THE EMPIRICAL AND PRAGMATIC
TRADITIONS IN THEOLOGY

JRT 412
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Fall 1972
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It is no easy task to analyze and discuss the attempts that have been made in the past century or so to relate the philosophical schools of pragmatism and empiricism to the theological enterprise. The chief reasons for this difficulty are the ambiguity of the material and the individuality of the theologian who approaches this problem. The terms "empirical" and "pragmatic" are as broad as, and have as many different interpretations as, the terms "God" and "theology" themselves, so that empirical theologians (a term really subsuming "pragmatic theologians") cover a great range of territory.

Considering this confusion, then, we must look at the historical and intellectual context from which all of this arose. James A. Martin, Jr., making note of the confusion surrounding the term "empiricism", has sought to clarify the issue.[1] He shows that there are three main types of empiricism: ancient Greek empiricism, eighteenth and nineteenth century empiricism, and modern empiricism. Greek empiricism emphasized the idea that empirical knowledge was all the accumulated knowledge of lore, custom, and "common-sense" wisdom. Eighteenth and nineteenth century empiricism maintained that empirical knowledge was obtained through individualistic observation and sense-perception. David Hume was indicative of this school, holding that "experience" was equivalent to sense-data in succession. John Locke, really the founder of empiricism, maintained that sense-experience can produce ideas, though he balanced this conception with the reflective processes.[2] These European-based ideas found a broader interpretation in America in the thought

of Charles S. Peirce, William James, and John Dewey. This American development can be considered to be the "pragmatic branch" of the "empirical school". The recent trends in empirical philosophy maintain that empirical knowledge is that which is obtained from public experience, but which is much more than mere sensation and association. It includes affective, volitional, and valuational elements (which are terms that Martin never defines), and uses the method of experimentalism to explore and to organize experience. Verification here is in terms of consequences, and not in terms of its origins or its "'correspondence with reality'"[3]. But it must be noted that many modern empiricists do not follow this recent development.

The term "empirical", in modern times, has three connotations (derivable from these three "schools"): the general attitude of James' "tough-mindedness"; the empirical method, which itself is variously interpreted; and a general appeal to experience. The problem in this last category concerns what is constitutive of normative experience - is it the immediate experience of Bergson?; is it the mystical experience of Royce and Hocking?; is it the sensations of the early moderns?; or is it any one of a myriad of other definitions of "experience"? These three connotations are, of course, related and mutually affect each other in determining the final meaning.

Thus, for Martin, the term "empirical philosophy of religion" has three connotations:

> Sometimes it refers simply to the "empirical" or "realistic" attitude of the thinker, suggesting that he is attempting to take seriously all of the facts, no matter how "stubborn", which should be taken account of in a religious philosophy. Again it refers to the attempt on the part of the philosopher to base his thought upon an appeal to "experience". This, in turn, may mean an appeal to various areas of experience

and a defense of a theistic "hypothesis" of some sort as
the best "explanation" of experience; or it may mean an ap-
peal to some type of specifically religious experience as af-
fording the normative data for a philosophy of religion. Or,
again, it may mean that the philosopher seeks to employ some
form of empirical method in the interpretation of such data
as seem significant for his purposes.[4]

Most empirical theologians have the empirical "temper"; thus, they

differ in terms of the experience appealed to and the empirical

method used.

In brief, then, empiricism holds that all knowledge is derived

from experience, without recouse to innate ideas, a priori truths,

or real "knowledge" of concepts. And certain knowledge is not

possible, for generalizations that are based on experience give

only probabilities.[5] In a sense, due to the broad range of "exper-

ience" available to the theologian, all except supernaturalists

are empiricists.[6]

Having thus looked at the general context of empiricism, we

can now take a closer look at the philosophy of pragmatism (and its

development in instrumentalism) and its major adherents. Pragmatism -

a philosophy which had its heyday in the first quarter of the twen-

tieth century in America - is a system which considers "thought" to

be a process with useful purposes, whose truth is tested, not only

by agreement with reality, but also (and more importantly) by the

practical results and by tests of consequences.[7] It was felt that

beliefs should be tested in experience. These ideas opposed the

metaphysical doctrines, in which the intellect was considered able

to discern the nature of truth by way of a correspondence of ideas

in the mind to "objective reality".[7] Holding that an idea is true

if it works, it constituted a reaction against speculative philosophy

without a link to practical living. Pragmatism had an immediate appeal to the religious mind, which was often more interested in the religious experience itself than with the concomitant interpreting and validating theology.[8]

In a sense, pragmatism started with Socrates, who said (in the name of Protagoras) that although one judgment is not _truer_ than another one, it can be _better_, with better consequences.[9] F. C. S. Schiller followed in the same tradition, as did Hobbes, who said that any doctrine repugnant to peace could not be true.[10] Bertrand Russell considers pragmatism to be a practical "action" philosophy, as intrinsic to and derivative from the industrial technological world, in contradistinction to philosophies of "happy" feelings or theoretical "knowledge" philosophies.[11] Pragmatic or utilitarian ethics, an offshoot of pragmatic philosophy, tells us that "goods" are not the absolutely final goal of moral action - rather, they depend on the psychological, sociological, and historical circumstances, and on consideration for the social consequences involved.[12]

As we shall see shortly, pragmatism fits into religious formulations in two major areas: in theism, the theistic God can be validated by recourse to practical considerations, following the procedure made famous by James; and in naturalism, as shown in the pragmatic developments undertaken by Dewey.[13] Further, religion is said to have _practical_ functions: the integration of one's life, the idealization and sanctification of social morals and customs, the expression of man's ultimate concerns, and the dependence on cosmic support for the fulfillment of human aspirations.[14]

It must be noted that it is difficult to apply pragmatism,
for "practical results" is a very ambiguous term: what does pract-
ical mean?; how does an idea work or not work?; if an idea is aimed
at deception and it succeeds, does it work in a pragmatically <u>true</u>
sense?; can there be any standardization, since different beliefs
word differently for different people?[15]And further, some ideas may
work only partially - e.g., belief in God's omnipotence works to
elevate the spirit but does not work to explain evil.[16] Some of
these problems will become a little clearer when we look more close-
ly at the thought of some pragmatic thinkers.

