THE POWER AND PROMISE OF BHIMRAO AMBEDKAR'S NAVAYANA PRAGMATISM

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ABSTRACT: Most accounts of pragmatism's global travels miss its past—and future—in India. As the world's largest democracy, India offers an exciting opportunity to explore new potentials of pragmatism as a practical philosophical approach. This article explores the pragmatism of Bhimrao Ambedkar, an anti-caste reformer and political leader. Ambedkar was not only one of the chief architects of the Indian constitution in the 1940s; he was also a devoted student of John Dewey's from his days at Columbia University in 1913-1916. There are historical and conceptual reasons to count Ambedkar as part of the diverse pragmatist tradition. Furthermore, his "new vehicle" or *navayana* pragmatism represents a novel philosophy that foregrounds human personality and the shared social values in unified communities to resist sources of oppression such as caste in a democratic society.

Keywords: Ambedkar, India, caste, Dewey, democracy

The engagement of Chinese intellectuals and activists such as Hu Shih with John Dewey's philosophy is by now a common part of our tales of pragmatism's global fortunes. While one can make an argument that the philosophy promulgated by the classical pragmatists—Charles S. Peirce, William James, and John Dewey—is unique to the American context in some important way, their engagement with global currents of philosophical thought is unmistakable. For instance, both Dewey and James wrestle with a distinctive Hegelian legacy in their own fashions. But the question remains: what unnoticed global roots—and future branches –of American pragmatism might we have missed? What more can we say about the global nature of pragmatism?

In this article, I want to focus on one part of the story of pragmatism that's only recently received sustained attention: its fate in India. The story of pragmatism in China is well known (Keenan 1977; Wang 2007). While the fortunes of pragmatism waned in China after the 1950s, and now grow in a certain manner independent of the country's politics, pragmatism ultimately lost out to communism in that 20th century battle. Hu and his compatriots did an admirable job spreading Dewey's gospel of science and democracy throughout China, but Mao—who was a note taker for some of Dewey's speeches—would ultimately position pragmatism and Dewey (and Hu) as enemies of the Chinese state after his successful capture of power. But in India, Bhimrao Ambedkar (1891-1956) would take what he learned in Dewey's classes and books into Indian politics, and spearhead the drafting of India's democratic constitution in the 1940s. In a certain way of looking at matters, pragmatism (and democracy) lost in China and won in India. Yet we have not fully explored the story of Dewey's engagement with India through his student, Ambedkar. If we do so, we shall see both a historical story of influence and adaptation, and a conceptual story of how pragmatism's emphasis on reconstruction can be applied even to its core texts and figures such as Dewey.

There are obvious clues that Ambedkar saw himself as fitting into the tradition of Dewey's form of pragmatism. On his way to New York in 1952 to receive an honorary degree from Columbia, Dewey died. Writing to his wife, Savita, from New York upon learning this news, Ambedkar lamented that "I was looking forward to meet[ing] Prof. Dewey. But he died on the 2nd [sic] when our plane was in Rome. I am so sorry. I owe all my intellectual life to him. He was a wonderful man" (Rattu 1995, 74-75). Ambedkar was not prone to such grand statements about his intellectual influences like this, so we must take it seriously. Taking it seriously means looking into Ambedkar's connections with Dewey, and what emphases appear when we place his original thought in some sort of relationship to Dewey and pragmatism. I have started this in-depth exploration in recent work (e.g., Stroud 2023), but there is much more to say on the evolution of pragmatism in India.

This article will explore the evolving nature of pragmatism in India, with a particular eye on what is unique about the pragmatism that results from Bhimrao Ambed-

kar's reception of Dewey's philosophy. Make no mistake about it: Ambedkar is a unique and creative thinker who ought to be added to the pragmatist tradition and philosophy in general on his own terms. He was no mere copier of Dewey's thought. But the reconstructive method he employed and the values he advocated did not fall from the sky. Pragmatist thinkers believe and argue for many things, but they almost all share an emphasis on the reconstructive potential of individual or group inquiry to make future experience better or more satisfying than past experience. Ambedkar shares in this quest with his unique form of Indian pragmatism, and shows how pragmatism's adaptation to issues such as caste oppression further fills out our narratives of its global evolution.

The Roots of Ambedkar's Indian Pragmatism

Ambedkar's road to pragmatism was far from predictable. He was born a poor "untouchable" (now called "Dalit") child in India, and experienced the crushing realities of the caste system through his early years. Much later (in the 1930s) he would pen a series of short autobiographical essays recounting the discrimination and harassment he faced as one consigned—through a prevalent interpretation of the theory of *karma* and rebirth—to a putatively degraded birth. His touch and presence were counted as polluting and as something to be absolutely avoided. Needless to say, Ambedkar's younger years were not a source of inspiration for him. Instead, they showed him what his experience *lacked*, and what moral standing he was *missing*. Yet young Ambedkar worked hard and became infatuated with learning.

Through a combination of lucky encounters (namely, with the reformer and teacher K.A. Keluskar) and hard work, Ambedkar earned the support of Sayajirao Gaekwad III of Baroda, a nearby princely state. The Gaekwad was devoted to social reform, and therefore ran a sort of affirmative action program in his realm for so-called untouchable persons. He also was taken by American education, largely because it had a sheen of progress and useful rebellion against the past that the British overlords didn't quite like; the Gaekwad was in a habit sending young Indians to America to be educated (see Gopal 2023; Rathore 2023; Stroud 2024). Ambedkar would be one of the beneficiaries of this policy, leaving for Columbia University in the summer of 1913 with the Gaekwad's support.

