THE PRAGMATIC ABSOLUTE

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In the concerns of our everyday life we are all Pragmatists.

In a large part of our conduct we simply are opportunists, and this is as true, or almost as true, of professors of philosophy as it is of manual laborers. Questions of the household budget are met in the "what is best on the whole" manner rather than in the absolutistic spirit. On January first we did not know certainly whether it would be better to spend more in 1924 for recreation and less for clothing. We had only experience to guide us to a decision. We do not know yet how our decision will turn out, and when the year is over we will not be able positively to decide, except in an approximate manner, whether we acted for the best. There are many factors in the situation, each and every one of which is an indefinite. If at the end of the year we are able to understand clearly what the results are, yet we will not be able quantitatively to assess the causal energy or inertness of the several factors.

Let us take another decision situation, perhaps on a higher level of seriousness. When one is called on in his adolescent period of development now finally to decide on his career, there is not infrequently a plentiful lack of certitude as to just what vocation one should honor with such selection. Yes, and when, mayhap, we in the plenitude of our powers are forced to decide, yes or no, what we are to do with that call to another position, have we any more resources of certitude than has the anxious sophomore with his problem of a vocation? In vain we look for a sure principle upon which we may base an
inerrant decision. We find ourselves reduced to a practical balancing of reasons for and against the proposed change, and this reason-matching game is likely to proceed until we find ourselves exhausted, rather than the supply of possible reasons which reason so easily, so tantalizingly, so tiresomely seems able to supply. No absolute guide is available here though the decision involved is serious. The final stage of such a decision situation oftentimes is that one throws reason and all its works to the winds and does the thing he feels for, much the same as his grandmother would have done. If it is true that no absolute is available in making the practical decisions of life, is it not then true that practically there is no absolute for us? But it is just the practice of life that counts, and what does not count here may rightly be counted out.

As I understand pragmatic philosophies, surely more than 13 by this time, this is the gist of the reasons for rejecting an absolute, and proposing pluralism in some form. If, on examination, the above considerations prove conclusive, I, for one, am ready to embrace pragmatism, humanism, Dewian voluntarism, Nietzschean super-voluntarism, creative evolutionism, behaviorism, go-as-far-as-you-can individualism, as the final and ultimate philosophy possible to man, although those last two adjectives do have a rather absolutistic twang.

If one could prove the actual existence of an absolute that would, of course, settle the matter and leave pluralism nowhere, except included within the absolute. But I do not propose to embark upon this venture. Not a few have essayed this grand finishing off of philosophy, but it is not the philosophical fashion of our day. I reverence the great philosophies but their fates appall me. And perhaps, with the young Socrates of Plato’s dialogue “Parmenides,” I am afraid, afraid of falling into a bottomless sea of nonsense. In any case my purpose
here is a far humbler one, namely, to examine whether an absolute be not necessary.

If an absolute proves useful to us in the conduct of our lives, if we find that we can do things by having an absolute, which otherwise we can not do, then as sensible empiricists we will surely adopt an absolute. If, in attempting to formulate a philosophy, we find that a concept of a final norm, or essence, or authority, or force, best serves to organize our thought and direct us in progress, then we as pragmatic philosophers will surely and cheerfully postulate the needed finality, nay, we will demand an absolute. And what is this but realism, this accepting what is forced on us?

Let us turn to the traditional departments of philosophical endeavor. Who can deny that in epistemology it would be convenient to possess a fixed norm of truth? Whether this norm were idealistic or materialistic in its character it would clear enfeebling doubt from our minds, and be most valuable as a time saving dispute-settler. As a comment I might add that I do not see how such a norm could be a neuter, for a neuter not only does nothing but it is nothing.

