

PRAGMATISM AS ROMANTIC POLYTHEISM  
(Girona Lecture #2)

In 1911 a book appeared in Paris titled Un Romantisme Utilitaire: Etude sur le Mouvement Pragmatiste. This was the first of three volumes on the subject by Rene Berthelot, a philosopher who had been struck by the resemblances between the views of James, Nietzsche, Bergson, Poincare, and certain Catholic Modernists. Berthelot, a convinced Cartesian, disliked and distrusted all these thinkers, but he wrote about them with acuity, verve and insight. He traced the romantic roots of pragmatism back behind Emerson to Schelling and Hoelderlin<sup>1</sup>, and the utilitarian roots to the influence of Darwin and Spencer<sup>2</sup>. "In all its different forms," Berthelot said, "pragmatism reveals itself to be a romantic utilitarianism: that is its most obviously original feature and also its most private vice and its hidden weakness."<sup>3</sup>

Berthelot was probably the first to use the term "a German Pragmatist" of Nietzsche, and the first to emphasize the resemblance between Nietzsche's view of truth and those of the American pragmatists. This resemblance--frequently noted since,

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<sup>1</sup>Berthelot, volume 1, pp. 62-3.

<sup>2</sup>Berthelot also looked back behind Darwin and Spencer to Hume, whom he regarded as "la transition entre la psychologie utilitaire et intellectualiste d'Helvetius et la psychologie vitaliste de l'instinct que nous rencontrons chez les Ecossais, and to Lamarck who was "la transition entre cette conception vitaliste de la biologies et ce qu'on peut appeler l'utilitarisme mecanique de Darwin." (vol. 1, p. 85)

<sup>3</sup>Berthelot, vol. 1, p. 128

notably in a seminal chapter of Arthur Danto's book on Nietzsche - is most evident in the The Gay Science. There Nietzsche says "We do not even have any organ at all for knowing, for "truth"; we "know"...just as much as may be useful in the interest of the human herd".<sup>4</sup> [Wir haben eben gar kein Organ fuer das Erkennen, fuer die 'Wahrheit'; wir 'wissen'...gerade so viel, als es im Interesse der Menschen-Herde, der Gattung, nuetzlich sein mag] This Darwinian view lies behind James' claim that "thinking is for the sake of behavior" and his consequent definition of truth as "the good in the way of belief". That definition amounts to accepting Nietzsche's claim that human beings should be viewed, for epistemological purposes, as what Nietzsche called "clever animals". Beliefs are to be judged solely by whether they get believers what they want.

James and Nietzsche did for the word "true" what John Stuart Mill had done for the word "right". Just as Mill said that there is no ethical motive apart from the desire for the happiness of human beings, so James and Nietzsche say that there is no will to truth distinct from the will to happiness. All three philosophers think that transcendental terms like "true" and "right" gain their meaning from their use, and that their only use is to evaluate human beings' methods of achieving happiness. Nietzsche, to be sure, had no use for Mill, but this was a result of arrogant ignorance, which resulted in a failure to grasp the difference between Mill and Bentham.

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<sup>4</sup>The Gay Science, section 354.

James, who dedicated his first philosophical treatise to Mill's memory, wanted to develop not only the debunking, Benthamite strain in Mill's thought but the romantic, Coleridgean strain as well. The latter led Mill to choose an epigraph from Wilhelm von Humboldt for On Liberty: "The grand, leading principle, towards which every argument unfolded in these pages directly converges, is the absolute and essential importance of human development in its richest diversity." As a romantic utilitarian, Mill wanted to avoid being the reductionist Bentham had seemed to be, and to defend a secular culture against the familiar charge of blindness to higher things. This led him, as M. H. Abrams has pointed out, to share Arnold's view that literature could take the place of dogma. Abrams quotes Alexander Bain as saying of Mill that "he seemed to look upon Poetry as a Religion, or rather as Religion and Philosophy in One."<sup>5</sup>

Abrams quotes a letter of Mill's which says that "the new utilitarianism"--his own as opposed to Bentham's--holds "Poetry not only on a par with, but the necessary condition of, any true and comprehensive philosophy".<sup>6</sup> Abrams argues that Mill and Arnold, despite their differences, drew the same moral from the English Romantics: that poetry could and should take on "the tremendous responsibility of the functions once performed by the exploded dogmas of religion and religious philosophy."<sup>7</sup> The

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<sup>5</sup>M.H. Abrams, The Mirror and the Lamp, pp. 334-335.

<sup>6</sup>Abrams, quoting a letter to Lytton Bulwer, at p. 333.

<sup>7</sup>Abrams, p. 335.

exploded dogmas included the claim that, whereas there can be many great poems, there can be only one true religion, because only one true God. Poetry cannot be a substitute for a monotheistic religion, but it can serve the purposes of a secular version of polytheism. A kind of polytheism is recommended in the famous passage near the end of The Varieties of Religious Experience at which James says

If an Emerson were forced to be a Wesley, or a Moody forced to be a Whitman, the total human consciousness of the divine would suffer. The divine can mean no single quality, it must mean a group of qualities, by being champions of which in alternation, different men may all find worthy missions. Each attitude being a syllable in human nature's total message, it takes the whole of us to spell the meaning out completely.<sup>a</sup>

James' loose use of the term "the divine" makes it pretty much equivalent to "the ideal". In this passage he is doing for theology what Mill did for politics when he said that "human development in its richest diversity" is the aim of social institutions.

