# THE REAL METAPHYSICAL CLUB

## The Philosophers, their Debates, and Selected Writings from 1870 to 1885

Edited by Frank X. Ryan, Brian E. Butler, and James A. Good
*with a Narrative History of the Metaphysical Club by John R. Shook*

SUNY PRESS

Map of the city of Cambridge, Mass., 1877. Map reproduction courtesy of the Norman B. Leventhal Map Center at the Boston Public Library.

Published by State University of New York Press, Albany



Printed in the United States of America



For information, contact State University of New York Press, Albany, NY
www.sunypress.edu

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Names: Ryan, Frank X., editor. | Butler, Brian E. (Professor), editor. | Good, James A. (James Allan), editor. | Shook, John R., writer of introduction.
Title: The real Metaphysical Club : the philosophers, their debates, and selected writings from 1870 to 1885 / edited by Frank X. Ryan, Brian E. Butler, and James A. Good ; with a narrative history of the Metaphysical Club by John R. Shook.
Description: Albany : State University of New York, [2019] | Series: SUNY series in American philosophy and cultural thought | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2018017083| ISBN 9781438473253 (hardcover : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781438473260 (e-book) | ISBN 9781438473246 (paperback : alk. paper)
Subjects: LCSH: Philosophy, American—19th century.
Classification: LCC B936 .R38 2019 | DDC 191—dc23 LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2018017083

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# A Narrative History of the Metaphysical Club

John R. Shook

In the summer of 1891, early in August to be specific, the two greatest minds of American education were cabin neighbors, camping on farmland owned by Thomas Davidson high in the Adirondack Mountains of eastern New York, and comparing views on the philosophical logic of G. W. F. Hegel. One of these men was the professor of philosophy of the University of Michigan, who could look across the rugged landscape to glimpse Lake Champlain, where his home town of Burlington lay only twenty-five miles to the northeast in Vermont. He was thirty-one years old, and his name was John Dewey. The other man was fifty-five years old, his name was William T. Harris, and he was the United States Commissioner of Education. Although Davidson and his Glenmore Summer School for the Culture Sciences was fondly remembered by attendees for its rustic accommodations nestled below the peak of Mt. Hurricane, this vacationing escape for professors and their audiences was no mere picnic. Seeds of America's intellectual future were being sown in fertile mental soil.

History remembers those two thinkers as educational giants, important philosophers, and discriminating scholars of German idealism. Devotees of American philosophy's heritage may note that Dewey and Harris had delivered lectures during June 1890 at Davidson's earlier summer school in Farmington, Connecticut. (That school had been a spinoff from the Concord School of Philosophy, founded by Amos Bronson Alcott and led by Harris and Davidson, which had closed in 1888.) William T. Harris and John Dewey also had this obscure fact in common: neither of them was a member of the Metaphysical Club.

The real Metaphysical Club was always small and fairly exclusive, and its members had intricate personal and professional relationships with each other. The time was the 1870s, and the locale was Cambridge, Massachusetts. Some academics can recall how pragmatism originated there.[1] However, historians have generally overlooked the involvement of more philosophers besides pragmatists, and other philosophical movements were initiated among Metaphysical Club members than just pragmatism. To comprehend what the Metaphysical Club really meant, one must understand the many relationships bonding its members and impelling them toward their distinctive philosophical achievements.

Their collaborative and competitive productivity made the Metaphysical Club real, as real as anything could be. Its existence was made all the more real as its influence spread far beyond the close-quarters of sitting rooms of one or another Cambridge resident. A web of entangled connections extending back decades into the past, and forward decades into the future, link otherwise coincidental events left inexplicable without the Metaphysical Club. That most curious web, the astounding proliferation of philosophy woven into America's fabric after the devastation of the Civil War, demands sufficient explanation. If the Metaphysical Club had gone unremarked without a lasting trace, it would be useful to postulate its existence.

Take the relationship between those two camping neighbors as an example. After Dewey graduated from the University of Vermont in 1879, he was teaching in a high school in Oil City, Pennsylvania, and contemplating how to enter an academic career. The only philosophy journal in America, the one he had avidly read in his college's library, was *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*. He had written an article about "The Metaphysical Assumptions of Materialism" that gathered up idealistic arguments gleaned from its pages and the tutelage of his philosophy professor at Vermont, H. A. P. Torrey. The letter accompanying his submission to *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* asked its editor, who was William T. Harris, for a sign of approval that Dewey should pursue philosophy further. Harris did accept that paper, and a second paper about Spinoza too, so Dewey applied to Johns Hopkins University in 1882, the only university in America offering a graduate program in philosophy at that time. He later confided to Harris that "in one sense you are the progenitor."[2] To have the good fortune, as Dewey did, of having two scholars of German idealism as mentors before reaching graduate school can also be taken as a sign of the tight circles enclosing intellectual life during those times, for his mentors were related to each other: William Torrey Harris's great-grandfather was H. A. P. Torrey's great-great-grandfather, Reverend Joseph Torrey of the Connecticut Torreys.

This brief narrative about Dewey does relate to the Metaphysical Club. It relates in a genealogical sense because Joseph Torrey's father-in-law, Reverend John Fiske, was descended from the Massachusetts Fiskes who were also the ancestors of one of the Metaphysical Club members, John Fiske. But there are also academic connections to recount. Harris founded the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, the first journal devoted to philosophy in the English-speaking world, in 1867, the year after he helped to inaugurate the St. Louis Philosophical Society. When some of its members came east in the mid-1870s, they naturally chose Cambridge and the Boston area for its hospitality to idealism, setting the stage for the second phase of the Metaphysical Club after the first stage had abruptly ended with the unexpected death of Chauncey Wright in 1875. William James warmly welcomed the arriving idealists, and he published his first formulations of pragmatism in 1878 in a *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* article titled "Remarks on Spencer's Definition of Mind as Correspondence." Harris himself arrived in 1881, invigorating the next philosophical society, the Hegel Club, as he was nearing the height of his prestige as the editor of America's philosophy journal. But that journal might never had existed at all save for a singular event

that altered the course of America's intellectual life. Harris founded his journal in 1867 after his essay criticizing Herbert Spencer was rejected by the *North American Review*. Only one philosopher had been consulted, and that single evaluation, as negatively dismissive as a single paragraph could be, was rendered by Chauncey Wright.

