Tony Beavers considers a timely understanding of machine ethics, Mark Cyzyk finds out how to be a loafing scamp, and Kurt Keefner argues that Americans have had enough of Dick Meyer’s Pragmatic medicine.
and Pragmatism are not quite the same thing, but they are commonly confused. There are two extremes in the field of Pragmatism: the one extreme we might call absolutism. This is any claim that there is one absolute truth. Examples of absolutism include Christian and Muslim fundamentalists, communists and fascists. According to Meyer, the problem is one of degeneration into a conflict of only black or white alternatives and no possibility of compromise. If you disagree with absolutes, he will probably think you are being willfully blind. Absolutists know that they know what is best for other people, and are not shy about imposing it on them by force.

On the other hand, absolutes are just fantasies of people who make everything worse for everyone. Meyer concludes the usual list of twentieth-century dictatorships and godheads, but he doesn’t seem to have tried very hard to find a counterexample, a human absolutist. For that I would nominate the nine-thousand-year-old absolutists, the anti-slavery agitators. Today’s absolutists are usually looked upon as the good guys in antifascism, the American history book, but immediately before and after the Civil War they were widely looked upon as fanatics who had brought on a needless conflict, a view quite similar to Meyer’s view of the micronation absolutist ‘hedginghogs’, who, according to Meyer, politicize debates, refuse to compromise, exasperate their opponents. (‘Hedginghog’ is Berlin’s term for people who know one big thing, as opposed to the ‘we’, who know many little things.)

The second extreme is subjectivism. (These are my labels, not Meyer’s.) Meyer has an unfortunate tendency toward cute coinages, such as ‘Watson-Wilcocks’ and ‘thankgivers’.) Subjectivists are agitated on the one side, and they are. It’s all about their own private opinions and feelings. Some subjectivists believe it is alright to have their own private religion — as does Meyer John ‘Wellman’, after a woman who had one. Subjectivists tend toward moral relativism — the notion that there can be no authoritative account of what’s good or bad.

Pragmatism is not subjectivism according to Meyer, because Pragmatism is grounded in the necessity of action rather than mere contemplation. Meyer’s claims are that America is overrun by its absolutism and subjectivism, like William James before him, Meyer offers up Pragmatism as a ‘third force’ — an alternative to these totalitarian policies of debate.

Meyer also does not offer a lot of examples of Pragmatism, which is strange because there are a few extremely obvious examples among American presidents, such as Franklin Roosevelt. So that is an improvement. Meyer offers up as a rational example, believed humans from Harper Lee’s novel To Kill a Mockingbird. Finch is an optimist of reasonable and non-violent, who heroically defends a black man against a false charge of raping a white woman in 1930s Alabama. Meyer apparently quotes Atticus telling his young daughter that to know a man you have to walk around in his skin for a while. This seems to capture the down-to-earth humanism of Pragmatism, although it seems equally compatible with Einstein being a Christian gentleman, or just a thoughtful person. However, Atticus also displays one of the weaknesses of Pragmatism: he cannot deal with evil. When he calculates the father of the ‘victim’ is, the man (who is absolute truth) holds a grudge, Atticus underestimates the depth of his ice, and is caught unprepared by the man’s attack on his daughter.

We must not confuse ourselves with Atticus for examples of the foolish weakness of Pragmatism. A real-life example is provided by the 1930s German center-left party that dealt with the National Socialists. Their constant plea to not give in to communism sounds much like Meyer’s Pragmatist advice to deal with those who would ‘politics’ debates. The moderate German parties took their own democracy for granted in others, and so were developed an absolute opposition to the Nazis at the level of ideological fundamentals — just as Meyer evidently didn’t want to have to come up with a systematic approach to life. Furthermore, the more moderate parties in the Weimar Republic shared many principles with the Nazi Party, sacrifice to society, obedience to authority, and other ideas. The Nazi party took these ideas to their logical conclusion. The response Germany needed was not more of humanitarian moderation, as the model of Isaiah Berlin, but a radical, certain, controlled defense of reason and liberty as in John Locke and Thomas Jefferson.