There is a passage in Nietzsche in praise of polytheism which complements the one I have just quoted from James. In section 143 of The Gay Science he argues that morality --in the wide sense of the need for acceptance of binding laws and customs--entails "hostility against the impulse to have an ideal

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<sup>a</sup>Varieties, p. 384.

of one's own." But, he says, the pre-Socratic Greeks provided an outlet for individuality by permitting human beings "to behold, in some distant overworld, a plurality of norms: one god was not considered a denial of another god, nor blasphemy against him." [Aber ueber sich and ausser sich, in einer fernen Ueberwelt, durfte man eine Mehrzahl von Normen sehen; der eine Gott war nicht die Leugnung oder Laesterung des anderen Gottes.] In this way, Nietzsche says, "the luxury of individuals was first permitted; it was here that one first honored the rights of individuals." For in pre-Socratic polytheism "the free-spiriting and many-spiriting of man attained its first preliminary form--the strength to create for ourselves our own new eyes." [Hier erlaubte man sich zuerts Individuen, hier ehrte man zuerst das Recht von Individuen....In Polytheismus lag die Freigeisterei und Vielgeisterei des Menschen vorgebildet; die Kraft, sich neue und eigne Augen zu schaffen...]

I can sum up what I have been saying by offering a definition of "polytheism" which covers Nietzsche and James. You are a polytheist if you think that there is no actual or possible object of knowledge which would permit you to commensurate and rank all human needs. Isaiah Berlin's doctrine of incommensurable human values is, in my sense, a polytheistic manifesto. To be a polytheist in this sense you do not have to believe that there are non-human persons with power to intervene in human affairs. All you need do is to abandon what Heidegger calls "the onto-theological tradition". This is the tradition that tells you

that we should try to find a way of making everything hang together which will tell all human beings what to do with their lives, and tell all of them the same thing.

Polytheism, in the sense in which I have defined it, is pretty much coextensive with romantic utilitarianism. For once one sees no way of ranking human needs other than playing them off against one another, human happiness becomes all that matters, and Mill's On Liberty provides all the ethical instruction one needs. Polytheists agree with Mill and Arnold that poetry should take over the role which religion has played in the formation of individual human lives, and that nothing should take over the function of the churches. Poets are to polytheism what the priests of a universal church are to monotheism. So once you become polytheistic, you are likely to turn away not only from priests, but from such priest-substitutes as metaphysicians and physicists. But such a turn is compatible with two different attitudes toward those who retain a monotheistic faith. One can see them as Nietzsche did, as blind, weak, fools. Or one can see them as James and Dewey did, as people who are so spell-bound by the work of one poet as to be unable to appreciate the work of other poets. One can be, like Nietzsche, aggressively atheist, or one can, like Dewey, see such aggressive atheism as itself a version of monotheism, as having "soomething in common with traditional supernaturalism."

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<sup>9</sup>A Common Faith (Later Works, vol. 9, p. 36).

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These contrasting attitudes toward religious belief will be my principal topic in what follows. But first I want to try to clear away another difficulty which faces any attempt to put Nietzsche and the American pragmatists in the same box: their dramatically opposed attitudes toward democracy.

Nietzsche was a utilitarian only in the sense that he saw no goals for human beings to pursue other than human happiness. He had no interest in the greatest happiness of the greatest number, but only in that of a few exceptional human beings--those with the capacity to be greatly happy. Democracy--which he called "Christianity for the people"--seemed to him a way of trivializing human existence. By contrast, James and Dewey took for granted, as Mill had, the Christian ideal of universal human fraternity. Echoing Mill, James wrote "Take any demand, however slight, which any creature, however weak, may make. Ought it not, for its own sole sake, to be desired?" (WB, 149)

Romantic utilitarianism, pragmatism, and polytheism are equally compatible with enthusiasm for democracy and with contempt for democracy. The complaint that a philosopher who holds the pragmatic theory of truth cannot give you any not to be a fascist perfectly justified. But neither can she give you a reason to be one. Once you become a polytheist in the sense I just defined, you have to give up on the idea that philosophy can help you choose among the various deities, and the various forms of life, which are on offer. The choice between enthusiasm and

contempt for democracy becomes a choice between, for example Walt Whitman and Robinson Jeffers, rather than between competing sets of philosophical arguments.

Those who find the pragmatist identification of truth with what is good to believe morally offensive often say that Nietzsche, rather than James and Dewey, drew the proper inference from the abandonment of the idea of an object of knowledge which tells one how to rank human needs. Those who think of pragmatism as a species of irrationalism, and of irrationalism as selling the pass to fascism, say that James and Dewey were blind to the anti-democratic consequences of their own ideas, and naive to think that one can be both a good pragmatist and a good democrat.

