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The Emancipation of American Philosophy

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Cornel West has written a provocative challenge to the standard self-interpretations of the classical and neoclassical pragmatic traditions. His own call for a "prophetic pragmatism" seeks to infuse emancipatory and historical consciousness into a philosophical perspective that contains seeds of emancipation while still clinging to forms of race, class, and gender privilege that are secured by the current means of capitalistic economic distribution. The contemporary revival of the classical pragmatic tradition runs the risk of missing the deeper impulses within pragmatism because of a mistaken focus on epistemic relativism and linguistic play. The Rortian stance of ironic conversation actually serves to blunt emancipatory drives while providing a kind of soothing, one might say numbing, effect for the intellectual mandarin class.

West's call for more politically profound engagement with pragmatism thus cuts across the neopragmatic distortions that have only brooked confusion concerning the roles of history and nature within emancipatory structures. At the same time, his own reading of the history of American philosophy downplays several emancipatory sources that could, if properly delineated, advance his own program and protect it from sliding too far down the road of a mere historicism. In particular, his recurrent contrast between naturalistic metaphysics and cultural critique, a contrast that he sees operating most clearly in Dewey, compels him to overstate the role of cultural critique within emancipatory consciousness while ignoring the role of metaphysics in securing and furthering the full pragmatic program of radical social reconstruction. In what follows I will adumbrate West's arguments and show that a revived conception of naturalistic metaphysics actually serves West's own project and can intensify the impact of his prophetic pragmatism.

My focus will be on West's analysis of Peirce and Dewey where he articulates the tension mentioned above, namely that between a naturalistic metaphysics, as a categorial framework that can be emancipatory in its own right, and a cultural critique that brings historical consciousness to bear on the social and economic conditions that reinforce forms of domination and privilege. While sharply critical of Rorty, West often reads Dewey as if through Rorty's distorted lens and, thereby, misunderstands the categorial commitments that secure Dewey's mature metaphysics against the kind of historicising that renders the classical tradition considerably

less powerful than it in fact is. In what follows, an alternative reading of Peirce and Dewey will emerge that will attempt to reclaim the correlation of nature, emancipation, and naturalistic metaphysics.

West acknowledges the role of metaphysics in Peirce's pragmatism, with particular recognition of the cosmology developed in the 1890's. He sees Peirce as advancing three major claims: the priority of the scientific method, the notion that the method of science works self-correctively within communities of inquiry, and that the universe is moving toward a greater instantiation of concrete reasonableness under the impress of evolutionary love. Peirce inherits the Emersonian theodicy and moves it away from an excessive individualism toward communal structures that are embodiments of concrete forms of inquiry. He retains Emerson's optimism by invoking the "would be" that stands as the final telos for finite and fallible forms of collective probing of the world. Further, Peirce continues Emerson's "evasion" of epistemology by denying the possibility of unmediated intuitions, first signs, and direct self-knowledge. Peirce's relation to foundationalism is, however, much more complex.

West does not detail the ways in which the three categories of firstness, secondness, and thirdness provide ways for understanding semiosis or cosmic evolution. Without an understanding of the role of thirdness, and the codependent notion of developmental teleology, it is impossible to see just how Peirce's mature metaphysics actually contributes to the rise of emancipatory structures within nature and its various histories. West's emphasis on Peirce's theory of inquiry and his anti-Cartesianism of the 1860's, while certainly not inappropriate, represents only one half of the story, and, one might add, the weaker half.

Peirce's metaphysics, whether panpsychist or not, attempted to locate teleology within the Darwinian synthesis while paying attention to the possibility of radical novelty and qualitative emergence within the world as a whole. If firstness represents the realm of pure possibility and pure feeling, and secondness represents the realms of dyadic and ontic interaction, thirdness represents the law like emergence of generality within the worlds of firstness and secondness. Cosmogogenesis is itself out of pure firstness and moves toward the *summum bonum* and the reasonable per se. Thirdness, whether the object of self-conscious articulation or not, emerges with its own emancipatory force to goad seconds toward a convergence that is promised in the infinite long run. Thirds are not so much products of seconds and firsts as forms of cosmic self control that live at the heart of the evolutionary process. It should be noted that Peirce used his concept of "self control" to analyze human processes of moral growth as well as those cosmic laws that emerge developmentally.

