

Threshold Thinking: Pragmatism and Inter-religious Dialogue

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Abstract

The main issue for John B. Cobb, Jr., and the most formidable stumbling block for inter-religious dialogue and intercultural communication is whether one can conceive of pluralism without “relativism”—whether “incommensurables” need be “incompatibles” (to use terms favoured by Joseph C. McLelland). This problem, or *problematic*, revolves around the connection and relation between logic and ontology, and particularly draws us into the question of what “difference” and “negation” mean and presage in traditional ways of philosophical and religious thinking about God, the Absolute, or the Ultimate Ground. But not just thinking, of course, for we cannot think about thinking without thinking and talking about language, which happens to be where we do most of our meeting—in conversation. Thus how we understand the use of language is key to an understanding of how we *conceive of, paint, discourse*, and ultimately, *function*, both *in* and *with* the world. This essay assesses Cobb’s vision of “mutual transformation” in terms of the Greek root *pragma* (pragma). Cobb’s work stands firmly in a “pragmatic” tradition (as he notes in his “Challenge to American Theology and Philosophy”) and here I investigate further the various implications (latent as well as patent) of “pragmatism” for Cobb, and the ramifications of this stance vis-à-vis his theory of pluralism, as developed, particularly, in his work on inter-religious dialogue.

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In terms of method, this essay employs *collage* and Heidegger’s *figura etymologica*³ to draw a “hermeneutical circle” around Cobb and the central questions of religious “meeting.” In the longstanding Western penchant for triads, I posit as a provisional heuristic three different “levels” at which the root *pragma* has specific implications, and in each level I point to several spokespersons, their strengths, and their limitations. These levels correlate loosely with Franz Rosenzweig’s division of his *Star of Redemption* into 1) *logic*, 2) *performative speech*, 3) *theological social theory*—a triad which itself is reminiscent of the classical trivium of Logic, Grammar, and Rhetoric, or, more loosely: Thought, Speech, and Action. For Rosenzweig, these are the three foci of any “New Thinking” [*Neudenkweise*]. John Cobb’s work on inter-religious dialogue is a similar, more recent attempt at a “new thinking” and stands, I believe, as a palpable starting point from which to

seek an alternative way of conceiving the invisible and demanding the impossible; of reconciling our quest for universality with our need for group and individual security-in-distinctiveness. But lest we be hasty, recall that even radicals require roots [Latin *radicalis* from *radix*, ‘root’], we must first check the soil in which they are planted, to see if it is fertile. An investigation of the pitfalls and potentialities of the levels of *pragma* may be fruitful in this respect, with one eye on epistemology and ontology, one ear on speech and human relationship, and a hand on the deed, *praxis*.

Postmodern Theological Thinking

The term “postmodernism” is a hydra-headed beast, to be sure. One thing we *can* say about “posties” (Rorty) is that they call forth the breakdown of hegemonies, absolutes, gods, and even the human subject (Lévi-Strauss, Foucault). In theological thinking and religious philosophy, this fracturation has caused a great fervour of activity, giving spur to the chastened liberal apologist as well as the strident kerygmatic prophet of doom. With this cosmic breakdown has arisen a world that is increasingly diverse and heterogeneous; the West, in particular, faces more than ever the “problem” of the other. Thus postmodern thinking in religion has to deal not only with a renewed vision of transcendence but also with a “pluralistic” way of thinking, speaking, and communicating this transcendence to others in the world, in the world we *share*; others who may or may not share, however, our thoughts and beliefs, or even our *ways* of thinking and believing! Many have begun this difficult quest, the most prominent being Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Raimundo Panikkar, John Hick, and John B. Cobb, Jr., but there remains much work to be done.

John Cobb is a particularly interesting figure in this respect, standing betwixt and between the others, a conservative radical, after a fashion. Cobb bemoans the too-readily made assumption (among religious pluralists, and dialogists more generally) that “difference in image and concept” belies a greater harmony at the core – that, for all the tricks of appearance, there is no difference in the “reality” which is being referred to in divergent theologies and ways of speaking about transcendency, ultimacy, or transfiguration (Cobb 1987, 97). This hypothesis, of an *Ur-reality* to which all religions

ultimately point (suggested for example, by Paul Knitter) is itself founded on an *a priori* assumption that metaphysics cannot be pluralistic but must ultimately be united across cultures and epochs. The conclusion follows that we must turn away from our specificities and put forth a “reality-centric” vision, or at least a very loose theocentric one. But this is to throw out the baby with the bathwater, sacrificing the core of different religious traditions (for Christianity, Christology, even “soft” Christology) for the sake of dialogue; and, most critically perhaps, it is to deny “difference” as a positive category. For, “the highest common denominator of all religions may prove to offer nothing by which man can find meaning in life” (Cobb 1965, 281).

Cobb complains that this “levelling” approach to dialogue stops too soon—if, indeed, it is on the right path at all. Dialogue may well, *should*, even, provoke not only a re-evaluation of one’s theology and history but also of one’s metaphysics and epistemology; i.e., one’s own foundations, the very basis (logical and ontological) of one’s experience. As early as 1965, Cobb wrote that with a commitment to self-clarification and a recognition of the fragmentariness of human apprehension, one tradition can “believe the truth of the other without becoming less convinced of the truth of that which has been revealed to it” (Cobb 1965, 283). In his more recent (1982) *Beyond Dialogue: Toward a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism*, he delimits certain aspects of Buddhism, playing them off (not “comparing”) against what seem, spontaneously, to be similar aspects of Christianity, all the time allowing for the “surprise” of incommensurability—i.e., of the limits to which correspondence can be postulated. Indeed, with respect the Buddhist *nirvana* and the biblical God, as well as in their conceptions of time, these two faiths diverge significantly. But what are we to make of this? What is one to do, when one reaches the limits of language, and of logical, rational comprehension? Must one, as Wittgenstein might say, “thereof be silent”?

In the Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas* Jesus exhorts us, rather cryptically, to “become passers-by.”⁴ Cobb picks up on the motif of “passing over” and “coming back” as developed by John S. Dunne.⁵ *Passing over* requires at least two related modes of being, or *attunements*, towards the other: the first positive, the second negative. In the positive sense, *passing over* is used by Dunne to connote a “technique... based on the process of eliciting images from one’s feelings, attaining insights into the images, and then turning insight into a guide of life” (Dunne ix). A matter of sympathy, or in its weightiest sense—*care*—passing over is a dialogic activity, or at least an interpersonal one: as well as becoming receptive to one’s own “images,” it involves becoming “receptive to the images which give expression to [the] feelings [of the other], attain[ing] insight into those images, and then coming back enriched by this insight” (ix). For the negative corollary to this point, it is useful to turn to the work of Nietzsche. *Passing over*, in this second sense, is what the parable of the Good Samaritan is all about, and is also evoked in the self-proclaimed Anti-Christ’s concept of the “innocence of becoming” which imbues the “noble man” with the ability to forget: not merely to *forgive* one’s hurts and humiliations, one’s impotencies, but what is more to *forget* them, to be able to pass over the past and welcome the rushes of the present. Thus one must forget, must *pass over* the past, as personified in the visage of the stranger, enemy, or other, in order to care

for her as a human being; i.e., a mortal and potentially suffering being, like oneself, at the same time as one *passes over* by exposing oneself to the ways” of the other, her values and beliefs; i.e., her implicit metaphysics, logic, and ontology.

In short, Cobb follows H. Richard Niebuhr, when the latter says: “metaphysics, and doubtless logic and epistemology, are as historical as ethics” (Niebuhr 1960, 12). The metaphysical ground of our thought cannot be held any more sacred than the theological, ritual, and historical aspects of our particular way. In certain respects, Cobb is grappling with some of the fundamental dilemmas of diversity, or problems of pluralism. He attempts to steer a fine course between absolutist (in this case, exclusivist Christian) theology and what might be called (to use Nietzschean terms) weak relativism, which only accepts diversity so long as there are no feelings hurt. The first tack is simply impossible in our heterogeneous and shrinking world; the second, which Cobb fears as an outcome of a “universal theology of religions” makes the mistake of going too far in seeing “common ground,” especially in terms of metaphysical and epistemological presuppositions. The problem I raise here is this: If the deepest roots of our thinking and ways of knowing are culturally embedded, how can we hope to communicate at all? Is not some amount of translation across ways not only admissible but even necessary?