Such critics make the same mistake that Nietzsche made. They think that the Christian idea of fraternity is inextricable from Platonism. Platonism, in this sense, is the idea that the will to truth is distinct from the will to happiness--or, to be a bit more precise, the claim that human beings are divided between a quest for a lower, animal form of happiness and a higher, God-like form of happiness. Nietzsche mistakenly thought that once you had, with Darwin's help, given up this idea, and gotten comfortable with the idea that you are just a clever animal, you could have no reason to wish for the happiness of all human beings. He was so impressed by the fact that Christianity would have seemed ludicrous to the Homeric heroes that he was unable, except at occasional fleeting moments, to think of Christianity as the work of strong poets. So he assumed that once poetry had

replaced religion as the source of ideals, there would be no place for either Christianity or democracy.

Nietzsche would have done better to ask himself whether the Christian ideal of human fraternity--the idea that for Christians there is neither Jew nor Greek, and the related idea that love is the only law--might have been only accidentally associated with Platonism. This idea might have gotten along nicely without the logocentrism of the Gospel of John, and without Augustine's unfortunate decision that Plato had been a prefiguration of Christian truth. In a different, but possible, world, some early Christian might have anticipated James' remark about Emerson and Wesley by writing "If Caesar were forced to be Christ, the total human consciousness of the divine would suffer."

A Christianity which was merely ethical--the sort which Jefferson and other Enlightenment thinkers commended, and which was later propounded by theologians of the social gospel--might have sluffed off the exclusionism which had characterized Judaism, and viewed Jesus as one incarnation of the divine among others. The celebration of an ethics of love would then have taken its place within the tolerant polytheism of the Roman Empire, having disjoined the ideal of human brotherhood from the claim to represent the will of an omnipotent and monopolistic Heavenly Father.

Had they preached such a merely moral and social gospel, the Christians would never have bothered to develop a natural theology. Thirteenth-century Christians would not have worried

about whether the Scriptures could be reconciled with Aristotle. Seventeenth-century ones would not have worried about whether they could be reconciled with Newton, nor nineteenth-century about whether they could be reconciled with Darwin. These hypothetical Christians would have treated Scripture not as "non-cognitive" but as useful for purposes for which Aristotle, Newton and Darwin were useless. As things in fact were, however, the Christian churches remained obsessed by the Platonic idea that both Truth and God are One. So it was natural, when physical science began to make some progress, that its practitioners should take over this rhetoric, and thereby stir up a war between science and theology--between Scientific Truth and Religious Faith.

I have imagined such a non-Platonic and non-exclusivist form of Christianity in order to emphasize that no chain of inference links the ideal of human fraternity to the ideal of escaping from a world of appearance inhabited by animals to a real world in which you will become as gods. Nietzsche and contemporary critics ~~has~~ of what they call "irrationalism" have been tricked by Plato into believing that, unless there is such a real world, Thrasymachus and Callicles are unanswerable. But they are unanswerable only in the sense that there are no premises to which they must assent simply by virtue of being rational, language-using--and, a fortiori, no premises which would lead them to agree that they should treat all other human beings as brothers and sisters. Christianity as a strong poem, one poem among many, can be as socially useful as Christianity backed up

by the Platonist claim that God and Truth are interchangeable terms.

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So far I have been trying to make Berthelot's idea that Nietzsche and the American pragmatists are parts of a single intellectual movement a bit more plausible by arguing that neither of the Americans need infer their devotion to democracy from their pragmatism. I have argued elsewhere that it is the other way around: that if there is an inferential connection between devotion to democracy and an anti-representationalist view of truth and knowledge, it is that the latter is better suited to the purposes of the former than are representationalist theories. But I shall not pursue this point now.

Rather, I want to turn to the second big difference between Nietzsche on the one hand and James and Dewey on the other: Nietzsche thinks religious belief morally disreputable and James and Dewey do not. First, I shall put forward six theses, intended as a sketch of a pragmatist philosophy of religion. Then I shall try to relate these theses to what James and Dewey actually said about belief in God. Finally, I shall my defense of Dewey's version of theism against some objections.

(1) It is an advantage of the anti-representationalist view of belief which James took over from Bain and Peirce--the view that beliefs are habits of action--that it frees us from the responsibility to unify all our beliefs into a single world-view. If our beliefs are all parts of a single attempt to represent a

single world, then they must all hang together fairly tightly. But if they are habits of action, then, since the purposes served by action may blamelessly vary, so may the habits we develop to serve those purposes.

(2) Nietzsche's attempt to "see science through the optic of art, and art through that of life" is part of the same movement of thought as Arnold's and Mill's substitution of poetry for religion, as the necessary complement to science. Both are attempts to make more room for individuality than can be provided either by orthodox monotheism, or by the Enlightenment's attempt to put science in the place of religion as a source of Truth. So the attempt, by Tillich and others, to treat religious faith as "symbolic", and thereby to treat religion as poetic and poetry as religious, and neither as competing with science, is on the right track. But to make it convincing we need to drop the idea that some parts of culture fulfill our need to know the truth and others fulfill lesser aims. The pragmatists' romantic utilitarianism does drop this idea: if there is no will to truth apart from the will to happiness, there is no way to contrast the cognitive with the non-cognitive, the serious with the non-serious.