The key to understanding Peirce's emancipatory metaphysics lies in grasping the role of thirdness in goading the self and the world toward convergence. It

should be stressed that this convergence is not hostile to difference or to novel seconds but that it represents the movement of the world toward reasonable-ness and justice. Specifically, what role does thirdness play in emancipation? How does a given third relate to social and personal forms of inquiry to goad the human process toward growth and the highest good?

Thirdness per se is emergent from antecedent conditions. Yet it contains a kind of ontological restlessness that arches out over the seconds under its sway and infuses these dyadic facts with their own forms of restlessness. Using the language of the German Marxist Ernst Bloch, we can say the Peirce's realm of thirdness contains the seeds of the not yet conscious or not yet Being (*noch nich Sein*) that lives at the heart of all forms of development. Peirce reconstructs teleology to account for the emergence of new and more generic goals within history while rooting thirdness within nature. One could almost say that Peirce's realm of thirdness is akin to the much older notion of *natura naturans*, nature in its naturing, if it is recognized that this process of naturing lives out of the not yet. Habermas captures this sense of *natura naturans* in his astute analysis of Bloch, and it applies in an indirect fashion, so I believe, to Peirce's mature metaphysics (Habermas 1981: 70):

Matter, or *natura naturans*, no longer needs any form entelechies; as the one and the whole, it engenders and bears the patterns of its fertility out of itself alone. It is the being-existing-in-possibility in such a way that the history of nature "points toward" the history of humanity and is "dependent upon" humanity.

Of course, when we use the concept of "possibility" we refer to Peirce's category of firstness which has the intrinsic tendency of self-othering into secondness and thirdness. For Peirce, as for Bloch, the world is restless and moving toward the not yet in the future. While Bloch radicalizes the eschatological dimensions of the not yet, thus moving decisively beyond bourgeois and liberal myths of social progress, Peirce recognizes, in however attenuated a fashion, that no third is fully "satisfied" with its current generic spread or internal richness. If Peirce still clings to the myth of progress and fails to radicalize his "would be" into the eschaton, he does understand that emancipation is not confined to the human process but is a process emergent from the depths of the world.

Any given third will exhibit the same kind of restlessness manifest in the realm of thirdness itself. The not yet Being of an emergent third or law is present to the self whenever it goes beyond a bare naturalism toward what might be called an "ecstatic naturalism" that feels the growing power of *natura naturans* within the self and the community. Of course, this reading of Peirce is one that coaxes out a not yet that was only dimly sensed by Peirce himself. However, like Bloch, I argue that historical

appropriation of a previous philosophical horizon entails looking for emancipatory seeds within a perspective that can be furthered and strengthened within general emancipatory consciousness. Gadamer's conception of the "fusion of horizons" needs to be augmented and judged by the deeper concept of "emancipatory reenactment" that allows the not yet within a given and past horizon to enter the clearing of our emancipatory life.

Peirce was a weak foundationalist insofar as he insisted that all of the traits of the world devolve into the primitive categories of firstness, secondness, and thirdness. Yet his foundations are themselves in the future, that is, in the not yet Being that secures evolutionary growth. Peirce's conceptions of God and of Absolute Mind are problematic precisely because his God, the vague version of the Absolute, can be seen to emerge out of pure firstness and move toward its own "would be." Using the language of Heidegger, we could ask Peirce to radicalize his understanding of the emancipatory not yet, whether divine or otherwise, by grasping the meaning of the "ontological difference," in this case, the difference between the orders of the world (*natura naturate*) and the performal potencies of firstness and emergent thirdness (*natura naturans*). This difference, from which all other differences derive their meaning and role in emancipation, is that which allows the power of the not yet into the community of interpreters so that it can open out horizontal and semiotic processes of inquiry (Corrington 1987).

