

## Pragmatism, Religion and Ethics: A Review Essay.

H. Deuser et al, *The Varieties of Transcendence: Pragmatism and the Theory of Religion*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2016;  
N. Brunsveld, *The Many Faces of Religious Truth: Hilary Putnam's Pragmatic Pluralism on Religion*, Leuven: Peeters, 2017;  
D.B. Heney, *Toward a Pragmatist Metaethics*, London: Routledge, 2016

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### Abstract

In the last decades, pragmatism is consolidating its influence on social sciences, both in terms of epistemology and ontology. A series of recent philosophical publications deal with a rather classical pragmatist topic — the relationship between morality, religion, and truth — in quite a new shape. First, they deal with the conception of a pragmatist epistemology based on situated morality and truth aptness of moral judgments. Second, they propose a large reflection on the relationship between theology and pluralism in terms of truth regimes. Finally, they try to overcome the pitfalls of the Jamesian phenomenological conception of religion, through both the semiotic lens of Charles S. Peirce and the rediscovery of the Josiah Royce's works. This paper uses the stimuli of the three books listed above to introduce the reader to a socio-philosophical perspective rather not considered in the European debate, despite its importance for the development of American sociology (symbolic interactionism, the School of Chicago, R.K. Merton, among the others) and for a variety of European scholars. A second objective is to understand how the problems pragmatist philosophers encounter in analysing the religious phenomena could help understanding the need for a multifactorial and multilevel explanation of religion and ethics. Finally, in the discussion, the author critically enlightens the need to avoid collapsing morality into religion — as sometimes pragmatists do — and extends and reframes Hans Joas' appropriation of Mead and Durkheim in his pragmatist approach to religion and morality.

**Keywords:** Pragmatism; ethics; religion; epistemology; social theory.

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## 1 Introduction

Twenty years after the beginning of the so-called neopragmatism's renaissance,<sup>1</sup> pragmatism is consolidating its influence on social sciences, both in terms of epistemology and ontology. A series of recent philosophical publications deal with a rather classical pragmatist topic — the relationship between morality, religion, and truth — in quite a new shape. First, going back to Dewey's statement about the possibility of a science of morality and a morality of science, they deal with the conception of a pragmatist epistemology based on situated morality and truth aptness of moral judgments. Second, they propose a large reflection on the relationship between theology and pluralism in terms of truth regimes. Finally, the publications try to overcome the pitfalls of the Jamesian phenomenological conception of religion, through both the semiotic lens of Charles S. Peirce and the rediscovery of the Josiah Royce's works.

This paper will use the stimuli of the three books listed above to introduce the reader to a socio-philosophical perspective, rather not considered in the European debate, despite its importance for the development of American sociology (symbolic interactionism, the School of Chicago, R. K. Merton, among the others) and for a variety of European scholars. A second objective is to understand how the problems pragmatist philosophers encounter in analysing the religious phenomena could help understanding the need for a multifactorial and multilevel explanation of religion and ethics.

The article is organised as follows. First, I will briefly sum up the assumptions of classical pragmatism. Then, I will consider how pragmatism dealt with the religion and ethics. In the second part of the paper I will give room to the three books listed above. In paragraph 4, I will explain how Deuser et al. (2016a) analysed the classical contributions of James, Dewey, Peirce and Royce. In paragraph 5, I will introduce the Brunsveld's reading of Putnam about religious propositions and pluralism. In paragraph 6, I will shortly explain how Diana Heney (2016) stressed the need for a pragmatic approach to metaethics.

Finally, in the discussion I will critically enlighten the need to avoid collapsing morality into religion — as sometimes pragmatists do — and will extend and reframe Hans Joas' appropriation of Mead and Durkheim in his pragmatist approach to religion and morality.

## 2 Origins and Assumptions<sup>2</sup>

The origins of pragmatism are conventionally identified in the foundation of the *Metaphysical Club* in Cambridge, Massachusetts in the 1870s. Here, a group of philosophers identified themselves under a conceptual label introduced in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). Chauncey Wright, Charles Sanders Peirce, and William James, in particular, started debating on the possibility to overcome the categoric *a priori* of Kantian *Critique*, given the *pragmatist* character of so-called hypothetic imperatives. The aim was to construct a statute of legitimacy for philosophy based on the imitation of scientific knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

Their efforts produced a new epistemology that has deeply influenced the development of so-called *interpretative sciences* in the Twentieth century (Denzin, 1997 & 2001) and that found in the works of George H. Mead and John Dewey a bridge towards sociology and social sciences.

The main 10 assumptions of the pragmatic epistemology can be synthesized as follows:

1. Social construction of truth. Truth is the product of a dynamic, negotiated, collective agreement. Consequently, the notion of truth is closely linked to the notion of community (Peirce, 1955,

1. During the 1980s and the 1990s, philosophical works by Richard Rorty (1982; 1989; 1991) and by Jurgen Habermas (1999; 2002), focused a strong attention on neopragmatism and the so-called *linguistic turn* of social sciences. In the same period, works like *Pragmatism and Social Theory* by Hans Joas (1993) and historical essays by Dmitri N. Shalin (1986; 1991) favoured a rediscovery of early pragmatist philosophers, in particular regarding their epistemology.