(3) Pragmatism does, however, permit us to make another distinction, one which takes over some of the work previously done by the old distinction between the cognitive and the non-cognitive. The new distinction is between projects of social cooperation and projects of individual self-development.

Intersubjective agreement is required for the former projects, but not for the latter. Science is the paradigm of a project of social cooperation. It is the project of improving man's estate by taking account of every possible observation and experimental result in order to facilitate the making of predictions which will come true. Romantic art is one paradigm of a project of individual self-development. Religion, if it can be disconnected from both science and morals--from both the attempt to predict the consequences of our actions and the attempt to rank human needs--may be another such paradigm.

(4) The Idea that we should love Truth is largely responsible for the idea that religious belief is "intellectually irresponsible." But there is no such thing as the love of Truth. What has been called by that name is a mixture of the love of reaching intersubjective agreement, the love of gaining mastery over a recalcitrant set of data, the love of winning arguments, and the love of synthesizing little theories into big theories. It is never an objection to a religious belief that there is no evidence for it. The only possible objection to it can be that it intrudes an individual project into a social and cooperative project, and thereby offends against the teachings of On Liberty. Such intrusion is a betrayal of one's responsibilities to cooperate with other human beings, not of one's responsibility to Truth or to Reason.

(5) The attempt to love Truth, and to think of it as one, and as capable of commensurating and ranking human needs, is a

secular version of the traditional religious hope that allegiance to something big, powerful, and non-human will persuade that powerful being to take your side in your struggle with other people. Nietzsche despised any such hope as a sign of weakness. Pragmatists who are also democrats have a different objection to such hope for allegiance with power: they see it as a betrayal of the ideal of human fraternity which democracy inherits from Christianity. For that ideal finds its best expression in the doctrine, common to Mill and James, that every human need should be satisfied unless doing so causes too many other human needs to go unsatisfied. The pragmatist objection to traditional forms of religion is not that they are intellectually irresponsible in disregarding the results of natural science. Rather it is that they are morally irresponsible in attempting to circumvent the process of achieving democratic consensus about how to maximize happiness.

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I turn now to the question of how this view of religious belief accords with the views of James and Dewey. It would not, I think, have been congenial to James. But I think it might have suited Dewey. So I shall argue that it is Dewey's rather unambitious and half-hearted A Common Faith, rather than James' brave and exuberant "Conclusion" to Varieties of Religious Experience, that coheres best with the romantic utilitarianism which both accepted.

James says, in that chapter of Varieties, that "the pivot

round which the religious life revolves...is the interest of the individual in his private personal destiny." Science, however, "repudiating the personal point of view", gives us a picture of nature which "has no distinguishable ultimate tendency with which it is possible to feel a sympathy." The "driftings of the cosmic atoms" are "a kind of aimless weather, doing and undoing, achieving no proper history, and leaving no result". (VRE, 387-388) On the view I have just outlined, he should have followed this up by saying "But we are free to describe the universe in many different ways. Describing it as the drifting of cosmic atoms is useful for the social project of working together to control our environment and improve man's estate. But that description leaves us entirely free to say, for example, that the Heavens proclaim the glory of God.

Sometimes James seems to take this line, as when, with obvious approval, he quotes Leuba as saying

God is not known, he is not understood, he is used--  
 sometimes as meat-purveyor, sometimes as moral support, sometimes as friend, sometime as an object of love. If he proves himself useful, the religious consciousness can ask no more than that. Does God really exist? How does he exist? What is he? are so many irrelevant questions. Not God, but life, more life, a larger, richer, more satisfying life, is, in the last analysis, the end of religion..." (VRE, 398).

Unfortunately, however, almost immediately after quoting Leuba he

says "we must next pass beyond the point of view of merely subjective utility and make inquiry into the intellectual content itself". (VRE, 399) He then goes on to argue that the material he has gathered together in Varieties provides empirical evidence for the hypothesis that "the conscious person is continuous with a wider self through which saving experiences come." He calls this "a positive content of religious experience which, it seems to me, is literally and objectively true as far as it goes." (VRE, p. 405)

On the view I have been suggesting, this claim to literal and objective truth is unpragmatic, hollow, and superfluous. James should have rested content with the argument of "The Will to Believe". As I read that essay, it says that we have a right to believe what we like when we are, so to speak, on our own time.<sup>10</sup> But we abandon this right when we are engaged in, for example, a scientific or a political project. For when so engaged it is necessary to reconcile our beliefs, our habits of action, with those of others. On our own time, by contrast, our habits of action are nobody's business but our own. A romantic polytheist will rejoice in what Nietzsche called the "free-spiritedness and many-spiritedness" of individuals, and see the only constraint on this freedom and this diversity as the need not to injure others.

