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PRAGMATISM AND THE ABSOLUTE IN AMERICAN PHILOSOPHY AND POLITICS

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Abstract: *While the classical American philosophers evaluate ideas in terms of their practical value, some of them, like Royce and Emerson, try to synthesize the pragmatic with the absolute. In politics, however, such a synthesis is not possible. In this essay, I show how philosophers have attempted to bring together in thought some notion of the absolute with an understanding of the pragmatic function of truth. I then contrast the pragmatic administrations of President Obama and the elder President Bush with the more absolutist administration of the younger President Bush. My aim is to show that the synthesis of pragmatism and the absolute in philosophy is not possible in politics.*

Key words: *Pragmatism, Absolute, Politics, Obama, Bush*

Introduction

This paper is on the relationship between pragmatism and the Absolute in both American philosophy and American politics. Pragmatism is a philosophical movement whose classical period can be dated, roughly, to America in the years 1870 to 1940. Though it has extended to other countries, and is quite popular in Hungary, pragmatism initially arose in the United States, and it characterizes a uniquely American way of thinking. American philosophy is called pragmatism because of the tendency in the United States to evaluate ideas and theories in terms of how well they work to solve concrete, practical problems.

As a philosophical method, pragmatism refers to the notion that those ideas are true which have a positive practical benefit in our lives. If an idea is effective, if it works and is successful, then it is a true idea. On the other hand, those ideas are false which bring about negative effects in our practical, everyday lives. But there is

another idea that is in opposition to pragmatism, the notion of the Absolute, which has influenced much of American thought. The Absolute was introduced into American philosophy by Ralph Waldo Emerson, who believed that there were eternal and universal truths. An eternal, universal, or absolute truth does not change, while pragmatic truth is constantly changing, depending on the particular circumstances. Thus, we find in American philosophy these two opposing ideas, and the attempt has been made, by Emerson and Josiah Royce, to synthesize them together. Emerson thought that we could find the eternal within everyday life; Royce believed that Absolute ideas might bring about positive effects in our lives.

When he was campaigning for President in 2008, Barack Obama often referred to himself as a pragmatist, and there have been numerous articles written about his pragmatic approach in both domestic and international affairs. One might say that the opposite of the pragmatic approach is the absolutist approach. Numerous articles have been written claiming that the previous president of the United States, George W. Bush, was an absolutist, due in large part to his religious faith. Absolutist ideas are, by definition, inflexible. They are resolute, unchanging, and uncompromising. If politics is the art of compromise, as it is often said, then it is not possible to have absolutist ideas and be politically active. You end up being too inflexible to engage in the give and take of political life. On the other hand, if you are flexible enough to engage in politics, then you run the risk of having no clear moral principles. In the following, I argue that this synthesis of pragmatism with the absolute may work in philosophy, but that it cannot work in politics, or at least that there is a profound tension in trying to do so.

This presentation divides into three sections: Firstly, I look at the synthesis of pragmatism and the absolute in American philosophy. Secondly, I show how President Obama, in the spirit of Abraham Lincoln and John Dewey, is a pragmatist. Lastly, I will look at the administrations of the elder and the younger Presidents Bush to show the inherent dilemma of being either a pragmatic realist or a moral absolutist in politics.

Pragmatism and the Absolute in Philosophy

It is interesting that the while the notion of pragmatism developed, at least in part, from Emerson, he is not considered a pragmatist. Emerson is a transcendentalist, who believed in a divine and absolute cosmic intellect. His essay "The American Scholar" identifies four essential features of scholarship: 1. the study of nature, 2. reading books in the right way (books are good but only when they invigorate the soul and lead to artistic and intellectual creation), 3. taking action (which is not normally associated with scholarship), and 4. fulfilling one's

duties and obligations. In these categories we find both his belief in absolute, universal ideas as well as his attention to practical, everyday life.