2. Considering the aims of the essay review, I will provide only a very schematic synthesis of the philosophical and sociological movement. For a larger discussion see: Mills (1964); Joas (1993); Rochberg-Halton (1983); Misak (2000).

3. "Philosophy ought to imitate the successful sciences in its methods, so far as to proceed only from tangible premises which can be subjected to careful scrutiny, and to trust rather to the multitude and variety of its arguments than to the conclusiveness of any one." (Peirce, 1955, pp. 264–265).

p. 247). Different communities and social groups will produce different worldviews and different vocabularies (Rorty, 1979).

2. Anti-foundationalism and anti-metaphysics. There is no final, certain, and objective knowledge to be *unveiled*. Knowledge is the contingent, fallible, and operational product of human activity;<sup>4</sup>
3. Practice-centrality. All knowledge and beliefs are oriented to (and assessed through) social practical purposes. Pragmatism is a practice-centric approach to human behaviour, knowledge, and to social phenomena;
4. As a philosophy of science, pragmatism supports “naturalism”<sup>5</sup> and “direct realism”;<sup>6</sup>
5. Situationalism. “The origins of articulated meaning are to be found in situational, unifying, pervasive qualities in which a manifold of intensely felt, but not yet articulated, directions for further cognitive elaboration is bodily present” (Deuser et al., 2016b, p. 7).
6. Holism. Pragmatists believe that there is no separation between facts and values<sup>7</sup> and between knowledge and beliefs;
7. Contingency. Structures are considered to be the contingent<sup>8</sup> and partially unpredictable product of a process of interaction between factors and/or individuals.<sup>9</sup> The idea of pre-existing, transcendental, and immutable structures — in the natural, social, and theoretical world — are considered artificial social constructions. Pragmatism stated the possibility of isolating emerging social structures but refused the existence of ontological, unverifiable, teleological structures, preceding the observations and independent from human action.
8. Emergency. Human action is considered to create the world and the identity of social actors (*performativity*<sup>10</sup>). The society-man relationship is dialectical.<sup>11</sup> Social structures emerge from human action.
9. Agency. Actors are not completely influenced by normative expectations. Rather, they can enact and express their *agency*, resisting to standardization and homologation.
10. Symbolism. Society is conceived as the result of a continuous symbolic production that juxtaposes a *symbolic world* to the pre-existing physical world (Mead, 1932, 1934 & 1938; Dewey, 1929b/1960 & 1938; Blumer, 1969; Peirce, 1955): man creates and recreates the social order in every social interaction.

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4. Different from the further social developments of social ecology (see Gaziano, 1996; Abbott, 2016), pragmatists presuppose total contingency: “Any human act (or omission) is radically contingent, excluding myriad possible worlds” (Pihlström, 2016, p. 44).

5. Naturalism denotes the “willingness to seriously consider the content of all kinds of experiences human beings are naturally inclined to have. All authentic experiences thus may reveal reality. In this manner, values are taken to be as real as atoms and scientific reductionisms are consequently rejected” (Jung, 2016, p. 99).

6. Direct realism means that things exist independently of subjective perceptions.

7. As Putnam stressed: “There is a distinction to be drawn (one that is useful in some contexts) between ethical judgments and other sorts of judgments [...] nothing metaphysical follows from the existence of a fact/value distinction” (Putnam, 2002, p. 19, emphasis in the text).

8. Contingency indicates at the same time that the case is imposed to causality in determining the progression of events, and that the phenomena remain, to a certain extent, unpredictable. Taking contingency in consideration doesn’t mean renouncing to any scientific knowledge, for a form of cognitive radicalism, but admitting the impossibility of controlling all the possible intervening factors in the field of scientific observation.

9. “There is no immutable structure. Matter and mind are structures, as well as the constitution of the United States. But they are only part of a process” (Mead, papers b7, fl cit. in Shalin, 1991).

10. This emphasis on the performative character of identities goes through the development of interactionism from the dialectic conception of self by Mead (1934) to the dramaturgical sociology of Erving Goffman (1959) until Ralph H. Turner’s role theory (1978; 1990).

11. “Human action is a double-edged phenomenon: it is an event in nature that binds the individual to other things, and it is also a fact of consciousness which organizes the world in the unique perspective of a particular actor” (Shalin, 1991, p. 227).

### 3 The Classic Works about Religion

Given the movement's orientation towards social problems, religion appears very early in the production of pragmatist classics. The three more important philosophers of the first generation, William James, Charles Sanders Peirce and John Dewey, all dealt with religion.

The more famous contribution is William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (1901–1902), a book deriving from the Gifford Lectures on natural theology, that was delivered at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland, during 1901 and 1902. In this counter-intuitive essay, James focussed on religious experience and defined it through the ecstatic experience of individuals in their real life.<sup>12</sup> When it was introduced, this phenomenological point of view was a revolutionary stance “in opposition to [what at the time was] an exclusive focus on the study of religious doctrines or religious institutions” (Joas, 2016, p. 219). The book is also innovative for its refusal of a medical determinism about the psychological states, and for the statement about the possibility of a science of religion. James conceives religion as a guiding principle in daily life. The pragmatist approach pushes him to focus on the practical effects of religion on one's existence. His approach, then, does not focus on doctrines, neither on ritual activities nor on religious institutions.<sup>13</sup> James aims to show how religious experience is in no way a special experience compared to other worlds of experience, and how religious emotions are ordinary emotions directed towards religious objects.