Charles Peirce really started the American pragmatic school,
with his postulating of certain principles of the pragmatic theory
and method.[17] William James followed through, fulfilled, and went
far beyond Peirce's theory of inquiry, adding his own individual-
istic interpretations of the pragmatic philosophy.[18] In the early
1900's, people wanted to somehow combine empiricism with religion,
for the world views on the scene did not fulfill the people's needs
(according to James). A system was desired that would affect one's
life; that would deal with facts, human adaptation, and values;
that would be religious without religion's shallow optimism. James
thus applied pragmatism to fill this gap - for it was religious
like rationalism and dealt with facts like empiricism.

Following Peirce's thought, the pragmatic method for James
meant an interpretation of metaphysical notions by tracing the
practical consequences, and a decision of a dispute by comparing the
consequences of the two ideas. But for James, the practical conse-
quences meant the individual, concrete, material results. "James

interpreted 'practical' to mean the particular import that a belief has in the life of the individual."[19] And we must, of course, have a "pre-knowledge" of the consequences in order to determine the validity, value, and truth (pragmatically understood) of any idea. Beliefs were considered to be rules for action; ideas were to become true instrumentally. "Truth" and "rightness" thus attained fun-ctional definitions. There can be no difference in abstract truth that does not somehow express itself in a difference of facts and conduct. Yet, to use James' example, if two different chemical theories yield the same results, is it not still important - for the sake of"knowledge" - to know which theory is correct? Doesn't "objective" truth have its own type of merit?

Unlike traditional and strict empiricists, James was willing to use abstractions.

> Interested in no conclusions but those which our minds and our experiences work out together, she (i.e., pragmatism) has no a priori prejudices against theology. 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. For how much more they are true, will depend entirely on their relations to the other truths that also have to be acknowledged.[20]

If a certain theological idea is the best world-view that fits in with the rest of the person's needs and uses, then it is true. James feels that - in a sense - this use is really an agreement with con-crete reality. (We shall see that this last idea is similar to an essential element of Peter Berger's theology.)

There can be, in pragmatism, success, and losses can be accept-ed; but there is no necessity for the triumph of good. Pragmatists are willing to sacrifice for ideals, and they trust other forces - human and superhuman - to cooperate with them in a melioritstic uni-

verse. James asserts that religious monotheism (not metaphysical monotheism) "has always viewed God as but one helper ... in the midst of all the shapers of the great world's fate."[21] And further, if one accepts this assertion, which is historically doubtful, then one "can well believe, on the proofs that religious experience affords, that higher powers exist and are at work to save the world on ideal lines similar to our own."[22]

James' earlier work[23] contains the precursors of his pragmatism, but does not constitute any systematic presentation of his theories. But some relevant ideas are contained in it. Defining God as a power who is not ourselves and makes for righteousness, is serious about it, and "recognizes us" in a universe that we desire to be friendly, he asserts that theism has a "subjective congruity" with the "triadic" reflex structure of our minds. This theism - knowing that God is there but also knowing that man may and must act - James calls "empirical theism". The religious choice is an option that we must make, whether to accept the theistic view or to reject it - for the choice is "living", "forced", and "momentous".

One wonders - as mentioned above - what has happened to "objective truth". James' functional definitions rob God of some of the ultimacy that is intrinsic to the religious situation. To quote a Chinese proverb - "'If you believe in the gods, the gods exist; if you do not believe in them, they do not exist.'"[24] This is just too "wishy-washy" and equivocal to maintain any real hold on the believer.

> To the man who desires an object of worship, this is unsatis-factory. He is not concerned to say, "If I believed in God I should be happy"; he is concerned to say, "I believe in God and therefore I am happy." And when he believes in God, he believes in Him as he believes in the existence of Roose-velt or Churchill or Hitler; God, for him, is an actual Being,

not merely a human idea which has good effects. It is this genuine belief that has the good effects, not James' emasculate substitute.[25]

James' "subjectivistic madness" substitutes "belief-in-God" for God Himself. There is the further question of what "works" means - does it mean that predictions are fulfilled, or that it helps those who have the belief, or what? It is also hard to apply the pragmatic method, for one must determine and evaluate the consequences of an idea beforehand, and many variables can enter the picture.

John Dewey parted company with James, remaining within the pragmatic tradition though his "school" is usually referred to as instrumentalism. Dewey felt that James confused the pragmatic meaning of an idea with its value - pragmatic meaning should really be "experimental meaning", but James ignored this and focussed his attention on value. Dewey also denied that the pragmatic method could find meaning in a conception that can never be empirically verified - and traditional theology would presumably fall into this category. But beliefs were still judged in terms of practical consequences.**

As a humanistic theist[27], Dewey showed how certain activities connected the ideal with the actual. Religious value was interpreted as the result of the "actualizing of ideal possibilities", and God was considered to be the process of actualizing the ideal. But this actualization is "selective", only realizing that which will lead to a good in a basically good and ordered universe. This actualization is not performed by God, it is God - but we fulfill the possibilities inherent in human possibilities, experiences, and relationships. God, the idea of the divine, is

one of the ideal possibilities unified through imaginative realization and projection. But this idea of God, or of the divine, is also connected with all the natural forces and con-

**Practical social consequences become a truth-test, for "ideas become true when their 'draft' upon existence is honored by the verifying facts they promise."[26]

> ditions - including man and human association - that promote
> the growth of the ideal and that further its realization.
> We are in the presence neither of ideals completely em-
> bodied in existence nor yet of ideals that are mere rootless
> ideals; fantasies, utopias. For there are forces in nature
> and society that generate and support the ideals. They
> are further unified by the action that gives them coherence
> and solidarity. It is this _active_ relation between ideal
> and actual to which I would give the name 'God!'"[28]

In this "_thoroughly_ humanistic naturalism", then, God is the order

or process that shapes human existence, and religion is devotion

to that activity and those ends which actualize these (human) ideals.

