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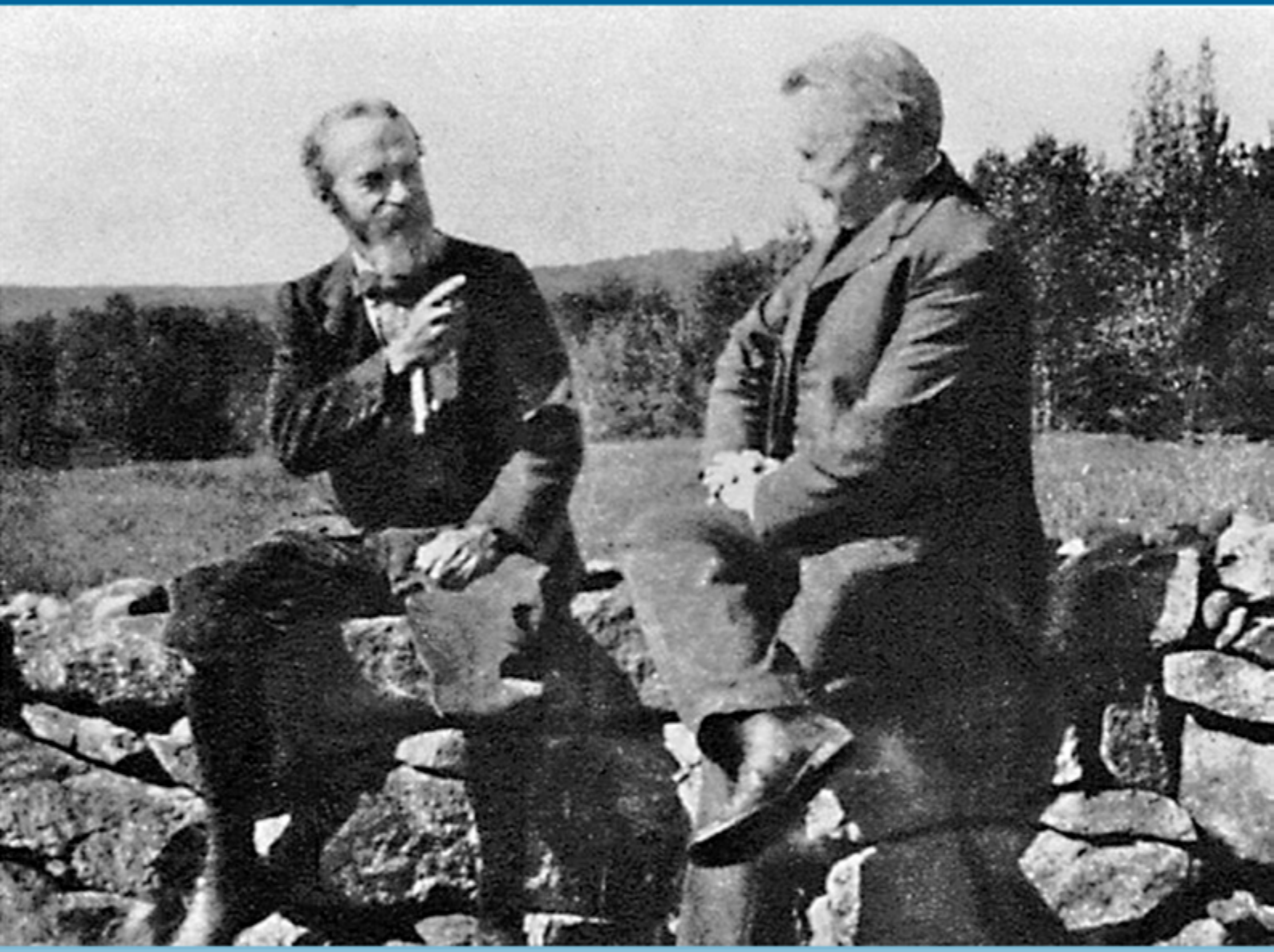

Absolute Pragmatism

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BOOK REVIEW

INTRODUCTION TO THE FOCUS OF ABSOLUTE PRAGMATISM

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The impetus for this in-depth study of Absolute pragmatism came from a paper given by Scott Pratt at the 2024 meeting of the Central European Pragmatist Forum in Vienna. A revised version of that paper heads this collection. Pratt was and is worried about the capacity of pragmatism to respond effectively and ethically to a post-truth world. Pragmatism was "soft on truth," one might say, from James's 1907 *Pragmatism* forward. Its allergy to idealism, to the Absolute, and to foundations of all kinds, grew slowly through the 20th century, culminating in a neo-pragmatism that was admittedly nominalist, and, many have charged, perniciously relativist. While the latter charge is clearly neglecting the nuances of, for example, a Deweyan pragmatism, there can be little doubt that pragmatism has struggled with the question of truth for many decades. That struggle delivers pragmatists into the present with doubtful tools for addressing fake news and alternative facts.

Pratt here delivers a call for a more "insurrectionist" ethic, in the sense elaborated and defended by Leonard Harris (who was the featured speaker at the Vienna meeting), but with the different idea that reviving the Absolute will help with the resistance. This suggestion brought lively discussion, to say the least. Everyone is struggling with how to respond to the current situation. In our breaks and editorial meetings, we decided that we should recruit some senior scholars from varying perspectives to mull over Pratt's idea.

Two of the papers, by Banerjee and Harrelson, go straight at the idea of reviving the Absolute, with varying degrees of sympathy. Banerjee sees promise in the idea if sufficient nuance is applied. Harrelson suspects the cure may be worse than the disease, since keeping the Absolute under control has always proven difficult, and in the present, the darker powers would be sure to misuse (and already are misusing) the Absolute. The middle paper, by Seibert, steps back into the existentialist and tragic side of Royce's philosophy. The prescription of wandering as a therapy for our fragmentariness would seem to mitigate some of the tendency to politicize the ethic Royce left to us. The last two papers are deep dives into the history of the ideas of the Absolute and of pragmatism. Beiseckker examines how the Absolute, as it came to the US from Germany (and especially the Left Hegelians, the 48ers), was anything but a reactionary philosophy. My own essay examines in great detail Royce's "Absolute pragmatism" period, roughly 1895 to 1906. I argue that his Absolute is not the worrisome type, and his idea of pragmatism is an alternative to the version we inherited from James.

In all, we hope that these contributions to contemporary discussion, and to Royce interpretation can spur pragmatists to a more serious (and less nominalist) consideration of the ground of pragmatic philosophy. Pragmatists can be insurrectionist against the growing populism and neo-fascism that is growing all around us.

Chapters

ABSOLUTE PRAGMATISM

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ABSTRACT: The present world faces a range of seemingly intractable problems from pandemics to climate change, from refugee crises to rising violent nationalisms and increasingly autocratic governments. Many of us would probably seek to stand against tyranny; but does pragmatism aid us in this effort? Or, as some would argue, is pragmatism indifferent to taking a side, seeking whatever solutions will quell fear and settle a troubled situation? I will propose here that while philosophical pragmatism of the ordinary varieties may not help, an alternative version might. I will call the alternative what Josiah Royce called it: "*absolute* pragmatism." The purpose of this paper is to consider absolute pragmatism, make a case for what it adds to pragmatism in its "pure" form, and say how the resulting view can provide a normative ground in support of a response called for by Leonard Harris in his insurrection ethics. I will develop the idea of the absolute in this context, illustrate the view in relation to Dewey, say what the "absolute" adds to pragmatism, and suggest the implications of absolute pragmatism as a global, critical, and decolonial philosophy grounded in what African American cultural theorist Fred Moten has called "improvisational foundations."

Keywords: absolute pragmatism, Royce, Dewey, Leonard Harris, Robert Brandom, Richard Rorty, anti-foundationalism, logic, insurrection ethics.

Introduction

Pragmatism has long claimed for itself the place of a philosophy that can settle abstract debates and provide the resources needed to solve pressing real-world problems. Yet late debates among pragmatists have divided this territory between "experience" pragmatism and linguistic pragmatism.[1] This division has introduced a credentialing step into conversations amongst pragmatists, in which each participant must identify what sort of pragmatist they are: neo, new, or just "regular" or "classical" pragmatists.[2]

John Dewey—who is claimed by pragmatists of almost all stripes—dismissed these sorts of credentialing questions as distractions. For Dewey, the worth of a philosophy was found in its ability to impact ordinary lives: "Does [the philosophy] end in conclusions which, when they are referred back to ordinary life-experiences and their predicaments, render them more significant, more luminous to us, and make our dealings with them more fruitful?" (LW 1, 18). Philosophical inquiry begins when the habits we live by and the systems that organize our meaning are interrupted or fail us in some way. Such inquiries, to be successful, not only address the interruption but do so in a way that makes the new situation "more significant," "more luminous," and "more fruitful."

It is this latter result, the troubled situation made better, that raises an issue. We know—or some of us know—that there is something wrong with systems, even democratic ones, that override the flourishing of humans and others, and which divide society, devastate lands, kill so-called enemies for a greater cause, or imply a particular advantage of one group over another. The question I want to ask is whether pragmatism can achieve Dewey's goals. *Can pragmatism solve these sorts of problems in a way that makes experience more luminous and fruitful?*

The present world faces a range of seemingly intractable problems from pandemics to climate change, from refugee crises to rising violent nationalisms and increasingly autocratic governments. In the aspirational democracies of Europe and North America, efforts to promote democratic solutions have been challenged by those who favor other priorities in responding to the crises of the day. For some, turning to autocrats such as Donald Trump in America, Vladimir Putin in Russia, and Victor Orbán in Hungary is viewed as the most effective amelioration for these problems. For others, acceptance of such solutions (or even failing to oppose them) will result in tyranny, with all its easily recognizable attendant evils, whether they arrive by so-called democratic means or by invasion and war.

Many of us would probably seek to stand against tyranny; but does pragmatism aid us in this effort? Or, as some would argue, is pragmatism indifferent to taking a side, seeking whatever solutions will quell fear and settle

[1] See Johnson, Experiencing Language: What's Missing in Linguistic Pragmatism? (2014).
[2] See Pappas, The Narrative and Identity of Pragmatism in America: The History of a Dysfunctional Family? (2014).

a troubled situation? Some, who take at face value the claim that pragmatists are good "problem solvers," will answer the former question by saying "of course." While the latter question will inevitably lead to a lengthy defense of pragmatism's commitment to fallibilism. In the end, I think that both of these answers are untenable. I will propose here that while philosophical pragmatism of the ordinary varieties may not help, an alternative version might. I will call the alternative what Josiah Royce called it: "*absolute* pragmatism."

Royce himself addressed the issue of naming his view in his February 1911 lectures at the University of Pennsylvania sponsored by the George Lieb Harrison Foundation and titled "On the Nature and Accessibility of Absolute Truth." The lecture was given as a response to a series of lectures John Dewey had delivered just three months prior titled "The Problem of Truth."[3] Royce begins his lecture by acknowledging his use of 'absolute' and the inevitable discomfort shared by his audience. Royce explains:

> I have chosen to use the expression 'Absolute Truth' in my title partly because this phrase is, at the moment, extremely unpopular. Of course unpopularity is not in itself an unmixed good. But sometimes, it helps one to be frank and independent. And this is such a time. What is often called "Absolutism" is nowadays a favorite target for the joyous ridicule of skillful humorists and for the more serious scorn of impressive public teachers. …. It seems fair of course to suppose that if a man is a believer in what he calls Absolute Truth, he must be some sort of 'Absolutist.' And you all know in advance what the leaders of opinion today counsel you to think of Absolutists and Absolutism.

I suppose I could justify my use of the term in the same way. The term 'absolute' is once again (or perhaps is still) "extremely unpopular" among philosophers and I am convinced that unpopularity is definitely not an "unmixed good." To borrow from Peirce, the use of this label in the philosophical community of pragmatists can block the way of our inquiry into the nature of pragmatism before it even gets off the ground because of the prejudices of thought Royce identifies. I would even say that the widely shared allergy to the term 'absolute' (and fear of what it must stand for) is responsible for the limitations imposed upon pragmatism by most pragmatists over the last century and a half. At the same time, these limitations are what stands in the way of pragmatism providing an effective resource for efforts to address the world's present problems.

To see the limits of pragmatism, consider Leonard Harris's proposed test of a philosophy's ability to have an impact on experience. He declares: "A philosophy that fails at speaking to miseries such as necro-being, that is, that which makes living a kind of death…is a failed philosophy" (2020, 198). For Harris, a philosophy that passes the test speaks to miseries by encouraging attitudes and practices that stand against the system that imposes and perpetuates such lives. In response to slavery, for example, a philosophy that is worth its salt is one that establishes a duty to oppose the system actively, even violently. It establishes a duty to insurrect.

Harris argues that pragmatism as traditionally conceived fails the insurrectionist test. Its commitment to the standard of successful inquiry—that is, to an inquiry's ability to settle an unsettled situation—lacks significant normative resources to reject systemic injustices and those political movements that seek to preserve them (e.g. the nationalism of Trump or Putin). There are no compelling standards within the philosophical toolbox of pragmatism that would, in all cases, demand standing on the side of peoples harmed by imperialism, slavery, starvation, and necro-being. The claim is that a pragmatist, responding to the starvation of children in some war zone will seek to *ameliorate* the situation by seeking a way to "make it better." If a negotiated settlement would provide at least some food for the children or that some

[3] See MW 6, pp. 12-67, for Dewey's lecture. For those wondering how an exchange between the two philosophers went, Dewey and Royce did not share the stage and it is not even clear that Royce read Dewey's paper in advance. It is clear, however, that Royce read other works by Dewey and mentions him (but not by name) in his first lecture. All references to volumes in *Dewey's Collected Works, 2003, Early Works (EW), Middle Works (MW) and Later Works (LW).*

are taken to safety outside the war zone, the situation is made better by degrees and so the response to starvation would be successful, albeit only partially. Progress would be made even if the solution leaves in place the system that caused and perpetuates the suffering. Pragmatism, Harris argues, prioritizes amelioration over an unyielding commitment, for example, that *no* children should starve or that *no* wars should be fought. For a pragmatist, operative guiding principles can always be adjusted in relation to the primary purpose of making a situation better.

To consider the problem of pragmatism's limits, I take up a distinction introduced by Royce between what he called "pure" pragmatism and the (some would say) oxymoronic "absolute pragmatism." The purpose of this paper is to consider absolute pragmatism, make a case for what it adds to pragmatism in its "pure" form, and say how the resulting view can provide a normative ground in support of the sort of insurrection called for by Harris. In what follows, I will develop the idea of the absolute in this context, illustrate the view in relation to Dewey, say what the "absolute" adds to pragmatism, and suggest the implications of absolute pragmatism as a global, critical, and decolonial philosophy grounded in what African American cultural theorist Fred Moten has called "improvisational foundations."

The Absolute

It is probably best to begin with a gloss of what Royce means by 'absolute'. Royce began his philosophical career as a pragmatist but embraced idealism and the concept of the Absolute early on. The leading advocate for the use of the concept of the Absolute at the time was F. H. Bradley for whom the Absolute "is experience." Not, he continues "one-sided experience, as mere volition or mere thought; but it is a whole superior to and embracing all incomplete forms of life. … And because it cannot contradict itself and does not suffer a division of idea from existence, it has therefore a balance of pleasure over pain. In every sense it is perfect" (1969, 213). For Bradley, as T. S. Sprigge observes, the Absolute is the "totality of all things … not a mere aggregate or assemblage of things." It is also "a timeless experience or state of mind inconceivably rich in the elements which go to make it up but still having something like the kind of unity which belongs to a human person's experience as it occurs at any moment." Yet, it is also "not a person," but rather is simply the "All … which … is present in each of its parts or aspects" (1993, 265). This Absolute is, to recall James's assessment, a "block universe." Mary Whiton Calkins—a student of Royce and a philosopher at Wellesley who was among the last defenders of Roycean idealism in the first third of the 20th century—characterizes "metaphysical absolutism" in her 1933 survey of contemporary philosophy as "the doctrine that the universe is fundamentally a single, individual, and all-including being" (436).

When Royce introduces the term in his late work, *Sources of Religious Insight* (1912), rather than emphasizing unity as one might expect given the ordinary approach to absolute idealism, he emphasizes the *experience* of the Absolute.

> [I]f any one wants to be in touch with the 'Absolute' — with that reality which the pragmatists fancy to be peculiarly remote and abstract — let him simply do any individual deed whatever and then try to undo that deed. Let the experiment teach him what one means by calling reality absolute. Let the truths which that experience teaches any rational being show him also what is meant by absolute truth (154).

Calkins offered an even more succinct definition of the absolute.[4] She writes "by 'absolute' is meant … not 'unlimited,' but 'self-limited,' or 'unlimited by anything external to one-self'" (1933, 455). In the case of an "individual deed" of the sort Royce describes, the action is "in touch with" the absolute because, by taking an action, an agent experiences self- limitation—the action one choos-

[4] Calkins defines 'absolute' in the context of her discussion of 'personalistic absolutism' (her position). Unlike for Bradley, the Absolute is here a person distinct from other persons in that it is "self-limiting." She argues that Royce holds a similar view.

es to take cannot be undone. If the action were forced on the agent, however, the action would be limited externally and not 'absolute' in this sense. The absolute as a unified whole still matters to Royce in relation to the possibility of truth and error in the long run, but this is secondary to what it is for finite beings to experience the absolute, that is, in the experience of irrevocable actions.

The idea of irrevocable action as an experience of the absolute is also endorsed by William James in an often-overlooked passage from *The Will to Believe*. In the titular essay, James offers one of his many criticisms of absolute philosophy when he contrasts "the absolutist way of believing in the truth " with the "empiricist way." Empiricists, he says, grant that one may attain truth but may not know it, while absolutists hold that one can both attain the truth and know that they have. Their views, James observes, "show very different degrees of dogmatism in their lives" (12) and neither is free of it. In this, James anticipates Dewey's critiques of 'isms and is clearly opposed to "absolutist" approaches in philosophy—as any "pure" pragmatist worth their salt should be.

In contrast to these absolutizing approaches to truth and knowledge, and in keeping with the theory of truth he had laid out in *Pragmatism*, James argues that belief should be associated first and foremost with the willingness to act. He argues that when agents are faced with a choice between possible actions, these options (or "hypotheses") are by degrees either "living" or "dead." In a striking passage, James asserts that "The maximum of liveness in a hypothesis means willingness to act irrevocably" (3).[5] In other words, in a given moment of choice, the "live" options are those that require actions that cannot be undone. To put this in Royce's terms, the most "live" options are those that are in touch with the absolute. Royce himself identifies this passage in the "The Will to Believe" as establishing what he calls in the Harrison Lectures "James' Principle": "*Not to decide is a decision*" (1911, 31). For James, as for Royce, every action by an agent involves judgments from among live options. Such options include both taking an action and choosing not to act; when one or more of the options available are irrevocable, the agent experiences the absolute. In fact, Royce concludes, "That the absolutism which I have been maintaining is but the sense of [James's] own early doctrine, stated a little more fully than he himself stated it, I firmly believe" (1911, 29).[6]

Absolute Pragmatism

Absolute pragmatism, for Royce, combines pragmatism—that is, "pure pragmatism"—framed by the "pragmatic method" with what I will call "Royce's thesis." In his remembrance of James following James's death in 1911, Royce described the pragmatic method as committed to the doctrine that "both the meaning and the truth of ideas shall be tested by the empirical consequences of these ideas and by the practical results of acting them out in life" (1911b, 33). For James, Royce wrote, "the 'consequences' upon which he laid stress when he talked of the pragmatic test for ideas were certainly not the merely worldly consequences of such ideas in the usual sense of the word 'worldly.' He appealed always to experience" (1911b 34). Truth, for a pragmatist, is found in response to the situations at hand in which they are tested (a principle that holds for knowledge claims as well as values). Royce observed, "A pragmatist was free to decide moral issues as he chose, so long as he used the pragmatic method in doing so; that is, so long as he tested ethical doctrines by their concrete results, when they were applied to life" (WJ 33).

[5] Thanks to Aaron Shepherd for noticing this point in James's work.

[6] Royce wrote the Harrison lectures in the summer of 1911. Royce's close friend James died in the house next door to Royce's on August 26 of that year. The lecture continues what Clendenning has called "the battle of the Absolute," waged between James and Royce in their published work, their classrooms, and across the fence between their yards. It also develops aspects of Royce's theory of logic that led to *The Principles of Logic* (1914) and may have been preliminary to Royce's planned book on logic. See *Letters*, pp. 610-11.

Absolute pragmatism, rather than a contrasting view, is an additive one. "This position," Royce wrote in his 1914 *Principles of Logic*,

> differs from that of the pragmatists now most in vogue. There are *some* truths that are known to us *not* by virtue of the special successes which this or that hypothesis obtains in particular instances, but by virtue of the fact that *there are certain modes of activity … which we reinstate and verify, through the very act of attempting to presuppose that these modes of activity do not exist…*.

The addition to pragmatism is "*Royce's thesis*." He summarizes elsewhere: "An absolute truth is one where denial implies the assertion of the same truth" (1911b, 251).[7] He offers a series of examples of his thesis to illustrate what counts as "absolutely" true.

> Thus, whoever says that there are no classes whatever in his world, inevitably classifies. Whoever asserts that for him there are no real relations, and that, in particular the logical relation between affirmation and denial does not exist, so that for him yes means the same as no, — on the one hand himself asserts and denies, and so makes a difference between yes and no; and, on the other hand, asserts the existence of a relational sameness even in denying the difference between yes and no (1911, 121-2).

The first example affirms that judgment requires classification; the second that it requires affirmation, negation and relationality. There are other such principles as well that apply to any judgment and more broadly to the actions of any agent.[8]

The frame of absolute pragmatism is the structure or principles of order that follow from—are produced by—agential action. Consider an agent who takes some action. Two things are immediately clear: (1) that if this action is a matter of agency and not mere mechanism, then the action will have been chosen from two or more possibilities and (2) the action taken cannot be taken back—it is irrevocable (regardless of how minor or major the action). These two aspects of action are principles that fit the description of Royce's thesis and so are among the absolute truths. In the first case, imagine that one denies that agency requires two or more possibilities. The effort to deny the claim reasserts the claim to be denied and so, in practice, reinstates two possibilities (the original claim and its denial).[9]

The emergence of irrevocability as an absolute truth follows the same pattern. Reject the principle of irrevocability. Declare "my acceptance of the principle never happened." But, of course, if the declaration means anything, it means that I did the thing that I now deny doing. The denial reinstates the principle. Royce makes the case in the Harrison Lectures. "The ideal of the decisive will," he says, "includes the assertion, that every deed of ours once done is irrevocable." To deny the claim one necessarily reinstates the act to be revoked. Royce illustrates:

> I am to do something. For instance I am to sing a song once through. Then I am to unsing that song. That is I am somehow to make it true that song never was sung. Let the feat be accomplished by whatever magic you please. Then by hypothesis it is true, or becomes true, that just that individual singing of just that individual song by just myself, never took place. But in stating the supposed truth, I seem to have contradicted the proposition uttered. … I now say that what I declare to have been sung is also and equally declared not to have been sung (34).

He concludes "the denial of the proposition that the deed once done is irrevocable is a denial that denies itself. In vain do you call such considerations abstract. They enter into the most concrete life of common sense all the time"

[7] I name this principle 'Royce's thesis' because, like the Church-Turing thesis (that a function is computable if and only if it is recursive), it is a description of a certain range of principles that can be found out, but that itself does not have a proof. The thesis serves as a guide to investigation and a kind of testing standard, not a provable theorem.

[8] In *The World and the Individual*, Second Series, Royce uses the thesis to argue for his interpretation of the moral 'ought': "And I prove my doctrine not only by this appeal to consciousness, but, indirectly, by letting my opponent try to refute me. If he does so, it soon appears that he rejects my account as something that seems to him unreasonable, i.e. as something that ought not to be held, just as our realist, in our former discussion, was found appealing to the 'sanity' of his beliefs, to their usefulness for practical human purposes, as part of his warrant for maintaining that the reality is independent of all purposes. One thus refutes our doctrine of the Ought only by appealing to it. All logical discussion is, in fact, appeal to a norm, and a norm is a teleological standard" (1904, 38).

[9] See Royce, The Relation of the Principles of Logic to the Foundations of Geometry, 1905 pp. 259-62.

(34).[10] The principles tested by Royce's Thesis are principles that emerge through the experience of taking action and can be recognized as absolute when they conform to the thesis. In this sense, the absolutes emerge in the experience of taking action, they can be called "performative absolutes."[11]

In addition to agential choice, individuation, irrevocability, negation, relationality, pluralism can be identified as an absolute in the same way. Affirming pluralism as an absolute truth is perhaps best seen as the other side of individuation and classification. To eliminate pluralism is to eliminate from judgment the reality of anything other than the judgment at hand. The action of elimination, however, requires selecting something other to deny. In so doing, the resulting separation of the act of denial and the principle denied reinstates a pluralism. What the principle of pluralism means is not the realist notion of things absolutely independent of knowers (or other things in relation to it), but rather something on the way to unity, on the way to its end or purpose. As with all the other principles, it is only in a mechanical world that pluralism is not necessary because everything is one system moving without agential interference. This raises the question of chance, tychism. In a mechanical world, chance is still a possibility. Perhaps this is the world we live in—mechanical and interrupted by chance. But then, as Peirce observes, it is hard to account for the role of purpose and agential activity. Royce's world can have operative chance, but it is a world where agents can respond to the operations of chance by ordering its effects even as it is a world that includes performative absolutes.

[10] One can imagine trying to denounce or forgive some action as a way of addressing its consequences (and so revoking it), but either requires that the action is done and cannot be taken back. Consider, for example, the argument often leveled against the death penalty that it neither brings closure to the victims because of the lengthy legal process necessary to ensure the perpetrator's guilt, nor is immune to the possibility of executing an innocent person. In such cases, the entire process can be rightly denounced as unjust, but all the while the lives of both victims and executed persons remain irrevocably ended.

[11] The name, performative absolute, was suggested by Mark Johnson.

Pure Pragmatism and Dewey's Absolute

As championed by James and described famously in his 1906 and 1907 lectures published as *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, "*True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify*" (97). One can say of a true idea that "'it is useful because it is true' or that 'it is true because it is useful.' Both of these phrases mean exactly the same thing" (98). In short, truth is a matter of useful or satisfying experience. For Dewey, truth (or rather warranted assertibility in *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*) is also a matter of experience, but more precisely it is the result of a successful inquiry: that is, an inquiry that responds to an indeterminate situation by changing its character or "pervasive quality" to a determinate one.[12] Such results are fallible and limited to the situation at hand, though they may also be used as guides in new situations.

For Royce, the truths of this sort of pragmatism are the result of "special successes ... in particular instances." In the Harrison Lectures, Royce defines a judgment as true "*if it so guides or counsels our conduct through its interpretation of the object, that the deed which it counsels meets our intent, i.e. fulfills, as far as it goes, the will* [purpose] *that we have in mind when, following this counsel we choose this deed*" (1911, 19). The definition marks a three-term relation between the claim, its object, and its "interpretation" framed by a purpose. A claim is true if the actions it directs lead to the intended result. The definition does not reject but develops the pragmatist definitions of truth Royce identifies: "Truth is not a fixed character of ideas or of assertions; it happens to them; they become true by virtue of their leadings" (20) and "The truth of an idea consists in its agreement with its expected workings" (20). In each case, truth is understood in relation to some purpose or goal.

Royce's theory of truth goes further than the pure pragmatist account. Given the limits of those who make

[12] See Dewey, LW 12, 69-74.

claims about the world, success is almost always prospective, awaiting some final outcome or a view wide enough to confirm that claims are true. Truth, in this sense, amounts to a successful connection between a claim and its object in terms of the purposes set for the connection. Royce says, "truth relations obtain neither temporally nor timelessly, but supratemporally" (1911, 26). An example of a supratemporal relation is "any musical unity you please" (27). What is required for unity is an experience that links, in this case, all of the sounds of a piece, beginning to end, at once and in an ongoing way. This idea is perhaps also captured by Dewey's later definition of inquiry: "Inquiry is the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole" (LW 12, 108). The result of a successful inquiry is a "warranted assertion," where the warrant is the supratemporal unity of a situation—resolving the indeterminacy of the initial situation and leaving a remainder: a warranted claim. What Royce's Thesis adds to pure pragmatism is the recognition that there are additional truths—principles that govern the process of making judgments (in James's and Royce's terms) or of inquiring (in Dewey's)—that are claims that do not satisfy the usual pragmatic expectation of being fallible and limited, even as they are the results of experience (through the testing implied by Royce's Thesis).

While particular claims about the world, that is, interpretations of experience, are potentially absolute in the sense of finally true, given a wide enough supratemporal unity, such claims are never settled in the experience of finite beings.[13] Absolute truths of this sort are only "absolute" when all possible inquiry is complete and so "absolute" marks the aspiration at once to get the "right answers" and nevertheless to keep trying. In this way, "absolute truth" suggests any settled answer remains fallible. Royce's Thesis, however, identifies a second class of absolutes: the principles that describe the actions of "decisive wills" including acts of seeking the truth. Absolute pragmatism recognizes truths of both sorts: the truths that can be overturned by further inquiry *and* the truths that describe the process by which truths are generated and overturned, that is, performative absolutes.

"Pure pragmatism" as described by Royce is subject to the Harris critique. At one time, this was of small concern since the primary worry, at least of the pragmatists (and later the critical theorists and post-structuralists[14]), was to undermine those who would impose truth dogmatically to the advantage of some group or system. More recently, the erosion of confidence in the possibility of truth has led to an era of "post-truth," which is manifested in science denial and weaponized falsehoods. Well-intentioned criticisms of dogmatic truth are now leveraged in bad faith to establish new regimes that, among other things, aim to undermine the results of scientific inquiry that are politically unpopular and exclude groups from opportunity and from having a voice in their communities.

A standard critique of pragmatism in its classical form is that its fallible stance on values means that it can support both genuine reform and genuine oppression. An early critic of this sort was Randolph Bourne, a former student of Dewey's and an influential public intellectual. When Dewey switched his commitments around World War I from opposition to America's entry into the war to a position in favor, Bourne declared his disappointment. "It is true," Bourne wrote,

> Dewey calls for a more attentive formulation of war-purposes and ideas, but he calls largely to deaf ears. His disciples have learned all too literally the instrumental attitude toward life, and, being immensely intelligent and energetic, they are

[13] This view recalls Peirce's definition of truth and reality in "How to Make Our Ideas Clear": "The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate is what is meant by truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real" (1992, 273).

[14] See Pratt and Rosiek, "Future Reductio: The Logic of Posthuman Empiricism, Method, and Possible Worlds" (unpublished).

> making themselves efficient instruments of the war-technique… Their education has not given them a coherent system of large ideas, or a feeling for democratic goals. They have, in short, no clear philosophy of life except that of intelligent service, the admirable adaption of means to ends. They are vague as to what kind of society they want, or what kind of society America needs, but they are equipped with all the administrative attitudes and talents necessary to attain it (1999, 60).

The problem was, according to Bourne, that, while Dewey meant his philosophy of life "to start with values… there was always that unhappy ambiguity in his doctrine as to just how values were created, and it became easier and easier to assume that just any growth was justified and almost any activity valuable so long as it achieved ends" (60-61). Dewey's pragmatism, Bourne argued, did not prevent him from focusing on challenging the "excesses" of the pacifists instead of "the excesses of military policy" and somehow led him to believe that one could "try to conscript thought, and assume that the war-technique [could] be used without trailing along with it the mob fanaticisms, the injustices and hatred, that are organically bound up with it" (cited in McKenna & Pratt, 2015, 88). Harris agrees with Bourne when he recognizes that Dewey does not rely on his pragmatism to call for social change but on his faith in democracy (2020, 181). One might argue that democracy is an essential part of philosophical pragmatism, but I agree with Harris here. "Pure" pragmatism is taken by most to be a method for understanding meaning and not, in any ordinary sense, a political theory or metaphysics.[15]

Something like Royce's characterization of pure pragmatism was also proposed much later in the 20th century by Robert Brandom who labeled the view "fundamental pragmatism." For Brandom, such pragmatism is committed to "the idea that one should understand knowing that as a kind of knowing how. … That is, believing that things are thus-and-so is to be understood in terms of practical abilities to do something" (2011, 9). "The fundamental pragmatist aspiration," he continues, "is to be able to exhibit discursive intentionality as a distinctive kind of practical intentionality" (9). Instrumental pragmatism, a variant of this "methodological commitment," is an effort to understand norms and standards of practice as a functional system that is "capacious enough to include the environment being acted on as well as the organism transacting with it" (18). Ends and purposes are themselves part of the functional system used in the practice of discourse—in the practice of explaining to others their shared world. Brandom takes both of these forms of pragmatism "as (one) optional way of elaborating what is often called 'Peirce's Principle': the meaning of a claim is the difference that adopting it would make to what one does" (20).

Rorty's conception of pragmatism is also similar to the view that Royce calls "pure," though in a different way than Brandom's. Rorty's pragmatism (at least in his 1982 *Consequences of Pragmatism*) "is the doctrine that there are no constraints on inquiry save conversational ones—no wholesale constraints derived from the nature of objects, or of the mind, or of language, but only those retail constraints provided by the remarks of our fellow inquirers" (165). As Chris Voparil has argued, Rorty in many ways could not be further from Royce. For Rorty, Royce was "the idealist and metaphysician" whose work was a "rightful target of anti- Philosophical with a capital 'P', critique" and a "foil to the historicist, antiessentialist, and anti-foundationalist contingentism Rorty advances" (2022, 185). Significantly, Voparil finds that despite their differences they nevertheless shared "the broad philosophical insight that truth, knowledge, and reality cannot be understood apart from community" (277). For Harris, I suspect, Brandom's fundamental pragmatism and Rorty's pragmatism suffer from the same pure pragmatist problem. Neither can endorse an absolute duty to insurrect or cultivate insurrectionist virtues on the basis of their pragmatism. As for Royce, both views represent

[15] James has a pragmatic politics but argues that pragmatism as a method is separate from his metaphysics of radical empiricism. See James, *The Meaning of Truth*, 1978, 173.

pure pragmatism and as such fail to take into account, on one hand, the absolute truths that frame judgment and, on the other, guidance about what social values ought to be used in making judgments.

For Dewey's part, it is his faith in democracy that provides the values that call for opposition to systems of oppression. He cultivated this faith in the years after the First World War in response to the criticism he faced from Bourne and others. While such criticism may hold of Dewey's pragmatism before the First World War, his later pragmatism represented by his theory of inquiry suggests that he was in fact an absolute pragmatist. Where he supplemented his pragmatism with a democratic faith, he did so because he relied not on "pure" pragmatism but on a version of pragmatism that recognized the kind of absolute truths that Royce's thesis identified. In Dewey's case, the self-reinstating principle is that judgment is the result of agents in situations. "The reader," he writes in *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*,

> whether he agrees or not with what has been said, … cannot decline to have a situation for that is equivalent to having no experience, not even one of disagreement. …. This very declination is, nevertheless, identical with initiation of another encompassing qualitative experience as a unique whole" (LW 12, 74).

The effort to eliminate situations that lead to reflection only have the result of initiating that same sort of situation anew and so generates an absolute truth in the sense specified by Royce's Thesis. The result is to recognize that necessity is experiential, not deductive or rational. Dewey concludes that one can only "*invite* the reader to have for himself that kind of an immediately experienced situation in which the presence of a situation as a universe of experience is seen to be the encompassing and regulating condition of all discourse" (LW 12, 75).

One might object that Dewey nevertheless denies absolutism, even in the *Logic*. "Absolute origins and absolute closes and termini [of judgments] are mythical" (LW 12, 221), he declares, despite his conclusion a page earlier that "Judgment is transformation of an antecedent existentially indeterminate or unsettled situation into a determinate one" (LW 12, 220). The first claim rejects absolute origins, while the second states that *all* judgments have their origins in indeterminate situations. There is, of course, no tension here from Dewey's perspective because rejecting absolute origins is a claim about experienced situations (there aren't any universal ones) while the latter claim is an observation about the nature of judgment in general, in effect, a performative absolute. The summary statement about judgment is, again, a truth of the sort Royce identifies as absolute, while any claims about particular "absolute origins and closes" are not.

Dewey's faith in democracy is not a requirement for inquiry. One can inquire even while oppressed or oppressing. Yet, if one needs to choose a ground for making judgments (which, by James's Principle, it must), democratic arrangements are the right choice. Dewey asks, "Can we find any reason that does not ultimately come down to the belief that democratic social arrangements promote a better quality of human experience, one which is more widely accessible and enjoyed, than do non-democratic and anti-democratic forms of social life?" (1988, 18).[16] The structure of inquiry sets up the need to make choices. Democratic values are not derived from this structure by necessity; rather, they are selected as grounds that lead to a certain sort of future. Absolute pragmatism, by affirming absolute truths that limit necessity in judgment, nevertheless requires foundations that can ground judgments in terms of possible futures.

