Dwelling in Absence: The Reflective Origin of Conversion

In the last chapter, I argued that William James stumbles when he deals with religious conversion. James studies religious experience for its contribution to human transformation, but he does not accept the ultimate character of conversion experience and the content of beliefs associated with dramatic and universal personal transformation. This rejection of conversion marks a shift in James’s purpose in the Varieties from trying to understand religion to advocating a critical deletion in religious understanding. James, who finds good in almost every idea, finds conversion quite troubling.

James is still one of the authorities on religious experience in America, so invoking conversion as a way of rekindling the fires within philosophical pragmatism must run into conflict with James at some point. And so I have. In previous chapters I have argued that conversion, using Jonathan Edwards’s work as a model, enables us to peer into the philosophical souls of C. S. Peirce and John Dewey, both to understand their compulsion to describe a philosophy of transformation, and to point out where their philosophies can be critically advanced. Conversion offers a way of suggesting a possible completion of the transformation the pragmatists seek that does not close down inquiry or limit the community. Conversion may be the confirmation that their desire for change is fulfilled.

Taken in this way, conversion in American philosophy leads to a striking disjunction. A great divide appears between James, who raises the issue of conversion directly with the intention of exposing its limits, and Peirce and Dewey, who do not raise conversion but are amenable in many ways to an ultimate moment of reorientation for the person or the community. The aim of this chapter is to explore this philosophical disjunction in pragmatism. In a nutshell, the difference between James and Peirce and Dewey is that the latter two orient their thought toward problems that represent the greatest threat to their reflective control.
They engage philosophical problems that have roots in their personal failings and fears. Dwelling with these problems requires both philosophical sophistication and nerve, and I think that the possibility for genuine conversion emerges within this ability to embrace the moments of absence within our reflection and our tradition.

Conversion reveals William James's deepest fears as well as his most profound hope. His hope is that his life will develop a power and meaning that somehow exceeds the narrowness of what he consciously creates or controls, but without dependence on some alien good or God. What he fears is that the significance of his life, and human life in general, may depend on some reality he does not create or control. James is compelled to explain conversion in Varieties of Religious Experience because of the power of the occasions where individuals confront a truth about themselves that remains absent from their control, and yet they are drawn into this absence rather than remain in the world that they do have control over. At this point James's fears outweigh his hope, and he backtracks from conversion as an ultimate and telling kind of experience that puts the person in clear relationship with the powers of the universe. Rather, he proclaims that religious experience has no ultimate figure of change. Only continuing effort toward personal transformation is religious, and any image of finality or the invocation of an external power necessary for such a personal change is inhuman and antireligious. Conversion limits James's philosophy because he cannot understand its attraction or abide its reality.

Let me step back a moment from James's rejection of conversion and place his thought in context with the argument of this book. I have argued that the pragmatists pursue a philosophical transformation that develops toward a dramatic and holistic change of a person or a community. This desire for an effective and comprehensive transformation is the root of the curious relation between American pragmatism and religious conversion, and this desire leads us to the hand of Augustine.

Saint Augustine’s narrative in the Confessions exposes the problem of understanding the kind of conversion central to Christian testimony. For Augustine, however, the limit of his philosophical understanding is the absence of his control of his own will. The fragmentation he sees in his inability to will one thing is more than an unattained good; it is a sign of his woundedness. Augustine knows what he is not able to do, and that inability becomes the orienting focus of his inquiry leading to his conversion.
Jonathan Edwards reflects Augustine’s willingness to face what is most threatening or troubling on his reflective horizon. For Edwards, the trouble comes through the tradition of Puritanism that was showing internal fault lines, especially concerning conversion. The failure of the Puritan community to live up to its own standards plagues Edwards. His adult reflection and influence move squarely against this resistance, resulting in his philosophical and theological positions that are bathed in conflict and disputation. This character of moving toward the most challenging reflective and communal problems, though, also collects the work of C. S. Peirce and John Dewey. They move into their traditions by seeking out the currents of resistance, where their thought is challenged by what it most clearly is not, or where reflective control is most painfully absent. Edwards, Peirce, and Dewey are examples of a philosophical transformation, the accomplishment of a character remarkable for its affection for moving through personal and reflective resistance into the questions that smell most like the abyss of death.

The development of this character is the heart of my project to understand conversion. Conversion means adopting a truth that we are not at present able to articulate or create, and so moving into the absence of this meaning is essential for understanding this experience. I am particularly interested in how this orientation becomes a moving principle in pragmatic thought, how an affection toward absence develops in our tradition. William James drives pragmatism into the neighborhood of religion, where this affection toward what we are not has its original power, even though I find that he eventually resists this affection. James is pivotal in the developmental course of pragmatism, and I think his resistance to this orientation toward absence marks out clear lines of philosophical struggle that continue into our present reflection.

The plan of this chapter falls along three lines of argument. First, I describe the ways Peirce and Dewey discover the limits of their efforts toward philosophical transformation. They represent distinct methods of locating and handling this limit, and they both face the failure of reflection that is part and parcel with discovering truth. Second, I show Edwards’s orientation toward the failure of transformation in his inquiry into the religious affections. This orientation toward failure, his failure, humanizes Edwards’s otherwise monstrous image. The last step is to bring these three thinkers together in terms of an American response to the limit of transformation in order to understand why conversion remains such a powerful and complicated feature of our religious and philosophical lives.
William James eclipsed his teacher, C. S. Peirce, in almost every way. James had the position at Harvard, the admiration of scholars, wealth, and international fame. But it was Peirce who started James on his philosophical quest of divining a new name for some old ways of thinking, and James acknowledges that debt. From Peirce James took the lesson that philosophy can produce a transformation of human life if it overcomes itself and its tendency to lose focus. As a mode of critique, Peirce’s pragmatism takes modern philosophy to task for not generating the kind of transformation hoped for. The need for a wholesale replacement of the status quo philosophical vision stands behind James’s persistence in exorcising dyads such as free will and determinism that have a hold on our thought, but James fails both to make the wholesale replacement he desires and to realize that Peirce is closer to the mark.

Transformation of Inquiry

For Peirce transformation requires a complete habit change, an ultimate encounter with the character of the universe. Discovering an ultimate habit change to the character Peirce calls “the law of mind” is the positive side of transformation that I connect with conversion. This habit change is possible, however, only if there is also a change in the habit of inquiry. The desire for the holistic change of inquiry emerges in a peculiar way.

The transformation of inquiry is actually one of Peirce’s primary philosophical goals. It links his logic, semiotic, and metaphysical speculation. If a difference is not accessible through inquiry, if inquiry does not work from a very different platform from current science and philosophy, then the conclusions of inquiry will not be any different.

What sponsors such a need to have a completely different platform of inquiry? For Peirce this is doubt. Doubt appears as the sign of our incomplete control of action and thought. When I wish to recall Kant’s argument for the transcendental deduction, but cannot recall the immediate context enough to locate it in my copy of *The Critique of Pure Reason*, I realize one form of doubt. This personal form of doubt leads me to the correction I need. What I do not know is clear enough that my inquiry builds on this absence. The same may be true of an idea that I am trying to write down: my expression does not capture what I intend, and doubt arises so that I can realize the deficiency and correct it,
although I may never bring my idea to exact expression. A third sense of doubt is much more catastrophic.