James wobbled on the question of whether what he called "the

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<sup>10</sup>See my "Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility, and Romance" to appear in Ruth-Anna Putnam, ed., The Cambridge Companion to William James (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1996).

religious hypothesis" was something to be adopted on "passional" or on "intellectual" grounds. This hypothesis says that "the best things are the more eternal things, the overlapping things, the things in the universe that throw the last stone, so to speak, and say the final word." (WB, 29-30) In "The Will to Believe" this is put forward as any hypothesis which cannot be accepted on "intellectual" grounds. But in the "Conclusion" to Varieties the hypothesis that "God's existence is the guarantee of an ideal order that shall be permanently preserved" (VRE, p. 407) is one for which he has accumulated evidence. There he also says that the least common denominator of religious beliefs is that "The solution [to the problem presented by a "sense that there is something wrong about us as we naturally stand"] is that we are saved from the wrongness by making proper connection with the higher powers." (VRE, 400) Again, he says that "the conscious person is continuous with a wider self from which saving experiences come". (VRE, 405)

James should not have made a distinction between issues to be decided by intellect and issues to be decided by emotion. If he had not, he might have wobbled less. What he should have done instead was to distinguish issues which you must resolve cooperatively with others and issues which you are entitled to resolve on your own--issues such that the problem is to conciliate your habits of action with those of others, and issues which are your own business. In the latter, the problem is to get your own habits of action to cohere with each other sufficiently

to have a stable and coherent character. But such a character does not require monotheism, or the belief that Truth is One. It is compatible with the idea that you have many different needs, and that the beliefs that help you fill one set of needs are irrelevant to, and need not be made to cohere with, those which help you to fill another set.

Dewey avoided James' mistakes in this area. One reason he did so is that he was much less prone to a sense of guilt than was James. After he realized that his mother had made him unnecessarily miserable by burdening him with a belief in original sin, he simply stopped thinking that, in James' words, "there is something wrong about us as we naturally stand". He no longer believed that we could be "saved from the wrongness by making proper connection with the higher powers." He thought that all that was wrong with us was that the Christian ideal of fraternity had not yet been achieved--society had not yet become pervasively democratic. That was not a problem to be solved by making proper connection with higher powers, but a problem of men to be solved by men.

Dewey's steadfast refusal to have any truck with the notion of original sin, and his suspicion of anything that smacked of such a notion, is bound up with his lifelong distaste for the idea of authority--the idea that anything has authority over the members of a democratic community save the decisions of that community. This anti-authoritarian motif is perhaps clearest in his early essay "Christianity and Democracy"--to which Alan Ryan

has recently called our attention, saying that it is "a dazzling and dazzlingly brave piece of work".<sup>11</sup> Indeed it is. It must have seemed strange to the University of Michigan's Christian Students Association to be told, in 1892, that "God is essentially and only the self-revealing" and that "the revelation is complete only as men come to realize him." Dewey spelled out what he meant by going on to say

Had Jesus Christ made an absolute, detailed and explicit statement upon all the facts of life, that statement would not have had meaning--it would not have been revelation--until men began to realize in their own action the truth that he declared--until they themselves began to live it.<sup>12</sup>

This amounts to saying that even if a non-human being tells you something, the only way to figure out whether what you are have been told is true is to see whether it gets you the sort of life you want. The only way is to apply the utilitarian test for whether the suggestion made proves to be "good in the way of belief." Granted that hearing what such a being has to say may change your wants, nevertheless you test those new wants and that purported truth in the same way: by living them, trying them out in everyday life, seeing whether they make you and yours happier.

Suppose that a source which you believe to be non-human tells you that all men are brothers, that the attempt to make

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<sup>11</sup>Ryan, p. 102.

<sup>12</sup>Early Works, vo. 3, pp. 6-7.

yourself and those you cherish happier should be expanded into an attempt to make all human beings happy. For Dewey, the source of this suggestion is irrelevant. You might have heard it from a god or a guru, but you might just as well have found it carved out by the waves on a sandy beach. It has no validity unless it is treated as an hypothesis, tried out, and found successful. The good thing about Christianity, Dewey is saying, is that it has been found to work.

More specifically, what has been found to work is the Christian idea of fraternity and equality as a basis for social organization. This worked not just as a Thrasymachian device for avoiding pain--what Rawls calls a "mere modus vivendi"--but as a source of the kind of spiritual transfiguration which Platonism and the Christian churches have told us would have to wait upon a future intersection of time with eternity. "Democracy," Dewey says, "is neither a form of government nor a social expediency, but a metaphysic of the relation of man and his experience in nature..."<sup>13</sup>. The point of calling it a metaphysic is not, of course, that it is an accurate account of the fundamental relation of reality, but that if one shares Whitman's sense of glorious democratic vistas stretching on indefinitely into the future one has everything which Platonists hoped to get out of such an account. For Whitman offers what Tillich called "a symbol

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<sup>13</sup>John Dewey, "Maeterlinck's Philosophy of Life", The Middle Works of John Dewey, vol. 6 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978). Dewey says that Emerson, Whitman and Maeterlinck are the only three to have grasped this fact about democracy.

of ultimate concern," of something that can be loved with all one's heart and soul and mind. Plato's mistake, on Dewey's view, was having identified the ultimate object of eros with something unique, atemporal and non-human rather than with an indefinitely expansible pantheon of transitory temporal accomplishments, both natural and cultural. This mistake lent aid and comfort to monotheism, and Dewey shared Nietzsche's sense that "Monotheism, this rigid consequence of the doctrine of one normal human type--the faith in one normal god beside whom there are only pseudo-gods--was perhaps the greatest danger that has yet confronted humanity" [Der Monotheismus...diese starre Konsequenz der Lehre von einem Normalmenschen--also der Glaube an einen Normalgott, neben dem es nur noch falsche Luegengoetter gibt--war vielleicht die groesste Gefahr der bisherigen Menschheit...]<sup>14</sup>

