Conversion in American Philosophy
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Published by Fordham University Press

Ward, Roger A.
Conversion in American Philosophy: Exploring the Practice of Transformation.

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Introduction: Conversion and the Practice of Transformation

American philosophy embodies a kind of criticism in all its parts. Charles S. Peirce, William James, and John Dewey, the founding figures of pragmatism, begin their projects with a deep desire to produce a vital difference in reflection and practice. The difference they seek in philosophy is an opening for a better life, a new world, a guiding principle of action refined by intelligence and human desire. A redirection of communal and spiritual orientation allures their sight, fueled by an optimism that finding a reflective platform connecting the present form of life to a fuller self-consciousness is possible. Their philosophical criticism frames a new kind of discernment of the human soul for the purpose of redirecting and transforming habits and desires. My aim in this introduction is to suggest a way of taking fuller account of the difference pragmatists have made in the broad terms of understanding transformation in human life. This difference, I think, returns some of the vitality of religious ideas and questions to pragmatism. What could have a more profound and permanent effect on our society than a vital difference in our religious self-understanding and expectations?

From Criticism to Construction

The constructive character of these classical American philosophers is often hard to discern because of their rigorous focus on criticism. Peirce, James, and Dewey challenge the core beliefs of their society and their intellectual contemporaries, separating them from their fellow citizens and from the tradition of Western philosophy. John Dewey makes a conscious move away from European philosophy by condemning all efforts to construct a positive philosophical program based on foundational methods or claims such as those of Spinoza and Descartes. Dewey argues that philosophy is only the criticism of criticisms. Peirce also insists that
the principal failure of philosophy is turning away from exhaustive self-criticism of its method and guiding principles.

Coursing through this critical attitude of American pragmatists, however, is the desire to expand and extend the values of practice and reflection already present in their communities. They are mindful that without a connection to presently lived values their philosophical critique loses its power and meaning. Criticism joined together with a return to lived values is the working faith of American philosophy. This working faith holds that a critical examination of deeply held convictions will yield a fruitful expansion of the living practice of men and women. In this book I aim to make the working faith of the American pragmatists explicit by delving into the philosophical critique they offer, and also by exploring the limits of the transformation of living values that it sponsors. I argue that the success of the constructive project of these American philosophers depends on finding a philosophical platform for describing and enacting a transformation of selves and communities.

TRANSFORMING EXPERIENCE

It would be naive to suggest that thinkers as different as Peirce, James, and Dewey operate from a univocal presumption about the prospects for philosophy and human transformation. They do not share this kind of identity, but I think they had their eyes trained on a similar expectation concerning human life and reflection. Their expectations vary according to their experience and background, but in each of these thinkers there is an agreement of purpose that the redemption of life through transforming practice is possible. It is real. The philosopher’s job is to reveal this redemptive capacity and dwell in its power rather than to create it out of whole cloth.

Pragmatism is more about discovering the transformation lurking within our experience and values than about generating a knock-down argument or an aesthetically pleasing story. In this respect, I connect Peirce, James, and Dewey with the figures H. Richard Niebuhr describes in The Kingdom of God in America who worked under the powerful vision of turning the kingdom into a principle for constructive action. Convinced that the reality of a new order of life was pressing upon them, they concluded that their responsibility was to find the means to
participate in that economy as best they could. Niebuhr describes their vision this way: “[T]o put the sovereignty of God in the first place is to make obedient activity superior to contemplation, however much of *theoria* is necessary to action. The principle of vision suggests that the perfection of the object seen is loved above all else; the principle of the kingdom indicates that the reality and power of the being commanding obedience are primarily regarded.”¹ The life aimed at is not a product of human imagination so much as it is a discovery of God’s desire for humanity. Discovering this new life comes through the process of subjecting living values to critical refinement and change, a change culminating in the re-creation of the person in God’s image. While the pragmatists reject the “divine initiative” this vision of the kingdom entails, they desire a power of transformation of life like this and they struggle to find ideals that would inspire obedience in action. In light of these demands, the pragmatists explore goals that dramatically expand reflective needs in philosophy.