In his essay “How to Make Our Ideas Clear,” Peirce drops a little autobiographical hint on his reader, but it is couched in an expression of extraordinary doubt:

Many a man has cherished for years as his hobby some vague shadow of an idea, too meaningless to be positively false; he has, nevertheless, passionately loved it, has made it his companion by day and by night, and has given to it his strength and his life, leaving all other occupations for its sake, and in short has lived with it and for it, until it has become, as it were, flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone; and then he has waked up some bright morning to find it gone, clean vanished away like the beautiful Melusina of the fable, and the essence of his life gone with it. (CP 5:393)

Most commentators skip over this hyperbole except to note that Peirce’s first wife, Melusina, had left him by the time he wrote this. But there is more philosophical significance here than meets the eye. While Peirce treats ideas and cognition with the cool hand of a logician, there is more at stake in it for him than making clear distinctions. Doubt is more than an insufficient belief; it is a kind of suffering related to the absence of a vague but powerful idea. Nevertheless, this overwhelming loss puts a stamp of veracity on our inquiry. What we bump into is not what we would produce ourselves—we could not manufacture this loss in a thousand tries—but it is what our inquiry must overcome in order to function as a working organ of thought. Occasions of doubt like this one are the beginning of Peirce’s discovery of realism.

How Peirce handles this absence is critical for his philosophy of transformation. Only an encounter with a real that is not us could become the genesis of a completely new habit of inquiry. If we lose this connection with the real and give in to the temptation simply to replace the vague and powerful idea, to take up with another woman, so to speak, Peirce thinks we will find our inquiry turning in a solipsistic circle, answering only the questions we pose to ourselves. Doubt is the key to a transformed inquiry necessary for the refinement of habits that will make real change possible.

Peirce makes one of his most important philosophical discoveries at this point in handling doubt. Doubt is a limit to thought because it marks the boundaries of ideas and practice. Doubt is also the sign of what stands beyond our reason and may destroy it, reducing our efforts to smash. But doubt is also, as I pointed out above, the indication that
our thought is moving beyond the well-worn paths of meaning and transgressing the limits of what we know into the strange territory of what we do not know. In this way doubt becomes a key to surpassing the philosophical production of the moderns—for them doubt was simply error to be avoided and not a potentially directive encounter.

Architectonic of Doubt

In his two essays “Four Incapacities Claimed for Man” and “Some Consequences of Four Incapacities Claimed for Man,” Peirce describes a form of inquiry that handles doubt as an integral aspect of thought instead of shoving it away. The first of these two essays demonstrates the failure of Cartesian doubt, what Peirce calls “paper doubt” because it appears under the philosopher’s pen and does not arise out of the existential conflict of habit. Descartes poses doubt and then creates a system based on overcoming this “error” by introspection and intuition. Peirce discovers Descartes’ error, but infers that this is more than a misguided application of philosophy. It is a sign that inquiry must be based on “a very different kind of platform than this.” But how to replace it? Can Descartes’ failure and that of modern philosophy be a beginning of a more genuine inquiry?

Peirce knows it is necessary not to simply reject the error of modern philosophy and move on, because he would still be seeking an answer only to that rejection, not to his doubt. The challenge is to incorporate this error of modern philosophy into a construction of a more stable platform, so that in this way philosophy overcomes and incorporates its own error within inquiry. The first blush of Peirce’s tendency to think in architectonic fashion appears in his suggestion that such a platform for inquiry is framed by four denials drawn from his rejection of Descartes: “1. We have no power of Introspection, but all knowledge of the internal world is derived by hypothetical reasoning from our knowledge of external facts. 2. We have no power of Intuition, but every cognition is determined logically by previous cognition. 3. We have no power of thinking without signs. 4. We have no conception of the absolutely incognizable” (CP 5:265). These four denials are not directives or principles Peirce states as unequivocal foundations for inquiry. Rather, they are leading suggestions that force the inquirer to seek the consequences of these “denials”—if they are true, what would this mean for inquiry? This hypothetical structure opens out into Peirce’s development of the main terms of his lifelong philosophical discovery of the continuity of thought, the logical necessity
of a community for fixing belief, the theory of semiotic development, and the real “object” that grounds inquiry.

The success of Peirce’s new platform finally rests on the nature of the object that he finds is essential for inquiry to have the nature of the real about it, so that what is discovered “is what it is no matter if any person thinks it.” If this object is only apparent in inquiry, like a Kantian “thing-in-itself,” then Peirce’s project collapses before it starts because thought will never connect to “what is” as heputs it. On the other hand, if his platform reproduces the Cartesian error of making a cognition out of what is incognizable, Peirce has also failed. The object of inquiry must ground the process of inquiry, yet it must remain absent from it in order to preserve the reality of error, of missing the mark, in order to confirm that inquiry is oriented toward something beyond itself. But the only possible confirmation that this object is orienting inquiry is a hypothetical relation. If inquiry exhibits an orientation and direction while still bearing the mark of doubt and error, then it is pursuing something like this object. The only sign that inquiry is grounded by a real object is the character of the inquirer that emerges with the inquiry. Peirce says it this way:

But it is plain that the knowledge that one thought is similar to or in any way truly representative of another, cannot be derived from immediate perception, but must be an hypothesis (unquestionably fully justifiable by facts), and that therefore the formation of such a representing thought must be dependent upon a real and effective force behind consciousness, and not merely upon a mental comparison. (CP 5:288)

Peirce points out that continuity among ideas is not from a representational comparison, but by an inference. And the inference that connects ideas has to do with discerning a resistant character in consciousness that establishes the idea as connected to a “real and effective force.” For Peirce this means that a community must exemplify this direction by a “real and effective force” to substantiate the success of its inquiry.

Let me quickly summarize this argument about how Peirce handles absence through inquiry. Doubt is a sign that thought is striking against something that resists it. The question is what the presence of this doubt means. Is doubt an indication that inquiry is failing or an indication that it is succeeding? Peirce claims that inquiry must move into the realm of doubt to face what it is not in order for transformation of thought to occur. Thought seeks its own transformation because it is capable of overcoming its own errors of taking provisional answers for final ones.
Only inquiry from this new platform pushes thought to its limit of finding the limit of the real by error instead of stopping for what works in the immediate occasion. A transformation of thought that is complete will emerge only as a result of inquiry that dwells in this absence which is doubt as the limit of thought.

The fact that all thought must be tested in action commits Peirce to the claim that an energetic expression of inquiry is required to fulfill this hypothetical platform. But Peirce also claims that just having a series of actions or moments of inquiry will not satisfy the claim that inquiry has in fact reached this new platform. Inquiry must be discovered in its generality for this character to appear. He says,

The deliberately formed, self-analyzing habit—self-analyzing because formed by the aid of analysis of the exercises that nourished it—is the living definition, the veritable and final logical interpretant. Consequently, the most perfect account of a concept that words can convey will consist in a description of the habit which that concept is calculated to produce. But how otherwise can a habit be described than by a description of the kind of action to which it gives rise, with the specification of the conditions and of the motive? (CP 5:491)

The description Peirce seeks requires both an active representation and reflection on the motive—the guiding principle of that inquiry. In this way Peirce thinks science must focus on performing critical inquiry and reaching a self-critical awareness of that inquiry to be truly scientific.