This sense of God is different from that in most forms of natural-

ism, where God is the order or process that shapes _cosmic_ values,

and where man adjusts to the ordering process. Dewey's ideas are

based on the assumption (pragmatically derived) that religious real-

ities are social phenomena that occur within human experience.

This kind of religious humanism does not inquire into realities be-

yond human affairs.

For Dewey, religious humanism has more pragmatic truth-value

than does liberal theology, which is often inconsistent. And here,

since God is the sum-total of ideal ends, traditional ideas of theo-

logy are inapplicable, for God is not a Being with _a priori_ exist-

ence. And tradition itself becomes a hypostatization, whereby man

converts his object of desire into an antecedent reality.[29]

The main theological problem with Dewey is his equating God

with the sum of social ideals. If ideals change, does that mean

that God changes? And can such a naturalistic type of God adequately

serve as a guarantor for human victory? Although still with the fun-

ctional aspect, God becomes also a symbol, so that unlike James,

Dewey barely allows for the possibility of God's reality.

Pragmatism as a full philosophy in its own right no longer holds
an important position on the American intellectual scene. But it
provided a pragmatic strand for empirical theology, a strand that
was to run alongside the Whiteheadian motif, as well as others, in
the empirical theological tradition. The most general statement
one can say about empirical theology is that it is grounded in ex-
perience - beyond that, one must go on to specifics, judging each
empirical theologian individually. The pragmatic nuances inherited
from James and Dewey are important in empirical theology, though
they are often overlooked by the less experimental and more abstract
theologians. These nuances emphasize the experimental method, leav-
ing the task and the system of religion unfinished, and the experi-
ential content, assimilating all types of religious experience.

Only in the post-Kantian era were the first serious attempts at
empirical religious philosophy undertaken, with appeals to "'practical
reason'", "'religious consciousness'", and "'religious experience.'"
Schleirmacher was the first outstanding theologian to appeal to
the religious consciousness, and thus was one of the "founders" of
modern empirical theology.[29] Appeals to the religious consciousness
appeared in many forms, depending on one's interpretation of experi-
ence. Others began to appeal to "value-experience" and to moral-
ity, basing the existence of God on such "empirical facts".[30]
Sometimes, the world in general is seen as having a theological character.[30]

The American empirical emphasis has been on the significance of
religious experience as such, and on the empirical method to inter-
pret the data of religious experience. Due to these emphases, the
more serious attempts at empirical theology have been carried on

mainly in America.[31] American empirical theologians have also incorporated certain empirical elements from idealism, including an "idealistic concern for 'the source of human good'".[30] (British empiricism, on the other hand, perceived itself with an absolute antithesis to certain forms of idealism.) Empirical theology (like empiricism) split over whether facts were isolated entities or were complex contextual wholes, with the American tradition - following James' example of experiencing relations - taking the latter position.

The thology school at the University of Chicago has been the foremost mouthpiece for empirical theology. From 1900 - the 1920's, the empirical method was in the pragmatic tradition. Then it was shaped by "organismic" science and philosophy.[32] That is, a "broadly pragmatic empiricism" was supplemented by and partly supplanted by Whitehead's organismic philosophy, which offered "the most viable cosmological or metaphysical articulation of modern scientific, moral, aesthetic, and religious experience."[33] Elsewhere in America, the empirical philosophy of religion was strongly influenced by Dewey.[34]

Appealing to value-experience, empirical idealists rationally deduced a supreme ideal being from an initial ethical analysis of the "'facts of experience.'"[35] God, the transcendent, Absolute Unity, becomes immanent, temporal, the "power for goodness", and a force struggling against evil. All of experience is perceived in "divine" terms, but God is not equated with that experience.

Empirical theism can be considered to be a part of the wider "philosophico-religious" category of "naturalism".[36] Empirical theism is less metaphysical than traditional theism, but is more

concerned with the motivating "cosmic interests" that is religious
humanism.

At first, empirical theism (at the Chicago school) emphasized
man's role in the creation of value. Gerald Birney Smith (a "mys-
tical naturalist")[37] felt that the character of God is found in
the "experienced reciprocity" between man on the one hand and his
environment and its sustaining power on the other hand. God is the
Creative Order that fulfills the human ends and to whom man adjusts.

The functional aspects of phenomena later began to take hold.
Shailer Mathews[38] (a"conceptual theist"), taking a "scientific"
world view that interpreted God as process, but recognizing the reli-
gious need for personal relations with God, interpreted God fun-
ctionally. For him, man uses "the term 'God' as an instrumental
concept to aid his adjustment to these personality-producing and
sustaining forces in the cosmic environment."[39] Thus, all thought
of God is grounded in human behavior; God is instrumental, con-
ceptual, an experience of certain relations, and not ontological, Be-
ing, principle, or the activities themselves. This is largely a
pragmatic stance, though there are some thistic assumptions, for
God is more than the social forces in reality, relating the personal
cosmic forces to man. Cosmic activities are conceived of through
socially determined symbols.