It was at Columbia that Ambedkar stumbled into pragmatism. According to the agreement he signed with the Gaekwad, Ambedkar was not supposed to audit or take any courses besides ones in his field of economics. But somehow he ended up in John Dewey's 1914 Philosophy 231 course focused on "Psychological Ethics." This course was a standard offering of Dewey's since his time at the University of Chicago. The content of this course, however, changed every few years as Dewey's own pragmatism developed. By the time that Ambedkar heard the American opine on ethics and psychology, Dewey had moved past his earlier neo-Hegelian tinged psychology of the 1890s and was even moving beyond the individualistic focus in his 1908 book with James Tufts, *Ethics*. Ambedkar heard a whole semester of Dewey talking about ethics from the individual standpoint, but this was the individual as social organism, one who took habits and customs from a group that greatly affected the individual's interaction with an environment. In other words, Ambedkar heard Dewey engage the naturalistic psychology that undergirded *Democracy and Education*, a book that also greatly influenced Ambedkar's own pragmatist vision. Ambedkar would take from this course, as well as from his own heavily annotated copies of the *Ethics* (1908) and *Democracy and Education* (1916), the idea that individual habits mattered for experience and for the achievement of social justice. Habits can be intelligent and well-adjusted to social and natural environments, or they could be badly adjusted; education could be one way of making these latter habits better. While Dewey did not reference the graded hierarchy of caste

in these lectures, Ambedkar was surely thinking ahead to the applicants of this melioristic psychology.[1]

In his final year in residence at Columbia during 1915-1916, Ambedkar would take Dewey's year-long Philosophy 131-132 "Moral and Political Philosophy." This series of courses was another regular offering that he alternated with "Psychological Ethics" since teaching at Chicago. It was a rare foray into the philosophy of law for Dewey, as half of the course was designed to deal with the interrelationship of law with social customs. The first portion of the course surveyed the functioning and formation of customs in the west through the lens of the alternating development of various social philosophies. Dewey was particularly enamored with the long-standing debate between individualism and communitarianism, even though he did spend considerable effort unpacking certain traditions—such as the tradition winding its way through Kant, Fichte, Hegel, and Marx—that engaged nationalism from the position of the formation of the modern state. This year-long series of courses was important for pragmatism's global prospects, since the Chinese reformer, Hu Shih, was attending the same small seminar as was Ambedkar.

Building on these significant courses by Dewey, Ambedkar would continue a life-long engagement with pragmatist thought. Even though there's no evidence that he wrote to or met with Dewey, even when he briefly returned to New York for a few weeks at the end of 1931 (Stroud 2023b), he took pains to keep up on Dewey's thought from afar by collecting his books. By my count of what remains in his personal library preserved in archives, Ambedkar owned twenty-two books by or about John Dewey. Some of the books by Dewey that he possessed are: *Ethics* (1908), *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy* (1910), *German Philosophy and Politics* (1915), *Democracy and Education* (1916, 1925), *Essays in Experimental Logic* (1916, 1953), *Experience and Nature* (1929), *The Quest for Certainty* (1930), *Freedom and Culture* (1939), *Education Today* (1940), *Problems of Men* (1946), *Human Nature and Conduct* (1948), and Joseph Ratner's edited collection of Dewey's works, *Intelligence in the Modern World: John Dewey's Philosophy* (1939).[2] Ambedkar would heavily mark most of these books, and passages from some of them—especially *Democracy and Education* and the 1908 *Ethics*—would serve as a sort of raw material in the construction of his own specific vision of pragmatism. What sort of pragmatism did he distill from his lifelong engagement with parts of Dewey's philosophy?

The Contours of Navayana Pragmatism

Ambedkar's complex thought developed in a sustained confrontation with elements of Indian society that upheld caste customs. These are the interpretations of Hinduism that place particular emphasis on one's birth being dictated by past *karma* or moral merit, and the overall ranking of these birth groups by privilege and worth. As Ambedkar would describe it, caste implied a graded hierarchy of value. Each caste looked down at those "lesser" than its own members, and those members in turn were looked down upon by those higher in the hierarchy. At the top, Ambedkar maintained, were the Brahmins, a group that had been traditionally entrusted with the continuation and interpretation of religious texts and rituals. Ambedkar fiercely argued that much of what was taken to be Hinduism was really *Brahmanism*, a religion shaped by Brahmins and allied castes for the benefit of these same power holders. At the bottom of this hierarchy were the outcastes—so called "untouchables" like Ambedkar, who were feared as religiously polluting by their touch or presence (for more on Ambedkar's engagement with the history of caste, see Teltumbde 2018).

[1] We know exactly what Ambedkar was taught through recently unearthed archival materials from Dewey's classes. See Stroud 2023, 68-102.

[2] For a complete list of Ambedkar's pragmatism-related books, see Stroud 2023a, 5.

Ambedkar developed a body of thought on caste and its harms for community formation alongside his legislative and civil efforts to resist it. Thus, his scholarship in books and articles dovetailed naturally with his on-the-ground activism and protest organizing. His collected works span some four million words in English, and this does not count the millions of other words he penned in Marathi and Hindi, and in the course of his tumultuous career as a journalist and newspaper owner. Capturing Ambedkar's philosophy is a challenge, but it is not unexpected. Even with professional philosophers like Dewey, a philosophy might be usefully extracted or hypothesized, but never at the cost of thinking that a complex thinker always maintained the same foci and commitments over a body of ever-evolving thought. For instance, Ambedkar's writings and arguments evolved over his many decades of thinking and acting, and his concerns and positions often matched the challenges of specific situations. Thus, we can speak of Ambedkar's *philosophy,* but we ought to recognize that there's room for examining the evolution and tensions within this abstracted body of thought. Let us examine his unique form of pragmatism with an eye to constructing a more general philosophy, albeit one that does not maintain that these themes and commitments are there in this same form in all of his periods and all of his works.