The “reality” of religion was thought to be determined by the real effects it produced in one's experience. Religion also was conceived as possessing a noetic character opening the way to access an unseen moral order and to organize one's life consistently:

There is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto (James, 2002, p. 46).

Differently from contemporary sociologists as Durkheim, James does not focus on religion as a collective activity. Rather, religion

shall mean for us *the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.* (ivi, pp. 29–30, emphasis in the original text).

The approach is ontologically solipsistic and utilitarian:

The pivot round which the religious life, as we have traced it, revolves, is the interest of the individual in his private personal destiny. Religion, in short, is a monumental chapter in the history of human egotism (ivi, p. 379).

Charles S. Peirce's contributions about religion are less systematic. References to religion can be found in different essays regarding truth, morality, and other matters (1955; 1974). His epistemology founds the pragmatic understanding of culture as the interaction between signs, actors, and practices. For this reason, he can be considered as the founder of semiotics. For Peirce, religion is a Community of Interpretation in terms that anticipate Berger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966).

Finally, John Dewey's *A Common Faith* (1934/2013) is again a collection of lectures, the Terry Lectures held at Yale University during 1933 and 1934. It has become one of the most influential American philosophical books. The approach to religion was again experiential and phenomenological, but Dewey's philosophy of religion could be better defined as *humanistic*. He conceived religion as a form of access to the universal values of humanity. He naturalized religion, extending its boarders to any beliefs able to move people toward the realization of the highest humanistic ends.<sup>14</sup> Still, he introduced the

12. The data James analysed were, almost exclusively, literary exerts, diaries and personal reports about individual religious and mystical experiences.

13. “In the more personal branch of religion it is ... the inner dispositions of man himself which form the centre of interest, his conscience, his deserts, his helplessness, his incompleteness” (James, 2002, p. 38).

14. “Any activity pursued in behalf of an ideal end against obstacles and in spite of threats of personal loss because of conviction of its general and enduring value is religious in quality.” (Dewey, 1934/2013, p. 30).

concept of religiosity, as the existentialist and practical side of religion. The difference between religion and religiosity in Dewey transfers the Peircean opposition between *langue* and *parole* in the religious symbolic universe. Individuals may have religious tendencies or inclinations, although they do not recognize themselves in any specific religion. Religions, rather than as Communities of Interpretation, are seen as superstructures that give retrospective meaning to subjective religious experiences. The solipsistic stance in James does not disappear completely, but it is declined in socio-psychological terms as the individual adaptation to general attitudes.<sup>15</sup>

Summing up, the work of the three founders holds three different but compatible visions of religion: an experiential (James), a semiotic (Peirce), and a super-naturalistic (Dewey) one. All three share a common anti-metaphysical outlook on religion. But they differ about the role recognized to social ties and subjectivity.

After their contribution, we can distinguish a second generation<sup>16</sup> of heirs and revisers, i.e. scholars who interacted during their lives with the founders and reviewed their philosophical stance on religion or revitalised their legacy. The more important representatives are Josiah Royce and Hilary Putnam. Their work could be analysed as a work of synthesis and integration of previous reflections about religion. Royce integrated Peirce's theosemiotic and James's phenomenologic ideas (see §4). After a long epistemological journey into naturalism in the second stage of his intellectual production, Hilary Putnam played a major role of mediator between the naturalistic scientific logic of Dewey and the dialogic phenomenology of Levinas and Buber (see §5).

The traditional believer, [says Putnam] ... visualizes God as a supremely wise, kind, just person (Putnam, 1992, p. 102).

In other terms, God is not conceived as a transcendental unity but as the abstraction of the highest human and social moral ends.

The third generation of pragmatists is characterized by an application of pragmatism as a discursive knowledge to political affairs. Here the positions are different and can be schematized briefly as follows:

- Richard Rorty and John Rawls expressed their position about (and against) religion in their works about the foundation of liberal democracies;<sup>17</sup>
- Hans Joas rediscovered G.H. Mead's work and helped a discussion of the Chicagoan thinker outside the borders of a social-psychological reductionism (Joas, 1985 & 1993; Joas & Huebner, 2016);
- Charles Taylor is not typically understood as a pragmatist, but his book on *A Secular Age* (2007) represents one pillar of recent pragmatist reflection about religion;
- Finally, all the critical German sociological and philosophical branches, including both Apel and Jurgen Habermas, of whom we will not discuss in this article.

## 4 Interpreting the Founders' Works

*Varieties of Transcendence* (2016a), the book edited by Hermann Deuser, Hans Joas, Matthias Jung, and Magnus Schlette helps understand the consequences while also the limits of the pragmatist conception of religion in James, Peirce, and Dewey. Further, it introduces an interesting reading of Royce's work, an author almost unknown in Europe. Despite the participation of Hans Joas, the most important

15. "According to the best authorities, 'religion' comes from a root that means being bound or tied. [...] The religious attitude signifies something that is bound through imagination to a general attitude." (Dewey, 1934/2013, p. 21).

16. For the purposes of this article, the term "generation" shall not be interpreted in a strict temporal sense but rather in the sense of intellectual generation.

