

**Recent Work in Pragmatism that Takes Religion Seriously: Making Room for Radical Impermanence and Existential Issues**

Andre C. Willis

*The power of Love, as the basis of a state, has never been tried.*

Ralph Waldo Emerson

*“Democracy” with all its promises and expectations has proved to be no panacea for confused and mismanaged humanity.*

Rufus M. Jones

The current economic crisis in the United States has swelled the ranks of citizens in fiscal dire straits. Time will reveal the full effects of this crisis, though we do know some of its causes: mainly an unregulated market rampant with the irrepressible greed of financial elites. While we should never belittle the impact of this catastrophe, particularly on those who suffer from it, it is important, at an appropriate time, to begin to take away lessons from the current crisis that might help reduce future suffering. Some economic and political theorists have already commenced assessing their role in this mess. For those of us who work in the area of philosophy of religion and attempt to inspire rational, bio-historical, spiritual and cultural individuals-in-community to deeper awareness the lessons of this crisis cannot be lost. One of our aims must be to prepare for what we all ultimately face: the existential fact of radical impermanence or the fact that everything ends.

People who lost their jobs and witnessed the closing of their long-term work places—automotive workers, mortgage brokers, and commodity traders—were forced to confront the difficult truth that neither history nor expectations fully determine the future. They learned that history is, in fact, equally open ended in its tolerance for good *and* evil. We are all witness to the basic fact that dissolution is the fundamental property of an unpredictable life with its ever-present extreme change and its truth that everything ends.

How we handle this existential truth is directly related to how we situate ourselves in relation to it. Trying to avoid dissolution by denying its reality will only make it more difficult to face when it inevitably arrives. I contend that this existential issue—in addition to those of loneliness and despair—must be eloquently addressed by work in philosophy of religion if we are to better prepare people to face the full range of their predicament as individuals-in-community.

Philosophically speaking, the existential unpredictability and impermanence of all seems to cohere with the ideals of change and interrelatedness at the core of Process thought; but Process thought, with its complex lexicon and nontraditional metaphysics, has not garnered popular appeal.<sup>1</sup> The tradition of American pragmatism, however, and its comfort with contingency, fallibility and social-vision, is currently experiencing a revival amongst the new generation of scholars that suggests it is compelling its readership.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, recent generative work that takes pragmatism and religion seriously has tended to concern itself with Deweyan notions of democracy and the role of religion in democratic society at the expense of fundamental existential issues that the present economic crisis occasions.<sup>3</sup> To its credit, this work has mostly prioritized the effective and expressive realm of social practice and generally deflected the ontological and metaphysical issues in philosophy; but, it has largely sidestepped the existential and theological dimensions of reflection. Still, it provides some foundational elements for

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<sup>1</sup> This is in spite of the recent work of David Ray Griffin, John B. Cobb and Philip Clayton who have done much to counter the heavy metaphysics and often intricate lexicon associated with Process thought. Additionally, recent work in Process thought forces those who assume it lacks a clear political or practical agenda to re-think their position.

<sup>2</sup> New works by Melvin Rogers, Joan Fontrodana, William G. Ramroth, Erin McKenna, and David Boersma make this clear.

<sup>3</sup> Additionally, the hurricane Katrina catastrophe of 2005 and the violence of Sept. 11, 2001 help us with the lesson of radical impermanence. The work of Richard Bernstein (*The Abuse of Evil*), Erin McKenna (*The Task of Utopia*) and Eddie Glaude (*In a Shade of Blue*) begins to touch on the more existential issues.

future work to address the existential issues we constantly face--including radical impermanence, loneliness, depression, and unhappiness.<sup>4</sup>

While there is little agreement as to the official constitutive elements that make an enquiry a pragmatist one, it can easily be argued that the classical pragmatists (Pierce, James, and Dewey as well as the proto-pragmatist Emerson) articulated a commitment to empiricism, pluralism, historicism, social-practice, novelty and open-ended inquiry.<sup>5</sup> Within the last twenty years, work that takes pragmatism and religion seriously has pushed the critique of strong realism along with the criticism of epistemological foundationalism to new levels. Additionally, it has expanded the Deweyan commitment to address declining social conditions, waning moral authority and short-sighted political choices of American society. This Deweyan emphasis has been politically astute in that it has provided sound rational options for a culture in crisis; professionally timely in that it has reduced the sense of confinement that burdens many professional philosophers; and philosophically challenging in that it has advanced historicist, anti-foundationalist and pluralistic ways of doing philosophy that take religion seriously and confront distorted

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<sup>4</sup> Work in pragmatism comes close to tending to existential issues when it takes evil seriously, but often the discussion of evil veers off into a romantic notion of “the tragic” that sometimes glosses over “the basic”--that is, the simple fact that everything ends. For example, Sidney Hook, *Pragmatism and the Tragic Sense of Life*, (New York: Basic Books, 1974).

<sup>5</sup> Arthur O. Lovejoy, a student of William James’ described “The Thirteen Pragmatisms” in 1908! Ralph Barton Perry argued that pragmatism was illegitimate as a mode of inquiry because it was based on James’ misreading of Peirce, and F.C.S. Schiller contended that there were as many pragmatisms as pragmatists. See Schiller, “William James and the Making of Pragmatism,” *The Personalist*, VIII, 1927, pp. 81-93. I find Hilary Putnam’s description of the pragmatist “way of thinking” as grounded in four notions to be helpful:

“antiskepticism; pragmatists hold that doubt requires justification just as much as belief... (2) fallibilism; pragmatists hold that there is never a metaphysical guarantee to be had that such and such a belief will never need revision (that one can be fallibilistic and antiskeptical is perhaps the unique insight of American pragmatism); (3) the thesis that there is no fundamental dichotomy between “facts” and “values”; and the thesis that in a certain sense (4) practice is primary in philosophy.”

Hilary Putnam, *Words and Life*, ed. James Conant (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 152.

power dynamics head-on. In short, contemporary work in pragmatism of the Deweyan strain has generally responded to the decline of American civilization by making bolder contributions to civic, social and political dimensions of American life.<sup>6</sup>

There seem to be two reasons that the most illuminating and generative recent Dewey-inspired work in pragmatism has overlooked the basic existential facts of impermanence, despair and loneliness that lie at the root of our cultural suffering. The first reason is because of its commitment to anti-realism in ontology. On this account, contemporary pragmatists are sensitive about ontological claims and universalizing theses that under-account for the role of human agency, social practice and dynamics of power. Their mantra, borrowed from C.I. Lewis that “all problems are at bottom problems of conduct” narrows the range of their discourse to focus on social facts, that is, what bio-historical individuals-in-community constantly negotiate. Thus they claim to focus on facts as fallible, experience as experimental and social practice as the end and aim of their reflection. This, in part, is the power this work. Yet the Deweyan strand of work in pragmatism and religion underemphasizes the experimental and turns away from a part of its legacy in doing so. For one example, Peirce’s naturalist ontology and evolutionary theory of reality that emphasizes novelty—a perfect point of entry into existential issues like radical impermanence—are overlooked as the Deweyan led contemporary thinkers primarily focus on social and cultural criticism.