When Christianity is de-theologized and treated as a merely social gospel, it acquires the advantage which Nietzsche attributes to polytheism: it makes the most important human achievement "creating for ourselves our own new eyes", and thereby "honors the rights of individuals". As Dewey put it, "Government, business, art, religion, all social institutions have...a purpose[:]...to set free the capacities of human individuals....[T]he test of their value is the extent to which they educate every individual into the full stature of his

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<sup>14</sup>The Gay Science, section 143.

possibility."<sup>15</sup> In a democratic society, everybody gets to worship his or her personal symbol of ultimate concern, unless worship of that symbol interferes with the pursuit of happiness by his or her fellow-citizens. Accepting that utilitarian constraint, the one Mill formulated in On Liberty, is the only obligation imposed by democratic citizenship, the only exception to democracy's commitment to honor the rights of individuals. This means that nobody is under any constraint to seek Truth, nor to care, any more than Sherlock Holmes did, whether the earth revolves around the sun or conversely. Scientific theories become, as do theological and philosophical ones, optional tools for the facilitation of individual or social projects. Science thereby loses the position it inherited from the monotheistic priesthood, as the people who pay proper tribute to the authority of something "not ourselves".

"Not ourselves" is a term which tolls like a bell throughout the text of Arnold's Literature and Dogma, and this may be one of the reasons Dewey had a particular dislike for Arnold.<sup>16</sup> Once he got out from under the influence of his mother's Calvinism, Dewey distrusted nothing more than the suggestion that there was a non-human authority to which human beings owed respect. He

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<sup>15</sup>Reconstruction in Philosophy (Middle Works, vol. 12, p. 186).

<sup>16</sup>See A Common Faith (Later Works, vol. 9, p. 36) and also Dewey's early essay "Poetry and Philosophy". In the latter Dewey says that "the source of regret which inspires Arnold's lines is his consciousness of a twofold isolation of man--his isolation from nature, his isolation from his fellow-man." (Early Works, vol. 3, p. 115).

praised democracy as the only form of "moral and social faith" which does not "rest upon the idea that experience must be subjected at some point or other to some form of external control: to some 'authority' alleged to exist outside the process of experience."<sup>17</sup> This passage in an essay of 1939 echoes one written forty-seven years earlier. In "Christianity and Democracy" Dewey had said that "The one claim that Christianity makes is that God is truth; that as truth He is love and reveals Himself fully to man, keeping back nothing of Himself; that man is so one with the truth thus revealed that it is not so much revealed to him as in him; he is its incarnation...".<sup>18</sup> For Dewey God is in no way Kierkegaard's Wholly Other. Rather, he is whatever human beings come to see through the eyes that they themselves create.

If atheism is interpreted as anti-monotheism, then Dewey was aggressive an atheist as has ever lived. The idea that God might have kept something back, that there might be something not ourselves which it was our duty to discover, was as distasteful to him as was the idea that God could tell us which of our needs took priority over others. He reserved his awe for the universe as a whole, "the community of causes and consequences in which, *We* together with those not born, are enmeshed." "The continuing life

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<sup>17</sup>"Creative Democracy--The Task Before Us" (1939). The passage cited is in Later Works, vol. 14, p. 229. Dewey says that he is here "stating briefly the democratic faith in the formal terms of a philosophic position."

<sup>18</sup>Early Works, vol. 4, p. 5.

of this comprehensive community of beings", he said, "includes all the significant achievement of men in science and art and all the kindly offices of intercourse and communication".

Notice, in the passages I have just quoted, the phrase "together with those not born" and also the adjective "continuing". Dewey's distaste for the eternity and stability on which monotheism prides itself is so great that he can never refer to the universe as a whole without reminding us that the universe is still evolving--still experimenting, still fashioning new eyes with which to see itself. Wordsworth's version of pantheism meant a great deal to Dewey, but Whitman's insistence on futurity meant more. Wordsworth's pantheism saves us from what Arnold called "Hebraism" by making it impossible to treat, as Dewey put it, "the drama of sin and redemption enacted within the isolated and lonely soul of man as the one thing of ultimate importance." But Whitman does something more. He tells us that non-human nature culminates in a community of free men, in their collaboration in building a society in which, as Dewey said, "poetry and religious feeling will be the unforced flowers of life".<sup>19</sup> Dewey's God, his symbol of what he called "the union of the ideal and the actual" was the United States of America treated as a symbol of openness to the possibility of as yet undreamt of, ever more diverse, forms of human happiness. Much of what Dewey wrote consists of endless reiteration of a passage

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<sup>19</sup>Reconstruction in Philosophy (Middle Works, vol. 12, p. 201.

in "Democratic Vistas" at which Whitman says

America...counts, as I reckon, for her justification and success, (for who, as yet, dare claim success?) almost entirely on the future....For our New World I consider far less important for what it has done, or what it is, than for results to come.