Why consider Ambedkar's thought as a form of pragmatism? First, he was inspired by parts of what he heard Dewey teach and what the American advocated in his books. Ambedkar was also inspired by what Dewey *ignored* or *got wrong*. We must resist accounts that exclaim the rather obvious point that Ambedkar's thought "moves beyond Dewey" (e.g., Berg & Midtgarden 2020) as a demur to understanding Ambedkar in the wake of Dewey's pragmatism. Such a naive approach leaves unexamined three vital assumptions: that Dewey's thought is one constant doctrine, that Ambedkar's philosophy is one doctrine and is wholly different from (or "beyond") any part of Dewey's consistent philosophy, and that matters of influence within a tradition mandate homogeneity.

Upon reflection, one can see how these assumptions are all unwarranted. Ambedkar and Dewey's thought evolved and changed. Any description of their thought is a provisional capturing an ever-changing movement of ideas and actions. But there are undeniable points of contact, extension, and refusal. In our discourse, inclusion within a tradition as a way to denote influence and continuity is by no means a claim to identity or sameness, even if the thought of the thinkers in question could be determinatively reduced to one and only one doctrine. Ambedkar, like Hu Shih and William James, was a pragmatist precisely because he differed from figures like Dewey within a tradition filled with discourse, disagreement, and alteration.

There are many ways to see Ambedkar's philosophy, but when we use the label of "pragmatism," we are drawing attention to Ambedkar's acts of extending, changing, adding to, or resisting themes in previous iterations of pragmatism such as Dewey's own evolving body of thought. We draw historical and conceptual attention to certain parts of his thought, whereas looking at him as a lawyer, a civil rights activist, a politician, or a Buddhist calls for attention to other constellations of facts, arguments, and commitments. Thinking of him as pragmatist foregrounds parts we overlook as well. For instance, we can see how Ambedkar's thought prized the practical, and the practical import of theorizing. Notice can be given to the fact that this emphasis even served as a framework for much of his critical theorizing about caste's history and conceptual functioning. We can make a new sense out of his approach to the issues of his day and its reconstructive intent. Like Dewey, his unique thought subscribed to a general path of meliorism or the improvement of lived experience. He telegraphed this melioristic focus in his late work, *Riddles in Hinduism*. There, he maintained that

> Philosophy is no purely theoretic matter. It has practical potentialities. Philosophy has its roots in the problems of life and whatever theories philosophy propounds must return to society as instruments of re-constructing society. It is not enough to know. Those who know must endeavour to fulfil. (Ambedkar 1987b, 286)

We can see these constellations of commitments, ideals, approaches, and historical influences if we consider taking Ambedkar as part of the pragmatist tradition. These are just some of the reasons why thinking about Ambedkar *as a pragmatist* allows us to see him in new, and hopefully useful, ways, further magnifying the contribution his thought can make.

In the following sections, I will organize his philosophy—what I call his *navayana* (or "new vehicle") *pragmatism* into abstract and distinct commitments. Of course, much more detail can and should be unearthed on each of these issues. And these aren't the only axes on which to analyze and generalize Ambedkar's complex body of thought. More can and must be said in future studies on his pragmatism in reference to his Buddhism—as I have discovered, there is good evidence that he wanted to *combine* elements of Dewey's account of democracy *with* traditional Buddhism as early as 1914 (Stroud 2023a, 7-12). Nevertheless, it's a useful endeavor to consider Ambedkar as a unique sort of pragmatist and answer the initial question—what are the general contours of Ambedkar's vision of pragmatism? In doing so, we can establish some of the unique contributions of Ambedkar's *navayana pragmatism* to the global history of pragmatism. Only after such contours are determined can we fully explore other aspects such as his synthetic reading of Buddhism later in his life.

Theme 1: The individual personality matters

All accounts of Ambedkar's life, thought, and mission begin, and often end, with the target of his ire—*caste*. Ambedkar was a so-called untouchable (now, denoted by the self-chosen term "Dalit," Marathi for "crushed"). This caste status was assigned and determined by birth placement—Ambedkar's parents were of this caste, and so was he. Untouchability is a complex topic, but as Ambedkar discussed it, it mattered to his life since it rendered his presence and touch as ritually polluting. Throughout his youth—and his adulthood—he encountered situations where individuals resisted sharing water sources with him, refused to cut his hair, and refused to do business with him. All of these concerns were out of concern for maintaining caste distinctions and avoiding contact with an "untouchable." Ambedkar spent much effort tracing out the sources of untouchability in the ancient *Vedas* of India, and in classical texts such as the *Bhagavad Gita*. His concern was always with the customs of Hindus—based upon a hierarchical interpretation of caste in their religious texts—negatively affecting himself and other low-caste or outcaste individuals. Caste dictated not only negative characteristics as pollution or repulsion, it also laid the path to what sort of occupation an individual was allowed to take. As Ambedkar put it in his *Annihilation of Caste* text, the "Caste System is not merely [a] division of labour. It is also a division of labourers" (Ambedkar 1979a, 47). It offered a graded hierarchy of caste groups, often divided by occupation, that placed some as more valuable and normatively desired than others.

But what was so bad about the caste system for Ambedkar? One answer is suggested by pointing to its harms—it literally excluded Ambedkar from the immediate scene of education, for instance, since he had to sit outside the classroom for fear of polluting his fellow students (Teltumbde 2024). But even when caste wasn't overtly harmful, Ambedkar still saw it as an awful social invention. It struck at a basic respect that each person was due. If one attends to some of the common arguments he made, one can see that the basis to his critique of caste hierarchies involved the concept of *personality.*

Ambedkar would often refer to the violation that caste represented to the personality of individual Dalits. For instance, in one of his first public appearances as an anti-caste activist, he testified in front of a British-led commission considering the extension of the franchise in India. In 1919, Ambedkar tied caste and society's highest aims together in the concept of personality:

> The growth of personality is the highest aim of society. Social arrangement must secure free initiative and opportunity to every individual to assume any role he is capable of assuming provided it is socially desirable. A new [role] is a renewal and growth of personality. But when an association— and a Government is after all an association— *is* such that in it every role cannot be assumed by all, it tends to develop the personality of the few at the cost of the many— a result scrupulously to be avoided in the interest of Democracy. (Ambedkar 1979b, 251)

Caste hierarchies left Dalits—and lower castes in general—out of the decision-making processes. This was harmful because such political and social empowerment was necessary for growing as a person, as a personality. Even given legal protections, the social machinations of caste still precluded this growth: "Legally the Untouchable is a freeman. Yet, socially he has no freedom for the growth of his personality. This is indeed a very glaring paradox" (Ambedkar 1989, 91). Later in his life, Ambedkar would return again to the notion of personality, claiming in 1942 that the struggle against caste oppression was about development, respect, and growth: "For ours is a battle, not for wealth or for power. It is a battle for freedom. It is a battle for the reclamation of human personality which has been suppressed and mutilated by the Hindu Social System" (Ambedkar 2003a, 276).