The pragmatic standard of truth is defective because it fails us just when we most need help. To say that a proposition is true if it works well in experience, or to the degree that it works well when tested, is not to get much further than the common sense level of rule of thumb empiricism. As reflective thinkers we are forced to go further than this and ask the meaning of "works well." We must ask for definition; "works well" in relation to what, for how long, and how often? It is not an answer to this difficulty to invite us to go ahead and test the questioned proposition until we are tired. Weariness and lapse of interest are not certitude, and they settle nothing except the fact that we are ready to give up the quest.
The fact that I find that a given proposition works well in an experience of mine, and in many such cases of experience, and that I am able to verify that other men, many men, agree with me, would seem to lead to the inference that there is something fixed and dependable either in my knower or in the thing known, or in both. The above comments apply no less to the demand of the realist that the knowledge act shall be a vital grasping by the knower of a real object. How shall it be known when we have gotten our reality, and how fully, unless we have a standard of success which shall arbitrate between our individualistic knowledge act and the independent object which we attempt to know? It certainly would be convenient here to have a standard of truth which one could fully trust. Even if we had to acknowledge that we did not possess unto perfection this absolute standard of truth, we could have more confidence in the whole knowledge process if we believed that such a standard existed. Such a faith would encourage us to strive to go on unto perfection. And is not every serious attempt to find truth a postulation that there is truth to be found and that we may attain it, however partial our success may be?

We require a standard of truth, one that will work when we most need it. Why not have it? And if any should denounce our procedure as an impious stretching forth of hands to snatch the fruit of the tree of knowledge and challenge our right to possess it, let us answer with Rooseveltian frankness, "I took it."

Surely no pragmatist can consistently impeach such a high handed assumption of the absolute to our epistemological needs. We need but to answer, "In my necessity I did it." And if we content ourselves to use Kantian terms, and say we postulate such an absolute, we will mean, as Kant did, that we do this in no light hearted spirit of preference, but that by our very attempt to attain truth we, by this act, postulate an absolute truth.
Let us now raise the ancient metaphysical problem, and ask what is real. We need not demand to know just what is the ultimate nature of the real, but only whether there is something which is truly real, a something there, which all knowers will find when they know. Is the world which we attempt to know in any sense systematic, or is it just a sum of isolated and unrelated bits of stuff? No metaphysics has ever radically assumed this latter proposition, however pluralistic it may have proposed to be. Such an atomism would destroy not only the possibility of knowledge but also the possibility of objects, for there seems to be nothing simple in our world, mental or physical.

But once admit that reality is systematic at all and we at once have on our hands the same old problem of "how much." Perhaps it is just as systematic as we find it to be. Such an answer is hardly satisfactory, for it seems to imply utter subjectivism and to assume, without proof, that nature is no more systematic than are our attempts to know her. But all of man's advances in the knowledge of nature, and his subsequent dominion over her, have been in just the other direction, that of assuming that there is order in nature and that it is, therefore, necessary for us to find and conform ourselves to this objective order of reality. The realists are right at least in their contention on this point.

But once granted any degree of law, order, system in nature, where are we to stop? Of course we do not stop at all. We go on investigating, experimenting, quietly assuming that the orderliness in things is sufficient and that it will hold out. No wonder the creative scientist is impatient when we ask him how he knows that the nature he is investigating is orderly. "Know! Why I assume that it is, and get results." And all of the workers in every field of investigation do the same. Success is the result. Why quibble? Why not assume that this rich and faithful order will never fail us?
tremendous assumption is just what we have implied in every step of our investigations, if we are productive workers and not merely timorous metaphysicians. Needing this faith in the dependability of the world order, on pragmatic grounds we have the right to assume the reality of such a world order.

We have said nothing as to what is the final nature of reality, except that, for us, it is orderly. In its final essence the Universe may be idealistic or materialistic. It might, of course, be both but I choose to discard the dualistic hypothesis, partly from lack of time to discuss it, but mostly because I do not consider it necessary to champ over that old straw. I believe that absolute idealism and materialism are the real opponents in the field of philosophy today. Pragmatism, the various realisms, the more or less idealisms, seem to me either to shirk the metaphysical problem or else refuse to go through with it. If one believes that the world, including man and all his works, are mechanistically arranged, then one is a materialist, but if one believes that the world order is intelligently purposive, one is an idealist. One may not be able to prove, perhaps it can not be proven, which of these antithetic propositions is true, but one is justified in choosing between them. If the mechanistic hypothesis best fits the facts as our reason knows and understands them, and most satisfactorily arouses our emotional reaction and with this our will, then materialism it is for us. If on the other hand the teleological hypothesis makes the world more understandable to our reason, if it better arouses our emotions and causes these to drain into actions of profit and honor, and into appreciations of beauty, then idealism is the philosophy for us. Which philosophy works best? That one we choose.