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So much for my contrast between James and Dewey, and for my claim that Dewey is the better exponent of a properly pragmatist philosophy of religion. I shall end with an attempt to reply to Dewey's most recent critic, Alan Ryan. Ryan agrees with Sidney Hook that Dewey was trying to stretch the term "God" too far. Toward the end of his discussion of Dewey's treatment of religion he says

As myself an aggressive atheist, I am not persuaded that the usefulness of such ways of talking has much bearing on their truthfulness; to put it unkindly, one might complain that Dewey wants the social value of religious belief without being willing to pay the epistemological price for it. To put it less unkindly, we may wonder whether in fact, it is possible to have the use of a religious vocabulary without the accretion of supernaturalist beliefs that Dewey wishes to sluff off.<sup>20</sup>

Elsewhere Ryan firms up this latter doubt by saying that Dewey

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 274

"was simply wrong about the religious attitude", because he failed to realize that "the sense of human finitude" and "the proper self-doubt that the doctrine of original sin picks up (and maybe traduces)" are among the "more serious features of traditional religious belief."<sup>21</sup>

Committed pragmatists like myself would not dream of distinguishing between the usefulness of a way of talking and its truth, nor would we imagine that any belief came with an epistemological price tag attached. We are saddened that, after plowing through those thirty-seven volumes, Ryan can still describe the crux between Dewey and his religious critics as follows:

Although we learn our understanding of the world in a community and employing the resources of a culture, we cannot help asking whether our interpretation of the world is right....The fact that we learn to interpret the world by belonging to a community does not answer the question of whether what we say about the world is mass projection of our hopes, fears, and whatever else rather than an account of how the world really is.<sup>22</sup>

We who are more convinced by Dewey than Ryan think that this latter question is one the answer to which can make no difference to practise, and therefore should not be asked. The only form of the question which we will buy is: does any other community,

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<sup>21</sup>Ryan, p. 102

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 361.

culture, or individual genius have a description of the world which suits our communal or individual purposes better?

But this philosophical quarrel is irrelevant to the answer to Ryan's question about whether "it is possible to have the use of a religious vocabulary without the accretion of supernaturalist beliefs that Dewey wishes to sluff off". Here one is tempted to answer: It's not only possible, but actual. Dewey did it.

But of course Ryan does not mean "possible", he means "legitimate." Ryan believes that Dewey was "simply wrong about the religious attitude", and not just because he doesn't have a proper sense of human finitude and proper amount of self-doubt. I suspect that Ryan thinks that, just as you probably can't play chess without the queen, you probably can't have a religious attitude without believing that there is a power not ourselves--a power occupying a place in the same causal order as the comets and the quarks--that makes for righteousness.

The big difference, however, between Ryan's and my own sense of what is important about religion is that for him a sense of sin and of the necessary inferiority of the finite and human to the infinite and non-human is necessary for an outlook to be called religious. I see Christianity as working its way from a form of religion in which the notions of obedience, sin, and immortality are central to one in which these notions have all but vanished. Christianity put forward, though it has never been very faithful to, the suggestion that the only form of obedience

which God wants is for us to love one another, that worship of him consists precisely in kindness toward each other, and that the only reward we should expect from showing such kindness is that others will show it to us.

If this is one's view of the Christian message, then it becomes possible to see Mill's utilitarianism as a de-theologized version of Christianity. This may seem paradoxical, since utilitarianism was often said, by its nineteenth-century opponents, to be a godless, atheistic, materialistic, creed. Those who take this view of utilitarianism and pragmatism will say that the religious should beware of pragmatists bearing gifts. In particular, they should beware of James' suggestion that anybody has a right to believe anything as long as their doing so does not compromise any cooperative enterprise to which they have committed themselves. They claim that utilitarianism is a view which could only be accepted by somebody who was already an atheist--or at least by somebody who had no religious feeling, somebody whose sense of human possibilities is narrow and blinkered.

This claim, however, presupposes that it is essential to religious faith to submit to the authority of something non-human. Insofar as religion consists in such submission, to what is sometimes called "a sacrifice of the intellect", then it is indeed the case that no one who is religious can be either an utilitarian or a pragmatist. But I this is a question-begging definition of religion. If "religious faith" is defined narrowly

enough, so that it consists in a refusal to take part in some cooperative enterprise such as scientific research or democratic politics because doing so would offend one's conscience, then of course nobody can have such faith and be a utilitarian.

But there are broader and more plausible definitions of "being religious". For example, it is sometimes said that for followers of Christ, love is the only law. Nothing, on this view of Christianity, takes precedence over the duty to be of assistance to one's neighbor, to treat his or her needs with loving kindness. Credal statements and acts of worship are secondary in comparison to this overriding obligation. Theology is not of the essence of Christian belief, for the Christian life is one of service to others, for only such service counts as service to God. To lead a life devoted to such service counts as Christian, and a fortiori as being religious, in the fullest possible sense of the terms "Christian" and "religious". But a life which neglects such service, no matter how many sacraments are received nor how many professions made, does not.