Thus, a central value in Ambedkar's pragmatism must be enunciated as the concept of *personality.* But what exactly is personality? For both Dewey—especially in his earlier years—and Ambedkar, it pointed at the unique set of impulses and potentialities an individual human organism had in its social functioning. It was also normative, gesturing at what that individual *might become* if social and natural environments were so structured as to let their will and agency count for something. Caste, with its degrading of the low and lower, and with its strictures placed on movement and occupation, limited vital channels for such self-development. The individual could not flourish in the function between their own impulses and desires and the social environment that mediated these organic pushes outwards. The habits and customs of caste dominated the individual, and his or her desires, projects, and hopes. Their personality was truncated along with this freedom, since the autonomy of choice only matters so far as it was directed by and reflected upon their unique self.

Caste stratification destroyed the chances for the growth and development of personality, and this was a central concern for Ambedkar's navayana pragmatism. Personality was what made each individual unique; it was even precluded by the earlier system of caste known as *chaturvarna*, where individuals are said to belong to one of four groups based upon inner worth: *brahmins* (priests), *kshatriyas* (warriors), *vaishyas* (merchants), or *shudras* (servants). Ambedkar acknowledged that the modern system of caste was a later evolution from this *varna* system, but he argued that both divided people based upon what was antecedently "inner" in way that held back novel individual development.

Anticipating that critics like Mohandas Gandhi would oppose caste (and untouchability), but not the varna system of societal division, Ambedkar harshly criticized the more limited groupings of *varna* as just as problematic as the thousands of castes that were operative in colonial India. The problem for both practices was that individuals were stuck into a limited range of discrete classes based upon qualities bestowed upon them at birth. Both *varna* and modern practices of caste said that each person had an essence or essential quality from a set list of such qualities; furthermore, this inner quality was there putatively since birth, and merely had to be discovered in order to ascertain a path of development or use. In his *Annihilation of Caste* text, Ambedkar likens the *varna* system approved of by Gandhi and others to Plato's tri-fold division of individuals in his republic. Both fail because they misread the value and uniqueness of personality in each human individual:

> The chief criticism against Plato is that his idea of lumping of individuals into a few sharply marked-off classes is a very superficial view of man and his powers. Plato had no perception of the unique-

> ness of every individual, of his incommensurability with others, of each individual forming a class of his own. He had no recognition of the infinite diversity of active tendencies and combination of tendencies of which an individual is capable. (Ambedkar 1979a, 60)

Class-based analyses suffered from this tendency—the erasure of individual difference, and the further development of new individual differences as the course of experience progresses. Ambedkar's pragmatism valued personality primarily because it offered a check on customs such as *varna* and caste, as well as theoretical moves that smashed individuals into groups all sharing the same putative characteristics (as was his problem with Marxist class analysis).

Ambedkar's pragmatism, following a similar path to Dewey's pragmatism, connected the development of personality with social organization. In that early 1919 testimony, Ambedkar was explicit that social environments such as that fostered by participatory democracy mattered because they enable the growth of personality in individual agents:

> It will be granted that each kind of association, as it is an educative environment, exercises a formative influence on the active dispositions of its members. Consequently, what one is as a person is what one is as associated with others. A Government for the people, but not by the people, is sure to educate some into masters and others into subjects; because it is by the reflex effects of association that one can feel and measure the growth of personality. (Ambedkar 1979b, 251)

Ambedkar saw the role this term played in Dewey's early thought. For instance, Ambedkar was always taken by Dewey's early essay, "The Ethics of Democracy" from 1888. He echoed part of this essay in the early 1930s in one of his speeches, and pestered a young student in London (V.B. Kadam) to transcribe a copy for him in 1954 as he couldn't find his own copy of the work. In this early work—one from Dewey's neo-Hegelian phase—Ambedkar saw Dewey weave this concept into his early ethics of self-realization; he would also observe Dewey extolling its value, as he would write in this 1888 essay that "democracy means that *personality* is the first and final reality." It is in this early work that Dewey connects the ideal of personality "with the other notes of democracy, liberty, equality, fraternity," which together form the "highest ethical ideal."[3] Ambedkar would extend the meaning of personality into a realm Dewey barely thought of—the socially deforming powers of caste hierarchy.

Theme 2: Democracy is way of life

Personality and individual uniqueness—or incommensurability—is not the only aspect for Ambedkar's social philosophy. As he puts it in *Annihilation of Caste*, "In the world of action, the individual is one limit and society the other. Between them lie all sorts of associative arrangements of lesser and larger scope—families, friendships, cooperative associations, business combines, political parties, bands of thieves and robbers" (Ambedkar 1979a, 64). Ambedkar, like many other pragmatist thinkers, saw individual habits and group customs as interwoven and as vital parts to diagnosing political and ethical problems—and to meliorating them. While many might be tempted to begin and end exposition of "democracy" at the institutional level, or at the level of decision-making processes, Ambedkar followed his teacher Dewey in placing democracy's primary concern in our habits of engaging others. For instance, Ambedkar was fond of echoing Dewey's line in *Democracy and Education* that "Democracy is not merely a form of Government. It is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (Ambedkar 1979a, 57; Dewey 1985, 93). Dewey moved "democracy" beyond a form of government and into the realm of our habits; Ambedkar pushed this further, noting that "It is a form of the organization of Society. There are two essential conditions which characterize a democratically constituted society. First is the absence of stratification of society into classes. The Second is a social habit on the part of individuals and groups

[3] I detail the evidence for Ambedkar's sustained engagement with this early work by Dewey in Stroud 2023a, 189-191.

which is ready for continuous readjustment or recognition of reciprocity of interests." (Ambedkar 1987b, 281).