**Pragmatism’s Goals for the Reflective Life**

Dewey introduces an expansive goal for his pragmatism in “The Need for a Recovery in Philosophy.” “The time has arrived,” he says, “for a pragmatism which shall be empirically idealistic, proclaiming the essential connexion of intelligence with the unachieved future—with possibilities involving a transfiguration.” He adds, “Faith in the power of intelligence to imagine a future which is the projection of the desirable in the present, and to invent the instrumentalities of its realization is our salvation. And it is a faith which must be nurtured and made articulate.”² James puts it in more personal terms, “The capacity of the strenuous mood lies so deep down among our natural human possibilities that even if there were no metaphysical or traditional grounds for believing in a God, men would postulate one simply as a pretext for living hard, and getting out of the game of existence its keenest possibilities for zest.”³ Peirce recurs to New Testament language to illuminate the principle of pragmatism, “consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings . . . then our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object.” “But [this] is only,” he adds in a note, “an application of the sole logical principle recommended by Jesus: ‘Ye may know them by their fruits,’ and it is very intimately allied with the
ideas of the gospel.” Producing fruits of practice and inquiry consistent with the character of the universe is the ultimate conception of success, displaying the “process whereby man, with all his miserable littlenesses, becomes gradually more and more imbued with the Spirit of God.” If pragmatism is a pedestrian philosophy, then these philosophers have found a walking bridge to the promised land.

I do not think it is an accident that religious symbols and language stand at the root of the connection between commonly lived values and the vision of a new life. The pragmatists capitalized on a common language and hope present in their communities. But they also demonstrate a religious and Christian sensibility that plays a key role in the formation of their ideas. For instance, James caps his “Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” with a version of St. Paul’s use of the Mosaic charge in Romans 10:7–8, “It is not in heaven, neither is it beyond the sea; but the word is very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it.” James’s profoundly influential Varieties of Religious Experience deals explicitly with the way such a word might be translated into a change of identity and practice, and what we might know of the origin of this word in personal religious experience. It is impossible to understand the power of James’s conviction about the human need for resolving philosophical questions apart from this religious impetus.

Dewey’s naturalism resists the historical encumbrances of revealed religion, yet it retains the character of an evangelical principle. Dewey advocates a form of life that effectively organizes a person’s habits and at the same time produces a community that consummates the desire for a satisfying social life. He calls dedication to this community “natural piety,” and he underscores the commitment necessary to bring this about in an allusion to the words of Job in Experience and Nature: “Fidelity to the nature to which we belong, as parts however weak, demands that we cherish our desires and ideals till we have converted them into intelligence, revised them in terms of the ways and means which nature makes possible. When we have used our thought to its utmost and have thrown into the moving unbalanced balance of things our puny strength, we know that though the universe slay us still we may trust, for our lot is one with whatever is good in existence.” Dewey’s dedication may stem from a religious experience he had when he was teaching in Oil City, Pennsylvania. In a mystical vision, Dewey saw a glorious merging of
ideals and human practice, producing in him a “quiet reconciliation with the world.”9 Hope for a life of realized value like this is more than he finds in religious communities. Dewey does not aim to be nonreligious; he aims to enable his community to be more productive than the religion in his day tended to be.10

Unlike James and Dewey, Peirce consistently connects the expansive aspect of his philosophical production to the reality of God and the significance this has for all inquirers. In his late essay “Law of Mind” he remarks that “a genuine evolutionary philosophy, that is, one that makes the principle of growth a primordial element of the universe, is so far from being antagonistic to the idea of a personal creator that it is really inseparable from that idea; while a necessitarian religion is in an altogether false position and is destined to become disintegrated. But a pseudo-evolutionism which enthrones mechanical law above the principle of growth is at once scientifically unsatisfactory, as giving no possible hint of how the universe has come about, and hostile to all hopes of personal relations to God.”11 Peirce’s biography is full of the struggle someone with his intellect and demeanor would have with an idea of the divine. In a remarkable letter written in 1898 to the rector of St. Thomas in New York City, Peirce writes,