17. Richard Rorty and Johan Rawls are both confident with the idea that in defining modern liberal democracies one can "put aside such topics as an ahistorical human nature, the nature of selfhood, the motive of moral behaviour, and the meaning of human life" (Macmillan, 2016, p. 261).

contemporary interpreter of G.H. Mead's thought,<sup>18</sup> it does not consider at all the work of the Chicagoan thinker. This, in our opinion, represents the book's main limit. Nevertheless, the work is important as it helps understand what works and what is wrong with pragmatism when one thinks about it both as social theory and epistemology.

In my opinion, the points of interests in the book are seven and they all deal with general premises of pragmatism as a general social theory: contingency, social change, individual vs. collective *cleavage*, transcendence and meaning, symbolism, practice and normativity, historicization, and denaturalization.

- a. Contingency. First, religion is conceived as an *antidote to contingency* and as a source of meaning against the meaninglessness of daily life:

This attitude requires a concept of transcendence that allows for the essential contingency of life and its threads to our seeking for meaningfulness and harmony (Deuser et al., 2016b, p. 1).

Schlette interpreted

Putnam's efforts to combine a pragmatist-style naturalism with faith in a Personal God as an authentic expression of the "cross pressure" ... between theism and naturalism in modernity (ivi, p. 9).

Even if the authors do not acknowledge it, it appears clear that religion plays for pragmatism the function of *necessary counter-balancing power* for theorizing the omnipresence of contingency. In other terms, transcendence is designed as the existential means for getting rid of the super-contingency of modern times.

- b. Social change. James's *Varieties* succeeded clearly in predicting some transformations of religion in the Western countries after WWII. It clearly anticipated the phenomenon of privatization of religion and, with reference to United States more than Europe, how individualization of faith would have been more relevant than secularization. In this sense, William James can be considered as an *ante litteram* postmodernist. But the authors, again, do not seem to acknowledge how their conception is strongly influenced by the American way to think about Christianity and Hebraism. The following citation shows how they do not rightly consider how religion is experienced in countries where normative forms of life are still prevalent and where agency is not possible in context of high normativity:

Religiousness is principally characterized by its *optional* status as a means of self-understanding in a pluralistic universe of various cultural perspectives on reality, and its quality is judged by its contribution to solve problems in the process of individual self-realization (ivi, p. 2, our emphasis).

Secondly, they tend to confuse a perspective on religion for a description of a social phenomenon. What is missing is what else was proposed — and partially acquainted — in Max Weber's sociology of religion (1920/1992): the analysis of the religious, economic, political, and social conditions that favoured a given transformation of religious forms of life in a given time and space.

- c. Individual vs. collective. Thirdly, the books aim at disciplining William James or, better, disciplining the readings of William James, integrating his point of view on religion with Dewey's humanism and Peirce's interpretivism while denaturalizing them. James does not conceive religion as a solipsistic experience, Brunsveld suggests,<sup>19</sup> but as a shared social experience that originates in and through the individual perception and cognition. Of course, this phenomenological approach to religion assigns a priority to the subjective cognitive and emotional experience of religion:

18. We will shed some light on his reading of Mead in the Discussion.

19. I anticipate here some content of the review of the following book (see paragraph 4), Niek Brunsveld's *The Many Faces of Religious Truth* (2017), as it explains one of the main points in the interpretation of founders' conception of religion, consisting with Deuser, Joas, Jung and Schlette's work.

We are thinking beings, and we cannot exclude intellect from participating in any of our functions (James, 2002, p. 334).

But it does not exclude the mystic experience of *social effervescence*. And, most of all, it does not exclude religious experience to be shared and communicated:

James's notion of religious experience may thus be individualistic or even ultimately solipsistic in the sense that religious experiences are thought to occur to individual mystics, not to group of mystics, and that they cannot be communicated fully to others. Nevertheless, the propositions based on these experiences can in principle be communicated. (Brunsveld, 2017, p. 217).

- d. Transcendence and meaning. Both William James and John Dewey conceive the existence of an unseen moral order as central to religious belief and practice. In this sense, they are near to Kant: *noumeno*, as the *Ding an Sich*, not immediately disposable to knowledge can exist and be represented by men. But, contrary to metaphysics, both Kantian phenomenology and pragmatism refuse the idea of a possibility to access this unseen and *unseeable* world through philosophy. The pragmatist function of religion is rather intended as a symbolic universe people use to give meaningfulness to their lives in the long run. This long run orientation shows an implicit contradiction in the social ontology proposed by pragmatists. While paying attention only to affection and the practical effects of religious experience, they exclude, from the main door, any metaphysics and any teleological vision of history in conceiving religion as a long run orientation of individual lives they re-introduce metaphysics — or at least transcendence — from the window. Dewey proposed an escape to this contradiction considering transcendence as the realization of an idealized — and strictly social — moral order. Elsewhere, the neo-Kantian solution proposed by Pihlström (2016) is to separate the realm of nature from the realm of morality.<sup>20</sup>
- e. Symbolism. This is a consideration that comes from Peirce and finds a larger development in symbolic interactionism (Mead and Blumer in particular). In Peircian terms, Christianity is considered as a universal community of interpretation. Reposa (2016) stresses this point, speaking of *theosemiotic*, an interpretative way to Christianity that moves from Scotus to Charles S. Peirce. As in Durkheim, religion is conceived as the first source of social representations and symbols, unified and coded in socially shared languages:

All knowledge...is mediated by signs...If this is stated explicitly, it yields...the idea of communally concretized, de-transcendentalized “selves” — of ‘I’s’, which, as sign-using, entail the community of a ‘we’ (Nagl, 2016, p. 238).