The second reason recent work in pragmatism sidesteps the existential is because it is desperately trying to recover from Richard Rorty’s notion that pragmatism is a secular project. Contemporary work that takes pragmatism and religion seriously faces

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<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that pragmatism and neopragmatism do not lend themselves to one political position. The recent work of Richard Posner and Stanley Fish confirms this.

an uphill climb. Rorty, the powerful neo-pragmatist--who almost single-handedly re-established pragmatism as a field of philosophic interest in the late seventies-- narrated pragmatism as a secular tradition, and has made the terrain of pragmatism practically inhospitable for religion. Thus contemporary work in pragmatism that takes religion seriously has tried to re-establish the importance of religion in the history of pragmatism and restore religion to a more respectable status in American political culture. This venture is important and shortsighted. It is important because it is a necessary corrective to Rorty's secular thesis. It is shortsighted, as I will show, because it often holds democracy as an obsession. It usually carries instrumentalist conceptions of religion and this venture therefore cannot speak to the existential issues that must be dealt with at the same time as, if not prior to, political and cultural work.

Generally, the implicit premise of the work of contemporary pragmatist 'rescuers' of religion is double-pronged. First, it prioritizes democracy as both a political aim and a way of life. Second, it understands religion above all as a vital instrument for the social-practice of meaning-making. This essay will investigate both premises. It will assess whether or not a strong commitment to democracy weakens the spirit of experimentalism and the principle of open-ended inquiry at the core of pragmatist thought and thereby negates the possibility of addressing fundamental impermanence. Also, this essay will determine if the emphasis on religion as a social practice by these thinkers undermines the unique aims of spiritual life that direct us to existential issues. My premise is twofold: first that a conception of democracy as radically impermanent can help develop our consciousness such that we are better able to come to terms with the existential fact of radical impermanence. That is, the political has existential effects. Second, that a

properly constituted conception of religion will take into account its spiritual and mystical as well as its institutional, personal and public role, and when constructed with the proper breadth it can effectively speak to existential issues of impermanence, loneliness and self-dislike that permeate our collective consciousness.

I believe that the most fundamental problems facing persons in the modern west are a lack of self-acceptance and the inability to find contentment. These issues require both spiritual development and political discipline. Therefore it is my sense that we must cultivate kindness *and* bravery, self-love *and* love-of-all. Our chief philosophical concepts and categories, themes and theories should reflect these commitments and be flexible enough to allow us to nurture our capacity for self acceptance that can lead to proper relationships; cultivate our capacity to be more present in the moment so that we might awaken our sense of compassion and adventure; and teach us to stay open to uncertainty so that we may find contentment. We can never know what might happen next, so we must develop practice to help us live in the discomfort that uncertainty produces. This practice is an inward one that looks outward. It is to be committed to the existential as political.

In this essay, my aim is to explore and build on the insights of contemporary Dewey-inspired thinkers who take the tradition of pragmatism and issues of religion seriously as a foundation for my larger existential project. These philosophers have gained well-deserved traction partially because they are compelling in their presentation of a *political project*. And though they are critical in part of Emerson, Dewey and Du Bois their project is based on an Emersonian vision filtered through Deweyan notions of democracy and Du Boisian structural criticism. While I celebrate, and share, many of

their political interests, I want to emphasize more of the *spiritual/existential side*, drawing on the best of their insights. My project will take the Emersonian vision and filter it through Jamesian conceptions of religious plurality, the aesthetic sensibilities of Alain Locke and the engaged spirituality of Howard Thurman.<sup>7</sup> It is the latter option, *in addition to* the political one, that may more precisely serve the interests and possibilities of a pragmatist philosophy of religion that remains committed to social criticism, yet is open-minded in terms of the possibility of democracy and tentatively committed to religion as deepening of presence via meditative social practice aimed at radical social-spirituality. In other words, I want to use resources from these Deweyan-inspired thinkers to serve as a foundation for addressing existential issues as well as social practices and political engagement.

There are three notable and recent constructive book-length efforts that take pragmatism and religion seriously.<sup>8</sup> Each deserves a full length treatment on its own. They are: Jefferey Stout's *Democracy and Tradition* (2004), Roberto Unger's *The Self Awakened: Pragmatism Unbound* (2007) and Cornel West's *Democracy Matters* (2004). These timely works make many contributions but one in particular stands out. It is that they attempt to clarify the role of religion in a democracy that is in jeopardy. A minor contribution is that they incorporate insights at the margins of the pragmatist philosophic heritage. Thus the work shows vitality in terms of extending the pragmatist tradition by incorporating insights from those on the margins of pragmatism as it also circumscribes its two central concepts, democracy and religion. In other words it both liberates and

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<sup>7</sup> I shall develop this project more fully in a forthcoming essay. Important to note here is that I do not accept a bifurcation between the political and the existential only a different emphasis.

<sup>8</sup> Each author is critical of pragmatism thus I hesitate to call them pragmatists. Yet, part of the strength of pragmatism is its flexibility so, in another context, one could argue for each of them being a pragmatist.

stultifies at the same time. Stout's *discursive* investment relies on the communicative emphasis of Jurgen Habermas yet to a certain degree it calcifies democracy as tradition and ossifies religion as a mere social practice. Unger's *romantic* project is informed by the aesthetic insights of Cavell and aims for a radical democracy that flies in the face of history and a poetic religion that tickles the imagination. Cornel West's *genealogical* undertaking incorporates insights from Nietzsche and harbors a tragicomic hope for the deepening of democracy and expansion of prophetic religion to sustain and improve a decaying American empire. My question is what do these projects offer to help prepare bio-historical, spiritual, cultural, political, passionate and rational persons in community for the radical impermanence we all face?

