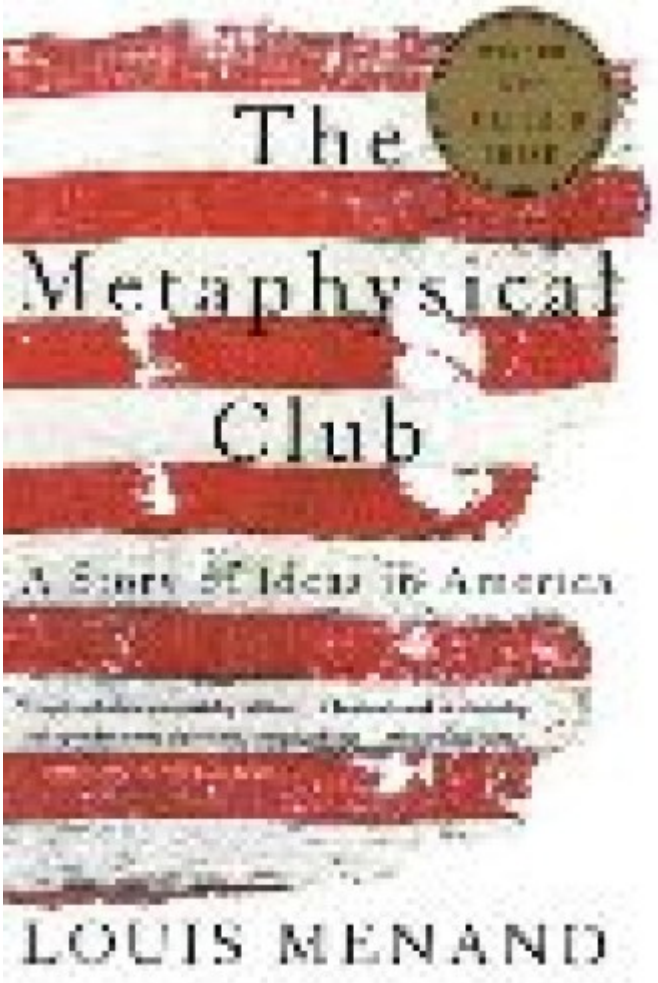
It’s all relative?

By Albert W. Alschuler in the November 20, 2002 issue

In Review



The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America

Louis Menand
Farrar, Straus & Giroux

This useful, engaging and distressing book by Louis Menand won the Pulitzer Prize for history in 2002. It chronicles and exemplifies the skepticism that has

characterized most intellectual discourse from the end of the 19th century through the beginning of the 21st. It recounts the development of American pragmatism, focusing on four central figures—Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., William James, Charles Sanders Peirce and John Dewey. Without analyzing or defending the philosophy of these writers, the book lauds them. It exudes a sense that perspectives other than theirs are no longer competitive or respectable. They were, Menand tells us, “the first modern thinkers in the United States.”

As Menand emphasizes, the post–Civil War era witnessed a profound intellectual revolution. His attribution of causes for the change, however, is less successful. As he tells the tale, the war itself was primarily responsible for the transformation. It “swept away almost the whole intellectual culture of the North” along with the slave civilization of the South. Because “philosophical and scientific certitudes had failed to prevent—in some cases had even incited—four years of mutual destruction,” the North as well as the South left prewar beliefs behind.

Menand writes of one of his protagonists, “The lesson Holmes took from the war can be put in a sentence. It is that certitude leads to violence.” He quotes Holmes’s comments: “Some kind of despotism is at the bottom of seeking for change,” and “I detest a man who knows that he knows.”

Menand has crafted his historical thesis primarily to fit Holmes. As a college student prior to the war, Holmes was, as he himself noted 70 years later, “deeply moved by the Abolition cause.” When war came, he abandoned his studies to enlist and then experienced three years of horror (including three battlefield wounds) as a front-line officer. In later decades, he dismissed crusaders and believers from John Calvin to Leon Trotsky to Bertrand Russell to prohibitionists to Christian Scientists to Catholics to Emma Goldman by comparing them to the abolitionists. In effect, the postwar Holmes mocked the prewar Holmes, a 20-year-old foolish enough to have causes.