Edward Scribner Ames, (a "humanistic theist")[40] saw God as
the "cosmic life" which comes in through the social process. God
became the cosmic processes idealized; He was equated with Nature,
Life, the Absolute. But Ames did not consider God as all that is -
He was"'the Power which makes for righteousness'"[40],(an idea identical

to that in the thought of Mordecai M. Kaplan, a contemporary Jewish representative of empirical theology of this type). Like Dewey, Ames goes beyond humanism, changing emphases but remaining a pragmatist and thus not becoming a theist. Human problems - including religious problems - were seen as psychological and cultural phenomena, expressing basic human needs. And without translating theology into the psychological equivalent, Ames looked at psychological reality as having religious significance,[42], thus introducing the strand of the psychology of religious experience into empirical theology.

Both religious realists (e.g., D.C. Macintosh) and theistic naturalists (e.g., H.N. Wieman) positified a basic continuity of God with nature.[43] Wieman, rooted in Dewey and Whitehead, held a naturalistic view of values, so that God became the supreme value as a "perceptible natural process". Like others before him, Wieman[44] starts with the experience of value in the outside world, but is more thoroughly empirical, holding that God is an object of experience, "perceived and discerned", like any other object of experience. He is not merely an instrumental symbol; He is a perceptual - not a conceptual - reality. God is a process, operating in the world, "shaping and fulfilling the good". Rather than merely appealing to religious experience or describing a "social" process, Wieman also made the ultimate cosmic reality of thinkers before him an actual "object" of inquiry.

Wieman defined value as that which is part of the interaction of enjoyable activities, leading to mutual and reciprocal support, enhancement, and the clarification of meaning. Thus, there is an

organic functioning, with the progressive growth of "the good" and with purposive and worthful endeavor on the part of men. "The Supremely Worthful is that activity in our midst which shapes life toward that progressive attainment of mutual support and meaning. Supreme Value, then, is growth of meaning in the world."[45] This Supreme Value is God, because the "growth of meaning" commands man's supreme devotion. Wieman does not say that his God is personal, due to the ambiguity of the term, though he does assert that reality is responsive to man. This empirical theology, functional and instrumental as it was, was tinged by the "idealistic absolute". Wieman went beyond what he considered the shallow pragmatism that said that reality is what is experienced, to reconceive the ultimate dimension of experience into "terms consistent with living experience".

What Wieman asserts so easily here is not all that clear to me- there is no "proof" that God is equivalent to Wieman's Supreme Value. Wieman was not truly empirical, in a sense, for what was observed was really occurrences and relations believed to be implicit in the empirical world. But such relations were discernible only to those who shared the same basic view of reality.[46]

Ultimately - and I may be entirely missing the point - I see little difference in these various formulations of empirical theology. Some of these thinkers hold that God is merely symbolic and others hold that He is a process in some manner; and both conceptions have something of immanentism. But I think that once one moves beyond the sphere of "theism", traditionally - and even existentially - understood, God becomes primarily functional in aspect, and any real existence is of secondary importance. This, I feel, is con-

trary to the gist of traditional religious formulations. And any
such formulations must justify such an "unorthodox" divergence,
which none of these theologians do. And besides, functionalism
in theology - as the ultimate religious principle - takes away from
the motivational and devotional aspects of religion.

In a later stage at Chicago, the Whiteheadian type of process
theology was incorporated more thoroughly into empirical theology,
for there was a "natural" relation between the two. And further,
process theology is empirical in method as well, though unlike prag-
matic and instrumental empiricism, it deals more with the total
structure and context. And it does have some logical (i.e., ratio-
nalistic) structures, which are applied to the empirical data of
"lived experience".

For Whitehead himself, God, the first emergent of creativity,
produces the "subjective aim" for each "entity". This he bases on
an empirical view of the universe. Charles Hartshorne, perceiving
the empirical universe in a "panpsychic" way, sees God as the "Su-
preme Creative Reality", while including the world in His self.

Bernard E. Meland, dealing with the nature of the religious re-
sponse as something more than mere consciousness, attempted to art-
iculate "the witness of faith, expressed as an enduring mythos of
the culture, to critical and secular minds of modern culture in
a way that can inform and enhance our secularity with ultimate de-
mands and resources."[47] Meland uses Whitehead's empirical meta-
physics to help analyze and describe the cultural milieu.

Hartshorne and Meland - as did Wieman - used Whitehead's
thrust, without fully pursuing Whitehead's metaphysical concerns,
such as Ogden did. For Schubert Ogden, empirical theology refers

to the type of thinking that seeks to arrive at an appropriate con-
ception of the witness of <u>Christian</u> faith, with no final justificat-
ion except that of the claims of our common human experience. He
limits his conceptual usefulness, however, by his specificity for
the Christian tradition, and by his definition of experience as
that type which is open to the divine Christian reality, using
Whiteheadian categories. Admittedly, Wieman and the other theo-
logians saw experience in a transcendent sense, but it seemed to
be a more open attitude. In a more general context, Ogden feels
that the goal of philosophy is to appropriate all of experience,
and since theology is one of the central tasks of philosophy, it
immediately gains an empirical aspect.[48]

And there are some contemporary theologians at Chicago who
go beyond the Whiteheadian categories, approaching empirical theo-
logy in a different manner. There is a modern felt need to deal
with contemporary problems of culture, man, and religion in phe-
nomenological and existential forms - both of which are at least
partly empirical.[49] Langdon Gilkey asserts that theology must be
both secular, incorporating linguistic analysis, and empirical,
incorporating process philosophy. A "neo-phenomenal" mode will
deal with the religious dimension in the new secular context.