Improvisatory Foundations

It is important to understand that a theory of judgment or inquiry framed by Royce's so-called performative absolutes has at least one significant result. As a logic or system of order, its principles produce a logic that is both capacious and limited. It is capacious in that its

[16] See also Dewey, Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us, LW 14, 225-31.

rules support a wide range of ordering systems. In present day logic, Royce's (and arguably Dewey's) theories of judgment are consistent with modern logic, Aristotelian logic, various logics of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and the range of recent paraconsistent and dialetheic non-classical logics. As his student and pioneering logician C. I. Lewis concluded, Royce's logic "is that of the path-finder. The prospect of the novel is here much greater [than in alternative logics of the day]. [Royce's system of order] may, probably does, contain new continents of order whose existence we do not suspect. And some chance transformation may put us, suddenly and unexpectedly, in possession of such previously unexplored fields'" (Lewis 1918, pp. 369–370).[17]

One of the ways to understand the difference between logical systems is to consider what can be validly inferred from the rules that form the logic. As a general guide, one can infer a wider range of necessary conclusions in a system with relatively more rules: more rules, more deductive conclusions. From logics with fewer rules, one can infer a narrower range of necessary conclusions but consequently leave open more possibilities. Beginning with the absolute truths identified by Royce's thesis, a logic is produced that includes classical logic as a subsystem but also recognizes logics with fewer rules that limit necessity and acknowledge more possibilities. As a simple example: if a logic accepts that some contradictions are true (in violation of the principle of non-contradiction), then certain argument forms of classical logic (*reductio ad absurdum* arguments, for example) are not valid and so some necessary conclusions in classical logic will also not be valid. By limiting the necessary conclusions, other conclusions, though not necessary, become possibilities (where their truth will depend, just as Dewey argued, on the particular situation at hand). Absolute pragmatism (perhaps contrary to one's intuitions regarding the term 'absolute') *limits necessity*. It limits those rules that establish norms in terms of which judgments are made.[18] There are rules about how to make judgments, but no necessity about the standards used to choose among the possibilities. These further standards are a matter of the purposes or intentions that direct the inquiry. Put another way, given a choice between one possible action and another which is incompatible with it, where both courses of action are in James's terms, live options, the choice is not determined by logical rules (that is, one cannot deduce the correct choice) but rather one must choose by other means that are directed but not determined by one's purpose or an imagined future.[19] In this sense, the necessity of Royce's logic is limited.

Dewey's democratic faith, as I said a moment ago, is not implied by his theory of inquiry but fills a gap left by that theory. The theory of inquiry does not provide a standard of success but only a context in which success can be achieved. The standard may emerge in the situation at hand, or it may be imported from outside the situation from past results, or it may be something committed to in advance and outside the present circumstances. Dewey writes "The key-note of democracy as a way of life may be expressed, it seems to me, as the necessity for the participation of every mature human being in formation of the values that regulate the living of men together:—which is necessary from the standpoint of both the general social welfare and the full development of human beings as individuals" (LW 11, 217). Dewey's democratic faith seems to satisfy what is needed to fill the gap left by the logical rules: (1) it emerges against a background of what is required for inquiry; (2) the standard of success is relative to the present situation; (3) it has been used successfully

[17] I've discussed this at some length elsewhere (2007).

[18] In his discussion of logical pluralism, C. I. Lewis concludes, for example, "The law of the Excluded Middle is not writ in the heavens: it but reflects our rather stubborn adherence to the simplest of all possible modes of division, and our predominant interest in concrete objects as opposed to abstract concepts. The reasons for the choice of our logical categories are not themselves reasons of logic any more than the reasons for choosing Cartesian, as against polar or Gaussian coordinates, are themselves principles of mathematics, or the reason for the radix 10 is of the essence of number" (1932, 505).

[19] See Pratt, Decolonizing Natural Logic, Pratt and Rosiek, 2023.

before in other situations; and (4) the inquirer has committed to the idea before the present case and so seeks solutions that satisfy it. Standards are required by the structure of inquiry, but they are not deduced from it.

Dewey's pragmatism, on this analysis, is absolute because inquiry is self-reinstating (following Royce's Thesis) and, as a result, it also calls for decisions about governing values. The argument for those values will not be one from necessity but one that attends to the system of order that constrains and affords life while nevertheless being subject to failure and new choices. Part of what the absolute brings to pragmatism is rejection of the classical conception of necessity. The absolute truths—performative absolutes—are necessary in one sense (they are reinstated by performative contradiction) while other supposed necessities, those of classical logic and systems of ethical judgment, are instead rules added as the consequences of human history. To rely on such historical necessities is to rely on the results of a process that, like all historical processes, involves the operations of *power* to advantage one group or interest over another. Absolute pragmatism *denaturalizes* (or from another perspective *decolonizes*) dominant logic and its conception of reason as the result of history in order to see it as a process of interest and circumstance and, in this way, creates a space for choosing and working toward other ordering systems.

By undercutting faith in logical and moral necessity, the ability for individuals or groups to lay down laws, enforce concepts and practices as the necessary consequence of some given ordering system—a categorical imperative or a maxim of utility or a set of commandments—is also undermined. For those who adopt absolute pragmatism the critical demand is that authority stop hiding behind claims of necessity and to recognize their actions for what they are—actions taken in service of some interest. Agents are responsible for their actions (or their inaction). Criticism of ideas and policies is not to show the absurdity of a position in order to reject them but to reveal their purposes. What is to be gained or lost, who is advantaged, and crucially, what alternatives are available become the core questions of criticism. Since agents are responsible, their choice of purposes is among the decisions they must make. Without necessity to rely on, purposes must be engaged as fully as particular actions if one is to act as an agent rather than an instrument of someone else.

In addition to providing a framework for denaturalizing dominant systems of order, the centrality of responsibility-taking, and the importance of the role of purpose, performative absolutes add to pragmatism not absolute foundations but the need for a different kind of foundation. Dewey's theory of valuation moves toward this point by making valuation the result of inquiry and in so doing argues against any fixed ground for valuation. Absolute pragmatism agrees with this but also agrees with Dewey when he says "everyone, in my conception, must be dogmatic at some point in order to get anywhere with other matters" (LW 3, 74). Those who would argue that there are no foundations are, on this account, simply fooling themselves or worse accepting a way of thinking by which they unwittingly affirm some system of order that is not one they would otherwise affirm.

In a sense, anti-foundationalist Harris agrees on this point. Even as he undermines established systems and unmoors them from given foundations, he nevertheless asserts that we can see and feel human suffering and we can, as a result, value its elimination. An enslaved person, to use Harris's example, has a moral duty to insurrect because the conditions of enslavement enforce suffering. While not foundations in the sense of western philosophical foundations, such commitments are grounds for judgment and are offered as grounds for others as well. There is no necessity for such grounds but there are reasons that emerge in human experience in relation to hoped-for futures.[20] Empathy with suffering leads to, but

[20] Not all inference is deductive or inductive. Inference can be responsive to a situation, a product of its felt qualities, what Peirce called reason by abduction. Also see Dewey on imagination, *Art as Experience*, LW 10, 271-74 and Chapter 14, Art and Civilization.

does not necessitate, the purpose of a future in which suffering is alleviated.

For Harris, Brandom, and Rorty, pure pragmatism, as a method that adopts the *success* of its efforts as its primary value, must reject insurrection because insurrections are likely to fail. Consistent with the everyday sense of "pragmatic," pragmatism would favor some compromised alternative that achieves "success" while nevertheless prolonging suffering in hopes that circumstances will eventually change.[21] Absolute pragmatism, on the other hand, offers the possibility of absolute truth without recourse to necessity. To act as an agent involves purpose; in this case, one can accept given purposes that cause suffering and immiseration or one can choose another foundation that responds to experience with hope for a different future. Such foundations are revisable and subject to failure, but nevertheless they ground judgment across different situations.

Which foundation does one choose when they do not merely affirm what is given? Rorty and Harris point the way. Experience of ourselves and others provides the orienting place from which we can imagine alternative futures. These futures can be compared, changed, rejected, and accepted, not by following antecedent standards, but by the character of the futures and the relations they promote. African American cultural theorist Fred Moten says of the black radical tradition that it "is not, though it is nothing other than, grounded in African foundations; that it is grounded in the impossible return to Africa that is not antifoundationalist but improvisatory of foundations" (Black and Blur,13). The foundations here are not absent but troubled, contradictory. As Moten sees it, the tension demands not just any result, but improvisation. The Black radical tradition's futures are not deductions from a set of premises nor selected because their outcomes are certain (in a way that may also defer responsibility to some other agency or source), but rather are improvisations accepted because they are experienced as "right," because, in Dewey's terms, they are experienced as making life more luminous and more fruitful. They are foundations nonetheless, necessary for agency but neither given nor unchangeable. Since a particular selection is a choice, we also know that the choice could have consequences that will be disastrous and that these results are irrevocable. Improvisation, however, is not just a matter of guesswork, it is the result of knowing one's instrument, the history of playing, the capability of one's collaborators, the skill of listening, and sharing both a goal and an experience. Absolute pragmatism is, in the end, a framework for improvisation with which today's pragmatists may respond to the crises of our time in compelling ways.

Absolute pragmatism shares much in common with what Harris called critical pragmatism, which he attributes to Alain Locke. For Harris, Locke's critical pragmatism can be read as confronting "a world of paradoxes and dilemmas," a view that "recognized that the promotion of moral imperatives was often occasioned or warranted dogmatism and absolutism" (193). Locke put it this way: "All philosophies, it seems to me, are in ultimate derivation philosophies of life and not of abstract, disembodied 'objective' reality; products of time, place, and situations … But no conception of philosophy, however relativist, however opposed to absolutism, can afford to ignore the question of ultimates or abandon what has been so aptly though skeptically termed the 'quest for certainty.' (Quoted in Harris, 193)[22]—also an apt description of absolute pragmatism.

[21] See Mary Parker Follett's criticism of compromise. In the context of her analysis of power, there are three ways to resolve conflict: domination, compromise and integration. Domination is a resolution where the results satisfy the interests and demands of one side. Compromise is simply a form of domination in which each participant both dominates and is dominated. Integration, as a resolution, "evolves" the purposes of the situation so that the "sides" become part of a shared process.

[22] Compare Locke's description of philosophy with Royce's in *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy*: "You philosophize when you reflect critically upon what you are actually doing in your world. What you are doing is of course, in the first place, living. And life involves passions, faiths, doubts, and courage. The critical inquiry into what all these things mean and imply is philosophy" (1).

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MORAL IMAGINATION, EPISTEMIC ALLYSHIP, AND FASHIONING *SHARED* MORAL WORLDS: REIMAGINING THE ROYCEAN *ABSOLUTE* FOR A PRAGMATIST MORAL EPISTEMOLOGY FROM THE MARGINS

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ABSTRACT: Women, Third World subjects, and other marginalized groups often have a difficult time fitting in with classical conceptions of the moral subject who is defined through mastery over oneself. The paper begins with the crucial feminist insight to attend to vulnerability, and centers the voices of the absent and dispossessed moral subjects to develop resources for a pragmatist moral epistemology from the margins. But a critical question remains: Is there a possibility of sharing in a common moral world, if moral agency looks radically different from the perspective of a morally privileged subject in comparison to a dispossessed subject? Moral imagination, I argue, can become a key resource for bridging epistemic divides and theorizing the possibility of *shared* moral worlds. While the work of John Dewey remains the primary reference point on moral imagination in pragmatism, this paper theorizes the nexus between moral imagination, dispossession, and collective resistance by engaging with Josiah Royce's idealistic pragmatism. To mitigate any distributive injustices in the burdens of moral dispossession, we need to simultaneously build a critical epistemology for the morally privileged subject alongside a moral epistemology of dispossession. The paper takes this dual-pronged approach for developing a collective moral epistemology of resistance, where the marginalized and the typically self-assured moral subject can hope to build epistemic allyship without which the project of moral recognition would remain incomplete. I engage with two texts by Royce, namely, the *World and the Individual* (Second Series): *Nature, Man, and the Moral Order*, which was originally published in 1901 and part one of *The Problem of Christianity*, which was originally published in 1913. The conception of the *Absolute* in the *World and the Individual* and the *universal community* in *The Problem of Christianity* are interpreted as the relational normative ground on which the dispossessed and the privileged may hope to stand together to expand their moral imagination and connect with moral and epistemic worlds beyond their own. This relational ground must be actively founded through imagination, which involves among other things, developing specific kinds of affective rationality. In this context, I interpret the Roycean notion of atonement as a form of affective rationality. I argue for atonement as a normative concept, which holds the capacity to bring into contention the epistemic and moral worlds of individually arrogant moral subjects as well as arrogant moral communities. Absolute pragmatism can help us to develop a future-oriented and anticipatory conception of imagination for fashioning shared moral worlds, rather than relying on a past-oriented moral foundationalism to resolve moral disagreements. Not only does my analysis contribute toward a pragmatist moral epistemology from the margins, but it also speaks to the aesthetic dimensions of our moral lives, which are central to pragmatist ethics. Finally, the paper contributes toward a novel interpretation of Josiah Royce's philosophy from the framework of dispossession and develops on its potential to contribute to moral epistemology and the theme of recognition.

Keywords: Moral epistemology, moral imagination, pragmatism, feminism, Josiah Royce, Absolute, universal community, atonement, moral dispossession, epistemology of privilege, epistemic allyship, recognition

Women, Third World subjects and other marginalized groups often have a difficult time fitting in with classical conceptions of the moral subject who is defined through mastery over oneself. Dominant versions of classical Western moral theory have not centralized relationality and vulnerability as sites of moral gravity, a point to which feminist moral theory draws our attention. The paper begins with the crucial feminist insight to attend to vulnerability, and centers the voices of the absent and silenced subjects in drawing up a moral epistemology. The point to note, however, is that a formal extension of dignity does little to build epistemic confidence in those who, at best, remain at the periphery of moral theory. The framework of *moral dispossession*, articulated as an aspect of feminist pragmatism (Banerjee, 2025), can be effective in capturing the nature of moral harm inflicted on the marginalized moral subject. "Moral dispossession is not a feeling, but a material-symbolic condition. It is an outcome of both structural inequalities and moral mis-recognition." (Banerjee, 2025, 33) The current paper attempts to intervene at the level of moral epistemology for mitigating moral dispossession. My aim is to develop resources for a pragmatist moral epistemology from the margins.

A critical question remains: Is there a possibility of sharing in a common moral world, if moral agency looks radically different from the perspective of a morally assured subject in comparison to a dispossessed subject? Moral imagination, I argue, can become a key resource for bridging epistemic divides and theorizing the possi-

bility of *shared* moral worlds. Pragmatism provides rich insights into both the experiential and aesthetic dimensions of morality through the emphasis on moral imagination. This paper theorizes the nexus between moral imagination, dispossession, and collective resistance for a pragmatist moral epistemology from the margins. As we center the voices of those that are on the margins of subjecthood in developing a moral epistemology, immediately concepts such as vulnerability, oppression, privilege, and injustice are situated at the heart of moral theory rather than being imported as afterthoughts or being viewed as post-facto problems for empirical morality but not something that moral theory must necessarily contend with. While the work of John Dewey remains the primary reference point on moral imagination within pragmatism, this paper develops resources for a pragmatist theory of moral imagination by engaging with an unlikely source, namely, Josiah Royce's idealistic pragmatism. Royce did not offer a conception of moral imagination, neither did he develop a well-articulated theory of moral aesthetics like Dewey. However, his philosophical perspective on self, community and the moral life can provide substantial insight for a pragmatist theory of moral imagination. The paper begins from these insights, but goes on to develop on their potential for building a moral epistemology from the margins.

A viable framework for moral epistemology from the margins should not only be capable of addressing the dispossessed moral subject, but also the privileged subject, since undoing moral dispossession ultimately requires undoing privilege. In fact, moral mis-recognition cannot be undone without a framework for recognition of all parties. More importantly, undoing dispossession should not become the sole or disproportionate burden of the marginalized.[1] To mitigate any distributive injustices in the burdens of moral dispossession, we need to simultaneously build a critical epistemology for the morally privileged subject alongside a moral epistemology of dispossession. A critical epistemology of privilege must offer resources for actively undoing privilege so that ultimately an arrogant conception of moral subjectivity comes undone. The paper takes this dual-pronged approach for developing a collective moral epistemology of resistance, where the marginalized and the typically self-assured moral subject can hope to build epistemic allyship without which the project of moral recognition would remain incomplete.

We must be attentive to the fact that due to differences in epistemic strategies, possibilities and varied as well as often incommensurable moral needs of the parties involved on the opposite sides of privilege, the two epistemologies have very different normative tasks. While the primary task of a moral epistemology of undoing dispossession is to secure the grounds of moral assuredness and epistemic confidence for the marginalized moral subject, the primary task of a critical epistemology of privilege is to preserve moral confidence while undoing epistemic arrogance. After all, not only are marginalized groups placed at a "cognitive disadvantage" (Fricker, 2006, 103), but as we develop the discussion of marginalization from a moral perspective, we also see that they are put at a disadvantage in terms of moral entitlement. Therefore, epistemic recognition requires the privileged not only to come to a recognition of the cognitive advantage they hold, but also requires them to epistemically relate to their own ignorance in order actively to undo it. The latter is especially important because the nature of privilege is to remain invisible, as scholars such as Peggy McIntosh (1989) and Alison Bailey (1998) point out. Similarly, moral recognition demands that the privileged come to an acknowledgement of the kind of advantage they hold in their claim to moral entitlement compared to morally dispossessed subjects (Banerjee, 2025, 41). Thus, working toward a non-ignorant viewpoint and undoing moral arrogance is not merely an epistemological project, but

[1] See Kristie Dotson (2012) and Amrita Banerjee (2018) for a philosophical analysis of various problems that arise when disproportionate epistemic and moral burdens related to difference are placed on marginalized or non-hegemonic groups.

it is also an ethical task at the same time. I argue that a collective moral epistemology of resistance, as described above, must in turn, center the idea of moral imagination as its critical component. A pragmatist perspective can make a valuable contribution in this regard through articulating a critical account of moral imagination.

The paper develops resources for a critical account of moral imagination, which can contribute toward resisting moral dispossession and undoing privilege. More specifically, I reflect on the nexus between moral imagination, dispossession, and undoing epistemic arrogance, thus taking us a step forward to articulating a collective epistemology of resistance. I engage with two texts by Royce, namely, the *World and the Individual* (Second Series): *Nature, Man, and the Moral Order*, which was originally published in 1901 and part one of *The Problem of Christianity*, which was originally published in 1913. I develop the idea of *relational vulnerability* by centering the fragility of the moral will to subvert, what I term, as an *arrogant conception* of the moral subject. Relational vulnerability challenges the idea of a moral subject as a self-validating and self-authenticating source of moral claims. The conception of the *Absolute* in the *World and the Individual* and the *universal community* in *The Problem of Christianity* are interpreted as relational normative ground on which the dispossessed and the privileged may hope to stand together to expand their moral imagination and connect with moral and epistemic worlds beyond their own. This relational ground must be actively founded through imagination, which involves, among other things, developing specific kinds of affective rationality.

Section one aims to provide an interpretation of the Absolute through the lens of a moral epistemology of dispossession. The focus is on Royce's *The World and the Individual* (Second Series) to conceptualize the will, its temporal structure, and the relation between willing and truth. I find this text fascinating for taking on a discussion of plurality while also working out a notion of unity through the idea of the Absolute. I argue that not only is the moral will relational, but we must understand its fragility and explore the ethical implications of this fragility. More specifically, I argue that in light of the fragile nature of the moral will, which in turn, exposes our relational vulnerability, we arrive at a normative counter-point to a notion of an epistemically arrogant moral subject. Relational vulnerability also opens up a space for situating concerns about dispossession and mis-recognition at the heart of moral theory. Moreover, it provides us with a way to conceive of epistemic agency in the face of moral dispossession. Section two shifts the focus toward a critical epistemology of privilege and provides an interpretation of universal community through this lens. By engaging with part one of *The Problem of Christianity*, I go on to consider the self's relation to their own community, and ultimately to the notion of a universal community. Analysis in this section builds on the epistemic underpinnings of the will's fragility, but does so with a focus on the affective dimensions of moral privilege. In this context, I interpret Royce's notion of atonement as a form of affective rationality. I argue for atonement as a normative concept, which holds the capacity to bring into contention the epistemic and moral worlds of individually arrogant moral subjects as well as arrogant moral communities. Atonement can disrupt uncritical epistemologies of privilege by actively undoing, rather than being merely complicit in one's privilege. This is essential for building a critical epistemology of privilege. Through my combined reading of the two texts, I build toward a perspective on moral imagination that not only captures moral dispossession and its wrongs, but also contributes toward a positive framework for a collective epistemology of resistance, where the oppressed and the privileged can hope to come together in epistemic allyship to undo dispossession and privilege simultaneously. Absolute pragmatism can help us to develop a future-oriented and anticipatory conception of imagination for fashioning shared moral worlds, rather than relying on a past-oriented moral foundationalism to resolve moral disagreements. Not only does my analysis contribute to-

ward a pragmatist moral epistemology from the margins, but it also speaks to the aesthetic dimensions of our moral lives, which are central to pragmatist ethics. Finally, the paper contributes toward a novel interpretation of Josiah Royce's philosophy from the framework of dispossession and develops on its potential to contribute to moral epistemology and the theme of recognition.

Section One: The Absolute as an Imaginative Ground of Epistemic Confidence for the Morally Dispossessed Subject: The Will's Fragility

Critiquing Kantian Rationalism on the question of the self, Royce asserts, "The defect of Critical Rationalism lies in the consequences of its essentially abstract and impersonal view of Being. The Self, in this sense, is a law rather than a life. … It is precisely the restoration of individuality to the Self which constitutes the essential deed of our Idealism." (1904, 286) In this section, I discuss how this notion of the individual in *The World and the Individual* (Second Series) problematizes a purely private understanding of moral life and consequently, a self-contained notion of the moral subject. It moves us to a dialogic notion of the moral will, which I term as *an-other will*. The latter signifies the moral will as being fashioned through transactions between the self and the other in the context of interpretation, which is triangulated through the notion of an Absolute within Roycean pragmatism. The analysis of the section also contributes toward subverting any simplistic reading of the Absolute in Royce as signifying a kind of unqualified foundationalism.[2] We need to situate the discussion of the individual will and appreciate the discussion of the underlying temporality of the will within this schematic.

Royce extensively discusses the temporal structure of the will in *The World and the Individual* (Second Series). The double aspects characterizing every experience are change and succession. Change in our experience is understood in terms of succession – we say that there is a change when something has succeeded the preceding experience. Temporal succession, in turn, involves specific relations between the entities in question and has a determinate direction.[3] However, we need to see the succession as a whole to understand its direction. The whole-part relation in our experience of temporality is such that we are aware of the individual entity in sequence (along with the boundaries between entities) and the sequence simultaneously in our experience.[4] Therefore, the entity in the moment gains its identity only by virtue of its connection to and differentiation from relations that exceed it, that is, with reference to something greater and in the context of various mediating relations. Moreover, that which appears whole from one perspective, can appear to be an individual as a part of a larger series from a different perspective. The temporality of the will, in other words, manifests an order, which gestures towards the whole but is also individualized in the moment through desires, interests and so on. The interesting implication of this analysis of the part-whole relation in the underlying structure of temporality is that it opens up a critical space for interpretation in the self's relation to itself.

Royce highlights that we realize the will's ties to that which exceeds individual experience when we evoke the

[2] Randall E. Auxier's anti-foundationalist reading of Royce constitutes a significant development in this context. Auxier (2013) interprets Royce's philosophical method as "hypothetical ontology," where philosophy can be best understood as kind of faith based on postulates that may be exemplified in our actual experiences or are posited to make sense of our empirical observations. How far the analysis in the paper exactly aligns with Auxier's understanding of hypothetical ontology, especially in relation to the respective appraisals of the roles of the epistemic, logical and moral in the scheme of ontology, remains a project for future analysis. However, the current analysis, in spirit, aligns with the conceptual move of problematizing any reading of the Absolute as Real in a transcendent sense in Royce. At this point, I agree with Auxier.

[3] In this context, Royce notes the distinction between time and space relations. In the experience of the succession of time, one event passes onto the next one which means that the first entity becomes a thing of the past as soon as the second one becomes present. In case of space relations however, when we say one entity is next to the other, the relation can also be one of coexistence of the two entities.

[4] On this point, Royce criticizes the Associationists or any view, which holds that we only experience parts and then we synthesize these into wholes. Rather, Royce argues, that we get both parts and the whole in experience.

question of truth. The body of facts that is often appealed to in order to guarantee truth exceeds any one individual. One reason for this is that we usually verify in degrees, which makes verification a progressive process rather than being one isolated moment in time. Second, even if we can verify and answer with a great degree of clarity questions about our present experience, in Royce's words, "… nobody amongst us human beings, as now we are, can verify precisely the whole of what it is that the present moment furnishes to his experience. … the present experience itself, or even the verification of facts of this present experience, has more Being than I am able now to observe." (1904, 19) Again, whatever transcends the data of our present experience, that is, any accredited fact that exceeds individual verification, is capable of indirect demonstration. To quote Royce, "… *our presented experience is indeed our only guide; but it always guides us by pointing beyond itself…. We know of no metaempirical truth except by means of presentations. But our presentations, in our present form of consciousness, get their whole sense from their reference to what, for us, remains metaempirical truth*." (1904, p. 23, italics in original)

The point that is emphasized through all these textual excerpts is that the being of any entity (including the will) is never exhausted in itself. Neither can the will be justified, nor can it be evaluated purely on its own terms and only in relation to the present. In other words, the will must stand outside of the mere present and project into the past, for instance, in order to interpret itself. In so far as the will has this power of interpretive judgement, we must regard the will as *ecstatic* and, almost in an existentialist sense, as standing outside of itself in order to be. Thus, we must conceive of the will not as a simple self-relation, but as being other-oriented and dialogic at the same time. I use the conceptual framing of the will as *an-other* will to highlight the will's relational, fragmented and fragile nature. The idea of an-other will is further reinforced through Royce's discussion of the phenomenology of the moral self. Identity is not merely a self-relation, but is defined in terms of an organic self, which is seen as developing in and through relations. It is only through acts of discrimination, as Royce puts it, which are accentuated by various social motives and models, that we begin to draw more and more rigid borders around the (individual) self. A significant implication of this for the current analysis is: if the will is ontologically and epistemologically related to others, then any illusion about its self-containment is shattered and we must accept vulnerability as a feature of the will itself, and not merely as an externally imposed constraint. Vulnerability, thus conceived, also gives the will, the normative capacity to link with epistemic and moral worlds of others.

The analysis in the *World and the Individual* (Second Series) enables us to center the significance of not only interpretation, but also imagination and, in fact, interpretation as an aspect of moral imagination in Royce's notion of the will, although Royce himself does not frame the matter in these terms. This is because action is always tied to moral agency. Given a certain range of possibilities, an agent must make an epistemic cut in order to act, and for this choice they become responsible. Royce characterizes this as the doctrine of "the ethical self".[5] The cut determines the direction of the series that will be generated and it is always tied to purposes, interests, and so on. Therefore, discrimination as both a logical and epistemic act always carries an interpretation, and the latter becomes an integral aspect of our moral lives. The ultimate context of interpretation, of course, is provided by a third space, that is, the *Absolute* in this text, which is not reducible to a collection of individual wills, but is constituted through them.

While resisting a reading of the Absolute in metaphysical terms, I am interested in its logical and epistemic function. The function of the Absolute in *World and the Individual* appears to be that of an epistemic ideal, that

[5] For a detailed analysis of how the self, conceived as an "ethical self" in Royce allows for a more productive framework for the self to relate to others that are different, see Banerjee (2018).

is, a larger horizon which serves as a reminder of our own finitude, narrowness of vision and fallibility rather than it being an all-encompassing totality, which simply expresses itself through individuals. In other words, I interpret the Absolute as signifying an epistemic excess, that is, one which calls us beyond our present here and now. The Absolute logically signifies a large and dynamic system of inter-weavings, which evolves through the ever new and creative acts of individuals. In Royce's own words, "The true variety is that of various individual Selves, who together constitute, in their unity, the Individual of Individuals, the absolute." (1904, 102) It is individuals who create a world through their acts of discrimination (1904, 103). Any entity is logically defined always through discrimination in relation to larger systems. We can find this implication in Royce's definition of an entity. In Royce's words, "I thus conceive the nature of *a* not as static and as merely given to me, but as a stage in a process that now has an actively appreciated and logically significant direction, – a direction determined by my own purposes, and also by the facts." (1904, 84, italics in original) We can further understand such claims in *The World and the Individual* when we read these alongside Royce's larger framework of idealistic logic. Scott Pratt, in his analysis of Royce's logic, notes that Royce understands propositions and classes as, "… modes of action, and they are mediated by still other actions that divide and connect them." (2007, 142). Writes Pratt, "for Royce, thoughts are plans of action, expectations, and dispositions as much as they are reports of the past or statements of fact." (2007, 142) The implication of this perspective for the current analysis is that since an entity is logically defined always through discrimination in relation to larger systems, and since agency is built into each act of discrimination, the identity of entities (including our moral identities) can never be considered to be static, but ever-shifting in response to changing connections, interests, etc. Viewed this way, there would be no abiding compulsion and, in fact, it would be very difficult to assume a homogenous notion of a moral will or even a unified and totally coherent moral identity through an individual's life. The moral will must be seen as dynamic and subject to pragmatist ideas of both change and growth. We arrive at a non-substantive conception of moral identity, that is, one where the moral will is understood as socially and politically embedded. The will is fashioned through our actions and imagination, which are lived and find expression through our loyalty to various epistemic and moral communities.

The Absolute reminds us of our epistemic finitude and incompleteness, and yet, the meaningfulness of our moral lives, which may not be apparent in the here and the now. The Absolute, thus conceived, undermines any conception of fixed reality, including that of a fixed moral world, which is pre-defined and can simply be accessed through the flashlight of reason or intuition. This makes the Roycean Absolute a far cry from a past-oriented moral foundationalism. The logical and epistemic excess designated by the Absolute can ethically re-orient our attitudes to both knowing and unknowing. By disrupting epistemic certitude and reiterating the dialogic aspects of our epistemic and moral lives, the Absolute holds the potential to serve as an imaginative and an interpretive ground for de-centering any arrogant conception of the moral subject, that is, a subject who believes that they can know the moral imperative in a self-referential or monologic fashion. Participating in a shared moral world is an achievement and, such participation is not a given fact when we take reality to be dynamic and open to transformation. The Absolute as a space of imaginative relationality can aid the moral imagination of what we might strive to become. In this sense, it can serve as a relational normative ground from which outcasts, aliens, refugees and other dispossessed moral subjects may be able to imagine an epistemic home. I use "home" here in the sense of the security of a community of belonging, which is able to bestow epistemic assurance and moral confidence in the here and the now. The Absolute interpreted thus, gives us a way of conceiving of reality (both

our epistemic world and moral reality) not as something that is well-formed or fully-formed, but is a praxis in itself. The praxis highlights the necessity to work our way carefully through our complex epistemic and moral lives with an aim to carving out safer spaces and new realities in the process.

The process of imagination and interpretation made possible by the Absolute can be figuratively read as a form of *cartohistography*, a term emerging in the work of feminist scholar Elba Rosario Sánchez (2003). Sanchez uses this term in the context of writing. Cartohistography designates the process of putting on the map new places; however, it is not simply a matter of discovering, but also creatively building and imagining new places (2003, 27). The epistemic connotation of the Absolute for a moral epistemology from the margins is that it enables us to conceive of the moral ground as a kind of relational and communicative space which is, in fact, the imagination of a new space of sorts. Our epistemic orientation to the Absolute reminds us that our individual and collective moral worlds are open-ended, prone to error and perpetually in need of greater integration. The Absolute serves as a sign against which moral responses between the self and others can be envisioned and interpreted. The Absolute calls us to relational vulnerability by opening us onto ever new possibilities of connection and separation, reconciliation and transgression from the given, of epistemically and morally failing and then picking up again, of enduring and striving. In this way, it assures us of a safe space for potentially articulating an oppositional epistemology, that is, of charting an epistemic and moral cartohistography from the margins of moral subjecthood. It is through embodying a liberatory logic, that the Absolute can serve as an epistemic home or a third space, which is creative, fluid and dynamic. As this kind of epistemic and moral space, the Absolute has great potential to confer epistemic assurance and moral courage to the dispossessed subject. To put it otherwise, the Absolute as an imagined material-symbolic space, can serve as a relational normative ground from where the morally dispossessed can hope to stake a claim to moral subjecthood.

Section 2: Universal Community as an Imaginative Ground of Epistemic Confidence without Arrogance for the Privileged Moral Subject: Atonement as Affective Rationality

The triangulation of individual wills through a third reference point (that is, the Absolute) gains a spiritual-religious reading through the ideas of the Universal community and interpretation in *The Problem of Christianity*. Royce argues that Christianity embodies such ideas.[6] Tracing the development of Royce's ideas, Ludwig Nagl writes, "The various communities which mature Royce distinguishes, are, however, nowhere simply a substitute for, let alone are they identical with, the "Absolute" of Royce's earlier theory. They do, however, inherit significant aspects of the Absolute's critical potential, albeit in a weak, post-rationalist form." (2004, 61)[7] Frank M. Oppenheim, S.J., too, while noting that there are changes in Royce's mid-period emphasis on the Absolute and late-period emphasis on Interpreter Spirit, nevertheless observes, "Royce's general terminological change from "Absolute" to "Interpreter-Spirit," while absolutely significant, should not, however, be interpreted absolutely." (2001, xxix)[8] This section develops the critical potential of the idea of universal community from part one of *The Problem of Christianity* and interprets it with respect to a critical epistemology of privilege.[9] The reading from the lens of moral epistemology may, in turn, contribute to-

[6] It must be noted that the reading of Christianity that Royce evolves in the text is not historical, anthropological, but deeply philosophical. If aspects of religion encapsulate life and its problems, then Christianity too "… appears as an art of living, as a counsel for the attainment of the ends of human existence." (Royce, 2001, 65)

[7] For more on how the universal community is different from a transcendental Kingdom of Ends, and how Royce keeps pragmatism at the heart of reading the Universal community, see Nagl 2004.

[8] Oppenheim also discusses the use of the term "Absolute" at various points in *The Problem of Christianity*. (2001, xxix).

[9] Unfortunately, the space of the current paper does not allow for an engagement with the notion of interpretation, as discussed by Royce in part two of *The Problem of Christianity*.

ward establishing some points of continuity between the logical and epistemological functions of the Absolute in *The World and the Individual* and the universal community in part one of *The Problem of Christianity*, without conflating the ontological connotation of the two concepts.

While analyzing the notion of a universal community, Royce writes, "The beloved community embodies … *values* which no human individual, viewed as a detached being, could even remotely approach." (2001, 125, italics in original) While the idea of a universal community gets its psychological basis in the social nature of the human, its ethical value comes from the interests, needs and values of individuals in various communities who have understood the deeper meaning of loyalty. By "loyalty," Royce means "… the thoroughgoing, practical, and loving devotion of a self to an united community." (2001, 101) The universal community is not given as a pre-existing foundation for moral life, it almost becomes an imaginative ground through which both the reflective and affective aspects of our individual moral lives can manifest. From Royce's perspective, a truly lovable community must be actively founded. The union of the individual with the universal community relies on a notion of redemption of humankind and, in this plan, atonement for the sins and guilt of humankind finds a crucial place. As Royce puts it, "Without atonement, no salvation." (2001, 73) In my secular interpretation, I read both salvation and atonement as phenomenological orientations to morally negotiate the part-whole relation between the individual and the universal community, while the individual is firmly rooted in particular communities to which they have pledged their loyalty. Atonement, in particular, will be interpreted as a form of affective rationality or a reason-feeling complex.

