Conversion in American Philosophy

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American philosophy is best known for the generation of pragmatism, the reconception of philosophy that emphasizes action as the ground and criterion of meaning and truth. Pragmatism has two main opponents: complacence and dogmatism. Lassitude of spirit that simmers into complacence threatens us all with a shrug of the shoulders. Pragmatism challenges complacence with powerful reflection on the depths of intellectual and moral dismay, but it also aims to make a convincing argument about how to live a fully engaged life. Pragmatism attacks dogmatism in order to overcome the false satisfaction of static conclusions held on to for obscure reasons, both personal and communal. Pragmatists work against these opponents by following their desire for things that change the human condition and positively affect its possibilities in terms of inquiry and practice.

Pragmatism seeks a kind of conversion in philosophy by demanding both a radical alteration of philosophical expectations and a renewed expectation of the good available in practice. Pragmatism moves on the conviction that the good of vital practice stands directly opposed to the received tradition of philosophy that privileges abstraction from life and theoretical formulation. Locating the good of philosophy in the emerging possibilities of radical differences in the lives of men and women sets pragmatists apart in the reflective landscape.

This book aims to underscore the ways pragmatism, as it develops in the thought of Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey, reflects the characteristics of religious conversion. This underscoring requires a look into the roots of American philosophy and its relation to religious motivation and meaning. It leads to Jonathan Edwards and his work on conversion in the *Religious Affections* that draws to mind St. Augustine’s desire for a healing transformation of his soul and his philosophy. It also leads beyond Edwards to Peirce, James, Dewey, and farther, to contemporary voices in American philosophy. Richard Rorty, Robert Corrington, and Cornel West take up the issues of transformation, religion, and meaning in ways that reflect the origins of pragmatism.
Underscoring connections to conversion in these contemporary voices, however, becomes a platform for pointing to what has been lost and what may yet be recovered for pragmatism and for philosophy. This examination of conversion sets the stage, I think, for a recovery of the spirit of philosophy that responds to the longing of all reflective souls to know more fully the possibilities of human life and change.

Reintroducing a religious term such as conversion to philosophy raises several concerns. First is the doubt that such a topic genuinely arises from the consideration of the texts. Is conversion a concern of these American philosophers? I think the answer is clearly yes, and I will demonstrate my reasons for saying so. A second and more powerful concern is whether reintroducing conversion is good for philosophy. Again, I think the answer is yes. Conversion has to do with how a person lives and knows his or her living results from an interaction with a better life, a more profound reality, larger and more vital reasons for living than were available before that interaction. Conversion is a method of establishing a critique of the soul, to borrow an image from Kant. Care of the soul may be the original meaning of the philosopher’s task, and recovering this philosophical impulse sends us back to our Platonic origins as well as ahead into the limits that define the lives we may yet live. Philosophy as a way of tending the soul is deeply embedded in our history and practice, and the American pragmatists represent a creative and effective return to this origin and this task. I offer this reflection, then, for those who seek to engage philosophical inquiry for what it may grant in terms of a more fully and meaningfully lived life, and for those who seek a deeper understanding of the American philosophical tradition of pragmatism.

In historical terms, no American thinker is identified by conversion more than Jonathan Edwards. He appropriates the problematic of conversion as the core of his creative theology and critical philosophy. Edwards, like St. Augustine, does not focus on whether he can understand conversion but on how human wills are changed so that they desire God rather than created things. Before we can begin the discovery
of conversion in American pragmatism, the historical Augustinian roots of conversion in American thought need to be accounted for. To understand American philosophy, especially with respect to the notion of conversion, we need to understand Edwards. And to understand Edwards’s approach to conversion, we need to understand Augustine. The American hope for transformation needs to be connected to the brilliant light of self-reflective evaluation Augustine models in the *Confessions*, reflection that constitutes a new identity and disposition that informs all thoughts, actions, and beliefs. The possibility of such a transformation remains deeply and problematically embedded in our American thinking owing in some part to Edwards’s continuation of Augustine’s work, which begins with the problem of conversion.