Consider what he says about our ability to study nature. Certainly, we are able to understand the natural world. But why? It must be because there is a correlation between the universe and the human mind, and wherever there is a correlation, there must be some unity. When we are young, we see every object as a singular, individual thing. This chair is different from that chair. As we grow and learn, we see that while things are different, they are also the same. We see before us two chairs, which are, nonetheless, the same. Each one is a chair. As Emerson writes,

> [the mind] finds how to join two things and see in them one nature; then three, then three thousand; and so, tyrannized over by its own unifying instinct, it goes on tying things together, diminishing anomalies, discovering roots running underground whereby contrary and remote things cohere and flower out from one stem. It presently learns that since the dawn of history there has been a constant accumulation and classifying of facts. But what is classification but the perceiving that these objects are not chaotic, and are not foreign, but have a law which is also a law of the human mind. (Emerson, 2000b, p. 18)

The human mind identifies universals and, in doing so, sees that the law of the mind and the law of nature are one and the same. In other words, discerning sameness in things in the world, the mind then also finds sameness between the world and itself.

To some extent, this explains why, for Emerson, it was so necessary to study the world around us. The scholar is engaged by the world: "Every day, the sun; and after sunset, Night and her stars. Ever the winds blow; ever the grass grows" (Emerson, 2000b, p. 18). There is an everlasting cycle within the universe, from the eternal, circular movement of the planets to the constant rotation of the seasons, which is reflective of a divine and absolute cosmic order. This "circular power" we also find within ourselves (Emerson, 2000b, p. 18). Thus, in studying the world, we learn about ourselves. The world, he says, is an "*other me*", for in learning about the world we come into a better understanding of ourselves (Emerson, 2000b, p. 21). Emerson thus finds the universal embedded within the world. In spite of having a rich inner life and of encouraging others to find the richness of their inner lives, he still advocates that we seek out life experiences. Emerson tells us to always do that which we are most afraid of doing. In calling upon the scholar to engage in action, Emerson is saying that it is through active participation in the world that the scholar can learn, cultivating the raw material of human experience.

Emerson's synthesis of the absolute with human experience crystallizes in his essay on Plato. He believed that Plato transcended the opposing interests of the Eastern and Western worlds. The East, or Asia and India, are concerned with notions of infinity, fate, and above all "the fundamental unity," something that we find especially in Eastern religious writings (Emerson, 2000a, p.425). In the distinction between the one and the many, the East focuses on the absolute and universal one. Europe, however, is more interested in the many. Emerson looks at the art and culture of the European world and finds not Eastern infinity, but boundaries and limitations, not the 'fundamental unity' sought by Asia, but the detail and particularity of an aesthetic and industrial culture. For Emerson, it was Plato who synthesizes these worlds. East and West come together in his thinking:

> The unity of Asia and the detail of Europe; the infinitude of the Asiatic soul and the defining, result-loving, machine-making, surface-seeking, opera-going Europe-Plato came to join, and, by contact, to enhance the energy of each. The excellence of Europe and Asia are in his brain." (Emerson, 2000a, p. 428)

We can read Emerson in the same way, as attempting to synthesize the universal with the particular by finding absolutes embedded within everyday life:

> The meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan; the ballad in the street; the news of the boat; the glance of the eye; the form and the gait of the body; – show me the ultimate reason of these matters; show me the sublime presence of the highest spiritual cause lurking, as always it does lurk, in these suburbs and extremities of nature. (Emerson, 2000b, p. 25)

Emerson died in April of 1882. In a memorial address given by William James, he says of Emerson that, "Through the individual fact there ever shone for him the effulgence of the Universal Reason" (James, 2000a, p. 14). This is interesting because James is not as sympathetic to the notion of universal reason or to absolutes as was Emerson. According to James, thought is always *individual*; it "tends to personal form" (James, 2000b, p. 162). This means that there are no pure or universal thoughts because thought is always connected to personal consciousness. Every thought belongs to a "concrete particular" someone (James, 2000b, p. 162). Thus, for James, either there is no universal reason, or, if there is one, it certainly is not something that we can know about because it is not something that we could ever experience. Moreover, for James, thought is in constant change. Again, we can contrast this against Emerson's belief in absolutes. In his description of the pragmatist, James writes that, "[A pragmatist] turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad a priori reasons,

from fixed principles, closed systems, pretended absolutes and origins. He turns towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action, towards power" (James, 2000c, p. 195). Thus, while James respected Emerson and valued his predecessor's interest in action and experience, James himself resisted, for the most part, any notion that truth is absolute and eternal.