Individual communities to which individual selves commit their loyalty become the mediating and embodied ground between the individual and the Absolute (now read as universal community). Loyalty to a community is an intermediate step to salvation, and smaller loyalties ideally lead to a larger or "universal loyalty" (2001, 85) to the universal community of all humankind. Loyalty becomes the basis for a moral life since it allows one to interpret oneself differently, that is, to overcome the excessive and regressive individualism by calling the self-will to look outwards or heightening the an-other will, as discussed in the previous section. However, in *The Problem of Christianity*, we see how the will finds moral assurance within specific communities of belonging. Loyalty moves us rationally and affectively to unite with causes and thereby to communities of belonging. Jacquelyn Ann K. Kegley (2004) provides an insightful reading of the Roycean idea of community as being a product of an interpretive process, and she also highlights the importance of continual self-interpretation in building community. On my part, I emphasize that communities of belonging, in turn, not only play a role in the fashioning of individual moral selves, but are critical sources for moral and epistemic recognition through which the will, at least momentarily, overcomes its fragility so that a confident moral subject can emerge. Withholding moral recognition, therefore, would constitute a grave moral injustice since lack of recognition by the community marginalizes subjects as moral outcasts. Royce does not evoke the theme of recognition in his work, nor does he trace the bearings of the epistemic and moral importance of communities in this way. However, an approach developed from the lens of moral dispossession opens up the possibility of a new interpretation of the Roycean idea of community. The dispossessed moral subject must not only contend with morally arrogant individuals, but also with arrogant moral communities. Therefore, a critical epistemology of privilege as an aspect of the collective moral epistemology of resistance must be dual-layered, insofar as it must provide resources for remedying the epistemic arrogance of both morally arrogant individuals and morally arrogant communities. I interpret atonement in this section as a form of affective rationality, which contributes toward the development of such a crit-

ical epistemology of privilege along both these registers. While the previous section focused on the fragility of the moral will and its ethical potential for developing an epistemology of moral dispossession, this section shifts the lens to moral privilege. In other words, the focus here is on the moral and epistemic agents who *do* find recognition within their communities, that is, those who do not find themselves to be outcasts or at the margins of moral subjecthood. The morally privileged subject is one whose loyalty is rewarded by the community through moral recognition and epistemic assurance, and they find themselves entitled to participate in the envisioning and fashioning of the truly lovable community.[10]

In my secular reading of the Roycean position, I not only add onto the ethical reading of atonement, but centralize it as a concept, which indicates an exercise in moral imagination. Atonement captures relational vulnerability and asks the moral subject to contend with the idea of moral dispossession by calling their attention to their own privilege in the scheme of moral entitlement. Royce embeds his discussion of atonement in the discussion of a traitor in *The Problem of Christianity*. It must be noted that Royce discusses various kinds of traitors in the text, and that not all forms of treachery are considered to be virtuous. A case to the point, is that of the traitor whose act emanates, not to further the cause or the community, but due to a desire for personal gain. The "ideal traitor," (2001, 168), on the contrary, through their act of treachery, pushes the community to atone.[11] The traitorous act is characterized as "sin" in the sense that the act demonstrates a betrayal of the community to which the traitor had pledged loyalty. Kara Barnette (2007) mobilizes Royce's ideal of the traitor and offers the conception of "feminist traitors," to think about feminism's critical role in society.[12] The notion of the ideal traitor, which is relevant to the current analysis and also for Barnette's conception of the feminist traitor, is one whose loyalty is intact in the sense that the person, "… commits a traitorous action for a higher purpose – a desire to improve the community as a whole." (Barnette, 2007, 85) Due to the presence of feminist traitors, argues Barnette, "… the atonement that would take place in a society as a result of their treasons would have to address the specific concerns raised by feminist traitors." (2007, 84) I invoke the concept of the traitor in this paper to reflect on its epistemological dimensions and to explore how this concept may contribute toward both undoing privilege as well as an epistemology of allyship from the point of view of the privileged.

The ideal traitor embodies various quandaries of loyalty. The ideal traitor must first have chosen to be loyal to an ideal and now, by their act, have betrayed the cause, thus unleashing what Royce calls the "hell of the irrevocable." (2001, 168) The latter concept signifies that there is no undoing of the deed once this is done. But the deed is not just the traitor's own, although their own moral universe is no doubt disrupted. The traitorous act constitutes a moment of disruption for the community to whose ideals the traitor has committed their loyalty. Royce interrogates the potential of this moment of "moral tragedy" and whether there is a possibility of reconciliation (2001, 166). He asks, "Can such a tragic reconciliation occur in the case of the traitor?" (2001, 170). The possibility of reconciliation ensues through atonement and the recognition that my deed cannot be undone and neither I, nor the community will be the same in light of it. No wonder, Royce emphasizes moral insight as issuing from realizing the "hell of the irrevocable." Scott Pratt (2025), in turn, draws our attention to how irrevocability

[10] Note that for Royce, communities constitute the backdrop for individuals to interpret their ideas, and only by participating in communities, can one atone and find salvation.

[11] Atonement for any form of treachery, however, requires community since atonement can happen only in the context of a community.

[12] "By providing a model of a traitor whose sins against the community play a large role in advancing the community toward salvation, Royce creates ample room for feminist traitors, who actively betray their communities for the goals of feminism and, thereby, positively transform their communities." (Barnette, 2007, 81).

is absolute in the sense that one could address its consequences or forgive the action, but the action itself cannot be taken back or undone. My reading highlights that the tragic but creative role attributed to the traitor, and the subsequent space this opens up for atonement, foregrounds the fragility of the moral will of even the most arrogant moral subjects.

I interpret atonement as signaling a kind of moral distress in which the epistemic and moral security of the home-ground is disrupted even for the privileged subject, that is, a subject whose community had hitherto conferred both epistemic and moral assurance through recognition. When the privileged subject's deed is no longer congruent with the cause, and consequently with the epistemic and moral standards of the community, this may issue forth in the realization of fragility and precarity. The break in the moral universe calls for an epistemic revaluation of existing norms as well as a moral evaluation of the cause to which one had pledged loyalty. In these ways, atonement is a reflective act. Atonement also has an affective dimension. In being designated a traitor and atoning for the deed, the privileged subject experiences themselves as a curtailed or inhibited subject, which is a marker of moral dispossession. Moreover, despite the fact that the privileged subject cannot share in the lived experience of the dispossessed subject and the latter's conception of reality, atonement provides an imaginative possibility for a new interpretation of the ethical self, which recognizes the significance of fragility, precarity, humility, and the fear of losing the very ground on which one once stood.

Atonement as a form of affective rationality begins to gesture toward a normative epistemology for the morally privileged subject, which can ultimately de-center privilege, and through this, potentially overcome the epistemic vice of arrogance. This is because atonement brings to the fore not just the fragility of the moral will in general, but the fragility of the moral will of the privileged subject in particular, especially in their role of a loyal traitor. As a form of affective rationality, atonement, becomes a form of moral imagination. The ethico-epistemic potential of atonement lies in creating this kind of moral ground, through which one is able to see the moral problems with privilege, and one could begin to epistemically and morally (even if not experientially) relate to those who never found a home and were denied participation in the community. In other words, atonement creates a normative orientation for epistemic confidence without arrogance on the part of a privileged subject. The epistemic insecurity created in the privileged subject, however, is qualitatively different from and cannot be characterized as a kind of "hermeneutical injustice" (Fricker, 2006, 96). Fricker's work points to hermeneutical injustice as a specific kind of epistemic injustice that affects marginalized groups, and she defines it as, "the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to hermeneutical marginalization." (Fricker, 2006, 102) Contrary to this, in the case of the privileged subject under consideration, the normative potential for fragmentation and incommensurability with existing standards operates within a larger epistemology of privilege. In other words, the epistemic perspective and experience of the typically self-assured subject is not obscured or marginalized within the collective epistemology. Consequently, the epistemic insecurity within atonement does not constitute a form of hermeneutical injustice. Nevertheless, atonement marks a moment of disruption within privilege, and gives us an opening to move from moral experience toward a critical epistemology of privilege. This is the move I wish to mark. A critical epistemology of privilege has both reflective and imaginative components, and is one which hopes to create a normative ground without a substantive foundationalism. Traitorous identities and atonement provide a normative beginning point of envisioning such a normative ground. In this way, they speak to epistemic allyship, trust and fostering moral recognition between the privileged and dispossessed moral subject. Atonement provides a way

to move toward a collective epistemology of resistance without assuming either sharedness of moral experience or sharedness of moral beliefs. Part of the reconciliation through atonement from the perspective of the privileged moral subject would be to come to a sense of epistemic confidence by overcoming insecurity but without the past epistemic arrogance. This may constitute a critical first step toward envisioning shared moral worlds where privilege is undone simultaneously with dispossession.

Royce further goes on to state, "The problem of reconciliation… if reconciliation there is to be, - concerns not only the traitor, but the wounded or shattered community." (2001, 175) Since individuals and communities are bound not just agentially, but also epistemically, the act of the traitor constitutes a moment of what we may term as, "epistemic reckoning" for the community. The community is now called to reimagine altogether new ways of assuming its moral burdens and epistemic responsibility. The fragility of the will of not only the individual traitor, but also fragility of the collective epistemology and sense of moral assuredness of the community of privilege to which the traitor belongs is exposed when the assurance of shared epistemic and moral beliefs is shattered. This moment has the capacity to generate a collective moral imagination, a practical wisdom of sorts that disrupts the community no doubt, but may ultimately bring it to rethink its own assumed epistemic world. The epistemic reckoning also creates a space for a moral reckoning and accountability as the assurance of the existing collective moral standards is undermined, and the fragility of the collective moral will lies exposed. The disruptive moment also provides a space for communities to begin to imagine themselves differently and to critically engage with their privilege. Managing epistemic ignorance demands specific kinds of ethical orientations, and atonement seems to provide a normative basis within the collective epistemology for a critical moral imagination to emerge since, for now, the community has to contend with a deed not done before. In this sense, atonement can be interpreted as an assertion of epistemic vulnerability and moral fragility since the traitorous deed creates an impasse and brings into contention existing standards of knowing and doing. The process of reconciliation, in turn, intervenes into privileged ignorance by forcing the community to register that which was not heard, not spoken, and not done before. While atonement can be read as an assertion of epistemic vulnerability and moral fragility, reconciliation yields a dynamic conception of reality and moral community since there is no way of simply going back to what was before.

Reconciliation requires interpretation, and the idea of the universal community creates the condition of possibility for such an interpretation to emerge. The universal community, interpreted as a *community-yet-to-be-imagined*, normatively provides epistemic assurance to individual communities of loyalty. It is able to provide assurance by grounding a vision of a moral community, which is inclusive and can accommodate unanticipated frames of knowing and doing. Healing of a community can only begin when a collective moral imagination develops, which understands that critically engaging with the moral burdens of privilege is central to undoing the privilege of morally arrogant subjects and ultimately for striving for the moral recognition of all parties. The universal community, in short, enables a moral epistemology, which can assure epistemic and moral confidence to particular communities, while undoing moral arrogance on the part of these individual communities of loyalty. The universal community, therefore, serves as an imaginative ground from which epistemic and moral incompleteness, fragmentation, ambiguity and moral injury to the community can be dealt with so that healing can begin for moral communities in a more inclusive mode.

Epilogue

In working across differences, moral agreement is often not possible; neither is this necessary. In fact, Charles

Mills (1997), through his conception of an "epistemology of ignorance" highlights how the privileged and the oppressed do not possess the same epistemology of the world, nor a shared sense of reality. In this scenario, a conception of moral imagination that presupposes the idea of a shared reality including shared moral beliefs, is bound to fail. Such a conception of moral imagination can be regressive and would end up appropriating moral worlds without understanding the particularity of moral claims or the specificity of moral situations. In contrast, the important project is to develop the epistemic capacity to inhabit, what I call, *shared* moral worlds, without presupposing a pre-given foundation for such worlds. To develop the idea of a shared moral world, however, we need a moral ontology that takes reality to be dynamic. Through my interpretation of the concepts of the Absolute and universal community in Royce, I have argued that these logically and epistemologically provide a holistic, integrative and yet non-foundationalist moral ground.

We also need a moral epistemology that takes our experience of reality as incomplete and fallible. In fact, working together across difference not only requires undoing of oppression but of privilege as well, as much of philosophy from the margins would tell us. This means that recognition calls not only for the marginalized to make their standpoints visible, but it also simultaneously demands a de-centering of privileged ignorance.

The imagined epistemic vantage-point of the Absolute in the *World and the Individual* and the universal community in *The Problem of Christianity* have been interpreted as providing a ground for an anticipatory form of moral imagination. This perspective sets us up in a better position to not only capture moral dispossession, but ultimately to build epistemic bridges across moral worlds, where we work together to undo both moral dispossession and privilege. While the imagination of a universal community becomes a symbolic home for dispossessed moral subjects, the arrogant moral subjects (both individuals and communities with moral privilege) are, in turn, reminded of their fragility, precarity and relationality to goals, values and interests that exceed them. By playing this role, moral imagination hopes to invigorate an epistemic capacity to inhabit shared moral worlds. The conception of a shared moral world proposed in the paper defines it as a meeting-place, which is based in affective rationality. It is an epistemic foundation that must be created through a future-oriented and anticipatory form of imagination, which involves affective labor rather than taking recourse to a predefined metaphysical ground on which one already stands. In other words, we no longer rely on a past-oriented moral foundationalism. Atonement as a reason-feeling complex gives us a glimpse intoone of the sites of such affective labor although, by no means, is this exhaustive of the labour. Through my interpretation, I have argued that the sharedness that is made possible by the logical and epistemological function of the Absolute in *World and the Individual* and universal community in *The Problem of Christianity* need not assume a shared moral reality; neither does it demand commensurability of lived experience between the dispossessed and the privileged moral subject. Rather, the aim is to move toward sharedness through an anticipatory and critical conception of moral imagination, which hopes to achieve epistemic assurance and moral security without arrogance.

Undoing privilege also demands a different kind of moral orientation that seeks to intervene creatively and sometimes even disruptively into a community's existing moral world in order to issue a call to action, undo epistemic arrogance and move one step closer to reconciling or at least reaching out to those who have been excluded from the moral universe of the community. For this, we need to put into contention both an abstract notion of absolute moral values on the one hand, and a reductionist communitarian understanding of values on the other. Moral community cannot be pre-empted, neither can it be discovered uncritically through a static system of shared moral beliefs. Rather, the sense of sharedness

of moral worlds developed in this paper does not assume a shared reality or even shared moral beliefs as starting points for ally-ship. The analysis gestures toward the significance of various epistemic processes and the need to mobilize forms of affective rationality, all of which are embedded in a dynamic understanding of moral community. Atonement, as an epistemic-ethical tool, is one among such reflective and affective practices, which can contribute to the imagination of shared moral worlds despite lack of commensurability in moral experience. In short, one hopes to move towards epistemic assurance without moral arrogance. The perspective of the Absolute and the universal community create a space for a non-foundational, but yet steady anchor for moral imagination, both for individual selves and communities alike. Such a conception of moral imagination hopes to remain critical and dynamic so that we can collectively work toward the moral recognition of all and not just a few privileged moral subjects.

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SCOTT PRATT ON THE USES OF AN ABSOLUTE PRAGMATISM

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ABSTRACT: Scott Pratt has argued that we might turn to Josiah Royce for a version of pragmatism that would underwrite decisive political action in troubling times. In the background of his proposal lies the hope that philosophers might do more to combat things like climate change, incarceration, or authoritarianism. I reply by considering the political position of philosophers who are employees of public universities, and I present some skeptical qualifications to his argument. Royce himself serves as a classic example of the philosopher as a professional, and it is no coincidence that he was also a defender of the political status quo of his time.

Keywords: pragmatism, Scott Pratt, Josiah Royce, Leonard Harris, insurrection

In "Absolute Pragmatism," Scott Pratt has written the kind of essay that we should applaud from any colleague: rooted in sound historical scholarship, it has both a clear argumentative purpose and a real-world application. Briefly, he claims that a pragmatism modeled on some of Royce's later ideas might serve as a normative ground for decisive action in troubling times. Even the most critical response should thus be sympathetic with his effort, since whatever is true in Pratt's claim would be a boon to philosophers, or at least to pragmatists. Many people would very much like a philosophy to help us through the mess of climate change, war, genocide, and authoritarianism. And we should forgive a colleague for any failings in thus executing what has only very rarely succeeded among the best philosophers.

What are the broadly political uses of pragmatism? Can a specifically Roycean pragmatism be of any use in 2025 or beyond? Pratt worries that classical or pure pragmatism is a politically indecisive tendency in philosophy, and that the purest pragmatists are *eo ipso* reluctant to "take a side." But he thinks that a Roycean turn, according to which an absolute pragmatism is actualized through transparently irrevocable action, corrects this shortcoming. The Roycean pragmatism consists precisely in decisive side-taking, because it is decisive action that is the mark of the absolute. In this essay I hope to extend Pratt's inquiries into these questions with a series of skeptical problems, drawn from historical sources cognate to Pratt's own, about the uses of philosophy in responding to problems of the sort posed by fascism, climate change, genocide, and the seemingly endless list of difficulties faced by us citizens of the twenty-first century.

Academic Philosophy and the *status quo*

Philosophy has a long and distinguished history, and so has served many masters. We can find a diversity of such uses of philosophy merely by perusing the syllabi of undergraduate courses in the history of philosophy. Some of the more interesting developments stem from antiquity, with stories about people like Socrates and Diogenes who refused to put their philosophies into the service of particular masters such as Athenian democracy or Alexander the Great. In her early work, Martha Nussbaum focused on such real-world applications of ancient Greek philosophy, in one important case contrasting the relative rebelliousness of Diogenes with the political quietism of the Stoics.[1] Nussbaum took it for a flaw in traditional stoic cosmopolitanism that it was unable to inspire social change. Moreover, the strictest and most loyal practitioner of classical stoicism will be marked by a distinct lack of real political action, as the Stoic sage views all these larger events as beyond its sphere of control. We should allow this kind of objection against a philosophical school: if adopting a particular philosophy prevents one from acting in the real world, then that is a significant mark against the philosophy. So if Pratt is correct that classical or pure pragmatism is also politically powerless, then it is both a good objection and one with classic company in Nussbaum's work on ancient cosmopolitanism.

[1] These essays date from the early 1990s, but reappear as chapters 1 and 3 of her recent collection Nussbaum 2019.

In my years of teaching ancient philosophy, Diogenes was the figure to whom a certain strain of student – those who were captivated by punk culture or prone to political activism – were most drawn, and that by virtue of having read Nussbaum's essays on him. But the towering figure of Greek philosophy is Socrates, and it is to him that we should look for a guide on this subject. Unlike the Stoic sage, Socrates was indeed a sort of political actor, and he was that precisely by means of his philosophizing. Leonard Harris, on whom Pratt leans for a critical voice in his essay, offers a powerful illustration of this issue with a simple thought experiment. He imagines Socrates in our context:

> Imagine Socrates as a citizen of a nation that represents about 4.4% of the world's population but with a prison population that constitutes around 22% of the world's prisoners, citizens who own more weapons than any other nation, its soldiers having killed more 'enemies' in various wars than any other nation, its citizens using more opiates than any nation its size and eating meat voraciously. Then imagine Socrates describing this population as only caring about good jobs, cheap health care, and discovering piety's essential form through pure and practical reason. (2018, 19–20)

I take the point of this passage to be that we cannot easily imagine Socrates, or any suitably Socratic individual, living peacefully in modern-day America while also upholding the status quo. Socrates would have to engage in some kind of philosophical rebellion, were he among us, because our society is thoroughly unjust in regard to incarceration, militarization, war, drug use, and (I fear less obviously) meat consumption. The major premise of Harris's argument is then something like Nussbaum's: a philosophy that will not underwrite an insurrection, under relevant conditions, is not a good philosophy. The minor premise, with which Pratt also agrees, is that (pure) pragmatism cannot underwrite an insurrection. So the conclusion that pragmatism is not a good philosophy is very tempting, and much of Harris's own career has followed this line of thought forward.

The rhetorical aspects of Harris's conclusion ("good jobs, cheap health care") seem to suggest an interpretation that is sociological or institutional as well as purely philosophical: not only can we not imagine a pragmatist Socrates, but we also cannot imagine one who holds a job as a Professor of Philosophy in a public institution in America. Would Socrates accept a salary funded from the same sources as the corrupt institutions that Harris offers in his abridged list? In any case, he would not consider his job qua philosopher (professor or not) to consist mainly in reciting arguments by Dewey or Kant while seeking publications in the most highly ranked journals. Pertinent to this observation, I take it, is that Harris, Pratt, and I are all Professors of Philosophy at public universities in the United States of America. None of us have, to my knowledge, engaged in insurrections of a significant sort. And acknowledging that Socrates, the person most readily identified with our intellectual pursuit, would indeed engage in insurrection (were he alive and American) might pose a challenge to our professional self-understanding.

There are various ways to align with a status quo, and we should distinguish at least two of them. Another writer from the African American intellectual tradition once made stronger claims against academic philosophy, claiming not merely that it is powerless against the status quo, but rather that it played a positive justificatory role in reinforcing it:

> the philosophy and ethics resulting from our educational system have justified slavery, peonage, segregation, and lynching. (Woodson 1933, 5)

Carter G. Woodson does not, in this brief passage, take aim specifically at pragmatism, but rather at the discipline of philosophy as it operates in "our educational system." His book was about miseducation, particularly in the case of Black Americans: there was nothing for the likes of Woodson in academic philosophy (or any other extant discipline), because he pretty obviously could not abide the four evils he mentions. Woodson was thus no pragmatist, though he was familiar with the movement. He attended Harvard for the PhD in History near the end of Royce's career, and there he met with the common

doctrine that Africa had no history.[2] Later he claimed that it took him decades to unlearn whatever he learned at Harvard, and he spent only a year in residence there (by contrast with Royce's thirty-four). Woodson was close enough to the sources of pragmatism to have known whether this movement presented a counterexample to his problem. It evidently did not.

In our modern political moment of 2025, we are rather familiar with a third position on the relationship of academic philosophy to the status quo. A standard canard has it that, *pace* Harris and Woodson, academic philosophy is a left-leaning enterprise. Vice-President Vance has claimed generally that "the professors are the enemy," and this belief has underwritten much of the financial and legislative attack on our universities in these past six years (2021). Since Harris's essay in 2018, many dozens of laws have been passed curtailing the speech and teachings of professors, particularly around race and gender issues. More recently, the full and expanding powers of the Executive have aimed rather at middle-eastern politics, and professors of philosophy – should any exist in the near future – might well be required to declare allegiance to the state of Israel in its actions in Gaza and elsewhere. It is pretty clearly the case that the American government wishes to push the professorate to the right, or at least eliminate any so-called leftist indoctrination.

Professors usually balk at the notion of left-wing indoctrination, and there is indeed much caricature in it. But there is also a grain of truth, and we should grant that truth while also clarifying the interpretation needed for it. Politicians might reasonably expect that, in a discipline such as philosophy at a publicly funded institution, we might find such things as arguments at least potentially in favor of our various political and social formations. Philosophers might then give reasons for our statistically high levels of incarceration, defenses of our military actions abroad, or of our drug policies. To my knowledge this is not at all common, though I do not doubt that some professional philosophers are working in this more actively status quo-justifying vein. That it is not especially common, however, may be seen if we update the list of evils in the Woodson passage by substituting them with Harris's examples:

> the philosophy and ethics resulting from our educational system have justified incarceration, gun ownership, war, and drug addiction.

The substitution does not work, at least as a broad characterization of our discipline or our institutions. So academic philosophy in our own context, while admittedly not as insurrectionist as Harris begs us to be, is not the mere defense of the status quo that Woodson purports that philosophy was a century or more ago. We are in fact generally somewhat left-leaning, but probably only in a very soft or symbolic, perhaps even feeble, way. Something like this, I take it, lay behind Harris's claim: he seems to expect a principled agreement about the injustices he lists, and notes only that qua philosophers we do very little to mitigate them. His argument suggests that we are indeed, on the average, theoretically opposed to mass incarceration, imperialism, and the opioid epidemic, but that we do nothing about them.

So among the three basic relations of academic philosophy to the status quo, it seems that our current predicament lies somewhere under this third banner, specifically as at once *in principle opposed to the status quo* but also *in practice complicit with it*. We professional philosophers are, as Harris suggests, divorced from concrete political action in the areas he mentioned. And pragmatism, he further argued, cannot help them. Pratt agrees with this assessment as regards classical or pure pragmatism, but he thinks he has discovered a way out of the dilemma through the writings of Josiah Royce.

Josiah Royce in Historical Context

Royce is an interesting choice for Pratt's article, and I wish to take that choice seriously especially in regard

[2] Woodson attributed this to Royce's longtime colleague, Edward Channing. See Goggin 1993, 21-5.

to Royce's status as one of the founders of the modern philosophical professorate in America. What Pratt does not explicitly say in his essay, but which he well knows, is that Josiah Royce of Harvard was precisely the sort of philosopher that Woodson might have had in mind in the quoted passage from The Mis-education of the Negro. Royce, in other words, did not belong to the species of philosophy professor who remains merely inactive in the face of harrowing political choices, but rather to the class identified by Woodson when he claimed that philosophers had defended the status quo in American history. This is true at least of the Royce of his loyalty period of 1900–1908, who:

– defended British imperialism in Africa and American expansion in the West. (2009, 223-7)

– at least apparently opposed miscegenation. (2009, 56–7)

– favored a specific form of racial segregation (though not the Jim Crow kind that marks our actual history). (2009, 56–8)

– proposed an aggressive model of cultural assimilation for Europeans who are not Anglo-Saxons, with adoption of the English language and Anglo-Saxon customs as requisite. (2009, 236–42)

– while not exactly defending slavery, remarked on the subject in accord with a broadly providentialist version of the Lost Cause narrative; he did not seek a return to slavery for Black Americans, but he viewed the progression of slavery-emancipation-reunification as a beneficial process that produced a stronger union and republic. (2009, 51–2; 228–9)

To be sure, Royce stopped well short of any defense of Woodson's fourth evil, lynching. He was generally opposed to violence and especially opposed to mob activity.[3] Royce's social scheme sought rather to pursue by peaceful means what others have sought by violence. Most of the essays in which Royce makes these points have been reprinted in the modern edition of *Race Questions, Provincialism, and Other American Problems*, of which Scott Pratt is a co-editor (2009). Moreover, all these points were debated in earlier discussions of Royce's philosophy of race from the loyalty period.[4] So I make no pretense of raising an original objection, but rather I only contextualize Pratt's argument: his appeal to Royce should be of that variety defended by Dwayne Tunstall, who argued that we have a right to distinguish "the good Royce" from "the bad Royce" (2021). Scholars have a right to be selective in their appeals to their deceased predecessors, and it is arguable that such selectivity is inherent to interpretation. So in following Pratt's tour through Royce's absolutist turn in pragmatism, we have to distinguish what Pratt wishes to take from Royce from other things we might find in the written record.

Most of Pratt's references to Royce in "Absolute Pragmatism" draw on works from the final, post-*Loyalty* period of the latter's career, so roughly from 1909 until his death in 1916. The highpoint of this era is *The Problem of Christianity* (1913), just as the era in which Royce backed versions of racism and colonialism culminates in *The Philosophy of Loyalty* (1908). Pratt appeals specifically to the 1911 lectures on Truth, to *William James and Other Essays* (1911), *The Sources of Religious Insight* (1912), and to the 1912/13 *Principles of Logic*. So it is possible to demarcate the Royce of Pratt's essay chronologically, such that the absolute pragmatism of which Pratt writes is a product only of Royce's final period.

The trouble with this picture is that the late-career Royce, which on my breakdown includes everything he wrote after *The Philosophy of Loyalty*, is marked by more rather than by less political commentary. In 1916 alone Royce penned at least four essays on the Great War, and particularly on the philosophical and historical significance of it. To my knowledge, Royce scholars have not sufficiently mined this material for a distinctive social or political philosophy that might contrast (or not) with the racial impe-

[3] On this see Curry, 2019, pp. 103ff.

[4] See especially Curry 2019 and Tunstall 2021.

rialism of the loyalty period.[5] I cannot say at this moment just what such a late Roycean social philosophy would include, though I can point to a few difficult passages.

The most troubling point, as I see it, is that in "The Hope of a Great Community" Royce defended a version of what we now call Christian Zionism (1916, 273). He argued specifically that the possibility of a great community should find its sources in ancient Israel, according to which "the redeemed and transformed Jerusalem of the future was to be the centre of a redeemed humanity, the spiritual ruler of a kingdom which should have no end" (273). That tradition was then transformed into the Pauline notion of community that forms the basis of much of Royce's theorizing in this entire period, especially in *The Problem of Christianity*. In the 1916 essay he continues:

> But the ideal city of Zion, the centre of a new heaven and earth, passed over as an ideal into the possession of the early Christian church. The Apostle Paul gave to its inner life the character which he called 'charity', and which he expounded to the Corinthians in one of the greatest documents of Christian literature. (ibid)

It is in terms of this Pauline notion that Royce then interprets his allegiances in regard to the Great War. He is not interested in one side or the other merely winning the war on the battlefield, but rather with the ultimate possibility of a true Pauline community of all humanity on the earth: "the outcome of the war promises to be either a victory or defeat, not for any one of the warring nations nearly so much as for humanity in its wholeness, and hence for what I shall venture also to call the church universal" (ibid, 272-3). So in response to the Great War, Professor Royce took an eschatological turn, not in any obvious way inconsistent with the culturally assimilative Americanism of the loyalty-period essays, but with a much more global and theological emphasis. He considers the possibility that the time for humans on the earth comes to an inglorious end (270), but he closes by referencing his scheme (elaborated already in 1914's *War and Insurance*) of coordinated international finance that might well, if we are lucky, sustain something of a human civilization beyond the coming World Wars.

Royce on the Nature and Purpose of Philosophy

The previous section was intended only as a reminder about Professor Royce and so a call for caution. The philosophers of the past have already acted (or not) in their world, and we their descendants must decide what to do in ours. So far as I am aware, no one has written a detailed study of Royce's responses to the Great War, such that we could measure this and consider it as an example for us to follow or not. Daniel Brunson has taken up the issue of insurance in a few essays, most recently in regard to our conception of nature and so with respect to environmental issues (2013, 2016). But irrespective of that, the classic accounts of Royce's late philosophy retain the emphasis on logic and metaphysics, and Bruce Kuklick was not wrong when he wrote more than a half-century ago that logic and the foundations of mathematics were arguably Royce's "main interest" after 1900 (1971, 349). Pragmatists especially have seized these texts, due to the more explicit (than in previous work) relationship to Piercean logic in them. But Pratt is caught in a difficulty of a kind that distinguishes his effort from the customary piece about the late Royce and his Peircean triads, insofar as he wishes to draw from these texts some lesson about real-world action: he must distinguish Royce's logic and metaphysics from his later social philosophy, but draw a new inspiration for action on the basis of these principles. It is a difficult path to navigate.

That the path is a difficult one, however, does not entail that we should not walk down it. As Pratt signals clearly in his opening, we have only difficult paths before us. He opens by declaring that we face a number of "intractable problems," that pragmatism in its purer forms is of no help, and that a turn to autocracy is unappeal-

[5] In *Royce's Mature Ethics*, Frank Oppenheim provides an overview of Royce's last ethical philosophy, but he does not address the themes I mention here.

ing. So what are we to do? Pratt does not tell us exactly whether to engage in insurrectionist activity, nor especially when we should do so. That would be far too much to ask. What he does tell us is that certain types of actions are what James calls "live options": history and the big world beyond us toss our way certain possibilities and not others (1896). Our choices are not infinite, nor indefinite, but rather limited. Moreover, they are not even limited by us, as individuals, but rather by historical context: I might join the resistance or not, but for that there must first be both something to resist and a movement to join.

In *The Sources of Religious Insight*, Royce writes that if "our purposes are definite," and "if the issues of life are for us sharply defined," then we are faced with peculiar situations in which we are forced to either act or not (1912, 153-4). Life presents us with real dilemmas, even for philosophers who spend most of our time in libraries. And our responses to these dilemmas are absolute in the sense that, once done, they can never be undone. I have either acted or not, resisted or not, rebelled or not. Each moment is absolute in respect of those options that we might call live. In peaceful times such dramatic descriptions of willing or acting might seem excessive, but in troubling times such as ours this description strikes rather with a sort of undeniability. Doing nothing then becomes more obviously a kind of something, an absolute and irrevocable choice not to respond. We will not get these moments back, and yet the possibilities of the future hinge at least partly on what we choose to do. Royce's point seems to be that every real choice to act as well as every real tendency to dither has a significance that warrants the descriptor 'absolute'. But *Pratt's point* seems to be that especially troubling circumstances, such as we live in, reveal or make transparent something about willing and acting that Royce insists was there all along. Pratt's point seems to be simply that Royce seems more right just now.

I will return to this, Pratt's central problem, in the next section. Here I wish to reflect further on what role philosophy in particular might play for us. Pratt closes with some quotes by Leonard Harris of Alain Locke, and so further aligns his absolute pragmatism with the Harris-Locke school. Locke claims, in the quoted passage, that philosophy is always engaged, always arising in the minds of particular persons faced with real-life problems, and yet for all that apparent relativism philosophy can never "ignore the question of ultimates" (2025, 18; 2018, 193). In a footnote, Pratt juxtaposes to this the opening reflections on the nature of philosophy from Royce's *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy*. I am fond of that passage and have quoted it myself, as I do here again: "You philosophize when you reflect critically upon what you are actually doing in your world" (1892, 1).

To use some more academic terminology, I call the position expressed in that line, and the subsequent parts of the Preface to *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy*, metaphilosophical gradualism. The latter expression is just a multisyllabic 'ism' meant to express the idea that there is a graduated shift from the passing thoughts we have on a park bench (Royce's setting) to the rigorously ordered thoughts in a philosophy lecture. But that is just one of Royce's metaphilosophical orientations. The other is a more classic approach that we might find in various lectures by him. I choose an example nearly randomly, as there are many such in Royce's papers: "Philosophy is an effort to get a reasoned solution of the most fundamental, that is, of the ultimate problems of human life" (1897, 5). Royce distinguishes ultimate problems first from passing practical problems like finding the best path home, or selecting a dinner menu; next, he distinguishes them further from social problems such as "what is to be the future of the British Empire" (ibid., 4-5) or of scientific questions. So on this Roycean perspective, philosophy is more abstract and apparently detached from life questions. Philosophy deals with ultimate problems, not trivial ones or even political ones.

Royce, of course, is a philosopher of an older school, and he is very much an old-fashioned philosopher who

proposed theories not only in general metaphysics and logic, but he also had a theory of psychology that supplements his idealism, a system of ethics both pure and applied, and a full-scale social philosophy that ties more or less neatly to his ethics. I take this point up again in the next section. Here I just want to add one further problem that makes it difficult to square Pratt's arguments with Royce's texts: Royce is a decidedly anti-individualist philosopher, and that fact is one of his most consistent tendencies from his earliest writings until his death. To illustrate the point I refer again, for convenience's sake, to "The Hope of a Great Community." In that text he dismisses Bentham's utilitarianism as too individualistic to matter in regard to the war, and without prescription in regard to any hopes for a great community: a great community is precisely not a matter of "endeavoring to alleviate the pains of individual men or collections of men." (1916, 278). But Pratt's appeal to James's argument in "The Will to Believe" threatens to align Royce with an individualist argument, and even Royce's formulation of the absolute nature of action – as quoted from *The Sources of Religious Insight* – are individualist. So I note here merely one problem that needs to be worked out: is an absolute pragmatism a matter for individual or collective action?

Irrevocable Actions and Pratt's Absolute Pragmatism

Most of us professors of philosophy are not altogether principled like Socrates, and to consider this I wish to reverse the Leonard Harris thought experiment that I quoted earlier: imagine us in Socrates's situation, rather than him in ours. I cannot speak for Pratt or Harris, but for my part I undertake very few of my activities on the basis of a self-conscious decision that forms the conclusion of a profound philosophical argument. Were I offered a trial and faced with execution on the accusation that my activities, pedantic such as they are, run contrary to custom, morality, or the public good, I could not give so great a speech as Socrates is alleged to have given, nor would anyone (let alone several people!) write an *apologia* for me. My actions have generally fallen short of being philosophical in this Socratic sense.

While I do not think that Professor Royce is very much like Socrates – Socrates belongs to the insurrectionist school that Harris lauds, whereas Royce falls among those defenders of the status quo targeted by Woodson – he does align with Socrates on an even broader division of philosophers: Royce is among those whose real actions were indeed philosophical, so that Royce and Socrates may both be contrasted with the bulk of modern professors of whom I concede that I also serve as an example. To do Royce any justice, we need to discern the sense in which even his defense of a status quo, as a kind of deliberate action selected from among live options of which insurrection was an alternative, was a deeply philosophical decision.

The text in which Royce deals with this problem most explicitly is "The Eternal and the Practical," which has the additional value of aligning institutionally with our professional context. It was initially delivered as the Presidential Lecture to the American Philosophical Association, at only its third meeting, and then published in *The Philosophical Review* – still considered the most prestigious journal in our profession all these years later - in 1904. It is thus the eminently professional text by Professor Royce. In it he provides a version of the argument that I believe Pratt to require: we are all pragmatists insofar as we are philosophers, or truth-seekers, at all, because our beliefs and our actions cannot be separated (1904, 118). Philosophy, even in an apparently merely formal setting such as a professional conference, is already kind of action. If it seems rather that our cogitations about "pure practical reason" – to echo Harris's invocation of Kant as the inactive or ineffective caricature of the professor – are nonetheless deep expressions of our will. The existence of a class of detached professors is thus a kind of illusion, about which Royce proceeds to disenchant by explaining over an additional twenty pages about how

the entire knowledge process is guided by the will.

Royce explains that we are already acting politically, and he thereby proposes a revision to my initial delineation of three types of philosophers, viz., insurrectionists like Socrates, defenders of the status quo like Woodson's professors, and the detached professors like myself. There are no detached professors. Those of us who are not insurrecting are defending the status quo, contributing not directly by our theories but rather indirectly by our actions to whatever list of ills we grant to our current society. The choice is absolute. Pratt is correct, at least if Royce is correct. What Pratt adds to the point is the notion of irrevocability: we already have acted in our world, and to whatever extent we have not insurrected we cannot rightfully claim anything but that failure. But the effect of either Royce or Pratt being correct is minimal, since Royce is not so much providing a normative ground for our actions as he is telling us that such a normative ground already lies in our will.

Royce indeed calls this a kind of pragmatism, but his alignment with the self-identified pragmatists is also minimal. He opens his lecture with references to James's *The Will to Believe*, which Pratt also references, as well as to the contemporaneous texts by Dewey and Schiller (1904, 1903). His point is that, contrary to the notion that these pure pragmatists hold so dear, their school of thought is nothing new. Pragmatism, in this absolute rather than pure sense, is an ancient school of thought, and it is also the school followed implicitly by every thinking person. In that sense I should withdraw the point with which I opened this section: even my decidedly non-insurrectionist actions are deeply philosophical, and the fact that I can give no grand *apologia* for my actions is now a different kind of shortcoming.

