to God was private. Yet New England Puritanism was intolerant of dissent and heresy, and the Massachusetts Bay Colony in particular was organized along theocratic lines. Increase Mather and Cotton Mather were both prone to authoritarian attitudes; and Anne Hutchinson, Roger Williams, the “witches” of Salem among others, encountered

innumerable difficulties with the religious intolerance of the new establishment. The covenant with God seemed to be more of a corporate arrangement between the whole community and God rather than a private affair. Moreover, the earliest settlements did not espouse a doctrine of the separation of church and state. The Congregational Churches, being organized as autonomous bodies, perhaps contained the seeds of democracy. But it was only after new sects began arriving, such as the Quakers, Baptists, antinomists, and others, that separate and freer communities were established in Rhode Island, Baltimore and the middle Colonies; for toleration seemed the only way to cope with the plethora of denominations. It was during the Age of Reason—when secularism prevailed—that the separation of church and state, and religious toleration, as fundamental American principles were finally and clearly enunciated.

Colonial Materialism and Immaterialism (1700-1776)

By and large, seventeenth-century America was so dominated by practical pursuits and religious interests that little time was devoted to theoretical philosophy or science (with some exceptions, such as the work of the astronomer, William Brattle, at Harvard). It was not until the eighteenth century that intellectual philosophic and scientific interests were more directly nourished. Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) represents the most thoroughgoing use of philosophical idealism in an attempt to provide a rational philosophical vindication of the Calvinistic system against its critics. But he arrived on the scene virtually at the end of the period in which Calvinism was influential. Samuel Johnson (1696-1772), an Anglican, shared Edwards' desire to use philosophical immaterialism to combat materialism; and his work was deeply influenced by George Berkeley of Great Britain. But despite intermittent periods of religious revival, neither Edwards nor Johnson could stem the tide of new forces, especially the development of modern science and modern philosophy, which had begun to emerge in Europe. The early Puritans were inspired by the Reformation; but by the eighteenth century, Newton, Locke, and the materialists provided a more powerful source of influence.

Within the Colonies there emerged American counterparts of European materialism and deism. Both Cadwallader Colden (1688-1776) and Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) represented these modern tendencies. Colden was a serious student of Newtonian science, and he offered a major defense and elaboration of materialistic philosophy. Franklin experimentally applied and extended the concepts of Newtonian physics to electrical phenomena. Franklin is a transitional figure. Although he came early under the influence of Calvinism, he proceeded to naturalize moral values, retaining Calvinism's practical code of hard work, but making happiness rather than faith its chief aim. Thus, the revealed religion of the early settlers was gradually supplanted by a religion of reason.

II. REASON AND REVOLUTION (1776-1800)

With the outbreak of the War for Independence in 1776, interest in the ideals of the Age of Reason became pre-eminent. The Enlightenment had a correlative impact in America. Many of the colonists were inspired by the English Deists such as Blount, Clarke, Bolingbroke, Collins, Shaftesbury, and Wollaston, and by French writers such as Condillac, Diderot, Condorcet, Cabanis, Holbach, Volney, La Mettrie, and Voltaire. However, it was the empiricism and liberalism of the British philosopher John Locke that had the most important and direct influence on American thought—though once again his major impact was practical.

The Age of Reason in America assumed three forms: first, it contributed to the development of materialism and deism in metaphysics and religion; second, it helped to emphasize the values of a secular and naturalistic morality; and third, and most dramatically, it made meaningful the ideals of republicanism and revolution.

Materialism

The Newtonian materialism of the colonial period came to full maturity in the latter part of the eighteenth century. Many of its proponents were medical men, such as Benjamin Rush (1745-1813) of Philadelphia. Among other materialists were Joseph Priestley, the noted discoverer of oxygen who fled from England to America in 1794, Thomas Cooper, Southern exponent of progressive thought, and Joseph Buchanan, leader of a remarkable renaissance in secular naturalism at Transylvania University in Kentucky. The materialists had strong interests in science and they attempted to extend what they considered to be the legitimate aims of science to other areas of the cosmos, including man. Thus, they consistently attempted to apply physical and mechanistic explanations to mind and morality.