For Augustine, philosophical awareness is a part of his developmental maturation that intertwines with the story of his coming to Christ. Accordingly, Augustine does not argue that philosophy is necessary or sufficient for this transformation (though some may argue otherwise on Augustine’s behalf). Rather, philosophy is a precursor and a sign of the power related to the soul’s great healing. Philosophical desire is refracted through the healing of Augustine’s desire for Christ. Stated negatively, Augustine finds that philosophy lacks healing power. The transition between Manichean dualism and Neoplatonism was significant because of the discovery of an abiding absence in philosophy. Augustine confesses at the end of Book 7 of the *Confessions* that although he was drawn into philosophy for its own sake, “later on . . . I would be able to detect and distinguish how great a difference lies between presumption and contrition, and between those who see where they must travel, but do not see the way, and those who see the way that leads to not only beholding our blessed fatherland but also dwelling therein” (7.26). Even though Augustine glimpses the immaterial God in Book 7, he cannot dwell there.

The narrative movement in the *Confessions* dramatically changes in Book 7. From the “tearing from his side” of his common-law wife at the conclusion of the previous book, Augustine turns to matters intellectual. Principal in this transition is the logical refutation of the Manichean position by Nebridius, although this refutation does little to assuage Augustine’s confusion about God’s substance or address his wounded soul. It does open the door to the question of the will and the presence of evil in the world. Augustine weaves together the twin problems of the
will and God’s nature in this book, leading to the realization of a “different infinite” than he was able to imagine before.

What is most striking about this book, though, are the warnings concerning the products of reasoning that proliferate here even as Augustine recounts his significant philosophical discovery of God’s spiritual substance. Set free from the limits and errors of dualism, stoked by the books of the Platonists, Augustine proceeds toward this consummatory vision of the reality of God—a vision that breaks the metaphors of container and contained that held him during his Manichean days. The momentary vision of God’s nature, unchangeable and encompassing all things, shows the deficiency of the ideas to which he had been committed. The disjunction between a materialistic metaphor and the spiritual substance of his Platonic meditation exposed the significance of his will in relation to philosophical discovery. A reason for his hesitation to commit fully to the Manichees appears that substantiates the logical rejection made by Nebridius, but one that accesses different ground in his soul. His hesitation to commit willingly to the Manichees was a sign of the error contained in that system even before he could articulate it clearly. Philosophical discovery showed him error and also signified a disturbance in his soul that was not simply intellectual. Augustine makes a similar discovery in light of the books of the Platonists. Although they lead him farther than he had been able to go on his own, yet there was nothing of Christ in these books. This awareness points ahead to Book 8, when he is finally able to submit himself willingly to the incarnate one of God.

While philosophy appears in Book 7 as a response to Augustine’s sickness and a sign of the depth of his illness and need for healing, healing metaphors surround Book 8 like a gentle vapor. For all the success of having escaped the error of his prior conclusions, Augustine is even more desperate since he no longer has the same fear of error to support his unwillingness to cleave to God. The stories of Victorinus and Ponticainus precede the famous conflict with himself in the garden. But before this ultimate encounter, and in response to these stories, Augustine returns to the problem of the will. Developing the analysis begun in Book 7 of whether the will is the product or cause of evil, he now claims the will is two. In willing we also will a complete will, and to the extent this is not accomplished our complete will is apparent by its absence. His inability to will one thing presses on his wound, and every
willing act reflects this absence of the whole will, which is painfully absent. Augustine laments,

I say that it commands itself to will a thing; it would not give this command unless it willed it, and yet it does not do what it wills. It does not will in its entirety: for this reason it does not give this command in its entirety. For it commands a thing only in so far as it wills it, and in so far as what it commands is not done, to that extent it does not will it. For the will commands that there be a will, and that this be itself, and not something else. But the complete will does not give the command, and therefore what it commands is not in being. For if it were a complete will, it would not command it to be, since the thing would already be in being. Therefore, it is no monstrous thing partly to will a thing and partly to not will it, but it is a sickness in the mind. Therefore there are two wills, since one of them is not complete, and what is lacking in the one is present in the other. (8.21)

The fragmented will is not a story of the moral completion of an intellectual conversion, which would indeed be a monstrous thing. To be converted, but only intellectually—what hope would remain for such a creature? The divided will is the articulated ground of the soul that holds the intellect and the will together in terms of what unsettles them: God’s truth. But they are held apart over what satisfies them. Intellectual discovery is essential in exposing the division of the will and preventing premature closure of the will. But this discovery does not afford the rest that the will seeks. Augustine seeks not a replacement for his will, but the transformation of his will through itself into its holistic completion.