Thus Peirce's mature metaphysics allows him to reshape his earlier conception of the self and the community so that interpretive life becomes attuned to the emancipatory structures of the world. Natural laws are not antecedent and rigid structures but are in the process of becoming. The community of interpreters is not a self-encapsulated natural community that merely reinforces forms of privilege but is emergent through and with the power of the not yet that opens out semiosis into the much vaster realms of nature and history. While Peirce remained within the horizon on the Eurocentric white male, he provided a metaphysics that opened up possibilities beyond his own provincial perspective. His theory of inquiry would lose much of its force if bereft of the deeper metaphysical structures that actually support the emancipatory power of the not yet.

Turning to Dewey, in many respects the central figure in West's history of pragmatism, we see how West's emphasis on cultural critique cuts off some of the power of the not yet that lives within Dewey's mature metaphysics of nature. As I noted earlier, West, in spite of some incisive and damaging criticisms of Rorty, still accepts Rorty's notion that Dewey was not fundamentally a metaphysician but was a critic of American culture who happened to say a few things about nature while moving toward a radicalized account of experience.

For Rorty, Dewey is a "historicist pragmatist" who used pragmatism to examine the various symbols and

myths of the twentieth century American horizon. Like Wittgenstein, Dewey strove to examine the cultural forms of life that animate society in order to work out an internal critique that would relativize any given horizon while showing how these horizons of meaning can become available to others. Dewey was thus a champion of historical consciousness because of his recognition of the finite and embedded quality of human experience and its various symbolic expressions. Truth is freed from its bondage to epistemology and becomes wedded to social practice. In the words of West (1989: 99):

. . . I am suggesting that the predominant element in Dewey's view of truth is social practice, the human procedures of critical intelligence that yield warranted assertions. For Dewey, the only alternative for pragmatists is to settle for truth-as-warranted-assertibility; ideas are neither copies of the world nor representations linked principally to one another, but rather ingredients for rules and for plans of action.

Dewey thus avoids a naive picture theory of propositions while steering away from what Umberto Eco calls "unlimited semiosis." Truths are not about an unmediated object anymore than they are about other signs alone. Truth is part and parcel of social semiosis that has its own needs and that develops its own plans for action.

West's portrayal of Dewey is compelling up to a point. Clearly, contemporary appropriations of Dewey that wish to see him as a postmodernist or straight historicist (e. g., Dean 1986 & 1988) miss the mark and ignore the deeper sources of social sign systems. Dewey's conception of problem solving, first brilliantly adumbrated in his 1896 paper on the reflex arc, locates all human interaction within larger orders of relevance that are at least social. Where I wish to part company with West, while attempting to serve his call for a prophetic pragmatism, is in terms of the scope and structure of these larger orders of relevance that surround and support the human process.

Dewey's naturalistic metaphysics is not an archaic or outmoded expression of a naive conception of established forms or "natures" any more than it is a bare materialism. Columbia naturalism, inspired by Santayana and consummated in the writings of Justus Buchler (cf. esp., Buchler 1989), struggled to free philosophy from its provincial and self-encapsulated scientism and bourgeois triumphalism. At the same time it redefined the human processes so that it would recognize the basic forms of limitation and natural indebtedness that haunt the self in time.

The move from a static concept of substance to an event ontology places Dewey's naturalism at a far remove from those materialisms or scientisms that actually blunt ramified forms of inquiry. The freedom manifest to the self is rooted in an event governed nature that allows, one might even say encourages, novel configurations in time. The power and direction of social criticism loses much of its force if it fails to remember that it is enable by

nature's plenitude. It should be stressed that Dewey's nature is not some kind of Kantian "condition for the possibility of" semiosis and communication but is the ultimate clearing within which the community rests.

For Dewey the not yet resides in the movement of energies as they become directed toward given symbols. He recognized that symbols were centers of power that could galvanize or condemn a community. Social semiosis is not merely conventional or contextual, although it is often so, but is rooted in vast evolutionary process and energies that surround the self. While Dewey refrained from the kind of cosmological analyses that tempted Peirce, always situating the self *in medias res*, he nonetheless refused to close off the self from its enabling conditions within nature itself.