For Ambedkar's pragmatism, our habits help determine if we share interests and form unified communities. If our habits, and our group customs, divide us and denigrate others, then community is not formed; antagonistic subgroups are. Our habits of seeing others as equal to us and as worth associating with hold out the hope of creating democratic society, and with it, democratic government. But make no mistake, Ambedkar is clear that government functioning depends on social and psychological realities: "Unfortunately to what extent the task of good Government depends upon the mental and moral disposition of its subjects has seldom been realized. Democracy is more than a political machine. It is even more than a social system. It is an attitude of mind or a philosophy of life" (Ambedkar 1987b, 283).

What characterizes an equal and unified community for navayana pragmatism? Ambedkar relies on Dewey's standard from *Democracy and Education* in his own *Annihilation of Caste* (1936). There, echoing Dewey, he argues against caste division by pointing to the criteria of shared interests and communication:

> The question to be asked in determining whether a given society is an ideal society; is not whether there are groups in it, because groups exist in all societies. The questions to be asked in determining what is an ideal society are: How numerous and varied are the interests which are consciously shared by the groups? How full and free is the interplay with other forms of associations? Are the forces that separate groups and classes more numerous than the forces that unite? (Ambedkar 1979a, 64)[4]

Caste, as Ambedkar forcefully argues in such texts as *Annihilation of Caste*, "is a notion, it is a state of the mind. The destruction of Caste does not therefore mean the destruction of a physical barrier. It means a notional change" (Ambedkar 1979a, 68). These habits, taken from the perspective of common group traits and tendencies of action, become the *customs* of caste of certain groups.

Caste is harmful for Ambedkar because it separates groups and limits the possibilities for forming the unified communities of shared interest that democracy as a way of life or associated living entail. At the individual level, the habits and customs of caste truncate the growth and realization of human personality. The shared, supportive environment of democratic community, with its numerous and varied contacts among groups, is precisely what allows for this expansion and development of each unique personality. Democracy is a way of life insofar as it represents a collection of habits of how we see, value, and interact with others in our de facto communities.

Theme 3: Communities are measured by their balancing of liberty, equality, and fraternity

So far, we have seen that Ambedkar's navayana pragmatism has a strong commitment to the ideal of human personality developing unencumbered by social strictures. We have also sensed that social environments matter in enable or disabling this growth of personality. The sort of social arrangement created by widespread habits that compel more unity, integration, and engagement with other individuals and groups is what Ambedkar (and Dewey) would identify as "democratic." But how can we determine if prevailing habits and customs are democratic in this way? How can we cognize and discuss the specific ways they fall short of the ideals of developing individual personalities and creating unified communities?

The point Ambedkar's pragmatism stresses is that political democracy relies upon certain habits that form a way of life among others. In a speech presenting the draft constitution he helped write in 1949, he warns that "Political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of it social democracy." He then asks, "What does social democracy mean?" His answer is revealing: "It means a way of life," he continues, "which recognizes liberty, equality

[4] This passage is an "echo" of a passage from Dewey 1985. See Stroud 2023a for an explanation of how Ambedkar's rhetorical technique of echoing and appropriating specific portions of Dewey's text for his own unique argumentative purposes functioned.

and fraternity as the principles of life. These principles of liberty, equality and fraternity are not to be treated as separate items in a trinity. They form a union of trinity in the sense that to divorce one from the other is to defeat the very purpose of democracy" (Ambedkar 1994, 1216). This is an extension of what he argued in 1936 in *Annihilation of Caste*, where he asserts his standard for an ideal society: "If you ask me, my ideal would be a society based on Liberty, Equality and Fraternity" (Ambedkar 1979a, 57.)

What has changed from 1936 to 1949 is that Ambedkar has made the habitual, personal basis of ideal society more explicit. It was there in 1936, of course, but explicit talk of democracy as "a way of life" was not present. But these evocations of these three values show us something about his general philosophy of democracy in general. A just or ideal society is one that respects individual growth *and* the unity of groups at various levels in such a way as to *balance* individual freedom (liberty), the relative worth of each in social considerations (equality), and shared interests among individuals as group members (fraternity). Ambedkar accuses Hinduism, especially in the form that privileges Brahminical hierarchies, of being opposed to key parts of this triad of values—namely, fraternity among all and the equality of all.

Where do these values come from? This is a challenge for pragmatists. Both Dewey and Ambedkar rebelled against appeals to certain and special arenas of knowledge. You can't derive morality from pure reason, or have it delivered from God. For Ambedkar, the caste system was said to be related to the holy scriptures or *shastras* of the Hindu tradition, and thus divinely ordained. It was beyond criticism or alteration, as it was part of *sanatan dharma* or a timeless teaching. Ambedkar's struggles were similar to Dewey's resistance to Christian attacks on social change and new scientific approaches; both resisted those who claimed that traditions of the past had a divine sanction and were outside of the realm of improvement. But both thinkers needed *ideals* to guide and measure the worth of change and alteration.