Philosophers after Academic Philosophy

I used to teach survey courses on the "History of Ancient Philosophy" and the "History of Modern Philosophy," and it is from those courses that I drew a few of my opening reflections. They were my primary curricular assignment when I was hired fifteen years ago for the job that I still hold. We read Martha Nussbaum describe the ancient Greek sages as real-world actors and assess their performance. Diogenes was better than the Stoics, she argued, but still far from ideal. In "Modern Philosophy" we read Naomi Zack's *Bachelors of Science*, which follows similar motives (to use Roycean language) but moves in a different direction: philosophy was enacted in the early modern period mainly by people in very specific situations, by men who belonged partly to the class of servants and partly to the class of nobles, insofar as they were enlightened European men who worked as advisors to aristocrats and as tutors to their children (1996). Her title notes, in its play on our academic credentialing, that the early modern philosophers were a special class of men (somewhat emasculated by social position at that, and hence bachelors). Philosophy, on Zack's account, was enacted only in these very practically limited circumstances. These were also the men who generally defended the status quo of their time, including European imperialism and so implicitly (at least!) slavery and genocide.

I no longer teach such courses, not as a result of my private will but rather of the collective will of the state of Indiana. The legislature has gutted our philosophy program along with many other academic offerings. Probably if they better understood the content, if they had followed the arguments of Naomi Zack or Martha Nussbaum let alone those of Socrates or Carter Woodson, they would have eliminated the courses sooner. It would all seem, from their standpoint, a kind of left-wing indoctrination. At the same time, however, the pedagogy was probably not very Socratic even where it was "Socratic": it does not seem to me that any real insurrectionist actions took place as a result of them, and the students who took those courses are now lawyers, doctors, journalists, and other contributors to the American empire that Harris reminds us incarcerates our fellow humans at more

than five times our share of the world's population. So I close with a revision of Pratt's main question: what kind of philosophy will guide us through these times without the context in which Royce proposed so much of his absolute pragmatism, which is to say without the support of public institutions that might expect that we defend them? Socrates, after all, claimed in his *apologia* that we may pursue justice, in an unjust society, only by private and never by institutional or official means (*Republic* 32a).

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WANDERING, CRISIS, AND LOYALTY
REFLECTIONS ON ROYCE

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ABSTRACT: This article develops an interpretation of Josiah Royce by placing the metaphor of wandering at the center of his philosophical anthropology and ethics. The essay argues that Royce diagnoses the human condition as structurally precarious: shaped by crisis, conflict, lack, and the incessant search for unity within the temporal flow of life. The motif of wandering serves as an existential category describing the in-between character of finite subjectivity and its striving to overcome its own indeterminacy. Royce's ethics of loyalty is interpreted as a pragmatic strategy to manage this precariousness without ever transcending it; loyalty is framed as an art of synthesizing conflicting impulses, forming a life-plan, and relating the self to causes that constitute social orders of meaning. Yet because selfhood itself is marked by negativity, crisis and adversity remain constitutive rather than eliminable.

Keywords: wandering, human condition, crisis, conflict, temporality, negavitiy, self, loyalty, unity, good

Texts allow for multiple readings depending on the contexts of interpretation. Such contextualizations provide occasions to interpret texts in a particular direction. Without these contextual perspectives, our interpretations would lose their sharpness and devolve into a mere reproduction of syntactic facts. In the following pages, I interpret Josiah Royce's thought from a perspective that is at once deeply rooted in the collective consciousness of the present and, in its variations, visible within the pragmatic matrix—especially in Royce's own writings. This viewpoint expresses a heightened awareness of the precariousness of the human condition, the crises it experiences, and the opportunities and limits of political or ethical strategies to respond. I pursue a systematic sketch of these themes in Royce's thought, not chronologically and not as a survey of any single phase, but by tracing some aspects of the overarching structure of his ideas while largely setting aside the development from his early articles to his late theory of community. I recognize that such a method risks neglecting important parts of his theory – in my case, for example, the concepts of the absolute and interpretation. Yet the advantages lie in revealing how deeply grounded these topics are in Royce's thinking. Central to my reading will be *The World and the Individual*, from which I will draw on both earlier and later writings. The argument will proceed in four steps: following a brief contextualization of my research question, (1) I will reflect on the metaphor of wandering, which appears to be crucial not only for Royce's understanding of philosophy but of existence; (2) subsequently, certain traits of his ethics will be examined in light of "wandering"; (3) I will conclude with a few brief remarks for further inquiry; and (4) as is evident, the various parts of my interpretation are linked to one another by a guiding motif, the motif of "wandering," and especially by the aspect of negation that can be discerned therein.

I. Context

We live in an age of crisis. At least, that is what one might assume if one follows prevailing diagnoses of our culture. There seems to be agreement that many crises have overlapped in recent times on a larger scale, and they may even be interconnected. For example, we talk about the crisis of democracy, the ecological crisis, the crisis of international institutions, or of the crisis of attention in the digital age, to name just a few well-known highlights. At the personal level, crises occur in many forms, from birth to death, sometimes subtle and sometimes disruptive. It is therefore difficult to offer a universal definition of all possible crises; it may be said, however, that we speak of crises when we encounter situations in which our established habits of orientation fail to operate, and we experience disorientation in our world- and self-relation, with varying degrees of severity. In severe cases we feel as if we have literally fallen from the world. Accordingly, crises are accompanied by particular emotional states—typical examples include fear or anxiety, as well as feelings of

powerlessness or vulnerability.[1] These emotions should not be treated as merely mental states reflecting an inner disposition; instead, they are intentional modes of our engagement with the world, expressed in situationally embodied forms of action. Through feeling, a situation is already apprehended with a particular quality; in a crisis, it is often experienced as irritating, threatening, or dangerous. This is why crises seize our attention so strongly, narrowing our view of some aspects of reality. From a somewhat more detached vantage point, concrete crisis events can, however, also shed light on a much broader issue. They can cast light on what the human condition fundamentally designates: its precariousness.

Thinkers at the dawn of pragmatism were well aware of this more general matter; among them, Josiah Royce, after all, was no stranger to crisis, conflict, and tragedy. Born and raised in California, he did not belong to the Boston elite, which was able to pursue the great tasks of philosophy and science within a relatively stable institutional framework. In contrast, the situation on the West Coast was anything but institutionally stable. Royce's historical/sociological studies on the subject provide an excellent impression of the sensitivity with which he perceived the problems of this emerging social order in the West (Royce, 1886). They describe anarchic conditions familiar above all from contemporary Western films. These experiences made a lasting impression on him and are likely to have influenced his social soteriology, whose most basic idea is, as is well known: "it must be my community that, in the end, saves me." (Royce, 2001c, 41). Throughout his life, Royce retained a philosophical sense of the tragic and crisis-prone nature of existence, in this respect resembling William James. This is evident not only in his studies of the situation in California, but also, more fundamentally, can be seen in the basic structure of his philosophical thinking. I would like to examine some features of this structure in more detail in the next section.

II. The Human Condition: Wandering

Royce defines the process of life and thought with the help of a metaphor that is very catchy at first glance, the metaphor of "wandering." Several years ago, Douglas Anderson has lucidly shown how the shifting meanings of "wandering" are reflected in the different phases of Royce's intellectual biography, especially concerning the notion of the Absolute (Anderson 2006, 33–49). In this article I choose a more phenomenological approach interpreting it as a kind of "*Existential*" in a Heideggerian sense that might reveal something of the fundamental structure of the human condition. In general, one can say that those who wander are on a journey, have not yet reached their destination, and are in a peculiar in-between state. They are moving on the border between the known and the unknown, between the familiar and the foreign, or between the self and the other. In a sense, those who wander are border crossers, neither here nor there, who risk, taking detours or even going astray. This is true of wandering as an outer journey with a fixed spatial beginning and end, but it is also true of wandering as the temporally ongoing human quest to understand one's own destiny. It is primarily this perspective that bears on the interpretation of Royce, who conceives the "process of coming to consciousness" as a fundamental "wandering in the wilderness of ignorance." (Royce 1901, xv).[2] Hence, the metaphor holds central significance for his philosophical framework. It entails many aspects, including ethical and epistemic dimensions. Both belong together, but for analytical reasons I will briefly address them separately.

(1) The ethical dimension of "wandering" has to do with the fact that, for Royce, what we call our self is not

[1] Cf. Tietjen, Ruth Rebecca. 2023. "Feeling and performing 'the crisis': on the affective phenomenology and politics of the corona crisis." *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 22/5: 1281–1299.

[2] Note that the "wandering" metaphor serves both as opening of the Second Series of the Gifford Lectures (Royce 1901, xv; 3) and as ending of the last lecture (ibid., 452).

an empirical datum to which we can directly refer and say once and for all: That is me. Rather, it is to be understood as an "Ethical Category" (Royce 1901, 275), denoting an ethical task which is in principle infinite. The motive of "wandering" thus expresses what belongs to the conceptual core of Royce's thinking: The situation in which we find ourselves is not a mere state of affairs, but a constant temporal transition.[3] It is a temporal constellation that, on closer inspection, reveals that we are always in a shifting or flowing mode of existence. Our past no longer exists as a direct presence, yet it continues to exert influence in many ways; our present state of selfhood has already passed as we come to know it; our future way of ng-inng is not yet present and must first be acquired, and it stirs us with emotions like restlessness or fear.[4] In this temporally shifting mode of being, the ongoing transitions between present, past, and future create a dynamic partly driven by the experience of lack and by the desire and will to fill it. The sense of lack should not be seen as a relation to a particular object that we do not have and therefore seek to acquire; rather, it should be grasped as a fundamental structure of our self-relations that includes lack as a defining feature. If that were not the case, the self could not be defined as an "Ethical Category," since this presupposes that the aim is to become an individual self, which in turn implies that it is not yet, and thus something that, strictly speaking, is missing, at least in its full meaning. Absence of determination, negativity, is thus a structural component of our being-in-the-world, even if we do not always notice it in our daily affairs. The self we refer to as our own develops in these temporal transitions, seeking what it is not yet, or, positively expressed, what its unique relationship to reality fully constitutes. Accordingly, Royce defines hope as a central existential mode: "this dwelling in hope rather than in fulfillment, in search for a lost self rather than in enjoyment of a present self..., this dwelling constitutes the inner finite life of every one of us" (Royce 1969, 434). So much for one aspect of the ethical dimension.

(2) I would like to develop the epistemic dimension further, following the suggestion that the structure of the self is characterized by a lack, and for this purpose I rely on what one might call Royce's negative method. It might be said that the aim of the process of "wandering" is, both in theoretical and practical terms, to determine oneself as a concrete, i.e., real, individuality, whereby the concept of the individual forms a kind of boundary concept (Clendenning 1970, 340–345). This is, in part, because individuality is defined by the predicate of uniqueness, and since positive knowledge about an object can only be obtained through the application of general concepts and categories; the unique determinateness of an individual as such can never occur as an object that is known. What can be known are always objects of a certain type or class. Royce is very clear about this impossibility; it underpins the paradoxical initial condition of our will-to-know the individual real, a condition that can never be completely overcome: "And, finally, our experience, whether internal or external, never shows us what we, above all, regard as the Real, namely, the Individual fact" (Royce 1899, 297). What remains are conceptual approximations achieved by excluding all that the sought object prima facie is not, thereby progressively restricting the range of possible determinations. Royce designates this as "*Determination by Negation*" (ibid., 296), noting that the full determination of the real functions as an "ideal" and as "a limit toward which we endlessly aim." This mode of seeing things echoes Kant's considerations of "dem Grundsatze der durchgängigen Bestimmung" in his *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Kant 1990, B 599).[5] It culminates in the thesis that the complete determination of a thing cannot be found as an empirical fact and instead serves as a principle (or rule) of reason: "um ein Ding vol-

[3] For the importance of temporality in Royce's ontology see Auxier 2013, 38–40.
[4] See Kegley, Jacquelyn Ann K. "*Josiah Royce in Focus*." (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 14f., 28f.
[5] Kant, Immanuel. 1990. *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1990), B 599.

lständig zu erkennen, muß man alles Mögliche erkennen, und es dadurch, es sei bejahend oder verneinend bestimmen. Die durchgängige Bestimmung ist folglich ein Begriff, den wir niemals in concreto seiner Totalität nach darstellen können" (ibid., B 601).

In other words, the individual is not given as an object of theoretical knowledge in the perspective of the "world of description," but as a point of reference for ethical attitudes in the "world of appreciation" (Royce 1892, Chapter 12). In order to avoid a dualistic misunderstanding, it should, however, be immediately noted that the theoretical insights of the "world of description" are not separable from the perspective of the "world of appreciation"; rather, they must be interpreted under its set of presuppositions: "Hence, the World of Description, taken by itself, is never the whole truth. It needs to be interpreted in terms of the World of Appreciation" (Royce 1901, 156). That's why the individual person emerges primarily as object of the practical attitude of "love" (Marcel 1956, Chapter 3), but also of "hope," "desire," and "will," (Royce 1899, 297) which are all implied in the relation of love.[6] The reverse, however, cannot be claimed. Against this background, we strive to be uniquely related to what Royce calls the whole as the "Inbegriff" of possible meaning: "*to be is to be uniquely related to a whole*" (Auxier 2013, 46).

Taking the ethical and epistemic dimension together, it seems obvious to characterize the human condition very fundamentally by a negative factor, by something that is lacking, whereby the missing element itself functions as a productive resource. To assess this finding properly, it is essential to keep the hidden logical architecture in view. In his late article on "Negation" Royce distinguishes two kinds of negative relations. Fundamentally, there is the reciprocal, symmetric "not-relation" that holds between a "proposition and its contradictory" (Royce 2001a, 94): if A is not B, then B is not A. As we have just seen, this form of negation is foundational for the theory of determination. Yet it does not by itself exhaust the terrain Royce addresses. The relevant field is shaped by "not-relations" that are non-symmetric and that occur not only in dyadic, but also in more complex relational structures. Lacking something, in this sense, is a second type of "not-relations." From the mere fact that A is not B and B is not A, the lack evidently carries a positive quality, since its fulfillment is the aim of a desired action (ibid., 100). This additional determination, which is far more complex, rests on the fact that the symmetrical kind of negation does not appear in isolation, but rather in contexts where it functions as an implicate of evaluative practices. Against this backdrop, it can be seen that the "negativity" (Royce 1892, 230) in the fabric of existence is not simply a symmetric form of negation; rather, it comprises asymmetrical structures that, in diverse modalities and contexts, cause unrest, irritation, and generate conflict, which in turn drive thought and action productively beyond their own factual situation. This is an insight that Royce finds primarily in Hegel and Schopenhauer and which he appropriates in his own creative way. In his 1892 lectures on modern philosophy, he says: "The spiritual life isn't a gentle or an easy thing. It is indeed through and through and forever paradoxical, earnest, enduring, toilsome; yes, if you like, painfully tragic" (ibid.). This basic idea is expressed in various ways in Royce's understanding of the human condition: In anthropological terms, we are fundamentally "needy creatures" (Royce 1912 11); in epistemic terms, we are defined by what is meant by the concepts of "narrowness" and "ignorance"; and in ethical terms, we are, among others, in conflict with our own "selfishness," so that some interpreters even argue that Royce understands ethical subjects as "moral failures" (Tunstall 2021, 93–108).

The list of attributes could easily be continued. But even without doing so, we have gained some coordinates that allow us to interpret Royce's ethics functionally as a strategy to deal with conflict and crisis. It articulates a perspective of hope whose pragmatic orientation is

[6] When we speak of love, we articulate both a desire (*eros*) and a volitional decision directed toward the other (*agape*). It is also tied to hope, because love looks to the future and desires a good that is not yet present.

evident in its position between resignation—the path of Schopenhauer—and optimism—the path of Hegel. Royce takes a middle ground between them. In this regard, I would like to examine some features of the ethical standpoint more closely, bearing in mind that the existential mode of wandering furnishes the frame of reference, a frame that remains operative in ethics as well.

III. Managing the Human Condition: Loyalty

As has already been evident in the foregoing considerations, Royce contends that we each strive to become an individually determined self. The self is not realized at a specific moment, but is an ongoing ethical task grounded in the experience that the complete meaning of our concrete being is something we lack. What this means Royce has repeated across numerous writings, reaching into his late Oeuvre. Throughout these various versions, a core thesis is discernible, one that he first elaborates in his early articles and later more systematically in *The World and the Individual*. It states: "From this point of view, the Self is not a Thing, but a Meaning embodied in a conscious life" (Royce 1901, 269). In following the theses' articulation, it becomes apparent that the formulation "a Meaning embodied in a conscious life" is to be understood, in Royce's sense, as the formation of a life-plan: "*By this meaning of my life-plan . . . I am defined and created a Self*" (ibid., 276). This further reinforces that the self is to be understood as the temporal totality in which the formation of a life-plan proceeds. Royce contends that this formation is directed toward the establishment of a "unity of life" (Royce 1908, 341).

Taken in itself, this thesis may invite us to reflexively subject it to the well-known postmodern critique of conceptual devices of closure in which unity-concepts of various kinds occupy a prominent position. Regardless of how the moments of truth in this critique are assessed, Royce's thesis would be misconstrued if one ascribed to it a naïve closing function concerning the openness und plurality of experience. As we will see, it functions in a different way since it primarily opens up a horizon of problems rather than dogmatically asserting any fixed concept of unity. Royce's starting point is not unity but the opposite of it. It is, for example, the experience of a disordered diversity of sensations and impressions, or the driving forces of a capricious desire that leads to all kinds of object choices, from wild to absurd, or it is the experience of a permanent conflict between different demands that all want to assert themselves at the same time. The fictional starting point is therefore a kind of psychological, epistemic, or ethical anarchy, i.e., a deeply critical constellation in which the structures of possible orders of conduct either are completely lacking or are still *in status nascendi*, in a state of infancy, so to speak: "every one of us is, 'by nature', a mass of contradictions" (Clendenning 1970, 549). With this concession in mind, Royce nevertheless advances a premise that can certainly be debated: that we do not wish to remain in such a diffuse and contradictory constellation, but rather we want to organize its aspects within an ordered schema. The felt lack thereby constitutes a motivating factor for transcending it. Thus, the so-called "unity of life" seems to be an elementary practical and theoretical "need."

The question of the strategies that are needed in order to deal with this situation constructively is therefore not just a theoretical one. Whatever the complete answer may be, it will always involve acts that reduce complexity by synthesizing the various aspects of the experience at hand, thereby organizing them into unities of meaning. Such a synthesis may take the form of a judgment and consists of what Royce calls "insight," more precisely understood as "unity of many facts in one whole" (Royce 1912, 5). One might think of the classical form of judgment, in which the so-called "whole" is constituted by the conjunction of subject and predicate. Royce is likely to draw on this classical notion, though his concept of "insight" is more complex. It comprises three features: "breadth of range, coherence and unity of view,

and closeness of personal touch." (ibid., 5f.). Orientation of conduct, of thought and action, would probably not be possible if it were not directed toward processes in which a sense of the meaningful structure of existence emerges and is transformed into an insight with a concrete meaning. It should be emphasized that the act of synthesis, by which the complexity of the given situation is substantially reduced, exceeds empirical facts, for it frames the situation within a structure not supplied by the contradictory aspects of actual experience and, in the contending dynamics, introduces an ideal, unifying element.

The notion of a life plan exemplifies this, since it presupposes that the diversity of experiential flow is continually organized into a form bearing the contour of a coherent "plan," thereby constituting the ideal function of unification that surpasses mere factual multiplicity, – the production of an autobiography or a curriculum vitae would be impossible without it. In any case, acting in this way is a need: "We need to give life meaning, to know and control ourselves, to end the natural chaos, to bring order and light into our deeds, to make the warfare of natural passions subordinate to the peace and power of the spirit. This is our need. To live thus is our ideal" (ibid., 31). Note the justificatory structure. In a pragmatist style, Royce does not offer an ultimate grounding for his thesis; instead, he appeals to the practical needs that mark human beings' interest in a reliable orientation to the world. It is well known that Royce's systematic treatment of this topic can be found in his theory of loyalty and community. And even within these contexts, the basis for justification stays the same: Loyalty "is founded ... upon a study of man's own inner and deeper needs" (Royce 1911, 68). I won't go into it in detail here, but I will very briefly highlight two points:

(1) Considerations of loyalty – which is generally understood as *"willing and practical and thoroughgoing devotion of a person to a cause*" (Royce 1908, 16f.) – assume that, taken on its own, the individual would be at the mercy of deeply conflicting impulses. It only becomes an ethical subject in a multi-stage process of loyalty formation, which is in principle a social process: (a) It is fundamental that the subject perceives itself in the light of the perspectives of others and determines itself practically based on these perceptions. This finds its elementary expression in the behavior of imitation, to which Royce devotes numerous studies.[7] (b) Under this assumption, forms of loyalty emerge that more or less resemble conventional morality. Here the bond to others mostly remains uncritical and external to one's own reflected choice. For example, one belongs to a political party or a church without inquiring into whether one genuinely believes what is said and done. (c) Only in the reflective, critical, and active "devotion" to a "cause" does the subject constitute itself as genuinely ethical. This has to do with a fact that Royce very briefly indicates in a letter to his colleague Frank Thilly. There he assumes that the principle "loyalty to loyalty" is not on the same level as, for example, the formulation "justice to justice," since it is intrinsically linked to "the very essence of self-consciousness" (Clendenning 1970, 533). This statement is important since it draws attention to the fact that the formation of genuine loyalty should not be reduced to its normative dimensions but should also be taken in its descriptive functions as referring to the emergence of self-consciousness itself. In my reading this indicates that the structure of loyalty expresses the structure of self-consciousness, and, conversely, that the latter expresses the former. Royce's statement thus denotes the process by which subjects project themselves toward another whom they are not, and through this ongoing relation they successively discover their practical identity. Viewing things this way is natural to the matter, since for Royce the ethical formation of the self is fundamentally bound to its relation to a cause that is always a social reality, even if it's just a relation between two persons, like in the case of friendship or a love relationship. Only in active appropriated relations to others, whose

[7] Cf. Kegley 2008, 145–147.

contexts must be expanded further and further to finally include the "ideal community," it is possible to become an ethical subject and to interpret reality as being organized in different kinds of order.

From this it is clear, that a central function of loyalty, in both ethical and epistemic terms, is to bind the individual to a cause and thereby establish a practical reference point toward which the various impulses and desires can be focused. The resulting unification of the disparate is thus to be conceived as processual on one hand and as grounded in the commitment to the pertinent matter of the cause on the other. In an existentialist register, one may even claim that practical engagement constitutes the only mode through which the unity of the life plan is realized within the temporal flow. Its unity is not given; it is "an ideal to be attained by hard work," formed in the course of a "struggle for unity" (Royce 1908, 124).

Apart from practical engagement and its inherent struggles, there are no means by which a coherent self can be developed. So, it is apparent that the ethics of loyalty does not rest on a dogmatic notion of unity; rather, it should be understood as a kind of art that encompasses the skills required to lead a life as a temporally extended practical synthesis—a synthesis of the ever-changing aspects of the stream of individual and social experience. As a form of art, loyalty-oriented practice is concerned with (a) identifying and (b) creatively promoting tendencies that render the diffuse diversity of reality in more or less coherent orders, and with transforming the conflicts among competing ethical standards – virtue, duty, happiness – into cooperative relations (Royce 2001b, 147), thereby fostering a higher level of unity among them: "Loyalty, again, *tends* [my italics] to unify life, to give it center, fixity, stability." (ibid., 22). Moreover, from the perspective of loyalty as an art, it is evident that the logic of Royce's ethics cannot be reduced to deductive inferences alone. Considering Peirce, one might argue that, even within ethical methodology, abductive, inductive, and deductive inferences constitute a logical cycle. The art of loyalty must draw on all phases of this cycle. I fear, however, that the initial and most creative abductive phase, which the late Peirce likens to the playful attitude of musement, is not given sufficient weight in Royce. I will revisit this, but first one must ask how the existential mode of wandering is inscribed in the process of loyalty formation. For one thing is sure: loyalty cannot claim a separate realm of existence for itself that bears no marks of wandering.

(2) If it is true that – as Royce stated in his letter to Thilly – "the very essence of self-consciousness" is expressed in loyalty that has become reflected, then this has an important consequence. It means that the paradoxical, crisis-ridden structure of our being-in-the-world cannot simply be eliminated by the strategies of ethics. Such a claim would amount to a contradiction. If, indeed, loyalty and the structure of consciousness are mutually corresponding notions, and if, likewise, the structure of self-consciousness is marked by something that is lacking, is inevitably fraught with conflict and is susceptible to crises, then loyalty cannot be understood as the complete elimination of crisis and conflict. As we have seen, the formation of loyalty is a necessary strategy for grappling with the ethical trials of the human condition; it acts to transform conflict into cooperation, struggle into peace, and to narrow perspectives into a broader view, at once on individual and social levels. But this does not mean, that it can escape the matrix of finite existence, for which the process of wandering with its in-between mode of being is constitutive. Against this backdrop, the achieved cooperation, peace, and breadth of view are not only contextually limited; they are further shaped by the traces of former struggles and may serve as occasions for future crisis. They are, in short, provisional. Thus, the link between loyalty formation and the crisis-prone texture of existence is subtler than a simple and one-sided negation of elimination, as Royce writes: "There could not be loyalty in a world where the loyal being himself met no adversities that personally belonged to and entered his own inner life" (Royce 1912, 253).

Finally, I will briefly deepen this statement with respect to the relation between the moral distinction of good and evil. Drawing this distinction rests on the general premise that the ethical life unfolds within a logical framework in which positive and negative elements are integrally bound. Accordingly, nothing pertaining to ethical life exists whose determinations do not first require development from a counter-concept, and the determinations of that counter-concept are thus constitutive moments of the self in its pursuit of concrete individuality. Within this framework, affirmative and negative propositions are not autonomous categories but interdependent, paired elements of discourse (Royce 2001a, 95). Royce makes this point very clearly in his first major work, *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy.* There we read: "The moral insight condemns the evil that it experiences; and in *condemning and conquering this evil it forms and is, together with the evil, the organic total that constitutes the good will*.. . . The good act has its existence and life *in the transcending of experienced present evil*" (Royce 1885, 434). For Royce – and in contrast to some representatives of the socalled analytic ethics – the good is not a foundational term immune to further analysis. The good is instead a term that can be analyzed; concretely, its scope includes all aspects of experienced evil that the good will seeks to overcome or has already overcome. Put differently, the logical elements of the concept of the good necessarily incorporate corresponding elements of the concept of evil, so the meaning of the former can be developed only by integrating the relevant semantic dimensions of the latter. In this fashion, Royce transforms the abstract opposition between "good" and "evil" into a hierarchically interwoven relationship.

Proceeding in this way serves both hermeneutic and logical functions: The hermeneutic function is that we can understand the so-called evil only, if at all possible, when we are able to integrate its phenomena into broader meaning-structures. An action is, for example, not characterizable as "evil" unless it can be construed as such within a comprehensive evaluative context. Yet that is not all. The decisive logical claim is that Royce posits a "logical necessity" of certain forms of evil for the growth of ethical and religious insight, which he, for example, labels "sorrows."[8] The background architecture seems plain: it is only through the negative that the determinations of the positive are realizable. Theologically, one might even utter that "the divine will also must be made perfect through suffering" (Royce 1912, 253). The same truth surely holds for the ethical self. Applying this approach to the discourse of loyalty, the initial expectation is confirmed: the more enlightened and more comprehensive forms of loyalty are precisely those that strive to overcome, or have already overcome, its opposite, which threatens to disrupt them. It may even be said that the more enlightened and comprehensive forms of loyalty are the more strenuous or even the more wounded forms. Anyhow, their "struggle for unity" appears to be more severe than in other cases. The unity of the self, which develops as the practical synthesis of one's life-plan gets realized in the flow of time, can thus be achieved only through conflict and, as a specific stage in the ongoing process of "wandering." It remains inherently provisional. In other words, whatever stage one reaches could, and likely will, give rise to new crises and conflicts.

IV. Conclusion

We see, that on the one hand, Royce conceives his ethics as a strategy for dealing with the precariousness of the human condition; on the other hand, however, the art of loyalty does not eliminate this characteristic of the human condition, it rather develops its determinations by relentlessly struggling with and working through actual conflicts and crises – and for Royce it is clear that no particular form of loyalty at a given moment can exhaust the

[8] To speak of "sorrow" is, according to Royce, already an assimilation and idealization of the experienced event. Cf. Royce, Josiah. 1912. "*The Sources of Religious Insight.*" New York: Charles Scribner's Son: 239f.

semantic potential of the general concept. That seems to be why he needs the notion of the Absolute as a kind of hidden logical function that is presupposed in our ways of dealing with the particular syntheses of meaning we realize in our individual and social lives. From what I have said it appears that Royce, unlike James, does not tolerate "moral holidays." Reading his works one may rather get the impression of a picture of human existence as a persistent, restless, and often strenuous engagement with reality – a view which, at least in this regard, resembles to that of existentialism. In any case, the handling of the ethical task of loyalty formation seems to permit no interruption, neither individually nor socially.

If this interpretation is correct, it may account for the fact why Royce does not systematically develop the function of abductive inference in his art of loyalty. As his expositions repeatedly indicate, he assumes that the exercise of an art occurs within the medium of the imagination and requires creativity. A precondition for creativity in all kinds of activity, however, are mental states in which deliberate, intentional action is bracketed, interrupted, or deferred. Such states may be described as a form of cognitive hovering, or playfulness, as Peirce discusses in his famous treatment of musement. Now, Royce is well acquainted with the phenomenon of play, but he treats it almost exclusively from the perspective of psychology oriented to childhood.[9] Nonetheless, the processes at work in play can be understood in a more categorical sense and therefore apprehended as a distinct attitude toward reality, which is not confined to a particular developmental stage. If one follows this line, it would lead to a much tighter integration of the relations between ethics and aesthetics than Royce himself allows, a methodological weakness about which he was well aware.[10]

[9] Cf. Royce, Josiah. 1903. "*Outlines of Psychology. An Elementary Treatise with some Practical Applications*." New York: Macmillan Co.: 319–342.
[10] Cf. Royce's letter to Richard Cabot from June 1912, in: Oppenheim, Frank M.; Bristol, S.J. (ed.). 2001. "*Late Writings of Josiah Royce.*" Vol.1. (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 2001), 20f.

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AMERICA ENCOUNTERS THE ABSOLUTE

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Abstract: In this paper, I push back a bit against Pratt's "plain vanilla" characterization of ordinary pragmatism as lacking the normative clout to counter necro-being. Though particular pragmatists might prove disappointing in their individual commitment to insurrection, pragmatism as a philosophical movement may be much more absolute and insurrectionist in its inception than Pratt allows. Specifically, when we look into the sources of Dewey's faith in democracy, we also encounter the origins of a pragmatism that can support an insurrectionist ethics. On this alternate telling of the tale, several of the pragmatists Pratt finds to be so ordinary actually emerge as more absolutist in their commitments, including Peirce, Dewey, and even the contemporary so-called "neo-pragmatisms" of Brandom, Sellars, and Rorty.

Keywords: Pragmatism, Absolute Pragmatism, American Hegelianism, Duty to Insurrect, Community, Democracy, Peirce, Dewey, W.T. Harris, J. Stallo,

I. The Challenge to Insurrect

Scott Pratt begins "Absolute Pragmatism" with a challenge to any form of pragmatism (or any philosophy) that wishes to be taken seriously as a way of thinking that can address pressing real-world human problems. The challenge, arising from Leonard Harris' "Insurrectionist Ethics," is roughly that pragmatism needs to provide more than just means for clarifying meanings or settling abstract philosophical disputes; it must genuinely *stand for* human flourishing, and *resolutely oppose* the forces of necro-being working against such – namely the impetuses of societal division and domination, as well as those of environmental devastation, depravation, and degradation, which generate many of the problems that seem so intractable today. Following Harris, Pratt tells us that most "ordinary" or "pure" forms of pragmatism – I prefer to dub them "plain-vanilla" pragmatisms – fail to have the resources to rise to Harris' challenge. Plain vanilla pragmatisms, according to Pratt, emphasize epistemic humility and fallibility at the expense of countenancing absolute demands upon our practices. By contrast, Pratt calls upon an "absolute" form of pragmatism championed by Royce, which embraces an absolute in the form of irrevocable commitments and structural self-limitations that we experience in living practical activity.

In this paper, I push back a little against Pratt's "plain vanilla" characterization of ordinary pragmatism as lacking the normative clout to counter necro-being. Though particular pragmatists might prove disappointing in their individual commitment to insurrection (and Royce himself might well be taken to be an example here), pragmatism as a philosophical movement may be much more insurrectionist in its inception than Pratt allows. Pratt's comments about Dewey here are particularly telling. Echoing Harris again, Pratt acknowledges that Dewey, alongside Addams, is a staunch supporter of social reform. However, he contends that this support stems not so much from Dewey's *pragmatism*, but from a largely independent faith in *democracy*:

> For Dewey, it is his faith in democracy that provides the values that call for opposition to systems of oppression. He cultivated this faith in the years after the First World War in response to the barrage of criticism he faced from his former student, Randolph Bourne, and others. (Pratt 2025, tbd)

This remark is a little curious, and I think it worth pausing over it to see why. Granted, in the face of Bourne's criticisms, Dewey's faith in democracy rebounded in a more tempered and resilient form. However, this faith was already well-rooted, as attested by "The Ethics of Democracy" (Dewey 1888) and *Democracy in Education* (Dewey 1916). I think that it is important to explore Dewey's earlier commitment to democracy, for when we look into the sources of this faith, I think we will also encounter the origins of a pragmatism that can support an insurrectionist ethics. On this alternate telling of the tale, several of the pragmatists Pratt finds to be so ordinary will actually emerge – in addition to Royce – as more absolutist in their commitments, including Peirce, Dewey, and even the contemporary so-called "neo-pragmatisms" of Brandom, Sellars, and Rorty.

II. Initial Contact with the Absolute: Johann Stallo and the St. Louis Hegelians

In "The Ethics of Democracy" (Dewey 1888), Dewey insists that democracy is not just a mere form of government, but a form of life – a "social organism"—in which all individuals take part in the creation and maintenance of a common will expressed in the form of articulated law. That's what self-governance amounts to, the ultimate identity between governing and governed. Against critics like Maine, Dewey insists that this identity between governing and governed provides democracy with a special type of resilience or stability over alternative forms of governance. The "Ethics of Democracy" clearly displays the Hegelianism Dewey inherited from his mentor G.S. Morris at Johns Hopkins and then the University of Michigan. Yet this defense of democracy has roots in America well before Dewey came along to express it. Consider the following striking passage from a much earlier source:

> In the law society writes its own thoughts, reads its spirituality, brings it to the consciousness of its constituent individuals, and proceeds to regenerate itself, - to think itself anew. The form is by no means adventitious; it is essential. Whatever is organic, - lives, - can have but one form; the form is the thing, and born from the essence, not added to it. And that society lives and is organic will not be disputed, I hope. Society is progressive, - a progression toward itself, toward the Spiritual, of which it is the representative. – I have stated and shown that it is the destiny of the individual to identify his private reason and will with universal reason and will; and, obviously, this can take place only if the latter, in the form of law, be in the consciousness of the individual, and reproduce themselves in and from him. The organization of society is, therefore, essentially democratic. The objects of government are by no means barely to secure tranquility, formal justice, stability of affairs, &c., as we are told by the prevalent theories of government; the object of government is to embody the life of society. And how could it embody the life of society in proceeding from a few individuals only, or in being superinduced from without, - in a word, unless it were democratic. A government, offering the strongest guaranties for individual security, material prosperity, formal justice, &c, if it were not born from society, not the representative of the peoples reason and will, would nevertheless be an abomination. (Stallo 1848: 159-60)

This passage, what with its talk of the life of society and denial that the function of government is merely to protect individual freedoms, clearly aligns with Dewey's "Ethics of Democracy." It, too, also displays an evident Hegelian orientation. It should come as no surprise, then, that it was penned by another American Hegelian. The passage was drawn from Johann Stallo's *General Principles of the Philosophy of Nature, with an Outline of Some of Its Recent Developments Among the Germans, Embracing the Philosophical Systems of Schelling and Hegel, and Oken's System of Nature*, written in 1848, while Stallo was teaching at St. John's College (now Fordham University) in New York. This work is arguably the very first extended treatment of Hegel's philosophy, not only in North America, but the entire English language.[1] Emerson had an extensively annotated copy of the book. When Whitman speaks of "only Hegel" as being "big enough for America," he is likely drawing as much from Stallo as he is from Frederic Henry Hedge.

