Beyond
Eurocentrism and Multiculturalism:
Volume I

Prophetic Thought in Postmodern Times

Cornel West

Common Courage Press • Monroe, Maine

Cover design by Norma Whitman
Manufactured in the United States
ISBN 1-56751-004-3, paper ISBN 1-56751-005-1, cloth

Common Courage Press
P.O. Box 702
Monroe, ME 04951
207-525-0900 fax: 207-525-3068

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
West, Cornel.
Beyond eurocentrism and multiculturalism / Cornel West.
P. cm.
Contents: v.1. Prophetic thought in postmodern times -- v. 2. Prophetic reflections
ISBN 1-56751-005-1 (v. 1.) -- ISBN 1-56751-004-3 (pbk. : v. 1.) -- ISBN 1-56751-00708 (v. 2). -- ISBN 1-56751-006-X (pbk. : v. 2)
1. United States--Race relations. 2. Pluralism (Social sciences)--United States. I. Title.
E185.615.W425 1993
305.8'00973--dc20 92-41610

Third Printing

The three speeches in Part I comprise the R. Grady Snuggs lectures given in October 1991 at the University of Tulsa.

"The Postmodern Crisis of Black Intellectuals" appeared in *Cultural Studies,* Grossberg, Nelson & Treichler, 1991.

"Decentring Europe: The Contemporary Crisis in Culture" appeared in *Critical Quarterly* Vol. 33 No. 1, Spring 1991.

The review of Jeffrey Stout's *Ethics After Babel* appeared in *Theology Today,* Vol. XLVI, No. 1, April 1989.

"Michael Harrington, Socialist," appeared in *The Nation,* January 8/15, 1990.

"Prospects for Democratic Politics: Reconstructing the Lippmann-Dewey Debate was given as a lecture in November 1990.

you see.

But Du Bois was saying, look, I am realistic enough to know that America is endemically and chronically racist. That there are some good white folk, but they are nowhere near the majority in relation to issues of race. And that I am going to do the best that I can for all people of goodwill who are willing to join me. And he went on about his work.

Do you see what I am saying? That is what I am talking about. And that is where I think some of the Afrocentrics who are concerned with competing with some of the great European achievements, or some of the assimilationist black folk who are concerned about imitating and aping what they perceive to be white achievements, the white way of life and so on. They both fall through the cracks and miss the best of what I consider to be black culture. But I think this is true for all human beings. Of course, Irish have this vis-a-vis. White Anglo-Saxon Protestants, Jews have this vis-a-vis the goyim, women have this vis-a-vis males, and so on and so forth. So it is a human quest. I think people can learn much from looking at the black plight and predicament and that is why looking at Afro-American studies means that one is never ghettoizing black folk.

But you are recognizing critically their humanity and seeing what can be gained from insights of their humanity for the human species as a whole. And some Americans have actually learned this lesson. That is why jazz is a great contribution of culture in this country.

Pragmatism and the Tragic

Last night I talked about the impact of a market culture and the ways in which the prospect for democracy was called into question by the pervasiveness of market values, market mentality, and market morality. And it may be the case—I think not—but it may be the case that any serious talk about prospects for democracy are empty. That it is too late.

The market fashioning of young people does not provide the kind of critical sensibilities for an active citizenry in a democratic society. Again, for me, this is a challenge, not a conclusion. It raises the question, what are the intellectual and cultural resources of this particular grand, yet in some ways, flawed democratic experiment begun in 1776? Antonio Gramsci—one of the leading cultural theorists of the twentieth century—raised the question, how does one tease out the best of the various traditions that has constituted a civilization?

One of the reasons why I highlight pragmatism is because I am of the opinion that pragmatism is in fact distinctive in the modern world because it is preoccupied with the prospect for democracy, the democratic way of life, as much as a democratic way of governance. And yet, it may indeed be in reflecting upon this tradition, that that which confronts us is overwhelming. And of course, I will be trying to say a word about that this evening [in the final lecture]. About what the future looks like.

So, in sharp contrast to last night, when I was primarily treading in historical waters, I am going to be treading in philosophical waters today. Looking at this very rich tradition of American pragmatism. Noting, as I said last night, that pragmatism has nothing to do with vulgar practicalism, or unprincipled opportunism. It is usually associated with one of those two.

Pragmatism has to do with trying to conceive of knowledge, reality and truth in such a way that it promotes the flowering and flourishing of individuality under conditions of democracy.