Deism

Deism as a religious philosophy was widely espoused by many of the advanced leaders of the new republic, such as Jefferson and Washington. Its most forceful and persistent defenders, however, were Thomas Paine (1737-1809), Ethan Allen (1737-1789), and Elihu Palmer (1764-1806). The deists affirmed the supremacy of reason, and denied the claims of revelation, prophecies, and miracles. They were bitter critics of the established church and clerical authority, defending the principles of religious freedom, toleration, and the separation of church and state. Paine and Allen in particular submitted the Old and New Testaments to scathing criticism and denunciation. Their religious radicalism was perhaps atypical in its extremism, but it did express a widely-shared point of view in the age.

For the deist, all events in nature were determined by natural laws. God, as the first cause, designed the natural order. Most deists looked upon nature, including man, as a manifestation of the goodness of God. This belief in the basic goodness of man was incompatible with the Calvinist conceptions of human depravity and original sin. Moreover, the deists held that man, as a rational being, was capable of achieving the good life on earth, and did not need to wait for the heavenly kingdom to come. Their morality was humanistic, and relative to human aims and goals—a marked contrast to the religious morality of the first settlers. Happiness and pleasure, not faith and humility, were the standards of choice. The Enlightenment manifested an optimistic faith in science, in reason, and in education, as the instruments of human progress. Following Lockian empiricism, all knowledge was reduced to original sensations. Man was held to be the product of conditioning forces in his environment and there was, therefore, a great interest in achieving social justice and welfare; for it was held that if one improved the social environment, one might change man for the better.

Political Ideas

If America contributed anything original in this period, it was the practical development of new political and social ideals. The ideas which inspired the Revolution had their origins in the writings of Locke and Montesquieu, but their experimental application in a new context was a significant innovation. The application of the general ideas of liberalism to the Revolutionary situation involved difficult problems and required serious thought. Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), Thomas Paine (1737-1809), and others maintained that justice is related to the doctrine of "natural rights" ("life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness") and not to the divine right of kings, hereditary rights, or the conserving of established institutions. Governments are artificial contracts made by men, to be overthrown and changed by men if they do not fulfill their original purposes or if they violate inalienable human rights. Thus republican institutions and democratic attitudes were tested in action, and the principles of democracy became an essential element in American life.

This does not mean that there was unanimity among the colonists. And indeed, after the Revolutionary cause was gained, there was need to reason out and build a new system of government. *The Federalist* papers (1787-88) were written by Alexander Hamilton (1757-1804) the conservative, James Madison (1751-1836) the liberal, and John Jay (1745-1829) in order to explain and justify the Federal Constitution. These papers raised profound issues in areas relating to political science and philosophy, issues that were especially troubling in that period: what are the claims to power of the various factions and classes of society? how does one reconcile the claims of the democratic with the oligarchical principle? which is more important, liberty or equality? and many

others. Some American thinkers, such as Jefferson, considered agrarian society as the ideal, but others, such as Hamilton, favored a commercial or industrial society. Some wished to defend sectional interests and state governments, but Hamilton defended the necessity of strong centralized government. The problem of how to safeguard human liberties against the encroachments of a tyrannical government was dealt with by the development of a system of checks and balances among the three branches of government.

Impressive and unique in the origin of the new republic was the attempt of the colonists, unencumbered by tradition, to apply a vigorous and fresh outlook to political and social problems. If their ideas were not original in genesis they were original in the pragmatic uses to which they were put.

III. CONSERVATISM IN POLITICAL THEORY AND PHILOSOPHY (1800-1850)

No sooner had America reached its apogee in brilliance than a conservative reaction set in—political, religious, moral, and philosophic. The liberal stream of the Enlightenment was overwhelmed by a conservative undercurrent, which now rose to the surface. This seems to be a fairly recurrent phenomenon in American history, where liberal free thought has at various times been subjected to suppression by evangelical revivalist movements or by reactionary pressures. Yet a good case can be made for the counter-thesis that, in spite of periods of conservative reaction, the dominant theme of American life is one of changing, hence liberal, social values. Nonetheless, the period between the American Revolution and the Civil War, with the exception of transcendentalism, was peculiarly lacking in intellectual distinction. There were profound social and political problems that the United States faced in consolidating the gains of the Revolution and in coming to terms with slavery. But this had little effect in creating a new or vigorous philosophical point of view.