Dewey's standard solution was to find the ideals that guided ethical growth *within* parts of a tradition. They did not reside in some ahistorical realm outside of tradition. But this solution would not work for Ambedkar, since he saw the majority of tendencies within his native tradition of Hinduism as not enabling the sort of caste critique he so desperately desired. This is where the three values of the French revolution came in. These are not *dharmic* concepts from the Sanskrit tradition. Ambedkar nowhere claimed they had some divine certainty, or even that they sprung from the human powers of mind like Kant's appeals to pure practical reason seemed to assert. Later, he would claim they came from the Buddha's teachings, although it is clear that these are English translations of French concepts that he (most likely) heard for the first time in Dewey's spring 1916 moral and political philosophy course (Stroud 2023a, 54).

The point that seems evident to me is that Ambedkar found a *usefulness* in these three values; that reconstructive value was all the warrant he needed for applying them in a critique of Hindu social structures. I call these concepts *semi-transcendent ideals*, since they reside outside of the dominant Hindu tradition or any tradition that Ambedkar is enmeshed in. This motto associated with the French revolution does not arise from Ambedkar's cultural placement and these values do not historically derive from Sanskrit or Pali concepts (although Ambedkar later relates them to the philosophy of the Buddha), so they are not strictly *immanent* values in any straightforward way. Of course, he also doesn't tie them closely to their original contexts in French philosophy and culture. But they are not *transcendent* since they have no claim attached to them for a validity that goes beyond human society and conceptual contingency.

Ambedkar's pragmatism recognized both the necessity of ideals and the danger associated with taking them as transcendentally justified. "Ideals as norms are good and are necessary," Ambedkar argued. "Neither a society nor an individual can do without a norm," he con-

tinued, "But a norm must change with changes in time and circumstances. No norm can be permanently fixed. There must always be room for revaluation of the values of our norm. The possibility of revaluing values remains open only when the institution is not invested with sacredness. Sacredness prevents revaluation of its values. Once sacred, always sacred" (Ambedkar 1990, 31). The ideals of caste and *varna* were too sedimented, too holy. They could not be flexibly applied in a way separate from their divine certainty. The trio of equality, liberty, and fraternity could be extracted from the French context—and away from the justifications given by French philosophers—and applied to Hinduism or correlated with other traditions such as Buddhism. There was a contingency to these ideals that attracted Ambedkar.

These values occupy a middle ground—between the confines of a specific cultural context and transcendent universality—that allows Ambedkar to criticize the traditions that oppress him and fellow untouchables in India without asserting his own claim to a timeless standard or source of knowledge and value. In short, this trio of semi-transcendent values is useful because it can be applied to *any* group or *any* community. This application is by choice, and not forced by some necessity of reason, though. Ambedkar simply chooses them to make his point, and he thinks we will see in their functioning a usefulness that justifies this choice of ideals. How do they function in such a manner? They derive their usefulness from the tension among them—they point to features that emerge in almost any situation featuring individuals living among others. How much does the individual matter in terms of their ability to act? Does this liberty occlude and oppress the freedom of others? If so, there is a lack of balance among the individual concern of liberty and the more communal concern of equality among group members. In other words, liberty is out of balance with equality. Does a state of affairs create group unity and shared interests at the expense of too much individual liberty? If so, fraternity is not optimally balanced with liberty. The power of these ideals is not in some distracting claim of an origin in divine or pure sources; their functioning instead resides in how they focus our attention to important values and capacities in our experience, and how we might better optimize or balance each among the others.

Theme 4: Fraternity imposes certain limits on the pursuit of justice

Let us focus on one of the semi-transcendent ideals that Ambedkar advocates: fraternity. This value is often taken to detail the endpoint of Ambedkar's pursuit of social democracy. When we achieve fraternity, fellow-feeling, or *maitri* toward others, we will have the sort of unified, supportive community animated by vital shared interests that democracy as a way of life postulates. This is accurate, but it misses an important aspect to Ambedkar's pragmatism. Fraternity denotes a habit and a check on the *means* available to get to such an end state. It is both an *end* in Ambedkar's social philosophy and a means—or perhaps, a limitation on the means we might consider.

To explain this point, let us turn toward an unpublished book Ambedkar authored in the last few years of his life—*Riddles in Hinduism*. This book and its history is complex, and I've detailed parts of that story elsewhere (see Stroud 2022). In this work, Ambedkar emphasizes the habitual basis for democracy. "Whether the Democratic form of Government will result in good," Ambedkar writes, "will depend upon the disposition of the individuals composing society. If the mental disposition of the individuals is democratic then the democratic form of Government can be expected to result in good Government" (Ambedkar 1987b, 282-283). After evoking Dewey and the pragmatist conception of democracy as community formation, he turns to the triad of semi-transcendent values taken from the French revolution. He then precedes to answer an odd, but important, implied question: which one of these values is more important?

This is an odd question because he is clearly committed to these values as equal and in need of *balancing* in

a just society. But it is a very human reaction to seek out the *really* important factor and lift it above the crowd. This is precisely what happens in much of the modern discourse about caste—caste oppression is noticed because of the inequality present, so appeals for justice emphasize *equality* as seemingly the most important concept to focus on. Ambedkar seems to be anticipating such a reasonable reaction, since our felt lacks focus our attention like no other incentive many times. In this book addressing Hindu readers, he opines that "some equate democracy with equality and liberty." These values are "no doubt the deepest concern of Democracy. But the more important question is what sustains equality and liberty" (Ambedkar 1987b, 283)? Answering this second question, Ambedkar argues that "What sustains equality and liberty is fellow-feeling," or "what the French Revolutionists called fraternity" (Ambedkar 1987b, 283).

If Ambedkar is truly committed to a balancing account of these three values, it seems odd to advocate such a primary role for fraternity. While others have explored some of the tensions and historical evolutions of these three values in Ambedkar's thought, I want to explore why he was tempted to place fraternity in such a role in this later appeal for democracy as a habit or way of life.[5] Looking at his reasoning in *Riddles in Hinduism*, we see intimations that fraternity has a role to play as a *means* or *instrument* for creating—or sustaining—certain end states or social goals. "Without Fraternity," Ambedkar continues, "liberty would destroy equality and equality would destroy liberty. If in Democracy liberty does not destroy equality and equality does not destroy liberty, it is because at the basis of both there is fraternity." "Fraternity," Ambedkar emphasizes, "is therefore the root of Democracy" (Ambedkar 1987b, 283).

