

**THE METAPHYSICAL CLUB BY LOUIS MENAND  
FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX: NEW YORK,  
2001, xii, 546 pp.**

**Reviewed by Anthony Roda**

Towards the end of Spring 2001 Jean Strouse's review of *The Metaphysical Club* appeared in *The New York Times* (June 10, 2001). My daughter, aware that I occasionally teach a course in American Philosophy, was delighted to bring the review to my attention. I was intrigued by it and struck by Strouse's focus on the personal dimension, for both the intellectual fate of individuals as for the fate of their ideas. I made xerox copies of the review and during that summer distributed them to students in an "Introduction to Philosophy" class I was teaching at the time. I thought that it would be an interesting way to introduce students to the traditional Platonic trinity of "The True," "The Good" and "The Beautiful." These concepts and categories still provide instructors and students an avenue by which to approach the issues of knowledge, values and action.

Although the review did not leave an indelible mark it did leave an impression strong enough to excite me when my son surprised me with a Christmas gift of *The Metaphysical Club*. I did not read it at one sitting, however; I spent a good part of the winter break working through it and found it to be the sort of book I had been searching for ever since the Fall of 1967 when I first taught a class in American Philosophy. Consequently, I decided to adopt it for the American Philosophy class I was scheduled to teach during the Spring of 2002. Fortunately for Louis Menand and *The Metaphysical Club*, but unfortunately for our class, hardback copies of the book were already out of stock and the paperback edition did not become available until late in April of 2002.

So we had to make do with the two copies I owned. Of the ten students that finished the class, one student, who plans to attend law school in the Fall of 2002, purchased his own copy and others showed varying degrees of interest in it. We divided the class into four groups of students (3 groups of 3 students and one group made up of the one student who had purchased his own book) in order to cover the four central figures of Menand's investigation, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., William James, Charles S. Peirce, and the inheritor of their tradition, John Dewey. Each group prepared comments on one of the above and presented them to the class.

The Metaphysical Club made the Spring 2002 semester far more exciting than it would have been otherwise. On the whole, it is a graceful account of the lives of the above mentioned thinkers at the center of pragmatism; and by tracing the development of this movement, unique to the U.S., Menand has addressed a long-standing need in the country's intellectual history. In recognition of his contribution he earned a well-deserved Pulitzer prize. Further, through his remarkable appreciation for their personal peculiarities and struggles Menand shows how these factors may have conspired to change their lives as well as their intellectual development; thus, we get a sense of how they influenced one another and the intellectual climate of their times. The graphic picture of Chauncey Wright, Charles Peirce's teacher and anyone else's who cared to be instructed by him, whose need for conversation was so great that he almost ceased to function without it is a case in point. This peculiar need played itself out in a number of social discussion groups of which The Metaphysical Club was, the one that may have provided part of the ground from which American Philosophy developed its own distinctive character. When all is said and done, we have a crisp picture of the U. S. intellectual landscape (from the beginning of the Civil War to the end of WWI) along with the development of its university culture, including both leading and lesser actors.

Menand suggests that groups such as The Metaphysical Club served Wright therapeutically as a way of warding off alcoholic and depressive episodes, while also providing a forum from which to articulate his views of the universe, human knowledge and human efficacy. Whatever, Wright's (regarded by Darwin as having articulated Darwin's views better than Darwin himself had) personal shortcomings may have been, Menand finds clear evidence for the high regard in which he was held by Holmes, Peirce and James. Each thinker extrapolated from Wright what was compatible with his own larger perspective with emotional and other personal experiences as factors.

In Holmes' case and probably for most northerners caught up in the fratricidal experience of the Civil War (1861-1865) the events associated with the war were traumatic and crucial for the development of a new attitude of mind. As this new outlook evolved it undermined the sensitivities fostered by the New England Brahmins (a term coined by Oliver W. Holmes Jr.'s father, Dr. Holmes, glib of tongue with a self-centered provincialism he identified with the natural objective and universal order of the universe). Brahmins such as Dr. Holmes commissioned a kind of genteel reason in the resolution of human conflicts. Unfortunately, it did not rise to task and was unable to prevent the horror of the war with its devastating effects on both the social and intellectual pre-Civil War order.

Thus, what the Civil War brought home to the junior Holmes and those who experienced it firsthand was that the assumptions of his father's generation with their implied intellectual order failed to prevent the war. Holmes Jr., the legal thinker, captured the new orientation in his first law review article. [ In it we get something akin to R. G. Collingwood's phenomena of absolute presuppositions as they are transformed into relative ones.] He characterized the process of legal reasoning in language in which concrete lived experiences are primary (at least anthropologically) and abstract principles are secondary. "It is the merit of the com-

mon law that it decides the case first and determines the principles afterwards.” [p. 217] It is an approach consistent with an open universe, one in which our knowledge of the universe is not fixed and predetermined in advance. It is an attitude which is shared by James as well as Dewey and in a rather complicated way by Peirce. Holmes’ language advocates a method by which principles are realized in conjunction with human cooperation.