Southern Racial Aristocracy (1800-1860)

In political theory, an immediate reaction against the Declaration of Independence was stimulated by a fear of "the mob" inspired to some extent by the Jacobin excesses of the French Revolution. The South was unable to reconcile itself to Jeffersonian democracy. Is the principle "all men are created equal" defensible, or does it rest on untenable metaphysical grounds? And if it is acceptable, does it apply to Negroes? Virginia was at first under the influence of Jeffersonian ideals. But the black belt, with its center in Charleston and extending to the southwest, and later Virginia itself, came to defend an ideal of Greek democracy" in which only the white "citizens," not the slaves, were to be properly considered. People like John Taylor, George Tucker, Thomas Dew,

Alexander H. Stephens, Albert Bledsoe, and John C. Calhoun attempted to provide a defense of the *status quo*, which included the institution of slavery and the economic interests that it supported. Various attacks were leveled against the notions of liberty, equality, natural rights, democracy, and strong federal government. Some southerners based their defense on racial superiority, on custom, or on passion, or even Biblical authority; some held, too, that slavery was a good, since it strengthened the character of the masters! John C. Calhoun (1782-1850), the most serious southern philosophical writer of this period, denied that there were natural rights prior to society—such rights were metaphysical abstractions—and he attempted to defend a hierarchical and organic conception of society. Order and security, rather than scientific reason or democratic reform, were to be valued and preserved.

There were times, of course, when the liberals were ascendant, as during the election of Jefferson to the Presidency (1801-09) and during the Jacksonian period (1829-37), when western frontier individualism and egalitarianism returned in full force. But in the nine divisions between the States, which was sealed, finally, only through war and by force. Lincoln gave renewed expression to the ideals of Jeffersonian democracy and, victorious in the Civil War, was able to preserve the Union.

Academic Philosophy: Scottish Realism (1800-1850)

A similar conservatism was evident in religion in the early nineteenth century. The radical deistic spirit of the Age of Reason was lost in the general subservience of science to religion. The earlier confidence in the powers of human intelligence was replaced by a failure of courage and a sense of human dependence. Remarkable during this period were the numerous scholarly attempts to rationalize received traditions and values. Many national religious denominations were established—Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Baptists, Mormons, etc., and many colleges were founded under religious auspices. When Union College (Schenectady) was founded in 1795 as a nondenominational college its *motto-Fraternite*—was taken from the French Revolution; Trinity College (Hartford), on the other hand, was chartered by Episcopalians in 1823, and its motto was *Pro ecclesia et patria*. During the colonial period philosophy had no special place in the colleges, which were looked upon at first as a training ground for the ministry, and later for the learned professions, such as medicine and law. But, with the founding of many liberal arts colleges in the nineteenth century, philosophy was widely taught as a subject having an important place in the curriculum. It was generally divided into three parts: natural, mental, and moral philosophy. Frequently, the college president was a clergyman who taught an “edifying” course in philosophy, that is, a course that was safe, respectable, and designed to indoctrinate. The purpose of many or most of these institutions of higher learning was to provide moral

discipline and an ordered conception of the universe. The college thus had the conservative function of preserving a cultural tradition and, in effect, of justifying the *status quo*. The early nineteenth century was the heyday of the writer of philosophy textbooks—equaled perhaps only in our day. In 1835, for example, Francis Wayland, President of Brown University, published *Elements of Moral Science*, which eventually sold two hundred thousand copies. The key to its popularity lay, perhaps, in the fact that two-thirds of the text was devoted to “practical ethics.” Wilson Smith has observed that between 1830 and 1860 a high percentage of professors of moral philosophy were personally involved in public affairs. Most of the books published in philosophy were works intended for either moral or religious application. Indeed, Noah Porter, President of Yale, maintained that philosophy in America had been prosecuted chiefly as an “applied science” and in its special connection to theology, morals, and politics.

There were at least two dominant philosophical influences apparent in this period: Scottish realism, and philosophical idealism, with the latter finally prevailing toward the end of the century (see Part V, below). The Scottish philosophers, Thomas Reid, Dugald Stewart, Adam Ferguson, and others, seemed to many in America to offer a powerful answer to Hume’s skepticism.