The recent revival of pragmatism provides a timely intellectual background for the most urgent problem of our post-modern moment. That is a complex cluster of questions and queries regarding the meaning and value of democracy. No other modern philosophical tradition has grappled with the various dimensions of this problem more than that of American pragmatism. The grand spiritual godfathers of pragmatism, Thomas Jefferson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Abraham Lincoln, laid the foundation for the meaning and value of democracy in America in the modern world. These foundations consist roughly of, first, the irreducibility of individuality within participatory communities. I will say that again. The irreducibility of individuality within participatory communities.

Second, is the heroic action of ordinary people in a world of radical contingency. And third, is a deep sense of evil that fuels a struggle for justice. The reason that I am preoccupied with a sense of the tragic is that I am preoccupied with our moment in which we must look defeat, disillusionment and discouragement in the face and work through it. A sense of the tragic is an attempt to keep alive some sense of possibility. Some sense of hope. Some sense of agency. Some sense of resistance in a moment of defeat and disillusionment and a moment of discouragement.

Pragmatism, as I shall suggest, has not come to terms with the sense of the tragic and hence we need revisionist understanding of this tradition, even as we build upon the best of it. Now Jeffersonian notions of the irreducibility of individuality within participatory communities is an attempt to sidestep, on the one hand, rapacious individualism, and on the other hand, authoritarian communitarianism. To walk a tightrope between an individualism, hedonism and narcissism in careers, self-centered on the one hand. And on the other hand, conceptions of community that impose values from above, thereby threatening precious liberties.

Jefferson tried to do this by situating unique selves within active networks of power sharing. That protect liberties, that promote prosperity and that highlight accountability. In this sense, Jefferson's ideal combines much of the best of liberalism, of populism and of civic republicanism. And of course, I am talking about the Jefferson who penned the Declaration of Independence, one of the great moral events of the modern period.

We also know Jefferson was a slave-holder, of course, and Jefferson cannot be viewed independently of the critique that David Walker put forward in his classic *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World.* A powerful text that must be read alongside Jefferson, because there are long critical readings of Jefferson's *Notes on Virginia* in that famous manifesto.

And he uses Jefferson. He calls Jefferson one of the great philosophers of his day. And he uses Jefferson's own formulations to bring critique to bear on Jefferson's slave holding. Building on the insights of Jefferson as such an exemplary democratic theorist, but then calling into question Jefferson's practice that fell so short of what he was writing about. David Walker in many ways goes hand in hand with Jefferson. But, ironically, David Walker is situated within a Jeffersonian tradition as he critiques Jefferson himself. Because he is furthering the ideals of democracy that Jefferson articulates, even as he brings critique to bear on Jefferson's slave holding.

Emerson's formulations of heroic action of ordinary folk in a world of radical contingency try to jettison static dogmatisms on the one hand, and impersonal determinisms on the other. He attempts to do this by accenting the powers of unique individuals to make and remake themselves with no original models to imitate or emulate. This is so very important. And as I noted last night, I think it is one

of the grand breakthroughs of the Age of Europe. This notion of locating human powers and faculties, the capacity to make and remake a self, and society, locating those powers among ordinary people in the commonplace.

This is new. The Greeks had no notion of tragedy as it applied to ordinary people. Most of you know the hierarchy of the Greeks. Tragedy was reserved for the highbrow and the upper class. Only comedy was applicable to ordinary people. Erich Auerbach talks about this in his famous text *Memisis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature.* It was published in 1941. He says that there is a dark contrast between the Christian tradition in which, in biblical stories, one can capture the grandeur, sublime and tragedy among ordinary people. An ordinary David for example. Ordinary Noah. And yet, the hierarchy of styles holds this at arm's length. This is a profoundly democratic sensibility. The locating of human powers among ordinary people.

Emerson in many ways embodies this. Of course, Abraham Lincoln used to say that God must love common folk because God made so many of them. One of the great democratic artists (distinct from his politics) of our day, Frank Capra, born in Palermo, Italy, and died a few weeks ago, captured this in *It's A Wonderful Life.* One of the greatest films ever made. Not so much technically, but because it crystallized the precious value of an ordinary human being. The uniqueness, the sanctity and the dignity of an ordinary human being who could provide a disclosure of the human condition in the ways in which the Greeks thought only kings were capable of. Even the great Shakespeare confined this quality to the princes of his day. It is profoundly democratic and also we should say, a profoundly American sensibility. Emersonian ideals bring together salutary aspects of romanticism and Protestantism.