And yet this passage is remarkable, as is "The Ethics of Democracy," in its use of Hegelian tropes to defend democracy. Here we have the great departure from orthodox Hegelianism, which might well be called the original heresy of American Hegelianism. It endorses a Hegelianism infused with a spirit of democracy - an unfolding of Hegel out of Hegel, whereby the march of the world spirit proceeds not according to its own necessary internal logic, but is rather an immanent product of the free individual and collective actions of persons attempting self-governance.[2] In short, it is what happens when Hegel gets read, not by those embracing a tradition of constitutional monarchy, but rather by those raised within a democratic form of life marked by traditions of free speech, assembly, and

[1] Some (e.g., Johnson 2024) have granted that honor to Frederick Rauch's *Psychology* (1841). However, the mentions of Hegel in that work are far too sparse, and far too limited to Hegel's remarks on history, to be considered a general exposition of Hegel's philosophy.

[2] I would contend this also to be the origin of the relatively "non-metaphysical" interpretations of Hegel that persist to this day, primarily in North America. These readings show that one must not lump American Hegelianism together with the British Idealism of, say, Bradley.

press.[3] Here Hegel is imbued with a spirit of reform, even to the point of insurrection and revolution. Stallo himself embodied this spirit, as did many of the refugees from the European Revolutions of 1848-9, whom he supported and helped bring to American shores. Indeed, while it is sometimes asserted that Hegelianism in Europe fell out of fashion in the latter part of the 19th century, it is perhaps more fitting to say that it was expelled, first to England (think Marx, Engels, and Ruge) and then to the rest of the Anglophone world (think Schurz, Anneke, Hecker, and Willich). While cultural, geographic, and language barriers largely prevented these "Latin farmers" from playing much of a role within American institutions of higher education, they nevertheless contributed significantly to the political and journalistic life of the country, especially in those western states with large German populations that then bordered the American frontier (Wittke 1952). The 48ers also played an important, and often underappreciated part in the prosecution of the American Civil War, which they viewed in world-historic terms as part of the worldwide struggle against a landed aristocracy. Stallo himself raised a regiment of largely German volunteers (so-called "Turners"), and played a prominent role in post-war reform politics. August Willich, another so-called "Ohio Hegelian" whom Stallo had brought to Cincinnati to edit a German-language labor paper, also led German regiments, and arguably became one of the most capable brigadier generals in the whole Union army. Before then, Willich had led a force of revolutionaries in the failed Baden Uprising of 1849 (with none other than Engels as his adjutant). His familiarity with Hegel was extensive, and perhaps even personal. As a child, he had been raised in Berlin in Feuerbach's household (Dixon 2020).

Both Stallo and Willich were auxiliary members of the St. Louis Philosophical Society. Perhaps the most well-known of the early American Hegelians, the St. Louis group led by Henry C. Brokmeyer and William Torrey Harris were also animated by a democratic spirit not expressed by Hegel himself. Their *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, like Stallo's *General Principles*, was the first publication of its kind in the English language. Its purpose, similar in spirit to Emerson's "American Scholar," was to elevate American intellectual life, in part by exposing Americans to, and engaging them with, the best work coming from Europe, chiefly Hegel and followers like Karl Rosenkrantz. Through their translations of Hegel, their stated aim was to "make Hegel speak English." However, like Stallo, their brand of American Hegelianism was much less committed to a transcendental metaphysics than orthodox European and British Hegeliansms. Whereas Hegel had surmised that world history would begin its work in America only after "the rabble" could no longer retreat across the American frontier, the Hegelians of St. Louis thought that they had witnessed history and the world spirit in action as Americans sought to forge a unified nation through the settling and creation of a network of new states spanning the continent. They shared Hegel's view that the violent excesses of the French Revolution were chiefly the product of an abstract conception of freedom, which served only to reinforce "brittle" and predatory individualisms that were also characteristic of the American frontier. A more concrete, resilient form of freedom could be achieved through the creation of Democratically organized social institutions supported by the types of persons habitually inclined to protect such institutions. "Law in Freedom, and Freedom in Law" was their rallying cry. And the most crucial institution of them all was the school. Thus, in keeping with the chief occupation of so many of the group's members, the St. Louis Hegelians were concerned with defending a broadly Hegelian conception of education as *Bildung*, as attested by the following passage from a letter William Torrey Harris sent to George Holmes Howison:

> The progress of man implies the increasing endowment of the individual with the conscious-

[3] As Pratt has noted elsewhere (Pratt 2002), this democratic orientation and mindset might well have some roots in early indigenous lifeways.

> ness of the experience of the whole race and with greater directive power, so that each one sums up in himself the whole. This implies that the individual shall be educated to a higher and higher degree to the end that there shall be no such thing as caste, hereditary or compulsory, but only such caste as the individual is responsible for himself. How this can be anything but a democracy, I do not see. (Letter from W.T. Harris to G.H. Howison, Sep. 26, 1887)

As in the Stallo passage above, one could well imagine seeing something very much like it appearing in Dewey's *Democracy and Education*. Dewey shares much of Harris' *Bildung* conception of education (Good 2006), by which students in part come to acquire the wisdom of the race (Harris 1898: 322) or "the funded capital of civilization" (Dewey 1897: EW 5:84). Moreover, both Johnston (2014) and Garrison (2006) add that at least part of the "permanent deposit" that the study of Hegel left in Dewey's thought can be found in his general notion of inquiry. Understood as a passage from unsettled to settled situations, this picture is remarkably reminiscent of Hegel's picture of education as a returning home from self-alienation, though mercifully and wisely emancipated from "Hegelian garb" or verbiage. None of this should be surprising, given the long and mutually supportive relationship Dewey had with William Torrey Harris. Dewey's first four articles appeared in Harris' *JSP*, and Harris' encouragement helped spur Dewey to pursue graduate work in philosophy at Johns Hopkins. Later, they and their families would spend summers together at their vacation homes near Thomas Davidson's Glenmore school for the cultural sciences. In short, we should not overlook the fact that Dewey's early commitment to democracy, or at least the specific form that that commitment takes, owes much to his interactions with early American Hegelians.

III. Peirce's JSP Series: Our "Glassy Essence"

While Dewey's commitment to democracy might have roots in early American Hegelianism, I have yet to tie it to his pragmatism. The story I have told so far is perfectly consistent with Pratt's overall view that these two facets of Dewey's thought are largely independent of one another: that a commitment to democracy is something *in addition* to a pragmatist theory of inquiry. As Pratt puts it, perfectly good inquiry may proceed in non-democratic contexts. Let's put some pressure on that claim, once again by turning to the roots of classical pragmatism.

Dewey was far from the only classical pragmatist to pay attention to Harris' *Journal of Speculative* Philosophy. Royce published early articles there, as did James, despite his evident distaste for "Hegelizing." However, the most significant contribution of a pragmatist to the *JSP* was surely the 1868-9 series of articles by Charles Sanders Peirce. Peirce's initial reception to Hegel and Hegelianism was less than wholly positive. In particular, he seems not to have approved of the beginning of Hegel's *Science of Logic*, what with its famous (or notorious) bringing together (or mutual dissolution) of Being with Nothingness. Hegel and his followers were willing to embrace contradictions far too blithely, and to his mind, were woefully uninformed about the actual practice of science. Still, he read the first volume of the *JSP* with interest, prompting him to start a correspondence with Harris registering his reservations about Hegel and his followers' grasp of logical notions, such as that of determinacy.[4] In so doing, he offered to write a series of articles on the conduct and logic of science. Harris printed Peirce's comments on logical determinacy, anonymously, along with his own responses in Volume 2 of the *JSP*. Having promised his readership more articles on scientific practice, he accepted Peirce's offer.

Peirce's 1867-8 series of articles, widely known as his anti-Cartesian or cognition series, also appeared in Volume 2 of the *JSP* This series is at least as notable for how congenial it would have been to the journal's overall Hegelian orientation. Though Peirce again registers some of his differences with the Hegelians, especially concern-

[4] Much of this correspondence is to be found in Vol 2 of Peirce's Chronological Edition, pp 143-159.

ing their treatment of "pure" being, Peirce's main target is an attitude of epistemic individualism epitomized by Cartesians and Empiricists alike. These philosophies fail largely because they claim of individuals cognitive capacities that are far too promethean to withstand serious scrutiny. Simply put, our sense about the origins and implications of our conceptions is far less certain than typically claimed. Referring to the statistical forms of reasoning beginning to take hold in 19th Century science (and which would take center-stage in his photometric researches) Peirce famously insists that the very notion of reality itself can be had only against the backdrop of a *community* of inquirers working in collaboration to root out individual idiosyncrasy and bias. As he puts it:

> The real, then, is that which, sooner or later, information and reasoning would finally result in, and which is therefore independent of the vagaries of me and you. Thus, the very origin of the conception of reality shows that this conception essentially involves the notion of a COMMUNITY, without definite limits, and capable of an indefinite increase of knowledge. (CP 5.311; EP1: 52)

The isolated individual, working alone as Descartes, Kant, and other enlightenment figures had envisioned, had little chance of obtaining anything approaching an absolute grasp of reality, one that would prove unassailable to doubt. Invoking Shakespeare's *Measure For Measure*, Peirce famously concludes "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities" [CP 5.317; EP 1:55]:

> The individual man, since his separate existence is manifested only by his ignorance and error, so far as he is anything apart from his fellows, and from what he and they are to be, is only a negation, this is man,
> proud man,
> Most ignorant of what he's most assured,
> His glassy essence.

Peirce's message in the cognition series is that we are but signifiers ("signs") dependent upon the further interpreting activity of others. Meaning outruns our frail capacities, and it is up to others to complete our cognition. Peirce has located an Absolute, understood as a "higher" unlimited standpoint that allows us to make sense of error as such. Rather than a highest-perspective offered by a transcendent God (as Berkeley and the earlier Royce would have it), it is centered instead (as the later Royce would come to see) in the ideal community of inquiry, an imminent community that of necessity is also a community of mutual interpretation. The Hegelian editor and readership of the JSP surely would have found affinity with this message. Harris claimed that "self-activity, the freedom of the soul, is made possible by the institutions of society, the family, civil society, State, and Church" (Harris 1893: Lecture V) and that "the individual can not exist as human apart from the institutions of society" (Harris 1898: 291). To one steeped in Hegel, Peirce's point was that being can be grasped only as a unity in diversity.

Peirce repeats this message that the conception of reality depends upon ultimate communal inquiry in his 1877-8 series in *Popular Science Monthly*. There, however, he registers some distance between his own logic of science and that of more orthodox readings of Hegel. Though he writes that the Hegelian philosophy "represents tolerably the science of that day" (CP 1.524), it may be faulted for insisting that the historical progression or unfolding of ideas completely follows its own internal dialectic, without ultimate check from another absolute: the external permanence we hope will serve to stabilize or fix our beliefs so that they may remain unassailable by doubt. Thus, Peirce complains that Hegel's total embrace of "thirdness" (symbolizing) loses sight of "firstness" (sensation) and, more importantly, "secondness" (resistance): "Had Hegel, instead of regarding the first two stages with his smile of contempt, held on to them as independent or distinct elements of the triune Reality, pragmaticists might have looked up to him as the great vindicator of their truth." (CP 5.436). As emphasized in his *Monist* series of the 1890s, Peirce worried that the Hegelian picture does insufficient justice to the contributions of individual inquirers by limiting the scope of freedom, spontaneity, or "real possibility" available in the evolution of science. In short, Peirce chides the Hegelians

(though not exactly Hegel) for not appreciating all the possible non-transcendental mechanisms for historical and conceptual change. As Darwin had emphasized, such change can be driven by the efforts or chance variations of individuals. The march of history, in this case the history of science, is not a necessary unfolding of conceptions following its own internal, dialectical logic, but is rather an immanent product of individuals collaboratively working together to cope with an all-too-intransigent world. Here Peirce is defending what again might be regarded as a peculiarly American, immanent form of Hegelianism that seeks to do justice to individual freedom. "My philosophy," he will come to claim, "resuscitates Hegel, though in a strange costume." (CP 1.42)

Dewey, of course, sees all of this. The development of American pragmatism, he stresses, is an attempt to bring philosophy, specifically the Hegelian philosophy, up to date with Darwin. Several commentators have thus noted that Dewey's philosophy is a systematic attempt to "biologize" Hegel (Menand 2001, 329; Garrison 2006). What Darwin adds, and Hegel overlooks, is that world history, like evolutionary change, can be, and in fact is, driven by chance individual variation, rather than the ineluctable unfolding of some internal transcendent force (or the dialectic). My point here is that Peirce was up to something remarkably similar. Though initially dismissive of Hegel's grasp of logic, his estimation of Hegel only seems to have grown over time, reaching a point where he claims that Hegel "in some respects" is "the greatest philosopher that ever lived." (CP 1.524)[5]

Moreover, Dewey picks up something else in Peirce's appeal to the unlimited community of inquiry. He sees that if this community is to do the work it should in bringing us ever closer to ideally stabilized (or warranted) belief (that is, Peircean truth), then it will have to be organized *democratically*. No individual, or group, should occupy a privileged position determining what it is we are to believe, lest their biases block the path of inquiry. An epistemic injustice against one of us is thus an epistemic injustice against all of us. Hence Dewey stresses over and over again that a great society will never attain the status of a great *community*, unless it values free inquiry, the free exchange of ideas, and the wide dissemination of the fruits of inquiry to all (Dewey 1927). In short, Dewey's commitment to democratic community grows out of the general account of collaborative inquiry that he shares not only with Peirce, but also Stallo, Harris, and other early American Hegelians. It is indeed our frailty and fallibilism – our glassy essence – that leads us to an absolute embrace of democratic ideals.

IV. The Critique of Individualistic Pragmatism: James and Tautomeres

Let's pause and take stock. So far, I've argued that the classical pragmatist values of community, democracy (self-governance), and epistemic humility (fallibilism) are tied closely together in what Peirce might have called a self-reinforcing cable. Moreover, considering their origins, these strands intertwine to form what can profitably be viewed as an unorthodox, and distinctly American, expression of Hegelianism. My narrative has emphasized the classical pragmatists Peirce and Dewey, as well as the American Hegelians Stallo and Harris. Royce clearly fits into this narrative arc as well (Nagl 2004, Kaag 2009). If so, then I would suggest we ought to brand both Dewey and Peirce, alongside Royce, as pragmatists subscribing to a robust, though immanent Absolute. Among the classical American figures, that would leave James alone as subscribing to a plain vanilla form of pragmatism. That would make a certain amount of sense. For James. "Hegelizing" meant adopting a metaphysics of necessitarian

[5] I lack world enough and time to share my thoughts about that fascinating transition here. I suspect that it involves none other than the aforementioned Johann Stallo, whom Peirce would characterize as "the brilliant Judge Stallo" in "Man's Glassy Essence" (1892). Part of Stallo's "brilliance" could well lie in how he gave a clue to Peirce about how best to understand the twin conceptions of "being" and "nothingness" in what will become his logical graphs, thereby corroborating Peirce's early claim in the *JSP* series that the best way of understanding such "pure" conceptions is to understand the functioning of their signs in a system of logic.

unity against libertarian diversity. He resolutely opposed any appeal to the Absolute, on the grounds that such appeal would only serve to reaffirm "The Block Universe" as against his preference for a more pluralist alternative: a universe of diverse entities freely jostling with and against one another. He was thus either unable or unwilling to see pragmatism – as I claim Peirce, Dewey, and Royce all eventually did – as a peculiarly libertarian spin upon German Idealism that is open-ended and imbued with possibility. It is a Hegelianism with an American twist, which makes special appeal to the notion of community.

Pratt notes that James' embrace of the pragmatic maxim qualifies him as a pragmatist in some bare, non-absolute sense. In so doing, he suggests that an absolute pragmatism would have to be committed to something *in addition* to such embrace. By contrast, I would argue that "absolute" pragmatism is better characterized by the *manner* in which the pragmatic method is adopted. James may rightly be counted an ordinary pragmatist in Pratt's sense, not just because he endorses the pragmatic maxim, but rather because he construes Peirce's pragmatic maxim in a subjectivist way that Peirce and other absolute pragmatists would disavow.

While it's no news that Peirce disapproved of James' understanding of the pragmatic maxim as too subjective, it still might prove useful to rehearse the objection. Let us focus upon a case where their disagreement shows up in stark relief. Recall that according to Peirce's pragmatic maxim:

> 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. (EP 1:132)

In "What Pragmatism Means" (James 1907), James illustrates his understanding of the pragmatic maxim by calling attention to the German chemist Ostvald and his discussion of the process of tautomerization. This is a pervasive process in organic chemistry in which a compound exhibits certain chemical instabilities. In James's time, there was a question of whether or not these instabilities are best described in terms of two distinct chemical substances which readily interconvert back and forth, or one substance that exhibits a variety of chemical properties. Ostvald claims that since there is no conceivable test to settle the dispute one way or another, the question is meaningless and moot. James speaks approvingly of Ostvald's instrumentalist resolution of this dispute as a successful application of the pragmatic maxim:

> The debate would never have begun if the combatants had asked themselves what particular experimental fact could have been made different by one or the other view being correct. For it would then have appeared that no difference of fact could possibly ensue. (James, 1907, 49)

The problem is that James (and Ostvald) were mistaken. We now know that tautomerization is better described as the interconversion of two distinct chemical substances, rather than an oscillation of one.[6] We know this, because we have devised tests to distinguish the two hypotheses, tests that were largely inconceivable (and possibly inaccessible) in Ostvald's time. James' claim that Ostvald has successfully applied the pragmatic maxim is marred because he limits the relevant sense of conceivability to Ostvald alone (or perhaps Ostvald and a handful of peers). If we had followed Ostvald's guidance on the matter, we would never have come to the more satisfactory resolution of the debate that we have. In other words, as a result of such a diminished sense of conceivability, James threatens to commit the gravest Peircean sin: that of blocking the road to inquiry.

In applying the pragmatic maxim to the Ostvald case, James falls precisely into the sort of Cartesian error that Peirce warns us against in his *JSP* articles. By limiting the range of conceivability to just a single person or handful of inquirers, James claims of individuals capacities that they simply don't have, at least not on their own. The space of

[6] If you must know, tautomerization typically involves the rearrangement of hydrogen atoms along different parts of a compound.

conceivability needs to extend out to the whole Peircean community of inquirers, a community, let me remind you, that is absolute in that it is "without definite limits, and capable of an indefinite increase of knowledge." In other words, it is a commitment to the unlimited capacity of the individual that marks James off both as a pragmatist of a non-absolutist stripe and a non-Hegelian.

V. A Performative Absolute?

As I've been painting the intellectual landscape, the great divide within pragmatism is between those like Peirce and Dewey, who insist that our individual frailties (or glassy essence) can only be overcome by a robust appeal to a broadly Hegelian notion of community, and those like James, whose suspicion of Hegelian totalitarianism leads them to a more individualistic understanding of the pragmatic maxim. Royce's mature thinking, of course, fits quite nicely into the former camp. A natural arc can be drawn from the Peircean community of collaborative inquirers to both Royce's beloved community of interpretation and also to the great community Dewey envisions arising out of great society. As I've suggested, this tradition originates in America's first attempts to adapt Hegel to its shores. Moreover, the examples of Stallo and '48er firebrands like Willich only go to show that this tradition would also seem particularly well-equipped to respond to Leonard Harris' challenge to make sense of a duty to insurrect, in the name of free inquiry and collaborative political participation for all.[7]

Among contemporary pragmatists, it is perhaps those in the so-called "neo-pragmatist" camp who see this most clearly. Whatever *bonafides* it can claim as an offshoot of the classical pragmatisms of Peirce, James, and Dewey, there can be no question that Brandom's theory of conceptual activity has roots in Hegel. *A Spirit of Trust* (Brandom 2019), after all, is a reading of the *Phenomenology,* and not a commentary on Peirce's *Illustrations of the Logic of Science*. Specifically, the relatively immanent or non-metaphysical interpretation of Hegel preferred by Brandom is a continuation of those who first tried to transplant Hegel onto American soil. Much the same could be claimed of Sellars. Though not self-identifying as much of a pragmatist, Sellars nevertheless was apparently "astonished" by what he found in Dewey and Peirce, and for good reason (Sellars 1980). Moreover, while not celebrated much for his contributions to normative ethics, Sellars also explicitly singles out Royce's account of loyalty as a precursor of his own theory of the source and force of ethical imperatives (Sellars 1977). Both these thinkers (and Rorty too, in his own way) continue the intellectual tradition I've been trying to trace here.

In "Absolute Pragmatism," however, Pratt sketches a different picture of how to understand an absolute within Royce's pragmatism. Rather than focusing on texts that develop Royce's notion of community, Pratt emphasizes "The Principles of Logic" (Royce 1913). There Royce labels his pragmatism "absolute," not by dint of an appeal to an interpretive community without definite limit, but rather by his subscription to a notion of truth that for him is "performatively" absolute.

> This position [Absolute pragmatism] differs from that of the pragmatists now most in vogue. There are *some* truths that are known to us *not* by virtue of the special successes which this or that hypothesis obtains in particular instances, but by virtue of the fact that *there are certain modes of activity… which we reinstate and verify, through the very act of attempting to presuppose that these modes of activity do not exist*. (Royce 1913, 122)

By "the pragmatists now most in vogue," Royce clearly has James and Schiller in mind. Pratt suggests that he might also have Dewey in mind as well (or at least the more "instrumentalist" Dewey minus his commitment to democracy).

[7] To be sure, this case is a bit harder to make for the St. Louis Hegelians, whose attitudes toward folk like John Brown were much less favorable than those of, say, Emerson and other abolitionist intellectuals. One might say that rather than resort to violence, they placed much more faith in strong civic institutions, especially those involving the press, the courts, and especially the schools.

As Royce clarifies, for him "an absolute truth is one where denial practically implies the assertion of the same truth." For instance, the attempt to deny a distinction between affirmation and denial thereby reinforces the very distinction at issue. Such commitments are absolute, in the sense that they may not be denied coherently, while still making sense of ourselves as rational creatures acting and interacting with each other in an occasionally refractory world.

> Thus, whosoever says there are no classes wherever in his world, inevitably classifies. Whoever asserts for him there are no real relations, and that, in particular the logical relations between affirmation and denial does not exist, so that for him yes means the same thing as no, -- on the one hand himself asserts and denies, and so makes a difference between yes and no; and, on the other hand, asserts the existence of a relational sameness even in denying the difference between yes and no.
>
> In brief, whatever actions are such, whatever types of actions are such, whatever results of activity, whatever conceptual constructions are such, that the very act of getting rid of them, or of thinking them away, logically implies their presence, are known to us indeed, both empirically and pragmatically (since we note their presence and learn of them through action); but they are also absolute. And any account which succeeds in telling what they are has absolute truth. (Royce 1913, pp. 122)

Pratt takes this sense of absolute to mark Royce's form of pragmatism off from the rest, and to provide the normative oomph to counter Leonard Harris' challenge for pragmatism to justify insurrection against necro-being.[8]

Nevertheless, I worry that this notion of an absolute is too slender to do the work that Pratt wants. If it is meant to support a duty to insurrect, I'm just not clear how it is supposed to go. While Royce might be describing what could be called an absolute pragmatic *commitment* to some truth, that may well fall short of a commitment to an absolute *truth*. The difficulty I find resembles the problem I described with James in the previous section. Observe the individualistic overtones haunting the quoted passage above: the qualification 'in his world' and the repeated use of 'for him'. The fact that I happen to find something undeniable does not mean that it isn't deniable altogether. While someone (perhaps Royce) might find it impossible *for him* to deny classes *in his world*, more nuanced conceptions of class and classification may allow one to deny classes without thereby classifying.[9] Similarly, a strategy for denying the ultimate reality of relations might just emerge through a richer, more nuanced understanding of what's at stake in these debates. There may indeed be performative absolutes, but it simply isn't clear that we will be able to identify just what they are, at least not individualistically. As with James, Royce appears here to be dismissing our glassy essence, thereby threatening to block the path of inquiry. Ironically, what goes missing in the foregoing passage is precisely that for which the mature Royce and other pragmatists I consider to be absolute are so justifiably famous – their faith in a never-ending interpretive community to help us complete our thoughts. And that, I would contend, is a faith of a kind worth fighting for.

VI. Conclusion

Permit me to close this piece with a remark contextualizing the passages Pratt relies on to develop his notion of Royce's absolute pragmatism. "The Principles of Logic" is a chapter of the English translation of Volume 1 of an *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* edited by Arnold Ruge and Wilhelm Windelband. Ruge, of course, was a revolutionary to the core. One of the famed "Young Hegelians," he had organized the left wing of the Frankfurt Parliament (the so-called "Professor's Parliament") during the failed revolutions of 1848-9, after which he

[8] I can't help but remark that the project of uncovering such truth (or "laws of rational will" [a phrase omitted in Pratt's quotation of this passage]) begins very much to look like the project Hegel undertakes in his *Science of Logic*. Moreover, insofar as these truths are to be discerned by looking specifically to *discursive* practices like assertion and denial, Royce's pragmatism also begins to take on the character of Robert Brandom's neo-pragmatism.

[9] Something very much like this happened with the move away from naïve set theory.

was driven into exile. As Ruge explains in the introduction to this work (written before his death in 1880, but not published until 1913), this volume was envisioned to provide a contemporary update to Hegel's *Encyclopedia* of the same name. Unlike the original, this *Encyclopedia* was explicitly designed to include a multitude of individual perspectives on the principles of logic, and not just a single perspective advanced by an individual subject:

> In the form of the new *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, however, this thought of unity, *a parte subjecti*, is torn up and rejected, and many philosophers are substituted for one; but the idea of unity, *a parte objecti* (i.e., the unity of Philosophy itself towards which all the philosophers are striving) is held fast. (Ruge 1913, 3)

Note how this passage calls Peirce to mind! It serves to underscore how closely aligned Peirce's account of inquiry was with the Hegelianism of his time.[10] The volume was animated by a cheerful hope that collaborative inquiry would eventually produce a stabilized unity of opinion, if carried along to an indefinite future. As Ruge explains:

> For, however we may understand the idea of Philosophy, whether as the comprehending of spirit by itself or as the comprehending of something alien to itself, there always lurks in the notion of Philosophy the idea of an unceasing striving toward a unity which in its totality and timelessness can never be grasped and reduced to a fixed formula by finite minds. But if this idea of unity and timelessness be involved in the very Notion of Philosophy, we can never hope to colligate results. We can only point to the multiplicity of points of departure and of paths which lead towards this unity. Hence the only object of our Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences is to give some idea of this vital striving towards the idea of unity, and by no means to record fixed results. We can speak here not of bringing together but of working together. *The Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* shows us philosophical thinkers in their efforts towards unity, working for the idea of unity. (Ruge 1913, 1-2)

Again, the affinity with Peirce is striking. But if that is the vision of the volume of the whole, it's less clear that we find it in Royce's particular contribution to the volume. There, in the claim that "an absolute truth is one where denial practically implies the assertion of the same truth," we find Royce attempting precisely to find some "fixed formula" by which a finite mind may come to grasp a timeless truth.

I draw attention to this connection between Peirce and Ruge to reinforce the overall theme of this piece. The pragmatism of Peirce is a peculiar, American form of Hegelianism. The relatively "non-metaphysical" reading of Hegel it advocates, in which the evolution of spirit is an imminent product of individual initiative, has roots going back to Stallo, the democratic supporters of the '48 revolutions, and the St. Louis Hegelians, before popping up again in Peirce, Dewey, the later Royce, Sellars, and Brandom. If that is so, then the spirit that animates pragmatism is of a kind with the world-moving spirit sung of by the western forces of the Grand Army of the Republic, as they brought the jubilee from Atlanta to the Sea. Pragmatism is thus birthed in a revolutionary cradle. As such, one can call upon it to further insurrectionist aims. That of course is not to say that any particular philosophical pragmatist, especially those ensconced in comfortable university positions, will ever heed such calls to action. I suspect that the disappointment Harris and Pratt register against plain vanilla pragmatism is more a reaction against those who espouse philosophical pragmatism, yet consistently fail to live up to its revolutionary spirit. That is a fair charge, which is why I have devoted so much of my time to early American intellectuals that worked *outside* the academy. But I also suspect that that is a charge that may be levelled against academics of virtually any persuasion. Universities are distinctive and somewhat precarious spaces (as we are being reminded of today). Though

[10] Indeed, it would have been fascinating to see what Peirce would have written, had he been tabbed to contribute to this volume as well. Randall Auxier has related to me that Royce's chapter in the volume came about after his participation in the 1908 World Congress of Philosophy in Heidelberg, during which he was annoyed by all the attention being paid to those "pragmatists now most in vogue." In addition to Royce, the other authors included in the volume were Wilhelm Windelband, Louis Couturat, Benedetto Croce, Federigo Enriques, and Nicolaj Losskij.

the source and inspiration of many revolutionary ideas, the university-temperament requires an institutional even-handedness and open-mindedness among its stewards that can work to distance thought from immediate action. Jane Addams could not have been the Jane Addams that we so admire, if she had been forced to confine her career in a university (and especially the University of Chicago!). In a sense, university life has an anti-pragmatic streak. If academic pragmatists are insufficiently insurrectionist for Pratt and Harris, it just might be the institution of the university, not pragmatism, that is the culprit.

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THE ABSOLUTE IS NOT "GOD"

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ABSTRACT: This paper addresses the question "what, for Royce, is Absolute pragmatism?" I break this down into a discussion of the idea of the Absolute, as related to pragmatism?" And "what is pragmatism, relative to Royce's Absolute?" I focus on a period in Royce's development from 1895 until 1906, in particular with his reworking of the idea of the Absolute and the idea of God during that period. The reason for this span is that these are the "Absolute pragmatism years." After 1907, "pragmatism" became whatever James said it was. Royce backed away from the term. Before 1907, and after Peirce introduced the term (1877), there was a lively discussion as to what pragmatism was, how the pragmatic maxim applied and to what. Royce was certainly a participant in this discussion, and an important contributor to the formation of the ideas. It is often repeated that James kidnapped "pragmatism" from Peirce, and Peirce objected. In no way did Royce concede to James any pre-eminence regarding the configuration of pragmatism until after 1907, when the cause became hopeless. Never did Royce and James come close to agreeing about what pragmatism is/was. But after 1907, with the publication and wide dissemination of James's *Pragmatism*, Royce pretty much gave up the struggle for the meaning of the word. I will examine this period in part to show that James's horror of the Absolute and his ambivalence about God are in surprising ways mirror images (rather than accurate descriptions) of what Royce was doing with pragmatism. This effort supplements Scott Pratt's resuscitation of Absolute pragmatism by adding some historical nuance that may help readers connect Pratt's recommendations with Royce. I also counterbalance some of what Kevin Harrelson says about the pro-empire, new Zionist Royce. I do not say that Royce's views are unproblematic, but I do not think some eschatological Kingdom of Heaven is what Absolute pragmatism seeks. Arguing that the Absolute is not "God," even if it is God (in a new sense) removes concern about a new Zion and a Christian empire.

Keywords: Royce, Absolute, God, pragmatism, theology

Introduction

The Augustus Graham Lectures (January-March, 1896) were delivered during a crucial moment both in Royce's own intellectual development and at a turning point in the history of American Philosophy.[1] These five lectures remain to us substantially complete but have not attracted much scholarly attention before now. One part of these lectures, the final sections of the fifth lecture, was published in 1897 under the title "The Problem of Job,"[2] but the rest remained unpublished and has been very little studied. "The Problem of Job" has attracted quite a bit of attention, for several reasons. It is one of the earliest and most poignant expressions of what came to be called "theistic finitism," which is the idea that God is limited in some way, usually with regard to power, and thus *cannot* prevent the evil in the world –not just that God does not do it for the sake of freedom, but rather cannot prevent moral or natural evil. Such a God suffers with us and sustains the order and value of the universe, in part through that suffering. Usually finitists argue that God eventually overcomes the evil to the extent it can be surpassed.[3] This view gives up on the traditional conception of God, and thus isn't really a theodicy. It is an accommodation to the modern temper, in the sense that the traditional God of religion is no longer believable to people living in an age of science. In 1906 in his Baltimore Lectures, which were published in 1919 as *Lectures on Modern Idealism*,[4] Royce explains what he means by "Absolute pragmatism," and responds to the inadequacy of other pragmatist proposals, especially the views of James. These "bookends" of 1896 and 1906 are the best material for evaluating the historical case.

God and the Absolute

Important for our purposes is that from 1896 forward, this limited being is "God" for Royce. I place the term in

[1] The Graham Lectures are available online at https://csub.app.box.com/s/svtr6mdq0qv5594l8ufz61p9c744ymi6, accessed October 4, 2025. All citations are from this site.
[2] Royce, "The Problem of Job," The New World, vol. 6 (1897) pp. 261-281. This is easily accessible here: https://csub.app.box.com/s/y78ak7tkt4lr482kjmzrmirdltdbhpd3, accessed October 4, 2025.
[3] A classic example of two theistic finitists arguing dialectically about how this position should be filled out is found in *God, Process, and Persons: The Philosophical Correspondence of Charles Hartshorne and Edgar Sheffield Brightman, 1922-1945*, eds. R.E. Auxier and M.Y. Davies (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2000).
[4] Josiah Royce, *Lectures on Modern Idealism*, ed. Jacob Loewenberg (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1919).

scare quotes because it denotes the historical, Western conception of God, but revised to suit the *theological* rather than philosophical needs of human beings who inhabit a greatly changed world. The traditional God, who would have been the same as the Absolute, is less and less believable to the educated people of 1896. Thus, we now have "God," who is a personal being, a companion, a paraclete, a fellow sufferer who understands more than we do. This deity is believable but limited in power. This is the "God" we can appeal to, and who, for example, helps us transform our grief into sorrow.[5]

A second reason that "The Problem of Job" attracted attention is due to its seeming departure from Royce's doctrine of the Absolute. Most readers of Royce's two philosophy books prior to 1896 had concluded that Royce was an absolutist in about the same sense as Hegel or Bradley, and that Royce's Absolute was supposed to be God, as in the God of religion.[6] If this God was now *finite* in some important sense, that would be a surprise to many, and difficult to reconcile with the Absolute God they associated with Royce. Royce argued in 1906 (The Baltimore Lectures) that the change in how the West viewed God started with Kant and gradually spread to the educated public. God became a philosophical idea, with Kant, and the personal being of traditional Western religion went into retreat.[7]

Royce was still forming his understanding of how Kant's idea of God had changed everything in 1896. He had published a lengthy and popular book about the development of idealism in 1892 *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy* [SMP],[8] but that book turned out to be less specific about the idea of God than was needed by those who wondered what would become of God in their time (and beyond). Royce had traveled back home to Berkeley in 1895 and was there confronted with a public debate for which he was not really prepared. He hadn't knowingly signed on for such a show, but he carried through reluctantly. Two prominent philosophers, along with Royce's own former mentor, challenged his various "doctrines" about God. The most important challenge, by George Holmes Howison, was that Royce's absolutism destroyed the place of the individual in the cosmos and in the community. It had evidently never occurred to Royce that his doctrine of the Absolute could be read that way, since in his own mind he had never advocated the kind of absolutism that could have that effect.[9]

This spurred an evolution in Royce's thinking[10] which culminated in *The World and the Individual*, his Gifford Lectures (1899, 1900), in which his aim was to make out

[5] The poignant argument of the chapter entitled "The Religious Mission of Sorrow" (1912) suggests that grief and sorrow are two different ways of seeing the tragedies of the world. The former wishes the world away so that the grief will abate; the second, the sorrow, embraces the world as it is and idealizes the shared experiences we have now lost, such that we may still find value and even joy in them. The critical edition of this book is here: https://hrc.csub.edu/josiah-royce-edition/edition-volumes/ accessed October 4, 2025. It is easy to see that this "God" is not coming in an apocalyptic storm to judge the world or establish a millennial reign. His entire theological relation to us is different from traditional Western religions.

[6] Regarding this opinion, most of these readers followed the poorly informed opinion of William James, who lumped together a lot of different views he didn't like. His slipshod summary of absolutism is well summarized by Frank Oppenheim in *Reverence for the Relations of Life: Re-imagining Pragmatism via Josiah Royce's Interactions with Peirce, James, and Dewey* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), pp. 109-111. The current paper may be taken as a supplement to Oppenheim's effort at re-imagining pragmatism from Royce's point of view, embracing his whole account and adding to it.

[7] The Baltimore Lectures (1906) are accessible here, as edited and later published (1919): https://csub.app.box.com/s/1jkw1vudrfpzv6ovt4mgxc8kv66d7i2n, accessed October 4, 2025. It is important to remember that these lectures date to the year before James published *Pragmatism* (1907).

[8] This book is *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy*, which may be found here: https://csub.app.box.com/s/xaapr2slu5trxm0nvxiotpoyzka1nnnz, accessed October 4, 2025.

[9] Quite a lot has been written about this debate over the decades. My own summary, with notes to other interpretations, is in my book *Time, Will, and Purpose: Living Ideas from the Philosophy of Josiah Royce* (Chicago: Open Court, 2013), ch. 3. Hereafter cited as "TWP."