Scottish realism was first introduced at Princeton before 1800 by John Witherspoon and Samuel Stanhope Smith. It was espoused later in one form or another by Francis Bowen, Joseph Haven, Noah Porter, and James McCosh, among others. James McCosh (1811-1894), a late arrival to American shores, was able to summarize the significance of the movement more effectively than his predecessors. McCosh thought that “. . . Yankees are distinguished from most others by their practical observation and invention,” and that realism might very well be the “distinctive” American philosophy. The return to common sense implicit in realism no doubt appealed to native American practicalism.

Realism was based on the doctrine that “real objects” existed independently of man and were perceivable as such. Real objects were neither unknowable nor reducible to phenomena or ideas. All of this seemed self-evident” and “given” to inductive intuition. But the realists also thought that such intuition might establish moral, political and religious truths. Indeed, all “first and fundamental truths” could be known in the same way. There were self-evident certitudes of right and wrong, standards of justice and injustice, truth of God’s existence and of immortality of the soul, mathematical objects, and basic scientific universals. This method could be extended indefinitely, and Edinburgh philosophy was conveniently used to instate a whole set of orthodox ideas and values, giving them the sanction of philosophical necessity. Thus, what at first appeared as a solution to knotty philosophical problems became a means of rationalizing the unquestioning acceptance of traditional values which appealed to “common sense.”

IV. TRANSCENDENTALISM (1820-1860)

Many literary historians consider transcendentalism the distinctive development in American letters of the nineteenth century. It was largely a pre-Civil War movement, although many of its adherents lived well beyond that period, and it attempted to establish Boston as the cultural center of America. Among its proponents were Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, William Ellery Channing, Theodore Parker, Bronson Alcott, James Freeman Clarke, James Marsh, Frederick Henry Hedge, Margaret Fuller, and Caleb Sprague Henry. Henry James the elder, a Swedenborgian mystic, might also be classed as a transcendentalist of sorts.

The movement was rather conservative in its metaphysics and epistemology, but it was decidedly liberal in its morals and politics. It was a fairly inchoate movement-literary, religious, political, and philosophical-distinguishable more perhaps by what it opposed than by what it supported.

Initially the transcendentalists were Unitarians, in particular William Ellery Channing (1780-1842), Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), and Theodore Parker (1810-1860). Liberal in sentiment, the Unitarian transcendentalists transformed Calvinistic pessimism to optimism; God was loving and just, not arbitrary or vindictive; man was not necessarily sinful but capable of moral virtue and goodness. The Unitarians also reacted against the mechanistic universe and rational religion of the deists. Nature manifested divine purpose, and man might know and appreciate its full beauty. But man must transcend ordinary understanding or experience, and his soul must have direct contact with divinity; this might be done largely without benefit of clergy. The Unitarians, like the deists, wished to use reason to interpret the Bible but, unlike the deists, many, such as Channing, accepted revelation and Biblical miracles as true.

The transcendentalists were reacting against what they considered to be the limitations of the Lockian conception of experience, but they went somewhat beyond rational Unitarianism. Many rejected Biblical religion. Influenced by the romantic idealists, Coleridge, Kant, Schelling, and Cousin, by Platonism, and by Indian mysticism, they attempted to expand the categories of the Enlightenment. The universe was richer and deeper, they claimed, than the empiricists had allowed. There was a "transcendental realm" over and beyond the world of phenomenal appearances, an "ultimate reality which only reason and intuition could penetrate. The transcendentalists gave free play to subjective and mystical insight. Transcendentalists, such as Theodore Parker, criticized the dependence upon empirical and scientific facts and understanding; knowledge based on such evidence was no more than probable, and ended in skepticism. Parker claimed that there was an "ultimate truth" which was certain and absolute, and this provided a basis, not only for metaphysics, but for morals and politics as well. In general, the transcendentalists were poets and seers who

proclaimed the truth as they saw it and were not interested in rational proofs. Transcendental epistemology thus seemed impervious to the rules of scientific verification or logical consistency: it was tested by intuition and sentiment.

The transcendentalists were idealists in metaphysics. They postulated two realms: the unreal world of sensations, which was the object of physical science; and the unseen world, a religious, moral, and aesthetic universe, which only poetry and philosophy could discover. The universe, according to Ralph Waldo Emerson, was at root one in which mind/ the "over-soul," and the "spirit" ultimately prevailed. In spite of Emerson's idealism, many have recognized a core of Yankee pragmatism even in transcendentalism. Emerson himself distinguished three stages of idealism: the academic, the poetic, and the practical, by which man relates to nature. And his late work, *The Conduct of Life*, is concerned with the ". . . practical question of the conduct of life. How shall I live?"