Consider what James says about belief in God. He points out that it is not possible to prove that God exists. Thus, if you need proof in order to believe something, then you will never be able to have faith. He argues, therefore, that you must simply believe in God first, and if that belief proves to be valuable to your life, then it is a true idea. That is, it is a true idea *for you*. In this instance, belief in a fact actually creates the fact. While James may be right in saying that it is not possible to have a verifiable proof that God exists, what he calls the truth of that belief is its practical value for you, the believer. Your belief in God is true if it makes a difference in your practical life. Thus, while he does not rule out the possibility of belief in absolute truth, the value of that belief is simply in the difference that it makes to your practical life. He writes, "If theological ideas prove to have a value for concrete life, they will be true, for pragmatism, in the sense of being good for so much" (James, 2000c, p. 200).

Royce claims that for James, truth is an "agreeable leading" (2000, p. 309). To discern if an idea is true, you must consider the practical consequences of believing in that idea. As James says, if you are lost in the woods, and you have ideas that eventually lead you successfully out of the woods, then those are true ideas. Of course, you cannot know in advance if the idea is true or not, but you can anticipate possible ideas, and those ideas that lead to positive practical consequences will end up being the true ones. Truth, for James, is a matter of anticipation and usefulness. He will often speak of the cash-value of ideas, which is a way to reference the practical value an idea has for your life. In James, there are no words that can grasp the universe. Terms such as 'God,' 'Matter,' 'Reason,' and 'the Absolute' should not be used to discern the essence of the universe or cosmos. Rather, "you must bring out of each word its practical cash-value." Even with direct reference to God, James says that we need to "interpret" Him "pragmatically" and consider His "cash-value" (James, 2000c, p. 201). In the end, we can say that for James, true ideas are those ideas that prove themselves to be good – that prove themselves to be successful – in our practical lives.

A major criticism of James's notion of truth comes from the philosopher Josiah Royce, who was a student of James's at Harvard. He asks of James a simple question: What do you mean by success? Are true ideas those that prove successful in our personal lives? Or are true ideas those that prove successful to us insofar as we share our lives with others? Royce makes the claim, well-known to philosophy

professors, that if you scratch a relativist, you find an absolutist. A relativist says that there are no absolute truths, but in making that claim, they must believe that there is at least one absolute truth, namely, that there are no absolute truths. Royce claims that truth is not personal and individual. Rather, it is communal. There is for Royce, as there was for Emerson, a fundamental unity to life, what he calls "a distinctly superhuman type of unity" (2000, p. 311). Thus, according to Royce, any notion of truth must take some account of the foundation upon which human communities are based. It seems as though we are all separate individuals, but that is actually not the case. We are all part of a community, and we all share a common future. Royce's notion of community is directed forward, towards our shared vision of future events. If we all share a common vision for the future, then true ideas, successful ideas, cannot be personal. They must involve the whole community.

From a philosophical perspective, we can see that there are two competing elements that have guided American philosophy from the beginning. On the one hand, there is the notion of an Absolute. This can be interpreted in various ways, as God, as Absolute truth, as universal reason, or as the divine order of the cosmos. On the other hand, there is the notion of pragmatism, which views truth in terms of its consequences and its practical success in our lives. Emerson and Royce attempt to synthesize these ideas. James is more of a pure pragmatist. Let us turn now to politics to see how pragmatism and the Absolute function there.

Lincoln – Dewey – Obama

President Obama insists that he is a pragmatist. Coming from Illinois, he certainly has a good understanding of the political strategies of Abraham Lincoln and of the philosophical theories of the pragmatist John Dewey, who taught at the University of Chicago. As some commentators have pointed out, elements of both Lincoln and Dewey are evident in Obama's approach to politics.