Cobb’s anti-foundational historicism is provocative, in terms of its theological ramifications, but here we might look to a similar movement within philosophy, one which can deepen the claims made by Cobb while providing a challenge to theology and philosophy of religion. In a later article entitled a “Challenge to American Theology and Philosophy,” Cobb calls for intellectuals in North America to engagement in the problems of the real world, but with the caveat that such means nothing (is “platitudinous”) without a simultaneous investigation of what we mean when we speak of “the real world.” I will turn now to the work of one American thinker who has been attempting to clarify similar questions for several decades, standing on the shoulders of a fruitful home grown American way of thought: the recently late “neo-pragmatist” anti-philosopher Richard Rorty.

Rorty’s Challenge

In his provocative *Irony, Contingency, and Solidarity* (1989) Richard Rorty eschews, like Cobb, the Western penchant for universalization: the Occidental obsession with bringing disparate together under one encompassing rubric; for demanding “correspondence” as an essential element of truth-claims. Instead, Rorty preserves this essential tension in terms of what he calls the division in modern Western thinking between (private) ironism and (public) liberalism. A thoroughgoing anti-foundationalist, he sees in past metaphysics and theology “attempts to unite a striving for perfection with a sense of community [that] require us to acknowledge a common human nature. They ask us to believe that what is most important to each of us is what we have in common with others—that the springs of private fulfillment and of human solidarity are the same” (Rorty 1989, xiii). This is erroneous, he argues; these two realms, and their respective spokespeople, should, *must* in fact, be kept “separate but equal.”

In one sense, Rorty’s ironist is a fideist who refuses to take the Kierkegaardian leap of faith; she is the sort of person who “faces up to the contingency of her own most central

beliefs and desires, someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance” (Rorty 1989, xv). Rejecting theological as well as scientific or metaphysical certainties, Rorty’s ironist hopes to create solidarity by increasing our (individual and collective) sensitivity to the particular and very specific details of the pain and humiliation of others, best revealed in the narrative of a story, in the literature made by the “strong poets” of our tradition. In the absence of a single meta-vocabulary, we must settle instead for narratives that connect the present with the past, on the one hand, and with utopian futures, on the other. Most importantly, the quest for utopia is and must regard itself as an endless process: “an endless, proliferating realization of Freedom rather than a convergence toward an already existing Truth” (Rorty 1989, xvi). Though, says Rorty, we must not go so far as Nietzsche, who, in his “inverted Platonism,” suggested that a life of self-creation can be complete and autonomous, we *can* think of any human life as the always incomplete, and in this sense somewhat comic, quixotic, yet sometimes tragic and heroic, reweaving of a web in which we are continually connecting and confronting other worlds.

Yet Rorty’s neo-pragmatist vision, of an ideal “liberal ironist” community, is one that is “secular through and through”; one “in which no trace of divinity remain[s]—either in the form of a divinized world or a divinized self.”⁶ He thinks it imperative that the notion of God should go the way of Truth: the process of “de-divinization” would culminate in “our no longer being able to see any use for the notion that finite, mortal, contingently existing human beings might derive the meaning of their lives from anything except other finite, mortal, contingently existing human beings” (65). Here Rorty makes a clear rejection of William James in favor of John Dewey as pragmatist muse.⁷ Yet this steadfast reliance on Deweyan secularism fails to acknowledge not only the prevalence but also the power latent in holiness and conceptions of transcendence or what might be called the faith impulse. Like many thinkers of today, Rorty is only able to see religion as an (institutionalized) crutch that enlightened men and women can finally discard and begin to live by their own authority. But religion, whatever it may be, is surely more than just an outdated source of authority.⁸

Rorty’s definition of “what is most important” gives rather short shrift to the “sacred,” or “ultimate ground” of so many people in the world. This is a challenge, I think, to other writers, who see in his position a problem which resounds across academic disciplines and lived lives: that without firm “foundations,” the edifice of human solidarity *need not* crumble in a heap of solipsistic narcissism; that “pluralism” *need not* become “relativism” and (thus?) nihilism. But religious thinkers, for all they may sympathize with Rorty’s program, will have difficulty accepting his radical apartheid of private ironism and public liberalism: religion cannot be confined to one or the other “realm” and hope to survive in any meaningful form. As one of Rorty’s own heroes once proclaimed: “No longer joy in certainty but in uncertainty; no longer ‘cause and effect’ but the continually creative... no longer the humble expression ‘everything is merely subjective’, but ‘it is also *our* work – let us be proud of it!’”⁹ By refusing to enter the sacred realms, or even acknowledge the mystery of faith, Rorty misses a potential mine for alternative ways of thinking and relating and acting vis-à-vis the

other—of treating difference. A “postreligious” culture we may indeed have here in the West, but a culture in which many lay claim to the faith impulse, and whose lives are not bereft of an “ultimate reality”—though one that is not necessarily the ground of traditional metaphysics and classical theism.

Collage, Liminal, Metalanguage

As I have said, however, we cannot afford to dismiss Rorty’s insights, particularly his emphasis on the necessity of *bricolage*, which he shares with Jeffrey Stout (*Ethics After Babel*) and Cornel West (*The American Evasion of Philosophy*), and which was a trope as well for Reinhold Niebuhr, all “pragmatists” who maintain the Jamesian interest in religion and religious experience. Bricolage may serve as a postmodern motto, but it has roots in the modernist collage. This is the aesthetic technique, discovered by Picasso, which involves the incorporation of extraneous matter on the picture surface. The intellectual and aesthetic implications of collage can be deeply disturbing, and reflect the modernist painter’s obsession with the *tableau-objet*: the concept of a painting as a built up, constructed object or entity with a separate life of its own, “not echoing or imitating the external world but re-creating it in an independent way” (Stangos 1994, 63). Picasso sought more than a *trompe l’oeil*, he sought a *trompe l’esprit*:

If a piece of newspaper can become a bottle, that gives us something to think about in connection with both newspapers and bottles, too. The displaced object has entered a universe for which it was not made and where it retains, in a measure, its strangeness. And this strangeness was what we wanted to make people think about because we were quite aware that our world was becoming very strange and not exactly reassuring. (Picasso, quoted in Stangos 1994, 63)

In short, *collage* and *bricolage* reveal a turn away from an “analytical” to a “synthetic” mood. Rather than beginning with a naturalistic image, “out there,” and fragmenting and analysing it; now the artist or *bricoleur* begins with an abstraction and works towards representation: “abstract, non-representational shapes or forms can be made to assume a representational role by their symbolic arrangement or their synthetic placement in relationship to each other” (Stangos 1994, 67). These laud not the determinacy of Being, but the indeterminacy and fragmentation of beings-in-the-world. Similarly, we can invoke Victor Turner’s “liminality,” the condition of “betwixt and between” when normal constraints are released, making possible not only the deconstruction of the constructions of common-sense but also the reconstruction, or reconstitution, of shattered “cultural units” in new, novel, and even “monstrous” ways (Turner 1985, 160). In liminality, “manifest” purposes of tradition are supplemented by “latent” capacities in the “meeting”—to elicit creative and innovative responses. In this we have stepped beyond metalanguage in the sense of a single, univocal source, ground, and criteria of compatibility-relation. Now facile assumptions of similarity must be passed over in favour of a deeper experience of not only other acts and deeds (i.e., ritual, ethics) and speech (i.e., creeds, dogma), but also, critically, of other logics and ontologies.

ETYMOLOGICAL EXCURSUS

Indo-European base *prak-*, from whence the Greek:

pragma (*prágrma*) – deed, affair; act; thing of consequence, importance, concern

praktos (*praktós*) – things to be done, i.e. matters of moral action

pragmatas (*pragmatas*) – agent or official of a religious guild

pragmateia (*pragmateía*) – poet

pragmatikos (*pragmatikós*) – skilled in affairs

from whence Latin **pragmaticus**

& English *pragmatic, praxis, practice (n), practise (v)*

Orexis: Pragmatism

pragmatism – *n.* the attitude of looking away from first things, principles, “categories,” supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts (William James); a philosophy that evaluates assertions solely by their practical consequences and bearing on human interest (*Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, 8th ed.)