Transcendentalism was, therefore, not limited to metaphysical speculation, but sought to provide a fulfilling way of life. It was a movement stimulated by moral idealism. Transcendentalists attempted to liberate the individual and to free him from the blind hold of custom and convention. Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), whom Herbert W. Schneider describes as a "pagan" and the "Nietzsche of New England," best illustrates the model of the nonconforming individual. Thoreau insisted that the individual must be free to consult his inner light, and he opposed institutions when they imposed on an individual's intuition. Thus civil disobedience was man's highest obligation, if society contradicted his moral conscience. This was a continuation of the radical individualism and anarchism implicit in the spirit of the frontier. Even the genteel Emerson, in his essay *Self-Reliance*, hails the nonconforming individual and defends his independence from tradition. Emerson, whose very name later became synonymous with respectability, was himself a rebel of sorts. Indeed, an early theological address he delivered at the Harvard Divinity School was considered too radical and was likely one of the reasons why he was, for many years, ostracized from the Harvard Yard.

The transcendentalists were humanitarians deeply concerned with moral progress, with political and social justice and equality. Each individual possessed an implicit dignity, which was also a claim to equality, for each person had both the ability and the right to consult his private intuition. From the dignity of each man and his inalienable natural rights it followed that slavery was an unpardonable moral crime. Many of the transcendentalists were leaders in the abolitionists' cause. Some defended women's rights, others espoused the building of ideal Utopian communities (such as Brook Farm). They fought against acquiescence to injustice and defended liberalism in social action.

V. SPECULATIVE AND ABSOLUTE IDEALISM (1860-1900)

Transcendentalism was sympathetic to philosophical idealism, but it seemed primarily to offer a literary and romantic rather than a technical approach to philosophy. European philosophical idealism had taken root in American thought, and it reappeared after the Civil War as the dominant academic tradition. But it was transformed into pure and technical speculative philosophy. A group known as the St. Louis Hegelians was especially influential in the development of this kind of speculative idealism. Its members included William T. Harris, Henry C. Brokmeyer, Thomas Davidson, George H. Howison, Denton J. Snider, J. E. Woemer, Joseph Pulitzer, and Carl Schurz. Many of these men were immigrants who fled Germany after the failure of the 1848 revolution. The teaching of this group became known throughout the midwest from Milwaukee to Chicago, and later in California; eventually it even penetrated New England, the heartland of transcendentalism.

The St. Louis Hegelians published two major journals: *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, the first of its kind in America, and *The Western*, a review of education, science, literature, and art. The movement was initiated (about 1858) by the Kant Club through the serious study of German absolute idealism: Hegel, Kant, Fichte, Schelling, and later of lesser scholars, such as Erdmann, Trendelenburg and Lotze. The transcendentalists had received their idealism from secondary sources; the speculative idealists went to primary sources, translating and studying directly the works of absolute idealists, especially Hegel's *Logic*. Hegelian philosophers offered a coherent world view and applied it in many different areas: metaphysics, religion, art, morals, politics, law, and education. The German influence continued later, though in a different form, as American scholars, Henry James, George Bancroft, Horace Mann, Henry Barnard, George Ticknor, Edward Everett, and others, studied abroad in German universities. The net result was that Germanic methods of scholarship and philosophy were imported into America.

The speculative idealists argued single-mindedly for the speculative method: they attacked the positivism, empiricism, and agnosticism of Comte, Mill and Spencer, and defended "abstract philosophy." Reason, they believed, could achieve knowledge of "ultimate reality."

William T. Harris (1835-1919), influential editor of *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, thought that before America could develop a philosophy of its own it must study the great masters; and Hegel seemed the most promising. Harris observed, however, that for the St. Louis Hegelians philosophy came to mean "the most practical of all species of knowledge," which suggests that even for those theoretical philosophers, some pragmatic element was present. Laurens Perseus Hickok (1798-1888) was also among the first to become a full-fledged advocate of German idealism. Well-grounded in the work of Kant and

Hegel, he attempted to build a systematic theory of the universe based on absolute reason.