Dewey viewed Hume’s suggestion to map human nature as an attempt to unravel the structure of the humanities and the social sciences and to an extent the natural sciences. But this is only half of the story for Dewey and he hastens to add that Hume neglects the effects of associated living. However, the metaphor of a map is apropos and suggestive of the contribution humans make to the evolution of our knowledge of the world around us, as long as it is understood as a product in which human nature and social customs and institutions are cooperative factors. Perhaps, the history of map-making exhibits a process similar to the history of organic life. Given the influence of Darwinism on Wright, Peirce, James and Dewey, they would have reflected on the relationship between the organizing principles (maps) humans use and the history of organic life (map of organic life such as the theory of evolution). Furthermore, they would have wondered about the implications of humans writing the history of organic life from an evolutionary perspective while they (humans) are subject to the same processes (evolutionary). What kind of relation would there exist between the evolving human cognitive processes and the evolving organisms (the subjects of inquiry)? These kinds of reflections might push one towards a kind of Humean skepticism as happened in the case of Chauncey Wright whose use of scientific reasoning led him to a through-going nihilism regarding a theory of conduct and a theory of nature.

After the Civil War, Wright’s views would have had many sympathizers to the extent that his views pointed out the limitations of human reason and his “thought represented a mature de-

bunking of the philosophical and scientific certitudes that had failed to prevent – in some cases had even incited – four years of mutual destruction.”[p. 214] However, thinkers such as James, Holmes, Peirce and later Dewey read Wright’s nihilistic conclusions as a new beginning for their own inquiries. “Their challenge, as they perceived it, was to devise a theory of conduct that made sense in a universe of uncertainty, a universe like the one Wright described.”[p. 214] What Louis Menand gives us in *The Metaphysical Club* is the story of how these thinkers and their colleagues responded to the failure of reason in warding off catastrophes such as the Civil War. Thus, he shines a light on the path these thinkers followed in their re-examination of the limits of reason, not only with respect to cognitive certainty and the status of “truth” but also, and especially, with respect to reason’s ability to effect human happiness.

The traditional metaphysical search for principles of order both adequate and consistent seems to have eluded these thinkers and their world-view receded into one of uncertainty and change. These thinkers viewed these features (uncertainty and change) as ultimate traits of human experience, but some modification would have to be added with respect to Pierce. And yet one had to act one way or another, or refrain from acting altogether, for actions seemed to demand a unified direction. However, concerning the efficacy of human actions the best that could be expected from human reason (ideas) amounted to hunches and bets (Holmes, James). In Dewey these ideas (hunches and bets) are treated as instruments or tools that have a use only insofar as they overcome obstacles in the fulfillment of human goods and desires. Thus, these thinkers end up with a humbler view of human reason, only one of the many factors in the historical process. Ideas viewed as events or occurrences subject to the same historical and evolutionary processes as biological organisms suggest that they may be compared to the “fixed species” of Darwin’s “theory of natural selection,” and may exhibit similar patterns of change. But this is

an unusually controversial and difficult issue, to say the least, without even broaching the issue Wright might have raised: is it even possible to decipher the order change might follow with respect to either biological organisms or human ideas?

For these giants of American thought, these kinds of concerns undermined the transcendental character of metaphysics and exhibited the hubris that often attached to its claims. Such considerations could serve as a prolegomena to classical American philosophy and shed light on why Holmes, James, Peirce and Dewey developed the views that they did while they shield away from ideologies. In his "Preface" Menand stated that "The belief that ideas should never become ideologies... was the essence of what they taught," [p. xii] and the attitude they had towards ideas was that they are: (i) "tools" which are (ii) "social" and (iii) "dependent on human carriers and the environment" while their survival was tied to (iv) "adaptability." [pp. xi-xii] It is this attitude that Menand unravels from the events and the backdrop in which and against which the above figures came by their views.

The result is a work in the best tradition of intellectual and cultural history, and as such it is also the story of the development of philosophy in the United States as it became integrated into the fabric of U.S. society. In this multi-dimensional panorama we also get the story of a people's declaration of intellectual independence. It seems as though these thinkers harkened to Ralph W. Emerson's call in the *American Scholar* and freed themselves from the past but lost all fixed points of references by which to set their compass. How they responded to this intellectual state of affairs is the story Menand wove for us in *The Metaphysical Club*. It should become a cornerstone for all areas of American studies, especially for those focused on the dynamics of history and philosophy.

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