Victor Turner, theorist of liminality in socio-cultural transformation, cites the father of hermeneutics, Wilhelm Dilthey, as a precursor and muse. Dilthey posits a Heraclitean vision of experience (*Erlebnis*: “living through”) as a dynamic flux of three strands, the first (working downwards from the surface) being a more or less coherent system of ends, ideals, and principles of conduct, “which are the point of contact between the Weltanschauung and praxis” (Turner 1985, 191): the sociocultural interaction which shapes the individual and the society-at-large. This is the level of *orexis* – of desire, will, and the liberal hope of Rorty; i.e., the “connative” aspect of experience. It is here that we begin our investigation of the levels of *pragma*, with the most obvious manifestation of such in the American school of thought known as “pragmatism.”

“Pragmatism” is a term with as many meanings as “postmodernism.”¹⁰ Like post-modernism, as well, pragmatism attracts and repels equal numbers, but its hold on American thought, though diminished since Dewey’s day, is lasting and deep, and has, with Rorty, experienced a rebirth of sorts of late. Charles Morris, a third-generation pragmatist, paraphrases Wallace Stevens in summing up the pragmatic vision of philosophy as “the voice of its occasion” (Morris 1970, 3). Less cryptically, one could cite John Dewey:

The work of philosophy [is] the old and ever new undertaking of adjusting that body of valuations which constitute the actual mind of man to scientific tendencies and political aspirations which are novel and incompatible with received authorities. Philosophers are parts of history, caught up in its movement; *creators* perhaps in some measure of its future, but also assuredly *creatures* of its past. (Quoted in Morris 1970, 3, my emphasis)

Pragmatism demands much from philosophy, which is to be dedicated to the concerns of human existence, and which is meant to be not a “theory” [*theoria*] about existence but rather a “technic” [*tekhne*] in order to clarify how we speak of and understand, and how we thus relate to ourselves, others, and to the world at large. In this way the pragmatic tradition anticipated by a century and a bit the “challenge” of John Cobb.

Charles Morris stresses the differentiation principle critical to pragmatism—i.e., the distinction that must be made between what *is* and what *is not* “problematic.” For “every problem is specific and occurs in a situation many features of which present no problem, and which as unproblematic are taken for granted in attempts to solve the problem” (Morris 1970, 3). Pragmatism does not throw out the past; as Dewey insists, we are assuredly *creatures* as well as *creators*. What must be uncovered however, and what pragmatism has at times overlooked, is to what extent we are each. For “[i]t is a matter of *apaideusis* not to distinguish between that which requires demonstration of proof and that which does not” (Steiner 1989b, 231; Aristotle’s *apaideusis* here implies “want of schooling,” an “indecentcy of spirit and understanding,” or simply “bad taste”). One pitfall of pragmatism is the scientific bias that has informed it from the beginning (the legacy of Peirce); another is the opposite problem, that of grounding anti-foundationalist claims without resorting to science or reason (the legacy of James).

At any rate, William James stretched [*orexis* = “to stretch”] Peirce’s “pragmatism” by opening it up to literature, as well as religion and theological concerns.¹¹ James developed a “synthetic” style of pragmatist determination, one example of this being his *law of dissociation*, whereby the occurrence of a particular *a*, in a novel combination *ax*, favors the discrimination of all the particularities in a previously undistinguishable totality. “One might call this the law of dissociation by varying concomitants” (from *Principles of Psychology*, 1890, quoted in Turner 1985, 161). What results from such activity—akin to Husserl’s phenomenological technique of “perspectival variation”—are Turner’s “liminal monsters,” compounds from various *discriminata*, each originally an element in the common-sense construction of social reality. These have a two-fold pedagogical function: revealing the building blocks of the world that were hitherto taken for granted, while at the same time illumining freedom—“the indeterminacy underlying all culturally constructed worlds, the free play of mankind’s cognitive and imaginative capacities” (Turner 1985, 161) In this way James encourages *synthesis* as well as *analysis*, in a form of pragmatism where the fabrications of liminality are free from the “pragmatics” of the common-sense world, yet are not by this reason ineffective.

It is clear that in the pragmatism of James (or Emerson) what is *practical* or of *ultimate concern* cannot be equivalent to what is logically, empirically, or even rationally *verifiable* in terms of use or value. For “indifference to the theological and the metaphysical, to the question of whether or not the confines of the pragmatic and of the logically and experimentally falsifiable are or are not those of human existentiality,” would be, at best, a great lacuna, at worst, the death of creation (Steiner 1989b, 231). Cobb and others make it clear that, while pragmatism is a deeply American method of inquiry, it can by no means be simply an apology for Americanism, for hard headed “practicality” over “theory” (though sometimes it has been interpreted as such). More important than the caricatured pragmatism of right ends or mere volition is the *technic* of clarification through dissociation and discrimination, a turn that is, as well shall see, primarily linguistic. But if a true pragmatism is one that is open to transcendence and the sacred, what does this presage in terms of inter-religious dialogue, and language that is

directed to both the other and the Wholly Other—i.e., to an interlocutor of another tradition and to the focus and source of one's own tradition, simultaneously? In order to pass beyond the realm of *orexis*, where what is meant by philosophy is stretched and expanded towards human solidarity, but is still restricted by whim, we must delve into the depths of *lexis*, where beings are beings-in-relation, and beings-in-conversation.

Lexis – “pragmatics”

pragmatics – n. the science of the relation of signs to their interpreters (Charles Morris); the branch of linguistics dealing with language in use (*Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, 8th ed.)

The particular truth theory of pragmatism need not detain us here. Cobb is looking for something other than this; he lauds the “pragmatic temper.” But in order to understand this temper, it will be useful to dig deeper into Dilthey's *Erlebnis*, to the set of judgments expressing the relation of the adherents to their world and the meaning [*Bedeutung*] found therein. *Pragma* goes deeper than mere action, into the act of language and the language of acting—to *semiotics*. With George Herbert Mead and Charles Morris, we move beyond the *orexis* of pragmatism to the *lexis* of pragmatics, and come closer to the real “temper” of pragmatism, which is, after all, a grand attempt to “make our ideas clear” (James).¹²

Pragmatist cosmology, like that of phenomenology and most forms of *Lebensphilosophie* is from the beginning anti-Cartesian.¹³ Experience is not something merely “mental,” cut off from the cosmos; experience is most often *common* experience, i.e., interactive and functional; beings are, first and foremost, *beings-in-relation*.¹⁴ Mead's greatest contribution to the theory of signs was precisely this emphasis on the behavioral aspect of the linguistic symbol—i.e., the recognition of the dynamic between mind, language, self, and society. A one-time student of James, Mead broke with his teacher's Emersonian individualism, and brought pragmatism into relationality and social context. “Meaning arises and lies within the field of the relation between the gesture of a given human organism and the subsequent behavior of this organism as indicated to another human organism by that gesture.... Meaning is given or stated in terms of response” (Morris 1970, 35).

In short, Mead's social psychology reveals the way human beings, through communication, are able to take into themselves the social act in which they are involved, and which cannot be understood except in relation to the whole. Identities or “universals” are here “the common elements found within a perspective or between various perspectives” (Mead 1938, iii). For Morris, “These common elements are manifested when an individual is able to carry out a purposive act or when several individuals are able to assume the role of each member of the group and thereby to unite in concerted action, resulting in a common goal” (Mead 1938, iii, n.61). In general, it is fair to say that with Mead, universality is not “out there” as in Platonism, nor is it a mere “word” as in certain forms of nominalism, but in what might be called a “responsive conceptualism,” is rather a property of common responses or of objects answering to common responses. Action only takes place within a communicative process; and communica-

tion necessitates reflection by each organism upon the response of the other to his/her/its own ongoing series of gestures and attempts to communicate. Thus do we have the emergence of *significant symbols*. The significant symbol is “the gesture, the sign, the word which is addressed to the self when it is addressed to another individual, and is addressed to another, in form to all other individuals, when it is addressed to the self” (Mead 1964, xxviii). Real “thinking” can emerge only through reflection upon this process.