British empiricism largely deals with linguistic logical anal-
ysis, and Fred Berthold relates empirical theology to this "tradit-
ion". He feels that at least some theological assertions should be
open to public evaluation, using certain kinds of evidence. Scien-
tific models should be analyzed as paradigms for theology. Ber-
thold insists that it requires careful thought - and not facile
reasoning - to "jump directly from concrete data to ... high-level

statements" concerning God.[50] The real connections between "theo-
logical utterances" and "scientifically-warranted factual state-
ments" must be shown. F. Ferré tells us[51] that theological lang-
uage has certain familiar functions - to reassure, is existential,
is ethical, is quasi-factual, is attention-directing - and some
unique functions - assent and worship, conviction, commitment, and
address. These are all experience - and not knowledge - oriented.
We can use these functions to analyze religions, but the question
arises that if a religion automatically fulfills these functions,
does that necessitate the pragmatic conclusion that that religion
is true? Meland feels that it is in this direction, as well as in
the direction of (empirical) phenomenology and existentialism, that
the future of empirical theology lies.

Martin gives us his idea of what the concerns of empirical
theologians should be: theories of experience; experience as the
beginning and end of inquiry; analysis and interpretation of experi-
ence through a scientifically based method; a tentative and realistic
attitude; and presumably - though he doesn't specifically mention
it! - a discussion of how and what theological insights are obtain-
able from such an empirical method.[52] Empirical theology - especi-
ally that kind which is most affected by the pragmatic influence -
should provide an understandable guide to life and how it is lived.

The empirical theologians before the time of the very pro-
nounced effect of process theology,

> as representatives of the "liberal" tradition in Protest-
> antism, have been concerned to state in terminology meaning-
> ful for the modern mind what is the "meaning of God in hu-
> man experience." One of their aims is to make the life of
> devotion and its guiding concepts "experience-centered", and
> to this end they seek to ground their systems in what they
> take to be publicly available and semi-familiar experiences

> like "right religious adjustment" and "problem-solving
> mysticism". They would give new significance to traditional
> theological terms by pointing to specific "happenings" in
> the world, experiences which are, they believe, publicly
> available and valid as interpreted in terms of modern sci-
> ence and metaphysics.[53]

These theologians - and their successors to varying degrees - have

constructed "normative" religious philosophies empirically, using

different methodological assumptions, interpretive systems, and

implicit or explicit personal religious convictions that are the

pre-suppositions - and not the results - of the empirical analysis.

(This latter point is not quite so obvious in the more contemporary

thinkers, though it exists there too.) The empirical realm they

deal with is thus colored by their assumptions, often stemming from

a specific religious context. They often use only a segment of the

totality of experience and deem that to be normative, thus using

pre-conceptions and predilections, instead of remaining "open" to

experience as they wished to do in opposition to the rationalistic

metaphysicians. And by what logic can we authenticate the experi-

ence - by intuition?; by philosophical assumptions?; by religious

pre-suppositions?; or by any other a prioris? Some of these experi-

ences, assumed to be universally valid, are not, for the systems

rest on particular religious traditions assumed to be accepted by

all. Often the "universal" theology arrived at is applied to inter-

pret the particular revealed theologies, though it is not noted that

that the "universal" theology really comes from a specific context.

Empirical theologians seem to have emphasized the problem of

the interpretation of religious experience (and belief) into (quasi-)

metaphysical terms, rather than the problem of the true reference

and meaning of religious experience, belief, and practice.

Not only is it no easy task to analyze empirical theology, it
is no easy task either to undertake the formulation of an empirical
theology, somehow relating religious experience, natural (so-called)
experience, God, and man. In a sense, there is an air of futility
about the whole problem of the feasibility of empirical theology,
well summarized by James.

> "(W)hat religion reports, you must remember, always purports
> to be a fact of experience; the divine is actually present,
> it says, and between it and ourselves relations of give and
> take are actual. If definite perceptions of fact like this
> cannot stand upon their own feet, surely abstract reasoning
> cannot give them the support they are in need of. Conceptual
> processes can class facts, define them, interpret them; but
> they do not produce them, nor can they reproduce their indi-
> viduality. ... Philosophy in this sphere is thus a secondary
> function, unable to warrant faith's veracity. ... In all
> sad sincerity I think we must conclude that the attempt to
> demonstrate by purely intellectual processes the truth of the
> deliverance of direct religious experience is absolutely
> hopeless."[54]

I am not sure that empirical theology only attempts to "deliver"
religious experience. There is more to it than that, but James
does give the flavor of the difficulty in the endeavor.

I have purposely left most of my criticisms and constructive
ideas for the end. But before I present them (however superficial
they may be) I would like to make mention of an interesting socio-
logical work by Petoer Berger,[55] in which, perceiving that the "sup-
ernatural" has departed from contemporary experience for most
people, he shows us the possibilities for present-day theological
thinking. He characterizes our age as being empirical, secular,
humanistic, pragmatic, utilitarian, and so forth. The development
of secularization and of "cognitive minorities" who believe in
the religious supernatural experience has resulted in a theological

crisis because of which the traditional religions (especially Protestantism) have felt to need to accomodate to the contemporary mood.

The secularizing trend, Berger feels, is continuing. The extant choices are cognitive deviance in sectarian communities or "cognitive surrender". In this latter alternative, the

> traditional religious affirmations are translated into terms appropriate to the new frame of reference, the one that allegedly conforms to the Weltanschaung of modernity. ... The supernatural elements of the religious traditions are more or less completely liquidated, and the traditional language is transferred from other-worldly to this-worldly referents. The traditional lore, and in most cases the religious institutions in charge of this lore as well, can then be presented as still or again 'relevant' to modern man.[56]

Possible translation grammars are existentialism, Jungian psychology, linguistic philosophy, or sociology. Berger rejects the first alternative as being untenable in modern society, and the latter as an inefficient means to produce an "existentially happier person" or a "political liberal" through a truncated secular theology. And the middle road is a tenuous and difficult path to stay on.