This conception overlooks the institutional power of Church as an *ecclesia*, i.e. as a communitarian *locus*. Rather, religion is seen almost exclusively as a process of communication. The analogy goes as far as to include different kinds of rituals and aspects of religious life:

Being realized on different language levels of rationalization (e.g., doxology, confession, narration, theology) and being institutionalized in different forms (e.g., common prayers, rituals, feasts) (Seibert, 2016, p. 24).

This sacralization of the process of communication has famous interpreters in Emile Durkheim, G.H. Mead (1936) but also in Karl Jaspers, Jürgen Habermas, and Karl-Otto Apel (Joas, 2016).

- f. Practice and normativity. A religious belief, for Peirce,

20. Morality is in James's *The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life*, an omnipresent feature of social life. There's no moral holiday free from the obsession of the sense of guilt, as Craig explained (Craig, 2010).

involves the establishment in our nature of a rule of action, or, say for short, a *habit* (Peirce, 1992, p. 129).<sup>21</sup>

Christoph Siebert develops this Peircian motto stressing an interpretation of religion as a “procedure by which ends will be realized in ways of controlled conduct.” Considering religion in normative terms means paying attention to the *religious engaged commitment to reality* and to the *enactment* of religion-oriented-actions. As Siebert explains,

one may finally say that religious ideas — as elements of belief— are means of orientation in an at-least-twofold sense: 1) they orientate the manner a person understands the world/the universe in; 2) they align the ways a person is engaged in particular *action situations* (2016, p. 26, emphasis in the text).

This reminds us of course of Peirce’s semiotics but also of Sloterdijk’s conception of modern day religion as a form of *de-spiritualized askesis* (Sloterdijk, 2009). This emphasis on the religious actions has two further sociological consequences: any complex of beliefs has the same right to become a “religion,” and also that religiosity is measured not starting from some given doctrinal premises but on the practical effect of regulating one’s life course.

- g. Historicization and denaturalization. In his article, Hans Joas aims at a synthesis of American pragmatism and German historicism in order to integrate “the semiotic theory of self and community with a non-teleological understanding of history.”

Similarly, Jung suggests that

The totality of a given situation is shaped not only by its actuality but by the long sequence of the prior experiences of the social self with the world. This is what the German tradition of hermeneutics, since the days of Wilhelm Dilthey, has always emphasized (Jung, 2016, p. 97).

This emphasis corrects one of the problems with the Deweyan naturalization of religion: the risk to reduce it to a neurophysiological process and to hide the artificial naturalization *a posteriori* of religion:

Religious concepts and practices have sometimes been vehicles by which ethical concepts, norms, practices, and institutions have been naturalized or represented in such a way as to render invisible the fact that they are contingent products of human society and culture (Proudfoot, 2016, p. 110).

Finally, the book helps to rediscover the important but almost unknown philosophical work of Josiah Royce.<sup>22</sup> This re-discovery synthesises all the previous points, helping to go beyond the sociological limits of James’s, Dewey’s and Peirce’s philosophy. Josiah Royce is the first pragmatist to provide an overall sociological theory of religion including, at the same time, the religious experience, the religious institutionalisation, and the relevance of collective dimension of both doctrine and rituals. In contrast with Dewey and James, Royce recognizes the “social depth structure of religion.” Its philosophy of religion is a

community-oriented, post-dialectically dialectical, semiotically informed, “reflective” theory of interpretation (Nagl, 2016, p. 236).

21. There is not space enough to do this work here, but it would be very interesting inquiring the relationship between Peirce’s, Bellah’s, and Bourdieu’s conceptions of *habits* and *habitus*.

22. Josiah Royce (1855–1916) has been a professor of philosophy at the Universities of Berkeley and Harvard. Here he met William James and became his close friend. Royce’s two more important works about religion are *The Sources of Religious Insight* (1912) and *The Problem of Christianity* (1913). Nevertheless, religion represents a constant topic in his long intellectual production, since his first book, *The Religious Aspects of Philosophy* (1885).



In a Simmelian shape, Royce distinguishes the two fundamental dimensions of a religious man: “man the individual” and “man the community.”

Differently from James, the sources of the so-called *Religious Insight* include seven very different dimensions: individual experience, social experience, reason, will, morality, sorrow, church. What Royce seems to propose is a dialectical model of religious action that gives the same weight to the individual and the religious community, to morality and rationality, and that conceives church, sociologically, as an institutional and normative organization. Furthermore, Royce’s model is aimed at keeping

equal distance from a purely cognitivist understanding of religious faith (e.g., faith as “knowledge” of church doctrines) and James’s experientialism (Joas, 2016, p. 222).

In conclusion, this book has the great quality to actualize the pragmatist classics on religion and to introduce the less known work by Josiah Royce. It also problematizes but not develops too far the distinction between religion and ethics, and helps disciplining, in a sociological sense, the conception of religious experience in the works of Peirce, James, Dewey and Royce.