We have only just begun to trace some of the innumerable strands weaving together the lives of our main characters, and many more are awaiting their introduction. Let us return to young John Dewey. At Johns Hopkins, he took philosophy courses with George Sylvester Morris and psychology courses with G. Stanley Hall. Hall had received his own PhD in psychology in 1878, as the first person to receive a graduate degree in psychology in America, from William James at Harvard University. Hall had found philosophy and then psychology as a career only after abandoning his theological studies at Union Theological Seminary in New York in order to go to Germany for advanced studies in philosophy, inspired by the prior example set by a fellow seminary student, who was none other than George S. Morris.[3] Hall attended some meetings of the Metaphysical Club, and the later Hegel Club as well, and his 1879 article describing "Philosophy in the United States" drew heavily upon his acquaintances with their members. Dewey was a member of a Metaphysical Club, the philosophy club at Johns Hopkins University, which was founded and led by his third professor, Charles Sanders Peirce. This namesake echo of the Cambridge Metaphysical Club was perhaps its most significant organizational spinoff, where Peirce, Dewey, and several other Johns Hopkins graduate students read promising papers on philosophy, psychology, and logic which became valuable publications. Like Dewey, Peirce and Hall had both published their early philosophical work in *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*.

Although a philosopher could reach an audience of intellectual peers in a journal's pages, philosophers were few in number and there were fewer opportunities for direct interactions. In the 1860s and 1870s, a philosopher's dialogue partners were, of necessity, local residents with connections to the area. For the real Metaphysical Club, the locale was Cambridge, and the preeminent connection for everyone was Harvard University. This club was a nine-years-long episode within a much broader pattern of informal philosophical discussion, which had enlivened Cambridge and the Boston area from the 1840s to the 1880s.

Small clubs for convivial discussions of literary and intellectual matters were commonplace in Cambridge, going back to the previous generation of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr., and Henry James Sr. By the 1860s and 1870s, the elder transcendentalists had their Saturday Club dinners in Boston, while the next generation of freethinkers had their Radical Club (founded in 1867 and later called the Chestnut Street Club). What they all had in common was Harvard University. To graduate from Harvard or teach at Harvard meant a lifetime of opportunities to dine and discourse with alumni, if one resided anywhere in the vicinity. It was an opportunity for classmates to maintain social ties, pursue professional connections, and promote civic interests. Small gatherings were held in private homes after the dinner hour in Cambridge; larger gatherings could be

scheduled as dinners at any of Boston's genteel restaurants. To have an upcoming "club" meeting on one's calendar might be a reminder about an evening at a friend's house, an afternoon to spend with admirers of literature, or a group dinner at one of Boston's eating establishments, such as Parker's Hotel or the Union Club.

Our narrative has, so far, mentioned philosophical organizations, among several, where professors of philosophy, their students, and intellectual enthusiasts could regularly gather:

St. Louis Philosophical Society (1866–mid-1880s)
The Radical Club, or Chestnut St. Club, in Boston (1867–1880)
The Metaphysical Club in Cambridge (1872–79)
The Metaphysical Club at Johns Hopkins University (1879–1885)
The Concord School of Philosophy (1879–1888)
The Hegel Club in Boston (1880–88)
Farmington Summer School for the Culture Sciences (1888–1890)
Berkeley Philosophical Union at the University of California (1889–1910s)
Glenmore Summer School for the Culture Sciences (1891–1900)

These organizations, large and small, played an indispensable role for the profession, since there was no other obvious opportunity for philosophical minds to gather. The first meetings of the Western Philosophical Association and the Eastern Philosophical Association were not inaugurated until 1900–01. During the nineteenth century, smaller groups at regional levels fulfilled that academic need. The hundreds of speakers and lecturers who offered their talks and their time to those organizations read like a "Who's Who" of American collegiate and literary life during that era.

Chauncey Wright, Harvard class of 1852, seems central to any important intellectual gathering around the Cambridge area. He was renowned in town for his social demeanor and amiable intelligence. He had been a central participant in intellectual groups, such as the "Septem" club consisting of college friends, and literary gatherings such as the Shakespeare club, since in the mid-1850s. Thanks largely to Wright, the core of the Metaphysical Club had known each other for more than a decade before its first official assembly. After Wright met Charles Peirce (Harvard 1859) in 1857, they struck up a philosophical comradeship that drew in John Fiske (Harvard 1863) and William James (Harvard MD 1869) during in the early 1860s, and James brought along Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. (Harvard 1861). Their letters and reminiscences are sprinkled with references to encounters on the occasion of a philosophical lecture they attended, or evening visits to each other's homes for conversation, throughout the 1860s. Writing home from Brazil in 1865 while a member of the Agassiz expedition, James admits his homesickness: "Would I might hear Chauncey Wright philosophize for one evening, or see La Farge, or Perry, or Holmes."[4]

After 1866, their interactions deepened and accelerated. Holmes was a regular visitor at the James house, Wright and Fiske were frequent interlocutors, Wright was corresponding with a classmate of Peirce's, Frank Abbot (Harvard 1859), about space and time, and Peirce and Wright were debating over Mill and Kant on a practically daily basis.[5] While

traveling in Europe, James wrote to Holmes in January 1868 to again confess his longing for deep conversation, and he proposed a plan of action:

> When I get home let's establish a philosophical society to have regular meetings and discuss none but the very tallest and broadest questions to be composed of none but the very topmost cream of Boston manhood. It will give each one a chance to air his own opinion in a grammatical form, and to sneer and chuckle when he goes home at what damned fools all the other members are—and may grow into something very important after a sufficient number of years.[6]

After James returned to Cambridge in November 1868, a dinner club was waiting for him, but no philosophical society was formed. Nevertheless, Peirce and James grew to appreciate each other's acumen as much as they both esteemed Wright's brilliance. In 1869, James remarked in a letter to Henry P. Bowditch, "I have just been quit by Chas. S. Peirce, with whom I have been talking about a couple of articles in the St. Louis 'Journal of Speculative Philosophy' by him, which I have just read. They are exceedingly bold, subtle and incomprehensible, and I can't say that his vocal elucidations helped me a great deal to their understanding, but they nevertheless interest me strangely."[7] Peirce's articles were "Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man" and "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities" from 1867, in which intuited and a priori certainties are overthrown by the inferential and fallible nature of all thinking and belief.

