

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 phi-

losophy 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 “un-

mixed 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 chooses

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*"

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

(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).

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

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).

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”

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-structuralists¹⁴), 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 dialectic 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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