This morning after breakfast I felt I must go to church anyway. I wandered about, not knowing where, to find a regular Episcopal church, in which I was confirmed; but I finally came to St. Thomas. I had several times been in it on week days to look at the chancel. I therefore saw nothing new to me. But this time,—I was not thinking of St. Thomas and his doubts, either,—no sooner had I got into the church than I seemed to receive the direct permission of the Master to come. Still, I said to myself, I must not go to communion without further reflection: I must go home & duly prepare myself before I venture. But when the instant came, I found myself carried up to the altar rail, almost without my own volition. I am perfectly sure that it was right. Anyway, I could not help it.12

Peirce adds that he is aware that this communion comes with a responsibility to work for the church and that he is prepared to do so, though he leaves the nature of this work vague. An awareness of religious vocation would strike many commentators as an absurd addition to a critical study of Peirce’s philosophy, but I think understanding this aspect of the man and his work opens up many interesting and fruitful discussions.13
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JONATHAN EDWARDS AND CONVERSION

While we see traces and images of the religious hope for transformation in the pragmatists, there is an origin in the American tradition of meeting such questions directly. No person carries this burden more than Jonathan Edwards. Edwards measures philosophical transformation by his biblical understanding of conversion. Historically speaking, Edwards retrieved conversion out of the ashes of his own tradition to accomplish a culture-altering critique of Puritanism, withstanding the harshest of criticisms from those within his own circle. Edwards lifts conversion by an “expropriated” vocabulary from the moralists whereby the true enthusiasm of Shaftesbury becomes the ground for an enthusiasm that only comes from “the knowledge of the loveliness of divine things.”

Harry Stout finds this a clever way of turning his assailants’ arguments against them, and indeed it is clever. But more than cleverness, Edwards reveals a confidence that humankind is made for conversion, and that our fullest potential and truest character is found only in the transformation possible with the Holy Spirit. His facility with philosophy compounds the power of his description of conversion. There is no fear of coming to the end of his tether and realizing he was his own God, as Perry Miller suggests in his beautiful biography.

Edwards is in remarkable continuity with the larger project of pragmatism to make practice intelligent and attain a higher order of clarity in practice through self-criticism. Edwards brings critical self-awareness to the ultimate change of character he discovers at the core of his own tradition. But I think his notion of conversion is broader than eighteenth-century Puritanism or even twenty-first-century Christianity. Conversion is a philosophical platform rich enough to serve as the ground for understanding the development of American pragmatism broadly construed, both in terms of the products it most deeply desires to produce in the person and in the community and in terms of the criticism of ideas and practice necessary to make it a living enterprise.

EXPANDING PRAGMATISM THROUGH CONVERSION

So far I have been arguing that the significance of religious metaphors and meanings for Peirce, James, and Dewey is expressed in their method of doing philosophy and the aims for which they engage in philosophy.
Making sense of this meaning, however, depends on overcoming two hurdles embedded in the way American philosophy has long been interpreted. First, the emphasis on naturalism dominant in contemporary discussions of pragmatism blankets the obvious springs of religious motivation and meaning in these thinkers with a smothering rejection. This rejection violates their texts. The pragmatists’ critique of supernatural dependence is much more powerful when it is not taken as a simple negation of religious meaning and practice. Strictly segregating religious meaning from pragmatism renders too much of its reflective accomplishment out of touch with its origins. Monolithic naturalism subverts the vitality of the pragmatists, closing off reflection on the kinds of concerns they aimed to render more productive of value in the lives of men and women. I intend to challenge this kind of naturalism by exploring a religious meaning in American pragmatism that is consistent with both its origin and its critique of traditional supernaturalism.

This conviction leads me to the second hurdle that needs to be cleared. I argue from the religious origin and concern of pragmatism that conversion provides a helpful framework for understanding and extending the American philosophical spirit. Conversion entails a holistic change of life that follows a discovery of the truth about ourselves, our community, and God. Conversion also becomes a platform for reorienting practice and reflection. Its power extends in a global critique of the guiding principles of inquiry, and its effect is a pervasive change of the habits and aims of the community and those individuals who find its success as their ultimate obligation and desire. For these reasons, I suggest that conversion forms a general aim of pragmatism’s founding figures, who promote a turning from the present world of failing practice to an entirely new kind life and practice for both individuals and communities. Leading philosophy toward conversion inverts the more usual practice of implying a change that needs to be made to religion because of philosophical discovery. While Dewey and James clearly voice the need for a reconstruction of religion, I disagree with writers such as Eugene Fontinell who argue that this reconstruction is the principal aim of pragmatism, requiring the “surrender of much of what we at one time held or may now hold dear.” My claim is that no proper reconstruction of religion can be accomplished by an argument that is disconnected from the reconstruction by religion of the person and the community if genuine transformation is the desire that holds us.
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CONCERNS ABOUT CONVERSION