Menand views Holmes’s disillusionment as a model of modern insight rather than a sad personal tale. But Holmes’s personal and intellectual development was distinctive. Neither James nor Peirce served in the war, and Dewey belonged to a later generation. Holmes’s cynicism repelled James, and Dewey’s many causes were among those Holmes mocked.

The historical thesis of *The Metaphysical Club* gives credence to the southern canard that northern abolitionists were responsible for the war. Until the Confederate attack

on Fort Sumter, however, most members of this largely pacifist minority were, as Menand acknowledges, committed to “moral suasion” and prepared to “let the erring sisters depart in peace.” Major players in the prewar North like Lincoln did not qualify as ideologues. The war came less because “certitude leads to violence” than because pragmatic, art-of-the-possible statecraft misfired.

Portraying the Quakers and their allies as originators of violence and the postwar Holmes as a champion of peace seems topsy-turvy. Although Holmes had no use for causes, he had no aversion to violence. He wrote, “Moralists and philosophers . . . declare that war is wicked, foolish, and soon to disappear. . . . For my own part, I believe that the struggle for life is the order of the world at which it is vain to repine.”

A brutal war contributed to the intellectual changes that followed it, but an event of vastly greater significance was the publication in 1859 of Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species*. A reader who proceeds beyond Menand’s opening chapters on the war, the abolitionists and Holmes discovers in *The Metaphysical Club* abundant evidence of Darwin’s transforming influence.

The Metaphysical Club is engaging mostly because the book does not match its subtitle. It is less *A Story of Ideas in America* than a story of personalities, foibles, academic politics, friendships, animosities, adventures, intrigues and events. One reviewer called it a book in which context overwhelms text. Menand provides absorbing details about the lives of his four protagonists and numerous others—Louis Agassiz (a noted, self-important, half-baked biologist whom Menand treats at length), Benjamin Peirce (Charles Peirce’s intriguing father), Juliette Annette Froissy Pourtalai Peirce (Charles Peirce’s intriguing second wife), Chauncy Wright, Nicholas St. John Green, Asa Gray, Jane Addams, W. E. B. Du Bois, Franz Boas, Eugene V. Debs, Randolph Bourne, Alain Locke and a great many more. The gossip is great.

The four given leading roles differed immensely, and their differences do not fit a neat or predictable pattern. Two (James and Peirce) were religious believers; two (Holmes and Dewey) were antireligious. One of the believers and one of the nonbelievers (James and Dewey) were unusually decent and generous. The other pair, Peirce and Holmes, were unusually self-centered and selfish. Three may have suffered from mental illnesses. James was depressive, suffering extended periods of melancholy and self-loathing. Peirce was a drug addict whose life was marked by

violent outbursts, sex scandals, dismissals from employment, poverty and hunger. Although I doubt that Holmes experienced posttraumatic stress disorder following his war service, the diagnosis “narcissistic personality” seems plausible. Dewey was mentally healthy to the point of being dull. He alone among the four could not reasonably be called a genius.

Menand maintains that his pragmatists shared a key insight:

> What [they] had in common was not a group of ideas, but a single idea—an idea about ideas. They all believed that ideas are not “out there” waiting to be discovered, but are tools—like forks and knives and microchips—that people devise to cope with the world in which they find themselves. . . . They believed that ideas do not develop according to some inner logic of their own, but are entirely dependent, like germs, on their human carriers and the environment. And they believed that since ideas are provisional responses to particular and unreproducible circumstances, their survival depends not on their immutability but on their adaptability.

Menand’s suggestion of even this much commonality among his four figures is a stretch. His description most closely fits James and Dewey, both of whom sometimes appeared to equate truth with utility. Reality for these figures was, in Menand’s words, whatever “gets us pellets.”

James proclaimed, “My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will.” This existential move—the product of what James later called the will to believe—made every belief easy. He wrote, “‘The true’ is only the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as ‘the right’ is only the expedient in the way of our behaving.”

