

AMERICA ENCOUNTERS THE ABSOLUTE

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

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I. The Challenge to Insurrect

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

calls upon an "absolute" form of pragmatism championed by Royce, which embraces an absolute in the form of irrevocable commitments and structural self-limitations that we experience in living practical activity.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Both Stallo and Willich were auxiliary members of the St. Louis Philosophical Society. Perhaps the most well-known of the early American Hegelians, the St. Lou-

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

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

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

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

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

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

While Dewey's commitment to democracy might have roots in early American Hegelianism, I have yet to tie it to his pragmatism. The story I have told so far is perfectly

consistent with Pratt's overall view that these two facets of Dewey's thought are largely independent of one another: that a commitment to democracy is something *in addition* to a pragmatist theory of inquiry. As Pratt puts it, perfectly good inquiry may proceed in non-democratic contexts. Let's put some pressure on that claim, once again by turning to the roots of classical pragmatism.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Peirce’s message in the cognition series is that we are but signifiers (“signs”) dependent upon the further interpreting activity of others. Meaning outruns our frail capacities, and it is up to others to complete our cognition. Peirce has located an Absolute, understood as a “higher” unlimited standpoint that allows us to make sense of

error as such. Rather than a highest-perspective offered by a transcendent God (as Berkeley and the earlier Royce would have it), it is centered instead (as the later Royce would come to see) in the ideal community of inquiry, an imminent community that of necessity is also a community of mutual interpretation. The Hegelian editor and readership of the JSP surely would have found affinity with this message. Harris claimed that “self-activity, the freedom of the soul, is made possible by the institutions of society, the family, civil society, State, and Church” (Harris 1893: Lecture V) and that “the individual can not exist as human apart from the institutions of society” (Harris 1898: 291). To one steeped in Hegel, Peirce’s point was that being can be grasped only as a unity in diversity.

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

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

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

Moreover, Dewey picks up something else in Peirce’s appeal to the unlimited community of inquiry. He sees

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

IV. The Critique of Individualistic Pragmatism: James and Tautomeres

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

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

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

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

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

Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object. (EP 1:132)

In “What Pragmatism Means” (James 1907), James illustrates his understanding of the pragmatic maxim by calling attention to the German chemist Ostwald and his discussion of the process of tautomerization. This is a pervasive process in organic chemistry in which a compound exhibits certain chemical instabilities. In James’s

time, there was a question of whether or not these instabilities are best described in terms of two distinct chemical substances which readily interconvert back and forth, or one substance that exhibits a variety of chemical properties. Ostwald claims that since there is no conceivable test to settle the dispute one way or another, the question is meaningless and moot. James speaks approvingly of Ostwald’s instrumentalist resolution of this dispute as a successful application of the pragmatic maxim:

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

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

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

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

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

V. A Performative Absolute?

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

Among contemporary pragmatists, it is perhaps those in the so-called “neo-pragmatist” camp who see this most clearly. Whatever *bonafides* it can claim as an offshoot of the classical pragmatisms of Peirce, James, and

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In brief, whatever actions are such, whatever types of actions are such, whatever results of activity, whatever conceptual constructions are such, that the very act of getting rid of them, or of thinking them away, logically implies their presence, are known to us indeed, both empirically and pragmatically (since we note their presence and learn of them through action); but they are also absolute. And any account which succeeds in telling what they are has absolute truth. (Royce 1913, pp. 122)

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

Nevertheless, I worry that this notion of an absolute is too slender to do the work that Pratt wants. If it is meant to support a duty to insurrect, I’m just not clear how it is supposed to go. While Royce might be describing what could be called an absolute pragmatic *commitment* to some truth, that may well fall short of a commitment

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

VI. Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ers in their efforts towards unity, working for the idea of unity. (Ruge 1913, 1-2)

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

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

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

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

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