[10] In Oppenheim's interpretation of the genesis of Royce's thought, this moment is associated with Royce's "second maximal insight" into the relation of God and the world. This interpretation is offered in and then expanded in numerous writings. The most perspicacious summary I have found, for the curious reader is in Oppenheim's short book, *Royce's Voyage Down Under: A Journey of the Mind* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1980), pp. ix-xviii. I do not wholly subscribe to this interpretation of the development of Royce's thought, as three maximal insights, with lesser insights along the way. There is no denying its general accuracy of the framework, especially since it follows closely (too closely in my opinion) Royce's own narratives about himself. I think Oppenheim neglects continuities that make the "maximal insights" seem more transformational than the really were. I find evidence of all these "maximal insights" much earlier in Royce's published and unpublished writ-

the place of the individual in an idealistic philosophy. The published version of his 1895 Berkeley lecture[11] was the public beginning of this development, and indeed, whole pages were torn out of a copy of that publication and pasted into the Graham Lectures the next year. But Royce's host in Berkeley, Howison, had proposed publishing all of the lectures given in 1895, together as a volume. Royce, being somewhat unhappy about the proceedings, agreed only if he could add a "Supplementary Essay" to the published proceedings, clarifying his position. Howison agreed. Royce, realizing he had a lot of work to do on the issue of "individuals," went back through the whole history of philosophy tracing down the idea. He discovered that not much had been done with the idea, in metaphysics and logic, since the major debates of the High Middle Ages. Royce decided it was time to trace the idea from that time to his own time, and that is what he does in the first part of the lengthy Supplementary Essay, published in 1897 in the volume entitled *The Conception of God*.[12]

Thus in 1896, when the Graham Lectures were presented, Royce was in the midst of the research that yielded his view of God in *The Conception of God*. Howison (mis)used his position as editor to comment in the notes on various flaws in the *new* doctrine –not something we would normally countenance today. Royce read these notes and was untroubled by them. Ultimately Royce decided to "move on," as it were. By 1897, he had already staked out the difference between "God" (of religion and theology) and God as the philosophical Absolute. That epistolary exchange with Howison was occurring while the Graham Lectures were being drafted and delivered.[13]

It comes to this: at one level, historically speaking, we need to take very seriously what Royce says about God and the Absolute in the Graham Lectures, because he was exploring possible views, and we can see what he is doing, as well as imaginatively expand on paths not quite taken. In another sense we need to keep in mind that since the ideas were in transition, their mature forms are foreshadowed in 1896 but not asserted as settled doctrine.[14] They were still in transition in *The World and the Individual* (1899, 1901 [WI 1 & 2]), as Oppenheim argued (see below). The structure of WI1 mirrors the structure of the Graham Lectures (GL). Both begin with an exposition of three "historical" conceptions, but in GL, it is historical conceptions of God, versions of theism, while in WI1, it is historical conceptions of Being. The germ of the main dialectical arguments in WI1 are found in GL. Grasping this helps us understand the difference between the philosophical and the religious projects Royce was undertaking. They are closely related, but they are not the same.

Royce was reluctant to accept the invitation to provide the Graham Lectures because they were defined as concerning "The Power, Wisdom, and Goodness of God as Manifested in His Works." Royce did not want to talk about this kind of God, but he did it anyway.[15] It was an opportunity to modify or correct the assumption that Royce's "God" was more or less interchangeable with his idea of the Absolute, which it isn't. In a way, the Absolute *is* God (philosophically), but in a way it definitely isn't God, it's "God." This inaccurate and widely held assump-

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ings. I have argued for greater continuity in TWP. I do not dispute Oppenheim's facts, only his emphasis of some over others and the way that emphasis leads to an overly easy abbreviation of interpretation that scholars have substituted for close study of the original sources.

[11] This was just a pamphlet put out by the Philosophy Student Union of the University of California (Berkeley) in 1895, following the so-called debate. It is available here: https://csub.app.box.com/s/51f86132imfacxcc0mlq4r8r0mfljwdf, accessed October 4, 2025.

[12] The full text is available here: https://csub.app.box.com/s/kok2atur9b02i01ol4eycwt06mc44jok, accessed October 4, 2025.

[13] I do not know whether Howison's letters survive, but Royce's letters make clear enough where matters stand. See *The Letters of Josiah Royce*, ed. John Clendenning (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), letters to Howison 1895-1897 in that volume pp. 335-361.

[14] In two separate (as yet unpublished) studies I have focused on the scope and meaning of "theistic finitism" in Royce's philosophy, first, "Royce, Oppenheim, and Theistic Finitism," a keynote address read at the annual meeting of the Josiah Royce Society, Xavier University, Cincinnati, OH, April 3-6, 2014; second, "Royce's Philosophical Theology and Theistic Finitism," an invited public lecture for the Katholische Akademie in Berlin, e.V., Berlin, Germany, December 16, 2021 (presented F2F and online), with responses by Christoph Seibert and Christian Polke.

[15] See John Kaag, "The Place of 'The Problem of Job' in the Philosophy of Josiah Royce," *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, 33:1 (2012): p. 36.

tion that the Absolute *is* God gave a religious sheen to the philosophical Absolute, and it has driven away many philosophers who want no God, and *therefore* no Absolute.

But Royce's Absolute is not "God," even if he sometimes used the word *God* to describe it (from a theistic point of view) along the way (which happened less and less as his vocabulary was refined). Never did Royce say or assert that one should take his arguments as anything except a case for the necessary hypothesis of the Absolute, *in philosophy*, as reason to *believe in* the "God" *of religion* –the historical object of faith for various religious traditions. Royce himself did not believe in the "God" but he understood that many fine people do. He was no enemy of the idea or those who believed it. As he points out in 1896, some of those religious traditions had a God closer to the Absolute, some further from it, but no religious tradition had a God that *was* the Absolute *of philosophy*. He explains in 1892 in SMP and again in 1906 that when God became the Absolute, after Kant, the God of theology was in trouble, because the Absolute is impersonal and the God of theism *cannot be* impersonal. By 1906, Royce sees this as the central tension of post-Kantian idealism.

Oppenheim has, fortunately, provided both a diachronic and a synchronic characterization of the Absolute in Royce. In terms of the development of this idea, Oppenheim says that this idea "traced a strikingly more diversified path [than James understood] in his [Royce's] intellectual development concerning the Absolute." (Oppenheim, *Reverence*, p. 110.) It is worth quoting Oppenheim at length, with edits: Beginning as a "decidedly skeptical critical empiricist," Royce found "a 'certain internal absoluteness' in the mental laws of Kant's system," but with reservations about the immutability of the categories. So the absolute begins as an *adjective* for Royce, modifying experience(s), and we will see that it retains this role to the end of his life. Next was an analysis of the possibility of "human errors" in *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy* (1885 [RAP]) which "led him to his insight about the truth of an All-knower, an Absolute." (Oppenheim, *Reverence*, p. 110) This insight is what Oppenheim calls Royce's "first maximal insight," in his developmental narrative of three maximal insights. This one was also called Royce's "ethico-religious insight" and has been examined by a number of scholars.[16] This is the analysis that led Howison and others to question whether the individual was real for Royce.

Oppenheim continues, "by 1889, he had come to counterbalance this knowing side of the Absolute with its experiential and volitional sides." (ibid.) Here we find that the Absolute does more than know the answers when we make errors, but acts and wills in relation to those, and the idea of error becomes more a special case of the "fragmentariness" of experience. Royce had made this shift before the debate of 1895, which is one reason he complained that Howison and his guests were arguing with views that were out of date. Fragmentariness was the ontological fact of human experience, and error was only its epistemological sign. This really had to be Royce's view all along, but readers misunderstood his argument, which was intended to be "psychological" in his (expansive) sense of that term –the dialectic of belief and doubt, a sense of psychology he took from Peirce, and quite in contrast to James's way of using the word. Royce is following closely what Peirce says about doubt in the series of articles known as the *Illustrations of the Logic of Science*.[17] Thus, for Royce to be taken as having offered a *metaphysics* of the Absolute in RAP surprised him, since he developed that ontology later, after RAP but in SMP.[18]

Then Oppenheim says that "in 1896, his "second maximal insight" was into the socially constituted individual as an object of exclusive interest. Accordingly, Royce presented the Absolute as the most concrete of

[16] See Dwayne Tunstall's *Yes, but Not Quite: Encountering Josiah Royce's Ethico-religious Insight* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006).
[17] This series of articles has been edited in light of its complex history by Cornelis De Waal, *Illustrations of the Logic of Science* (Chicago: Open Court, 2014).
[18] See Gary L. Cesarz, "A World of Difference: The Royce-Howison Debate on the Conception of God," in *The Personalist Forum*, 15:1 (spring 1999), 84–128.

individuals, the Individual of individuals, with the finite individuals depending for their reality upon a relation to the Absolute." (Oppenheim, pp. 110-111) This is the fellow-sufferer of "The Problem of Job," what I am calling "God." Significantly, "his seemingly static, All-knowing, Absolute Judge of 1885 had now become a processing reality that aimed at ever fuller perfection." (ibid.) I would disagree with this, except that Oppenheim says "seeming," since he knows that Royce never held the static view. Royce's Absolute had been a process all along. It was James who convinced gullible people of a poor interpretation of what Royce was saying, as Oppenheim richly documents.

In the Gifford Lectures, the finite experience is "but a fragment of an absolutely organized whole of experience, at once universal and individual called the Absolute." (ibid., Oppenheim is summarizing Clendenning's biography of Royce here,[19] p. 239) But from there Oppenheim skips to the 1908 version of the Absolute, which is "the universal conscious experience," and "the world spirit," and "the eternally true and constantly loyal Will of the universe with which all finite loyalists strive to conform their series of temporal deeds." (ibid.). Elsewhere I have given a general interpretation of how these versions of the Absolute stand, overall, at three levels: metaphysical, phenomenological, and psychological.[20] I read Royce's philosophy as more continuous than Oppenheim allows, and I do not see these developments as changes in his view so much as an unfolding and filling out of a view he always held. My analysis is, I think, more granular than Oppenheim's, but I do rely on his excellent and insightful work.

Much of what I am interested in developing here comes between the 1901 Absolute and the 1908 Absolute. After 1908, Oppenheim's narrative points out that Royce rarely spoke of the Absolute in the major works of 1912 (SRE) and 1913 (PoC). In 1912 he was emphasizing the irrevocability of human deeds as an experience *of* the Absolute, while the interpreter Spirit has a wider view than we have. By 1913, the term Absolute nearly disappeared from *The Problem of Christianity* (only three occurrences) although my understanding of why this happened seems to differ from Oppenheim's. He attributes this to Royce "Peircean insight" in which the "Universal Community of Interpretation" is doing the same work as the Absolute did earlier.

I do not concur with Oppenheim's interpretation here. I agree that it looks like God as the Absolute "goes away" in 1912, but only in the sense that "God" is no longer needed. "God" wasn't ever really needed by Royce. "God" was always a theological object of faith, and a faith he did not have from about the age of 11. That was his mother's "God," which he respected but did not share. Royce had encountered Spinoza at around that time, and even though he later cringed to think he had believed he *understood* Spinoza at that tender age, he left "God" behind and never felt it as a loss. He just wasn't very inclined to church, much to his mother's disappointment. But I think the difference between theology, which leaves "God" intact (as in the Graham lectures and "The Problem of Job"), is being confused with the destiny of the Absolute, which is still in play in 1912-1913, and indeed is defended in the 1915 *Metaphysics*, and distinguished from the "God" of religion.[21]

Oppenheim says Royce "avoided the term 'Absolute' using instead terms like 'Universal Community of Interpretation' and 'Interpreter Spirit' and calling the entire world 'the process and life of the Spirit and of the Community.'" (Oppenheim, p. 111). I don't regard the terminology in PoC to be indicative of a change in Royce's view,

[19] John Clendenning, *The Life and Thought of Josiah Royce,* 2nd ed. (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1999).
[20] See TWP, chs. 5-6.

[21] Josiah Royce, *Metaphysics: His Philosophy 9 Course of 1915–1916, as Stenographically Recorded by Ralph W. Brown and Complemented by Notes from Byron F. Underwood*, eds. William Ernest Hocking, Richard Hocking, and Frank M. Oppenheim (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998). Esp. pp. 49, 58, 192. It is not always clear in these lectures when Royce is speaking for his own view and when he is summarizing someone else's view. Yet, the entirety of the course makes it clear that the Absolute is still a living idea for Royce.

and I think that older usage shows up as endorsed in his 1915 lectures. The synchronic schema Oppenheim gives distinguishing the logical, metaphysical, and psychological aspects of the Absolute is something I have replaced with my own slightly different account in *Time, Will, and Purpose*, chapters five and six. But my task here is not just the genealogy of the Absolute, it is its relation to "pragmatism," and that is complicated by the development of pragmatism itself. I must therefore add some things about the Absolute that bear on pragmatism.

It might be more accurate simply to say that God or the Absolute isn't what "he" used to be, and Royce was delivering the news in 1892, and certainly by 1896. He had, after all, been studying Nietzsche very closely and was aware that God was either dead or soon would be. So it isn't just that Royce was personally past this older "God," it is something much bigger. In this forecast, we really have to see Royce as being correct, and well ahead of his time.[22] Royce says:

> For my part, I think that such writers [Nietzsche, Browning, Walt Whitman, Tolstoi] and their works should be treated with the same freedom which they themselves exemplify. They worship nobody, and stand for themselves. Let us follow their example, so far as they themselves are concerned. . . it is folly not to recognize how much such people and such work may mean to us. (LMI p. 141)

This is hardly the view of an apocalyptic apostle of the New Zion. Yet, my point is not just about the difference between God and the Absolute. It is about pragmatism and the Absolute. And so we must tell a different story, this time involving the destiny of the idea of pragmatism in Royce's thought.

Delivering the news that the "God" of religion, who had been interchangeable with the Absolute, was basically dead would have been unwelcome among the religiously devout of Brooklyn. Royce knew that. It was not as in the case of the madman who delivers the news and then has to say he has come too early. Royce had in mind a more nuanced approach –to give the news on a spoonful of, if not sugar, then something to moderate the bitterness. The Absolute is what is left to us in the future, and "God" is for those who can't handle the Absolute. Royce's message was that since Kant, God could not be in the future what the traditional religions had tried to promulgate. A different age had arrived and, to use the language of the mocking crowd in *The Gay Science*, "God" had immigrated –to idealistic philosophy. The "God" of religion would not be believable to the people of the dawning age –because that "God" was not pragmatic. God, after Kant, was now the Absolute of philosophy precisely because the *philosophers* could not accept Kant's finitism, for logical, epistemological, ontological, and psychological reasons. They needed a new God, one belonging to pragmatism –so Royce believed.

Royce's solution? It was different from Hegel and Schelling and Bradley, who, in very different ways, balanced God's transcendence and immanence by emphasizing the latter. All were apologists of mediation as the main source of human finitude. Royce certainly accepted mediation, in that we have no immediate experience of the Absolute, but we do *experience* the Absolute, in an incomplete or fragmentary way. The meaning of that experience, the irrevocability of the deed, could be worked out philosophically. Nietzsche and Whitman and Browning and Tolstoi helped. Yet, regarding the balance struck in 19th century idealism between an impersonal Absolute and a personal deity, the contemporary person must favor the Absolute, Royce thought. He basically instructed the Brooklyn audience in the new path.

Pragmatism and the Absolute

It was important to Royce not only that we think about the Absolute in a clear and defensible way, but that we

[22] Royce took a lot from Nietzsche, but not his individualism. He says: "The well-known doctrine of Nietzsche is that of an individual equally merciless to himself and to others. It is a restlessly intolerant and muscular individualism which despises its own sufferings , an idealism without any ideal world of truth, a religion without a faith, a martyrdom without prospect of a paradise." (LMI p. 68)

have some practical experience that points to that reality. This "pointing" has a semiotic and a logical structure, and these structures are not the same. The semiotic structure has a triadic character, an iconic, an indexical, and a symbolic aspect, and one does not get *any* of these, as meaning, without *all* of them. The necessity accompanying this experience of meaning is of the internal and external meaning of ideas, and how they are linked. In short, the reality of the parts of the meaning (whether iconic, indexical, or symbolic) depend on a complete meaning which is not accessible to finite experience. We get it by conception, not perception. To consider any part of the meaning is the presuppose the whole meaning. The logical structure has to do with how logical individuals imply the complete individual, that is, the Absolute. The semiotic structure is a phenomenological level (in Peirce's sense of that term), while the logical structure is a metaphysical issue. I have discussed all of this in detail elsewhere.[23]

Thus, Royce had a different idea about the relationship between God and the Absolute, experiential and practical. That issue was purely philosophical, i.e., not something we can settle in experience itself –we must *think* about our experience. That is very much the topic of the Graham Lectures. There has been much written about the "God of philosophy" as distinct from the "God of religion.," ever since Descartes. In Royce we have a clear case of these being quite different, but since very few have studied Royce's *theology*, which is worked out in detail only in the Graham Lectures, very few understand that he has a "doctrine" of the "God" of traditional religion (a position about that idea), and it is quite different from the Absolute, as I have argued. Pragmatism, as Royce understood it, is the difference. Let us look at some specifics in the Graham Lectures, and then at some in the Baltimore Lectures.

As I mentioned. Royce spends the first part of the Graham Lectures setting out three traditional religious conceptions of God, much as he does with the historical conceptions of Being (to which these ideas about God are analogous). He endorses none, of course, including the tendency to see God as Absolute, the culmination of which he finds in what he calls the Hindoo mystical union with the One.

From there he moves on to the "philosophical conceptions of God," found in idealism. Here he says:

> Common to the various forms of Idealism is the further undertaking to define the Absolute in spiritual terms, and to insist upon the unity of its life as analogous to the unity which we observe in our own inner life. Beyond this point, indeed, the modern philosophical idealists have widely diverged, both as to method of procedure and as to result,—some, like our contemporary Von Hartmann, defining the Absolute as an Unconscious Spirit, others laying stress, as I myself shall try to do in later lectures of this course, [65] upon the notion of the Absolute Spirit as a conscious as well as a rational Self—a Person in the highest sense of that word. (GL 1, p. 12)

Note that the unity of the life of the Absolute is analogous to the unity we "observe" in our own life. I would add "such as it is." This is not the God of religion. Since Kant, the conception of God has "taken a new turn." Royce aims to reclaim the Personhood of God for *philosophy.* His idea of person, personhood, and personality will be philosophical, not religious. It is a point that connects him with James, who was also a philosophical personalist, but James never understood that Royce's Absolute is supposed to be a Person. Personal idealism, which Royce shared with Howison, Borden Parker Bowne, and many other philosophical idealists of his time, was, between 1896 and 1906, not a position opposed to or opposed by pragmatism.[24] Royce continues:

> Modern [66a] Idealism has a conception of God which once more explicitly regards him as the one ultimately real being, and which does so, not, in the way of the ancient mystics, who trusted merely to intuitions, but in full view of the destructively

[23] See my *Time, Will, and Purpose*, chs. 5-6. For a detailed analysis of the actual logic, see my "Complex Negation, Necessity, and Logical Magic," in *The Relevance of Royce*, eds. Kelly A. Parker and Jason M. Bell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), pp. 89-131 (ch. 6).

[24] I have explained this point in great detail in chapters 4 and 7 of TWP.

> critical Agnosticism of Kant, with a keen appreciation of the limitations of human knowledge, and with an earnest effort to appeal to the verdict of the dispassionate reason. (GL 1, p. 13)

This is pragmatism, as Royce understood it. The fallibilism, that there is nothing "ultimate" in the human domain, and the rejection of agnosticism (the position associated at that time with Herbert Spencer) are key indicators. And he adds, "Idealism, has founded its positive theses upon the very basis which Kant's Agnosticism has laid." (GL 1, p. 13)

There is no avoiding this, however:

> [T]he theses of the of these lectures will be: That God is the Absolute Spirit, and as such the one Reality; That despite this fact, yes, [70] even because of this fact, Ethical Monotheism is a true doctrine; That although Aristotle's conception of God was, as far as it went, a true conception, our modern notions of nature will not permit us to use Aristotle's arguments; and, *in fine*, to sum up all in one statement, That God is the only reality, but that his revelation to us is the moral, not the natural order. For the natural order, as we men see it, is a show, a hint, an anticipation of a hidden reality whose foundation we can indeed surmise, as I shall try to show you, though we cannot attain thereto. But in the moral world, as we shall see reason to maintain, God and man, as it were, touch hands. Here then we shall reach the manifestation of God in his, and, if we choose, in our works. (GL 1, pp. 13-14)

Royce sees no reason why this sort of moral (personal) idealism should be inconsistent with pragmatism, and he complains on numerous occasions, sometimes naming James, sometimes not, that some of the pragmatists are developing an allergy to God and the Absolute, and even to idealism. Remembering that Royce's understanding of pragmatism comes directly from Peirce, whom he rightly takes to be a personal idealist, this aversion surprises Royce. Peirce, after all, is the source and authority here. Royce was in regular communication with Peirce from the summer of 1892 onward, and likely would have been aware of his objections to what James was making f pragmatism. There was at this time no reason to think James would prevail and wrest control of the term and the movement from others.

Later in the Graham Lectures, Royce says:

> [O]ur social experience of one another gives us the only suggestion as to how these two contrasting but inseparable aspects of reality [the natural and the moral] can be reconciled. Your experience is not present to me. To me your experience is remote, merely possible, merely ideal. But for you your experience is given, is a fact, is present. Well, what is now suggested to us is the notion that perhaps that system of organized possible experience, so remote from us and from even our science, has its reality in so far as it is not merely possible experience, but is present to some divine point of view, is a given as well as a merely possible system of experience. (GL 2, p. 43)

This move to "experience" is the solution to the tension in idealism between the impersonal Absolute of Bradley, Hegel, and their like, and the personal Absolute of Royce. The move to "experience" is also an indicator of Royce's pragmatism.[25] One of the most important point is that, from our finite point of view, the Absolute experience must be treated as possible experience, a term which is the key to his argument about the Absolute in GL. He is employing the idea of possibility as John Stuart Mill does –the "permanent possibilities of experience." (GL 2, p. 32-33) Recall that James says later in the dedication of the 1907 book that he fancies Mill as the leader of the pragmatists. It was surely a topic of conversation between Royce and James. Royce later identifies this higher "possible experience" as "'the experience or the verdict of science', as distinct from the actual experience of any one mortal." (GL 2, pp. 39-40) In short, this is Peirce's idea of truth as agreed to by an ideally situated community of inquirers in the infinitely distant future. The Absolute has this experience, for Royce. It is pragmatism. Even Dewey eventually embraces this definition.

I end this examination of GL with this passage:

> All our actual sensory experience comes in passing moments, and is fragmentary. Our science, wherever it has taken any form, contrasts with this this immediate fragmentariness of our experience the assertion of a world of phenomenal truth, which is first of all characterized by the fact that for us it is a conceptual world, and not a world directly experienced by any one of us.

[25] I have argued this point in detail in TWP, chapter 4.

> Yet this ideal world is not an arbitrary world. It is linked to our actual experience by the fact that its conceptions are accounts, as exact as may be, of systems of possible experience, whose contents would be presented, in a certain form or order, to beings whom we conceive as including our fragmentary moments in some sort of definite unity of experience. That these scientific accounts of this world of organized experience are true, at least in a measure, we are said to vary [sic] insofar as we first predict that, if they are true, certain other fragmentary phenomena will get presented under certain definable conditions, and insofar as, secondly, we successfully fulfill such predictions. (GL 2, pp. 40b-40c[26])

> Anyone can see here that the community of inquiry, the pragmatic maxim, and the truth as the consequences of the way we inquire, are all packed into this passage. But the important point is that the Absolute the fulfilled experience, here is an all-inclusive community of inquiry. Most important is that the ideal unity of our own experience is grounded in the Absolute, and our actual experience, when we practice the method of science, reaches toward that ground. There is nothing for a pragmatist to fear, here, unless the community of inquiry cannot be idealized in order to account for the conceptual character of scientific knowledge. If there is an eschatology in Royce's philosophy, this is it. Harrelson's worries about a few scattered remarks are misplaced.

The result of this examination is that in GL, Royce defended a position that he took to be pragmatism. But let us now turn to the Baltimore Lectures so that we can see how Royce sees his view relative to the roiling discussion of pragmatism that is breaking loose in 1906. This is a good moment for Royce to be addressing both absolutism and pragmatism. His own views about the individual are fully formed here, having moved through his important *Outlines of Psychology* (1904), in which he sorts out the various ideas about the self and its relation to the individual, and this analysis supplements his logical-metaphysical doctrine from *The Conception of God* and *The World and the Individual*. It is also a good moment because James has not yet published *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, which will dominate all subsequent discussions of the term. Lovejoy's "The Thirteen Pragmatisms" of 1908, would seal the arguments into their sub and sub-sub domains forever.[27]

The word "pragmatism" was on everyone's lips in 1906, but its interpretation was still wide open. Most importantly, the relation of "pragmatism" to the problem of truth was also still an open discussion. That is the very issue that led Scott Pratt to suggest that we should take a new look at Absolute pragmatism, since we have a crippling problem with truth in the present. It would seem that finding some really solid ground upon which to defend truth, and to defend ethics, is desperately needed. That might be found in Royce's ideas. I think it is, as must be obvious to any reader by now.

Beyond what has already been described, what is the character of this Absolute pragmatism? Royce is explicit. The Baltimore lectures include several significant arguments about pragmatism which were not taken up in the wider discussion. By the time these ideas were published in 1919, the pragmatism ship had sailed. But for us there is sufficient time and distance to look again. After discussing the heroic effort of the German idealists to reconcile the "paradox that the self was the center of the universe, while the Absolute was nevertheless impersonal," (LMI, p.70), Royce says:

> Our idealists were, one and all, in a very genuine sense what people now call pragmatists. They were, to be sure, absolutists; and nowadays absolutism is supposed to be peculiarly abhorrent to pragmatists. . . . What I now emphasize is that all these thinkers make much of the relation of truth to action, to practice, to the will. Nothing is true, for them, unless therein the sense, the purpose, the meaning of some active process is carried out, expressed, accomplished. Truth is not, for these post-Kantian idealists something dead

[26] These passages are pasted into GL from the 1895 edition of *The Conception of God*, pp. 21-22. Thus, the view predates GL, but is also repeated in the 1897 edition of CG. It is not a passing phase of Royce's pragmatism, it is the heart of it.

[27] Arthur O. Lovejoy, "The Thirteen Pragmatisms," *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Methods*, 5:1 (January 2, 1908), pp. 5-12; 5:2 (January 16, 1908), pp. 29-39. Lovejoy does not mention Royce, but does point out that personal idealism is a version of pragmatism, referencing F.C.S. Schiller. The fact that Royce was not mentioned in 1908 is surprising, in the context, but it probably contributed to the general feeling that he wasn't a pragmatist. Most of the effort is expended on showing how hopeless James's view is.

> and settled apart from action. It is a construction, a process, an activity, a creation, an attainment. *Im Anfang war die That*. (LMI pp. 85-86)

The final lines in German are those written by Goethe's character Faust, and no sooner has he written them than Mephistopheles appears in the form of a large black dog. To say "In the beginning is the act" is both what idealism and pragmatism have in common, but pragmatism has always been weak on the finality, the irrevocability of the act. The human experience of the Absolute, insofar as we experience the Absolute, resides in the irrevocability of the act, for Royce. Any pragmatist who does not believe in the Absolute should perform the following experiment: (1) do something; (2) now make the world such that it has never been done. Even God cannot achieve this, for even if God could arrange the world such that the act never happened, God could not arrange the divine internal life so as to forget having made those changes. It goes without saying that many religious people hold, paradoxically, that "God" (recalling our earlier distinction) can do such things, but Royce isn't worrying about that sort of "God." He has set that "God" into a historical frame that ends with Kant.

Thus, pragmatically, if we place the truth in the consequences of the act, one aspect of the truth *of* that truth is that the act is irrevocable, permanent, a part of every possible future experience. To have truths of this sort is both pragmatic and absolutist. But to experience the irrevocability of the act is certainly not an experience of "God." Royce does not think that finite beings have immediate experiences of "God," although religious traditions have mystical practitioners who claim to experience "God." By 1906, William James had done as much as anyone could to document the historical breadth and depth of mystical experiences in his 1902 Gifford Lectures. Royce did not discount the experiences, but the interpretations given to those experiences he sees in light of history and context. They do not prove that "God" or the Divine is what one or another religious tradition claims. If there is a God, that being is not the sort of entity that finite consciousness can encompass in an experience, or that limited intellect can bring under a concept. Kant's antinomies are unsatisfactory but not inaccurate. Royce says in GL:

> [I]f there concretely is such an absolute experience, then there concretely is such a reality present to it. If the absolute experience, however, remains to the end barely possible, then the concept of reality must be tainted by the same bare possibility. But the two concepts are strictly correlated. To conceive, for instance, absolute reality as containing no God, means simply that an absolutely all-embracing experience, if there were one, would find nothing Divine in the world. (GL 2, p. 40f; CG 1895, p. 24)

Some pragmatists, especially in recent decades, are content to find nothing divine in the world. That position probably undermines truth, even scientific truth, without an Absolute. If pragmatists want truth, and they do, especially now, they must become reconciled to a benevolent type of absolutism. Royce says:

> [T]hat all are discontent with their finitude, is a matter of common experience. I interpret this as implying, and as inevitably implying, that it is the truth that every finite life actually finds its fulfillment in an Absolute Life, in which we live, move, and have our being. I maintain . . . that to attempt to deny this Absolute Life is simply to reaffirm it under some new form. That the Absolute Life has to be conceived as the absolute union of experience and rational necessity, of freedom and of law, of infinitude and finitude, of what we regard as irrational and of what we regard as rational, I have elsewhere maintained at length. [See CG 1895, GL, CG 1897, and WI2] I am not here to preach my own doctrine. But may I assert that personally I am both a pragmatist and an absolutist, that I believe each of these doctrines to involve the other, and that therefore I regard them as not only reconcilable but as in truth reconciled. (LMI p. 258)

In 1896, Royce *was* in Brooklyn to preach his own doctrine. That was not his task in Baltimore. But to act on this reconciled union, as we all do every time we act, shows that "we all not only accept life, but try to conquer its irrationality, and to idealize its finitude. So to act is essentially, whether we know it or not, to view the temporal as the symbol and the likeness of the eternal." (LMI p. 259). That

is how the 1906 lectures end. Within two years it would have been difficult to say such things, since the publication of James's book left the impression that, as Royce said in a letter to James, pragmatism is "in large part, a splendid joke,--a brilliant *reductio ad absurdum* of all attempts at serious grappling with any philosophical issue. This was in no sense your intent; but, as a fact, the externals,--the mere setting and style of the *Pragmatism*, tend to produce in the man on the street this impression" of a splendid joke.[28] This criticism is harsh, but it became clear to Royce that pragmatism was becoming a joke. Royce did not think that to be the case in 1906. By 1908 Lovejoy showed to the satisfaction of many that the movement was ridiculous. James had been bested by Bertrand Russell in a public bout, and James made the matter worse by writing a book on truth no one could defend. We all know how Peirce responded to James's kidnapping of the term. In 1908, Royce was distancing himself from pragmatism. In an unenthusiastic letter refereeing Henry H. Bawden's book on pragmatism for Macmillan, he says:

> In itself, the book is good,--a scholarly presentation of Pragmatism by one of the followers of the movement, and by an academic teacher and writer of reasonably good position and reputation for his age. But Bawden is not a very original man. . . . What I miss is any commanding quality,--any originality sufficient to compel attention, or to insure a deep impression. Pragmatism is, however, so popular at present, and so much in need of a synthesis and of connected presentation, that there is a good chance that this book could find its way to a fair sale. On the whole, then, I recommend publication,--not as a great book, but as "a good horse if you like that kind of horse." The public seems just now to like the kind of horse called Pragmatism.[29]

Macmillan did not publish the book.[30] But what is telling is that Royce sees pragmatism as still in need of synthesis and connected presentation *after* James's book, which he thought was awful. He opened the Third World Congress of Philosophy in Heidelberg (1908) with a call for Absolute Pragmatism.[31] Soon he would realize that there was no coming back from what James had done. That probably happened at the 1908 Congress.[32]

In a very real sense, then, saving pragmatism from the nominalism it fell into, with its aversion to a hard-edged idea of truth, all for the sake of avoiding idealism and its Absolute, means turning the clock back to 1906 and taking a serious look at Royce's case for Absolute

[28] Royce to William James, no date, but presumed to be 1907 by the editor. *Letters of Josiah Royce*, ed. John Clendenning (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 511. I think Royce's response to *Pragmatism* may have broken the camel's back with James. In 1906, when delivering the lectures that became that book, he wrote to James Jackson Putnam, who evidently assumed Royce was one of the targets of the lecture, James says: "I didn't have Royce in view at all for he is essentially a pragmatist, & *tries hard not* to use the Absolute to deny experience by—the men I was antagonizing were Bradley, Taylor, and Rickert." James to Putnam, Dec. 3, 1906, in *The Letters of William James*, vol. 11, eds. I. Skrupskelis and E. Berkeley (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), pp. 289-290. James often lumped Royce and Bradley together regarding the Absolute, see for example ibid., p. 295. Why he did not do so here is something of a puzzle.

[29] Royce, Letter to the Macmillan Company, February 17, 1908. *Letters of Josiah Royce*, p. 520.

[30] Henry H. Bawden, *The Principles of Pragmatism: A Philosophical Interpretation of Experience* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1910).

[31] Royce, "The Problem of Truth in the Light of Recent Discussion," in *Bericht über den III. Internationalen Kongress für Philosophie* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter's Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1909), pp. 62-90.

[32] F.C.S. Schiller reported in a letter to William James on Royce's and others talks at the Congress, and characterized the whole thus: Altogether as far as *interest* went it was Pragmatism first & the rest nowhere." Schiller to James, September 8?, 1908, in *Letters of William James*, vol 12, eds. I. Skrupskelis and E. Berkeley (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004), p. 92. This "hedging" speech also brought the following report to James by Thomas Segeant Perry:

> In the philosophic world I notice that Bro. Royce is hedging & is beginning to appear in Congresses as the only true and original pragmatist. While it will be a comfort when you get home to have the internecine warfare that has devastated Irving St. come to an end . . . you must be careful, for he can't be a real pragmatist, one those whose portrait you drew in yr. first lecture [in *Pragmatism*]. I am sure he loves Truth & shld. be exposed. Make no peace until the whole tribe is exterminated. This will give you something to do when you get home. (ibid., p. 97)

I can easily imagine it would not bother Royce to be "exposed" as one who "loves Truth." But the strident tone helps us understand the importance of the struggle for the term. In my opinion, as Royce realized he could not have both truth and pragmatism anymore, on account of James, he gave back the term "pragmatism" and kept truth. Upon reading Royce's Heidelberg address, James says in a letter to Schiller it is "a charming piece of literary composition," but: "As an *approach to stating* our view (I think he has tried to) it is feeble; as a *correction* of our view, it [is] pitiful and inexcusable after all we have printed." Letter to F.C.S. Schiller, early January 1910 (ibid., p. 409). This pretty much finishes the case. If Royce's hedging was an olive branch, it wasn't accepted.

pragmatism. We land on "in the beginning was the act." The act is irrevocable, Absolute. That includes the act of thinking. I have never been able to abide the nominalist version of pragmatism, and have always reverted to Peirce. But Royce has this worked out, thoroughly, defensibly, and, I must say, absolutely.

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Varia

THE FORGOTTEN PRAGMATIST AESTHETICS OF KATE GORDON AND HORACE M. KALLEN

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ABSTRACT: This article challenges the prevailing Dewey-centered historiography of pragmatist aesthetics by examining the aesthetic theories of Kate Gordon (1878–1963) and Horace M. Kallen (1882–1974). Both philosophers explicitly identified their aesthetic work as pragmatist. They rejected the separation of art from life and understood aesthetic experience as practical and transformative, emphasizing its natural and social functions rather than conceiving it as a purely contemplative or autonomous domain. Through an brief analysis of Gordon's *Metaphysics as a Branch of Art* (1906) and *Pragmatism in Aesthetics* (1908), alongside Kallen's *Art, Philosophy, and* Life (1913), *Indecency and the Seven Arts* (1930) and *Beauty and Use* (1939), the paper shows that pragmatist aesthetics in the early twentieth century was a plural field shaped by multiple voices. Recognizing these contributions calls for a revision of the standard narrative and expands the conceptual resources available for contemporary work in pragmatist aesthetics.

Keywords: Pragmatist aesthetics, Art, Horace M. Kallen, Kate Gordon, Aesthetic Experience.

"The final step in the application of the pragmatic method, it is, in the business of living, first."
Horace M. Kallen in "Art, Philosophy, and Life"

1. Introduction

The term *pragmatist aesthetics* has been employed in recent historiography in an ambivalent manner to designate two distinct objects. On the one hand, it has been used to group under a single label a plural tradition of reflections on aesthetics found in the writings of C.S. Peirce, William James, Alain Locke, John Dewey, and Jane Addams, among others (Shusterman 1999b; Shusterman 2011; Barrena 2015; Dreon 2021a; Vaamonde 2023). On the other hand, the term has also been used to refer almost exclusively to John Dewey's aesthetic theory, particularly the views elaborated in *Art as Experience* (1934), thus consolidating a narrative that identifies the history of pragmatist aesthetics with the Deweyan model (Shusterman 1992a; Kremer 2020; Dreon 2021b).

In this paper, the term *pragmatist aesthetics* is adopted in the first sense, emphasizing its historical plurality. The central hypothesis is that the concentration of the historiography of pragmatist aesthetics around Dewey has produced a homogenizing interpretative effect, obscuring important contributions by other philosophers working within the same pragmatic horizon. More specifically, this research aims to demonstrate that the aesthetic theories of Kate Gordon and Horace M. Kallen constitute autonomous and systematic pragmatist formulations that cannot be understood merely as anticipations of, or secondary derivations from, Dewey's aesthetics.