I am aware that conversion evokes many powerful and troubling images. For many people conversion simply has no value; it is not a live hypothesis, to use James’s term. A holistic response to an experience or conviction of the truth about ourselves and God is so remote from current expectations that even suggesting it as a possibility, especially in a philosophical context, appears absurd. For others, the suggestion that conversion is necessary for an ultimately productive intellectual discernment of the self, God, and the world draws active and vociferous resistance because it is perceived as the enemy of a self-directed and free reflective life. Despite these worries, conversion remains a powerful image in our common life. A recent poll finds that 41 percent of Americans claim to have been “born again,” including both major candidates in the 2000 presidential race. The variety of responses to conversion, and its continuing place in the religious identity of many people, suggests that sorting out its complexity would address live concerns in our common life.

Some concerns about using the language of conversion stem from the belief that religious transformation reflects a static conception of humanity and God. But this is hardly the case. Conversion in the Christian tradition is not as monolithic as its opponents believe and neither is it as reflectively secure as its advocates suggest. The practices and beliefs related to the transformation of human life by a divine influence or a divine principle of concern are as old as Abraham and as convoluted as the controversies among the scholastic philosophers. The presence of this conversation through many centuries of human history reveals the organic need for continuing reflection on the question of a change of human character.

From the point of view of historical theology, the puzzle about conversion is the absence of theological formulation of the doctrine of soteriology. John McIntyre points out that christological controversies and Trinitarian debates structured the development of church practice and theology, but no statement of theological relation of the work of Christ in personal or communal salvation was made. This is interesting from a historical theological point of view because conversion is the crux of worship and church practice. Biblical witness for a conceptual theology of conversion is thin, so when theological development of soteriology did occur it took on the distinct forms based on philosophical conceptions of the person, community, and God of the person writing. McIntyre concludes that
trying to bring these diverse formulations together into one kind of development is difficult if not impossible.\textsuperscript{19}

Moving in this absence of formal doctrine, however, has opened the way for expansive and creative thinking connected to conversion. The account of intellectual conversion by Catholic theologian, philosopher, and teacher Bernard Lonergan culminates in his work \textit{Insight: A Study of Human Understanding}.\textsuperscript{20} Insight is a sudden, unexpected habit affecting discovery that “pivots between the concrete and the abstract.”\textsuperscript{21} Lonergan takes insight, what I would associate with the discovery of conversion, as the leading principle for an epistemic description of judgment. This epistemic work includes metaphysics, ethics, and transcendence, the tendency of human understanding to “go beyond.” Lonergan says his pursuit of insight “has found man involved and engaged in what he happens to be, and it has been confronted with man’s incapacity for sustained development and with his need to go beyond the hitherto considered procedures of his endeavor to go beyond.”\textsuperscript{22} Richard Liddy tracks the development of Lonergan’s understanding of intellectual conversion. Following his encounter with Augustine’s intellectual grasp of his convictions and in response to the developing scientific worldview, Liddy says Lonergan came to see that “it is the presence or absence of intellectual conversion that is the core issue in the Church’s understanding of what is going on in the world and the world’s understanding of the meaning and realm of divine revelation.”\textsuperscript{23}

David Ford takes the question of transformation and salvation in a different creative direction. He asks, “Can this theology of salvation go to the heart of Christian identity?”\textsuperscript{24} His answer leads him to engage the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas and the metaphor of “facing” as a key to reentering the question of salvation. Ford demonstrates both the perplexity of uncovering a single or common word about conversion and salvation in Christian theology and the breadth of inquiry that is possible once this inquiry is embraced. “Flourishings” from his dialogues with the philosophers Levinas, Jungel, and Ricoeur open into the world of Christian identity through singing, facing Jesus Christ, polyphonic living, and feasting. Ford turns to Thomas Trahern for an expression of salvation as felicity, a transformation of God by joy:

\begin{quote}
By infusing grateful principles, and inclinations to thanksgiving He hath made the creature capable of more than all worlds, yea, of more than enjoying the Deity in a simple way; though we should suppose it to be
\end{quote}
infinite. For to enjoy God is the fountain of infinite treasure, and as the giver of all, is infinite pleasure: but He by his wisdom infusing grateful principles, hath made us upon the very account of self-love to love Him more than ourselves.  