James also heard some of Peirce's 1869 Harvard lectures on British logicians, and despite James's episodes of depression during 1868–1871, the ongoing life of Harvard was a welcome distraction. Harvard's new president, Charles William Eliot, reoriented the university lectures in philosophy toward graduate-level instruction. Francis Bowen accordingly delivered the first graduate lectures given in America, on the subject of "Seventeenth-Century Philosophy," in the early fall of 1869. John Fiske also gave philosophy lectures during 1869–70, and Nicholas St. John Green (Harvard 1851) was an instructor lecturing on mental philosophy, metaphysics, and logic during 1869–70. In the Medical School, Bowditch opened a new physiology laboratory in 1871, where James spent much time. James also saw Harvard friends such as Holmes, Fiske, William Dean Howells, Thomas Sergeant Perry, and John Chipman Gray at a monthly dinner club that started in 1868 and met on occasion during the early 1870s.

Wright, like James, was suffering from depression, but worsened by alcoholism, during the late 1860s. His friends took action, surrounding him with social activities and securing a lecturing opportunity at Harvard. His lectures on psychology based on Alexander Bain during the fall of 1870 and spring of 1871 were visited by Peirce and James, and lawyer Joseph Bangs Warner (Harvard 1869). Wright and Green, who had known each other from their college days, reinvigorated their intellectual bonds in Harvard's halls, becoming the closest of friends by 1870. Peirce was in the company of Wright and Green then, where he heard Green expound his admiration for Alexander Bain's definition of belief as "that upon which a man is prepared to act." Peirce was also guiding Warner and Francis G. Peabody through Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* during the winter of 1870–71, and during that time

Peirce was composing his review of Fraser's edition of *The Works of George Berkeley*, in which he declares, "A better rule for avoiding the deceits of language is this: Do things fulfil the same function practically? Then let them be signified by the same word. Do they not? Then let them be distinguished." In his 1908 article "A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God," Peirce recollects the significance of that insight: "In 1871, in a Metaphysical Club in Cambridge, Mass., I used to preach this principle as a sort of logical gospel, representing the unformulated method followed by Berkeley, and in conversation about it I called it 'Pragmatism.' "[8] Peirce was in Cambridge during March–October 1871, between Coast Survey assignments to Europe and Washington, D.C., so pragmatism's introduction to the world was likely to have taken place in 1871. Although Fiske was probably among their company during those months, James was not circulating socially in Cambridge that season, so neither he nor Holmes were present for Peirce's preaching, and the Metaphysical Club was not yet assembled for this birthing of pragmatism.

Everything required for the congealing of the real Metaphysical Club, both socially and intellectually, came together at the start of 1872. The original set of members were Chauncey Wright, Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., Nicholas St. John Green, John Fiske, and Joseph Bangs Warner. Francis Ellingwood Abbot joined them in 1873. Peirce identified all eight members in this detailed account in 1907:

> It was in the earliest seventies that a knot of us young men in Old Cambridge, calling ourselves, half-ironically, half-defiantly, "The Metaphysical Club,"—for agnosticism was then riding its high horse, and was frowning superbly upon all metaphysics—used to meet, sometimes in my study, sometimes in that of William James. It may be that some of our old-time confederates would today not care to have such wild-oats-sowings made public, though there was nothing but boiled oats, milk, and sugar in the mess. Mr. Justice Holmes, however, will not, I believe, take it ill that we are proud to remember his membership; nor will Joseph Warner, Esq. Nicholas St. John Green was one of the most interested fellows, a skillful lawyer and a learned one, a disciple of Jeremy Bentham. His extraordinary power of disrobing warm and breathing truth of the draperies of long worn formulas, was what attracted attention to him everywhere. In particular, he often urged the importance of applying Bain's definition of belief, as "that upon which a man is prepared to act." From this definition, pragmatism is scarce more than a corollary; so that I am disposed to think of him as the grandfather of pragmatism. Chauncey Wright, something of a philosophical celebrity in those days, was never absent from our meetings. I was about to call him our corypheus; but he will better be described as our boxing-master whom we—I particularly—used to face to be severely pummelled. He had abandoned a former attachment to Hamiltonianism to take up with the doctrines of Mill, to which and to its cognate agnosticism he was trying to weld the really incongruous ideas of Darwin. John Fiske and, more rarely, Francis Ellingwood Abbot, were sometimes present, lending their countenances to the spirit of our endeavours, while holding aloof from any assent to their success.[9]

That same list of eight members is indirectly confirmed by James, whose letters in 1876 mention Francis Abbot, Nicholas St. John Green, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., John Fiske, and Joseph Warner as participants in the second phase of the Metaphysical Club. Their biographical highlights at Harvard are as follows:

Chauncey Wright (1830–1875, Harvard AB 1852). Lecturer in psychology (1870–71), Instructor of physics (1874–75)

Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914, Harvard AB 1859, ScB 1863). Lecturer in logic of science (1865), Lecturer in philosophy (1869–71)

William James (1842–1910, Harvard MD 1869). Instructor of anatomy and physiology (1872–76), Assistant Professor of physiology (1876–1880), Assistant Professor of philosophy (1880–85), Professor of psychology (1889–1897), Professor of philosophy (1885–89, 1897–1910)

Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. (1841–1935, Harvard AB 1861, LLB 1866). Lecturer in the Law School (1871–73), Overseer (1876–82)

Nicholas St. John Green (1830–1876, Harvard 1851). Lecturer in political economy (1869–70), Lecturer in the Law School (1870–73)

John Fiske (1842–1901, Harvard AB 1863, LLB 1865). Lecturer in history and philosophy (1869–71), Assistant Librarian (1872–1879), Overseer (1879–91, 1899–1901)

Joseph Bangs Warner (1848–1923, Harvard AB 1869, LLB 1873). Instructor of history (1872–73), Lecturer in the Law School (1886–87)