*Doubt and the Inquiry of the Community*

From this position it appears that the community, especially the community of scientists, may provide the consequential proof of Peirce’s conditional idea of inquiry. He says that a community is necessary because it “overcomes the vagaries of you and me” by examining more general action. Inquiry in a community does not have the constraint of individual persons and their histories or their limitations. Communal inquiry strives against the limit of time, and may, it seems, hold the prospect for at least containing the instances of doubt that mark the functional limits of its reach. Is the community a way out of the absence which begins Peirce’s inquiry?

The quick answer is, no, it cannot without squelching inquiry. But how does doubt become the focus for a development of meaning and ideas in a community? Especially since Peirce now has invoked the infinite long run of inquiry in which time is no longer an eater, as it is for Augustine.
Doubt and absence turn up in the community in the 1903 lectures on pragmatism. Peirce proposes a way “the real” is discovered in three types of men (CP 5:210–212). The first type are aesthetes, for whom “action is taken as utterly free and expressive” and who reflect the quality of the real, but push the articulation no further. They do not aim to make practical or self-critical distinctions. Men of the second type are concerned with the immediate challenge of getting things done. Peirce is quite negative here, since these practical types have no care for the meaning of their actions, only the brute efficiency. He pronounces against this focus on the immediate as the gospel of greed in “Evolutionary Love.” “Here, then, is the issue,” he says. “The gospel of Christ says that progress comes from every individual merging his individuality in sympathy with his neighbors. On the other side, the conviction of the nineteenth century is that progress takes place by virtue of every individual’s striving for himself with all his might and trampling his neighbor under foot whenever he gets a chance to do so. This may accurately be called the Gospel of Greed” (CP 6:294). Dewey, we will see, finds immediate goods and acts occasions for attaining a different kind of transformation, but Peirce does not think this is possible. Rather, there is a third type of men, the scientists, who escape the limits of the temporal order and qualitative characteristics to the elements contained in thirdness, the realm of argument, inference, and the expansion of meaning:

The man who takes the third position and accepts the cotary propositions will hold, with firmest of grasps, to the recognition that logical criticism is limited to what we can control. In the future we may be able to control more but we must consider what we can now control. Some elements we can control in some limited measure. But the content of the perceptual judgment cannot be sensibly controlled now, nor is there any rational hope that it ever can be. Concerning that quite uncontrolled part of the mind, logical maxims have as little to do as with the growth of hair and nails. We may be dimly able to see that, in part, it depends on the accidents of the moment, in part on what is personal or racial, in part is common to all nicely adjusted organisms whose equilibrium has narrow ranges of stability, in part on whatever is composed of vast collections of independently variable elements, in part on whatever reacts, and in part on whatever has any mode of being. But the sum of it all is that our logically controlled thoughts compose a small part of the mind, the mere blossom of a vast complexus, which we may call the instinctive mind, in which this man will not say that he has faith, because that implies the conceivability
of distrust, but upon which he builds as the very fact to which it is the whole business of his logic to be true. . . . That he will have no difficulty with Thirdness is clear enough, because he will hold that the conformity of action to general intentions is as much given in perception as is the element of action itself, which cannot really be mentally torn away from such general purposiveness. (CP 5:212)

The metaphysical condition for action among practical minds is a linear notion of time. In linear time there is no room for an event between two that are separate in time. There is no possible connection between this time and either a past or a future. Linear time is the grounding notion of negative liberty, of absolute freedom from all constraints. Peirce takes the notion of linear time as securing the freedom of action, where that freedom means that it is susceptible to change through criticism. But linear time cannot contain the element of thirdness needed for this criticism. There is no error in absolutely linear time, either considered as a whole, as Hegel does, or in its isolable and fragmented parts, as Rorty makes clear. There is only what is, or what is easiest to think. Anything real is disconnected from the temporal order, or is absent altogether.

Only men of the third type, then, are able to overcome the limit of time while retaining the movement of inquiry, doubt. So the community is not a way of stepping aside from doubt, but a way of uncovering another dimension of it. That is, the community of inquirers of the third type discovers an absence that is not possible in either of the first two types, nor is it possible simply in community qua community.

However much Peirce loads his argument toward generality and the community of inquirers in the infinite long run, it remains true that this community is constructed of actual individuals joined in this inquiry. But how does the individual see this community as an enterprise that is actually oriented toward the kind of long-run inquiry without any qualitative recognition that this is so? How does the individual come to participate in the inquiry of the community, or rather, how does the community appear in the thought of the individual? Is the community of scientists sufficient to warrant this identification with the law of mind, as the living sign of thirdness?

Peirce needs a fourth category of inquirer, that is, an individual that stands apart from the dialectic of the first and second type of men and, through standing in his or her own doubt, finds community in the third type of inquiry and the doubt that orients the character of that process.¹
This type of community of inquiry cannot be continued by an internal reproduction but must continue to draw inquirers from the other types into its reality of dwelling in absence.

In one of his more striking phrases, Peirce says, “Ignorance and error are all that distinguish our private selves from the absolute ego of pure apperception”\(^2\) (CP 5:235). He means that we perceive our individual character as inquirers, separate from the ideal ego of apperception, by noting when our judgments are wrong, when we do not control our action, or when our thought turns out to fail in practice. To join this personal negation with the movement to the community of inquirers mentioned above means that at some point the “personal” source of doubt must coincide with the doubt of the scientifically inquiring community. In this way personal negation remains a feature of absence for Peirce’s objective idealism and becomes the limit of his transformation of inquiry. There is no change in human inquiry if this transformation of a person into the third type is not possible. And this requires that the individual somehow is able to stand in the community through dwelling in the absence of their own ignorance and error. Otherwise there is not a working from negation but canceling and rejecting negation.

Peirce’s own absence is the absence of transformation, and I think he realizes this most fully in the “Neglected Argument for the Reality of God.” In that essay the individual appears to become a sign for the community, not vice versa, and the absence of the individual is the absence of philosophy. The community of scientists is a kind of verification of the emergence of the “muser” into agapism, but despite the instinctive power of the idea of God in its “beauty, for its supplying an ideal of life, and for its thoroughly satisfactory explanation of his whole threefold environment” (CP 6:465), the individual stands as an absence, as that which cannot be overcome by generality of thought or inferential form.

**Dewey: Nature, Absence, and Communication**

Peirce’s lonely condition of confronting the absence of the universe in himself perplexes a philosopher like John Dewey. Dewey is not lonely because he sees himself already in relation to a content of the universe from which there is no possibility of escaping into solitude or private reflection. The problem for Dewey is not overcoming personal limitations so much as it is bringing the ground of interaction that stands behind all
thought into plain view. This ground of interaction is the source of expanding meaning in the universe and in thought. In this world transformation is not precariously balanced on the development of meaning by an inference from the vague origin of inquiry, as it is for Peirce. Rather, transformation is a worklike process of bringing ideas and habits more and more directly into contact with the ground of interaction in order to soak up the principle of expansion already present there. Transformation, though, must exceed this soaking up or reflexive response with the development of new meaning. How this is possible in Dewey’s estimation is the focus of this section.