Science, history, psychology, and sociology have all "shown" that theology is faced with a "credibility gap", relativization, and ideas concerning the social foundation and reinforcement of beliefs (no matter how empirical the original formation of those beliefs were). This is not helped any by contemporary pluralism. But by "relativizing the relativizer", we may see that the supernatural still exists in reality, though the contemporary consciousness prohibits man from perceiving it. Reversing the Feuerbachian thrust, Berger says that the religious ideas that man projects out of his own consciousness can correspond to some external reality, which is reflected in his own consciousness. That is, real religious phenomena,

in an empirical sense, will <u>also</u> be human projections, in a (differ-
ent empirical sense).

> The theological decision will have to be that, "in, with,
> and under" the immense array of human projections, there
> are indicators of a reality that is truly "other" and that
> the religious imagination of man ultimately reflects. ...
> If the religious projections of man correspond to a reality
> that is superhuman and supernatural, then it seems logical
> to look for traces of this reality in the projector himself.
> This is not to suggest an empirical theology - that would be
> logically impossible - but rather a theology of very high
> empirical sensitivity that seeks to correlate its propositions
> with what can be empirically known.[57]

Berger gives us certain "<u>prototypical human gestures</u>" in the

empirical situation that may serve as "<u>signals of transcendence</u>."

These gestures are: (1) the human propensity for order, which im-

plies a basic trust in the order of reality. Thus, religion becomes

a projection of and the ultimate vindication of human order. (2) lu-

dic, or playful, elements, most poignantly seen in the face of death

and destruction. Joyful play points to a supernatural justificat-

ion, and through inductive faith religion becomes the final vindi-

cation of joy and play. (3) courage and hope, which while defying death,

point to a "religious interpretation of the human situation". (4) the

human sense of justice for evil and consequent damnation which, like

the other gestures, is not empirically verifiable. Religion gives

a context for both condemnation and damnation. (5) humor, as a fun-

damental human experience, always involves a discrepancy or an

incongruity that ultimately refers back to the discrepancy between

man and the universe. Humor comments on man's finitude, transcend-

ing empirical limits and thus finding religious justification.

Berger ignores religious experience, itself, because he does

not want to emphasize the projection, but the projector, with its

empirical data. This is an attempt to link daily reality with meta-

physical reality.

This is in the tradition of liberal theology, which induces from experience, though faith is there, as holding the greatest promise of approaching religious truth in a secular, relativistic society. Berger also feels that the religious traditions (all of them!) must be confronted, in order to search for historical signals of transcendence that are perceived as discoveries - and not as revelations. When one discovers how these signals are related to transcendence, then he will have moved into the realm of metaphysics. And "culture" may even be found to yield signals of transcendence as well.

Once these signals have been perceived, and the transcendence has been "experienced" - once we have heard these "rumors of angels" - we can and must move on to a religon that will truly confront the age.

I can find little fault with Berger's analysis. In an interesting "proof", he shows the existence of the Biblical God to be that of one who stands outside and against man and the world, but also one who relates to and is found within empirical experience, especially in terms of the ethical demand. (This is to be differentiated from the inner salvation of neo-mysticism and psychological formulations.)

> To reaffirm this discovery of God in our situation might necessitate the formulation of new creeds, though their content would in this case be quite traditional - the reaffirmation of God who is not the world and who was not made by man, who is outside and not within ourselves, who is not a sign of human things but of whom human things are signs, who is symbolized and not a symbol. It is this God, totally other and yet accessible in human experience, in whom faith will see the foundation of order, justice, and compassion

in the world. It is _this_ transcendence of which certain
human gestures in the world are signals. And is is the
faith in _this_ God that (as it did in the religious history
of Israel) eventuates in a hope that reaches beyond the con-
fines of death.[38]

Thus, Berger legitimates the Biblical God and gives to Judaism an

empirical foundation. Methodologically, I think that Berger's ap-

proach is a sound one, one that can be applied to Judaism - as in

the case of the Biblical God. His sociological method is clearly

empirical, and it has deep roots in the empiral tradition. However

(and here I may be showing myself to be a "liberal theologian") I

think that those translation grammars that Berger so handily dis-

misses as the tools for cognitive surrender, _can_ be helpful

in expressing, in the final stage of the methodology, what has pre-

ceded it. That is, taking Berger's route to a point where trans-

cendence is "perceived", such a "grammar" as existential language

could express the route taken, the point reached, and the metaphys-

ical/transcendent reality that one induces, in a way that will ex-

press and fulfill human needs.

And what of the other empirical theologians? James, I feel,

has value. His emphasis on facts and experience (widely under-

stood) is not misplaced; and I think we are still governed by that

attitude. Such an emphasis can work against the "shallow optimism"

that one so often sees. His idea of a "melioristic theism", which

holds that though there is no Absolute necessity for improvement,

things _can_ be better, but man must co-operate with God in doing

the work of the world, parallels certain Jewish Midrashic references,

where man becomes God's partner in creation. This attitude that the

world can be improved, but with man's help, must never be ignored.

But with James' pragmatic sanction, I run into difficulty. I

do not see how - in any way - truth and goodness are dependent upon practical consequences. Hitler may have been "true" and "good" for the "good Germans", but was he "true" and "good" for the rest of mankind, and especially for those he slaughtered? The ethical relativism that comes out of James'/functional view of truth and value is fraught with problems. If one removes determinations of truth and value from the role of practical consequences, then I think that James' idea of God as a "working-hypothesis" may have some value. But here I maintain with Berger that though God may have functional use, as a human projection, there may still be a transcendent reality that is reflected by this projection. James hints at this idea, but only in passing. Such an idea can help a congregant, for example, who wishes to establish faith, but is unable to do so. If one established the "plausibility structure" for a belief in God, showing how belief in God may lead to certain practical consequences, that inroad into belief may set the stage for a realization that this functional belief is a reflection of a transcendent reality - of the Biblical, commanding God. The Jew- ish idea of a commanding God is largely lost in functional interpret- ation. Why should I follow the commandments of something that is merely the projection of my imagination? So we must see James' ideas as a first step, not to be taken as the end point and as having final authority in the religious life and search.