We can see the influence of Lincoln in Obama's idea that the United States can *make progress*. During a political rally in California in the fall of 2008, Sarah Palin claimed that Obama believed that America was "imperfect enough that he's pallin around with terrorists" (Schulten, 2009, p. 814). For Palin, America is perfect; it is an ideal (Schulten, 2009, p. 814). Obama, however, echoes the claim in the Constitution that it is possible to create a "more perfect union." If the union can become *more perfect*, then there must be room for improvement (Schulten, 2009, p. 814). This idea that the U.S. is not an ideal is the origin of Palin's attacks on the patriotism of Obama and others (Schulten, 2009, p. 814).

Lincoln had employed the strategy of seeing that the United States could improve and become better when he said that equality was a goal to be achieved. It

was Lincoln's greatest and most creative political insight to read the U.S. Constitution through the Declaration of Independence. Many people believe that the Constitution defends equality for all human beings. This is not the case. The Declaration of Independence says that "all men are created equal," but the Constitution does not. In his debates with Stephen Douglas and in his speech at Cooper Union, Lincoln asserted, as one commentator has pointed out, that "the Constitution's emphasis on law and order was designed to implement the values of the Declaration" (Schulten, 2009, p. 812). When Obama gave his famous speech on race in Philadelphia during the 2008 campaign, he utilized exactly the same tactic that Lincoln had used. He appealed to the Constitution to justify ideas of equality that are not found in the Constitution, but only in the Declaration of Independence. Such is the political pragmatism of both Lincoln and Obama, using language and interpretation to create a way of thinking that is true insofar as it successfully creates solidarity and generates support for their position. Both Lincoln and Obama engaged in a kind of creative re-reading of the U.S. Constitution in order to generate political consensus.

Obama is also a Deweyan pragmatist. Like James, Dewey did not believe that there were absolute truths. Rather, he was interested in trying to rearrange social organizations in order to reach consensus and solve practical social and political problems. Dewey's hope was to strengthen political platforms and parties so that within the community one would find acknowledged social values. For him, being a liberal must mean something definite and, for that matter, being a conservative must mean something definite. He thought that there must be stable sources of meaning within a community, so that citizens can use those sources of meaning, those values, to give definition to themselves. On Dewey's account, these values, and *not absolute truths*, have the potential to forge social solidarity. Obama is taking the same approach. He is attempting to transcend political differences by focusing on the values that all Americans share. This is different from an appeal to absolute truth or idealism. He is not saying, 'there is a truth and we need to follow it.' Rather, he is saying, 'let's come together on common ground and do what is best for the country as whole.'

Obama is a pragmatist, and thus a realist, when it comes to governing and creating policy. His administration is still young. The question arises as to what kinds of problems one faces in being either a realist or an absolutist in politics. Let me turn now to two Presidential administrations that preceded Obama's, those of the elder and the younger George Bush.

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The Dilemma of Politics

The basic political dilemma between pragmatism and absolutism in politics comes to light in an interesting article by Jeffrey Goldberg from the *New Yorker* magazine, which I look at in this section to make my point about politics. The article is entitled "Letter from Washington: Breaking Ranks." In politics, the distinction between absolutism and pragmatism might be cast as the distinction between idealism and realism. Consider America preceding the war in Iraq. In August of 2002, as Goldberg points out, an editorial was written in the *Wall Street Journal* by Brent Scowcroft, who had been the national security adviser to the elder George Bush. It ran a scream headline: "Don't Attack Saddam." Scowcroft argued in the editorial that to attack Iraq would draw the United States away from a more focused attention to the war on terror. He also thought that such an attack would not do anything to help in establishing a peace between Palestine and Israel (Goldberg, 2005, p. 57). Scowcroft and the elder George Bush were realists, and this meant that they considered the strategic benefits and drawbacks to waging war against another country. The opposite might be said of the younger George Bush and his national security adviser, Condoleeza Rice. When she read Scowcroft's editorial in the *Wall Street Journal*, she called him and said, "How could you do this to us?" (Goldberg, 2005, p. 59). Rice had been a student and protégé of Scowcroft, but she became less of a realist and more of an idealist under George Bush. There is some speculation that this was due to her religious beliefs; in any event, she worked "comfortably for a President who speaks in terms of 'evildoers' and the 'axis of evil'" (Goldberg, 2005, p. 59). Rice's position is summed up in an extraordinary statement she made over dinner one night in September of 2002 at a Georgetown restaurant. She said, "The world is a messy place and someone has to clean it up" (Goldberg, 2005, p. 59). For Rice and Bush, the United States invaded Iraq, at least in part, on absolutist, moral grounds. It was a matter of good vs. evil. When that is the rationale for military action, then the strategizing of the realist becomes secondary, if not unnecessary. If it is morally right to do something, then it does not matter what the consequences are going to be for you. (It is interesting that while Scowcroft, a realist, was a key political adviser and close personal friend of the elder George Bush, he had very little interaction with the younger Bush or even with Rice. He wielded little to no power in that administration, as Goldberg points out.)