Peirce thus has a stronger sense of the cosmic role of the not yet within nature and history while Dewey locates the not yet within more concrete forms of social reconstruction. Neither thinker should be appropriated as if his metaphysical naturalism were somehow secondary to his general emancipatory task. I have been arguing that both thinkers probed into those features of the orders of nature that are future directed and emancipatory per se. Yet their naturalism needs to be quickened and deepened by an ecstatic transformation that shows how the not yet is creatively present to communities of interpretation. Here West and I converge in sensing the religious dimensions within emancipation that make the human process meaningful and returns life to the center of power and meaning. I will conclude with a few words about the theonomous core of emancipation.

West gives a succinct and highly compelling definition of prophetic pragmatism (1989:232):

The distinctive hallmarks of a prophetic pragmatism are a universal consciousness that promotes an all-embracing democratic and libertarian moral vision, a historical consciousness that acknowledges human finitude and conditionedness, and a critical consciousness which encourages relentless critique and self-criticism for the aims of social change and personal humility.

The prophetic pragmatist moves past forms of privilege and domination that merely reinforce the ideological needs of the American empire. At the same time such a pragmatist will become open to the spiritual forces that are themselves emergent from the innumerable orders of nature. The ecstatic transfiguration of naturalism preserves a place for the not yet and empowers the self beyond its own horizontal limitations. Within the "relentless critique and self-criticism" articulated by West lies the deeper restlessness of the not yet that is one of nature's goads and sources. While Peirce's specific cosmology may not be compelling, his sense of natural semiosis and natural growth must be preserved against a historicism that would

place far too much emphasis on the powers of human beings. The human process is sustained and recentered through those spiritual potencies that govern the world. While the spirit is not providential or teleological in more traditional senses, it is evocative of the not yet that makes any drive toward justice and liberation possible. Put in other terms, the spirit lives on the edges of our horizons locating them within those emancipatory structures that can only come from a nature in process. Disempowered horizons are given emancipatory power through nature's spiritual potencies while privileged horizons are shriven of their plenitude so that they let go of the institutional props that give them their undeserved place within history. In this way prophetic pragmatism honors nature and its spiritual orders while working tirelessly to transform unjust natural communities into true communities of interpretation. The emancipation of American philosophy thus comes from the spirit that is ecstatically encountered whenever naturalism discovers its deeper source of empowerment. What is needed is a new metaphysics that can support relentless social critique while providing a conceptual place for hope.

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prophetic pragmatism could be strengthened if I balanced my focus on cultural critique with a sophisticated Peircean metaphysics (added by Blochian sensibilities) that grounds the restlessness of the not yet within the present in and beyond human processes.

I resonate with Corrington's attempt to broaden and deepen my narrow anthropocentric historicism to nature and the cosmos. My readings of George Santayana - shot through the footnotes in the book - made me aware of this limitation of prophetic pragmatism. Yet I disagree with his claims "that social criticism loses much of its force if it fails to remember that it is enabled by nature's plenitude" or that social critique needs "a new metaphysics that can provide a conceptual place for hope or that a theory of inquiry would lose much of its force if it lacks deeper metaphysical structures that support the emancipatory power of the not yet." Philosophy indeed is much more than social critique - owing to the logical issues in mathematics and existential issues in life - yet I fail to see why Corrington's call for a subtle and self-conscious metaphysics - naturalistic and emancipatory - is possible or needed. From my pragmatic perspective, such a project is but another philosophical attempt to prop up the kind of hope - individual and social - that can never be metaphysically grounded.

Response

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I am grateful to Professors Corrington, Kolenda, Spelman and Gooding-Williams for their provocative comments and acute insights. So I shall simply highlight some of the major points of contention. Professor Corrington rightly resists the poststructuralization of pragmatism, namely, a mistaken focus on linguistic freeplay and epistemic relativism. He claims that my own embryonic project of