The justification for examining these two philosophers is not merely that they explicitly identified their aesthetic theories as pragmatist, a feature that is indeed rare among their contemporaries; rather, it lies in the fact that both directly investigated what it means to transpose the method and categories of pragmatism into the domain of aesthetics. This point is decisive: in Gordon and Kallen, the relationship between pragmatism and aesthetics is not a retrospective attribution made by historiography, but a problem consciously assumed by the philosophers themselves. Recovering their formulations, therefore, makes it possible to recognize that pragmatism also sought to think of itself as an aesthetic approach. Furthermore, incorporating these perspectives into the historiographical discussion reconfigures the interpretative map of pragmatist aesthetics, by demonstrating that its history is not reducible to the Deweyan model. Instead, it comprises multiple ways of conceiving aesthetic experience, the relation between perception and action, and the social function of art.

2. Kate Gordon's Pragmatist Aesthetic

Kate Gordon (1878–1963)[1] was one of the first philosophers to explicitly formulate an aesthetic theory from a self-declared

[1] Gordon was trained in philosophy and psychology at the University of Chicago, where she studied under John Dewey, and later

pragmatist standpoint. Although she held prominent academic positions and published widely in aesthetics in the early twentieth century, her contributions have been almost entirely omitted from the historiography of pragmatist aesthetics. Her name[2] is simply absent from most accounts of the tradition, and when it does appear, it is typically mentioned only in passing, as a marginal curiosity rather than as an important contributor (Shusterman, 2014; Ramazzotto, 2024).

Two short papers by Gordon are central to the present discussion: "Metaphysics as a Branch of Art" (1906) and "Pragmatism in Aesthetics" (1908). While the latter is usually mentioned as the first explicit formulation of a pragmatist aesthetics, I argue that the 1906 essay already articulates a distinctly pragmatist approach to aesthetic experience. Atherton (2012) has already suggested this point, however, its implications for the historiography of pragmatist aesthetics have not been fully noted.

In "Metaphysics as a Branch of Art"[3], Gordon advances the thesis that abstract concepts and metaphysical categories acquire meaning only insofar as they are embodied in motor attitudes, and that the consciousness of these attitudes forms the basis of our emotions, sentiments, and dispositions. This move aligns her directly with the pragmatist maxim that meaning must be understood in terms of its effects within experience. Her formulation, "the concept means the attitude" (Gordon, 1906: 368), places her in close dialogue with pragmatists such as James and Dewey, whom she explicitly mentioned in the essay. For Gordon, metaphysical categories such as space, time, and unity cannot be grasped at a purely theoretical level; they require translation into embodied attitudes to become genuinely intelligible.

According to Gordon, metaphysics, like art, concerns abstract ideals capable of orienting human conduct, even if not in a determinate or prescriptive manner. In other words, metaphysics does not instruct or demonstrate in the way science does; rather, it shapes dispositions, moods, and orientations of the lived experience. In the conclusion of the paper, Gordon makes this point explicit by reformulating the pragmatist question of consequences: "following the pragmatic method, let us ask of one or two metaphysical doctrines, what difference do they make? what shall one do about them?" (Gordon, 1906: 370). The effect of metaphysical system, she argues, is comparable to that of works of art such as *Prometheus Bound*, the *Book of Job,* or Michelangelo's *Moses*, all these works do not yield demonstrable truths, but generate a sense of "intolerable but inevitable law", shaping a general emotional that generates a particular attitude toward existence. Thus, the "truths" of art and of metaphysics are not propositional truths, but *felt* truths, registered at the level of response and disposition.

Gordon's 1906 paper can be regarded as one of the earliest articulations of a pragmatist aesthetics. What makes it significant is not merely that she mentions James and Dewey, but that she develops a theoretical framework in which the meaning of abstract concepts is understood through their embodied, affective consequences in experience. Gordon thus brings metaphysics and aesthetics onto the same plane of inquiry: both shape how we feel and orient ourselves in the world, and this is precisely where their meaning lies. Moreover, Gordon employs the term "aesthetics" in the modern sense of reflection on art, beauty, and experience, at a time when other pragmatists had not yet systematically addressed the field. For these reasons, the essay does not simply

continued her studies in Germany under Oswald Külpe. She held academic positions at institutions such as Mount Holyoke, Teachers College (Columbia), Bryn Mawr, Carnegie Institute of Technology, and the University of California, Los Angeles, Where she taught for several decades (Scarborough and Furumoto, 1987). She was an active member of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the American Psychological Association, and the American Philosophical Association, and served as president of the Western Psychological Association in the 1920s (Wayne, 2011). She died on October 5, 1963.

[2] It is worth noting that Atherton (2012) devoted a conference paper to revisiting Gordon's work, in a rare attempt at recovery. However, this effort does not appear to have generated immediate or sustained resonance in subsequent scholarship.

[3] This essay was written in response to Bernard C. Ewer's attempt to classify metaphysics as a scientific Rather than artistic activity, based on a strict opposition between Truth and Beauty. See Ewer (1903). For a detailed account of this Exchange, see Atherton (2012).

anticipate later development in Dewey; it constitutes an autonomous and theoretically coherent contribution to the formation of pragmatist aesthetics, one that has remained largely unacknowledged in the historiography.

Even though the 1906 essay already articulates a pragmatist approach to aesthetics, the paper that made Gordon recognizable to her contemporaries as a pragmatist was her subsequent essay of 1908, "Pragmatist in Aesthetics", published in the *Essays Philosophical and Psychological in Honor of William James*. The volume also included contributions from figures such as John Dewey, Arthur O. Lovejoy, and Edward L. Thorndike, which situates Gordon within an influential intellectual network at Columbia. As has been noted, *Pragmatism in Aesthetics* is the first published essay to explicitly place the term "pragmatism" in the title of an aesthetic work (Shusterman 2014, Ramazzotto 2024), a gesture that would remain uncommon in this tradition, with one of the few later echoes appearing in the work of Kallen.

In "Pragmatism in Aesthetics", Gordon opens by stating that aesthetic experience "illustrates and confirms the teachings of pragmatism" (Gordon, 1908: 462). Her aim is to determine what it means to apply the pragmatist method, already established in epistemology and logic, to the field of aesthetics. For Gordon, the meaning of beauty, like the meaning of truth, is found in concrete cases and is verified through action. Art, therefore, has a specific function: it creates new ways of experiencing the world. By grounding aesthetic value in the production and transformation of experience, Gordon articulates a conception of art as a mode of experiential renewal. This link between art and experience was later developed in different terms by Dewey, yet Gordon's formulation does not derive from Dewey but emerges from her own application of the pragmatist method. The presence of her 1908 essay among Dewey's reading materials from 1909–1910 (Dewey 1977) suggests that the influence was not unidirectional.

It is noteworthy that Gordon begins her 1908 essay by acknowledging the difficulties involved in defining pragmatism. She does not attempt to provide an exhaustive definition, arguing that pragmatism cannot be fully captured in a single formula. Instead, she adopts what she calls a disposition to "look for final explanations in terms of purpose, and for reality in experienced satisfactions" (Gordon, 1908: 463–464). This operational understanding of pragmatism is the standpoint from which she approaches aesthetics: aesthetic meaning, like all meaning, should be understood in terms of how it is lived and translated in concrete experience.

This paragraph is crucial because no other classical pragmatist offered such an explicit statement of a pragmatist standpoint in aesthetics, except for Kallen. This gives Gordon's essay a distinctive place in the history of this tradition. While many commentators have searched for aesthetic theories in pragmatist authors who did not directly address aesthetics, Gordon developed an aesthetic theory that explicitly identified itself as pragmatist. Yet her work has remained largely overlooked in the secondary literature, despite the clarity of her commitments to pragmatism.

It is worth noting that Gordon places the notion of aesthetic experience at the center of her account, analyzing it from the standpoint of both the creator and the perceiver, and emphasizing its formative role in shaping the very conditions of experience. A crucial dimension of her position concerns the function of art. According to her, although artistic works do not directly intervene in social circumstances, they cultivate the emotional dispositions that make transformation possible. In her words, "Art inspires merely the emotional stage of reform" (Gordon, 1908: 479). By presenting art not as a form of direct instruction but as a means of shaping and preparing emotional dispositions, Gordon delineates an aesthetic theory grounded in experience and oriented toward sensibility. In this framework, art is not understood as a mirror of life, but as a force that reorganizes the ways in which reality is perceived, felt, and inhabited.

A decisive point in Gordon's 1908 essay concerns the relation between art and life. She argues that aesthetic experience should not be understood as a final state or resolution, but as an open problem that initiates further modes of perceiving and acting. As she writes, "the pragmatic view of aesthetics recognizes the aesthetic moment as a problem, not as a solution, a beginning rather than an end. The pragmatic view of art, I should say, is this, that art is not essentially an imitation of life … but that life is a copy and imitation of art" (Gordon, 1908: 481). For Gordon, art does not merely imitate reality; rather, it shapes the very ways in which reality become available to us. In this formulation, art plays a constitutive role in the organization of perception, meaning and emotion, and actively participates in the formation of how the world is lived and understood.

Another essential point is that, for Gordon, art has a function that goes beyond preparing the emotional ground because it renews perception itself. Art reorients how the world is seen, felt, and valued. To illustrate this, she writes: "after seeing a Turner one sees more form and color in a sky. We see beauty in nature because we see it as a picture. The genre in art has given us an interest in common things; we can see them at last because we see that they are a pageant" (Gordon 1908: 481). In this account, art educates the senses by reorganizing the conditions of experience functioning as an instrument that precedes and shapes the experience of the world. As Gordon remarks, "life and nature are in a vital sense experienced as products of art" (Gordon 1908: 482). So, art does not merely reflect reality; it actively constitutes the modes through which reality becomes perceptible and, importantly, meaningful.

Based on the above-mentioned, it becomes evident that Gordon (1908) understands her project as a deliberate transposition of the pragmatist method into the field of aesthetics. This move allows art and aesthetic experience to be conceived in continuity with ordinary experience, rather than as isolated in an autonomous or disinterested sphere. Aesthetic experience, for Gordon, is a mode of intensifying and reorganizing experience, enriching perception and cultivating affective dispositions. Just as the pragmatist method requires that concepts be verified in lived experience, Gordon maintains that aesthetic experience must remain continuous with life to be meaningful. Only under this condition can aesthetic experience be "verified" and thus fulfill its function.

Taking together what has been presented, Gordon's writings of 1906 and 1908 articulate an aesthetic theory that is explicitly grounded in pragmatist principles. By conceiving aesthetic experience as a mode of reorganizing and intensifying experience, she advances a conception of art that is continuous with the practices and conditions of ordinary life, rather than detached from them. This position not only anticipates later developments within the pragmatist tradition but also demonstrates that the history of pragmatist aesthetics is broader and more diverse than the Dewey-centered narrative suggests. Recovering Gordon's contributions[4] it is an opportunity to reopen the conceptual field of pragmatist aesthetics and reveal dimensions that have long remained forgotten.

3. Horace Kallen's pragmatist aesthetics

Horace Meyer Kallen[5] occupies a paradoxical position within the history of pragmatism. On the one hand, he is commonly mentioned in broader accounts of the movement (Konvitz and Kennedy 1960; Shook 1998; Bernstein 2012; Spencer 2020), particularly in discussions of cultur-

[4] Gordon continued to publish in aesthetics after 1908, including an introductory textbook on the subject (Gordon 1909), which was generally well received (Pitkin 1910) his 1909 book served as an introductory text for her students in the field of aesthetics at universities. It is important to remember that aesthetics as a philosophical discipline was still struggling to establish itself in American universities during the early 20th century (Munro 1951). In the following decades, Gordon increasingly shifted toward psychology, and her contributions to aesthetics gradually diminished.

[5] Kallen was born in Germany in 1882 and immigrated to Boston as a child. He held academic appointments at Princeton, Harvard, and the University of Wisconsin before joining the New School for Social Research, where he taught until his retirement in 1969 and later become professor emeritus. He died in Palm Beach, Florida, in 1974 (Kronish 1982).

al pluralism and democratic theory. On the other hand, his aesthetic writings have remained almost entirely absent from historiographical narratives of pragmatist aesthetics. In major studies of the field (Shusterman 1992a; Małecki 2014), his name simply does not appear at all.

This silence is striking since Kallen explicitly identified his aesthetic theory as pragmatist, much like Gordon before him. The two constitute, in fact, the only classical pragmatist thinkers to self-designate their aesthetics in these terms. The absence of Kallen from the historiography of pragmatist aesthetics, therefore, cannot be explained by a lack of textual material, but rather by the force of a narrative that has centered the tradition almost exclusively around Dewey.

Kallen's relationship with pragmatism was long-standing, dating back to his undergraduate training at Harvard, where he studied under William James and George Santayana, and later continued his formation under F.C.S. Schiller at Oxford (Kronish 1982). His intellectual proximity to pragmatism was further reinforced through his sustained correspondence with John Dewey, particularly during the period in which he taught at the University of Wisconsin. This connection intensified when, in 1919, Kallen joined the newly founded New School for Social Research in New York, an institutional space that gathered several figures engaged with pragmatist inquiries, such as Sidney Hook and Morris R. Cohen (Konvitz 2016). Kallen developed an extensive philosophical interest, engaging with questions in politics, ethics, psychology, and social theory. His most influential contribution, however, is the concept of *cultural pluralism*[6], formulated in dialogue with Alain Locke in the first decade of the twentieth century (Ratner 1984).

One of the most sustained areas of Kallen's philosophical work was aesthetic theory. This is particularly remarkable because, although Kallen generally avoided affiliating himself with specific schools or traditions in his broader philosophical writings, he consistently identified his aesthetics as pragmatist. Contemporary reviewers recognized this affiliation, describing him as an heir to the pragmatist legacy of James and Dewey (McMahon and Buck 1930). More importantly, Kallen himself explicitly embraced this alignment, using terms such as "pragmatist" and "pragmatic" in the titles and introductions of several of his aesthetic works. His case is therefore exceptional within the history of classical pragmatism: like Gordon, he is not retrospectively labeled a pragmatist aesthetician but presents himself as one.

Kallen produced a substantial body of work in aesthetics, including at least ten books, twenty-eight articles, and five reviews. In several of these writings, pragmatism is present even when not explicitly named, as in the two-volume *Art and Freedom* (1943)[7]. The consistency with which pragmatist ideas shape his aesthetic theory, from his early publications through to his mature works, distinguishes his position within the history of pragmatist aesthetics. Indeed, although Dewey is the only classical pragmatist whose writings on aesthetic rival Kallen's in scope, Dewey did not explicitly adopt the pragmatist label in his aesthetic writings in the way Kallen repeatedly, and deliberately, did.

Although Kallen's pragmatism was never systematically elaborated, it remained remarkably consistent, since his aesthetic reflections evolved over nearly two decades. This body of work signaled that pragmatist aesthetics did not emerge suddenly or uniformly, rather, it developed through multiple trajectories and distinct conceptualizations. Recognizing Kallen's contributions, therefore, challenges the prevailing historiographical narrative and highlights the plurality that has characterized pragmatist thought from its early stages. Given the extensiveness of Kallen's aesthetic writings and the impossibility of examining them all here, I will focus on three works in which his

[6] For further information on Kallen's cultural pluralism, see Ratner (1984) and Spencer (2020).

[7] In the first volume of this work, Kallen writes: "The present study is a review and an interpretation of the record on the relations of Art and Freedom in the history of the Western World. Essentially, it is an essay, from the standpoint of an esthetic pragmatism, toward a philosophy of art, and as such concerned with the ideas familiar in esthetic doctrine…" (Kallen 1943: 15).

pragmatist orientation is most explicitly articulated. The first is the 1913 paper "Art, Philosophy, and Life", followed by two works from the 1930s: the 1930 book *Indecency and the Seven Arts: And Other Adventures of a Pragmatist in Aesthetics* and the 1939 article "Beauty and Use: A Pragmatic Interpretation."

One of the most important expressions of Kallen's pragmatist aesthetics appears in his 1913 essay "Art, Philosophy, and Life." There, Kallen argues that art arises directly from "naked experience," from spontaneous activities in which action unpredictably discloses new uses or meanings beyond mere functional need. Art, in its primary form, is therefore not a matter of detached contemplation, but a mode of doing in which expressive activity becomes significant. Once such expressive acts are repeated and stabilized as a routine procedure, they cease to be art in the strict sense and become craft. In this view, art marks the moment in which experience first discovers its own possibilities.

From this premise, Kallen argues that art and labor share the same origin "at bottom, therefore, art and labor are coincident; all labor is art, and all art is fine art" (Kallen 1913:40). This continuity forms the basis for the distinction he subsequently draws between art and philosophy. Art engages directly with the immediate material of experience, while philosophy, by contrast, reflects upon this experiential material and upon the practices that emerge from it. Yet, the important point here is that the reflective activity does not lead philosophy away from life into abstraction. On the contrary, reflection must return to practice. He writes, "conduct is the beginning and end of all philosophy" (Kallen 1913: 53).

Thus, from this perspective, aesthetic reflection, art, and philosophy do not culminate in a separate or autonomous realm; they are inseparable from the ongoing shaping and transformation of experience. As Kallen puts it, "this life in all its breadth and depth, as it expresses itself in social organization, religion and science as well as in art, we invoke, of necessity as art's measure" (Kallen 1913: 54). Art must therefore be evaluated not by criteria internal to an aesthetic domain isolated from life, but by its capacity to intensify, clarify, and enrich lived experience. In other words, the standard of artistic value is pragmatic: the extent to which a work contributes to the growth of experience. This inseparability of art and life is one of the most recurrent features in the writings of thinkers associated with the pragmatist aesthetics tradition.

Kallen's Indecency and the Seven Arts (1930) is an anthology that brings together essays he had previously written over nearly two decades. In the preface, Kallen states that the texts "consistently undertake to survey the field of Criticism and the Fine Arts from the pragmatic point of view" (Kallen 1930: XIV). The collection addresses numerous themes: two essays confront debates on past and contemporary censorship, while the remaining contributions explore questions of literary and artistic criticism, as well as different artistic schools and movements. The diversity of subjects is significant, because rather than presenting a unified aesthetic system, Kallen works through concrete problems and disputes. His pragmatism in aesthetics is thus not articulated as a set of abstract principles, but as an orientation that emerges in response to specific situations in which art and aesthetics acquire meaning.

Curiously, the term "pragmatism" appears in the title of the book and only once in the body of the text. Yet, pragmatist commitments are evident throughout the whole essays. This is clear, for instance, in the third essay, "What is an Elephant? A Fable for Critics." Here, Kallen challenges the compartmentalization of judgment that separates experience into distinct spheres. He writes: "to talk about 'aesthetic' as against 'ethical' judgment is an absurdity of the classifying habit of mind. In living experience there are no such compartments" (Kallen 1930: 63). He then adds that such divisions are merely "invented as methodological conveniences" (Kallen 1930: 64). Aesthetics, in this account, is not an autonomous domain but one dimension of a continuous field of experience. This

position aligns directly with the pragmatist commitment to meaning as immanent in lived conduct and to the critique of dualistic conceptual schemes.

Another element that echoes Kallen's pragmatist orientation is his emphasis on the social and communal character of aesthetic and art experience. This element appears, for example, in the fifth essay, "The Arts Under Dictatorship", where he argues that "for greatness, whether in painting or in music or in poetry or in architecture, is a reflection of a public interest, not the projection of a private power" (Kallen 1930: 111). The artist is therefore not a solitary genius detached from social life, but a participant in a shared cultural horizon whose work expresses the values, tensions, and aspirations of a community. As Kallen writes, art "consists of uttering the inward feeling and outer achievement – or failure – of a time or a civilization in moving and unmistakable symbols, symbols that reveal its own meaning to a people's heart" (Kallen 1930: 111). In this account, artistic creation is inseparable from the historical and social conditions that make it possible; it is the articulation of a collective form of life in material form.

It is worth remark that the pragmatism present in this 1930 volume appears in a more subtle and indirect form. This is partly due to the nature of the work itself, Kallen's primary aim was not to elaborate a systematic pragmatist aesthetic theory as I already mentioned, but to intervene critically in contemporary debates. The essays are addressed to a broader public and adopt a more flexible and accessible style. Even so, the conceptual commitments that inform Kallen's position, his rejection of rigid aesthetics dualism and his insistence on the social embeddedness of artistic expression, clearly align his work with the pragmatist tradition. For this reason, the book ought to be recognized as an integral contribution to the history of pragmatist aesthetics.

A more explicit formulation of Kallen's pragmatist aesthetics appears in his 1939 essay "Beauty and Use: A Pragmatic Interpretation". In contrast to most classical pragmatist accounts, which emphasize the concepts of art or aesthetic experience, Kallen returns to the category of beauty. This choice signals a deliberate effort to rethink one of the oldest problems of aesthetics through pragmatist principles. Rather than treating beauty as a metaphysical property or a purely subjective feeling, Kallen interprets it in terms of use and experience.

Kallen opens the essay by identifying what he regards as a central problem in aesthetic theory: the persistent tendency to separate art from life. This concern, already evident in his 1913 writings and in Gordon's work, now serves as the premise for his argument that traditional theories of beauty approach the aesthetic domain in abstraction, treating it as if it were detached from the concrete situations in which artworks are created, encountered, and experienced. As Kallen observes, discussions of beauty often proceed "without regard to the living situations in which art occurs and beauty and ugliness take place" (Kallen 1939: 316). This critique provides the point of departure for his own proposal: to reconceive beauty not as an isolated attribute but as a phenomenon emerging within the flux of lived experience.

Another striking point in the essay is Kallen's emphasis on naturalistic and biological foundations in developing his account of beauty. He argues that the origins of beauty are rooted in natural functions and uses, observable across the animal world as well as in human life. Beauty, in this view, is not a purely contemplative attribute, however one with a biological and social history. Within this orientation, beauty appears as a functional element in the processes through which life sustains and adapts itself.

In Kallen's view, beauty and ugliness should not be treated as pure or independent essences, nor as passive qualities that can be isolated and analyzed in a purely abstract or esoteric manner. Instead, he insists that "beauty and ugliness discover themselves as relations between the objects to which they are attributed" and should be judged according to the values they embody (Kallen 1939: 317).

Kallen summarizes his position in a formulation that paraphrases John Keats's well-known poem: "Almost it might be said, Beauty is use, use beauty; that is all we know or need to know" (Kallen 1939: 319). The central significance of beauty, for Kallen, is therefore not located in detached contemplation, but in its functioning within social life. Beauty appears through the practices that shape collective existence as religion, industry, war, education, finance, and government, and operates within them as a meaningful force. In this view, beauty is not an ornamental object set apart from everyday life; rather, it is a tool that acts across the full range of human activity.

At the end of his essay, Kallen explicitly acknowledges the fallibilism inherent in the concepts of beauty and ugliness. Beauty, he argues, is not an eternal truth or fixed essence, but rather the outcome of a creative use that changes as social conditions change. Consequently, new circumstances call forth new forms of response, perception, and valuation. Beauty is therefore not something that can ever be completed or finalized; it is a concept continually under construction, always open to revision.

Kallen's conception of beauty, understood in instrumentalist terms, grounded in aesthetic naturalism, and framed through a social and fallibilist perspective, positions his essay as an original contribution within the pragmatist tradition. His writings illuminate a broader and more plural genealogy of pragmatist aesthetics, one that does not converge exclusively on Dewey. Recovering Kallen is therefore not merely a matter of historical correction, but of expanding the conceptual resources of classical pragmatist aesthetics and the range of problems it can address today.

4. Conclusion

The analyses of Gordon and Kallen presented in this paper support the claim that the history of classical pragmatist aesthetics is broader and more diverse than the prevailing historiographical narrative suggests. Their writings articulate aesthetic theories grounded in pragmatist commitments, formulated independently and in dialogue with the same intellectual environment that shaped Dewey. Incorporating these figures into the canon is not simply a matter of recovering overlooked thinkers. It requires reshaping the conceptual and historical parameters through which pragmatist aesthetics has been understood. Recognizing Gordon and Kallen as contributors to this tradition therefore expands the scope of inquiry and demonstrates that pragmatist aesthetics was never the work of a single philosopher, but the product of a plurality of voices engaged in a shared philosophical method.

Recognizing Gordon and Kallen as contributors to this tradition makes it possible to correct interpretative omissions and to perceive pragmatist aesthetics as unfolding, in Papini's well-known image, like a corridor with many doors. Some of these doors have been opened repeatedly and are now thoroughly studied; others have been only partially explored. The aim of this paper has been to enter two of these less-visited rooms. Many more remain, awaiting further inquiry into the plurality that has always been a constitutive feature of this philosophical tradition.

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THE PRAGMATIC-REGULATIVE CONCEPT OF CONVERGENCE AND (THE END OF) HISTORY

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ABSTRACT: This article develops a concept of convergence as a pragmatic-regulative orientation toward epistemic and normative improvement over time. Drawing on Peirce's long-run inquiry, Habermas's discursive idealizations, Kant's regulative ideas, and James's meliorism, it argues that these distinct frameworks share a structural motif: agents orient their practices toward greater coherence, adequacy, or mutual intelligibility under idealized conditions, without presupposing any metaphysical endpoint. Convergence is understood as future-directed, open-ended, and normatively oriented, linking epistemological, and normative dimensions. By situating this concept against contemporary debates on the "end of history," the article highlights how pragmatist and regulative insights provide sensitive framework for thinking about human agency, improvement, and the openness of historical development.

Keywords: Peirce, Habermas, convergence, the end of history, meliorism

Introduction

Austrian historian Philip Ther, a specialist in the contemporary history of Middle European countries, writes in one of his latest books about "a different end of history" (Ther 2019). Naturally, it is an allusion to Francis Fukuyama's famous 1989 essay "The End of History." As is well known, in that essay the Japanese-American political scientist predicted the gradual, global victory of the Western form of liberal democracy, connected especially with the free market economy. Recently, Fukuyama's predictions, which are based on, among others, Kojéve's influential interpretation of Hegel's teleology of history, has definitely lost its persuasiveness. A persuasiveness, at least according to some, it never actually had (cf. Derrida, 2006, pp. 16–17; 97–98; Žižek 2009).

Ther claims that the period of the end of history (for him, especially the "transformative" nineties) comes to an end around 2016. Since that time, the consequences of this "belief in the end of history" have become increasingly apparent. Ther situates this "different end of history" in the turbulent rise of populism and authoritarianism, and he links it to certain neoliberal policies and to a broader crisis of liberal democracy—another indirect allusion to Fukuyama (cf. Ther 2019, pp. 13–15; on populism in this context, cf. Mudde 2021; Lanham and Fishman 2005).

These remarks do not serve as an introduction in order to argue for a general thesis about the (un)persuasiveness of the alleged "end of history," nor do I aim to systematically revise the broader debates surrounding it, of which Ther's work is one example. Rather, my goal is to situate the subsequent discussion within the context in which "end of history" discourses—largely critical or rejective—remain operative. This context reveals the need for conceptual tools that can address the questions implicitly raised by these debates.

In this sense, I develop the idea that pragmatic philosophy provides a framework for addressing questions of meaning and orientation in historical and political life. However, I do not aim to offer a systematic development of what might be called a pragmatic philosophy of history. Instead, starting from the alleged "end of history," I focus primarily on how orientation toward the future can be conceptually articulated. In this sense, the broad relation to history is not understood in terms of history as a set of events, its internal laws, or a potential final state, but rather in terms of potential of epistemic and normative improvement.

As a terminological starting point, I draw on Richard Rorty's term "end-of-history convergence." Rorty introduced this expression to describe the Peirce-Kantian orientation of Jürgen Habermas's political philosophy to characterize a specific form of quasi-metaphysical liberalism (cf. Rorty 2009, p. 68). I instead attempt to redefine and rearticulate the term convergence, arguing that the convergence structure can be reconstructed across Peirce's account of long-run inquiry, Habermas's discursive idealizations, Kant's regulative ideas of reason, and

James's melioristic conception of truth. Since these concepts are most often treated in isolation, my goal is to argue that they can be understood as part of structurally similar motive.

Accordingly, in the first section I analyse Peirce's procedural theory of inquiry as an epistemological structure of convergence. In the second section, Habermas's model of deliberative democracy is presented as a political analogue of convergence, rooted in procedural idealizations. In the third section, the term convergence is further elaborated and related to Kant's regulative conception of ideas. In the final section, I introduce Jamesian meliorism as an existential-affective dimension grounding convergence within an essentially open conception of agency. I then conclude with a brief effort to explicate the internal connection that consist in an understanding of agents and their practices as tending toward greater coherence, adequacy, or mutual intelligibility without presupposing any metaphysical endpoint.

1. Epistemological Term of Convergence

What I will call the epistemological term of convergence or of converging[1], can be reconstructed against the background of Peirce's reflections on the nature of scientific inquiry from the 1870s and 1880s. The idea of convergence is closely connected to Peirce's conception of reality and of definite knowledge and belongs to a broader nineteenth-century tendency toward methodological and scientific optimism.

Thus, the idea of convergence occurs most clearly in the starting point of Peirce's epistemology: in his general description of the method of scientific inquiry. The convergence functions here as the end of the process of scientific inquiry, which is thought of as temporal. At the same time, in the spirit of methodological optimism, Peirce emphasizes the method of this sort of inquiry. Therefore, science can approach its goal – despite occasional stumbles – through the right procedure.

Now, I consider three primary formulations coming directly from Peirce to define the epistemological concept of convergence. These include the concept of convergence itself, along with the contextual conditions and underlying assumptions that make it intelligible. Firstly, Peirce's famous claim about the relationship between inquiry, reality and truth:

> The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate, is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real. That is the way I would explain reality. (Peirce 1992, p. 139)

Or, very similarly to the explicit accent on the temporal dimension of the definitive knowledge of reality:

> The real, then, is that which, sooner or later, information and reasoning would finally result in, and which is therefore independent of the vagaries of me and you. (Peirce 1992, p. 52)

These formulations can now be evaluated in terms of convergence, understood as a state of agreement or congruence. Such agreement presupposes a certain end point or outcome. From the claims presented, two underlying assumptions can be identified that make this convergence possible.

The first can be named the transcendent assumption (1). This also has been identified as the realist premise (cf. Röd and Basile 2014, p. 103). According to Peirce, scientific investigation advances towards the end. It moves ever closer to an adequate knowledge of the external world. This is at the same time the condition for the gradual converging of non-definitive and partial findings. Thus, converging is only possible when the process of investigation is transcended by something that guarantees the convergence as such.

At the most general level, the second assumption could be identified with the inter-subjectivity of knowing,

[1] This distinction has a meaning as follows: when I use the term "converging", I want to stress a processuality. So basically, I conceive it as a process. When I use the term "convergence", I mean it as an end of some process. That is also the reason why, below, I occasionally switch between "end" and "convergence".

which in science is represented by scientists. For the quotation that was cited above continued and emphasised the fundamentally inter-subjective character of science. The second part of the claim sounds like this:

> Thus, the very origin of the conception of reality shows that this conception essentially involves the notion of a COMMUNITY, without definite limits, and capable of an indefinite increase of knowledge. (Peirce, p. 52)

This second assumption makes some useful corrections of the first assumption, because it supplies it with an element that excludes the standpoint of naïve subjectivist-adequational realism. It thus brings Peirce closer to a kind of regulative realism, which prospectively admits knowledge of the real, but only on condition of denying any form of subjectivism.

If I have accordingly called the first assumption transcendent, it is clear now that the possibility of achieving the goal depends at the same time on something that is immanent to the whole process and defines it, so to speak, from inside. The second assumption can be called immanent (2).

This means however that, according to Peirce, the convergence presupposes some conditions, under which scientific practice should take place. Thus, I count as a part of the immanent assumption some form of cooperativity between scientists in the sense of a constant exposing of one's own point of view to others on the one hand, and inferential linking of what are always only partial claims and conclusions transcending generations of scientists on the other (cf. Peirce 1992, pp. 126–127, 138). It is interesting that Peirce admits that inferential methods could be used very differently and are even different in very fundamental aspects. Convergence is guaranteed precisely because methods are complementary but are also in tension and conflict with each other.

To put it more concretely, the immanent assumption means a summary of semantical, inferential and even ethical rules, under which the practice of inquiring should ideally proceed. It is these rules that ensure that the different perspectives converge in content over time. In this sense, Peirce also defines convergence procedurally.

But Peirce never thematized the methodology of science in a way that would explicitly connect it with the idea of convergence. For him, this assumption is largely self-evident. For example, the way Peirce portrays different forms of fixing beliefs implicitly entails this motive (cf. Peirce 1992, pp. 116–123). In fact, Peirce generally conceives fixation as both an individual and historical process directed toward ever clearer beliefs, which simultaneously approximate full knowledge of reality. This ultimate and comprehensive goal, however, applies only to the scientific method, by its very nature. Here again, the intersubjective foundation is stated as a basic starting point, since all other methods of fixation, except the scientific, deny the social impulse; if they do not, they tend to transform into a more reliable method. This is particularly true of the method of authority (cf. Peirce 1992, p. 116).

To summarize briefly: the idea of convergence expresses Peirce's basic understanding of scientific conduct as directed toward the "final opinion." Approximating reality involves moving from particular and obscure claims toward shared and intelligible ones. Convergence is thus a fundamental aspect of the process by which knowledge ideally develops, both as an outcome and as a goal, reflecting how distinct conceptions of truth and reality gradually align through methodologically correct inquiry. Consequently, scientific conduct is ideally guided by this orientation toward greater epistemic adequacy, which in turn fosters its ongoing development.

2. Political Term of Convergence

During the last few decades, an interesting development has taken place in contemporary German philosophy. Against the background of Apel's introduction of Peirce into the German-speaking philosophical context, authors of the second and third generations of critical theory have engaged increasingly and more systematically with

ideas from both classical and contemporary pragmatism. The original misunderstandings, or even rejection and aversion, common to the first generation (cf. esp. Horkheimer 2004, pp. 29–37) slowly disappear and are simultaneously substituted by efforts to find a common ground (cf. Frega 2015, pp. 63–96). This mainly concerns the three main authors of classical pragmatism, Peirce, Mead and Dewey, and the four contemporary authors of critical theory, Habermas, Joas, Jaeggi and Honneth (cf. Särkelä 2021, p. 145–156).

The connection between Peirce and critical theory may appear unintelligible at first glance, not only because the foundations of critical theory are rooted in Hegelian-Marxian thought rather than in Kantian philosophy, but also because Peirce's basic opinions and habits were supposedly conservative (cf. Atkins 2016, p. 34; Westbrook 2005, pp. 142–149). However, Peirce's general influence on Habermas has recently become well recognized (cf. Misak 1994; O'Mahony 2023; et al.), even though Habermas and the core of his philosophy are generally treated within pragmatism as Kantian-critical rather than pragmatic (cf. Misak 1994; Bernstein 2010; Rorty 2021). Here, I follow this Peircean influence on Habermas by referring to his discursive idealizations connected with the communicative notion of power and his conception of deliberative democracy.

Of course, Peirce's role for Habermas cannot be reduced to this idea alone. Habermas regards Peirce as one of the most significant thinkers in modern philosophy, primarily because of Peirce's paradigmatic shift from a subjectivist to a communicative conception of rationality. Accordingly, I take as my starting point the claim that Habermas formulates key conclusions of his universal pragmatics, as well as his later elaboration of the theory of deliberative democracy, as part of this Peircean "communicative turn" (cf. Habermas 2019, pp. 715–716; Habermas 2024, pp. 164-165, 177-178).

In continuity with the first section, I will now apply the two previously introduced assumptions of convergence—transcendent (1) and immanent (2)—to Habermas. This distinction clarifies both the similarities and the differences between the approaches of Habermas and Peirce, and it makes it possible to further identify the convergence motif that underlies Habermas's political rearticulation.

The starting point of Habermas's communicative conceptualization of politics is his universal pragmatics, where idealizing operations similar to those in Peirce are understood as norms necessarily presupposed by an inquiring community. His analysis begins with everyday speech acts and, through reconstruction, uncovers universal validity claims that are inherently presupposed in every single act of communication (cf. Habermas 1998, p. 24). Habermas, however, demarcates his own approach primarily in contrast to Apel, revolving around what I have called a transcendent assumption. Habermas nevertheless emphasizes that both his methodological and theoretical commitments deny the existence of any necessary presupposition that could be understood as equivalent to Peirce's reality notion. This denial is most clearly articulated in his rejection of Apel's next step—namely, the transcendental-normative reinterpretation in which Peirce's notion of a final opinion becomes the basis for a justification of certain norms as necessary, unavoidable, and ultimately binding (cf. Apel 1980).

In Habermas, however, the idealizing steps that mirror those in Peirce consist in a pragmatic demonstration of presuppositions that are justified solely through discursive procedures. For Habermas's position, what I have called the immanent assumption above appears to have an equivalent in his procedural conception of norms that essentially structure the formal-pragmatic space of argumentation.