Lincoln's profound wrestling with a deep sense of evil that feuls the struggle for justice, endeavors to hold at bay false optimisms and paralyzing pessimisms by positing unique selves that fight other finite opponents rather than

demonic foes. This distinction between finite opponents and demonic foes is fundamental. It has to do with my second moment last night. It has to do with the notion of empathy.

In a democratic society, you cannot demonize because demonizing means you have lost contact with the humanity of your foes. You struggle, you take a stand, you fight. But once you demonize, then you are calling into question the possibility of dialogue or further engagement down the line. This is something, of course, that Lincoln understood well. You read that second inaugural lecture closely in the Lincoln Memorial. It says malice toward none, charity toward all. He is talking about Southern opponents. He refuses to demonize, even as they have murdered the sons of the North. It takes a profound sense of statesmanship and a deep understanding of evil to make that distinction.

Of course, Martin Luther King, Jr. understood this well, himself. Bull Connor was never a demonic foe. He was a misguided human being who had racist sensibilities. That realization is part of a great tradition. Lincoln's ideals hold together valuable insights into Christianity and American constitutionalism, which is so very important, and incorporate Scottish commonsensical realism. Yet, interestingly, enough, not one American philosophical thinker has put forward a conception of the meaning of and significance of democracy in light of these foundations laid by Jefferson, Emerson and Lincoln.

If there is one plausible candidate, it would have to be John Dewey. Like Maurice Marterlinck and Walt Whitman. It is very important that in Lincoln's lifetime, Whitman was the only writer to describe Lincoln with love. But Dewey understood that if one takes democracy as an object of philosophical investigation, then one must grapple with the contributions of Jefferson and Emerson. And Dewey wrote some wonderful essays on both figures.

But I suggest that Dewey failed to meet seriously the challenge posed by Lincoln. Namely, he never defined the

relation of democratic ways of thought and life to a profound sense of evil. Within the development of post-Dewey pragmatism, only Sidney Hook's suggestive essay, "Pragmatism and the Tragic Sense of Life" responds to Lincoln's challenge in a serious manner. Yet it remained far from the depths of other tragic democratic thinkers like Herman Melville, in my view, the greatest literary artist ever produced in this country. Or F.O. Mathiessen, mid-twentieth century literary critic who was preoccupied with the possibility that America might be unique among modern nations, beginning with a moment of perceived innocence and moving to corruption without a mediating stage of maturity.

That lays bare the problematic of his work. In his *The American Renaissance* of '41, he struggles with this. Or the third, is of course, Reinhold Niebuhr. Especially the Niebuhr of the 30s. There is only one other great American philosopher, and Alfred North Whitehead's origins exclude him in this regard, so I am not including Whitehead. He was born in Britain and didn't come to the States until he was in his 60s, to Harvard. There was only one great American philosopher who seriously grappled with the challenge posed by Lincoln and that is Josiah Royce.

Josiah Royce's name rarely comes up these days. I want to suggest that he is a figure with whom we must grapple and of course, I grapple with him from my vantage point because I am concerned about prospects for democracy. And I am concerned about prospects for democracy because I am concerned about pervasive death and disease and destruction in the country, especially in working poor and very poor communities. But Royce deserves our attention.

I would go so far as to say that Royce's systematic post-Kantian idealism is primarily a long and winding set of profound meditations on the relation of the deep sense of evil to human action, human agency.

Therefore, a contemporary encounter between Dewey

and Royce is not an antiquarian reconstruction of exchanges in the philosophical journals. They had a number of exchanges in the journal *Philosophy and Philosophical Review* and so forth. But that is not what I am after. Nor is it a synoptic synthesis of Dewey's instrumentalism and Royce's idealism. That is not what I am after either. Rather, this encounter is a response to the pressing problem of our day that creatively infuses the contributions of Jefferson, Emerson and Lincoln in our quest for the meaning and value of democracy.

You can imagine that this has profound national implications given the fact that democracy is now on the lips of most of the elites in second world countries that were once part of the Soviet empire. It is on the lips of Gorbachev. It is on the lips of South Africans, so that this struggle with the meaning and value of democracy has global significance.

Royce viewed his project as what he called absolute pragmatism, primarily owing to valuable lessons learned from his close friend William James. The Dewey/Royce encounter is an affair within an American tradition, within the pragmatic tradition. Hence the major philosophic progeny of Jefferson, Emerson and Lincoln carry the banner of American pragmatism.