Charles Morris, Mead's protégé, quite early found his calling in the pragmatist family. He was, in *Foundations of the Theory of Signs* (1938), *Signs, Language and Behavior* (1946), and *Signification and Significance* (1964) to “organize and extend the contributions to semiotic by the various pragmatist philosophers” (Morris 1970, 47, n.39). Morris explicates, in a clear and simple manner, a theory of semiotics, developed in response to Mead's work. He suggests three levels: the *syntactic*, dealing with words in their relation to other words; the *semantic*, dealing with the relation of the word to “extralinguistic reality”; and last but certainly not least, the *pragmatic*, dealing with words in their median (and Meadian) relation to the language user. It is this last to which Morris focuses his attention, arguing not for the abandonment of syntactics and semantics, but rather for a recognition of the “meaning” of the *pragmatic* level of interpretation. At this level, semantic concepts of “truth” and “knowledge” play little role; instead Morris suggests the applicability of terms such as “interpreter,” “interpretant,” “taking-account-of” and “understanding.”

Pragmatics does not, indeed cannot forsake the other two levels, however; it, too, has its “pure and descriptive” aspects: “the first arises out of the attempt to develop a language in which to talk about the pragmatism dimension of semiosis; the latter is concerned with the application of this language to specific uses” (Morris 1938, 30). Morris connects pragmatics with the historically developed theory of *rhetoric*, but admits that, while traditional rhetoric allowed in some ways the recognition of the performative aspects of words and phrases, it was ultimately a restricted form of this relatively neglected sense of language use and meaning. With the pragmatic orientation, new horizons of meaning and interpretation are opened: “The relation of the sign vehicle to its designatum is the actual taking-account in the conduct of the interpreter of a class of things in virtue of the response to the sign vehicle, and what are so taken account of are designata” (Morris 1938, 32). Morris warns of the possible “perversions” of pragmatics (and pragmatism), in attempts to claim *only* the pragmatic dimension to the neglect of the others, thus justifying “truth” (a semantical concept) as “what works... for me!” Semiotics, he insists, is more than a sum of its parts, it is in fact concerned with the inter-relation of the three levels of meaning, which form a mutually irreducible tri-unity. In short, “Semiotic provides a basis for *understanding* the main forms of human activity and their interrelationship, since all those activities and relations are reflected in the signs which *mediate the activities*” (Morris 1938, 58, my emphasis).

In 1942, Morris tried his own hand at a theory of “universal religion” in his so-called “positive existentialist”¹⁵ *Paths of Life*, elaborating further on the central trope of this work—i.e., “detached-attachment”—six years later in *The Open Self*. Though one can certainly question the seven-fold typology put forth by Morris in *Paths*,¹⁶ his is an interesting attempt to

explore the image of “a dynamic integration of diversity—the ideal of persons able to encompass jointly the multiform facets of human nature which the historic, religious and ethical traditions have cultivated separately” (1956, viii). Cobb would rightly be wary of the universalistic tone—e.g., the author presents us with a meta-Way called *Maitreyism*¹⁷—of this tome, but Morris’s *imaginative experimentation*, “humanistic in tone, direction, and purpose” (viii), delineates the potential of *pragmatics* in religious and theological thinking.

Nexus – “*pragmata*”

pragmata – that which one has to do with in one’s concerned dealings (Martin Heidegger); that which one talks about [*to peri ou a logos*] (Pierre Legendre)¹⁸

We are led past the work of Morris and Mead, however, towards Dilthey’s deepest level: the level of the *Weltbild*, and thus to *pragmata*, the “object(s)” of *pragma*. Martin Heidegger, like no other, concentrated his thought on what “is” the “real world,” or rather, what it is that we mean when we speak and think of “isness”—“things” and “Being”—as well as “thinking” itself. *Philosophia* is for Heidegger an astonishment that manifests a particular attunement, a receptive audition to the Being of being(s). Contra Descartes, “man” is not a predatory “knower” or “user” but is “only a privileged listener and responder to existence” (Steiner 1989a, 32). My purpose in this section is to delimit the Heideggerian sense of *pragmata* in terms of this notion of philosophy, as “meeting” and “concern,” in order to reflect upon the ramifications of this level of *pragma* for *pragmatics* and *pragmatism*, and for inter-religious transformation as per John Cobb.

In the first sense given above, *pragmata* denotes “that which one has to do with in one’s concerned dealings.” This requires some unpacking, in order to get beyond the spontaneous understanding of such as a mere tautology. Heidegger’s word for *pragmata* is *Zeug*—“equipment,” “instrumentation,” or “*outillage*”—the principal German derivative being *Werkzeug* (“tool”). Though the *world* comes toward us as “things,” it is not just any “object-entities” that constitute the being-in-the-world of *Dasein*: it is *pragmata*. This differentiation—between “anything at all” and *pragmata*/*Zeug*—is crucial to Heidegger’s *Weltbild*. While the “scientist,” stuck in Cartesianism, sets out and confronts objects “out there,” in what Heidegger calls a relation of “presentness-at-hand” [*Vorhandenheit*], “thinkers” and “poets” [*der Denker und der Dichter*] “meet” things differently, in a different light, with a different existential disposition: in a relationship of “readiness-to-hand” [*Zuhandenheit*]. That which is *Zuhanden* “reveals” itself to *Dasein*, in ways absolutely constitutive of the “thereness” into which existence has been “thrown” and in which it must “accomplish its being” (Steiner 1989a, 89).

In his later work, after the *Kehre* away from the focus on “man’s” place as the privileged locus for the *unconcealment* of truth [*aletheia*] in *Sein und Zeit*, and towards a more esoteric and anti-anthropocentric (and perhaps anti-humanistic) vision of “man” dwelling within the house of language, where the *irradiant concealment* [*lichtend-verbergende*] of Being takes priority, Heidegger speaks of a *reconciliation* with the world of Being, which comes about from the task of “new thinking.” The centrality of poetry and art, and language more generally becomes crucial, as art is a “thinking that memorializes and

responds” to the call of language (Heidegger 1971, x). As such, a new authentic way of existing is envisaged “as mortal to other mortals, to earth and sky, to the divinities present and absent”; it means “to let each of these be [...] and to hold oneself open to its being, recognizing it and responding to it appropriately in one’s own being, the way in which one oneself goes on, lives” (1971, x). Neither of the two historical legacies of Western thought, the idealist-metaphysical (of Plato) nor the scientific-technological (of Aristotle) satisfies the original, authentic condition and task of thought, which is to experience, to “think through the nature of existence,” the “Beingness of being” (Steiner 1989a, 28). To maintain a pretence of scientific distance and analytical objectivity is to remain within the circle which perpetuates the modern world’s “forgetting of being” that has made unavoidable “the alienated, unhoused, recurrently barbaric estate of modern technological and mass-consumption man” (Steiner 1989a, 28). In short, thinkers must answer to the questions of being—through dialogue.

Despite the size of his graphic *corpus*, Heidegger’s *oeuvre* bespeaks a certain orality. “The true thinker,” he asserts, “the authentic pedagogue above all, relies on face-to-face speech, on the uniquely focused dynamics of direct address, as these knit question to answer, and living voice to living reception” (Steiner 1989a, xiv). This has obvious implications for transformative encounter, being a dialogue of a different sort from normal discourse or mere “conversation.” *Gespräch* deals not with the “said” but with the “unsaid”; it involves *Ent-sprechen*—not “an answer to” but a “response to” or a “correspondence with”—in short, a dynamic reciprocity. *Entsprechung* is, in fact “participatory engagement,” and as such is the only proper way to *answer* to the being of Beings. Engaging in real dialogue involves a “leap” or “spring” into the source of language (cf. Pascal, Kierkegaard), for there is no bridge linking presentational and meditative thinking (Richardson 1963, 611). The commonality in dialogue is not a foundationally shared essence, a set of established rules, but the radical astonishment [*Thaumazein*] of the fact of existence, which gives precision to “thought” as well as “responsibility” (Steiner 1989a, 31).

Instead of a transcendental subject who in knowing or acting confronts the objective world as the totality of existing states of affairs, “the acts of knowing and doing performed in the objectifying attitude can now be conceived as derivatives from basic modes of standing within a life-world, within a world intuitively understood as context and background” (Habermas 1987, 148). These modes of being in the life-world are characterized by Heidegger as so many modes of *caring*, in the sense of having concern for something, i.e., for *pragmata*. *Having concern* for the phenomena one studies (or questions) seems like a rather vague or banal precept, but it remains, in a sense, the essence of Heidegger’s later work.¹⁹ *Care* is the existential mode in and through which being grasps its necessary location and implication in the world. As George Steiner puts it, to be-in-the-world is to be *besorgt* (care-ful); it is *Sorge* that makes human life meaningful (1989a, 101). Martin Buber suggests that Heidegger sought, in the unfolding of the new ontological thought, a turning point in which the divine or the holy would appear in “new and unanticipated forms” (1957, 71). Heidegger repeatedly denied that his work was theological, proclaiming that it “decides neither positively nor negatively about the possibility of God’s

existing” (71); yet he certainly imbued his new thinking with overtones that can be considered religious, even if only in the wider Tillichian definition of such. The quest for revealed Being, whether such is God or something else, is not only a possibility but a *necessity*.