Dewey uses the term *nature* to refer to the ground of interaction and experience that provides the material for our efforts to transcend habits and meanings. Nature is mostly inert, that is, it is not a superconscientness or a personality, but it is that to which practice and thought are modified. Nature occasionally appears to have semiconscious effects, especially when Dewey describes its forcefulness in becoming manifest in human practice. Nature almost appears to be a guiding intention behind the development of meaning. But Dewey is careful to return to the position that this intention emerges only in the enlivening interaction of experience with nature.

Dewey builds his understanding of nature from the ground up, so to speak. He begins with the changes in thought and culture that are either an interaction with a stable and directive content or an interaction with a contingent and unordered continuum of non-meaning matter. Dewey is optimistic that every transformation that comes in experience is an opening to inquire into the “ordered richness” of nature. Nature has an effect on human community that can be discovered, and its authority for altering practice can be witnessed and critically appraised. At the same time Dewey absolutely rejects anything that smacks of an onto-theologically authoritative Word. There is no “the greater than which none can be conceived” for Dewey. Nature is all we have and all we need.

But given the fact that nature resists any objectification in knowledge, the only way to bring the ordering authority behind practice into clear view is to develop new habits. Otherwise the authority behind the development of our practice is “beyond” us and is outside our range of intelligent control. Dewey’s most fundamental critique of traditional religion is that it removes a large part of the meaning of our practice from critical control by giving it over to blind obedience. This kind of
obedience is an abdication of our most human characteristic of bringing reflective control to our action.

The community, as a denotable thing in experience, is an instance of intelligent control of material conditions for some prospective end, and so the community is the assurance of the incarnation of authority without Being. This is why Dewey eulogizes “democracy.” But the community is also an instance of resistance to that control, and this is why Dewey describes democracy as “the task before us” (LW 14:224). This complex relation of confirmation and resistance of intelligent control indicates that the community is a rich object for inquiry, especially as Dewey explores its phenomenal aspects in *Experience and Nature*.

Dewey’s premise throughout *Experience and Nature* is that the community does not yet have a clear conception of its enlivening authority. As a result of this absence the community remains an open question, both reflectively and existentially. But to bring the nature of community to fuller view Dewey has only to “understand better what is already the common experience of mankind” (LW 1:40). Dewey seeks to transform our “common experience” into a self-conscious community through a reflection on experience and nature. The most telling feature of this transformation arises from bringing to view what is absent in our “common experience.” The reflective control of developing meaning in our experience eludes us, despite the fact that this meaning is part and parcel of a response to nature. Exploring this absence requires Dewey to become more explicit about the relation of meaning and nature.

*Nature*

Nature is the broadest possible consideration of meaning in the universe. But nature is present only as the condition of experience, and the meaning of nature is just the content of experience that develops in this interaction. Experience is not governed by an ideal progress, nor is it representative of a Platonic form. The transformation of the human community that occurs in the interaction with nature is the only material basis for a meaningful understanding of experience.

Since experience arises in response to nature, fully knowing experience means being able to adopt habits self-critically and adapt the direction of that interaction. The universal condition of nature also means that experience cannot be permanently manipulated or held in a false abeyance by cultural accretions no matter how ingrained in practice they
might be. The reason such accretions cannot stand is that we are a com-
munity in relation to nature. Nature is the perennial transformation of
the unstable into the more stable and the recognition of the limitations
of static conceptions by their eventual failure in directing practice.
Meaning in experience is a result of developing habits that can stand in a
productive relation to nature, which for the human community is like
drinking from a common cup. Dewey boldly states, “This community of
partaking is meaning” (LW 1:146).

In this way Dewey stacks his notion of transformation around the pole
of nature. Nature is at once the idea that draws human community for­
ward as the order of interactions that produce a character are collected in
an expanding meaning of practice. And nature is also the instance of
expanding meaning—since this is a material reality and not an ideal. This
interactive materiality is not locked into one form but evolves in an
unlimited expansion of value; that is, differences appear in practice that
guide development into specific habits but not into terminal habits.

The unlimited expansion of value is reflected in Dewey’s understand­
ing of the role of impulse in human nature and conduct. Habits are
formed by interactions with conditions that are connected to ends of
action, but habits are flexible, changing when an impulse interrupts their
continuity. This interruption appears within the action related to a habit,
so all of human meaning is not a making from nothing but a reforming
of what is already present. Dewey thinks that many of our reflective
problems stem from the notion that we make Reality, as he points out
here in respect to idealism,

[Idealism] took re-constitution to be constitution; re-construction to be
construction. Accepting the premise of the equivalence of Reality with
the attained object of knowledge, idealism had no way of noting that
thought is intermediary between some empirical objects and others.
Hence an office of transformation was converted into an act of original
and final creation. A conversion of actual immediate objects into better,
into more secure and significant objects was treated as a movement from
merely apparent and phenomenal Being to the truly Real. In short, ideal­
ism is guilty of neglect that thought and knowledge are histories . . . .
Only action, interaction, can change or remake objects. . . . Intelligence is
a factor in forming new objects which mark a fulfillment. But this is
because intelligence is incarnate in overt action, using things as means to
affect other things. (LW 1.126)
What makes interaction with nature the realm for transformation is the disjunction between the present and the *better* that is absent from our habit.

I find Dewey’s shifting use of nature problematic. As both the continuum and the interruption that makes transforming change possible nature becomes a gratuitous term—it means both things and does not have an internal complexity necessary for separating these two different functions. This slippery character of the term *nature* flows from the way Dewey uses the term as a sign of absence when speaking in terms of impulse and a continuum of meaning when speaking in terms of habit. Overcoming this aspect of nature is the challenge Dewey faces in developing his account of transformation through communication.

**Absence and Communication**

Immediate experience is challenged when a different value appears that is beyond the control of the present habit. For instance, when a swimmer sees a shark fin, her ability to swim in relation to the danger shifts her habit toward another value like being out of danger, and this is beyond her present swimming ability. And so she shouts for help. The appearing value is not a threat of non-meaning, but it comes from a realization of incomplete meaning. This absence is a kind of incompleteness apparent in human habit.

Communication emerges from interactions with this recognition of incompleteness in habit. Communication is not a direct interaction with nature, because nature always remains beyond our habits as the founding condition. Thought is distinct from nature in that thought does not aim to represent nature but to respond to it. Here Rorty is exactly right about the metaphysical ground of Dewey’s pragmatism. Practice reveals all the meaning nature has for us. Our action is all that nature can mean. But how this action expands like nature is the question.