Recalling these events and thoughts prevents Augustine from creating a formula for conversion. In the garden in Milan, after hearing the stories of the men who had taken up the way of Christ, Augustine sees himself as a person unable or unwilling to will completely, sick with the division in his will. Is there anything that one could will completely that would be free from the doubt of error yet not a product of vain imagining? The disposition that erupts in his will, “putting on the Christ,” resolves the complete/incomplete nature of his willing soul. Entering into the place of the circular walled garden reveals this absence most clearly, and the one thing the Apostle urges, putting on Christ, was the one thing he was clear that he could not do by himself. Urged by the introduction of the possibility, shown his will as it stood in opposition to the words of St. Paul, Augustine came to see his complete will for the
first time as a desire to lurk in the shadows of his rejection of willing one thing. To will that one thing, supported by the spiritual reality attained by his Neoplatonic glimpse, brings Augustine to face himself—that there is no opposition to putting on the Christ except his own willing refusal. As he gave up that fight for the last time, he became a new person, in terms not of the substance of his belief but in his disposition toward that belief in Christ as the mediator between God and man. His willful subordination to Christ achieved a character reflecting the infinite good of God in flesh. The sufficiency of this subordination becomes the new object of Augustine's inquiry toward which he can now turn completely, not as a replacement of himself, but as a soul transformed into a will willing. The Christ, the richness of God's infinite healing for the world made flesh, became the principle of his own will.

Still, the part of this conversion that remains a problem is the certainty that Christ is sufficient to make such a willful subordination possible. Overcoming the absence of the will coalesces into a disposition from which inquiry moves to articulate the sufficiency of this transformation. How does this satisfy the will without canceling it? What kind of answer can be given except confession? But the problem of conversion is that it stands on such ground as confession that can always be subject to questions and uncharitable readings. The accomplishment of his Christlike disposition does not respond to these questions as much as it explains Augustine to himself. This disposition is his healing, and is it possible to argue with health?

The problem of conversion Augustine struggles with is the absence of emphasis in the tradition on the change of disposition. If conversion of the heart is so essential to the Christian faith, as it appears to be from his reading of Romans, why has conversion been underplayed? In traditional stories of conversion the focus was on the person being “safely brought into the harbor” of faith, leaving unsaid how the person was transformed from opposing God's truth to acceding God's truth in the only way a will can completely accede. Throughout the text of the Confessions, the hints of this possible transformation are laid out clearly for us, even as Augustine himself realizes the hints and suggestions are laid out for his own persuasion. The problem of conversion for Augustine lies not with the intellect but with the will, and Augustine must show how conversion does not reject the tradition but completes it.
Edwards’s spirit of engaging challenging issues of his community is reminiscent of Augustine’s detailed account of his personal journey. This character sets Edwards apart from his contemporaries. The formula of conversion in New England Puritanism evolved through the Calvinist appropriation of covenant toward a corporate intellectual assent.\(^5\) Covenant theology established that what could be trusted was not the soul’s appropriation of God’s grace, since that was impossible to claim without hubris, but that God had covenanted with a part of humanity to be a peculiar people. The affirmation of God’s covenant relationship with the community was sufficient affirmation of one’s relation to God. According to Conrad Cherry, “[i]n terms of the Puritan morphology of conversion, ‘belief upon moral evidence’ and under ‘a conviction of the judgment and conscience’ is equivalent to belief through the saving gift of grace. Therefore, those who cannot profess faith but who prepare themselves through moral endeavor and profess a desire for faith can be counted as believers and admitted to the Supper. For if one is sincere in his moral life and earnestly desires to be in the covenant of grace, even though he cannot in all honesty say he is in that covenant, he is ‘for the matter of it’ a man of faith and a participant in the saving covenant.”\(^6\)