Francis Ellingwood Abbot (1836–1903, Harvard AB 1859, PhD 1881). Instructor of philosophy (1887–88)

It deserves to be said again that by 1872, the original members had known each other for around ten or fifteen years, or even longer. Wright and Green were classmates in preparatory school in the late 1840s, and then at Harvard. Wright and Peirce met in 1857 and often discussed philosophy during the 1860s. James met Peirce in 1861 at Harvard's Lawrence Scientific School, and he was introduced to Wright soon after. Fiske met Wright in 1862, and they remained very close friends. James met Holmes at Harvard in 1864 (their fathers were close friends), and they met Warner by 1868 while he was a student at Harvard Law School. Wright had begun an active correspondence with Abbot in 1864, and welcomed Abbot to the Metaphysical Club upon his relocation to Cambridge in 1873. There is ample evidence in their correspondence, journals, and later reminiscences to illustrate their fondness for visiting each other's homes for literary and philosophical conversations. By the time that the Metaphysical Club in Cambridge had received its baptism, all of its members could look back on many years of discussion and debate together.

They were also aware of the leading lights involved with London's Metaphysical Club, which was founded in 1869 and lasted until 1880. Papers from its meetings were published in a serial review available in Boston, and Peirce had been in London in 1870 and again in 1871 to hear of its fame. An experiment in intellectual debate as audacious as any, this Metaphysical Club brought together leading scientific, philosophical, and theological

minds of England to forge an alliance against unbelief. James Martineau was among its founders; in November 1869 he recounted the basis for that alliance.

> A project, suggested I believe by Mr. Tennyson, has been started here, of a Metaphysical Society for the thorough discussion of the ultimate grounds of intellectual, moral, and religious belief. The scheme originated in a desire to bring together from different sides the scattered representatives of a theistical philosophy, and present a strong front of resistance to the advance of Positivism and the dogmatic Materialism of the newer science. On being asked to join, I urged the absolute reciprocity of inviting the heads of the negative party into the Society from the very first, and making the Society unreservedly one of philosophical search, for patient and impartial comparison of ideas among differing equals. This principle has been adopted, and Mill, Bain, and Tyndall have been asked to join—with what result I have not yet heard.[10]

Science was indeed well represented, and papers by Alexander Bain, Thomas Huxley, and W. K. Clifford about science, morality, and religion were closely read back in Cambridge. In January 1872, Peirce returned from Washington to find James equally eager to collect the full complement of Harvard intellectuals into a single club. The name of their own club was easily settled.

The month of the Metaphysical Club's founding can be determined: January 1872. Peirce's later recollections sent his mind back to the club's start after his return from travels—he returned to Cambridge from a European trip in March 1871, and returned to Cambridge after a residency in Washington, D.C., in January 1872. An inauguration for the club in 1871 is improbable because James was still recovering from health breakdowns, he spent the summer in Maine, and his letters from that year only mention personal visits from individuals, such as Holmes. By mid-January 1872, James was telling his brother about the newly founded metaphysical club. Henry James reports to a friend on January 24, 1872, how his brother William "has just helped to found a metaphysical club, in Cambridge (consisting of Chauncey Wright, C. Pierce etc.)."[11] Henry's letter to Charles Norton on February 4, 1872, relates this news: "He [Holmes], my brother, and various other long-headed youths have combined to form a metaphysical club, where they wrangle grimly and stick to the question. It gives me a headache merely to know of it."[12] Peirce can help confirm this year of 1872. He gave the late 1860s, 1871, and 1872 as dates for the club's founding in some scattered reminiscences after 1900. But his most specific memory was about "a paper I read—it must have been in 1872—to a group of young men who used, at that time, to meet once a fortnight in Cambridge, Mass., under the name of 'The Metaphysical Club' "[13]

The other member besides Peirce on record labelling this club as the Metaphysical Club was James. The evidence was published in Perry's *Thought and Character of William James* in 1935. James's letter on February 10, 1876, informs his brother Robertson that "we have reorganized a metaphysical club here, and contains some very acute heads."[14] Not

only does James speak of an active metaphysical club in 1876, but he clearly understood its predecessor as the "metaphysical club" as well. One of James's invitation letters, to Frank Abbot on January 23, 1876, shows how much continuity this reorganized club possessed: "You are invited to join a Club for reading and discussing philosophical authors, which meets once a week at present and is composed of C. C. Everett, N. St. John Green, O. W. Holmes, Jr., John Fiske, Thos. Davidson. J. B. Warner, Prof. Bowen, and one or two others."[15] This second phase did not disperse until 1879, so the entire duration of the real Metaphysical Club is 1872 to 1879. This club therefore had two phases, distinguished by the most active participants and the main topics pursued: empiricism and pragmatism (1872–75), followed by idealism (1876–79). Six members were able to attend meetings of both phases of the Metaphysical Club: William James, Francis Abbot, Nicholas St. John Green, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., John Fiske, and Joseph Warner. Two members of the first "pragmatist" phase were absent for the second "idealist" phase: Chauncey Wright had died in September 1875; and Peirce was in Europe until September 1876, stayed in Cambridge for a few weeks, and moved to New York City in October 1876.

The "pragmatist" Metaphysical Club was intended to meet twice a month, but it was able to meet only on irregular occasions, even during its most active periods. They usually met in the home of Peirce or James in Cambridge during the spring of 1872. Peirce departed for Washington, D.C., in April, but club members continued to see each other. In late May, James mentions a visit from Wright,[16] and then Wright left for a European trip in July 1872. The entire club was briefly reunited in November 1872, when Wright returned and Peirce was also in Cambridge. James wrote to his brother Henry on November 24, 1872: "He [Peirce] read us an admirable introductory chapter to his book on logic the other day."[17]