Andrew Tallon, in *Head and Heart: Affection, Cognition and Volition as Triune Consciousness*, takes still another tack into the question of transformation. Tallon moves through an analysis of Ricouer’s *connatural*ity. Tallon summarizes, “as we ‘become’ through our own agency, by forming habits, thereby constituting our ‘second’ nature, so we become better able to feel resonance or dissonance, harmony or disharmony, according to the beings we are, according to our acquired ‘second’ nature. . . . In practice, our actions issue proximately from our habits, our modified nature, and only remotely from our first nature, an idea important to Ricouer’s general project, namely a theory of the relation of feeling to will and the role of feeling in relation to affective fragility and human fallibility.” Tallon’s work is significant for the development of a theory of consciousness that makes way for the kind of transformation that percolates through the works of Ricouer, Ford, and Lonergan.

From a completely unsuspecting angle, I also find conversion at issue in the work of the recently deceased philosopher Gillian Rose. Her stunning work *The Broken Middle* puts postmodernity on notice that the privilege of fragmentation will give way to a reflective analysis of value and social reconfiguration. But here I turn to her confessional book *Love’s Work: A Reckoning with Life*. In her meditation on what enables some people to live through challenges and experiences that escapes rational explanation, she uncovers the significance of her Jewish heritage and the religious lapses of her dysfunctional family. But what captures me is the organic character of her writing about the deepest issues of life—health, sex, relationships—and that in coming to grips with her own mortality and philosophical reflection she discovers a space in reflection that stands beyond what philosophy can address. Her philosophical consciousness is a prelude to a set of puzzles about what makes it possible to live in light of the ubiquitous threat of death. From this place she can look back at philosophy:

I find it baffling that philosophers are currently claiming that we have a choice between three alternatives: revealed religion, enlightened rationalism, and postmodern relativism. “Revealed religion” refers to faiths which based their claim to truth on divine intervention and sacred scripture;
“enlightenment rationalism” means the modern authority of unaided human reason, the ability of humanity to achieve unlimited progress and perfection; “postmodern relativism” renounces the modern commitment to reason in view of its negative outcome—the destructive potentiality of science, the persistence of wars and holocausts. It proposes pluralism, localism and reservation as principles, when it has abandoned principles. It is the unrevealed religion which troubles us more than any revealed religion: the unrevealed religion which has hold of us without any evidences, natural or supernatural, without any credos or dogmas, liturgies or services. It is the very religion that makes us protest, “But I have no religion,” the very Protestantism against modernity that fuels our inner self-relation. Yet this very protest founded modernity.\textsuperscript{28}

Rose’s own protests are met with a realization that what holds her is a work of love.

The variety of these responses to human transformation and salvation make a strong case for engaging the question of conversion and transformation with utmost reflective attention and concern. Thinking about conversion reaches across disciplines of psychology, philosophy, and theology, as well as the entire spectrum of religious traditions. Across historical space, even into our own lives, the powerful questions flow: “What is my being, if not an invitation to be transformed?” and “What might be possible for me and my community in light of such transformation?” These questions reformulate the traditional query “What does God require me to be or to do?” My contention throughout this book is that the depth of the American philosophical tradition can be fully seen only in direct relation to these questions.

**Plan of Inquiry**

This inquiry follows a historical path beginning with Jonathan Edwards. Edwards was aware of his precarious place in the world of ideas and his New England society. He was also acutely aware of the security of the gospel in working toward a completion of redemption and the limits that prevent individuals and communities from participating in that redemptive plan. Edwards’s theological creativity in developing the structure of conversion in *Religious Affections* opens this door to participation as widely as possible. His integration of psychological structure and theological content raises pivotal and challenging questions about
the soul and the reality of God. These are leading questions, and Edwards is intent on expanding the meaning of God’s gracious influence on the soul and demonstrating the forms of life within which this influence can be most clearly known.