## 5 On Religious Propositions and Pluralism: The Actuality of Hilary Putnam

Niek Brunsveld’s *The Many Faces of Religious Truth: Hilary Putnam’s Pragmatic Pluralism on Religion* (2017), as the title reveals, deals with a different matter. It provides a conceptual analysis of an important aspect of religiosity, “namely the potential truth-value of religious propositions” (Brunsveld, 2017, p. 1). Focussing on religion propositions the book does not investigate other dimensions of religious life. The objective is to provide

a perspective on the question whether we can, in contemporary societies, take religious discourse to have truth-value, and how (ivi, p. 3).

Starting from this assertion, the Dutch scholar develops a pragmatist approach to religious pluralism based on the “the truth-value of religious propositions.” With this term he defines any proposition about one of the following three dimensions: the supernatural, the natural, or the life-orientation. His point of view is anti-essentialist.

The book’s development is organised in three parts. In the first, the author analyses the religious realism vs. religious anti-realism debate.<sup>23</sup> In the second and third, he discusses his approach to religious pluralism, starting from the first Putnam, i.e. the one who discussed the topics of truth, ethics, facts, and value:

I show that Putnam’s view on the truth-value of propositions potentially leads to two view-points that his pragmatic pluralism opposes, namely a form of cultural relativism and of reductionist naturalism (ivi, p. 75).

Let us look more closely at why Brunsveld stresses this point.

Hilary Putnam refuses the realistic-antirealistic opposition. His conception of truth is deflationist, pragmatist, and pluralistic. It is deflationist because

truth is not a property of true propositions, but denotes an attitude of the person asserting the proposition towards the proposition (ivi, p. 96).

It is pragmatist because the truth-conditions vary from one practice to another. Finally, it is pluralistic because any statement of truth-value depends on conceptual relativity,<sup>24</sup> i.e. the idea that

23. For reasons of space, we will not devote our attention to it, given its strong philosophical and theological character.

24. “[T]he phenomenon of conceptual relativity [...] turns on the fact that the logical primitives themselves, and in particular the notions of object and existence, have a multitude of different users rather than one absolute meaning” (Putnam, 1987, p. 19).

the actual use and meaning of truth can vary depending on the area of human reasoning within which it is employed (ivi, p. 117–118)

and conceptual pluralism, i.e.

the view that one can describe the same situation in different non-contradictory ways, while making avail of the same natural language (ivi, p. 121).

In other terms, what is considered to be true depends on

the various actual practices of reasoning, and see whether and how the truth-value of (religious) propositions hinges on reality (ivi, p. 112).

Reality and practices are, for religious proposition as for any other proposition, the two main sources of truth-value.

As practices, experiences, actors, and their conceptual abilities are plural, truth as well is plural. It is the product of an interaction between concepts and reality. On this point Brunsveld constructs a theory about the truth-value of religious propositions:

I argue that if we take pragmatic pluralism's views that truth is interactional and that experience is transactional to be applicable to all areas of human reasoning and inquiry, (meaningful) religious propositions too have truth-value. [...] Religious propositions are true because and in as far as the religious practices of which they are a part are themselves interactions with reality (ivi, p. 247 & p. 250).

But, at the same time, Brunsveld is aware that Putnam's conception, as anticipated, has two risks: relativism and reductionism. Relativism is because it tends to express no value judgment on any religious proposition. Reductionism because it does not consider the given religious context that precede any religious reasoning. Actually, it is the same Hilary Putnam who gives some answer to those allegations, starting from his famous late book on *Jewish philosophy as a Guide to Life*:

For homo religious, the meaning of this or her words is not exhausted by criteria in a public language, but is deeply interwoven with the sort of person the particular religious individual has chosen to be and with pictures that are the foundation of that individual's life (Putnam, 2008, p. 5)

In other terms, Putnam gets to the same conclusions of Ludwig Wittgenstein: the truth-aptness of religious propositions is not understandable philosophically but depends on the *lebenswelt* where the actor lives, born, and decide to stay. The conclusion is also the same of Rorty: philosophy cannot judge ethical or religious choices.

I do not believe that philosophical or scientific discussion can provide compelling reasons for making these choices one way rather than another, although such discussion can help us make whichever choices we make more reflectively (Putnam, 2005, p. 71).

In conclusion, Niek Brunsveld and Hilary Putnam seem to support a *negative conception of religious pluralism*: the pluralism deriving from the impossibility to decide whether an ethical or religious belief could be assessed to be right or wrong. But pragmatism also provides them an alternative, *positive solution*: pluralism is positive when, on the practical ground, more religious or ethical choices reveal to be good, or, in other terms, to favour the well-being of a large number of people.

Brunsveld and Putnam's epistemological argument works for liberal societies, in which individuals can decide their ethical and religious options, but it is not valid for normative societies, where the collective identities (religious included) are defined at one's birth. In this second case — but partially also in the first — religion plays a major role in defining the *lebenswelt* where religion can be experienced. Then, its influence comes priorly to the practical test of experience. Finally, if one states the truth-value of religious propositions, the issue of power and political controversies between religion, science and other "regimes of truth" comes to the fore.