But what does all this imply? Perhaps, as Maurice Boutin has argued, it is precisely *pragmata* that, being “what we are concerned with,” “what we talk about,” and yet being “nothing in particular,” perpetuate plurivocity. Being “pluralistic in structure... [t]hey provide language with the possibility of enjoying both indeterminacy and determination” (Boutin 1994, 8). The pragmatic level of semiosis must always reflect back upon the semantic, and vice versa, language can only function in the flux between a *grounding* determinacy and a *propelling* indeterminacy, and between self and Other, in *communitas*—“the law of wholeness arising out of relations between totalities” (Turner 1985, 190)—resting on Buber’s “I-Thou” and “essential We.” Meeting with others is “an essential, integral element in the reciprocal relations of being and of world” (Steiner 1989a, 90). “The other is encountered in his *Dasein* with and in the world” (91). In short, being-in-the-world is always a “being-with”—*to understand the presentness of other is to exist*.²⁰ It seems that it is at the level of Heideggerian *pragmata* that the three levels of (Diltheyan) *Erlebnis* converge: One *is* by virtue of one’s interrelations with others, through communication and performance; through one’s “concernful dealings” *with* and *in* the world.²¹ Perhaps the most useful way of thinking about inter-religious dialogue in the fullest sense of the root *pragma*, about “what is called thinking” in a pluralistic age, is in terms of a revelatory art, which stands somewhere between pure creation and disinterested objectivity—a *tekhne* that is reconciled with both *poiesis*, and *theoria*.²²

Subjunctivity [“as if”]

Now that we have reached the bottom of these levels, we must work our way back up, so as not to lose the value of all the levels of *pragma*. I mentioned at the outset the work of Joseph C. McLelland, and it is his “modalism” and “modal logic” which set the stage for an important aspect of reconstructive postmodern theological thinking. “[W]hile the *assertoric* or *simple categorical* proposition simply *asserts* (or *denies*) the predicate of the subjective...the modal proposition not only asserts (or denies) the predicate of the subject, but also states the *manner* or *mode* in which the predicate is identified with the subject or denied to the subject” (McCall 1952, 182). In short: a modal proposition states not simply the *that*, but the *how* of a proposition. In *The Logic of Perfection*, Charles Hartshorne offers a neoclassical alternative to classical metaphysics. Whereas the classical model involves “a metaphysics of being, substance, absoluteness, and necessity as primary conceptions,” the neoclassical model is *modal*, stressing, in a Nietzschean phrase, “the metaphysics of creative becoming, event, relativity, and possibility” (Hartshorne ix-xiii). This reflects McLelland’s comment that the modal acknowledges Bertrand Russell’s remark that the mono-model—i.e., the universalist, Platonic–Aristotelian / Augustinian–Thomistic / Cartesian–Baconian model—has “paid too much attention to substantives and adjectives and too little to verbs and propositions, thus concentrating on the logic of *qualities* to the neglect of the logic of *relations*” (McLelland 5). Modal logic, against the Cartesian system, is a

logic not of *therefore* but rather of *if* (McLelland 1995, 3)—it is the logic of possibility, of conditionality, and of contingency.

We might with some justification call this a *subjunctive* turn in pluralist thinking, a move implicit in the *bricolage* of Rorty and John Cobb. The subjunctive designates:

a verb form or set of forms used in English to express a contingent or hypothetical action. A contingent action is one that may occur but that is not likely or intended. Subjunctivity is possibility. It refers to what might or might not be. It is also concerned with supposition, conjecture, and assumption, with the domain of ‘as-if’ rather than ‘as-is’. (Turner 1985, 264–65)

“As-is,” the indicative mood, refers to the world of what a particular culture recognizes as factuality, the world of cause and effect, where the denoted act or condition is recognized as an “objective fact” (265).

Crucial to the subjunctive turn is the high status given to performance, to the *theatre* of *theory*.²³ Whereas Noam Chomsky’s (Gnostic?) distinction between “competance” and “performance” seems to prioritize the former to the denigration of the latter (as a faded derivative or fallen state), Victor Turner sees, in the wake of Dilthey and Heidegger, a reversal of Plato’s banishment of the artists from the Eternal City. “[P]erformance, whether as speech behavior, the presentation of self in everyday life, stage... or social drama” is the “center of observation and hermeneutical attention” (Turner 1985, 182). This reflects, I think, Cobb’s insistence that the World Council of Churches has erred in “resisting dealing with religious traditions as such, and with people as representatives of these religious communities” (Cobb 1982, 39). In doing so they have privileged, with Plato and Western thinking, the *critic*, the theologian, the philosopher, over the *actor*, the “ordinary” believer and social actor.

Subjunctive thinking tends to be as *connative* as *cognitive*, expressing desire, hypothesis, supposition, and possibility; suggesting “it *might* or *may* or *could* or *can* be so”; providing the “as-if” as adjunct to the denuded copula “(as) is.” The subjunctive cannot get bogged down in Utopian wish fulfillment, however, it must colligate past, present, and future. For Heidegger, the Thinker retrieves, in her “leap” into language, the “tri-dimensionality” of time: mediating what-is-as-having-been (past), thought lets the un-said Origin come (future) and brings it into words (present). This is the hermeneutical circle which is meant not to be broken, but to be entered into more profoundly—in order to discern more clearly the nature of what is presupposed (Richardson 1962, 612). In a similar vein, Charles Morris cites the Meadian concept of “objective relativism” (akin to his own “attached-detachment” as well as to James’ “law of disassociation,” Turner’s “liminars,” and Cobb’s “mutual transformation” based on “passing over”), where, within the new world created by the interaction of *a* and *b*—which now includes *a-before-ab*, *b-before-ab*, *a-as-part-of-ab*, *b-as-part-of-ab*, and *ab*—the inextricable links of the web of multiversity (James) make a functional universe. “In the active process of making crucial space between one another by highlighting... differences [both elements] are caught up in shared [if tangled] webs of signification spun in dialogical encounter” (Taylor 1986, 423).

Yet all of this subjunctive creation and liminal free play, released by the upsetting of the Platonic jug that we have dutifully carried on our heads for more than two thousand years; all of this Dionysian revelry must be contained, Apollonized, with the caveat of Morris and Mead: that *homo performans* is necessarily *reflexive*, in the sense of revealing, through “pragmatics,” not only himself to others, and others to himself, but also (and perhaps, most critically) himself to himself.²⁴ Though *Alter* may not alter *Ego* much, “Alter tells Ego what both are!” (Turner 1985, 187). “Concern” requires more than mere “attention” to the Other; the solicitude of *pragmata* requires the reflexivity of *pragmatics*, as well as the subjunctivity of *pragmatism*.

Reflexivity [“if...then”]

Thus, we must go beyond a mere “as if” to an “as if” that apprehends “if...then”, prompted by the “pragmatic” mode of interpretation. I have relied heavily upon Heidegger much in this exposition, in alluding to the *nexus* of *pragmata* in *pragmata* and the trope of *care* [*Sorge*], but any serious appropriation of Heidegger must come to terms with both the man and the philosophy, whatever their relation. One cannot so easily bypass the infamous Case—*der Fall des Heideggers*—as one can, say, the ravings of Frau Förster-Nietzsche or the questionable politics of D. H. Lawrence and Ezra Pound, for Heidegger’s involvement with Nazism implicates his thought and its application at seemingly greater levels. I will not dwell upon this here, but bring it up for several reasons: one, it seems to reflect in an all-too-vivid fashion a real lack of self-critical candour, and even a lack of basic “humanity,” on the part of one of the greatest minds of our century, thus revealing that even a “thinking” with seemingly liberatory implications needs a certain amount of pragmatic reflexion and critical awareness; second, it is interesting that, while Richard Rorty agrees wholeheartedly with what I have just suggested, he seems little bothered by these facts, lauding Heidegger as an “edifying thinker” while lamenting his personal incapacities. Thus Rorty (rather flippantly) absolves “Heidegger” the philosophy, from “Heidegger” the rather petty and cruel man, invoking his solid fence between private self-expression and public activity.