What puzzles Dewey is the expansive property of human habit in meaning that cannot be strictly tied to a contingent shift in material conditions. Communication is the movement in meaning that is possible when habits are challenged to become *better* than they are by virtue of criticism rather than material conditions. This *better* and the ground of this criticism of habit brings us to another sense of absence related to nature. The interaction that propels habit past itself toward a *better* for the sake only of this *better* is communication.
The praise of communication cannot be overstated. Dewey says, “communication is a wonder by the side of which transubstantiation pales” (LW 1:132). Communication appears miraculous because natural conditions are reproduced as reflective content, as meaning. He describes a mythical relation of two individuals, A and B, where A proposes the consummatory experience of possession of a flower and B accepts or rejects. The miraculous moment to the interaction is that “the thing pointed out by A to B gains meaning” (LW 1:142). No other sentence in Dewey’s corpus carries the freight that this ex nihilo appearance of meaning does. Between the individuals blankly denoted by A and B, a community is formed around “significant things [which are] actually implicated in situations of shared or social purpose and execution” (LW 1:142). A word “gains meaning when its use establishes a genuine community of action” (LW 1:145). The transformation of individuals A and B into a community is now a “denoted” object.

Communication is a tool that joins elements of consciousness into a “partaking of meaning” like sharing a common meal. Transformation of experience is possible when communication becomes a conscious aspect of our habit forming and reforming, and this is what Dewey means by “intelligence.” Communication reveals the ability of consciousness to anticipate the direction of a habit and redirect it toward another appearing value. Nature is newly discoverable in this function of hosting anticipation, but the character of nature as a condition of experience takes another step into the shadows. Transformation of human value occurs because some aspect of interaction reveals a lapse or an emptiness, and it is not clear that this absence can ever be a proper aspect of nature. Dewey says “without reference to the absent, or ‘transcendence,’ nothing is a tool” (LW 1:146). He makes the same point at another place; “when we name an event we speak proleptically . . . we invoke a meaning, namely, the potential consequence of the existence” (LW 1:150). When Dewey names the community of partakers, he anticipates such a community of partakers where meaning obtains. But he also anticipates the transformation of meaning that is communication when he says that communication is a tool, in fact “the tool of tools” (LW 1:146). So what is transcendentally absent here, communication, or the community? The ambiguity centers on the question of who or what is refining or using the tool. Is communication the tool the community uses to get clear about itself, or is the community a tool communication uses to continue to dwell in the absence related to expanding meaning?
Dewey’s account of communication leads toward this further reach into absence. What intrigues Dewey is that communication fully emerges as a good only when it requires the individual to give up a secure world, though flawed in some aspect of its authority, for a new world that cannot be presented in any descriptive terms. All that can be promised is based on a metaphorical relation of this ultimate move into flux and prior moves into the same kind of space in particular habits. This peculiar undergoing is seen, Dewey says, “when an old essence or meaning is in process of dissolution and a new one has not taken shape . . . the intervening existence is too fluid and formless for publication, even to one’s self. . . . This process of flux is intrinsic to any thought which is subjective and private.” The subject arises in continuity with the reconstitution of experience from pure flux. Dewey continues, “The point in placing emphasis upon the role of individual desire and thought in social life is that it shows the genuinely intermediate position of subjective mind: it proves it to be a mode of natural existence in which objects undergo directed reconstitution” (LW 1:171). But communication as a conscious moment in our orientation toward nature marks a shift in the direction in experience. In communication the subject is not defined by an effort to get into a better relation to nature, but trying to consciously adopt and adapt the process by which nature molds and influences action. To this end, communication must contain the same kind of absence nature does in order that it can represent another possibility beyond the active habit.

This repetition of absence between nature and communication turns into a threat for Dewey’s account of the transformation of experience. Once communication becomes a habit of reconstitution in the community, where it is in full control of its expansion of meaning, it is possible to supplant the authority of nature with some other content. This is possible because the state of flux necessary for communication to obtain means that a disconnection from nature is also necessary. The “new world” that appears before it is realized cannot be discriminated from any other world except by being fully realized. There is no standing outside and evaluating a world of value for Dewey; there is only entering into a world and assessing its ordered richness from within. This becomes a problem, for instance, when philosophy replaces the transformative impulse of nature with the non-natural good of an ultimate and static being. The change of habit possible in communication can be skewed in this way by an alternative content that
can be evaluated holistically only in relation to the expansion of nature. There must be a concrete instance of communication related to nature, therefore, in order for this discrimination to take place at all.

The philosophical challenge for pragmatism is discriminating between content in human action once the range of communication is employed within the community, because this is the condition within which all philosophy emerges. Separating communication that is grounded in nature from communication that is not is Dewey’s focus in books such as *The Quest for Certainty and The Public and Its Problems*. Nature is absent in a more powerful way in these reflective pursuits because the mode of habit change that reflects our natural condition itself becomes a problem. Reflection that follows the authority of an alien content is doubly dangerous because communication is changed into a negative product. It is impossible to describe this problem by formal criteria because it reflects the pattern of responsive change to conditions. This ambiguity is the reason Dewey is positive toward religious impulse but expressly negative toward traditional religion.

Dewey ultimately arrives at a crucial philosophical problem in *Experience and Nature*. Content that is less than completely reflective of nature cannot be revealed as incomplete except by projecting the characteristic direction of these habits. And since the material form of the community or its habits never amounts to an exhaustive image of nature, the only distinguishing difference is that the authority that nature properly has over habits (in Dewey’s model of community) is an authority that other content cannot duplicate. The authority of nature cannot be reproduced by anything other than nature itself.

The authority of nature, then, is what is most powerfully absent in reflection that is less than it can be. Dewey works to reveal this absence of authority in other modes of reflective reconstruction. Communication becomes the feature that manifests the dialectic of authority because it collects all habits in their elemental “being-for-reconstruction.” Dewey says, “If a man has experienced a world which is good, why should he not act to remake a bad world till it agrees with the good world,” or, “at least so act so as to get the renewed sense of a good world?” (LW 1:259–260). Who gives up an old world unless a new one is found or remembered? And can this remembering or giving up be described apart from the “sense” of a good world? Dewey does not explain what that sense is.
The force behind remembering a sense of a good world is what Dewey means by authority. He puts it this way in *A Common Faith*: “The authority of an ideal over choice and conduct is the authority of an ideal, not of a fact, of a truth guaranteed to intellect, not of the status of the one who propounds the truth” (LW 9:15). The absence Dewey finds in communication is that authority of an ideal that refuses objectification.

Dewey is confident that the failure of reconstructive efforts in individual and social practice is not because of a failure in the content of experience. It is not a failure of nature, but a failure in the appearing authority of the content of nature. This is the deeper absence Dewey’s philosophical transformation struggles with. This authority transcends both knowledge and conditions, and catches the human consciousness up in that search for a content that could reproduce the effect of that on the whole community.

*Authority*

The absence of nature that finally propels the expansion of meaning in the community is its authority over transformation and communication. Trying to bring this absence to clearer expression is one reason Dewey takes a tentative step toward religious language in *A Common Faith*. He seeks to open up the transformative value of authority for all people, not just those who have had religious experience. But this authority evades his attempt to isolate it from its traditional garb and to use it for expanding the meaning of the democratic community. Instead, Dewey’s *A Common Faith* provoked a firestorm over his use of “God” and the notion that there is a transcendent value that he is surreptitiously beholden to.