## 6 Heney's Pragmatist Way to Metaethics

Diana B. Heney's *Toward a Pragmatist Metaethics* (2016) suggests the need to consider pragmatism in the context of ethical theory, and in particular as an approach to metaethics. The author spouses a non-ideal approach to the topic, defining metaethics as “the study of the preconditions (and presuppositions) of moral thought and discourse” (ivi, p. xvi).

Pragmatism is considered important for metaethics for three reasons: its concern with social problems, its emphasis on the primacy of practice, and the theorised centrality of experience.

Applied to metaethics, the centrality of practice invites to study how “groups and individuals actually do deal with moral discourse, moral disagreement, and experience that is value-laden in a way that makes it morally salient” (ivi, p. xvii).

Indeed, the centrality of “pressing problems” transforms morality from a cognitive activity to a “vital mater”:

Whether moral life essentially involves some notion of truth, whether principles are the right tool for moral reasoning — these are pressing problems, not merely academic puzzles (ivi, p. xviii).

As a result, Heney proposes a “shift from a purely rationalist — let's say pragmaticistic — conception of pragmatism to a new ethical-oriented” aimed at conciliating the “concurrent locally *true* religious statement.”

Going back to Peirce, the *truth* of a belief is not measured in the short time but in the long run in its “external permanency” as a source of relief from contingency. While doubt is dissatisfactory and anxiogenic, belief is satisfactory and relaxing. Then, a persistent belief gives life to working *habits*: there could be no everyday life without beliefs of some sort. But, only through inquiry can we find durable beliefs that can favour positive outcomes for ourselves and for all our community in the long turn.

Diana B. Heney suggests that Peirce's approach to pragmatism is pro-social, as it conceives interactions with others as the best way for settling our beliefs and making our inquiry successful. Actually,

the more widely a belief is supported by the experience of disparate persons or groups, the happier we will be to count that belief among our own, for we have greater reason to take it to be true.

Peirce's model of inquiry invokes a broad conception of experience in two senses. First, it is a wider conception compared to traditional empiricist views: it includes more than sensorial experiences, until including anything that stimulates our doubts; secondly, it sees all experience as

involving an element of interpretation. In his development of what he refers to as “Kantian categories,” Peirce maintains that such categories are the categories of experience, and that each of them is present in every experience (Heney, 2016, p. 22).

Of course, Peirce disagrees with a Kantian accent on the transcendental nature of guiding principles. Rather, he suggests a pragmatic indifference toward moral categories:

Almost any fact may serve as a guiding principle (Peirce, 1974, p. 369).

Those principles do not define essences but rather indicate relationships or inferences. Then, their nature is regulative, and a regulative assumption of any inquiry is bivalent: for inquiry to be possible, a proposition can be true or false.

As Heney suggests, if one — as pragmatists do — renounces to some sort of *a priori* foundation of morality — ethics become a normative science based on practical validity:

Peirce does care about ethics qua normative science, though he comes to recognize its importance too late to do much about it. It is “ethics” qua instinctual reasoning in vital matters as a replacement for proper inquiry that Peirce disparages. But even if one contends that the historical evidence cannot be interpreted as I have suggested here, this is a hurdle, not a barrier, to extending Peirce's account of inquiry to handle moral questions (Heney, 2016, p. 24).

Finally, the reader can easily find similarities and overlaps between the Brunsveld discourse on religious pluralism and the Heney discourse on metaethics. Both share an emphasis on moral neutrality, both consider religion as a source of interpretation of one's life, both maintain the centrality of practice, and for both the critiques introduced at the end of paragraph 5 are valid.

## 7 Discussion

In conclusion, pragmatist accounts of religion showed some common features: moral neutrality, practice-centrality, emphasis on the experiential dimension, symbolism, individualization of faith. They do not discuss the origins of transcendent ideals but rather assess their social validity on the practical ground of subjective gratification. Well-being is a concept that shifts around two axes: the temporal (immediate\long run effects on individual lives) and the individual-collective (individual good, collective good, dialectical expression of individuals *and* collective good). As Kestenbaum suggested,

[i]deals may have been launched by faith, but pragmatism provides the telemetry system that brings them back to earth and puts them to work here. Ideals are invitations to get down to work by lifting up those possibilities latent or resident in ordinary experience. Practice and the practical are the ground (Kestenbaum, 2016, p. 78).

Central to this conception is the reductionist naturalistic assumption that religion experience is limited — or at least, largely based on — the subjective sensorial dimension.<sup>25</sup> As Frankenberg (2006) demonstrated, this assumption makes pragmatism becoming *body-centric*: the body is the phenomenological centre, start and end of any experience.<sup>26</sup> In other terms, it becomes the synecdoche and the solipsistic center of any social system.

A second critical remark needs to be done about the almost missing distinction between religion and morality. In the books I analysed, this distinction is sketched, from time to time, but authors do not extend and develop the topic so far as to progress over a discussion on truth-aptness of religious beliefs. Indeed, the focus on truth is one of the reasons why, at a first reading, they tend to collapse morality into religion. In our proposal, a distinction between religion and morality shall be made starting from the different regimes of truth and from their different relationship with anti-foundationalism and practice. These last two principles do not conflict with each other when it comes to stress and idea of morality based on truth. For pragmatists, indeed, truth is what fits better on the long run with experience and argumentations, and what further inquiry cannot improve (Misak, 2000), despite any given-for-granted principle. On the contrary, when we deal with religion

a gap opens between warranted assertibility or unforced agreement on the one hand, and truth on the other. We can always ask whether a belief which is warranted or agreed upon is really true. (ivi, p. 37).