There is something important behind this emphasis on fraternity, something vital for understanding Ambedkar's navayana pragmatism. Like Dewey's pragmatism (e.g., Dewey 2008), I believe that Ambedkar is committed to the idea that democratic ends require democratic means. Fraternity, fellow-feeling, or the Buddhist concept of *maitri* is how Ambedkar enunciates this common commitment. To fully understand this reading of fraternity, we must understand Ambedkar's account of force. From as early as 1918, and as late as the 1950s, Ambedkar was consistently intrigued by the question of how much force a reformer could employ against oppression and not create new states of injustice. In a 1918 review of a book by Bertrand Russell (Ambedkar 1979c), the young Indian reformer enunciated his "Professor Dewey's" distinction between force as energy and force as violence. He also referred to this same distinction in his final years as an older Buddhist reformer in an unpublished work titled *Buddha or Karl Marx* (Ambedkar 1987a). In both of these works, he makes the point that he heard Dewey explain to him (and Hu Shih) in the Philosophy 132 course in 1916: one must use force to get anything done, but some uses of force destroy more than they achieve or create. In the sense of reform or social change, force as violence fixates so much on one end (the reformer's goal or interest) that other valuable goals of other agents are degraded, ignored, or destroyed. In other words, Ambedkar was committed to the pragmatist theme that solutions to problems in community settings must be both intelligent *and* sustainable; accomplishing something today should not set up new problems or battles tomorrow.

Fraternity as a means-relevant concept focuses Ambedkar's pragmatism on this aspect of sustainable action in settings with diverse arrays of individuals and projects. In other words, fraternity implies another sense of balance that must be struck in *creating* the balanced and just society that one desires. One must balance their ends and how they are pursuing them with the ends that others—including one's opponents—hold. Ambedkar, like Dewey, believed that community meant sharing interests and mutual respect with like-minded *and* disagreeing others. In 1947, Ambedkar advised the student

[5] For an excellent account of Ambedkar's use of these three values, see Gokhale 2016.

government leaders at Siddharth College (an institution founded by him during the previous year) that they ought to pay attention to how they treat their "enemies" in getting the legislative change they so desire: "You cannot win over a majority in this House by giving a black eye to your opponent... You will have to carry a proposition only by the art of speaking, by persuading [your] opponent, by winning him over [to] his side by argument, either gentle or strong, but always logically and instructively" (Ambedkar 2003b, 378). Logic and persuasion, not blunt force, is what carries today—and tomorrow—for Ambedkar. What he's getting at here is the notion of fraternity: we must solve problems while maintaining the possibilities for fraternity with those we consider friendly, *and* those we consider foes or oppressors.

In *Buddha or Karl Marx*, a work left unpublished due to his demise, he argues for something similar. Buddha and Marx, Ambedkar claims, both focus on the problem of inequality and poverty; both see private property and greed as part of the cause of the suffering doled out by this inequality. But the Buddha is distinct from Marx, Ambedkar claims, *and superior*, because of his attention to the ethical limitations on means in getting to these ends. In a pragmatist fashion, Ambedkar worries about the sustainability and scope of the Marxist commitment to any means necessary for resolving class conflict. "We welcome the Russian Revolution," Ambedkar writes, "because it aims to produce equality. But it cannot be too much emphasized that in producing equality society cannot afford to sacrifice fraternity or liberty. Equality will be of no value without fraternity or liberty." The problem wasn't with communism's pursuit of equality, it was in the unlimited means used to achieve this; they segued into force as violence, and truncated too many other valued ends others held. For instance, it chose to sacrifice the liberty and fraternal feelings of those deemed as class oppressors. As Ambedkar concludes, "It seems that the three [values] can coexist only if one follows the way of the Buddha. Communism can give one but not all" (Ambedkar 1987a, 462).

As Ambedkar noted, the Buddha relied on means that respected others and their ends, thereby upholding the limits bestowed by the value of fraternity. Again, Ambedkar turns toward willful persuasion and free acquiescence to persuasive messages as means. "The Buddha's method was different," Ambedkar indicates; "His method was to change the mind of man: to alter his disposition: so that whatever man does, he does it voluntarily without the use of force or compulsion" (Ambedkar 1987a, 461). He wanted to induce reflection in the targets of persuasive advocacy concerning the usefulness of their habits and customs, especially those of caste hierarchy. This approach of Buddha was superior to Marx's wide approach, Ambedkar argues, since Buddha de-emphasized force and coercion and instead focused on the communicative method of the "constant preaching of his Dhamma [philosophy]" to "alter the disposition of men so that they would do voluntarily what they would not otherwise to do" (Ambedkar 1987a, 461). Ambedkar's navayana pragmatism recognized that force was always needed, but it also focused on the ideal of fraternity and how it mediated or even limited the use of force for good ends. For Ambedkar, democratic ends required democratic—and fraternity preserving—means.

Theme 5: There is a plurality of means to reach the endpoint of justice

The final hallmark of Ambedkar's navayana pragmatism and its approach to securing just outcomes in situations of oppression is the notion of *pluralism*. Many pragmatists spanning from William James to John Dewey might be considered pluralists. What does it mean to be a pluralist? Simply put, it means that their theories and personalities are such that it is reasonable to hold or live with a tension between two or more contradictory concepts or ideals. For instance, James seems ready to live with or accept a range of inconsistent readings of the meaning of life, or of the religious vocation. We can identify this as *ends-pluralism*, or the idea that there are

a range of acceptable ends that people may pursue that don't always consistently fit together; the pluralist in this case recognizes that we lack a truly determinative way of sorting through these conflicting ends to find the *right* one. Ambedkar is probably best labeled something other than an ends-pluralist, since he clearly thinks that certain religions, say, are better than others in their visions of the just society. For instance, he clearly prefers Buddhism over Brahminical Hinduism as a way to structure society and individual action. But what kind of pluralist is he?