### **Stout's *Discursive Pragmatism***

Jeffrey Stout's *Democracy and Tradition* is a broad yet nuanced work that describes—with patience and detail—the civic value of democratic means and practices. His *discursive pragmatism* holds what he calls the “expressive” or the discursive space as the central location for democratic engagement. In other words, it is in deep, substantive dialogue between responsible agents in community where issues of trust, justice, hope and ultimately democracy get worked out. But Stout's notion of discursive practice is neither flat-footed nor unbalanced. He accounts for issues of power, truth and history by enumerating the discursive encounter as one that is always just “relatively

nondeferential”<sup>9</sup> but that allows for shifting (or nonauthoritarian) authority that holds a minimalist conception of truth.<sup>10</sup>

Deeply influenced by Dewey’s notion of democracy, *Democracy and Tradition* is, most broadly, an attempt to assess the role of reason in contemporary democratic culture while paying special attention to religion. His commitment to “modern democratic practices and ideals”<sup>11</sup> guides his inquiry, which is, generally speaking, a response to a twofold critique of American liberal democracy. He addresses the work of Alasdair MacIntyre and John Rawls who—on Stout’s reading--claim that liberal democracy is a secularizing project that undermines religious values and leaves little space for religious beliefs and practices. He then challenges theologians Stanley Hauerwas and John Milbank who claim that the only way for religion to survive in liberal democracy is by distancing itself from civic engagement and divesting from the public square entirely.

On the first account, Stout’s contention is that American democracy is not a secularizing project, but a pluralizing project and that—at its best—it is a tradition that venerates human dignity, character, and piety. He uses the work of Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Ralph Ellison and John Dewey to show that American civic life has been an evolving tradition which has been concerned with developing a sort of piety based on moral/democratic character in a pluralistic society. To Milbank and Hauerwas he asserts that religion has always played an important role in democratic (secular) discourse and that their desire to marginalize it to protect its integrity overlooks the extent

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<sup>9</sup> Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 213.

<sup>10</sup> “Minimalism can be given a pragmatic twist if one adds that the wanted justification of our practices is to be found, if at all, “in showing their worthiness to survive on the testing ground of everyday life”. Stout, p. 251.

<sup>11</sup> Stout, p. 289.

to which both religion and democracy benefit when religious norms and values are in the public square. Stout puts forward his notion of “expressive and/or discursive pragmatism” to show how democratic life can properly carve out a moral discourse that takes religion into account yet does not privilege religious voices.

Stout’s democratic commitments do not allow him to address the existential issues like radical impermanence that lie at the heart of our consciousness. His investment is in the social practice of democracy, which he defines as culture; and culture is “an enduring set of social practices, embedded in institutions of a characteristic kind, reflected in specific habits and intuitions, and capable of giving rise to recognizable forms of human character.”<sup>12</sup> This culture happens in a piecemeal fashion, when diverse communities come together and “hold one another responsible for commitments, deeds, and institutional arrangements---without regard to social status, wealth or power.”<sup>13</sup>

Does Stout’s notion of democracy limit our capacity to deal with existential issues? I think it does on two levels. First, Stout’s argument grants democracy status as a “way of life.” This imposes a sense of democracy as an enduring and everlasting trait, something that one can never be fully transcended or overcome. Second, the notion of democracy as culture removes the historical dimension of democracy (that is, was there no “culture” in feudalism?) and leans towards infallibility; thus it renders the existential issue of radical impermanence or ultimate dissolution as a non-issue.<sup>14</sup> Finally, and this political argument will not be emphasized here, Stout gives little sense of how the

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<sup>12</sup> Stout, p. 28.

<sup>13</sup> Stout, p. 226.

<sup>14</sup> On Stout’s argument it seems that ‘feudalism’ could be culture as well. Presenting Democracy as a ‘way of life’ diminishes the fact that it is fundamentally empowered by institutional and proceduralist elements that determine—often undemocratically—the fate of constituents. Additionally, it disallows one to grasp the radical impermanence or the basic fact of existence. It is the very notion of radical impermanence that may better assist in the creation of more equality. But Stout venerates democracy over equality and thereby seems to circumvent sharing discursivity with those who passionately view democracy itself as the enemy.

democratic culture he describes is impacted by an aggressive and overzealous market culture that seeps into our transactions and consciousness in ways we do not yet completely understand.

But is Stout's conception of religion open to the existential issues that I am concerned with? Stout leaves space for a sense of piety that looks back and acknowledges sources of our existence and for a notion of "religion" as social practice. He discusses "religious pluralism," "religious premises," "religious expression," etc., but he does not elaborate on what religion is, nor does he show how we might engage our most basic existential concerns. Though he does not give a specific definition, Stout understands religion as the non-secular; and, given his commitment to naturalism, this is all he needs to discuss. The varieties and nuances of how one might be "non-secular" are not interesting for his argument, so he does not spend time detailing or defining the complexity of types, expression, functions or practices that constitute being non-secular. Stout's concern is to construct a public philosophy that ascribes the appropriate location to religion in deliberative democracy. Thus, he focuses on religion as social practice and his text is silent on the questions of transcendence, religious experience, spirituality, the sacred, and ritual. In short, Stout offers a narrow discussion of religion that is not able to tend to existential issues like impermanence, loneliness and discontent.

Stout's argument cannot speak to the existential issue of radical impermanence on both philosophic grounds (his conception of democracy is fixed, ahistorical and infallible) and religious/spiritual grounds (his work conceives of religion too instrumentally). A more complex grappling with the breadth of what religion is and less of a commitment to democracy as a fixed norm would allow him a way to talk about the

existential issues religion can access with the open-endedness that radical impermanence demands. Additionally, to dismiss the existential aims of spiritual life in a discussion of religion in public life is to overlook the very complicated process of self-acceptance that precedes the democratic engagement that Stout wants.

Still, Stout's discussion of the religious, political, ethical, and philosophical issues intimately linked to the flourishing of democratic energies is curative and in many ways exemplary contemporary pragmatist reflection. His pragmatist commitment is eloquently evinced in his practical focus on developing democratic character, in his critique of metaphysical realism<sup>15</sup> and his anti-foundationalism in terms of epistemology.<sup>16</sup> But it is his commitment to the discursive realm as the site where we can hold one another accountable and thereby better realize our potential that most reflects the pragmatist commitment to social-practice for it is "social practices that matter most to democracy—[that is] the discursive practices of ethical deliberation and political debate".<sup>17</sup> For Stout (and Dewey) when individuals are better able to reach their potential in community the

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<sup>15</sup> Additionally, Habermas' notion of truth as "pragmatic epistemological realism" factors into Stout's discussion of truth. Over and against Dewey's notion of truth as "warranted assertibility" and James' demotion of truth to the contingent and useful, Stout holds a minimalist concept of truth for his "modest pragmatism" (251). This means that Stout wants to be able to distinguish between beliefs that one is merely justified to hold and beliefs that are true; at the same time—against metaphysics—he wants to reduce the weight of the notion of truth. Habermas holds a similar notion of truth as objective but limited by the pragmatic constraints of our language. While Stout refuses to define his own notion of truth, he does say that it is normative, revisable, and real, and that it has an objective and conceptual status. It also leaves his discursive project open to religious believers who at least minimally depend on objective truths. While not explicitly religious here his argument is reminiscent of the "pragmatic epistemological realism" of Habermas that posits a transcendent *and* linguistic/discursive notion of the truth. Habermas' pragmatic realism is arguably not as minimalist as Stout demands, but Stout's creative appropriation of Habermas enables him to carve out a greater space for religion.