One problem Dewey creates for himself comes from the way he opposes nature to all things nature cannot contain. This opposition carries him into a deep ravine because the authority he seeks to multiply and express must be beyond nature; it must be authority in experience, and so it is in one sense already supernature. Authority in experience that cannot be created or controlled by manipulating conditions becomes a compounded problem because of Dewey’s dogma of naturalism. Dewey is able to display this authority only if he can construct a content that can be holistically tested in practice, and so he turns to education. But even if he succeeds in this construction, he has no assurance that he has not made another false step since the Truth of nature is always one more remove away from practice. He must fail to develop the authority he
seeks, and he must deny that it can come from anywhere else but his construction. Dewey can finally only point to and remain within the absence of authority.

To Dewey’s credit, he realizes the deficiency of his own content and resists claiming the authority that appears in most philosophical productions. Dewey retains the character of a servant of the universe, an apostle of the possible value of community and experience, and the great goodness of the enterprise in making this value manifest. He knows the good is not his own creation, and neither is the product of the community dependent on his content, but the authority nature bears on its own. Dewey is a priest of sorts, realizing that his skill in metaphorically revealing this authority is the key for communal transformation. He tried but failed to make God a utility term for the authority of nature by coining his phrase “natural piety.” Beyond natural piety, however, Dewey is clearly captured heart and soul in this enterprise. We read this statement toward the end of 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 in 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” (LW 1:314).

Pragmatic Paths in Absence

Edwards prefigures both Peirce’s and Dewey’s means of dwelling in absence. Like Peirce, Edwards is struck that his ability to discern fully his own presence in the community depends on his own transformation. Discovering what remains absent for him and the community is the same thing. His transformation, then, is like the transformation of the community, and on the basis of this continuity he can speak to his community and to himself in one voice.

Like Dewey, Edwards realizes that his failure to articulate the pressing authority behind the good of the universe limits the prospects for his temporal community. Transformation is limited by the rhetorical power revealing the authority of the content of nature and God. But also like Dewey, Edwards knows that the content he serves does not wait for his creative act and neither will its final success be reduced by his failure.
Beyond Peirce or Dewey, however, Edwards finds the compelling source of absence for his reflection in the affections of human hearts. The affections, our most powerful desires and lively ideas, reveal a character that cannot understand its own ordering. There is an absence in the principle that makes our desires into a character. Unless we are able to bring this absent order to view we will not fully understand all that we are or what, in fact, we most deeply desire. Edwards does not have to convince people that they are affectively dissatisfied. If this dissatisfaction is not apparent to the person there is nothing anyone can do or say that would work a transformation in that person. To do so would be to force an adoption of some linguistic formula without genuine connection to the person’s habits—it would mean nothing. But people do desire to know themselves, and to know themselves through the transformation of their desires.

Dwelling in absence leads Edwards to the question of how the structure of inquiry and the appearing content in experience become the platform for an alteration of the affections—not a change in desire, but a discovery of the principle of desire that attests to the soul’s transformation from what it is in its present incompleteness to the holism it can attain with an orientation toward God. Philosophical absence, for Edwards, becomes the absence of conversion.

**EDWARDS DwELLING IN ABSENCE**

Edwards’s emergence as one of the most significant American philosophers of religion followed a protracted period of corporate neglect. For some reason after his death Edwards became a sign of what his culture could not face, and so it excluded him from its identity. At least it tried to. Edwards is the kind of thinker, however, who trusts the truth of what he has discovered. Neither he nor any person can subvert the force of transformation that works within human life, inquiry, and religious practice. This conviction gives Edwards’s thought a resilience that we are currently rediscovering in the midst of our postmodern and post-Christian wanderings.

But Edwards’s confidence is not built on the power of reason, rhetoric, or intellectual creation. Edwards’s confidence is built on his awareness of the human condition that precedes transformation, the lack of order, coherence, or satisfaction that becomes an overwhelming absence within a person. This order can be recognized only in its absence before it is approached as the proper object of our understanding or an orienting
moment of our desire. Edwards’s task in the *Affections* is describing how this absence appears and the connection it makes to transformation.

H. R. Niebuhr, in *The Kingdom of God in America*, explores the character of America’s founding religious thought that sought to translate the pressing reality of God into a constructive Protestantism. Niebuhr identifies Edwards as the leading theologian whose “faith in regeneration was solidly founded upon a supreme conviction of the reality of divine sovereignty.” The pressing reality of God’s purpose necessitated the transformation and conversion of man, not just a better moral state, but also a new nature. Given this acknowledgment of Edwards’s power it is surprising that Niebuhr uses F. D. Maurice rather than Edwards as the example of an advocate of “Christ the Transformer of Culture” in *Christ and Culture*. In this way I think Niebuhr confirms the American resistance to mixing the topics of philosophical progression and religious conversion. But this is exactly where Edwards dwells. If conversion is human, it will show up in the philosophical discovery of our world and ourselves.

Edwards’s philosophical range has been the topic of a variety of interpretations and expansions. John Smith argues that Edwards’s response to Locke describes his focus on the development of a “spiritual taste” in the *Religious Affections*, although he thinks that Perry Miller and others drive this dependence on Locke’s empiricism too far. Michael Raposa, on the other hand, develops Edwards’s emphasis on perfect moral obedience in the twelfth sign in the *Religious Affections* using terms of Peirce’s theosemiotic philosophy, supported in spirit by the work of Sang Lee. These are just two examples of the philosophical completions Edwards’s *Religious Affections* invites. But something more than these kinds of completions is necessary to probe the power of the *Affections*.

Despite the ways Edwards appears in continuity with aspects of our philosophical tradition, the transformation of thought he proposes does not cohere with a linear or ascending character of intellectual discovery. The transformation Edwards philosophically describes comes only by standing in the radical discontinuity of absence he identifies as “evangelical humiliation.” While philosophers dismiss this reference to sin as a holdover from Edwards’s reformed tradition, I do not think this adequately addresses the issue. Evangelical humiliation, as we will see in a moment, completely undermines the potential success of every form of continuous human thought, and this includes aspects of Edwards’s Puritan tradition as well. Edwards does not repeat the formulas of his tradition, like original sin,
without establishing the ground of these ideas in reflection. The progres­
sive discovery of conversion from the blindness of our natural state into a
new nature is not one feature among many in his thought—it is the whole
story. This puts Edwards at odds with all forms of philosophical continuity
narrowly conceived.

On the other hand, conversion is discovered only within human
reflection. As such it is within the realm of human responsibility to seek
reflective control over thoughts and action in relation to conversion.
Edwards does not pose God as the ineffable ground of experience that
cannot be explained, as James does in “The Will to Believe.” For James,
the ineffability of the object behind religious questions or commitments
puts discovering it beyond control and thus beyond our responsibility.
Edwards disagrees. While God’s character is absent from us, discovering
this absence is possible in reflection and is thus the most determinative
aspect of our character.

Edwards begins where Dewey and Peirce end by driving the ques­
tions of structure and content toward the Christian tradition and the
soul. Finding the place of absence in our reflective ordering becomes a
sign of grace and an opening for reflection. Edwards does not begin with
revelation of supernatural content, but what is discovered to the soul is
the supernatural depth of the absence of the affections.