Dewey offered worse drivel. Menand notes approvingly:

> We think that a response follows a stimulus; Dewey taught us that there is a stimulus only because there is already a response. . . . We think we know in order to do; Dewey taught us that doing is why there is knowing. . . . Later in his career, Dewey would criticize, in the same manner, the distinctions between mind and reality, means and ends, nature and culture.

One can turn things upside down in this way only when one is in a funk, drunk, in France or at a university. Proclaiming that a stimulus is called a stimulus because it generates a response is a truism. Proclaiming that a stimulus exists only because the response is there already is like Zen, the sound of one hand clapping.

Menand writes:

> When the British writer G. K. Chesterton complained . . . that “pragmatism is a matter of human needs, and one of the first of human needs is to be something more than a pragmatist,” Dewey was delighted. The remark “spilled the personal milk in the absolutist’s cocoanut,” he said. For the objection that pragmatism’s account of belief doesn’t satisfy all of our needs confirms pragmatism’s most basic claim, which is that what people choose to believe is just what they think it good to believe.

Chesterton was a devout Catholic, and the pragmatist’s test of truth was not his. His argument was that pragmatism fails its own test of truth. Someone who could miss the point of Chesterton’s indictment and smile that the charge simply made his day could not have been one of America’s greatest thinkers.

Unlike James and Dewey, Holmes had enough common sense to declare, “I am in the universe, not it in me.” Holmes distinguished sharply between facts and values, and although he would have accepted James’s claim that “‘the right’ is only the expedient in the way of our behaving,” he rejected James’s view that “‘the true’ is only the expedient in the way of our thinking.”

In the realm of morals and values, Holmes believed that people made everything up out of self-interest or out of nothing. He observed that “morals were a contrivance of man to take himself seriously, which means that the philosophers . . . make them an end in themselves, an absolute matter, and so an excuse for their pretension to be on the ground floor and personal friends of God.” He wrote that “in the last resort a man rightly prefers his own interest to that of his neighbors.” He insisted, “It seems clear that the ultima ratio . . . is force, and that at the bottom of all private relations, however tempered by sympathy and all the social feelings, is a justifiable self-preference.”

For Holmes, however, the material and scientific realm was different. He identified pragmatism’s main thesis as the claim that “the truthfulness of our ideas consists in the fact that they will work,” and he grumbled that James had advanced this thesis

to make a “warm God . . . that loves and admires us” seem more plausible than an “automatic universe.” He proclaimed, “I now see . . . that the aim and end of the whole business is religious.” Pragmatism was like “the spiritualist’s promise of a miracle if you will turn down the gas.” Holmes “never could make anything out of it” except, perhaps, “that by yearning we can modify the multiplication table.” He declared pragmatism “an amusing humbug.”

Menand’s portrayal of his pragmatists as prescient deconstructionists fits Charles Peirce even less well than it does Holmes. Peirce emphatically rejected the equation of truth and utility. He wrote, “I must confess that I belong to that class of scalawags who propose, with God’s help, to look truth in the face, whether doing so be conducive to the interests of society or not.”

The Metaphysical Club is disturbing mostly because of the complacent tone of its philosophical pronouncements and because many readers of the book may swallow its talk whole. Here are some illustrations:

> The modern conception of law is similar [to the modern conception of scientific truth]: if the legal process was adhered to, the outcome is just. Justice does not preexist the case at hand; justice is whatever result just procedures have led to.

Would a scrupulous regard for legal procedure make it just to stone an adulteress or burn a heretic? If Menand does not contend that it would, what on earth does this mean? That an outcome is “just in the eyes of the law” does not make it just any more than the fact that O. J. Simpson is “innocent in the eyes of the law” makes him innocent.