Perhaps the most interesting thing about why (why) has Meyer’s is that the pragmatic pluralist philosophy that he author believes will help America with its problems has been the dominant philosophy here for about a century. The three big philosophers of Pragmatism — Charles Sanders Peirce, WilliamJames, and John Dewey — were Americans. Most of the great presidents of the twentieth century — FDR, Kennedy, Johnson, were Pragmatists. People continue to describe America as a pluralistic society. Moderate liberalism (as the American usage of the term, meaning the soft left), with its emphasis on adding new layers of government to solve problems created by old layers of government, is basically Pragmatism. Meyer thinks we need more Pragmatism, when it is a Pragmatism which has gotten as into the zone we’re now in. We built our half-empty, half-futuristic financial system up piece by piece, each piece seeming right at the time, but with every look at the fundamentals of either the political or economic philosophy behind our actions, one result is the current economic crisis.

The decline of civility can also largely be laid at the foot of Pragmatism, which hastyly proclaims “Your manners are not my manners — do not try to improve your manners on me.” Even the polarizing tendencies of the media and some politicians can be explained as a rebellion against a Pragmatism which pretends to be neutral but really is biased, thus inflaming both conservatives and hard liberals, who feel that out of the debate.

Dick Meyer wants more Pragmatism for America. Who, were a better journalist, he would see that America already has too much of that philosophy.
A beloved literature professor gave me a nice hardbound 1937 edition of this book during my undergraduate days in the spring of 1985. I read it that summer. The following spring I found myself studying in China, traveling around the north, climbing the Taoist holy mountains Hua Shan and Tai Shan, visiting the tomb and family mansions of Confucius, and thinking quite a bit about this book. Here, in essay form, were simple lessons for living. Here was a gentle, mandarin manner of approaching the world – one that surely was swept away in the violent storms of the Cultural Revolution twenty years earlier? And yet, amid the vandalized Buddhist temples, the crumbling hutongs of back Beijing alleyways, and the concrete midrise apartment complexes in whose shadow they cowered – amid prominent Party proclamations that citizens must strive for more production and efficiency, amid the surge for modernization and industrialization – amid all of this, I captured glimpses of what came before. In Chufu, outside the K'ung family compound, an old scholar pleaded with my companion and I to return and study calligraphy under his tutelage. Atop Tai Shan, small shrubs with large rocks crammed into their branches and crevices were evidence of a centuries-long folk belief that good luck and enhanced fertility for this soon-to-be-siblingless society would surely follow. High in the monasteries of Hua Shan, robed Taoist monks performed their quotidian duties, some of them not having bothered to descend into the valley for thirty years or more, ignoring the Revolution below. Lin Yutang and his The Importance of Living belong to this time before. And the relevance persists.

How should one live one's life? Surely a perennial philosophical concern. How should I live my life? And why would I now reread this book, twenty years later, forty pounds heavier – a husband, a divorced and remarried father and stepfather, a busy professional with a career to attend to, a monotonous and sometimes soul-crushing daily and weekly schedule, a house, cars, lawn, retirement investments to maintain,
What is Luck?
Celibacy a Freak of Civilization
On Sex Appeal
On Lying in Bed
On Sitting in Chairs
On Smoke and Incense
The Inhumanity of Western Dress
On House and Interiors
On Rocks and Trees
On Going About and Seeing Things
Good Taste in Knowledge
Why I Am a Pagan

The Importance of Living belongs on the same shelf as The Enchiridion of Epictetus, The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius, Thoreau's Walden, the essays of Emerson and the aphorisms of Baltasar Gracian, not because it agrees with any one of them to a great degree (with the exception of Walden), but because, in the same non-systematic way as these other great classics, it illustrates a life, and how to live one.

My beloved literature professor died several years ago, at a venerable age. I think of him often. I recently learned that an equally-beloved philosophy professor, who introduced me to Chinese philosophy, died last year. He was only 54. I think of the significant and important lives they both led. I think of China and my time there. I think of Lin Yutang and the life he led; learning, loving, living, just like my professors.

It's funny how mere reverie and rereading a cherished book can revive enthusiasm, tenacity, zest. Suddenly, the weight of twenty years lifts. I don't feel so middle-aged and graying anymore. I feel something else: like a college senior studying abroad, silently standing atop a holy mountain in China, looking down on the clouds.

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In fond memory of Professor Jesse Fleming (1953-2007).

"Darkness within darkness.
The gateway to all understanding."

Tao Te Ching, 1