PROGRESSIVE DISCOVERY IN THE SIGNS OF AFFECTION

In the twelve signs of gracious affection in Religious Affections (RA) there
is a clear sense of movement and progression in religious understanding.
Unlike the twelve signs of what are not gracious affections in Part II, the
last part of the Affections moves to a positive statement of what kinds of
affections signify the effect of God’s active grace. This moving discovery
of what is present in the affections of the saint gives Edwards’s account
its character of building toward a conclusion of God, rather than simply
proclaiming faith or knowledge based on intuition or revelation. In this
way Edwards not only contravenes Locke’s claim of supremacy for ideas
immediately held in the mind; he also shifts the focus of his tradition
from its expectation for an undeniable perception of God’s revealed
truth to the way that truth does emerge with power in the affective lives
of people. The affections progress from the recognition of a spiritual
sense of love to God, to an attraction for God’s moral perfection, to the
awareness of a sense of the heart. The progression moves in depth from conclusions that can be intellectually held to those that can only be sensed. Edwards says, “The one is mere speculative knowledge; the other sensible knowledge, in which more than the mere intellect is concerned; the heart is the proper subject of it, or the soul as a being that not only beholds, but has inclination, and is pleased or displeased” (RA 272). God becomes a feature of sensible intuition only by virtue of the character inclinations make possible in the heart.

But progression toward a sensible knowledge in the affections runs on another track than positive discovery. The love the saint has for God is a love that arises without human control. Edwards says “that God loved us, when we had not loved him. God’s love to the elect, is the ground of their love to him” (RA 249). Love toward spiritual things, for Edwards, is coupled with the recognition of what the saints perceive in their affections but that does not arise because of their power. Also, God’s moral perfection appears as a beautiful thing, but it shows an order that is not our own but a further sign of God’s holiness. This absence of the order that appears in the “great manifestation of God’s moral perfection” (RA 272) provides the ground for what the sense of the heart might be that it is not. Without the opposing order of God’s moral perfection, the order of the saint’s inclination and will would not ever be recognized as an absent condition that might be satisfied. This absence of the heart appears only in light of God’s moral holiness.

Edwards’s discovery in these first six signs of affection is that the soul can progressively move toward God only by a continued attraction to what is most absent in the soul. The sense of the heart that follows the conviction of the truth of the gospel concerning Jesus is not the culmination of this progressive discovery. It sets the ground for the discovery of the sensible knowledge that is most painfully absent in the affections. The progressive discovery in the Affections resolves toward an absence that the soul knows cannot be overcome by any reason, intellectual production, or willful act.

**Evangelical Humiliation**

Evangelical humiliation interrupts the apparent ascent of the affections. This humiliation, in which the true depth of our separation from God is discovered, is not an intellectual grasp but sensible knowledge of the
heart. This sense confronts the saint; it is not what would ever be aimed at intentionally, and this sense cannot be produced by any active work of the intellect or will. In evangelical humiliation the holiness of God reveals what is absent from the soul, but this is revealed in the affections of the saint. Edwards distinguishes between two forms of the recognition of error:

There is a distinction to be made between a legal and an evangelical humiliation. The former is what men may be the subjects of, while they are yet in a state of nature, and have no gracious affection; the latter is peculiar to true saints: the former is from the common influence of the Spirit of God, assisting natural principles, and especially natural conscience; the latter is from the special influences of the Spirit of God, implanting and exercising supernatural and divine principles: the former is from the mind's being assisted to a greater sense of things of religion, as to their natural properties and qualities, and particularly of the natural perfections of God, such as his greatness, terrible majesty etc. which were manifested to the congregation of Israel, in giving the law at Mount Sinai; the latter is from a sense of the transcendent beauty of divine things in their moral qualities . . . ; a sense of this is given in evangelical humiliation, by a discovery of God's holiness and moral perfection. . . . In legal humiliation, the conscience is convinced, as the consciences of all will be most perfectly at the Day of Judgment: but because there is no spiritual understanding the will is not bowed, nor the inclination altered: this is done only in evangelical humiliation. (RA 311–312)

Evangelical humiliation is the awareness that the content that is absent in the affections is the order of God’s moral perfection and holiness. Time or reflection is not sufficient to develop this quality or order in the affections because no continuum of progress can overcome this absence. The heart is not determined in its character by the long run of inquiry. The inability to construct an entity out of linearly compiled acts or thoughts is the human absence Edwards strikes upon.

In light of evangelical humiliation the unordered soul leaps to the inference that the absence within the person is the absence of God in the world. The prior signs of the epistemic and moral incompleteness of the soul are confirmed in this humiliation as the demonstration of the blindness of human consciousness. In opposition to his philosophical tradition Edwards finds that intellectual power and reflection are finally means of a clearer discovery of human limitations that can be revealed only in light of the unity of God’s moral holiness.
Gracious affections flow out of this brokenness in self-abasement. Self-abasement is not an exercise of decrying valuable efforts as not valuable because the scripture says so. Rather, genuine self-abasement follows the realization that we are not the order of “the divinity of Divinity.” God’s character, as the origin of excellence, becomes clear in the discovery of this absence in ourselves, and nothing else can produce this disjunction. Just as Dewey finds nature emergent in human habit, Edwards finds the character of God emergent in relation to the soul only through the discovery of this absence.

God, for Edwards, is discovered to us only in conversion. The mystery of Christ appears as the order of the tradition that holds human time together, both the time of the power of human reflection as it constructs the ground for our identities through the compiling of actions and reexamining those for an order, and the breaking apart of that time by the discovery of the impossibility of overcoming error. Christ is for conversion, where this continuity and discontinuity of the soul becomes one thing—the work of God. This close connection between human conversion and a description of God’s character is one of the reasons Perry Miller sees Edwards as a closet naturalist. Edwards does not herald a peculiar divine conviction that shoots into the soul or mind ad extra to confirm or create the positive character of God. God is only known through the Christological absence in the affections.

**Tradition and Conversion**

In this analysis of the *Religious Affections* I have paid attention to the negative or absent aspect of the progression of the soul’s awareness of gracious affections. I have tried to show at each level of self-awareness, from the love of the saint for God, the recognition of God’s moral perfection in the revelation that there is a unity of will and intellect in the sense of the heart and in the experience of evangelical humiliation, that Edwards’s discovery is what the soul most deeply lacks. Absence in the affections, however, leads to the content that answers the Christ of the gospels. Christ is not just a focus of faith or a claim that must be accepted; Christ is the linchpin between the soul’s search for content in light of its failure and the tradition of Christianity that also finds its unity in this one that cannot be a construction by human mind.
The truth of Christ emerges in the tradition of scripture by which the soul is now able “to behold the amiable and bright manifestations of the divine perfections, and of the excellency and sufficiency of Christ, and the excellency and suitableness of the way of salvation by Christ. . . . Which things are, and always were in the Bible, and would have been seen before, if it had not been for blindness, without having any new sense added by words being sent by God to a particular person, and spoken anew to him, with a new meaning” (RA 281). Without this absence of meaning in the scriptures, that there are things “not seen” that become the ground for a new meaning, there is no transformation of the affections. The gospel tradition is an external confirmation of the sign that Christ is the essential content for the soul only if the Christ is the essential content for that tradition. This locates the Christ between the soul and tradition built upon scripture.