This basic idea finds its expression in Habermas's systematically developed theory of deliberative democracy. Especially in his later works, the procedure of deliberation is understood as a socially mediated process of will-formation, through the institutionalization of which law is created (cf. Habermas 1994, pp. 150–153). Howev-

er, will-formation is described more as a dialectical process in which particular individuals, through reciprocal communicative exchange, reach a level of generality that is then fixed in the creation of law.

The deliberative processes are still captured within the formal-pragmatic framework, as they create the very possibility of reaching consensus—of reconciling the tension between the general will and the individual will. Just as in Peirce, where the method itself establishes the conditions for convergence toward the final opinion, so in Habermas the principle of discursive legitimacy is derivative from formal pragmatics and the conditions it posits for the possibility of consensus. In other words, the presuppositions or principles that constitute the "normative conditions for the possibility of understanding" (Habermas 1998, p. 22) ground the very idea of legitimate deliberation.

The immanent assumption of convergence therefore finds its equivalent in Habermas's development of the principles of comprehensibility, truth, truthfulness, and rightness within the broader notion of the communicative situation that ultimately underpins his theory of deliberative democracy. These principles include:

> (a) of public debate and complete inclusion of all those affected; (b) of equal distribution of the right to communicate; (c) of a nonviolent context in which only the unforced force of the better argument holds sway; and (d) of the sincerity of how all those affected express themselves. (Habermas 2003, p. 37)

However, Peirce's original idea of long-run inquiry and convergence toward greater epistemic adequacy does not make sense in this context and is instead reformulated as an orientation toward mutual intelligibility. In other words, the fact that the procedural logic of idealization is present in every argumentative exchange means that each discourse implicitly aims at conditions of inclusivity and equality. Orientation and convergence are therefore not captured in terms of a long-term inquiry, but rather as a reconciliatory inclination toward consensus, one that remains always potentially attainable.

3. Regulative Ideals and the Form of Convergence

I think the structure of the convergence motif, as defined so far, already displays some essential features that can now be summarized and further developed. In Peirce and Habermas, convergence can be understood as involving an element of idealization and future orientation. Additionally, for both, idealizations serve as a tool for defining and grounding the improvement-oriented tendency toward increasing epistemic adequacy in Peirce, or mutual intelligibility in Habermas.

However, this future-oriented tendency does not result in the postulation of a metaphysical endpoint. It is now clear that the idea of convergence refers neither to concrete empirical facts corresponding to reality in the epistemological sense nor to any specific form of social order in the political sense. For example, it is neither a society free of ideological conflict, as imagined by Fukuyama (Fukuyama 1989, p. 12), nor one free of class struggle, as imagined by Marx and Engels (cf. Marx 1998).

It is the assumption that I have called immanent that underlies what is typically referred to as the regulative definition of the entire idea of convergence, whether epistemological or political in nature. There are textual reasons to follow this path, as Habermas himself interprets Peirce's communicative notion of rationality within the context of Kantian regulative theory of truth and occasionally refers to his own "idealized presuppositions of communication" as the regulative principle of communicative practice (cf. Habermas 2022, p. 70). Precisely the Kantian analogion could help bridge the epistemological and political dimensions and add further features to the idea of convergence.

The regulative function of ideas in Kant's philosophy primarily serves a heuristic and methodological role within his system. Following Kant, Dorothy Emmet distinguishes between regulative ideals and regulative principles. While the former represents concrete goals—though ultimately unrealizable—the latter denote the rules employed to ad-

vance toward these goals (cf. Emmet 1994, pp. 11–13). This distinction is crucial, as it underpins the conceptualization of convergence: it entails both the denial of the existence of "the end" in a realist sense—depicting it instead as already present in an idealized form—and the emphasis on procedural rules, which acquire specific meaning precisely through this denial. Moreover, Emmet captures the pragmatic aspect of Kant's subsequent argument:

> The Regulative Ideals have an explicitly practical function in which the question of existence need not arise – we might say it is 'bracketed'. A Regulative Ideal provides a focus imaginarius, that is, a goal which can give a direction, an orientation, for a practice. (Ebd., p. 13)

Against this backdrop, a third motive crucial for convergence can be added, namely the orientational element, which also reflects historically significant echoes of Kant's conception of regulativity in the pragmatic conception of truth. (cf. Apel 2016; Howat 2013). In particular, James' conception of truth is grounded in the practical difference that knowledge makes within reality. Accordingly, knowledge must primarily serve an orientation-practical function, similar to the one Emmet attributes to Kant (cf. James 1987, pp. 573–576; Putnam 2017).

In Kantian thought, these motives are also directly tied to the conception of history. This is evident in Kant's reflections on so-called universal history, the Enlightenment, as well as international relations viewed through the prism of eternal peace (cf. Kant 1999; 2007). For Kant, history appears to converge toward a happy ending, somewhat analogously to Fukuyama's thesis. The Enlightenment and the idea of peace-order are introduced as part of a broader naturalistic metaphysics. Kant describes this especially in the 8th and 9th theses of his *Universal History*, where he connects the end of history with "Nature's secret plan." The end is then identified with a specific order of human society, organized particularly according to law-principles—whether in the internal, reciprocal interactions of citizens or in the external relations between states (cf. Kant 2007, pp. 116-118).

However, this seemingly naturalistic concept of history is underlaid by the conception of regulativity: the goal is not predetermined or metaphysically fixed, as the "plan" here refers heuristically to a tendency, not a necessity, and is understood as an idealized, orientation-based concept (cf. Ebd.). Similar to the way I have appropriated the ideas of Peirce and Habermas, this orientation points toward greater coherence and intelligibility while simultaneously preserving the openness of the end connected with human's freedom that Kant presuppose (cf. ebd., p. 108). In this sense, Kant's regulative ideas represent a structure compatible with the interpretation of convergence that I propose.

Nevertheless, what remains insufficiently clear is how the content of convergence, understood as a regulative idea, is to be determined. In Kant, the focus imaginarius of history at times appears to be identified with a cosmopolitan, peaceful order. Yet in order to avoid a metaphysical teleology of history, Kant repeatedly denies that the final state can be empirically described in determinate detail (ebd., pp. 116–117).

The same must hold for my reconstruction of both the epistemological and political terms of convergence. A determinate endpoint would contradict the very features that constitute the substance and value of the motif: orientation is not prediction; idealization does not postulate a metaphysical endpoint; and improvement must be articulated in terms of open-ended and free human agency.

A further structural feature of convergence can thus be identified: a form of essential openness. This does not imply an absence of content, but rather a continual need to determine the relevant conditions with some content. This content-determination, however, cannot be prescribed in advance. It must take place within the framework of concrete human lives, concrete disputes, and socially mediated forms of deliberation.

Something very similar is expressed in Dewey's well-known account of the dialectic of means and ends, a central element of his experimentalist metaphysics. Dewey

argues that no goal is ever fixed or definitive. Goals are inherently variable, as their formation depends on the conditions under which they arise and necessitates continual adjustment in response to new experiences (cf. Dewey 1929, pp. 373–374). The conceptual distinction between means and ends is therefore derivative: means are included within ends and ends in turn refer back to the means.

Thus, the definition of the conditions of convergence can be situated within this logic of means and ends. Convergence cannot be prescribed or concretized a priori, because the conditions under which such a definition would be formulated are themselves variable. They depend on historically contingent and continually changing forms of experience characteristic of situated agents. These experiences repeatedly generate new and inherently inexhaustible demands. Only on the basis of such experience can content be assigned to any putative goal, and thereby the means implicated in its possible realization be identified and justified.

Once the affinity between convergence and the regulative function is uncovered, its basic traits become much more visible: it contains a normatively conceived orientation toward the future and toward one's own situatedness. In this sense, a pragmatic-regulative understanding of convergence allows—when applied to the field of history—for a conception of history as a future-directed process. History can then be understood as having a distinctive quality that provides future orientation in terms of its integrity and unity, rather than as a mere series of contingently occurring individual points. The same holds for a situated, present-based orientation: the present moment is grasped within a broader unity that constitutes a whole.

As in James's theory of truth, some ideas have a greater potential than others to establish desirable practices. Even if grounded in idealized conditions, the idea of convergence seems capable of imparting, in a Jamesian sense, a dimension of meaning to an individual's behaviour—including her choices and possibilities. Or, in Emmet's terms, it can provide direction and orientation for practice. The term meaning here captures precisely this function. Presupposed convergence thus helps articulate a basic distinction between a life understood and lived as oriented or meaningful and one that is not. This resonates, in a broad sense, with Wittgenstein's claim that "the world of the happy is quite another than that of the unhappy" (*Tractatus* 6.43; Wittgenstein 2016, p. 83), as well as with Jan Patočka's remark in the *Third Heretical Essay* that it is impossible to live without meaning, even if that meaning is relative and problematic (cf. Patočka 2007, p. 67).

4. Improvement Orientation as a Structure of Agency

In the conclusion of the previous section, I indicated that the orientational and open-ended structure of convergence appears to be linked to a conception of agency. As discussed above, the idea of convergence contains an inherent orientation. However, this orientation has not been systematically developed by previous authors in terms of an existential and affective attitude. In my view, another motive from the pragmatic philosophical tradition—namely, William James's conception of meliorism and truth—exhibits traits similar to those I have ascribed to convergence and can therefore be understood in the context of an improvement-oriented tendency, this time more directly connected to human agency.

In James's account, meliorism is originally formulated with respect to the question of the world's salvation, i.e., within the philosophy of religion. Whereas optimists hold that salvation is inevitable and pessimists consider it impossible, meliorists defend a third position: salvation is neither guaranteed nor precluded but remains a genuine possibility (cf. James 1987, pp. 612–613).

Rather than remaining with the somewhat vague, quasi-religious terminology characteristic of James's period, one can instead consider how James conceptualiz-

es a melioristic relation to salvation as a possibility. He writes:

> It treats it [meliorism as regards salvation] as a possibility, which becomes more and more of a probability the more numerous the actual conditions of salvation become. (James 1987, p. 612).

Precisely this formulation reveals that meliorism is not a belief but a hope (cf. Shade 2001). That is, it need not be understood only in a religious context. The distinction between faith and hope can be made on the basis of James' seemingly subtle emphasis on the conditions that guarantee the possibility of salvation. Meliorism thus does not involve a Kierkegaardian leap into the absurd (as accepting something that is not based on reason) – the leap of which is a resignation to the validity of secular or better ethical standards as a necessary condition (cf. Kierkegaard 2006). To the contrary, it draws on a confidence in being successful that is based on conditions that seem to be exclusively secular.

It could be said that meliorism in this form is a kind of appropriation or analogy of what I called above the scientific optimism of the nineteenth century, or of modernity and its expression as such (cf. Koselleck 2002; Löwenstein 2009). It is no coincidence that there is in Peirce many statements very close to this Jamesian meliorism, for example:

> All the followers of science are animated by a cheerful hope that the processes of investigation, if only pushed far enough, will give one certain solution to every question to which they can be applied. (Peirce 1992, p. 138).

Although it is not fully evident directly from this quotation, both authors agree that the possibility of an eschatological element depends on the conditions which are its sine qua non. But these conditions need to be concretized. While Peirce understands them as a true method of science, James conceives them in the spirit of pragmatic humanism and his own conception of truth (cf. also Koopman 2006). James associates meliorism with a dynamic and open notion of experience in which there is quite a lot of room for initiative, understood in terms of individualism and individual freedom, respectively.

This is to be explicitly connected to James' theory of truth, whose core lies in the rejection of a straightforward correspondence between things and their representation, favouring instead a processual understanding of verification. In James' account, truth is considered in the context of experience—or more precisely, in the context of events—which determine whether an idea can be regarded as true or plausible. Truth is not solely a matter of correspondence; it also carries existential connotations. Its realization depends significantly on human intervention and agency, requiring active engagement with the truth. This becomes clearer in light of James' "humanist view of reality" (James 1987, p. 599), which forms an integral part of his theory of truth:

> In our cognitive life as well as in our active life we are creative. We add, both to the subject and to the predicate part of reality. The world stands really malleable, waiting to receive its final touches at our hands. Like the kingdom of heaven, it suffers human violence willingly. Man engenders truth upon it. (ibid.)

Returning to meliorism in this context, the main condition of the world's salvation according to James can be understood as grounded in a subjectivist-existential conception of human agency, effort and initiative. It is not the aim here to further develop or problematize this idea, or to offer a more precise definition (e.g., whether it also entails an endorsement of individualistically conceived freedom). Importantly, such initiative must operate in conjunction with certain concrete conditions (e.g., material), since without this complementarity the concept would risk appearing naïve.

However, it is possible to reinterpret meliorism in the context of convergence, in part due to the general character of hope. Convergence is not conceived as a fixed goal, nor does it possess a determined referent; the same holds for hope. Experience suggests that hope can sometimes be directed toward a specific outcome, yet at other times it constitutes a more general "leaning" into the future—a vague combination of ideas, possibilities, and their cautious engagement with reality.

The regulative function of convergence explicitly entails openness, alongside the requirement to determine the content of meaning-projection. Nevertheless, the specific form of this projection remains unspecified. In this sense, it remains "waiting to receive its final touches" through human initiative. The openness of the end, together with the means employed to pursue it, thus underscores the necessity of active engagement and initiative.

Conclusion

I have followed concepts that I take to be internally connected, and the explication of these connections has made it possible to define the concept of convergence gradually, in what I have called a pragmatic sense. Peirce's notion of scientific inquiry, Habermas's conception of procedural idealizations, Kant's regulative ideas, and James's conception of truth and meliorism, although distinct and operating in different domains, share a deeper structure that I have tried to articulate. I take the functional notion of convergence to be what unifies these concepts and enables us to treat them as related. Put differently, I have tried to show that they can be understood as structurally similar instantiations of a single pragmatic-regulative concept.

This convergence framework serves as a conceptual tool for providing orientation toward epistemic and normative improvement over time. It emphasizes a future-directed, normative orientation of actors in their present situatedness, highlighting openness, initiative, and melioristic motivation. In negative terms, the framework rejects teleological metaphysics, predetermined ends, historical skepticism, and naïve optimism.

Instead of offering a conventional conclusion, I add a few remarks that connect the preceding analysis to the much-discussed motif of the "end of history" with which this text began. On the one hand, the "end of history" in Fukuyama's sense no longer appears conceptually tenable (if it ever did). As Derrida observes, even the intellectual climate of the 1950s was marked by recurrent proclamations of various "ends"—of philosophy, of Marxism, of man—that ultimately failed to materialize (cf. Derrida 2006, p. 16). One plausible interpretation of this recurring apocalyptic tone is Ther's historizing gesture: the "end of history" becomes symptomatic of a particular period and its characteristic self-understandings. Yet it is doubtful that such historization suffices when normatively laden questions about historical orientation remain at stake.

On the other hand, the very motif of "an end" need not be dismissed as misguided or naïve. It may retain conceptual value when understood as part of the epistemological convergence-structure reconstructed above. Pragmatism itself arose in response to the transformative dynamics of modernity (Tindall and Emori Shi 2013, pp. 821–845). Although it participated in the period's characteristic forms of optimism, it also cultivated a distinctive sensitivity to what modernization overlooks, obscures, or undermines.

This sensitivity is especially evident in Dewey's reflections on the emergence—and crisis—of democracy amid the transition from eighteenth-century feudalism to the industrial and mass society of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (cf. Dewey 1991). Dewey underscores the fundamental ambiguity of modernity: unprecedented technological and material progress coincides with intensified social stratification, disintegration, and individualization. It is therefore unsurprising that Derrida, to invoke him once more, counters Fukuyama's thesis with a similarly ambivalent sensibility:

> Instead of singing the advent of the ideal of liberal democracy and of the capitalist market in the euphoria of the end of history … let us never neglect this obvious macroscopic fact … no degree of progress allows one to ignore that never before, in absolute figures, never have so many men, women, and children been subjugated, starved, or exterminated on the earth. (Derrida 2006, p. 106)

Derrida's formulation is undoubtedly polemical, and its empirical accuracy is contestable. Yet it expresses a form

of vigilance—a consciousness of ambiguity and historical fragility—that is also characteristic of pragmatist thought. A conception of convergence grounded in intersubjective rationality and accompanied by melioristic agency similarly acknowledges the indeterminacy and contestability of every purported "end," including Fukuyama's.

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Book reviews

HALF-HEARTED NATURALISM? PAUL B. CHERLIN'S METAPHYSICAL GROUNDING OF DEWEY'S PHILOSOPHY

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Paul B. Cherlin, *John Dewey's Metaphysical Theory*, Cham, Springer Nature Switzerland, 2023

John Dewey's Metaphysical Theory by Paul Benjamin Cherlin offers for the first time a comprehensive, technical yet accessible synthesis of John Dewey's metaphysics, proposing fresh insights into its genesis, empiricist method, content and practical consequences. It sheds a new light on the role of metaphysics in Dewey's work, challenging its marginalization by some of his commentators. This work adds a new stone to an ongoing debate from the 1980s about the possibility of a pragmatist, and in particular Deweyan, metaphysics. R. Rorty's 1982 article on "Dewey's metaphysics" (Rorty 1982) sparked a long-running controversy by judging Dewey's proposal of a metaphysics to be contradictory with his "anti-foundationalist" rejection of the quest for certainty. In response, many commentators attempted to minimize this contradiction and circumvent this anti-foundationalist ban. Thus, R. Boisvert's previous work on Dewey's metaphysics (Boisvert 1988) invited us to move away from the analytical grid proposed by Rorty, in conclusion of a book that followed the evolution throughout Dewey's work of a single metaphysical scheme, that of the tension between change and permanence. In many respects, the present work follows in the footsteps of Boisvert's, while adding much to it. In terms of content, Cherlin takes up the idea of the centrality in Dewey's work of the tension between change and permanence, but generalizes it into a metaphysics of "double movements", or dialectical tensions between contradictory tendencies, in the tradition of Hegel. In terms of method, the book takes up a historical approach that seeks out the "prefigurations" and subsequent traces of Dewey's metaphysics before and after the publication of *Experience and Nature* in 1925. But it reinscribes this approach in a "naturalistic" metaphysics that builds on the works predating 1925, generalizes them beyond human experience, to ultimately return to it in the form of practical consequences. This methodology ultimately leads Cherlin to take a stand in favor of a non-pragmatist naturalism, against a radically anti-foundationalist reading of Dewey. But before returning to this proposal (which has the merit of being clear), let's take a closer look at the book's content.

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Its first chapter aims to present the "metaphysical orientation" of Dewey's metaphysics, in other words, to justify its general necessity within his work and to outline the originality of its method. Metaphysics, like the whole of philosophical discourse, does not take place in a vacuum. It always emerges from a state of human experience in a given society, and hence from its knowledge, artifacts and institutions, which reflect a way of situating oneself in the universe. But whereas metaphysics has traditionally isolated certain features of experience to turn them into metaphysical foundations, metaphysics as Dewey conceives it must take "empirical data" in its entirety as its starting point, without introducing dualisms. Metaphysics will thus be based on a "new theory of experience", which maintains that experience must neither be separated from the rest of nature, nor reduced to one of its aspects, such as cognitive experience (p. 11). On the other hand, it will draw on a "new approach to the empirical method": the continuity of nature and experience implies that the features of experience reveal something about nature itself. Thus, for Dewey, "metaphysical inquiry becomes a matter of expanding what counts as 'empirical data' to what is yielded by and through every type of experience — the spiritual, the political, the quotidian, our dreams, nightmares, anxieties, and our

moments of elation — and drawing from these varied experiential fields in order to determine what nature is and does." (ibid.)

However, according to Cherlin, this implies that we cannot see Dewey as a pragmatist metaphysician, for whom "truth is shaped by what works in practice, and what shapes future practice" (p. 15). Indeed, "Dewey's own 'pragmatism' is most squarely located in his work on 'logic', his theory of inquiry", which focuses only on that part of experience that is cognitive, whereas metaphysics seeks to grasp experience in its entirety (p. 16). On the other hand, it is only thanks to a "theory of experience" that pragmatism can extend beyond the realm of knowledge, so as not to be reduced to a narrow-minded positivism (p. 18). Finally, pragmatism is judged incapable of grasping on its own the continuity of experience with the whole of nature that metaphysics aims at (p. 25). Dewey's metaphysics is therefore not pragmatist but empiricist, or better still, naturalistic: "For Dewey, a naturalistic metaphysics was that which opposed a dualistic metaphysics. Nature is inclusive and pluralistic, not exclusive and dualistic." (p. 20) This inclusiveness enables nature to contain qualitatively plural existences within itself, a continuous emergence of human experience without recourse to supra-natural factors, and a naturalized religious experience. Methodologically, this naturalism calls for a "direct realism" that dissolves the false problem of the possibility of knowledge and takes experience as a source of knowledge of nature (pp. 22-23).

Chapter 2 moves on from the method to the content of Dewey's metaphysics, outlining its "prefigurations" in his middle works. The point is to show that Dewey's metaphysics did not suddenly appear in 1925 with *Experience and Nature*; rather, it is a "continuation" of his earlier, more specialized philosophical writings, or even a metaphysical "response" to them (p. 30). At the very least, Dewey's metaphysical theory cannot be understood without reference to the empirical materials he gathered in his "logical theory" of inquiry in the years 1900-1910, on which his metaphysical generalizations are partly based. This continuation concerns content more than method, since the logical writings prefigure a central metaphysical scheme in Dewey, that of "double movement" or "dyadic pairing", understood as "a general term that marks a tensional exchange between two co-determinate tendencies, functional phases, or qualitative characteristics of some event or particular process that results in some augmented or transfigured identity" (p. 35). This metaphysical scheme has developed steadily since the 1896 article on the reflex arc (Dewey [1896] 2008), to the point of appearing as what holds Dewey's work together as a system (p. 29).

This general thesis is justified on the basis of Dewey's logical writings from 1900-1916. Here, the author offers a challenging interpretation of several key works from that period, arguing that both the scheme of "double movements" and a metaphysical ambition emerge in them. Cherlin identifies in Dewey's contributions to the 1903 *Studies in Logical Theory* a distant call for a metaphysics that brings the "double movements" of inquiry — for example, between the precariousness of new hypotheses and a stable foundation of beliefs, or between the factual given and the ideal inferred — down to the generic traits of nature that make them possible. The list of these double logical movements grows longer in the 1910 version of *How We Think*, where Dewey proposes to conceive of thinking as a rhythmic alternation between direct grasp and understanding mediated by ideas, or between abstraction and reintegration within a synthetic grasp. Finally, the introduction to 1916's *Essays in Experimental Logic* makes every investigative situation a tension between a qualitative "focus" and a "context" cognitively grasped in terms of relationships.

Chapter 3 dives into the study of the content of Dewey's metaphysics, understood as "cognizance of the generic traits of existence" (Dewey [1925] 2008, 50). Its genesis is first traced back to the famous 1915 paper, "The Subject-Matter of Metaphysical Inquiry". Whereas

scientific inquiry deals only with causal relations, which are always singular, metaphysics is necessary to know the most generic traits of existence, without any conditions of duration or context. This radically "ineluctable" character of generic traits leads the author once again to take a clear stand against a pragmatist conception, which would conceive of these traits as contextual and fallible tools (p. 54). The other important moment in the genesis of generic traits is found in (what remains of) the typescript of the *Carus Lectures* of 1922, which would eventually provide Dewey with the material for *Experience and Nature*, and of which Cherlin seems to be the first to propose a study. Here we find a prefiguration of "double movements" through the tension between "provinces", both relatively individualized and continuous in their interactions, and "borders" dynamically determined by the "resistances" that these provinces mutually oppose (p. 56-57). This may allow us to see "provinces and boundaries" as the generic, architectonic features from which all the others derive. And if, in 1925, it is the double movement of "stable-and-precarious" that becomes primary and paradigmatic, it is because it strategically enables Dewey to oppose the reduction of all existence to the stable (metaphysics of the eternal), the precarious (metaphysics of flux), or to a dualistic "conjunction" of the stable and the precarious (ibid.).

However, the chapter does not linger in its study of the "stable-and-precarious", but continues its study of generic traits in their very genericity, that is, as "dialectical rhythms". In case the terms "dyadic pairings" and "double movements" didn't make it clear enough, Cherlin is among the commentators who see Dewey as a continuator of Hegel. He nevertheless brings home the idea that, in Dewey, the naturalization of the Hegelian dialectic is not only logical or methodological (inquiry as a reconciliation between conflicting tendencies) but also ontological: "Dewey's understanding of identity, interaction, change, and growth are all infused with a naturalized application of Hegel's dialectic. (…) Dewey never ceased to think in terms of dialectical oppositions and tensional movements, even if the specific character of these oppositional relationships was Dewey's own unique contribution." (p. 60) While offering an impressive list of these dialectical oppositions in Dewey (p. 62), the author suggests linking them to the philosophy of rhythm presented in *Art as Experience*. Drawing on a few key pages from the second chapter of *Experience and Nature*, Cherlin argues that, for Dewey, nature is fundamentally "syncopated"; it is made up of the conjunction of opposing tendencies according to different "modes and tempos" of interaction[1]. This is what is clarified in *Art as Experience*, which "should be treated as a work about metaphysics more so than about 'art' as narrowly defined" (p. 64): art is a culmination of nature because the explicit rhythmicity of aesthetic experience manifests the implicit rhythmicity of all reality.

In Chapter 4, this study of generic traits leads to the study of the emergence of human experience from these traits of existence. Experience is not an empire of subjectivity within an empire of materiality; rather it is a "foreground" continuous with the "background" of nature; as such, it constitutes a guide for discovering its traits (Dewey [1927] 2008). And experience is all the less a sphere of subjectivity when it is duly identified with the whole of culture (p. 83). The link between existence and experience can then be clarified through the notion of emergence, once this notion has been linked by Cherlin to "double movements". Considered as a process, emergence can be characterized as the appearance of an irreducible novelty within a "series" (and not a mere "succession") of which it is a "refinement", i.e. "a transformational movement toward some provisional terminus" (p. 89). But we can also consider emergence through the notion of "field", understood as "a dynamic environment comprising relations that are loosely grouped in accordance with a common function" (p. 90). Emergence isn't the appearance of new types of substances but rath-

[1] See (Dewey [1925] 2008, 6667), cited by (Cherlin 2023, 63).

er of new "fields" and modes of interaction, which are also new ways of instantiating the generic traits of stability-and-precariousness, individuality-and-relationship, etc. Thus, the mind is not a substance but an "emergent field", a new and irreducible way in which the body interacts with its environment when this interaction comes to be organized around a system of symbols (p. 95). Similarly, consciousness "is not a faculty or a special part of the brain. Rather, it is an emergent field, entailing a serial system of transactions and events that operates in conjunction with mind", appearing when the latter is confronted with a new environment requiring renewal (p. 97). Finally, cognition as an "emergent field" becomes a way for consciousness to use and update the meanings guiding the body-mind in the transformation of its environment. At this level of interaction, double movements take on the special form of a tension between subject and object. This pervasiveness of double movements provides new evidence that "Dewey's conception of experience can only be accurately and meaningfully understood in connection with his theory of emergence" (p. 102) and thus his metaphysics of generic traits.

The fifth and final chapter discusses the ethical implications of the metaphysical study of the generic traits. Whereas philosophy is a "criticism of criticisms"[2], i.e. the self-critique of the ability to trace values back to their conditions and consequences, wisdom is more precisely the philosophical ability to trace them back to their metaphysical conditions: "Wisdom provides a way of seeing every relation in terms of its contingencies and stabilities, its unique characters and relations, the present factors and their possibilities. Moreover, wisdom entails an additional capacity to balance relations in ways that engender human flourishing, enrichment, progress" (p. 108). Wisdom's generic way of posing any practical problem — as a work of rebalancing "double movements" — must then become the canvas for creating new values and new ways of living, as Cherlin insists in his conclusion (p. 137).

The first example of this understanding of wisdom relates to personality. Ethics, concerned with the consequences of the social environment on the development of personality, can usefully refer to the "tensional circuit" formed by the dual tendency of all existence towards individuation and relation (p. 115). Personality then becomes the "refinement" of this tension within the new "emerging field" that is the social; it is individuality endowed with a recognized communitarian office. This avoids the devastating consequences of a "bad metaphysics of personality" regarding for instance the question of the personality of human fetuses, or the management of the Covid19 pandemic (p. 121). The second example, concerning the relationship between metaphysics and democracy, deepens the first, since through the democratic ideal we achieve what constitutes a *good* personality. The democratic ideal is a faith in individual possibilities, a faith "grounded in those features that are identified through a proper metaphysical inquiry" (p. 127). Indeed, metaphysics reveals a world that rejects absolute fixity, hierarchy and isolation — in other words, a world of freedom, equality and fraternity (Dewey [1918] 2008, 49–53). The metaphysics of "generic traits" definitively settles social criticism in favor of democracy, and provides once and for all a foundation for the effort to subvert all absolutism and authoritarianism (p. 131) and to criticize institutions that prevent the development of capacities for relating and listening to others, for example in the context of concentration camps (p. 133-134).

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This summary does not pretend to fully do justice to the book's density and erudition. One of its most remarkable contributions lies in the effort to restore in a single movement both the genesis of Dewey's metaphysics from "empirical data", its content, and its ethical and political consequences. The author convincingly shows that the

[2] See (Dewey [1925] 2008, 298), cited by (Cherlin 2023, 107).

scheme of the "double movements" partly originates in Dewey's logical studies, and that his metaphysics generalizes it to the scale of existence. It also shows that, for Dewey, metaphysics is not an end in itself, but a means of drawing practical consequences from experience. Overall, Cherlin's effort to show how central "double movements" are to the content of Dewey's metaphysics is impressive. On the other hand, the clearly anti-pragmatist form he gives to this metaphysics seems to us open to criticism in several respects.

First, let's return to this "prefiguration" of the metaphysics of double movements in the logical writings of the years 1900-1916. We may well wonder about the choice of logical writings as the main source of these empirical "prefigurations", since the first chapter invited us to draw on empirical material broader than that of knowledge. But in any case, the term "prefiguration" should be considered with greater caution than Cherlin perhaps does. In works on the history of philosophy, the use of this term always runs the risk of sounding a bit suspect. Whether it is called retrospective illusion or "historical fallacy" (Dewey [1896] 2008, 105), the suspicion is, in short, that of an undue projection of what comes after onto what comes before. Yet although Cherlin claims he does not want to "conflate Dewey's earlier theory with what would come later" (p. 34), he sometimes seems to be moving away from what these "prefigurations" really are according to his own methodology, namely mere empirical material that *can* be metaphysically generalized *when* it comes to metaphysics. On the contrary, Cherlin seems to argue that these "prefigurations" contain something like a latent metaphysics, as if logic itself required a metaphysical extension in order to justify why it is effective (ibid.; see also p. 39, p. 42). But why should this justification come from metaphysics rather than evolutionary biology, or social sciences, placing knowledge within the framework of organic and social interactions? What need did Dewey have to "fully answer" the question of the "relationship between the world and the results of inquiry" (p. 46)? Was he too succumbing to a quest for certainty, that of an integral justification of inquiry procedures by their inscription in the rhythms of all existence? Reading Cherlin, one sometimes gets the impression that the metaphysics of *Experience and Nature* does not arise in response to a specific cultural problem — that of naturalism and nature-culture dualism — and that it does not mark a qualitatively new stage in Dewey's philosophical growth, but only responds to a purely speculative concern for completeness and justification.

Another point of criticism concerns the "ineluctability" of generic traits, on which Cherlin bases his anti-anti-foundationalist position. According to him, Dewey aims at something "ultimate" in genericity or ineluctability, something without any causal or contextual conditions. This supposedly leads to the conclusion that generic traits should not be conceived as "provisional assumptions" that are subject to the test of experience (p. 54). However the conclusion does not follow from the premise, which is problematic in itself.

Turning first to the conclusion, Cherlin seems to gradually shift from the absolute necessity of generic traits to their irrevisability. He confides that he "cannot make sense of the thought that 'contingency-and-stability' or 'relation-and-individuation' are provisional assumptions about nature, or contingent features of nature" (ibid.). But contingency and provisionality are certainly not the same thing. Even supposing that generic traits are "non-contingent ontological constants", why shouldn't the way of knowing them be provisional? This brings us to the more general problem of the methodology of Dewey's metaphysics and its empiricism. For by refusing to recognize that Dewey's metaphysical statements are subject to the test of experience, the author is led to lend Dewey a "new empiricism" (p. 25) that breaks with the experimental method Dewey promotes. It also reintroduces new dualisms between science and philosophy that Dewey sought to avoid, and that "double movements" were supposed to combat. Finally, he is led to

make these double movements the object of a certainty exempt from any possible revision, even though Dewey intended to break with such a claim. He is thereby led to sacrifice Dewey's experimentalism, which is methodologically integral to his naturalism, to a metaphysical ambition. Yet such departures from canonic aspects of Dewey's thought seem insufficiently justified. On the contrary, Dewey stresses in *Experience and Nature* that general relations or correlations are an essential object of scientific knowledge[3]. If science deals with genericity while being experimental, why should metaphysics be any different, even supposing we demand that this genericity be "ultimate"? If this is a way to bring experimental logic back to its "existential" conditions of effectivity, we see no reason why this justification should not itself be subject to test and revision. In short, Dewey's metaphysics could well retain its aim of absolutely "ineluctable" features and its experimental method.

Nevertheless — to move on to the premise of the reasoning above — is Dewey really aiming for traits that are so "ineluctable"? Cherlin points out that "Dewey never, in any of his works, proposes that generic traits of existence come into being or pass out of being. Accordingly, he never suggests that they are contingent or situated" (p. 52). But one wonders whether these "metaphysical" traits can be separated in this way from Dewey's writings as a whole, especially from his logical writings on the role of genericity in inquiry. Take, for example, the "logical reconstruction" sketched in chapter 6 of *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (a text virtually absent from Cherlin's book, as is *The Quest for Certainty*). Here, Dewey conceives of the generic as an empirical instrument that is produced and tested empirically. It is not an absolute that exists prior to any context: it is a fallible tool, produced and summoned contextually, helping to analyze singular problematic situations. We do not need to know if generic traits are absolutely necessary in order to draw practical conclusions from them, whether we're talking about anchoring logic in the traits of nature, shedding light on the analysis of new moral and political situations through "double movements", or inventing new arrangements on this basis. For this, they don't need to be cut off from a metaphysics that itself claims that nothing is absolutely stable and necessary[4]: the fact that double movements *almost* are (and experimentation won't be able to prove anything else anyway) is enough to make them relevant philosophical tools.

But, finally, why see them as radically more than tools? The question we raise here is not one of realism, for Dewey's metaphysics can be pragmatic without renouncing its realism, its adequacy to reality. All that pragmatism requires is that the criterion of this adequacy be sought in practical consequences rather than in a correspondence to a prior reality. No, the question raised is that of foundationalism. By considering generic traits as removed from all contingency and revision, Cherlin returns to a quest for certainty from which, in response to Rorty's initial criticisms, it should rather be shown that Dewey's metaphysics manages to distance itself. Certainly, Cherlin insists on the need to draw practical consequences from this metaphysics, and to do so, to seek out and even invent singular instantiations of "double movements". But he draws these consequences in a foundationalist way, i.e. from something that is assumed to infallibly guide the criticism of methods and institutions, while itself being exempt from all criticism. And certainly, he seeks to reduce generic trait's prescriptive character to a minimum, by opening up the margin of "creativity" in the social inquiry they are supposed to ground. But the generic features still seem to impose unsurpassable

[3] This is a point that Cherlin obscures by referring to "relation" sometimes as interaction, sometimes as internal tension in the rhythm of double movement, but never in the sense it takes on in *Experience and Nature* and *The Quest for Certainty*, that is, as uniform and constant correlations in tension with qualitative uniqueness. On this point, see chapters 5 and 6 of Boisvert's book cited above.

[4] Dewey noted that the assertion of the universal existence of process leads back to the quest for certainty traditionally associated with a metaphysics of the eternal (Dewey [1925] 2008, 49) cited by (Cherlin 2023, 57). The same is true of a metaphysics that would posit a universal, de-contextualized tension of the precarious-and-stable.

limits on the latter, making every problem a question of dosing and balancing between double movements.

Why then not embrace the pragmatist alternative to this foundationalism, which is more consistent with Dewey's work? Contrary to Cherlin's assertion, pragmatism is able to justify by itself, though fallibly, its extension beyond knowledge; nor is there anything preventing it from adopting the naturalistic hypothesis of a continuity between nature and experience in order to seek its own grounding in existence. On the contrary, everything in Dewey's work invites us to build a pragmatist metaphysics of pragmatism, naturalistic because it postulates *experimentally* a continuity between experience and nature. The content of Cherlin's metaphysics of "double movements" could then be retained, but it would become revisable, experimental and naturalistic in this sense, and would be tested based on its ability to effectively guide criticism. The challenge would then be to more precisely establish what this critical — now pragmatic rather than foundational — function of double movements might be. This would make it possible to put an end to the doubts raised by Rorty over 40 years ago, and which Cherlin sometimes confirms in spite of himself.

But this difference in method or attitude, important as it is, in no way detracts from the interest of Cherlin's study of the content of Dewey's metaphysics. On the contrary, even those pragmatist readers of Dewey whom Cherlin opposes will wish to retain the essence of that content, albeit to take it in a different direction. For this reason, this remarkable work is highly recommended to anyone interested in Dewey's metaphysics or, more broadly, in the unity of his work.

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