What paper did Peirce deliver to the Metaphysical Club in November 1872? Peirce was working on drafts of chapters for a book on logic during 1871 and 1872, and he knew that he was due to return to Washington in December 1872 for an extended residency. Years later, Peirce offered this reminiscence: "Our metaphysical proceedings had all been in winged words (and swift ones, at that, for the most part) until at length, lest the club should be dissolved, without leaving any material souvenir behind, I drew up a little paper expressing some of the opinions that I had been urging all along under the name of pragmatism. This paper was received with such unlooked-for kindness, that I was encouraged, some half dozen years later, on the invitation of the great publisher, Mr. W. H. Appleton, to insert it, somewhat expanded, in the *Popular Science Monthly* for November, 1877 and January, 1878."[18] In another recollection, Peirce says that central portions of "The Fixation of Belief" and "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" were in a paper read to the Metaphysical Club in 1872.[19]

Material in hand from Peirce's logic manuscript served his purpose of outlining pragmatism for the club. Many of the chapter drafts from mid-1872 were preserved, and the first three were titled "Of the Difference between Doubt & Belief," "Of Inquiry," and "Four Methods of Settling Opinions," dated to May and June 1872 while Peirce was in Washington.[20] In these drafts Peirce states: "Our beliefs guide our desires and shape our

actions"; "Doubt is an uneasy and dissatisfied state from which we struggle to free ourselves and pass into the state of belief"; and "It is certainly best for us that our beliefs should be such as may truly guide our actions so as to satisfy our desires."[21] Peirce defines scientific method: "There are real things, whose characters are entirely independent of our opinions about them; those realities affect our senses, according to regular laws, and though our sensations are as different as our relations to the objects, yet by taking advantage of the laws which subsist we can ascertain by reasoning how the things really are, and any man if he have sufficient experience and reason enough about it, will be led to the one true conclusion."[22] The principal tenets of Peirce's pragmatism in "The Fixation of Belief" (1878) are heard here, but the "pragmatic maxim" presented in "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" (1878) nowhere appears in those 1872 drafts. That maxim is:

> Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object.[23]

However, by 1871 Peirce had already formulated his criterion for the meaning of a word, specifying that the function of the word distinguishes its meaning. We have James's corroboration in "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results" (1898) that the core ideas of pragmatism were discussed among Metaphysical Club members:

> Years ago this direction was given to me by an American philosopher whose home is in the East, and whose published works, few as they are and scattered in periodicals, are no fit expression of his powers. I refer to Mr. Charles S. Peirce, with whose very existence as a philosopher I dare say many of you are unacquainted. He is one of the most original of contemporary thinkers; and the principle of practicalism or pragmatism, as he called it, when I first heard him enunciate it at Cambridge in the early '70's is the clue or compass by following which I find myself more and more confirmed in believing we may keep our feet upon the proper trail. Peirce's principle, as we may call it, may be expressed in a variety of ways, all of them very simple. . . . Beliefs, in short, are really rules for action; and the whole function of thinking is but one step in the production of habits of action. If there were any part of a thought that made no difference in the thought's practical consequences, then that part would be no proper element of the thought's significance. Thus the same thought may be clad in different words; but if the different words suggest no different conduct, they are mere outer accretions, and have no part in the thought's meaning.[24]

Although no member's writings during the early 1870s use the word *pragmatism,* the term and what it stood for was thoroughly discussed among the Metaphysical Club's members back then, with both Peirce and James affirming that pragmatism labeled Peirce's theory about the psychological function and empirical confirmation of belief. Pragmatism had a birth, and the birthplace was Cambridge, Massachusetts, during 1871–72.

Other members of the Metaphysical Club published important writings during its formative years, about scientific, legal, or psychological topics for group discussion that related to pragmatism. Among the philosophers, Wright published his influential defense of Darwin's *The Origin of Species* in 1872, and his 1873 essay "The Evolution of Self-Consciousness" reached a climactic midway point by claiming that phenomena are not initially experienced as external objects in the world nor as internal sensations for self-consciousness, which is a thesis anticipating James's radical empiricism by decades. As for James, his review of *The Unseen Universe* in 1875 urges a practical justification for religious faith that he would later elaborate as the "will to believe."

The lawyers in this club—Holmes, Green, and Warner—were deeply interested in evolution and empiricism, and they knew James Stephen's *A General View of the Criminal Law in England*, which averred that people believe because they must act. During the 1870s, Green and Holmes dealt with difficulties to determining responsibility, culpability, and criminal states of mind, along with broader issues about the nature of law from a culturally developmental perspective. Both lawyers made important advances in the theory of negligence, which relied on a pragmatic approach to belief, and they formulated important justifications for the "reasonable person" standard in juridical deliberations. Green had published "Proximate and Remote Cause" in 1870, followed by "Insanity in Criminal Law" in 1871, in the *American Law Review*. Holmes's early articles for that law review during 1872–73 explore pragmatic definitions of law that work out his "prediction theory" prioritizing future judicial consequences rather than past legislative acts. Holmes had few remembrances of the Metaphysical Club to share. He later recalled that "in those days I was studying law and I soon dropped out of the band, although I should have liked to rejoin it when it was too late. I think I learned more from Chauncey Wright and St. John Green, as I saw Peirce very little."[25]

The reason that Holmes saw little of Peirce is due to Coast Survey responsibilities keeping Peirce away from Cambridge after 1872. The entire Metaphysical Club met only irregularly after the year of its founding. As its core consisted of Wright, Peirce, and James, then there were only seven months during 1872–75 in which all three were simultaneously residing in Cambridge: January–June 1872, and November 1872. Peirce later stated that Wright was present for all meetings; Wright traveled in Europe from July 1872 to early November 1872. In December 1872, Peirce relocated to Washington, D.C., and took charge of U.S. Coast Survey pendulum research and related projects, which kept him on the move across several Eastern states and some European countries for scientific experiments and conferences over the next few years.

Peirce did visit Cambridge on occasion during 1873 and 1874, and two Metaphysical Club meetings are confirmable during those years. Because Peirce later recalled Abbot's attendance at only a single meeting, and Abbot moved to Cambridge in April 1873, then Peirce remembered a Metaphysical Club meeting in either 1873 or 1874. James was in Europe from October 1873 to March 1874, and Peirce was then occupied in Washington, so presumably no meetings were held during that period. The other confirmable meeting

was in the fall of 1874, as James recalled an evening with Peirce and Wright (but not Abbot) to discuss Fiske's new book *Outlines of Cosmic Philosophy*. There may have been meetings during the winter months of 1874–75. By spring 1875, their career demands, travels, and a death had dispersed them. Holmes was busy with his new law partnership. Peirce went to Europe in April. James taught Harvard courses in the spring and took his usual summer holiday in the Adirondacks. And then Wright died on September 12.