The difficulty with the absolutist approach is that as a politician, it is essential to consider the consequences of your actions and to entertain positions that differ from your own. There are many who believed that the younger Bush simply ignored ideas that conflicted with his own (Goldberg, 2005, p. 58). This is clear

evidence that Bush was not a pragmatist. It is essential to the pragmatic view that we test our ideas against those of others. If what we think cannot be verified by others in public discourse, then our ideas cannot be true. The difficulty with the pragmatic approach in politics, however, is that, often enough, it can be immoral. Suppose that the U.S. did have a moral imperative to attack Saddam Hussein, but that strategically, it would not have been a good idea to do so. In that case, the pragmatist would have to accept injustice and moral corruption for the sake of what is practically advantageous. There are numerous examples of this in politics, as Goldberg explains. Here is Goldberg's example: some may be familiar with what is called the Chicken Kiev speech that the elder George Bush delivered in the Ukraine in August of 1991. Bush thought that the Baltic countries, which were on the verge of independence, should be careful about declaring their independence from the Soviet Union. He cautioned them against 'suicidal nationalism.' In the name of what he thought was pragmatically a good idea, he told the Baltic countries not to separate from the Soviet Union.

Indeed, in the elder Bush administration, there was only one act of humanitarian intervention, a sign that it was guided more by realism than by idealism, and that was in Somalia. But even there, Scowcroft claims that humanitarian intervention must bring about some practical good. It must still be in America's best interest. As Goldberg writes, "For Scowcroft, the principle is clear: by pragmatic standards, a humanitarian intervention without a strategic rationale is a mistake" (Goldberg, 2005, p. 65).

In politics, therefore, one is faced with this dilemma. As an absolutist and an idealist, one ignores what is strategically advantageous for the sake of what is morally right. As a realist, one must accept some degree of injustice for the sake of what is in the country's best interest. The philosophers can bring these ideas together in thought. But in politics, it seems, the synthesis between pragmatism and the absolute is not possible. Is this an indictment of politics? Is it an indictment of philosophy? Will Obama, as a pragmatist, have to do what is morally unjust for the sake of what is practically advantageous? I don't know. But to my mind, what all of this suggests is that Socrates may have been right when he said, "A man who really fights for justice must lead a private, not a public, life if he is to survive for even a short time" (Plato, 2002, p. 36).

Note

This essay was originally delivered as a presentation at the America Week conference in Veszprém, Hungary during the spring of 2010. Since it was originally written for presentation, and not for publication, I have chosen to retain the oratory

style of this piece. I might note, at least in passing, that this is how William James published many of his essays. They were originally delivered as speeches, and he had them published as is. While I make no pretense to match James in either style or substance, I appreciate the vitality and energy of the spoken word that resonates in his essays, and I hope that at least some of that same kind of energy is evident here. – SMC

Acknowledgements

There are a number of good essays on politics, which I did not reference in this presentation but that contributed significantly to my understanding of the political ideas expressed here. Those are as follows: Michael J. Kelly, "The Bush Foreign Policy 2001-2003: Unilateralist Theory in a Multilateral World, and the Opportunity for Change Offered by Iraq." *Washington University Global Studies Law Review*, vol. 221, 2003, pp. 221-229; Shane J. Ralston, "Obama's Pragmatism in International Affairs" Electronic Copy available at ssrn.com/abstract=1402283, no date, pp. 1-33; and Jonathan Rynhold, "President Obama and the Middle East Challenge." *BESA Center Perspectives Papers* No. 50, November 6, 2008.

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