As philosophy became increasingly professionalized and institutionalized in the colleges and universities, idealism became the foremost doctrine of the schools. Many academic professors, like the earlier Scottish realists, were thoroughly orthodox. They used idealism as a support for the "eternal verities" and supernatural religion.

Other noteworthy idealists in the nineteenth century were George T. Ladd, Paul Cams, and the personalists, George H. Howison and Borden Parker Bowne, who claimed that persons or selves are the principal reality. Felix Adler, a Kantian, in 1876 founded the liberal religious Society for Ethical Culture. At Cornell, idealism was strong; and the founding of the *Philosophical Review* by Jacob Gould Schurman in 1892 may be considered the high point of idealism in America.

In a symposium in 1895, George H. Howison summed up the dominant temper of American academic idealism when he said: "We are all agreed in one 'great tenet,' which is 'the entire foundation of philosophy itself: that explanation of the world which maintains that the only thing absolutely real is mind; that all material and all temporal existences take their being from consciousness that thinks and experiences; that out of consciousness they all issue, to consciousness they are presented, and that presence to consciousness constitutes their entire reality.'"

The kind of idealism which generally prevailed, however, was neo-Hegelian absolute or objective idealism. This kind of idealism, unlike mentalistic or subjective idealism (such as the idealism of Berkeley and Johnson), did not simply reduce reality to ideas. Mind was held to be central to the universe; but the universe was thought to be a systematic or organic whole, encompassing the experience of individual men, social mind, and culminating in an objective intelligible order. The order of the universe was not only a logical or causal order, but value and purpose were also said to have an ontological basis in reality. Metaphysical idealism, both in England and America, enjoyed its greatest influence in the nineteenth century, although many important idealists lived on into the twentieth century. Among these were Frank Thilly, George S. Fullerton, Mary W. Calkins, Hugo Munsterberg, George H. Palmer, and James E. Creighton.

Perhaps the greatest representative of idealism in America was Josiah Royce (1855-1916). Royce defended the great tradition of perennial philosophy. Although of the twentieth century and a major influence during the "Golden Age of American Philosophy" on James, Santayana and others at Harvard, Royce is really heir to the nineteenth century. He made a persistent attempt to discover the Absolute in the universe. From fragmentary experience he was led to "the larger self, from the possibility of error to a standard of Absolute truth, and from logic to a theory of order.

Absolute idealism was far removed from pragmatic and experimental naturalism, and was, thus, plainly alien to the native American practical temper. Yet even Royce considered himself to be under the influence of pragmatism, and he called himself an “absolute pragmatist”; for though truth was eternal and timeless, it was nonetheless related to purpose. Royce was doubtless attempting to accommodate some of the newer intellectual influences building in the late nineteenth century. In particular, the Darwinian revolution in biology had such a profound effect upon American thought that by the beginning of the twentieth century the death of absolute idealism seemed a foregone conclusion. The idealists that remained appeared to be, especially in the light of later developments, an anachronistic residue of things past, part of the “cultural lag.”

VI. EVOLUTION AND DARWINISM (1859-1900)

The Civil War marks a turning point in American culture. During the war, the energies of the nation were spent in resolving internal discord. With its termination, men were free to turn some of their energies to the creation of new worlds of imagination and thought. There was an enormous release of creative talent—in the arts, science, literature, and philosophy. The growth of American industrial and technological power and its increasing influence on the world scene was accompanied by correlative intellectual and cultural achievements.

The impact of the scientific revolution on the modern world took on significant proportions with the introduction of Darwin's theory of evolution. This theory stimulated new and bold philosophical discussion, and led to deep conflict, in both Europe and the United States, between science and traditional religion, metaphysics, and ethics. There were two outstanding questions in this dispute: first, was Darwin's scientific hypothesis true? And second, what were the broader philosophical implications of the theory?