The Metaphysical Club needed new life, literally. That vitality soon arrived from St. Louis. Our narrative must return to 1866, the year when William Torrey Harris, at the prodding of fellow "Kant Club" member Henry C. Brokmeyer, closely studied Hegel's "larger" *Logic* and composed his article about Hegel that so disappointed Wright. Harris brought Ralph Waldo Emerson and Amos Bronson Alcott to meet the St. Louis philosophers that year, and the group made a favorable impression on the two transcendentalists. At Emerson's suggestion, Thomas Davidson, who was enjoying the intellectual company of the Radical Club in Boston, moved to St. Louis in 1868 for a teaching job arranged by Harris. His Aristotelian individualism was a marked contrast to St. Louis Hegelianism, and he promptly started an Aristotle society. But better academic opportunities were still back east, as George Holmes Howison showed by departing from St. Louis and then becoming Massachusetts Institute of Technology's philosophy professor in 1872.

After Emerson's literary executor, James Elliot Cabot, joined Harvard's board of overseers in 1874 and recruited Howison as an overseer in 1875, they next plotted an idealist transformation of Harvard by trying to secure a philosophy position for Howison and then adding Davidson. Davidson duly arrived in Cambridge in the fall of 1875 in the hopes of joining the Greek faculty. Although both newcomers gave public lectures at Boston's Lowell Institute, their hopes for joining Harvard were disappointed. Davidson's scathing criticisms of Greek instruction at Harvard, published in 1877 in *The Atlantic Monthly*, turned the Harvard community against him. As for Howison, President Charles William Eliot permitted him to lecture on ethics at the Divinity School, but not the philosophy department. Eliot instead decided to appoint James to teach psychology in 1876 and philosophy as well by 1878.

Davidson's only connection to Harvard was to be through the Metaphysical Club. Although Davidson promptly got reacquainted with the Radical Club, he was soon writing to Harris in September 1875 that an Aristotle society was what Cambridge needed. Cabot helpfully suggested a broader theme, empiricism versus idealism, and pointed out how several local philosophers were already accustomed to vigorous debate. T. H. Green's edition of Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* had recently been published, complete with Green's lengthy Introduction offering a refutation of Hume using Kantian and Hegelian arguments. Having heard Cabot's high praise of Davidson, James assented to their plan to discuss Hume and Green, and brought along the available members of the Metaphysical Club. If they held any meetings in December 1875, that has gone unrecorded; the earliest information about a full meeting is in Davidson's letter to Harris on January 17, 1876:

> Last night our new philosophical society, to which I have given shape and direction at least, met at Mr. James's—present Bowen, C. C. Everett, Dr. James, Messrs. Green, Warner, Holmes (Wendell jun'.), Fenollosa, and myself; absent John Fiske, whose children were ill. We are reading Hume on Human Nature, and, I doubt not, we shall have a most interesting time.[26]

Abbot was added next; he, Cabot, and Howison were present at the meeting at James's house on January 30. In one of James's later recollections, his philosophy colleague George Herbert Palmer appears amid the others. James's new psychology graduate student G. Stanley Hall also attended some meetings. Joining original members, the new members and their relevant activities were:

Thomas Davidson (1840–1900). Lecturer at Concord School of Philosophy (1879, 1884–87), Leader of Farmington Summer School for the Culture Sciences (1888–90), Leader of Glenmore Summer School for the Culture Sciences (1891–1900).

James Eliot Cabot (1821–1903, Harvard AB 1840, LLB 1845). Lecturer in philosophy (1869–71), Lecturer in logic (1874–75), Overseer (1874–1883).

Charles Carroll Everett (1829–1900, Harvard STB 1859). Bussey Professor of theology (1869–1878), Dean of Harvard Divinity School (1878–1900).

George Holmes Howison (1834–1916). Professor of logic and philosophy of science at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (1871–79), Lecturer in the Harvard Divinity School (1879–80), Overseer (1875–1880).

Ernest Francisco Fenollosa (1853–1908, Harvard AB 1874). Professor of philosophy and political economy (1878–80) and Professor of philosophy and logic (1880–86) at Tokyo University.

Francis Bowen (1811–1890, Harvard AB 1833). Instructor in natural, intellectual, and moral philosophy (1836–39), Alford Professor of natural religion, moral philosophy, and civil polity (1853–1889).

George Herbert Palmer (1842–1933, Harvard AB 1864). Instructor in philosophy (1872–73), Assistant Professor of philosophy (1873–1883), Professor of philosophy (1883–89), Alford Professor of philosophy (1889–1913).

Granville Stanley Hall (1846–1924, Harvard PhD 1878). Instructor in English (1876–77), Lecturer in philosophy (1880–83). Lecturer in psychology (1881–83) and Professor of philosophy and pedagogy at Johns Hopkins University (1884–88).

Bowen attended one or two meetings in February 1876, but to the others' apparent relief, he made no further appearance. Another arrival in Boston quickly found his way into the club: Borden Parker Bowne (1847–1910), who had become Boston University's professor of philosophy in 1877.

The members of the club's first phase were not unfamiliar to the new members. Everyone knew James, but Fiske among all of them was the most prominent philosopher at that time. He had precociously defended his "Cosmic Theism" in his 1874 book *Outlines*

*of Cosmic Philosophy*, identifying the unknowable supreme power behind the observable world, an ultimate acknowledged by Herbert Spencer, with a purposive yet impersonal God. Everett, who was combining Hegelian views with insights from East Asian philosophy, responded to Spencer and Fiske with review articles titled "The Known and the Unknowable in Religion" in 1875 and "Cosmic Philosophy" in 1876. For Everett, the immanent teleology and love of God could not be unknowable, even if our own souls are largely a mystery even to ourselves. Fiske accused Hegel of pantheism, but Everett had a more nuanced interpretation of Hegel on the relationality of spirit. Although Fiske and Everett disagreed about humanity's capacity to comprehend the underlying Power responsible for nature's ways, they agreed that life evolves toward higher forms, anthropomorphic religion is just myth, and that pantheism must be rejected. Bowne also composed a lengthy response to Fiske's book in a review article titled "The Cosmic Philosophy" in 1876. He similarly rejected the "unknowable" as scientifically useless and philosophically empty, and added his view that a primal energetic ordering, rather than chaos or mechanism, is a better explanatory postulate for the universe's basis. For Bowne, that fundamental ordering is God's intelligent activity responsible for all phenomenal processes, which our minds in turn process into knowledge.