This is, I think, a rather facile and unconvincing treatment of *der Fall des Heideggers*, and even a dangerous one.²⁵ The connections between Heideggerian thought and Nazism cannot so easily be waved aside (and have been explored with great circumspection by George Steiner). Heidegger himself seems to have transformed his own agenda after the War, chastened perhaps (we can only surmise given his abstention from personal disclosure) by his complicity with the greatest “forgetting of being” the modern world has yet seen.²⁶ There may, after all, be something in his persistent denial of, not only “theology,” but also of “ethics.” Whatever the case, in his inability to “think Auschwitz,” Heideggerian anti-humanism crippled Heidegger-the-man’s humanity.²⁷ Maurice Boutin suggests that “[e]ven when language is taken as subject matter... it cannot escape history” (1994, 8); and Victor Turner: “Texts not only animate and are animated by contexts but are processurally inescapable from them” (Turner 1985, 152). Heidegger, both the man and his thought, cannot escape history.

This reveals a serious problem with the Rortyan project. His public imperative of lessening cruelty does not necessarily

fall without a metaphysical foundation (other than its being a central part of the final vocabulary of our shared narrative story as “liberals”), but it *does* seem to unravel if it cannot, or refuses to, go deeper than the public realm, and into the hearts of men, into the private realm of hopes, dreams, and self-creation; if it does not seep beyond the *orexis* of what is (publicly) desired to the *nexus* of what is (privately) required, whether in terms that are humanist, Christian, or otherwise. “For our species ‘meaning’ is intertwined with intersubjectivity, how we know, feel, and desire one another” (Turner 1985, 206). Turner writes of the dialectical tension between public and private, out of which are born religious leaders (and Rorty’s “strong poets”?), from the colligation of the plural self-consciousness of human beings experiencing and thinking together and the singular self-consciousness of a master craftsman of cognitive reflexivity (103). For George Herbert Mead, the self is not the “me.” “Me-ness” is an object of reflection, while “I” is the reflective process, which ultimately shapes the responses of the “me.” Thinking is reflection, as much as it is meeting. Perhaps Rorty, as Heidegger before him, is not asking quite enough of his own thinking.

In short, subjunctivity, though an integral aspect of post-modern thinking (theological, philosophical, and anthropological) is not enough. “As if” must be stretched towards a rumination upon “if... then,” and combined with a willingness to experiment and project. There is a dialectic established here between *is* and *maybe*, but this cannot be a denial of heritage—of the *was*. All of these are required if one is to arrive at “home” in the “if... then,” which denotes and organizes the pluralities of the present. Thus reflexivity, in the search for meaning, in dialogical imagination, in performance, response and attunement, is raised above (mere) desire and (mere) words.

Neudenkweise

In principle what we learn from the East can complement our achievement [...but it is o]nly through deeper analysis [that] apparent contradictions can be converted into mutually enriching contrasts. (Cobb 1982, 67–68)

According to the Diltheyan Turner, social situations of liminality are *dramatic* in that participants, actors, those thrown into dialogic activity, not only *do*, they try to (and inadvertently) *show*—others, as well as themselves—what they are now doing, have already done, and perhaps will eventually do. (Turner 1985, 179) Here we see “theory” [*theoriá*] returning to its roots in “theatre.”²⁸ The only way to come to terms with other faith traditions, John Cobb argues, is in some ways to experience them in the Diltheyan/Dunnean sense of “living through” or “passing over.” Only thus do we acquire a wisdom that comes not from solitary abstract thinking, but rather from immediate participation through subjunctive and reflexive thinking and performance.

Where knowledge or theory are no longer relevant with respect to “unhiddenness” [*aletheia*], we must turn to belief, defined as “a holding in the true [*Sichhalten im Wahren*] and so a holding in the double sense of giving support [*einen Halt geben*] and preserving an attitude [*eine Haltung bewahren*]” (Grassi 1983, 8). Belief then is not to be thought of as a level of cognition, nor is it a mere *orexis*, pure subjective volition, but rather an attitude [*Haltung*] assumed when one does not

adhere to something that has been fixed, and so does not “dogmatically adhere to beings or look for final foundations among beings” (81). For Nietzsche, a thinker held in great regard (though criticized for his virulent subjectivism) by Heidegger, *to do is to be*; for Heidegger *to think is to be* (or rather, “thought lets Being be” [*das Denken lässt das Sein sein*]; but thinking involves, first and foremost, questioning—“For it is questioning that is the piety of thought” [*Denn das Fragen ist die Frömmigkeit der Denkens*] (Steiner 1989a, 55). The use of the term piety is significant; Heidegger does not allow himself (unlike many neo-Nietzscheans) to fall into “the slippery Nietzschean slope of the wholesale metaphorical construction of reality” (West 1989, 184), where truth is entirely interpretation. In fact, both Rorty and Jürgen Habermas have criticized Heidegger for exactly this holding onto truth, which leads to his failure to free himself (despite his claims) from the traditional granting of a distinctive status to theoretical activity, from the constitutive use of language, and from the validity claim of a propositional truth (Habermas 1987, 138). According to these critics, Heidegger also remains attached, even in a negative way, to the foundationalism of the philosophy of consciousness, and perhaps even to the dreaded deceit of doing onto-theology. Because he does not reject the hierarchical orderings of a philosophy bent on self-grounding, “he can only counter foundationalism by excavating a still more deeply laid, and henceforth unstable, ground” (Habermas 1987, 138).

But whereas with regards to his lack of self-candour and critical reflexivity, Rorty may be too kind to Heidegger (both the work and the man) in this regard he (and Habermas) may be misguided, convinced as Rorty is that the post-*Kehre* Heidegger is a degenerate mystic who, for whatever reasons, dropped the promising common-sense empiricism (or, in Rorty’s case, the pragmatism) of *Sein und Zeit* to pursue esoteric arcanities about man in the “house of language.” Rorty certainly can be, and has been, challenged on this point. John Caputo sees in Rorty’s emphasis on discourse the loss of both method and grounding in Being. While Rortyan hermeneutics “seeks only to recognize the plurality of discourse and is content to keep a civil conversation going,” for Heidegger the end of foundationalist philosophy, classical metaphysics (and theology) cannot be so easily gainsaid, posing as it does the “task of thinking” [*die Aufgabe des Denkens*], of “a meditative openness to a matter which has been progressively concealed yet...[is] present in the history of metaphysics” (Prado 1987, 100). Heidegger, after, and perhaps in response to the War, attempts to evoke our awareness of Being rather than to speak of Being; “the goal is more the realization of being in us than the intellectual comprehension of being” (Cobb 1982, 64). Is it not possible, one could ask of Rorty, to move from a sense of the contingency of vocabularies to a desire to substitute *something more final than vocabularies*? “Heidegger’s waiting for the Call of Being might have been more than simply waiting for another vocabulary, one more *methodos*” (Hall 1994, 163). But *poieisthai*, lest we forget, has a two-fold meaning: it is not only “to make something into,” but also “to hold something to be.” Perhaps Rorty’s commitment to Baconian self-expression blinds him to the ruminations of the later Heidegger, who enframes a technic that focuses his (timely) critique of technological self-expression—i.e., the legacy of Bacon, and a vein of criticism which Rorty’s own work cannot, or refuses

to, address.²⁹ Rorty makes no attempt to refute Weberian critics of the “disenchantment” of the world, but he fears any kind of re-mythologization, saying for the sake of pluralism, “it is hard to be both enchanted with one version of the world and tolerant of all others” (Quoted in Hall, 103).

Yet this is exactly what Cobb and other Christian pluralists try to sustain. One could reverse Rorty’s dictum: how can we be tolerant to others at all if we have no deep love and “enchantment” with ourselves, with our own roots and traditions? What would be the point? Why not just accept others wholesale, or not bother at all? Rorty himself is an unabashed “ethnocentric,” and he loves his “strong poets” and “utopian revolutionaries,” yet his fear of “re-enchantment,” like his fear of religion and metaphysics, does not allow the possibility of “myths” and “symbols” which are not “foundational” in anything like the traditional sense, yet which can nonetheless be powerful and evocative “enchanters,” propelling us not away but towards the enchantments of the Other. Mark Kline Taylor’s “liminal Christ” is an example of the mutual transformation envisioned by Cobb, where the *nexus* of Christian faith—Jesus Christ—opens us up to the other. In this *Neudenkweise*, “inter-theoretical” vagueness reigns (as opposed to “intra-theoretical vagueness,” where terms are stipulated *vis-à-vis* a single theoretical context). Here “the putatively same locution is provided alternative stipulations by appeal to two or more theories” (Hall 1994, 104).