I did not find Dewey to be of great value, perhaps because some of his material overlaps James' ideas, as well as because of the possi- bility of subsuming Dewey's naturalism - in which God becomes a symbol for actualized ideals - into the functional systems of James and Berger.

The same holds true - and maybe even more so - for the later empirical theologians. Firstly, they give us either Christian systems, which pose problems to translations into the Jewish tradition, or systems that are so general and equivocal, that they lose all meaning. And secondly, in heavy language in stark contrast to James' wonderfully beautiful style, they all say essentially the same thing - God is either process or symbol, but either way is susceptible of a functional or pragmatic type of interpretation.

The contemporary empirical theologians each have something unique to offer - Berthold applies linguistic analysis to the problem; Meland applies metaphysics to the cultural milieu; and so on. As interesting as these efforts are, I do not find them very applicable to Judaism.

And so if one were to apply empirical theology to Judaism, one must first define the aspects one is referring to. In terms of functional aspects of consequences of "ideas", I find that aspects of Berger and James would be relevant, in the ways I have mentioned, while the rest of this wealth of material, redundant as it is, would either be superfluous (for James said it first) or inappropriate. The "open" pragmatic, empirical attitude is, to an extent, indigenous to Judaism, for it has never been a dogmatic, doctrinnaire religion. And since Judaism has always emphasized doing, action, halacha, there is more of a connection with experience, no matter how that experience is understood. It must be remembered, however, that empirical theology does not say that experience is the resultant of religious inquiry OR THAT EXPERIENCE IS THE ULTIMATE GOAL. Rather, from experience - whether historical, aesthetic, daily, or any other - one induces a theological framework by "experiencing" God. And Judaism, I feel, is susceptible to this.

Whether one makes recourse to the historical survival of the Jew-
to
ish People, or ᴧthe "existential" experience of the modern American

Jew, or to the I-Thou experience, it is part of the empirical

theological process of inquiry, from which an idea of Judaism may

come forth. And lastly, we can apply the empirical method to Jew-

ish religious phenomena as such - to religious consciousness, experi-

ence, institutions, and practices. And some good may come out of

these endeavors.

       Said the Kobriner: "The wise man learns how to serve the
Lord from every phrase he hears, from every event he ob-
serves, and from every experience he shares. We read in
Ecclesiastes 12:13: '(From) everything that is heard
(learn how to) fear God.'"[59]

EMPIRICAL
THEOLOGY ←———————————— Whiteheadian metaphysics
←———————————— Linguistic analysis
←———————————— Science
←———————————— Psychology
←———————————— Sociology
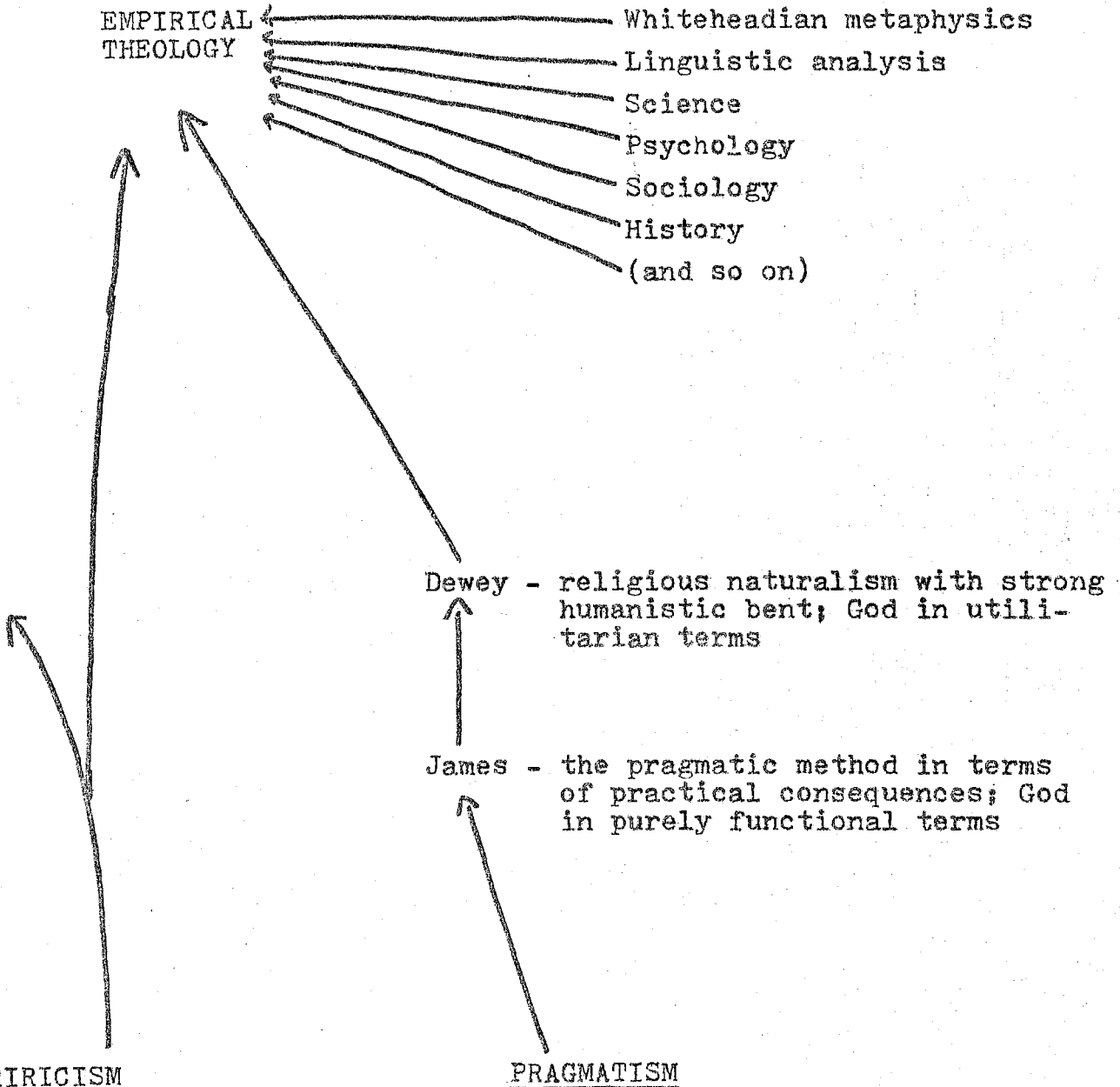←———————————— History
←———————————— (and so on)