Nicholas St. John Green died on September 8, 1876, but another voice for the empiricist side soon arrived. G. Stanley Hall came to Cambridge from Antioch College as an instructor in English in the fall of 1876, and he took this opportunity to study physiology and psychology under Bowditch and James. His graduate thesis on "The Muscular Perception of Space," for which he received the first American PhD degree in psychology in June 1878, offered a resolution to a key question dividing empiricists and idealists: Must the rational mind supply the relations permitting one's experience of an external world extended in space? Since our perceptions of phenomena are fused with our feelings of movement, Hall reasoned, and feelings of our own motions are intrinsically extended, therefore a person's immediate sensations are already spatial before higher mental operations are engaged. Hall attended some meetings of the Metaphysical Club during the spring and fall semesters of 1877. Cabot's idealist stance is presented in his article "Considerations on the Notion of Space" in *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* in 1878. James responded to Cabot in "The Spatial Quale" in that journal in January 1879, with Cabot's rejoinder, "The Spatial Quale: An Answer," appearing in the April issue.

James's memories of that time largely revolved around his other friend and ally, Thomas Davidson:

> At that time I saw most of him at a little philosophical club which used to meet (often at his rooms in Temple Street) every fortnight. . . . Davidson used to crack the whip of Aristotle over us; and I remember that whatever topic was formally appointed for the day, we almost invariably wound up with a quarrel about space perception.[27]

After receiving his doctorate, Hall departed for additional study in Europe, and James was again heavily outnumbered by the idealists of the Metaphysical Club. While in Germany,

Hall fulfilled a request from the editors of *Mind* in England (James had recommended him) to compose an account of "Philosophy in the United States" for publication in 1879. This account included lengthy passages about members of the Metaphysical Club and the St. Louis Hegelian movement.

James was then teaching psychology as a physiology professor. His scheme to situate psychology with the philosophy department had to begin with his accumulation of publications in philosophy. By the end of 1877 he completed his "Remarks on Spencer's Definition of Mind as Correspondence" for publication in *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* in 1878. He followed that piece with two papers in *Mind* in 1879. "Are We Automata?" posed the question in order to deliver the negative answer, and "The Sentiment of Rationality" developed a recognizably pragmatist approach to the human mind. James was also flirting with the new graduate university in Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University, by agreeing to deliver lectures there while President Daniel Coit Gilman was delaying a decision about appointing a full-time professor of philosophy. James lectured on "The Senses and the Brain and their Relation to Thought" during February 1878, with graduate student Josiah Royce in attendance. Before James arrived, the first graduate course offered in philosophy there, indeed the very first graduate course in philosophy leading to a doctorate in philosophy given anywhere in America, was the Spring 1877 course on Schopenhauer, taught by Royce.[28] George Morris began lecturing at Johns Hopkins in January 1878, Peirce arrived to teach logic in late 1879, and Hall began lecturing in psychology in 1882, when he met John Dewey among his students. Back at Harvard, President Eliot was unwilling to lose James, so his position in the philosophy department became permanent in 1878, and James became influential enough to recommend the next philosophy hire, the appointment of Royce in 1882.

During the academic year of 1877–78, Howison was busy with invited lectures and Davidson went to Italy, but the club's monthly meetings carried on, revolving around Kant and idealism and fixated on refuting sensationalism and materialistic agnosticism. In a September 1878 letter to William T. Harris about *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, James listed the Boston-area thinkers of his closest acquaintance:

> I fancy you could get more original contributions, if the journal aimed at a more modern cachet. There are five or six people here who I should think would send you then at least an article a year—Howison, Everett (C.C.) Cabot, Bowne, possibly Bowen, a man named Dunbar, Fennollosa, Hall, and perchance others. Many of these are non-hegelian however, and I am not sure whether you wd. consider so much infidel matter to be again.[29]

Quoting more from James's later reminiscence of Davidson, a similar list had come to his mind:

> At that time I saw most of him at a little philosophical club which used to meet (often at his rooms in Temple Street) every fortnight. Other members were W. T.

Harris, G. H. Howison, J. E. Cabot, C. C. Everett, B. P. Bowne, and sometimes G. H. Palmer.[30]

Regarding the second list, James was mistaken about Harris, who did not reside in the Boston area until 1881, and James understandably failed to mention Frederic Henry Hedge, then Harvard's professor of German, who was attending occasional meetings by then. On the first list, the man "Dunbar" that James mentioned to Harris was Josiah Newell Dunbar, a recent graduate of Harvard Divinity School, who was teaching at a preparatory school near Boston. In such recollections, Peirce is never mentioned as a visitor to the club's meetings, although he was invited to speak in the Boston area on occasion. For example, Peirce read a paper on "The Relations of Logic to Philosophy" to students in the new Harvard Philosophical Club on May 21, 1879.

The confluence of James, Davidson, Alcott, Howison, and Bowne in the Boston area during 1875–1885 engendered the second and third seminal developments in American thought sponsored by the Metaphysical Club, both of them on the side of pluralism over monism: process philosophy and personalism.[31] James strongly encouraged these developments. One of Davidson's talks made a great impression on James, from a paper titled "Individuality," of which only an abstract survives. Davidson gave this talk at the Radical Club on October 21, 1878, and then again to the Metaphysical Club's meeting at Howison's house soon after. Thereafter, meetings were held at Davidson's new residence in Boston on Temple Street, and scheduled for twice a month by 1879. It was a surprise to everyone, perhaps even to the combatants, that Davidson and Howison erupted into an angry dispute over Aristotle at the meeting on April 26, 1879. James tried to patch things up, but no more meetings appear to have happened after that, and later letters from James to Hall and Royce sadly confess that the club had expired.[32]

The philosophical energy easily passed on to nourish other idealist projects. In the summer of 1879 three St. Louis Hegelians made their way to Concord. Harris, Samuel Emery, and Edward McClure participated in Alcott's first Concord School of Philosophy during July and August. Harris had to go back to St. Louis, but Emery and McClure entered Harvard Law School. Having brought a manuscript of Hegel's larger *Logic*, they soon started a club for studying Hegel and joined George Herbert Palmer's philosophy course on Hegel in 1880. Harris took over as this club's leader at the start of 1882 after moving permanently to Concord.