Pragmatism and Pluralism

The connection I have drawn in this paper, between pluralistic thinking—philosophical, religious, cultural, aesthetic—and pragmatism, is not a random one by any means. Pragmatism and pluralism have always been deeply intertwined.³⁰ David Hall justifies Rorty’s claims to pragmatism by acknowledging his “implicit focus upon a problematic deeply embedded in the American experience: the fact and consequences of *plurality* in its psychological, social, and political forms” (Hall 1994, 66). From Jonathan Edwards through Ralph Waldo Emerson to the adopted American Whitehead and his disciples Northrop, Hartshorne and Cobb, each asked how, given the plurality and complexity of experience, order might be realized without excluding particularity at the ontological, epistemological, and practical levels. Furthermore, the call to “order” insistent on particulars pushed the pluralistic forms of pragmatism beyond the means of logic and rationality, embedding the tradition in a definite aesthetic or literary orientation, seen most strongly in Emerson and James. It was Charles Sanders Peirce, however, who made the connection between action and experience one of “entailment”; and James who fused Emerson and Peirce (to the latter’s chagrin) and opened up pragmatism to the *Varieties of Religious Experience*, religion being “a truth of orientation, serving not to define an end, but to determine a *direction*” (Quoted in Morris, 1970, 31). George Herbert Mead led pragmatism back from the volitional brink of James by insisting upon social process, and, with his pupil Morris, the function of signs and language within such. For Mead, the essence of the self is “reflexiveness”—its ability to take itself (its “me”) as an object from the standpoint of others.³¹

Yet for all this, “pragmatism” has been beset at times with “common-sense” scientism, and has flirted with anti-intellectualism while maintaining the enshrined separations (of

theology and philosophy, public and private) that hallmark Americanism. There are of course exceptions, even notable ones (e.g., James, Niebuhr, DuBois), but Steiner's question of "whether or not the confines of the pragmatic and of the logically and experimentally falsifiable are or are not those of human existentiality" (1989b, 231) remains. Indifference, not only to theology, religion, and "metaphysics," but also to *mystery*—the *mystagogia* of Rahner and the "felt strangeness" of Heidegger—is a serious lacuna in the pragmatic project, and cannot but stultify real thinking in a (like it or not) global, pluralistic age.

Richard Rorty's neopragmatism, while enriching the pluralist problematic of Peirce, James, Mead and Morris, through an expansion of the "we" of "we-consciousness" by way of detailed description of unfamiliar people and "redescription" of ourselves—the production, in short, of narratives [*geistesgeschichten*]—retains the anti-theory bias of pragmatism and thus rejects, out of hand, a *theoria* that narrates while seeing and showing, thus truly *mediating*; a possible *via media* between the ahistorical and foundationalist thinking of Western metaphysics and the rejection of "thinking" one finds in Rorty's radical historicism.

Stimmung

"The chief danger to philosophy," says Alfred North Whitehead, "is narrowness in the selection of evidence. This narrowness arises from the idiosyncracies and timidities of particular authors, of particular social groups, of particular schools of thought... Philosophy must not neglect the multifariousness of things. The fairies dance and Christ is nailed to the cross" (Whitehead 1957, 512–13). As such does Cobb's mentor delimit the pragmatist "school" while setting forth a motto for the project of mutually transformative inter-religious encounter. Rorty's *gesietesgeschichten*, as far as it goes, cannot take the leap of faith implicit in the Cobbean project, the leap from conversation to transformative speech and performance.³² The universalization of anti-foundationalism (just like the universalization of language or of "deconstruction") limits historicism. It is not inconceivable for there to be "ahistorical," though subject-specific, accounts of knowledge, *mythos* that center one's thoughts and beliefs, without being some sort of essentialized "foundation."³³ Pragmatism cannot subscribe to a fatalism that limits surprise and mystery; in fact "the core of pragmatism is that we ought never assume that there will be no more surprises, crises, or changes in belief structure" (Prado 1987, 10). *There is no truth beyond belief.*

In short, pragmatism must open itself up to the non-pragmatic elements of existence. In later writings like "The Origin of the Work of Art" and "Building Dwelling Thinking," Heidegger moves away from the pragmatic solidity of *Sein und Zeit* to a more searching reflection on *Angst*, mystery and "nothingness," showing us that the world exists (as *zu welten*) in a more absolute and non-pragmatic sense. The new thinking, far from being a new search for foundations, is the necessary passage from meaning to meaningfulness, centred around *Sorge*, "concern," from which one may build solidarity; and as such sheds light upon the Cobbean attempt to go *Beyond Dialogue* towards *mutual transformation*. But "[o]nly if we are capable of dwelling, only then can we build" (Heidegger 1972, 160). *Stimmung* is a favorite term for Dilthey, and, though not easy to translate, infers something

like "mood," or "temper" (what Cobb seeks in pragmatism). In Heidegger's lexicon, *Stimmung* implies "register"—as in the process of tuning and accord between question and being, or perhaps, between the determinacy and indeterminacy of language and human social existence.

A Dance with the Indeterminate

Sally Falk Moore, in *Symbol and Politics in Communal Ideology* (1976) proposes that we recognize the at least equal priority of "indeterminacy" in social life. This reaction against the traditional Western "priority of determinacy" (as in the priority of Being over Emptiness) is evidenced even in some forms of postmodernism—those which build universal structures out of language, speech, or narrative, thereby perpetuating the blindness of semantics to pragmatics, to the basic "indeterminacy" of language vis-à-vis reality. But language, speech, conversation *sans* the indeterminate is not *Gespräch* but *Fach*, i.e., univocal, static, dead. Univocity takes language out of time, presence, history, and thus out of human meaningfulness.

Inter-religious dialogue, if it is to be mutually transformative, must be a form of dialogical dialectic between two or more "essential solitudes,"³⁴ in which an attempt is made to compare semantic contexts *within* the other's narrative, in order to take into account the *intra*-theoretical significations of the primary concepts of the other, while allowing for the reflexive element of pragmatics, and the possibility of the surprise of incommensurability and indeterminacy, out of which may appear the liminal monsters of *inter*-theoretical dissociation and *collage*. In the past, inter-religious dialogue and pluralistic, comparative thinking, has been done according to analogical, rational methods of inquiry, where one needs to *interpret* aspects of the Other's Way vis-à-vis models and archetypes of one's own tradition. Cobb's alternative vision is, like Rorty's, more rhetorical than rational; it does not require consensus, but it also does not shy away from the mutations of indeterminacy. Rorty's "method" of colligation echoes with Cobb's project, but his "circumvention" by way of redescription and recontextualization lacks, I think, both the daring of transformation (openness to being) and the caution of circumspection (i.e., "concern," "care"). Lest Rorty's circumventions become circumlocutions—"personal, self-encapsulating stories"—which permit avoidance of the other on her own terms, his technic must be amended with Heideggerian circumspection and the concomitant wariness of dividing (as does Rorty, *in extremis*) the private and the public spheres.