<sup>16</sup> He begins with the premise that the distinction between fact and value is not only unimportant but also unclear, for all statements of 'fact' have been decided by and are therefore dependent on preceding values. He comfortably works from a practical acceptance of the fact/values of community, democracy, discursive practices, etc.

<sup>17</sup> Stout *Democracy and Tradition*, p. 293.

community is more ethical.<sup>18</sup> When communities are more ethical they are also more compelling in their capacity to transmit democratic ideals. This transmission of democratic ideals forms a tradition; thus democracy is a tradition and “pragmatism is democratic traditionalism.”<sup>19</sup>

Also, Stout’s notion of *discursivity* contains the fallibilism that is so central for many pragmatists. The way this works is that ‘conclusions’ of the discursive event are always tentative and revisable upon the occurrence of the next discursive event, and so forth. Discursivity is critical because we all live in community as “reason-givers” and “reason-exchangers” and it is the responsible expression in the exchange of reasons that constitutes the “discursive practice of holding one another responsible for the actions we commit, the commitments we undertake, and the sorts of people we become”.<sup>20</sup> Again, the contingency of the discursive event does not apply to his conception of democracy, which seems to serve as a limit or final resting place for these tentative discursive aims.

Though Stout credits Emerson, Ellison, Dewey and Whitman for “moral and intellectual sustenance”<sup>21</sup> another source of his argument in *Democracy and Tradition* is German social theorist Jurgen Habermas, a figure some consider to be a pragmatist not born in the US.<sup>22</sup> Stout’s *discursive pragmatism* is an intervention in the field of pragmatism because—borrowing from the Habermasian commitment to the

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<sup>18</sup> On an aside, the other impressive feature of his work, is that he has made a bold *political* choice to try to “improve the prospects of democratic community” via the construction of a public philosophy by relying on whatever resources he can muster. This move reminds us that professionalizing philosophers who avoid addressing vast inequities in the social context in which they reside to take up problems unrecognizable to the non-philosopher make a political choice too.

<sup>19</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, p. 13.

<sup>20</sup> Stout, p. 303-304.

<sup>21</sup> Stout, p. 8.

<sup>22</sup> Seyla Benhabib recognizes Stout’s indebtedness to Habermas. See her essay “Toward a Deliberative Model of Democratic Legitimacy” in *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 67-94. ed. Benhabib.

communicative--Stout specifically identifies the premier site of democratic struggle: discourse between two responsible agents.<sup>23</sup> This important pragmatic synthesis shows the fecundity of combining insights from the margins of the pragmatist strand with the best of the classical pragmatists. But Stout is not uncritical in his use of Habermas. He is very careful to note—against Habermas—that to be effective, discursive pragmatism must be open to religious believers and acknowledge the limitations of deliberative democracy.<sup>24</sup>

Stout contends that a limitation of Habermasian discourse theory is that its ideal actors are not free enough to reach democratic ends. Thus he supplies his *discursive pragmatism* with the Hegelian paradigm of the reasonable agent “who is prepared to engage in discursive exchange with any point of view that he or she can recognize as responsibly held.”<sup>25</sup> This agent possesses an expressive freedom that allows her to transcend accepted norms and rules of reason<sup>26</sup> and participate in the unfolding of the dialectic. Stout needs Hegel’s expressive freedom to power the potential democratic motion that is to result from a potentially combative discursive engagement.<sup>27</sup>

Cooper Harriss 9/24/09 2:52 PM  
Comment: Should/Could this be dialectic?

What I have tried to show here is that *Democracy and Tradition* expands the conversation in contemporary pragmatism because it builds on insights of Habermasian

<sup>23</sup> I want to be clear that I do not claim that Stout takes on Habermas entirely or uncritically, for this is not the case. Stout recognizes that Habermas believes that religious beliefs are too stable to evolve from public discourse and therefore useless in communicative exchange; Stout clearly disagrees. Nicholas Adams gives an in-depth critique of how Habermas’ overarching theory of rationalization confirms religion as irrational and thereby makes it unavailable to the public sphere. See his *Habermas and Theology*, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

<sup>24</sup> Stout writes, “a better way of characterizing my position in relation to contemporary political theory would be to classify it as a pragmatic version of deliberative democracy. Like other proponents of deliberative democracy, I emphasize the discursive dimension of democratic culture” Stout, p. 339.

<sup>25</sup> Stout, p. 80.

<sup>26</sup> whereas the paradigmatic Kantian reasonable agent can only “agree to rules that everyone else, acting on the same motivation, would have compelling reason to accept” Stout, p. 82.

<sup>27</sup> Stout explicitly acknowledges this Hegelian influence, but he wants to combine it with the Emersonian emphasis that suggests the “most substantial spiritual benefits of expressive freedom are to be found in a form of social life that celebrates democratic individuality as a positive good” Stout, p. 84.

social theory in its construction of a rich and dynamic kind of discursivity. At the same time its categories of democracy and religion are underdeveloped, particularly in relation to the existential fact of radical impermanence. His conception of democracy is too stable to inspire us to deal with the existential issue of complete disintegration and his notion of the religious is just too narrow.

And politically, while I am not persuaded that the *discursive pragmatism* of Stout takes seriously enough the power relations implicit in the use of language as a model for public philosophy or social theory—even with the Hegelian expressive freedom—I find Stout’s pragmatic emphasis on the discursive realm to be an important addition to the Deweyan strand of pragmatism that takes religion seriously. I imagine fruitful projects that could build on this emphasis but take into deeper account the pre-existing limitations on expressive freedom present prior to discursive event, develop a thicker historicism and a more poignant cultural criticism, be more open to spiritual life and existential issues, and provide a thicker description of religion and a more tentative commitment to democracy.<sup>28</sup>

### **Unger’s *Romantic Pragmatism***

Of the many interventions of Roberto Unger’s refreshing 2007 *The Self Awakened: Pragmatism Unbound* one is a highly *romantic pragmatism*. By romantic I mean that Unger relies on the idea of the heroic potential and spiritual power of humanity and celebrates the social hopes and future dreams of individuals in community. This passionate vision both builds on and counters Stout’s notion of religion as social practice

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<sup>28</sup> It is not that I think one should have no foundations or stable commitments only that if one understands themselves as a pragmatist, it seems to me that one must at least clarify why stability in some areas and contingency in others.

of meaning making. For Unger, religion is a *spiritual* enterprise--a social practice that aims for personal and then societal transformation. Additionally, for Unger, democracy is not the culture of discursivity that develops into a tradition, it is radical *possibility*. Unger's project pushes pragmatism in some important new directions; it shows the importance of our individual selves and bodies for developing the energy of transformation, it undermines the distinction between commitment to self and commitment to other, and it gives an aesthetic conception of life to the pragmatist enterprise. While it seems that the radical democracy and romantic spirituality of Unger might help us grapple with the existential issue of radical impermanence, Unger's extraordinary fluidity and consistent overcoming overshoot, and his work is too future-oriented to shed light on the radical impermanence of all. Still, Unger's radical pragmatism is a vital step for pragmatism as it shows the role that personal spirituality can play in politics and appropriates a version of Stanley Cavell's Emersonian perfectionism.