Edwards found this reliance on covenant affirmation problematic, especially because it bled into other forms of thinking. First, it became the complete expression of a person’s responsibility to God. Affirming the covenant replaced the expectation of a personal desire for an experience of God. Second, it bled into the trust that an argument for covenant affirmation, since it was the effective motor of corporate identity and continuance, constituted the goal or telos of preaching and theology. Skillful and vigorous defenses of the rational propriety of the covenant generated more affirmation, so this defense became considered a means of grace. But was God’s election influenced by informed consent and intellectually grounded choices made by men and women?

Edwards opposed both ways the covenant theology moved. Edwards opposed the limitation of personal responsibility to covenant affirmation, and he opposed the supposition that a person had the ability to choose God based on coherent grounds presented in rhetorically or philosophically powerful descriptions. Yet Edwards could not deny that souls touched by God’s grace would respond to a clear presentation of
the working of God, or that one way the soul properly responds to the influence of grace is with a desire to know more fully what grace is and what the soul is that it can be so influenced. In order to address this problem directly, Edwards undertook a careful inquiry into the nature of true religious affections. Following the Great Awakening, no longer defending it or its advocates in the heat of battle, Edwards focused on discerning the internal dynamism and signs of religious discovery. In the process he recovered and refined the meaning of conversion for his Puritan audience.

Recovering conversion from the early Puritan divines further separates Edwards from his contemporaries. His rhetoric is more like the first generation Puritans than his own. Perry Miller displays the Puritans’ self-castigation over their failure to become the beacon of truth of God’s light in the world. The vision was that New England would be a light that would draw all humanity to the truth of God’s redeeming grace seen plainly in a well-ordered civil life. But instead of a New World they found only a new England, a repetition of the problems and moral failures they fled. The failure of conversion marred their civic vision. Was conversion an impossible task, an inappropriate organizing principle of this new community? When Edwards takes up the topics of conversion and spiritual transformation he is engaged in nothing less than scrutinizing the validity of his own tradition. This project moves Edwards into sensitive reflective space, and his inquiry probes the absence of coherence and conviction in the corporate Puritan mind. In truth, Edwards transforms the problem of conversion from the private confessional ground of Augustine to the corporate covenantal ground the Puritans relied upon for their theological warrant. Edwards finds a problematic absence lurking in corporate self-understanding and drives his analysis directly to this place.

Overcoming the diversion of covenant affirmation is connected to answering the philosophical principles of Arminianism. But Edwards does not treat this situation primarily as a theological problem. For one thing, there was no good biblical evidence to back up Arminian claims that humanity chooses God based on a natural understanding of good, so Edwards sees the issue not as a problem for Biblical theology but what structures theology. Driving this turn toward Arminianism was a philosophical question: What power does the mind have over the most fundamental choices and dispositions? Edwards makes his seminal advance
A mental or intellectual conviction in and of itself cannot be a true sign of grace. Even the most persuasive and coherent defense of the covenant is not the same as God’s effective power influencing the soul. Yet the mind, as the principal ground of the perception of our souls, is the proper location for discerning the influence of God’s grace. If the state of grace of a soul would ever be apparent, and Edwards is confident that God would give us discernible signs to know this, it would be apparent in the conviction of the mind. But again, Edwards’s Augustinian spirit appears: it is not the intellect but the will that most essentially reflects God’s working. The intellect is the ground for conviction but it is not the end of that conviction. The conviction of truth reveals a sense within the intellect that cannot be attributed to the truths discovered by the “natural” operation of the intellect. Conviction of the truth of the claims of the gospel is in itself a sign of a sense inhabiting and informing the mind. In Sign V of the *Religious Affections*, Edwards writes,