Ambedkar's pluralism shines through in his respect for a range of means to reach the just end state denoted by the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Ambedkar thinks there is a variety of ways to get closer to the just balancing of these three ideals so often in tension. For instance, Ambedkar is famous for his work in spearheading the drafting of the Indian constitution. He clearly put much faith in legal means to combat untouchability. But why did he lead a massive conversion effort in his last seven years of life, pleading with enormous conferences of Dalits to make the *individual* choice to convert to Buddhism? Conversion taken as a larger movement was a political move, but his rhetoric demonstrated it had an individual side: it was aimed at shifting the orientations and habits of self-conception of individual Dalits. Add to this his never-ending advocacy in his own newspapers for Dalit equality and self-respect, and one has a challenge: how do all these disparate projects and paths make sense together?

If we see Ambedkar as a *means-pluralist*, we can make sense of his various, and sometimes contradictory, efforts to combat caste. Caste could be (somewhat) undone by legislative action; caste could be (somewhat) undone by individuals choosing to self-identify as Buddhists instead of untouchables. There is only a conflict here between these larger systemic actions and the individual choices involved in religious belief if we insist there is only *one* solution to a complex problem like caste inequality. For Ambedkar, many methods ought to be tried; as long as they did not push the anti-caste caravan backwards, each offered a way to address the complex challenge of social inequality. The theme that emerges here for Ambedkar's navayana pragmatism is straightforward: while it is committed to a vision of the good connected to that trio of semi-transcendent values, it recognizes a wide latitude of ways to actualize such a balance. And, as the metaphor of balancing intimates, justice is not a state that is self-sustaining—force as energy and constructive means must continue to be applied to make sure these values are in balance, and that one is not sacrificed in pursuit of the others.

Pragmatism's Past and Future in India

Much more is left to be said about pragmatism's past—and future—in India. As we have seen, Ambedkar was a foundational figure for modern India and its quest for independence and democracy. He was also significantly influenced by his teacher, John Dewey, and his pragmatism. As I have argued, one can consider Ambedkar's complex and evolving thought as a form of pragmatism in India. This *navayana pragmatism* reveals something new in the pragmatist tradition, and henceforth points toward the future. It shows us ways that pragmatism can engage divisive but deep religious customs, and can adapt means to combat these anti-democratic tendencies without spawning new forms of oppression just as bad as the initial inequality. How Ambedkar's navayana pragmatism does this is through its innovative use of psychological ideals as "personality," as well as his postulating of useful but only semi-transcendent ideals such as liberty, equality, and fraternity as ways to critique or measure *any* given historical society in terms of justice.

As mentioned earlier, this study leaves out Ambedkar's creative refashioning of Buddhism in his last few years. It does this from the pragmatic concerns that one cannot fit all of Ambedkar's thought, even in contingently abstracted forms, in one article. I also maintain that

those who study pragmatism can learn valuable lessons about the nature and diversity of the pragmatist tradition by simply considering Ambedkar's thought as a form of pragmatism. Other studies can add Ambedkar's Buddhism to this account as a further evolution of his pragmatism. What one ought not to do is to make the mistake of thinking that his pragmatism gave way to his Buddhism; much of the account of democracy as a way of life given in this article continued late in his life, and was coterminous with his advocacy of Buddhism.

There's yet another reason why I consider Ambedkar's navayana pragmatism (here, at least) with minimal reference to specific parts of his Buddhism (such as those developed in his final work, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*). There is a tension in the question of the extent of Buddhism and conversion as a means to realize deep democracy. For instance, must all of India become navayana Buddhist (Ambedkar's form of Buddhism)? Different answers can be given to this question, but I believe that Ambedkar is *not* committed to such a position. Buddhism might be the most democratically *useful* of religious-philosophical traditions for him, but there's still a conceptual distance between Buddhism and his account of democracy in general. It's this distance or conceptual separation that this article exploits in discussing themes of his navayana pragmatism; other uses and other studies might leverage the overlapping parts of his Buddhist thought and the account of democracy resident in his life-long critiques of caste oppression. As pragmatists always maintain, it's a matter of purpose and endpoints. Such is the contingency of life and intellectual exercises like this. But pragmatists can learn about the historical evolution of the pragmatist tradition—as well as of new conceptual possibilities—by considering Ambedkar as a general theorist and advocate of democracy. They can also gain from puzzling over the conceptual necessity (or lack thereof) of Buddhism in his general philosophy of democracy.

I have tried to avoid other missteps in accounting for Ambedkar as a pragmatist. Even though Ambedkar's thought resulted from his struggle with caste, it does not end there. We should recognize Ambedkar as a Dalit intellectual, but not consign him to the fate of being *only* a Dalit intellectual. We can and should see Ambedkar as a theorist of democracy in his own right, one in conversation with recognized figures in many of our courses such as Dewey, Gandhi, and Marx. Ambedkar's pragmatism brings caste into our discussions of social justice, but it also shows us a unique theoretical apparatus that resists claims to certainty all while usefully criticizing inequality. And it is also a democratic pragmatism for our times, given its emphasis on fraternity as both a desired end *and* a concern about the force of our means. Can we solve our problems of division and oppression now, without creating stronger or newer problems tomorrow? This is an important worry for pluralistic democracies like India and the United States of America, and Ambedkar is well-poised to help us think through such problems in a pragmatic fashion. Ambedkar's navayana pragmatism is of great historical importance for understanding India's recent past, and it also promises a great future yield if we but listen to it and include it in our global narratives of pragmatism's spread and evolution.

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