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**Comment:** Should this be "the existential issue" or existential issues"?

*The Self Awakened: Pragmatism Unbound* takes the reader on a marvelously energetic, intense and inspirational voyage in hopes ultimately to empower the reader to make a shift in attitude towards structural change. Emersonian in its sheer creativity and vision this unabashedly romantic journey is a response to the question "how shall I live?" and it aims to inspire a new vision of the self as an awakened being—a being that has a more intense and deep engagement with experience, nature, people and phenomena. Unger focuses on the individual as subject in ways that most pragmatists avoid given their Cartesian critique and concomitant decentering of the subject. But Unger tends to subjectivity in the context and purpose of improving social practice. He writes, "It is

movement from narcoleptic daze, interrupted by moments of pain and joy, to presence, attention, and involvement”<sup>29</sup> that will lead to greater democratic/heroic energies. This awakening has two phases (phase one is a deepening of self-consciousness via an ascetic approach to the body, and phase two is losing the self for recognition of the infinite), and only when complete will we be able to invent a better future to engage our context-transcending spirits and realize the enhanced powers of our humanity and the “dignity of ordinary experience.” Unger’s central claim is that “we become more godlike to live, not that we live to become more godlike,”<sup>30</sup> and by godlike he means open to the other and to the new. The way to this “greater life now” is to embrace the spiritual project at the core of his vision.

The above synopsis makes two things evident. First that Unger, like Emerson and James, understands religion to be primarily a spiritual affair; and second, that he believes democracy to be about heroic possibilities of those with a liberated spirit. This first issue is crucial because it allows Unger to sidestep the naturalism at the core of Deweyan inspired pragmatism and create a version of pragmatism as romantic spiritualism. His conception of the human as both finite *and* infinite is a turning point in pragmatism. It both radically changes the concept of human being as fully natural that rests at the core of pragmatism and it shows the complexities of our spiritual strivings. In this regard I think that Unger’s work is a very important intervention in pragmatism.

Though he allows for a more spiritual approach to the question of democratic social practice, Unger fails to address the socio-political status of religious belief in America and refuses to discuss how religion can be manipulated for violent or oppressive

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<sup>29</sup> Roberto Unger, *The Self Awakened: Pragmatism Unbound*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 215.

<sup>30</sup> Unger, 150.

purposes. In addition, the spirituality he describes is highly limited and circumscribed by its capacity to serve democratic ends. It does not speak to issues of radical impermanence, loneliness or lack of self-acceptance that so often haunt our consciousness. Thus Unger's conception of religion leaves him exposed both to a sociological/historical critique (his romantic sensibilities will not allow him to address the institutional forms of religion that can work directly against social transformation) and religious/spiritual critique (his work holds too narrow a view of religion because it does not address spirituality).<sup>31</sup>

Second, the notion of democracy that Unger wants is a "radical democracy." This is a way of being that celebrates the imaginative possibilities and innovative energies that are faithful to the transformative potential of human ability to "govern their own affairs and to wrest power away from any class or group claiming privileged access to the means for making the collective future within the social present."<sup>32</sup> This romantic notion of democracy privileges experimentalism and discovery yet it does not resemble the 'democracy' that most of us experience daily. Unger's visionary and imaginative notion of democracy is inspirational yet dreamily distant.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, while he

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<sup>31</sup> Still, Unger's work is spiritual in the Jamesian sense that it consistently points to transcendence. His chapter on religion focuses on *connection*-how we build a self, and *transcendence*-how we live. It is this vision of religion that calls us to resist and to fight in the name of democracy and our humanity. This awakening of the self, may seem like Christianity without Christ or the Church, but it must "recommend itself by its own force" (Unger, 222). We recognize, after the second awakening, that we are part of and driven to the infinite. At this point we realize, he writes, that:

The only solution, we know, is only barely possible: love, understood as the imagination and acceptance of the other person, as who that person both is and might become, not as the projection of our need, love freely given and therefore also freely refused, complete only when not tainted by the benevolence of the protector for the protected, precariously penetrating the routines of a life together and fading as it moves away from the core terrain of personal encounter to the larger life of society. (Unger, 227).

<sup>32</sup> Unger, 185.

<sup>33</sup> This raises the issue about Unger's pragmatism. Given his earlier work and his description here it is somewhat surprising that he chooses to work under the pragmatist label. The only reason he gives for

implicitly suggests that democracy is merely a guide and not a foundation for his project (he says it can revise itself out of its own form), it is difficult to see how democracy is not at least a normative foundation if not an epistemological one (the cure for democracy is now and will always be more democracy).<sup>34</sup> More importantly, while his notion of democracy contains impermanence because it is constantly being overcome and remade it does not assist with existential issues like radical impermanence. That is, Unger would have to articulate a way of life that venerated novelty and was ultimately willing to transcend radical democracy in order to help us comprehend radical impermanence. I think Unger's 'radical democracy' gets us close, but its constant overcoming and repeated transformation emphasize creation and re-creation so strongly that we have no sense of something ever ending. Further, Unger's vision takes us away from the present such that we cannot slow down enough to grasp the reality of radical impermanence and the fact that all things end.

The fecundity of Unger's program is its spiritualism. His project begins with the assertion that everything "can be changed, even if the change is piecemeal"<sup>35</sup> and he argues that the way to change (both personal and structural) is through affirming the "infinity of the human spirit."<sup>36</sup> In other words, one has to start with the self in order to ultimately make social change. For Unger, the first step on this journey to the self is to

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claiming to labor in the pragmatist vineyard is that it "raises the question of what pragmatism is". Unger contends that pragmatism has become distorted from much of its original impulse and he claims to have little investment in saving or transforming it. He does find some pragmatic reasons to mine the pragmatist tradition, namely because pragmatism is the most vibrant philosophical position today (even though it has been diminished), and because any work labeled "pragmatist" will provoke a "fight over meaning and value of pragmatism today" that will become a "struggle about how we should relate the future of philosophy to the future of society" (29). Additionally, pragmatism has two components that are indispensable for Unger: a commitment to the deepening of democracy and the stress on the empowerment of the individual (27-28).