If one takes this view of Christianity, then it is possible to view utilitarianism as a reformulation of the central Christian doctrine. For utilitarianism says that all human beings, or perhaps even all creatures that can suffer pain, are on a moral par--that they all deserve to have their needs satisfied, in so far as this can be done without harm to others. The egalitarianism which runs through Mill's and James' work is a moral attitude which could only flourish in a culture which had

been told, century after century, that God's will was for men to treat each other with loving kindness, that all men are brothers, that love is the first commandment. The idea that everybody--black or white, male or female, Christian or heathen, wise or foolish--has rights which deserve respect and consideration is one which, in Europe and America, has traditionally been backed up by appeal to the agapistic strand in the Christian tradition.

If one does see the claim that love is the only law as central to Christianity, then it is plausible to describe the historical development of Christianity in terms of the gradual substitution of love for power as the essential attribute of God. A god of power is an authority; a god of love is a friend. If one thinks of our relation to God as one of awe, worship and obedience, then one will insist that utilitarianism and pragmatism have their limits: limits set by God's commands. If God has commanded us to worship him under one name rather than another, or commanded us not to suffer a witch to live, or commanded that women be silent in churches, or that a man shall not lie with a man as with a woman, then no pragmatic or utilitarian consideration should have any force to persuade us of any different opinion. Insofar as Christians see their duty of obedience to God as including more than the duty to serve their fellow human beings, they are worshipping a god of power rather than a god of love.

From this point of view, Clifford's claim that we have an obligation to Truth--that the pursuit of truth is something

different from the pursuit of human happiness--is a version of the religious idea that we owe obedience to a higher power. Truth, considered as correspondence to the Intrinsic Nature of Reality, is the secularist's equivalent of the God of Power. Science, seen as Clifford does rather than as James does, is the Enlightenment's version of the worship of a god of power. But James, by insisting that reality has no intrinsic nature to be respected, is following up on the agapistic strain in Christianity. In saying that our duty to truth amounts to the duty to respect the needs of those fellow-creatures with whom we are involved in cooperative activities, pragmatists are following out the line of thought in Christianity which says that love is the only law.

Suppose that a source which you believe to be non-human tells you that all men are brothers, and that your attempt to make yourself and those you cherish happier should be expanded into an attempt to make all human beings happy. For Dewey, your belief that the source of this suggestion is a non-human power is irrelevant. You might have heard the same suggestion from a false messiah, or you might have found it scratched anonymously on a wall. Whatever its source, it has no validity unless it is treated as an hypothesis, tried out, and found successful. The good thing about the Christian doctrine that love is the only law, Dewey is saying, is not that it has been proclaimed from above, but that it works--works according to utilitarian criteria. Living in this way produces more human happiness than

would be produced by living in other way.

It would be pointless to ask whether Dewey is judging Christianity by utilitarian and pragmatist criteria or instead judging utilitarianism and pragmatism by Christian criteria. He is doing both at once, and sees no need to make one act of judgment prior to the other. For he is treating Christianity, utilitarianism, and pragmatism as so many different ways of getting human beings to stand on their own feet, to rely on each other rather than hoping for help from the non-human. They are, in his eyes, three different forms of the attempt to substitute love for obedience. He sees Christianity not as a matter of exchanging worship for a promise of protection from a power not ourselves, but as a way of freeing us to exchange awe for hope and love. He sees utilitarianism and pragmatism as ways of freeing us from the idea that something non-human deserves--be it the mysterious Will of God or the mysterious True Nature of Reality--deserves respect simply because it is so different from us and so unconcerned with our needs. For Dewey, Kierkegaard's Wholly Other is demonic rather than divine, and the worship of the Wholly Other is idolatry, a betrayal of everything which Christ stood for.

If this humanistic version of Christianity seems strange, that may be because it leaves no room for the doctrine which was closest to Kierkegaard's heart: the doctrine of sin. That we are in sin, Kierkegaard tells us, is something so hard for us sinners to realize that only the operation of Grace can make it

possible. For Dewey, on the other hand, there is no such thing as sin, no such thing as radical evil. Every evil, Dewey thought, is a name for a lesser good--a good considered and rejected in the process of deliberation. The anti-authoritarianism which was central to the Enlightenment, and of which anti-clericalism was only one facet, finds its ultimate expression in the substitution of the kind of fraternal cooperation characteristic of an ideal democratic society for the idea of redemption from sin. The Enlightenment rationalists substituted the idea of redemption from ignorance by Science for this theological idea, but Dewey and James wanted to get rid of that notion too. They wanted to substitute the contrast between a less useful set of beliefs and a more useful set for the contrast between ignorance and knowledge. For them, there was no goal called Truth to be aimed at; the only goal was the ever-receding goal of still greater human happiness.

I have given you this sketch of Dewey's attempt to appropriate Christianity for his own pragmatic purposes in order to reply to the suggestion that pragmatism begs the question against religion. As I see it, the only question it begs is whether we are in a state of Sin: whether we need to rely on something non-human for our salvation. Anyone who thinks the consciousness of Sin essential to religious faith will have no use for James' and Dewey's way of reconciling science and religion. But for those who are willing to use the term "religious faith" to cover both a religion of obedient submission

to non-human power and a religion of love between human beings,  
this project of reconciliation may have some attractions.