The first question was rapidly resolved. Evolutionary ideas in one form or another had been in circulation for almost a century. In biology, Buffon and Lamarck had suggested evolutionary explanations for the variety of life; similarly, geologists had used evolution to account for changes on the earth's surface. Even in America, Jefferson, Benjamin Rush, Samuel Stanhope Smith, and others had observed fossils and were generally aware of the existence of evolutionary processes. Moreover, evolutionary ideas featured prominently in philosophy: Hegelianism took historical development seriously; and Auguste Comte's positivism predicated three stages of social evolution. But it was with the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859 and of *The Descent of Man* in 1871 that evolution, for the first time, seemed to be taken out of the range of speculation and to be given fairly definite factual confirmation. In America, Asa Gray, a botanist at Harvard, became an immediate proponent of the theory. On the other hand, Jean Louis Agassiz, noted Harvard geologist and paleontologist, opposed evolution and defended instead “preformationism”—the idea that

each type was fixed and not capable of evolving from one species to another. In scientific circles generally, however, opposition to Darwin was soon dissipated, and most scientists came to accept his theory of evolution. 7

Behind much of the determined opposition to Darwin lay the strong religious, metaphysical and moral antipathies his theory provoked. Thus Agassiz rejected Darwin on theological grounds. And religious fundamentalists opposed evolution because it conflicted with literal interpretation of the Bible. Religious liberals, on the other hand, welcomed Darwinism, for it provided a basis for free symbolic interpretation. Many thinkers, like James McCosh, made room for evolution in their philosophical positions, yet maintained that God had created the universe and was its first cause. One basic problem, however, was whether and to what extent divine design could be reconciled with evolution. Critics of traditional theology held that natural selection undermined purpose, that chance replaced fixed entelechies, and that scientific law did not imply design. Darwinism challenged many traditional concepts: the notion of a teleological universe, of fixed species, and of man as separate from nature and the product of a special act of divine creation.

All of this led to drastic attempts to adjust philosophy to scientific discovery by the construction of new metaphysical and moral theories, in England, Spencer and Huxley defended Darwinism, and Spencer developed a new metaphysical world view. In America, John Fiske (1842-1901) propounded a cosmic theism, and attempted to explain through evolution the origin of all human capacities, including moral sympathy and intellectual ability. Francis Ellingwood Abbot (1836 - 1903) attempted to develop the broader implications of Darwin for philosophy. Chauncey Wright (1830-1875) accepted Darwin's explanations: within biology and used them to account for self-consciousness and the growth of language, but he resisted the attempt to extend the evolutionary process into a cosmic metaphysic. The major effect of Darwin on metaphysics in America, however, was that nature was now seen as a state of dynamic flux or change, not a fixed system of eternal reality. The classical category of substance or essence thus was transformed into the category of process or event.

Darwinism also encouraged the extension of scientific explanations beyond the physical sciences to the psychological and social sciences. As John Dewey later observed, Darwinism helped break down the dualism between man and nature, mind and body, and it made possible the study of “consciousness” in an objective scientific way. Social scientists such as Lewis Henry Morgan, Lester Ward, and William Graham Sumner early introduced Darwinism into their thinking, a trend which was continued in the twentieth century by George H. Mead and others. Indeed, behaviorism as a psychological method was stimulated in no small part by the Darwinian revolution; and the contemporary behavioral sciences may be said to have the same inspiration.

Within philosophy there was an attempt to naturalize morality by relating it to the natural conditions of human life; and various philosophers tried to apply reason to ethics and to develop a science of valuation and value. Values were not considered as external verities unavailable to scientific treatment and control, but as amenable to careful scientific investigation. American philosophers displayed great confidence in human powers, in the ability of man to know nature and to control it for his own purposes. This confidence, moreover, was extended to politics and society, and there was great emphasis on the potentialities of intelligence for creating a good society. The values emphasized were those of democracy, freedom, art, and education. Some philosophers suggested a "rational" approach to religion, a common faith in naturalistic humanism, justified by its functional value to the individual and the society.

Perhaps the most important fundamental consequence of Darwinism was that it undermined the classical edifice and made possible an experimental and naturalistic philosophy. Chauncey Wright was among the first to defend this kind of thought. Concurrent with the development of philosophic pragmatism and naturalism was a profound interest in problems of logic, semantics, language, and meaning. There was also strong interest in the philosophy of science; scientific method was taken as the key to knowledge. Human behavior was now considered to be continuous with other natural processes and an appropriate subject for science. Thus, the ideals of the Age of Reason which prevailed at the birth of the American republic became dominant again at the beginning of the twentieth century.