<sup>34</sup> Note there is nothing wrong with foundations but it is important to situate them as such.

<sup>35</sup> Unger, p. 38.

<sup>36</sup> Unger, p. 28.

abandon the “perennial philosophy” as well as the three traditional responses to it: phenomenism, naturalism and democratic perfectionism. Only then can one adopt his “radicalized pragmatism.”

The perennial philosophy is problematic for at least four reasons: it fails to recognize how we are embodied, it asks us to embrace perceptions of change and distinction in our lives and the world as illusions, it leads to the “hierarchical specialization in soul and society”<sup>37</sup> and it is not historicist. Responses to the perennial philosophy are also to be hurdled. Phenomenalism is misleading because it allows us to make the mistake of thinking that what we perceive is actually real. Naturalism is problematic because it affirms the illusion of our independence and distinction from the universal spirit. Democratic perfectionism gives way to the “cult of self-reliance.”<sup>38</sup> It is the notion that “a democratic society has a unique, indispensable institutional form”<sup>39</sup> and when that form is stabilized it allows people to achieve prosperity if they properly help themselves.

Unger’s themes of agency, contingency, futurity and experimentalism—are derived from but not dependent on pragmatism.<sup>40</sup> Still, Unger does not provide a heroic

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<sup>37</sup> Unger, p. 17.

<sup>38</sup> Unger, p. 24.

<sup>39</sup> Unger, p. 23.

<sup>40</sup> Though Unger situates his project inside of the pantheon of pragmatism, he is more explicit than Stout in his critique of classical pragmatists Peirce, James and Dewey. He states that Peirce’s approach to meaning is insightful in how it connects meaning to practice but flawed in that it does not confirm the “distinction as well as the relation” between political concepts and theoretical concepts. In the latter case, the concept does not gain meaning from making any difference as it does in the former. Unger wants us to understand these are two different ways of making meaning that exist together—a fact that the Peircean view does not make clear.

James’ pragmatic theory of truth (and Dewey’s notion of truth as “warranted assertability”) also comes under explicit fire from Unger. Unger contends that James’ theory of truth “asserts that the representation of reality and the experience of desire are internally related” (33). Unger, like others, misread James’ theory of truth. James was only theorizing about how a rare and new truth comes to be called true in a socio/linguistic system that is already value laden. For James, the consensus required to make some ‘new’ truth is contingent and revisable and will be worked out over a long period of time. Unger—committed to

reading of pragmatism nor undermine it for its failures—his radical pragmatism is to create a mode of thinking that elicits transformative action “while dispensing with the illusions of naturalistic superscience.”<sup>41</sup> The success of this enterprise depends on his concept of the human person that is particular, embodied, soaked in time and moving towards death; unable to be contained by culture, society and institutions, and able to change the character of our relation to social and cultural contexts (“we can change the extent to which they imprison us”<sup>42</sup>). This notion of humanity combined with the four themes of radical pragmatism lead to the “shortening of the distance between context-preserving and context-transforming activities” to form a “program of permanent revolution—a program so conceived that the word ‘revolution’ is robbed of all romantic otherworldliness and reconciled to the everydayness of life as it is.”<sup>43</sup> Unger then goes on to provide a series of proposals to restructure democratic politics along with three philosophical “attitudes” that accompany these proposals: the link between theory and praxis, the rejection of the “spectral idea of possibility” (that the possible is the antecedent to the actual),<sup>44</sup> and the belief that structures and institutions are not natural.

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James’ sloppiest articulation of his theory of truth (from James’ lecture “Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth”)—takes James to task for qualifying his pragmatic theory of truth in the face of his critics. Unger would rather radicalize (or romanticize) James’ most distorted and earliest expression of this theory so that we might use it as an “insight into the character of social experience” (34). In essence, Unger wants us to desire social change and thereby actualize it—he wants us to politicize James notion of truth for the ends of social reconstruction.

Like Peirce on meaning and James on truth, Dewey’s concept of experience is too naturalistic for Unger. Dewey, holds that the agent is both continuous with the historical (Darwinian) narrative of human development and at the same time in a sea of contingency where nothing is permanent and everything can fundamentally change. Unger contends that this ambiguity between biological evolution and creativity/novelty is unresolved in Dewey and that this “greatly weakens its most fertile proposal: the view of the agent struggling with constraint and contingency and using contingency to loosen constraint” (35). Unger, *The Self Awakened*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>41</sup> Unger, p. 48.

<sup>42</sup> Unger, p. 56.

<sup>43</sup> Unger, p. 57.

<sup>44</sup> Unger, p. 61.

Unger's romantic pragmatism is full of wisdom and has great inspirational value—something that is a rarity in philosophy. This work, like his others, is wildly hopeful and richly exciting in its call for a reinvention of the future; it brims with political, philosophical and spiritual possibilities. The fact that Unger has decided to stake his romantic tent in the pragmatist camp is salutary and extends contemporary pragmatism. His work has always emphasized religious and romantic themes of transcendence, overcoming, love, unity, and harmony; but he has always done so critically, and from the Gramscian/Marxist side. His romantic pragmatism is a much needed intervention for pragmatism yet it does not speak to radical impermanence and is still constrained by the category of democracy even though it is a radicalized democracy.<sup>45</sup>

Unger's intervention in pragmatism is to assert the romantic/spiritual aspects of our humanity. Methodologically, his writing is poetic and moving, free of jargon and without footnotes. He names just one influence in his work: Nicholas of Cusa. But a partial source of Unger's argument here is the thought of Stanley Cavell. Cavell's reliance on the Emersonian/Jamesian spiritualism in philosophy and its emphasis on transformation, his commitment to the autobiographical, particular and the historical over the universal, his the writing of philosophy as poetry and his assertion of "the absolute responsibility of the self to itself"<sup>46</sup> are all appropriated by Unger, pragmaticized (that is, given a shift toward social practice) and articulated as a "radicalized" or *romantic pragmatism*.

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<sup>45</sup> Why did he give up his Marxist/socialism?

<sup>46</sup> Stanly Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979)

Though Cavell's corpus is huge and quite diverse, his thought is generally distinguished by four major components: paying very close attention to the act of writing, particularly the construction of sentences; celebrating the heroic and transformative energies of Emerson's perfectionism as a response to skepticism and pain; the idea that "there is an internal connection between philosophy and autobiography"<sup>47</sup> and affirmation of the infinite quality of our finite existence.