Though he celebrates, with Rorty and the pragmatists, the demise of *The Quest for Certainty* (Dewey), John B. Cobb, Jr. adds a caveat—a very critical and very pragmatist caveat—to his own commitment to pragmatism. Though he is an anti-foundationalist, he is only one "unless": "unless that position is taken to deny that there *is* any given material or social world at all" (Cobb 1994, 614), worlds that, *pace* Richard Rorty, implicate the entirety of human *Erlebnis*; worlds where, like it or not, the fairies dance at the foot of the cross, and where, in the words of William James "things are 'with' one another in many ways, but nothing includes everything, or dominates over everything [...and t]he word 'and' trails along after every sentence..."³⁵ And

Notes

1. *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, Volume 15, Number 2 (May 1994), pp. 123–36.
2. Specifically: *Christ in a Pluralistic Age* (1975), *Beyond Dialogue* (1982), “Toward a Christocentric Catholic Theology” (1987); also comments interspersed throughout his other writings, such as his later essays on the place and role of the university: “Responses to Relativism” (1991) and “A Challenge...” (1994).
3. “We live,” says Heidegger, “by putting into words the totality-of-significations of intelligibility. To significations, words accrue” (Quoted in Steiner 1989a, 94).
4. Gospel of Thomas, Saying 42. *The Other Bible*, Willis Barnstone, ed. (London: HarperCollins, 1984).
5. In, for instance, *The Way of All the Earth* (New York: Macmillan, 1973).
6. Rorty 1989, 43. – “A postmetaphysical culture seems to me no more impossible than a postreligious one, and equally desirable” (65).
7. “Religious fermentation is always a symptom of the intellectual vigor of a society; and it is only when they forget that they are hypotheses and put on rationalistic and authoritarian pretensions, that our faiths do harm” (James 1982, xx). Despite the “religious” aspects of *A Common Faith*, in Dewey’s thought “naturalism has come to maturity not only in its thorough empiricism, but also in its rejection of a personal God and theistic religion” (Culliton *Processive* 1).
8. Rorty might well accept a “compromise” with religion (as he does with the self-creative impulses of Nietzsche, Sartre, and Foucault), relegating such to the strictly personal level to ensure that one does not “slip into a political attitude which will lead (one) to think that there is a social goal more important than avoiding cruelty.” There are two problems with this conception: first, unlike “aesthetic” self-creative tendencies, which can be privatized with little effort, religious impulses are almost by nature interpersonal—they manifest themselves in human interaction; second, there is no fundamental or necessary discrepancy between religious “values” and the liberal invective against cruelty; in fact, the Buddha, Mahavira, St. Francis, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King have shown that just the opposite can be the case.
9. Nietzsche, from an unpublished note of 1888 (Schutte 1984, 6).
10. In a fit of pluralistic glee, British pragmatist F. C. S. Schiller enthused “There are as many pragmatisms as there are pragmatists!” Perhaps (and one could argue the same for “post-modernism”) there is no pragmatism, there are only *pragmatists*—pragmatism being a *mood*, an *attunement*, a *technic*, or, as per Cobb, a *temper* rather than a hypothesis, theory, or methodology.
11. So much so that the latter was forced to change the name of his own program to “pragmaticism,” which he thought a sufficiently unattractive term that it would not stand a chance of co-optation. He was right, but not in the way he desired—people went on calling Peirce a pragmatist.
12. “We have noted... that pragmatic semiotic – important as it is – remained [with Peirce, James, Dewey] incomplete in its development, and this incompleteness manifests itself anew in the [flawed] pragmatic vision of axiology” (Morris 1970, 107).

13. It comes as no surprise to find that both fathers—of pragmatism: Peirce in 1868, in three long articles in the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*; and phenomenology: Husserl, three years before his death in the famous 1935 Vienna and Prague lectures—vociferated against the Cartesian *Weltanschauung*. Rorty concedes to pragmatist tradition in this regard, but hangs on to Francis Bacon as a paradigm modern, following Hans Blumenberg (*The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 1966)—an odd move given the fallen status of Baconian self-expression and technical instrumentality in contemporary thought.
14. Such connects pragmatism, and the work of Mead especially, with the writings of Jewish existentialists Buber and Rosenzweig, Emmanuel Lévinas, as well as with certain branches of phenomenology.
15. Or so dubbed by Japanese philosopher Seizo Ohe.
16. In particular, Morris’s idea of the so-called “buddhistic” and “Mohammedan” ways, which taint his imaginative experimentation with gross generalizations such as the following: “the Buddhist, being less dionysian and more promethean [than the Christian], is more narrowly intellectualistic, his love is more kindly and less mystic, and he tends to take the control of himself into his hands” (1956, 31).
17. In deference to Maitreya, the Messiah-like “friend” whose coming, according to legend, was predicted by Gautama the Buddha himself.
18. Legendre suggests an equivalence between the Greek *pragmata* and the Latin *res* (see Boutin 1994, 7).
19. “Care is always concern and solicitude, even if only privately [...] In willing, an entity which is understood – that is, one which has been projected upon its possibility – gets seized upon, either as something with which one may concern oneself, or as something which is to be brought into its being through solicitude” (Steiner 1989a, 101).
20. Emmanuel Lévinas, French philosopher and one-time pupil of Heidegger, has developed his own thinking along these lines – focusing on the encounter with Others and Otherness in the world.
21. As Walt Whitman would have it: “Both in and out of the game, and watching and wondering at it” (*Leaves of Grass*).
22. Heidegger’s term for the “good” *tekhne* is *entbergen*.
23. For not all experience, *qua* experience, is transformative. “Did not T. S. Eliot write: ‘to have the experience but miss the meaning?’ ... Experience must be linked with performance for there to be transformation” (Turner 1985, 206).
24. See in this regard Maurice Boutin’s “apology” for Karl Rahner’s concept of “Anonymous Christianity.”
25. David L. Hall, who writes an exquisite critical appraisal of Rorty (*Richard Rorty: Prophet and Poet of the New Pragmatism*), is aghast at Rorty’s flippancy with regard to the Heidegger Case, particularly his summary statement to the effect that, all one can say is that “one of the century’s most original thinkers happened to be a pretty nasty character.” But what, then, are we left with? Is *not being a pawn in the hands of a brutal and vicious autocracy* too much to ask of our most “edifying thinkers”?
26. As Lyotard suggests, in *Heidegger et les “juifs”* (1988).
27. “Like the life of Kant, on which he may have at some points patterned his own [and, one might say, in diametrical contradistinction to that of Rorty’s other twentieth-century hero, Dewey], Heidegger’s career with its rootedness in one place, with its almost total refusal, certainly after February,

1934, of external eventuality or contingency, poses and exemplifies the very rare, indeed troubling, case of a human existence invested totally in abstract thought” (Steiner 1089a, 17).

28. Greek *theoriá* is a derivative of *theorós* (spectator), which was formed from the root *thea*, the source also for *theásthai*—“watch, attend to,” from which the English “theatre.” “The movement from *theoriá*, the attitude of open-eyed wonder about the multifariousness of things, to *theory*, the product of the squint-eyed garnering and assemblage of conceptual surrogates for a selection of these things, seems to have dead-ended” (Hall 1994, 50).

29. David Hall and others have attacked Rorty for his lack of acknowledgement of the very important tradition of thought running from Marx and Weber and to the *Ideologiekritiker* of the twentieth century.

30. As Charles Morris says, as in the foundations of the American political experiment, so too in its most characteristic philosophy: *e pluribus unum*.

31. Prefiguring the later Heidegger, language for Mead is “the field from which mind emerges and in which it dwells” (1964, xxviii).

32. David Hall comments on Whitehead’s epigram vis-à-vis Rorty: “As long as our principal focus is upon just the fairies dance, or only upon the crucifixion, we can hold to either the comic or the tragic elements. Only if we are able to celebrate the dance of the fairies at the foot of the cross, will we be prepared for philosophic irony” (1994, 146). Thus the limits, one could say, of pragmatism as “common-sense empiricism.”

33. C. G. Prado (1987) suggests that the “goal is to see how pragmatism is limited – and in fact *completed* – by an emergent, restricted objectivism” (viii).

34. To use Paul Tillich’s term, expressing the singularity and uniqueness of the finite particular being, contrasted (by Tillich) with the “existential loneliness” of one without connectedness with other finite beings. It may be noteworthy that Rorty (who wrote his PhD thesis on Whitehead, and studied Tillich in some depth), adapts Whitehead’s definition of religion—as “what the individual does with his own *solitariness*”—to express the problematic of the private sphere of existence—“what should I do with my *aloneness*”—thus transferring from one of Tillich’s terms to the other (less positive) one (see Hall 1994, 171).

35. These words are from James’s interesting paean to pluralism, *A Pluralistic Universe* (1916). “Pragmatically interpreted, pluralism or the doctrine that it is many means only that the sundry parts of reality *may be externally related*. Everything you can think of, however vast or inclusive, has on the pluralistic view a genuinely ‘external’ environment of some sort or amount [...Yet] something always escapes. ‘Ever not quite’ has to be said of the best attempts made anywhere in the universe at attaining all-inclusiveness [...] However much may be collected, however much may report itself as present at any effective centre of consciousness or action, something else is self-governed and absent and unreduced to unity” (1916, 321–22).

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