Empirical
Philosophy

Dewey - religious naturalism with strong
humanistic bent; God in utili-
tarian terms

James - the pragmatic method in terms
of practical consequences; God
in purely functional terms

EMPRIRICISM   PRAGMATISM

FOOTNOTES

1. James Alfred Martin, Jr.; Empirical Philosophies of Religion;
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   and a conversation held with Martin at the Union Theological
   Seminary on Dec. 4, 1972.

2. Bernard E. Meland (ed.); The Future of Empirical Theology;
   University of Chicago Press; Chicago; 1969; introductory arti-
   cle by Meland.

3. Martin; op cit; Empirical; p.2; quoting Dewey's term.

4. Martin; op cit; Empirical; p.4.

5. The Columbia Encyclopedia; Clarke F. Ansley (ed.-in-chief);
   Columbia University Press; N.Y.; 1935 (1946); article on "Empir-
   icism".

6. Henry Nelson Wieman and Bernard Eugene Meland (eds.); American
   Philosophies of Religion; Harper and Brothers; N.Y.; 1936; p.149.

7. The Columbia Encyclopedia; op cit; article on "Pragmatism".

8. Daniel J. Bronstein and Harold M. Schulweis (eds.); Approaches
   to the Philosophy of Religion; Prentice-Hall, Inc.; N.Y.;
   1954; pp.10-14.

9. Bertrand Russell; A History of Western Philosophy; Simon and
   Schuster; N.Y.; 1945; 16th pb. edition; p.151.

10. ibid; p.551.

11. ibid; p.792.

12. Daniel J. Bronstein, Yervant H. Krikorian, Philip P. Wiener (eds.);
    Basic Problems of Philosophy; Prentice-Hall Inc.; Englewood
    Cliffs; 1947 (1964); p.73.

13. ibid; pp.445-451.

14. ibid; pp. 453-453.

15. These criticisms of pragmatism, and of other materials through-
    out the paper, are partly my own and partly come from a host of
    other sources.

16. Bronstein and Schulweis; op cit; pp.10-14.

17. The Encyclopedia of Philosophy; Paul Edwards (ed.-in-chief);
    The Macmillan Co. and the Free Press; N.Y.; 1967; articles on
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19. The E. of Philosophy; op cit; article on "Pragmatic Theory of Truth;"; p.427.

20. James; op cit; pp.72-73.

21. ibid; p.298.

22. ibid; p.300.

23. William James; The Will to Believe; Longmans, Green and Co.; N.Y.; 1896 (1931).

24. Bronstein and Schulweis; op cit; p.23.

25. Russell; op cit; p.818.

27. Wieman and Meland; op cit; pp.279-281.

26. The E. of Philosophy; op cit; article on "Pragmatic Theory of Truth"; p.429.

28. John Dewey; A Common Faith; Yale University Press; New Haven; 1934; pp.50-51.

29. Martin; Empirical; op cit; p.5.

30. ibid; p.6.

31. James A. Martin, Jr.; "The Future of Empirical Theology"; in Religious Studies; 8:1; March 1972; pp.71ff.

32. Meland; op cit; introductory article.

33. Martin; "The Future"; op cit; p. 72.

34. conversation with Martin.

36. Wieman and Meland; op cit; pp.272-274.
(The other "isms" in naturalism are religious humanism; cosmic theism; and evolutionary theism.)

35. Martin; Empirical; part.2; op cit.

37. Wieman and Meland; op cit; pp.291-295.

38. ibid; pp.286-290.

39. ibid; p.288.

40. ibid; pp.276-279.

41. ibid; p.279.

42. Meland; op cit; part.1.

43. Martin; Empirical; op cit; p.3.

44. Wieman and Meland; op cit; pp.295-305.

45. ibid; p.299.

46. Meland; op cit; introductory chapter.

47. ibid; p.49.

48. Robert A. Evans; (ed.); The Future of Philosophical Theology; The Westminster Press; Phila.; 1971; article by Ogden.

49. Meland; op cit; part.1.

50. Martin; "The Future"; op cit; p.74.

51. Frederick Ferré; Language, Logic and God; Harper and Row; N.Y.; N.Y.; 1961 (1969); pb.

52. Martin; "The Future" and Empirical; op cit.

53. Martin; Empirical; p.120; op cit;

54. ibid; p.127; quoting James in The Varietyies of Religious Experience.

55. Peter L. Berger; A Rumor of Angels; Anchor Books; Doubleday and Co.;Inc.; Garden City; 1969 (1970pb.).

56. ibid; p.20.

57. ibid; pp.47-48.

58. ibid; pp.89-90.

59. Louis I. Newman (ed.); The Hasidic Anthology; Charles Scribners' Sons; N.Y.; 1935; 65:5 p.155.