If now we turn to religion we find the assumption of the Pragmatic Absolute as an actual working method. Here one does not have to ask if it would be convenient to have an Absolute as a background assumption, for such
an assumption has already been made and is in fact the chief organizing concept of this very extensive portion of the life of mankind. The practical postulation of an Absolute is courageously done, in the Kantian manner of a postulate necessary to the rational life of man, and not as a timid hope. To the man of dynamic faith the rationality of the world in which he lives and the dignity and worth-whileness of the life which he lives depend on the reality of a God who is limited neither in his power nor in his love. Such a believer need not attempt to prove the existence of the God he needs; he asserts his existence. So far from his faith being a system of proven beliefs the active religious man never questions his faith except in moments of weakness and defeat. His faith is what he lives by and not the pindling product of logical exercises. He asserts his God and stands by the consequences. All values stand or fall together. Either God is, and heaven therefore possible, or else all is hateful, meaningless night. The religious man in his dire need passionately asserts God and wills heaven.

I am not unaware that much theology has been written to prove the existence of a God, infinite in all his attributes. It is significant, however, that the religious mystics have had little use for theology. They have had other reasons for their faith. Even the theologians in their practical religious life have trusted a living God rather than a logical deduction. See Calvin, in spite of his "Institutes."

In religion there is an antagonism between theology and experience, which is a part of that wider antagonism between reflective thought and practical action. It is not unusual to hear advocates of the present day program of sociologizing religion speak slightingly of "mere dogma." It is action which they wish, reforms of the social structure in the direction of greater social justice, as they view it. Such reformers seem impatient with creed making, not so much because they disbelieve the
formulations of such creeds, as because they fear that
emphasis on beliefs will draw away attention from more
vital and pressing problems of social readjustment.

There is a somewhat similar type of religious leader
who fears that credal emphasis will be substituted for
personal righteousness. The emphasis here is individu-

alistic and not social, but in both cases it is the moral
aspect of religion which is stressed. Both are voluntar-
istic and not rationalistic. These are practical interpre-
tations of religion and in them is felt the need of but
few and simple credal assertions. Such beliefs as they
feel to be necessary are assumed, and little time is lost
in attempted proof. It must be that God is and that He
is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him. God is
wise enough to know what is best, powerful enough to
bring it to pass, and He is "Our Father."

The practical man of religion asserts that there is
an universal power that makes for righteousness, and
he boldly takes sides with this beneficent force. All faith
is a venture, a dare flung to destiny. The religious soul
stakes all on its highest expectations. It is all or none.
It is just from its glorious daring that faith gets its power
over men. One desires all things of high character and
of good report to be true, for these alone make life worth
the living. Why not risk all on what is most precious to
us, and live accordingly? If one's personal efforts fail
there is yet the Absolute, however conceived, as an all-
enfolding protection. The great cause will win though
I see not the glory of the Lord in the land of the living.

As I interpret religions, at least developed religions,
the Absolute is sure to be there. Even in the Persian
dualism Ahura Mazda, the god of light, is finally to have
the victory over Angra Mainyu, the god of darkness.
The dualism in Christianity is only superficial, for the
devil's power is limited and will suffer a dramatic end.
Wm. James' pluralistic world, in which God is but one of
the forces, is not convincing, from the religious point of
view. The "tough minded" attitude, which he recommends, is not the attitude of faith. We are invited to "pitch in" and help out the spiritual cause which we approve, for it may win by our efforts. This sounds too much like an invitation to join a Spanish American revolution, in the spirit of Don Quixote. It is not the risk which one most fears but the futility of the thing. If we win, what have we won, and for how long? We need no genius to point out to us that in the life of our everyday experience there is plurality enough. But such plurality is of the very essence of the evil which we must overcome, and it is not very inspiring to be invited to worship one element in this confusion.

I can not bring myself to say hard things about H. G. Wells' finite deity. This limited deity is a product of the influence of the Great War on a sensitive mind struggling in the midst of a maelstrom of horror. Mr. Britling, another name for Wells and for tens of thousands of other British fathers, could not tolerate the idea of an all-powerful and benevolent overruling Providence as he sees his ideals swept, one after another, into abysses of horror which seemed to have no nethermost depth. He falls back upon the idea that his god hates all this even more than he can and suffers from it with an intensity that man can not conceive, yet this deity can not stop it. He saves God's goodness at the expense of His power. But the war has passed and its psychology will pass, and man will find that his God must have power adequate to sustain the values necessary to worthy life.