Unger's generative and highly energetic work is exemplary in contemporary pragmatism for a number of reasons I have highlighted here. It extends pragmatism by its rejection of parts of the classical pragmatism of Peirce, James and Dewey, yet simultaneously builds on pragmatism it by incorporating insights from Cavell. In sheer beauty and scope, it seems that Unger's remarkably insightful *romantic pragmatism* could only be produced by someone untrained in the professional discourse of philosophy. His text is emotionally powerful, highly readable and potent though its romanticism is so pronounced and its vision so transcendent that it stubbornly refuses to square off, face to face, on the everyday issues that confront most individuals: e.g. growing economic disparity, racial and gender inequity, homophobia, etc. While I think this project has great value, it does not assist us with radical impermanence or our pressing existential concerns mostly because it continues to render democracy as a way of life as well as a political ideal. Additionally, while it does get past the idea of religion as social practice of meaning making it ignores the institutional side of religion and therefore is not helpful in propagating a sound and realistic awareness of what religion is.

Cooper Harriss 9/24/09 3:00 PM

**Comment:** This paragraph on Cavell strikes me as odd coming here. It doesn't really drive your assessment of Unger. Is there a way to bring Unger into into the components you discuss regarding Cavell? Or could this paragraph be excised or cut and merged with the earlier one?

aw88 9/25/09 2:14 PM

**Deleted:** Stanley Cavell is a profoundly original and idiosyncratic thinker who takes film and literature as seriously as he does philosophy. By his own design, Cavell's thought moves in fits and starts. It is constantly unfolding and perennially unfinished. It is revisable and partial yet pointing to something beyond it. Still, Cavell has offered serious reflections on American thinkers, namely Emerson (and, to a lesser extent, Thoreau) and has discussed the contours of pragmatism in some detail.

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<sup>47</sup> Stanley Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

### **West's Historicist Pragmatism**

No thinker of his generation has done more than Cornel West to spread the ideas of American pragmatism and the vision of deep democracy throughout the world. Through his extensive publications and interviews in both popular journals/newspapers and academic ones; to his appearances in films/videos and his spoken-word cd, as well as his international lecturing, West has made both his self-styled humanism and pragmatist philosophy of social practice fashionable to new generations of students and delivered his compelling Checkovian Christian vision to a mass-based audience. For his sheer dedication and commitment he should be celebrated, but the substance of his vision and the artistry that he uses to compel his audience can only be matched by his kindness of presence and his personality.

*Democracy Matters* is an effort constructed for a popular but well-read audience. In it West puts forward a vision of democracy and a conception of religion that are historically grounded, politically driven, properly nuanced and broad, philosophically sound and representative of the very best of the pragmatism of Emerson, Whitman and especially Dewey. There are three features of West's unique project that set it apart from the above projects of Unger and Stout. First, West understands America as empire and seriously interrogates its quest for imperial greatness. Second, West passionately wonders aloud whether or not democracy can stay alive given our obsession with the market and our glorification of materialism. Third, his conception of religion is broad—he understands its spiritual and mystical dynamics, its institutional value and detriment and its ritualistic function. These fundamental issues at the core of *Democracy Matters* allow him to begin to raise the very existential issues that concern me most (radical

impermanence). But his commitment to prophetic religious forms and his investment in the deepening of democracy at all costs ultimately disallow him from dealing directly with the existential issues of radical impermanence, loss, and loneliness.

West's method here is mostly historical and critical. His commitment to genealogical or deep historical thinking suffuses the entire text. He improvisationally pulls from his historicist work instances of activists, artists, thinkers and writers with extraordinary moral vision. He connects these figures historically to illuminate the tradition that they form and are a part of. This is all in an attempt to inspire his reader to develop the capacity for courage and moral vision, the willingness to sacrifice, and the dedication to the cause of deepening democracy. Yet, he makes no firm prediction or guarantee that this fight will not be in vain. He is open to the very real possibility that we may not win the battle, but in *Democracy Matters* he falls back—more than in some of his other work--on “a hard-won tragicomic hope.”<sup>48</sup>

For example, in the first chapter, “Democracy Matters are Frightening in Our Time,” West begins neither by claiming that democracy is a firm tradition in which we are all rooted (Stout), nor by calling for a radical democracy (Unger). He starts with both a political fact and an existential truth: that democracy is deteriorating and that we don't feel like our participation matters. His text then promises to “look unflinchingly at the waning of democratic energies.”<sup>49</sup>

The tone of *Democracy Matters* is one of urgency. West contends that the obsession of government elites with pursuing imperial goals has democracy against the

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<sup>48</sup> Cornel West, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism*, (New York: Penguin, 2004), p. 216.

<sup>49</sup> West, p. 2.

ropes due to three “dominating, antidemocratic dogmas”:<sup>50</sup> “free-marked fundamentalism,” “aggressive militarism” and “escalating authoritarianism.” For West, democracy is in a fight for its very life but this struggle is not entirely new, for democracy requires a constant vigilance, it is always “incomplete and unfinished, and this is why American democracy is a work in progress.”<sup>51</sup> West’s conception of democracy is about “transforming corrupted forms of elite rule”<sup>52</sup> and “individuals being empowered and enlightened in order to help create and sustain a genuine democratic type of community.”<sup>53</sup> He then moves historically to show how “the love of democracy has been most powerfully expressed and pushed forward by our great public intellectuals and artists”<sup>54</sup> and lays out a tradition that extends from Socrates via prophetic religious figures to writers, artists and community/social leaders. This tradition is the “deep democratic tradition” and its high moments are “the penetrating visions and inspiring truth telling of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, and Eugene O’Neill, of W.E.B. Du Bois, James Baldwin, John Coltrane, Lorraine Hansberry, and Toni Morrison.”<sup>55</sup>

To his great credit, and similar to Dewey, West is not only adept at pointing out the problems, tensions and paradoxes of democracy in this place at this particular time, but also he is expert at crafting a historically based narrative on how we can reduce the decline of democracy. His writing is skillfully crafted to educate and inspire. While reading I felt like he was the wise coach prepping his NFL team for a Sunday “battle.” I

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<sup>50</sup> West, p. 3.

<sup>51</sup> West, p. 204.

<sup>52</sup> West, p. 204.

<sup>53</sup> West, p. 69.

<sup>54</sup> West, p. 15.

<sup>55</sup> West, p. 67.

wanted to jump on the “deep democratic team” and lead them to victory crushing the dogmas, nihilisms and problems along the way! But West is holding on to a tragicomic hope that we might win, he is not ensuring the victory. He is skeptical about whether the tradition of deep democracy can muster enough energy and strength to win. His last sentence even entertains the fact that deep democracy might not be victorious, he says, “and if we lose our precious democratic experiment...” thereby practically preparing us for the possibility of radical impermanence.