This sense of the spiritual excellency and beauty of divine things, does also tend to directly convince the mind of the truth of the gospel, as there are very many of the most important things declared in the gospel that are hid from the eyes of natural men, the truth of which does in effect consist in this excellency, or does so immediately depend upon it and result from it; that in this excellency’s being seen the truth of those things are seen. As soon as ever the eyes are opened to behold the beauty and amiableness that is in divine things, a multitude of the most important doctrines of the gospel, that depend upon it (which all appear strange and dark to natural men) are at once seen to be true. As for instance, hereby appears the truth of what the Word of God declares concerning the exceeding evil of sin; for the same eye that discerns the transcendent beauty of holiness, necessarily therein sees the exceeding odiousness of sin: the same taste which relishes the sweetness of true moral good, taste the bitterness of moral evil. And by this means a man sees his own sinfulness and loathesomeness; for he has now a sense to discern objects of this nature; and so sees the truth of what the Word of God declares concerning the exceeding sinfulness of mankind, which before he did not see. He now sees the dreadful pollution of his heart, and the desperate depravity of his nature, in a new manner; for his soul has now a sense given it to feel the pain of such a disease; and this shows him the truth of what the Scripture reveals concerning the corruption of man’s nature, his original sin, and the ruinous condition man is in, and his need of a Saviour, his need of the mighty power of God to renew his heart and change his nature. (301)
Embedded in Edwards’s description of this “seeing” is the subtle refutation of the Arminian ground that the soul is equivalent to its highest intellectual conviction and affirmation, and that the power of the mind is the same by which God’s truth is appropriated. Throughout the *Religious Affections* Edwards demonstrates, by appeal to scripture and by common-sense argument, that the will cannot be described in these terms, contradicting many of his fellow divines. The very people charged to support biblical faith had been drawn into the error of trusting that whatever prompts a conviction of the mind is equivalent to the proper conviction of the soul. To make his separation from this position conclusive, Edwards argues that conversion is a complete transformation of the nature. This is the most universal human desire, a desire that struggles against the resistance with the natural state of mankind, but a desire that remains unsatisfied with any other answer as a substitute. Second, he argues that the diversion of Arminian thinking, as a substitute for engaging the absence of one’s disposition, could be countered on the philosophical grounds that it is self-referentially incoherent. Answering the resistance of philosophy is possible by exposing the error of this conception of the free choice of the will, the work Edwards takes up in earnest following his removal from Northampton. In the *Religious Affections*, however, Edwards makes the positive point that to overcome the absence of the soul’s orientation toward a flawed position entails the appearance of content to the intellect that becomes the order of a new disposition. The mind perceives this content not as a new thing known, but as an order of the intellect and the self. The ordering power of this content is the revelation of an active sense within the mind and intellect that cannot have its origin in the natural mind.

Just as Augustine is careful to remind himself and his readers of the limits of philosophical discovery, so Edwards is careful to separate the sense of the excellence of supernatural truths from the accomplishment of the mind. What becomes the ultimate sign of gracious affection is not merely the truth about Jesus proclaimed in the gospel, but the heart affective results of that discovery. The flexibility of the affections to reflect this content is the sign of an “other than natural” influence on the soul. The signs of affection, incorporating the truths of reason and scripture, respond to Edwards’s memory of the persuasive structure of philosophy. Following along a path of discovery yields heart affective results only when the soul is able to recognize that its absence of a sufficient disposition is answered in Jesus Christ, by both the testimony of the
community and in personal recognition of that sufficiency of ordering the affections. The work of the Holy Spirit is clearly evident in the flexibility of the person’s affective character, softened and receptive to a reorientation. But this flexibility of affections is predicated on an original reorientation to the likeness of Christ. The more gracious affections are exercised, the more apparent their brokenness appears, which Edwards connects with the brokenness of evangelical humiliation in Sign VI of the *Religious Affections*. But even the experience of humiliation reveals a gentleness of spirit, open to receiving a shift in orientation that continues the return of the soul to its good, which is God. The opening paragraph of Sign VII describes conversion this way:

