

## The Metaphysical Club and the *Origin of Species*

Late in life, Charles Sanders Peirce recalled that in the early 1870s “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.”<sup>1</sup> It was at a meeting of this club in 1872 that Peirce first presented what James later called the principle of pragmatism: “Our idea of anything is our idea of its sensible effects.” The Metaphysical Club has thus been dubbed “the birthplace of pragmatism.”<sup>2</sup> If we believe Peirce’s testimony, the club was a success: “It proved quite the most successfully organized body of students for genuine educative efficiency, in contradistinction to saw-dust-stuffing, that ever I had the good fortune to be placed in.”<sup>3</sup>

The various people who participated in the Metaphysical Club were part of the intellectual community of Cambridge, Massachusetts. All of them apart from James had attended Harvard as undergraduates in the 1850s and ‘60s, and many went on to teach there. Most of the members of the Metaphysical Club were also members of the first cohort of pragmatists (shown in table 1 of the introduction).

1. MS 318 (1907), in Peirce, *Essential Peirce*, 2:399.

2. Charles Sanders Peirce, “How to Make Our Ideas Clear,” *Popular Science Monthly* 12 (1878): 293; Philip P. Wiener, *Evolution and the Founders of Pragmatism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1949), 18–30.

3. MS 620 (1909), in Peirce, *Illustrations*, 187.