Surely the boys in the trenches were nearer to truth in their falling back upon a primitive faith in fatalism. They saved their sanity and morale in that unaccustomed savage life by narrowing their creed to a comforting belief that they would not die until their time came. No shell could kill them unless it had their number on it, and nothing could save them if it had. So why worry? They were in the hands of destiny, and nothing that they
could do would change that unaltering order. Fatalism is the philosophy of the close corner. Overwhelmed by titanic brute forces, men in their dire extremity place the responsibility for the outcome where it belongs, on an overruling order. In his utter helplessness man escapes the ruinous shame of individual isolation by identifying himself with a majestic, all inclusive order. He does not demand that this order of things shall give him personal attention, but only that it shall include him. Such a fatalistic faith is not a faith of the highest type, but it is more normal than any highly sophisticated rationalization which attempts to save God's face in time of disaster by denying Him the power to help Himself.

The above analysis is an attempt to define the essential element in the religious attitude toward the Universe. This religious interpretation of total reality includes the assertion that it is a whole, in some sense, and such a whole that man can safely trust his dearest interests to it. The practical religious man, or any religious person when in the practical mood of action, is not interested in proving the existence or in minutely defining the attributes of his object of worship. He assumes the existence of a God worthy to be trusted and proceeds to avail himself in his necessity of the aid of such an all powerful helper. Such people are busy with life, and to be asked to stop in mid-career of their struggle and to perform a dialectical exercise of proof strikes them as of all things most futile and out of place. The mood of battle does not harmonize with the critical atmosphere of reflective thinking. So it has come about that the concept of deity of the theologian and the philosopher, and the God of men in the urgent practice of living scarcely seem the same being.

Unless, however, we are forced to it we will not willingly acknowledge that this apparent dualism between the voluntaristic necessities of man and his reflective interests is really an irreconcilable dualism. Is not
man's reflective activity, however abstract, a real activity after all? Why then should the reason reflective and the reason practical differ fundamentally in their essential interests, methods or conclusions? And when one examines the great products of reflective thinking one may justly doubt that they do so differ. Calvin really assumes his deterministic Deity and proceeds to map his attributes, and to describe what such a God would necessarily do. He needs such a God to make the world rational, to give man dignity and to furnish the church with a task. All follows, very logically indeed, from the initial assumptions as to the nature of God. This procedure is not alone rationalistic, in the reflective sense, for it does not lack a voluntaristic element, at least in its initial stage.

Royce, in his major work, "The World and the Individual," reverses the procedure described above. He attempts to prove the existence of the Absolute. And yet is not what he really proves that the Absolute is necessary to complete thinking about man and the world in which he lives? We are told that to deny truth is to assert the existence of a truth, namely, the truth that truth does not exist. To deny is to affirm, which is as much as to say that reason can not get on without a sure standard of reference. The first act of reasoning is in itself an assumption that there is a something to know and that this can be known. The will to know is the assertion of the possibility of truth. But truth to be truth can not remain in the fragmentary, empirical stage. Reason itself demands that we pass on to a complete whole of understanding. But how do we know that such a whole exists? Well, reality proves to be a re-representative system. No bit of reality, as we experience it, exists in self-sufficient isolation. It is only in relation that the fragment gets meaning, and any relation carried out points inevitably to a whole of well-ordered relationships. The monad mirrors the Universe.
In the labored Supplementary Essay, at the end of volume one of "The World and the Individual," Royce meets the acute criticisms of Bradley, not by proving the existence of the Absolute, but by showing that the concept of the Absolute is not self-contradictory and that it does not exclude the reality of the individual. In other words, reality may be a whole and yet the parts may be eternally significant. But what is really attempted to be proven here is not that the Absolute exists but that the Absolute is possible. Royce's argument does not attempt a formal proof of the existence of the Absolute, but rather that the existence of the Absolute is necessary.