All gracious affections do arise from a spiritual understanding, in which the soul has the excellency and glory of divine things discovered to it, as was shown before. But all spiritual discoveries are transforming; and not only make an alteration of the present exercise, sensation and frame of the soul; but such power and efficacy have they, that they make an alteration in the very nature of the soul; “But we all, with open face, beholding as in a glass, the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image, from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord” (II Cor. 3:18). Such power as this is properly divine power, and is peculiar to the Spirit of the Lord: other power may make a great alteration in men’s present frames and feelings; but ’tis the power of a Creator only that can change the nature, or give a new nature. And no discoveries or illuminations, but those that are divine and supernatural, will have this supernatural effect. But this effect all those discoveries have, that are truly divine. The soul is deeply affected by these discoveries and so affected as to be transformed. Thus it is with those affections that the soul is the subject of in its conversion. (340)

For Edwards, conversion is primarily a confessional result of individual souls, but conversion also becomes significant for the institutional career of Puritanism and the church more generally. The corporate absence of the Puritan civic vision did not reveal a need for better ecclesiastical governance; it revealed that this civic failure was a species of resistance to conversion. Edwards dwells at the limits of corporate confession. Even as he accepts the presidency of the College of New Jersey, he admits that he longs to return to the history of the work of redemption in order to establish a completely new method of divinity for his community so that he can finally answer Arminian errors.

Edwards’s movement from treating the absence of the individual soul to the projection of the overcoming of the corporate absence of soul is
where he is most liable to provoke resistance. Edwards transgresses the confessional space that Augustine opens up in the *Confessions*, in some way not only transforming conversion but also altering the ground of absence to which conversion is connected. After Edwards the need for conversion is always a corporate need, a demand for a content that not only brings souls and God together but that will also become a public platform of regenerative change.

**The Problem of Conversion**

The problem of conversion in Augustine and Edwards resolves into the question of whether the impulse of philosophy can be turned toward affective discovery, exploring the dimensions of conviction, habit, and transformation. Negotiating the threats of self-deception and the ground of religious authority opens up the space in which the soul can discover its proper confessional space.

In many ways Edwards is America’s Augustine. Edwards’s significance for the development of American theology and religious life are well documented. Less so, however, is his significance for the philosophical development in America. Edwards’s example of pursuing reflective self-understanding and the connection between this understanding and the meaning of communal transformation indicates that his influence is somehow active in the development of later American philosophy. There is an abiding expectation in American philosophy for a model of corporate conversion that does not exclude the confessional space of the soul, yet one that speaks to the general absence of the communal soul. Through the influence of philosophy resistance has grown to Christian models of conversion to which both Augustine and Edwards were committed. In part this resistance stems from the worry that the Christian model is exclusive, while the experience of God, grace, and transformation must be pluralistic in terms of being openly accessible from any tradition. This resistance also stems from the worry that any divine or non-natural origin of transformation is at base an abdication of human responsibility. Both of these concerns can be addressed but never completely allayed.

Still, the desire for a general response to the absence of conversion persists despite these philosophical worries. For this reason Edwards remains a vital force in American religious life. If Augustine evokes the desire for a personal conversion in making sense of one’s spiritual trajectory and
thought, Edwards evokes the desire for corporate success and transformation—confession become conversion. The problem of conversion, therefore, remains for philosophy as both a reflective obligation it must answer and a challenge to its authority that it must face. In this book I begin the process of answering this obligation in American philosophy by exploring C. S. Peirce’s desire for self-transformation, William James’s redaction of Edwards’s conversion, and John Dewey’s project of corporate transformation. Together these American philosophers construct a kind of triune authority that forms the basis of pragmatism, and it is my goal to examine that platform as thoroughly as possible, unabashedly locating this platform on the grounds of religious conversion.

NOTES

3. Ibid., 291.
11. Allen Guelzo, Edwards on the Will (Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 41. Edwards says, “The will is the mind’s inclination.” I disagree with Guelzo that Edwards treats the will as a coeval faculty with the intellect. Rather, I would argue that the will is principal in the determination of the substance of the soul, its inclination, which comprises intellect and apprehension. Neither intellect nor apprehension generates inclination, but both correspond to inclination and its changes.