Although the Metaphysical Club ended in 1879, its philosophical debates lived on. How is knowledge of the world possible? Should biological facts or transcendental principles reconcile humanity with nature? Is ultimately reality a unified whole, or a system of individuals? Could science be compatible with religion?

Several Metaphysical Club members published their fuller answers after the club's demise. Bowne's revolutionary achievement in *Metaphysics* (1882) renounced substance for process, denounced pantheism, and pointed the way toward personalism. Abbott's *Scientific Theism* (1885) defended a type of pantheism while affirming that God is personal. (Peirce

reviewed this book in 1886 in *The Nation*.) Howison and Harris read papers for a symposium on science and pantheism held at the 1885 Concord School of Philosophy. Howison's paper appeared in *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, asking "Is Modern Science Pantheistic?" He denied that science could support any cosmic worldview, whether supernatural, pantheist, or atheist. Harris published his paper "Is Modern Science Pantheistic?" in the same issue to counterargue that both the scientific intellect and the scientific worldview presumes an absolute universal intelligence.

As the 1880s passed into the 1890s and then the 1900s, Peirce was only seen in Cambridge when James could arrange some lecturing opportunities, but James ensured that his old friend's philosophy would be visible to the world. James's "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results" of 1898, presented at Howison's spinoff club the Philosophical Union at the University of California, credited Peirce with pragmatism's birth and the Metaphysical Club for supplying its cradle. The second chapter of James's book *Pragmatism* from 1907 again credits Peirce for pragmatism's reality—past, present, and future:

> A glance at the history of the idea will show you still better what pragmatism means. The term is derived from the same Greek word πράγμα, meaning action, from which our words "practice" and "practical" come. It was first introduced into philosophy by Mr. Charles Peirce in 1878. In an article entitled "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," in the *Popular Science Monthly* for January of that year Mr. Peirce, after pointing out that our beliefs are really rules for action, said that to develop a thought's meaning, we need only determine what conduct it is fitted to produce: that conduct is for us its sole significance. And the tangible fact at the root of all our thought-distinctions, however subtle, is that there is no one of them so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference of practice. To attain perfect clearness in our thoughts of an object, then, we need only consider what conceivable effects of a practical kind the object may involve—what sensations we are to expect from it, and what reactions we must prepare. Our conception of these effects, whether immediate or remote, is then for us the whole of our conception of the object, so far as that conception has positive significance at all.
>
> This is the principle of Peirce, the principle of pragmatism. It lay entirely unnoticed by anyone for twenty years, until I, in an address before Professor Howison's philosophical union at the university of California, brought it forward again and made a special application of it to religion. By that date (1898) the times seemed ripe for its reception. The word "pragmatism" spread, and at present it fairly spots the pages of the philosophic journals. On all hands we find the "pragmatic movement" spoken of, sometimes with respect, sometimes with contumely, seldom with clear understanding. It is evident that the term applies itself conveniently to a number of tendencies that hitherto have lacked a collective name, and that it has "come to stay."[33]

James's concluding prophecy, that pragmatism's place in philosophy is permanent, can practically convey the meaning of the Metaphysical Club's reality.

## NOTES

1. Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), ch. 9.
2. Jay Martin, *The Education of John Dewey: A Biography* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 53.
3. Steven Rockefeller, *John Dewey: Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 17.
4. Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1935), vol. 1, 221.
5. Philip P. Wiener, *Evolution and the Founders of Pragmatism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949), 43.
6. Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James*, vol.1, 508.
7. William James, *The Correspondence of William James, Volume 4: 1856–1877*, ed. Ignas K. Skrupskelis, Elizabeth M. Berkeley et al. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 363.
8. *Collected Papers of Charles S. Peirce*, ed. Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss, and Arthur Burks (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931–1958), vol. 6, 882.
9. Ibid., vol. 5, 12.
10. Abraham Willard Jackson, *James Martineau: A Biography and Study* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1900), 98.
11. Henry James, *Henry James: Selected Letters*, ed. Leon Edel (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), vol. 1, 269.
12. Ibid., 273.
13. Peirce, *Collected Papers*, vol. 7, 313, note.
14. Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James*, vol. 1, 713.
15. James, *Correspondence*, vol. 4, 531.
16. Ibid., 422.
17. Ibid., vol. 1, 177.
18. Peirce, *Collected Papers*, vol. 5, 13.
19. Ibid., vol. 7, 313, note.
20. *Writings of Charles Sanders Peirce, Volume 3, 1872–1878*, ed. Max Fisch et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 22–23.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid., 27.
23. Peirce, *Collected Papers*, vol. 5, 402.
24. William James, "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results," *University Chronicle* 1 (September 1898): 290.
25. Max H. Fisch, *Peirce, Semeiotic, and Pragmatism*, ed Kenneth L. Ketner and Christian J. W. Kloesel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 102, note 5.
26. Quoted in ibid., 141.

27. William Knight, ed. *Memorials of Thomas Davidson: The Wandering Scholar* (Boston: Ginn, 1907), 111.
28. John Clendenning, *The Life and Thought of Josiah Royce* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 66–67.
29. James, *Correspondence*, vol. 5, 22.
30. Knight, *Memorials*, 111.
31. Randall E. Auxier, *Time, Will, and Purpose: Living Ideas from the Philosophy of Josiah Royce* (Chicago: Open Court, 2013), ch. 7.
32. Fisch, *Peirce, Semeiotic, and Pragmatism*, 153–54.
33. William James, *Pragmatism, a New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1907), 46–47.

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