Edwards’s unique philosophical perspective grows in relation to his theological conviction that an affective transformation of individuals is the healing force of divine grace and revelation. Edwards’s role in calling the Puritan tradition to reclaim the ground of conversion emerged from his early preaching career and ultimately resulted in vitriolic opposition to him and his ideas. This opposition convinced Edwards that his generation was in need of a more stable reflective ground in the face of developments in philosophy and theology. Edwards gave his tradition a magisterial corpus and a sound defense of conversion because he realized that resistance to this idea was in fact the same opposition to the truth that necessitates the need for conversion.

Following Edwards, I turn to Charles Sanders Peirce. Peirce left us a full and complex record of his lifelong inquiry into the nature of the self and the universe. Adopting Peirce’s semiotic language of the self, I attempt to cash out his conviction that there is a “real and effective force” behind inquiry that pulls us forward into the realization of our continuity in thought with the universe. Rather than a fixed self or a thinking thing, Peirce discovers that the self is stabilized by inquiry aimed at the critical adoption of a guiding principle of thought and practice. This relation of the self and inquiry propels Peirce toward the difficult problems of making sense of brute experience, which does not seem to lead anywhere, and the context of finite time that limits any particular individual’s ability to enact a critical transformation. Peirce fails, I think, to make a successful argument about the nature of the transformation of the self. Briefly stated, he fails primarily because he approaches, but resists, the prospect that a particular positive content subtends all human inquiry, rather than facing that issue squarely as the problem. If this is a real failure for Peirce, as I claim it is, it is a very instructive failure.

John Dewey figures large in the American philosophical rejection of religion. He, more than Peirce and James, separates Christian hope for individuals and communities from his pragmatic faith in democracy and humanism. Despite this overt separation from Christian ideals there is too much of the New Testament in Dewey’s mature thought to argue that it is a clean break. But this ambiguity in Dewey is not my primary
focus. I am more interested in the way Dewey develops the philosophi- cal obligation to deal with human transformation. His description of the community revolves around the critique of public practice necessary to direct it toward a radical transformation of ends and means. Dewey resists disputes about the nature of ends, and the question that is its near relative, the debate over the relative values of theism and naturalism. Rather, he focuses on describing a community oriented toward its own transformation. John Dewey is a spiritual partner of Jonathan Edwards in the task of raising the desire for a new form of life through provocative images and descriptions, even if they both would have rejected each other theologically as extraordinarily misguided and dangerous. Dewey’s significance for this study of conversion comes from his goal of prompting transformation without capitulating to any authoritative content for that transformation except experience. Dewey highlights the natural human desire for transformation, and the yearning for a content that make this change possible. Dewey’s inability to ground this desire in any kind of tradition and his blunt rejection of the need for a structure of tradition for reflection undermines his project in my view. He, like Peirce, fails to achieve philosophically the transformation that he wants, but this too is an instructive failure.

William James, in distinction from Peirce, works from the emotive and sentimental side of human reflection. He pursues the impulse toward a transformed life through experience, dwelling in the imperative character of transformation. Generally speaking, American philosophy has adopted James’s conclusions concerning the sentimental and affective disposition toward transformation, but we have undervalued the problem of the content necessary for the transformation James advocates. James and Peirce disagreed about the importance of resolving the issue of what stands behind the human impulse to seek a holistic change. I explore James’s explicit rejection of this content basis for transformation in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* by following his description of religious experience and his systematic dismantling of Jonathan Edwards. James’s role in this study of conversion is that of an opponent to the claim that genuine transformation must originate outside or beyond the individual. This claim threatens James personally and philosophically. He engages in a subtle but violent battle with Edwards in order to unseat the prevailing conviction that religious experience always entails an extrapersonal source, like God, as a ground for transformation. James wins, by and large, in the
court of philosophical appeal, but I suggest that strong criticism of his argument is warranted. He sets the example for evading conversion by attempting to remove the sting of absence, the phenomena of realizing transformation is not possible from our present state. My criticism of James becomes the setting for a thematic treatment of this condition.