Menand maintains that our freedom to speak rests on a pragmatist concept of truth:

> The constitutional law of free speech is the most important benefit to come out of the way of thinking that emerged in Cambridge and elsewhere in the decades after the Civil War. It makes the value of an idea not its correspondence to a preexisting reality or a metaphysical truth, but simply the difference it makes in the life of the group. Holmes’s conceit of a “marketplace of ideas” . . . is the metaphor of probabilistic thinking; the more arrows you shoot at the target, the better sense you will have of the bull’s-eye. The more individual variations, the greater the chance the group will survive. We do not (on Holmes’s reasoning) permit the free

> expression of ideas because some individual may have the right one. No individual alone can have the right one. . . . Thinking is a social activity. I tolerate your thought because it is part of my thought—even when my thought defines itself in opposition to yours.

Whatever one's view of truth (pragmatist, conventionalist, correspondence or something else), one is likely to agree with Holmes that "the best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market." Before pragmatists declared that the value of an idea does not depend on its correspondence with reality and even before the American Civil War, John Milton wrote (in 1644), "Let [Truth] and Falsehood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the worse in a free and open encounter?"

Thinking is indeed "a social activity," but it does not follow that "no individual alone" can have the right idea. An astronomer might have discovered a moon orbiting a distant planet and died before recording her discovery. For years thereafter, the consensus of every person with a view on the subject might have been that the planet had no moon, but the astronomer still would have known what she knew.

The claim that the more constructions of reality we have the more likely we are to survive and get pellets is Darwinism gone wild (and the view that natural selection concerns "survival of the group" rather than the reproduction of individual genes and organisms is a misconception anyway). The best way to hit the bull's-eye usually is to aim or at least to have some idea where the target is. Encouraging people to make up their own realities without regard to "preexisting reality or metaphysical truth" is an idea worthy of Chairman Mao.

The Metaphysical Club includes one sentence criticizing pragmatism: "Pragmatism explains everything about ideas except why a person would be willing to die for one." Menand, however, emphasizes the opposite side of what he apparently sees as the same coin: "The value at the bottom of the thought of Holmes, James, Peirce, and Dewey is toleration." He writes:

> For many white Americans after 1865, the abolitionists were the century's villains—not only because they were thought to have been responsible for the war, but because they and their heirs were thought to have been responsible for the humiliation of the South during Reconstruction. They had driven a wedge into white America, and they did it because they had

> become infatuated with an idea. They marched the nation to the brink of self-destruction in the name of an abstraction. . . . [Later in the century] a philosophy that warned against the idolatry of ideas was possibly the only philosophy on which a progressive politics could have been successfully mounted.

For the abolitionists, the suffering of slaves was not “an abstraction.” Whatever they did was a response to specific evils inflicted on human beings. The idea with which they were “infatuated” was that the suffering of these people should end. They did not realize that they had devised this idea to get pellets.

The apparent implication of all the quoted passages and others in *The Metaphysical Club* is that unless you join William James in the belief that we make it all up, you will be an intolerant ideologue. (Of course, the reason you should recognize that we make it all up is not that this idea corresponds to the “reality” of human behavior. The reason is that the consequence of believing it is toleration, which is a good thing.) The unarticulated steps in Menand’s reasoning appear to be: Once you realize that you or your group has made up your beliefs to get pellets, you will be unable to believe strongly in any cause. Do not regret this loss of conviction. If you did believe strongly in a cause, you would be an incipient Osama bin Laden.

The claim that only pragmatists, skeptics and relativists can truly be tolerant of others is an insult to the rest of us. One of the things many of us believers believe is that toleration is a virtue. (We disagree with bin Laden and Torquemada on other issues too.)

I end this review by protesting that nonrelativists like me are not all zealots.

I believe in God. I believe that some things are truly right and wrong and not just right and wrong because people happen to think so today. Like Holmes, I believe that I am in the universe and not it in me. Although I recognize a reality external to myself, I do not claim to have a lock on it. The platform on which I stand does not provide a view of the universe. My perceptions are fallible and perhaps riddled with error. They have changed over time (I hope for the better) partly because I have learned from innumerable others. I realize (once more with Holmes) that “time has upset many fighting faiths.” For this reason and others, I have no interest in smashing people who disagree with me. I will be happy with just one vote. I wish pragmatists, skeptics and relativists were more understanding and that we could just get along.