Without this content that links the tradition and the soul every adjustment will only be to another incomplete form of ordered affections or another incomplete tradition. And if a complete ordering of affections is possible without Christ, then scripture is not true in regard to Christ. But more, if ordering the affections is possible without Christ, then all humanity is awash in a destructive absence that it should be able to rescue itself from, but so far it has not or will not. If it is possible to order our affections and our tradition in some other way, and yet this remains undone, what hope remains? Human life and affections will continue to show the absence of solidity, resistance, and entity, unless some transforming content appears. In sign 7 Edwards confirms the divine purpose of the discovery of Christ as this transformation:

“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. (RA 340)

Discovering transformation is the proof of evangelical humiliation, just as stabilizing opinion certifies Peirce’s self-correcting inquiry. We discover
the beauty and power of the scripture tradition in light of our deepest awareness of failure. Edwards raises the case another metaphysical level. Not only are our errors an essential aspect of the discovery of God, the explicit rejection of Christ, in the heart of the individual and in the tradition, makes transformation a local healing, a return to the place of error where error must be corrected. The individual returns to the tradition, and the tradition returns to the individual. This mutual dependence is possible only on the condition that we cannot give ourselves the same order as the tradition, and that the tradition cannot create us in our true individuality. The truth of this discovery is played out in the continuing search for the unity of inquiry and community that forms the backdrop for the American philosophical tradition. Conversion becomes a reflective origin of American philosophy, standing for the possible unity of sense and reflection, and experiential truth that can be known only in the living of it.

FROM EDWARDS TO PRAGMATISM

Speaking philosophically of Christ, and speaking religiously of Dewey’s notion of habits and Peirce’s notion of inquiry, brings this study to its most difficult point. How is it possible to connect the tradition of philosophical discovery with the tradition of Edwards and his Christ? Is absence a ground that enables us to move between these traditions? Can we claim that pragmatism moves into all the reflective problems of men and women, including religious absence? Can we also claim that Edwards’s understanding of the affections retains any effective application to the human community today?

One way to examine the possibility of such a connection is to see how the deepest problems of Edwards correspond to the problems of the pragmatists. Edwards does collect Peirce’s confusion about the structure of the self and the community. For Peirce, the truth that is present as an object of inquiry establishes the continuity of the community. The object that recedes in our inquiry resembles Edwards’s co-emergence of Christ in the individual and the community. But even more compelling is the significance of inquiry for the individual. Peirce and Edwards deal in the same discovery of absence that defines the individual. For Edwards and Peirce the individual is poised at the limit of the community. It is also true for Edwards and Peirce that conversion (or manifesting the law of mind)
is not possible unless the individual realizes that she is the sign of the community’s continuation. Peirce’s difficulty in describing the way the centering of the community occurs through inquiry and how it becomes a content that might inform the individual’s habit, is shared by Edwards. Exploring the structure of the individual and the community brings Peirce to the limit of the will, and this becomes a question of facts about particular habits that are adopted and overcome. The possibility of transformation is held within Peirce’s category of secondness, the brute fact of actions. Conversion is not a matter of the intellect so much as the will.

Dewey’s sense of nature as the content that draws the community forward has its origin in the kind of discovery that Edwards describes. The authority of that content stands apart from the content itself. Authority is what cannot be produced from the side of experience. We cannot make something authoritative for us and for our community. We discover ourselves only within that authority, or not. What makes community is the recognition of an authority in experience. Dewey explores the absence that Edwards finds, looking for a content that would satisfy every transformation of human habit. This means that Dewey’s pragmatism seeks a Christological completion, or at least it reflects a Christological absence. The community of transformation has this content that exceeds nature as its limit.

Conversion is yet to be fully explored, but dwelling in absence is a necessary feature of this exploration. Without a discovery of absence all creations and expansions of habit are disconnected from the core realization that we must exceed the aspects of our thought and practice from within that practice to attain real transformation. All of our habits must emerge in relation to the nature of our experience, as Dewey says, but this is not the most determining limit. How these habits reflect an order beyond that nature is the question. What Dewey desires is a loft to practice, where practice attains an ideal production that transcends what is now appearing with what might express a value not yet conceived. Peirce, on the other hand, longs for confirmation that the individual inquirer, namely himself, becomes not only a part of the community but that his inquiry becomes a sign of the agapistic expansion of meaning in the universe.

For Edwards, the opening for meaning for individuals and for the community of saints far exceeds all the expectations of our discovery. The soul becomes expansively unlimited as the answer to the Christological
absence in the universe. Seeing what it is not, the soul sees what it is yet to be. Edwards says this material for growth of the meaning of the soul is vast: “Spiritual good is satisfying, as there is enough in it, to satisfy the soul, as to degree, if obstacles were but removed, and the enjoying faculty duly applied. There is room enough here for the soul to extend itself; here is an infinite ocean of it” (RA 379). This is true freedom, where our discovery is never limited by the content we inquire into but only by our efforts toward it.

But the only way to prove out this absence is precisely what William James says it is—it must become a part of action taken at the risk of losing everything on the hope of gaining a place in the universe. But instead of taking for true that which we think we can live, as James does, the witness of Edwards, Peirce, and Dewey is that real freedom is living beyond what we are exactly sure we can. This means that freedom must explode beyond our expectations and our thought into the kind of life that exceeds what we can imagine or control. God, or whatever is real, must be like a flood coursing through valleys that can never hold its fullness. There is always a spilling over and backing up into other valleys. To use a different metaphor, our inquiry must always be getting away from us, bringing us to ever new discoveries in places that we thought were plumbed for all the good there. Transformed inquiry must also be breaking into places that before were reserved or cut off from our view as possible areas for exploration. The conversion that emerges out of absence means that we do not know the areas in which our discovery will expand, but our inquiry there will be a discovery just the same, and that we are not yet as free as we are intended to be.

NOTES

1. This point of a fourth kind of inquirer follows on the analysis of Carl Vaught’s criticism of Peirce’s categories from the basis of analogy. Vaught analyzes a difference that is accessible only by being given an autonomous place within a judgment of analogy. He says, “We often make judgments of this kind, and they are cognizable just to the extent that we are willing to grant that analogy is an intelligible conception that cannot be reduced to identity and difference. . . . this phenomenon can be understood only in terms of the Fourthness of analogy, and that Peirce made a disastrous blunder when he insisted that feeling, will and law; quality, existence and generality; possibility,


3. Dewey, Experience and Nature, 186. See also 247, where Dewey calls the self the “tool of tools,” as the means implied in every means. This presents another topic of concern than the one here, but the question is profound. Dewey cites the self as a tool because of the necessity of its having a prior order, an opaque essence. This opaque presence of order accords the self a quality that can sustain deep inquiry, almost precisely the same sort of inquiry that communication sustains. Dewey is close here to the psychologism that Husserl suffers in Cartesian Meditations, which Derrida makes critical use of in Speech and Phenomena, 13.


5. Niebuhr, Christ and Culture (Harper & Row, 1975), 220. Niebuhr explains his choice by referring to the way Edwards’s thought has been diverted by “shabby revivalism,” as a sociological science of mass-producing the knowledge of grace. Maybe moving beyond Edwards is necessary, but even this acknowledgment by Niebuhr suggests that Edwards opened up this potential in his preaching and writing. I wonder how Edwards’s reintroduction into American academic view would have been altered had Niebuhr resurrected him instead of moving beyond him.