Leaving the historical ground of American pragmatism, I explore the absence that emerges in each account of these four philosophers. Absence is a term for the general awareness that a holistic reorientation of the self, habits, or the community requires the recognition that the individual or the community is insufficient or in error in its current form. This awareness is expressed in a variety of ways. Absence refers to the existential condition that propels a person to seek transformation such as Augustine felt leading up to his experience in the Milan garden. Absence also refers to the inability to bring a reflective order to satisfactory articulation such as Gillian Rose describes. Philosophy swings between attempting to eliminate all elements of absence in modern thought and embracing absence as the only possible human condition in our postmodern condition. American thinkers try to let the depth of existential absence guide them while striving to bring human consciousness and thought to a functional stability. The irreducible character of absence in reflection is a sign, I think, that transformation and conversion are elemental features of human consciousness. Any spirit of optimism, then, is grounded in the conviction that the blunt experience of absence can become an opening for a movement toward the discovery of a content of reflection that issues in a living stability.

The ability to respond self-critically to the absence of transformation forms the essence of human freedom. Human freedom as creative transformation is the second theme that emerges from an examination of conversion in American philosophy. The possibility of freedom is an accomplishment of spirit discovered in the process of a class of actions related to the self and the community. In this way I understand freedom as a platform for developing an orientation of the self toward some content rather than as a self-oriented ability to select one value rather than another. Thinking about human freedom this way allows for a reappraisal of Jonathan Edwards’s claim that transformation from God in conversion demands a completely free human action in response to the revelation of grace. But the principle that establishes this act as a choice of the free will is that the person’s affective orientation hangs in the balance.
I conclude this inquiry with a critical approach to recent American philosophy. Three contemporary philosophers who have contributed significantly to the development of pragmatism and American philosophy are held up to the light of conversion. My fundamental question is how conversion enables a critical appropriation and advance from their thoughts. Richard Rorty has obviously influenced the direction of pragmatism and received his share (perhaps a share and a half) of criticism. Rorty associates himself with James, and I find the same tendency to overlook both the content necessary for transformation and the inability or unwillingness to dwell in absence present in his writing. Next I turn to the provocative writings of Cornel West. West picks up Dewey’s reforming spirit and recharges it with a jolting shock of charisma. West also falls under the criticism of conversion, but in a different way than Dewey. While Dewey attempted to manufacture the content necessary for transformation, West is clear that his Christian tradition is in play at that point. But West overlooks, I think, aspects of the Christian tradition that are necessary to sustain transformation because it does not appear conducive to his political goals of reconstructing community under an egalitarian warrant.

Robert Corrington, my last example of evading conversion, evokes Peirce’s complex interrelation of religious thought, semiotic metaphysics, and psychological insight. Corrington moves between the kind of transformation Peirce perceives he needs and the necessary criticism of Western philosophy’s drunken delight in consciousness. Corrington argues against the philosophical privileging of consciousness, and I extend this critique to Corrington himself. The question is not how to get along without consciousness, I suggest, but it is knowing what we are so that we can be transformed and know this transformation.

Making these claims and criticism about the orientation of American philosophy may appear confrontational, and it is. This confrontation appears to the extent that recent American philosophy moves away from lived values and experience and more toward the professional philosophical genre the pragmatists eschewed. I trust that the confrontation of this argument will be seen as an effort to provoke philosophers and reflective individuals to engage the questions of conversion and transformation in a new way. I have not attempted to hide the apologia for Christian content that informs this study of transformation and conversion. This may, and probably should, be taken as a kind of provocation. My own confession is that I have made the discoveries I am exploring here philosophically under
the conviction that Jesus, the Christ, is the suitable platform for engaging in this reflection. My defense of this conviction is offered as a dialogical challenge to philosophical programs that reject such content out of hand. My defense of this conviction is also an attempt to test whether a critical evaluation of American pragmatism can be oriented around the core issues of the human soul and communal life. My confession and my philosophical work aim to take fuller account of the difference pragmatists have made, not only in the broader tradition of philosophy, but also more particularly in my own self-understanding. This path of discovery has led to the guiding question for this study, “What could be more profoundly and permanently transforming than a vital difference in our philosophical expectations of religious self-understanding and practice?”

NOTES

5. James, “Moral Philosopher,” 86.
22. Ibid., 636.
25. Ibid., 278.
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