In other words, a religious belief is not true because agreed and it is not agreed because rationally considered to be true.<sup>27</sup> Otherwise, the social function of religion — as Dewey recognized in *A Common Faith* (1934 /2013) — is to give a symbolic and non-falsifiable foundation to the contingency of experience. Here is a pitfall of pragmatist account of religion: the forced application of scientific criteria of validation to non-falsifiable doctrines.

25. “This emphasis on process as the fundamental reality out of which things are made, and attention to the organic, profoundly relational, nature of reality, including any religious reality, is a mark of the naturalism of Whitehead” (Frankenberg, 2006, p. 338).

26. “For James and for religious empiricism in general, the body is the most immediate and elemental site in human life for experiencing that which is most concrete.” (Frankenberg, 2006).

27. This leads to a larger reflection on the relationship between truth, consensus and legitimation in religion and science. But there is no space enough here to develop this topic.

Religions play a major role also in defining the *lebenswelten* where religious beliefs can be experienced. Then, their influence comes prior to the practical test of experience. Second, individuals are not always free and willing to choose between a variety of religious and ethical options. This point must be considered if we want to universalize the cognitive extent of social sciences beyond the boundaries of Western societies. Third, if we accept that individuals continuously test the validity of their religious beliefs, therefore we state the natural instability of any religious doctrine. And this is right the reason why churches and other religious institutions play the crucial function of stabilising beliefs, rituals and practices. Of course, doctrines and practices evolve and change in time, depending on actors, social situations and hybridisations of various kind. But these processes are highly interactive and multifactorial. They need an extended epistemology, not limited to the analysis of the relationship between truth and value, but also addressing belonging, social identity, authority, solidarity, interaction between religion, politics and economy.

Finally, let me sketch some theoretical remarks. A first result of this quick exploration shows that, contrary to what we are used to think, pragmatism and Durkheimian *Elementary Forms* (1915) share some important similarities: first of all, the centrality of practices and the social origins of categories of thought and of classification (Rawls, 2001, p. 438), what I called symbolism. Secondly, the relevance of individual experience and of the personal interpretation of faith — what Durkheim theorized as the *personalized totem*.

The distances between the two approaches show the weakness of pragmatism from a social theory perspective. To a contemporary reader, James and Dewey's theories of religion could sound utilitarian, anti-sociological and solipsistic. Josiah Royce (1912) aimed to overcome these pitfalls, but still tended to describe religion *as it is*, not to explain why and how it plays a given function in society. But if we move forward from the Pragmatism Founders's legacy as to include Mead's social pragmatism, the intellectual landscape changes deeply. Indeed, George Herbert Mead provides a general sociological model that connects social interactions to macro-sociological phenomena. As Hans Joas and Daniel R. Huebner (2016) demonstrated, his sociology overcomes those utilitarianism and cognitive individualism Durkheim critically found in the thought of William James. The Chicago School pioneer presupposed the social orientation as the primary source of one's symbolic conduct. His symbolic interactionism, as expressed in *Mind, Self and Society* (1934) and in *The Philosophy of Present* (1936), develops the humanitarian approach by John Dewey and integrates the interpretative model by C.S. Peirce into the analysis of interpersonal communication and social practices. Mead's concept of *mind*,<sup>28</sup> as the internalization of a symbolic conduct that makes individuals foresee and control the practical effects of their social actions, explains *ab ovo* the social morality of individuals. It frames social and communicative behaviour as oriented by a *pre-contractual solidarity*: what is symbolic is also moral and normative, as socially constructed through social interaction, legitimation, finally institutionalisation.

For both Mead and the French sociologist, practices are the hub of group life, and the link between the social and the natural. The fundamental difference between the two thinkers is that Mead explains the origins of social life starting from the individual cognition, while for Durkheim "society consists of real forces, the experience of which creates shared categories" (Rawls, 2001, p. 311). Unlike Anne Rawls, Hans Joas maintains that practices do not have the same weight in pragmatism and in Durkheimian theory. The difference is in the sequence, or it would be better to say, in the causal nexus between action as a cause and collective goals as an outcome. In saying this, the German sociologist clearly separates the sacred from the social, according to a residual interpretation of the relationship between society and religion in Durkheim (Rosati, 2005). Mead and pragmatism support a contingent, processual explanation of social phenomena, while Durkheimian's epistemology is rather static and informed by an idealistic outlook:

[P]ragmatism is a theory which, although geared primarily to the solution of problem situations involved in instrumental action, ultimately points to the dimension of sociality via the theory of signs. Durkheim's sociology entails a similar sequence, but here the progression is inverted: the orientation is toward the social dimension of a constitution of categories

28. See the discussion around Randall Collins's paper "Toward a Neo-Meadian Sociology of Mind" (1989).

based on the model of social organization, yet which arrives at the practical constitution of categories in the form of ritual praxis (Joas, 1993, p. 63).

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