West’s understanding of history, power, and the market allow him to at least raise the question that democracy may end. Still, he wants us to fight and go “down swinging...with style, grace, and a smile that signifies that the seeds of democracy matters will flower and flourish somewhere and somehow and remember our gallant efforts.”<sup>56</sup> Democracy remains the precious ideal to aim for, the norm that should guide our living and we should spend our time pursuing this idea at all costs it seems.

Cooper Harriss 9/24/09 3:03 PM  
**Comment:** Should this be "seeds"?

West’s notion of democracy comes close to propelling us to reflect on radical impermanence, but he refuses to directly confront the question I am concerned with: “what happens when democracy ends.” This is mostly because he believes democracy is a precious ideal that allows us to come closest to reaching our potential as individuals-in-community. He sides with Dewey, not Lippman, at the end of the day. Still, his reflections bring pragmatism to the edge of the kind of existential investment that I am calling for and they prove that until pragmatists loosen their commitment to democracy—that is, entertain some visions and narrate some post-democratic possibilities—they will not be able to assist their readership with the fundamental questions of fragility, loneliness, contentment and radical impermanence that haunt our experience.

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<sup>56</sup> West, p. 218.

West can easily talk about religion both synchronically and diachronically and he does exactly that, exhibiting an ease with different religious traditions, a facility with the history of Middle Eastern religious tensions, a profound comprehension of the “crisis of Christian identity in America” and a strong sense of the mythological power, spiritual capacity, ritual necessity and desire for the sacrosanct that comprise the complicated connection between humans and “the religious”. His well rehearsed distinction between “Constantinian Christians” and “prophetic Christians” in the United States has helped codify the fight between empire and democracy in religious terms. I find West compelling on these issues and, against his critics, have no problem with the dualisms he employs in the service of deepening democracy—they accurately reflect the theatre his battle is to be waged in. The problem for me is that West—trying to make religion safe for pragmatism--focuses on the role of religion in public life at the expense of the more mystical/spiritual sense of religion that I believe *precedes* its influencing “government policies.”<sup>57</sup> I will say a bit more about this later. What is important to note here is that though West is like Stout and Unger and mostly discusses religion to describe its role in public life, his notion of religion is sufficiently dynamic and appropriately broad such that it invites us to a more complex understanding of the history and meaning of the term.

In terms of contemporary texts that take both pragmatism and religion seriously West’s *Democracy Matters* is soulful and inspiring as well as skeptical and ruminating. Deweyan in its major features, it builds on the best of Stout’s discursive project by agreeing with his call to bring religion into the public conversation. It builds on Unger’s romanticism by upholding a vision of the flourishing of democratic energies and it at least plants a seed for skepticism about democracy and leaves open the possibility for the

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<sup>57</sup> West, p. 146.

mystical understanding of religion. Thus, West's project provides important pieces of a foundation for work that might deal with the existential issues, particularly radical impermanence, that we all have to confront.

One of the unique features of West's thought—in addition to his Christianity—is his genealogical or historicist mode of work. In fact, West is the most deeply historicist philosopher working loosely under the pragmatist banner.<sup>58</sup> In this sense his thought is fundamentally informed by his reading of Nietzsche who calls for a historical consciousness in order to comprehend the present and visualize the future. Though West pulls from broad and eclectic sources, Nietzsche--though not mentioned by name in this text--is a foundational contributor to West's worldview.

There are two ways that this text reveals its Nietzschean or historicist commitments. First, it suggests, over and again, that the problems with American democracy cannot be assessed from an objectively neutral position but that they are only understood in historical context from particular locations. Thus, West admits, his sense of democracy matters is one particular reading informed by his own culture, tradition and social location. He is open to other interpretations as long as they admit they are not value-free, are historically thick and take into account those who are suffering. In this way, one can meet his Nietzschean standard for critical history and avoid the antiquarian and monumentalist approaches.

The second way West reveals his historicist leanings in this text is that he refuses to discuss any issue without taking it on historically. So, to grapple with imperial America now, he starts with the earliest formulations of America as empire against

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<sup>58</sup> West is critical of pragmatism. See his "The limits of NeoPragmatism" and his "Pragmatism and the Sense of the Tragic" in *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

Amerindians. To discuss democracy matters now, he begins with a turn to Ancient Greece. In his discussion of Christian identity in America now, he begins with the Roman empire. In short, his disposition to historicist analysis is quite pronounced and instructive to a point. West wants us to think more historically about where we are, because then when may be better able to understand how we may project possibilities for the future.

### **Conclusion**

Each of the Deweyan influenced thinkers who take pragmatism and religion seriously (Stout, Unger and West) do philosophy and discuss religion with mainly a political project in mind. All is subsumed in their quest to serve democracy. Thus they do not directly speak to the existential issues of radical impermanence, loneliness and fragility that I believe are foundational to human being and precede the political.

Given his slight scepticism about democracy and his broad sense of religion, West's historicist work invites a bit more of an existentialist set of interests and commitments. Though *Democracy Matters* does not directly speak to the question at the heart of my project—existential issues— in some ways, it provides some foundational pieces to the kind of spiritual/existential project that I want to build. I shall briefly outline this spiritual/existentialist project in its broad strokes before I close.

The work of Stout, Unger and West confirms that three important elements are necessary for the development of a philosophy of religion that takes pragmatism seriously, and therefore addresses the Deweyan commitment to social practice but adds the critical spiritual/existential component. The first is that the Deweyan investment in

democracy must be questioned. The strong commitment to democracy as a way of life leads to too much conceptual certainty and intellectual stability. In order to stay vital and effective, philosophy has to be more skeptical about the existence of democracy itself. Democracy is neither foundational nor fundamental. It is historic, fallible and impermanent. A more skeptical embrace of democracy can help set the groundwork for radical impermanence. Emerson is instructive here.

The second element that we can build on from the work assessed above is Unger's notion of the infinite in the human. This characteristic of our humanity enables us to produce the kind of self-acceptance that is a lacking but required part of the consciousness of late-modern agents before they can begin to behave discursively. The self acceptance can be derived from meditative practice, spiritual experience, worship, family or culture, but it is both pre-requisite and part of social-practice. It also allows us to develop tools that help us grapple with existential issues like loneliness, despair and radical impermanence. James is useful here.

Third, the deepening of our presence in the now—in a Howard Thurman inspired fashion--may be more useful than the intense focus on the future. In order to effectively self-actualize in community (as community actualizes) philosophy has to help us see the "inner prize." It must reach into dimensions of our being via the deepening of our awareness. This can only happen by a practiced focus on the present so that our spiritual emancipation that both takes race and ethnicity into account but undermines these categories at the same time (a/la Alain Locke) engenders our social practices of freedom.