When we attempt to know a bit of reality we find that we must understand the relations of this one item, and just in proportion as we are successful in our knowledge act we are lead on toward a whole of truth. In trying to fulfill any purpose of ours we find that just to the degree in which we understand the true meaning of this purpose and get it fulfilled that in that measure we are led on to an all-inclusive purpose. Here we arrive at an Absolute, as the last step in our process, rather than assume such an Absolute as our initial act. But, first or last, the Absolute is had by an act of assumption, and this is no less true of Royce than it is of Calvin, though their methods are in different degrees convincing. For Royce, and for a great company of like-minded thinkers, the world must be intelligible, truth and right must be secure. Nothing else is fit to be believed. Much experience, perhaps all successful experience, leads on toward a whole of experience, where all is explained and fulfilled. Let us take the hint. Our reasons demand this unity; our hearts desire with a great longing this everlasting safety; the life of reflective thought and the life of practice alike prosper best when it is assumed that reality is trustworthy; why not trust it to the uttermost? Yes, we affirm the Absolute.
This decision is not a formally logical conclusion. It is voluntaristic rather than reflective, and it does not lack an emotional tone. The only logic here is the logic of all the circumstances, that of boldly daring to assert the best conclusion which we are capable of formulating. In the last analysis all complete philosophies do just that: they affirm that final interpretation which best suits the philosopher concerned. I do not use the term “suits” lightly, as a mere personal preference, but in its gravest sense of fitting best what is known by the thinker and the practical doer of deeds alike.

And why should we not postulate an Absolute, philosophers and practical religious men alike, if an Absolute best solves our problems of thinking and of living? Ours is a pragmatic Absolute.

In the world of ethical action as well as in the philosophies of right it is not difficult to point out that a dependable standard is wanted. I have already touched on but not specifically discussed our requirement of such a standard of reference. Here, as in other fields of vital interest, the finality of the authority is really postulated. Proofs in plenty have been proposed, of the existence of such an authority, but the decisive factor has been that man has found that he had to have, both in his personal life and in his society, an unquestioned authority; and he has taken it. But rather than enter upon a discussion of the general field of Ethics I wish to take a single phase of our social life, namely a present day political episode, and see how the pragmatic Absolute applies here.

Our present national governmental situation illustrates well the pragmatic necessity of acknowledging inviolable and absolute principles.

It will not work well to trust even the selected “best minds” each to adopt what he thinks the necessary measures to further what he considers the best interests of the country. This is indeed to have a government of
men, i. e., of pluralistic purposes, rather than a government of laws, i. e., of unified social purpose. In the practical affairs of government, especially in so large a body as our federal government, it is necessary to acknowledge a source of the last word. This final arbiter in executive affairs presumably might be the consensus of opinion of the cabinet, or it might be the decision of the president. This is necessary for efficiency in ordinary affairs of government, but however this final arbiter may be constituted, he or it must acknowledge a yet superior authority, i. e., the authority of the principle of right. This principle of right is supposed to be embodied in the constitutional and other law of the land. But all laws, as well as all administrative acts must be justifiable on the principle of the good of all the citizens of the nation. Congress can, evidently, investigate as to whether this general principle is being lived up to by the executive branch of the government, and the Supreme Court can, when rightly approached, say an effective word on this same point, as well as upon the legislative acts of Congress.

The present controversies raging within the executive and the legislative branches of our government, and between these two, constitute an inconvenient illustration of pluralism of purposes, the result being that the business of government is not properly going forward. The root of this governmental confusion seems to be that officers of the government have used their offices for their own personal interests, for the benefit of their friends, personal and political, to favor special groups which are determined to possess the nation's domain or to evade and even defy its laws, and for party ends. The trouble is the lack of a controlling purpose strong enough to direct all of the branches of the government into the channel of public service. Such a unitary purpose alone can cause the government again to function with the necessary strength and justice, and make possible the
reassurance of the confused citizens that their government is still their own. From pragmatic political considerations it is highly necessary that our country and its government attain unto an inclusive political ideal worthy of worship and service.

We started out to examine whether an Absolute were not necessary, on strictly pragmatic grounds. It was not difficult to point out that great numbers of men, and these apparently the most effective, have assumed an Absolute as the background of their activities. If the Absolute has worked so well, why object to adopting it? We have observed that the creative activities of man, whether in science or in practice, demand a standard of reference. The workers, who have brought us along the way called progress, assume that they have this standard in reality and that it is trustworthy. They assume this complete wholeness of their world by their very acts, and this seems no less true of the thinkers than of the doers. On what grounds shall one then object to the Absolute? Certainly not on pragmatic grounds. We take, therefore, the liberty of recommending to those empirical spirits, who will be practical at all costs, the adoption of the Absolute, a brave Absolute which will work all around the circle of necessary interests. If the re-introduction of the Absolute in this manner is annoying, we are sorry, but after all ours is a Pragmatic Absolute.