Let me be very clear about what I mean about pragmatism. There are three principle philosophic slogans of pragmatism: voluntarism; fallibilism; and lastly, experimentalism. I'll define each of those in turn.

Voluntarism, Fallibilism & Experimentalism

Both Royce and Dewey are philosophers of human will, of human power, and human action. By voluntarism, we mean putting a premium on human will, human power and human action. And social practices sit at the center of their distinct philosophic visions. Structured and unstructured, contingent social practices. In short, they agree

with the best characterization of pragmatism ever penned, that of C.I. Lewis—Clarence Irving Lewis—when he said that pragmatism could be characterized as the doctrine that all problems are, at bottom, problems of conduct. That all judgments are implicitly judgments of value. And that, as there can be ultimately no valid distinction of theoretical and practical, so there can be no final separation of questions of truth of any kind from questions of the justifiable ends of action.

Dewey's stress on the primacy of human will is shot through all of his major works. His seminal conception of experience as against that of British imperialists and Kantian transcendentalists will suffice for our purposes. It is found in his classic essay penned in 1917. "The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy" says that experience is primarily a process of undergoing, a process of withstanding something. Of passion, of affection in the literal sense of these words. As organisms we're linguistically conscious animals. What linguistically conscious organisms have to endure, to undergo is the consequence of our own actions. Experience, then, is a matter of simultaneous doings and sufferings. Our undergoings are experiments themselves in varying the course of events. Our active tryings are trials and tests of ourselves. This is Dewey in 1917.

Royce also puts the premium on human will and embraces his stress of Dewey. Royce says no truth is a saving truth. Yes, no truth is truth at all unless it guides and directs life. Therefore, he hardily agrees with the current pragmatism and with William James himself. Every opinion expresses an attitude of the will, of preparedness for action. A determination to guide a plan of action in accordance with an ideal.

There is no such thing as a purely intellectual form of assertion which has no element of action about it. An opinion is a deed. It is a deed intended to guide other deeds. It proposes to have what the pragmatists call workings. That is, it undertakes to guide the life of the one who asserts the

opinion. In this sense all truth is practical.

Now the voluntaristic impulse of Dewey and Royce leads to two basic notions. First is the notion that truth is a species of the good. This is a very important formulation. Because with the emergence of modern science, the new physics of Newton and the new astronomy of Kepler, and the new probability theory of the Port Royal group, a conception of truth was put forward that was distinct from any conception of the good, because truth had to do with generating high levels of prediction and explanation. And a true theory was one that predicted better, and explained more broadly. And so there was a severing in the seventeenth century, and especially crystallized in the eighteenth century in Europe, between truth-talk and ethics.

So that the notion of truth being a species of the good, is radically called into question. And truth became the providence of the reality claims put forth by the new physicists. So, they would tell us that this table is actually the neutrons and protons bubbling up against one another because by positing those unobservable entities it would provide high levels of prediction. Of course, most of us do believe that those protons, neutrons and electrons are doing precisely what the physicists say they are. Because they do generate high levels of prediction. But it looks like a table to us. Its aesthetic surface is pushed aside, because quantitative myths are now being deployed. And the mathematicization of knowledge, which goes hand in hand with the despiritualization of the natural objects being observed, went hand in hand with the severing from any talk of knowledge and ethics.

Pragmatism comes along and says no. They accept the high levels of prediction of the new priesthood of knowledge, the physicists. They believe that the physicists are in fact engaged in very important activities that generate human control and mastery over nature. But they refuse to provide that new priesthood of knowledge with a monopoly on truth. They simply provide the highest level of pre-

diction and explanation. It is a very crucial move. Truth is a species of the good.

Second, that the conception of the good is defined in relation to temporal consequences. This is very important as well because, as we shall see, it puts a premium on the future, and for the first time in modern philosophy there would be a tradition that would be obsessed with looking forward rather than looking backward. Philosophical traditions have been preoccupied with representing. That is what representation is. Providing copies of that which happened in the past. Representations of that which happened in the past. To recapture, to recuperate that which happened in the past. But pragmatism says no. Truth is a species of the good and the conception of the good has to do with defining it in relation to temporal consequences prospectively.

The first notion of the truth as a species of the good means that our beliefs about the way the world is have ethical significance. William James writes that our opinions about the nature of things belong to our moral life. That is a profound point. If you believe that natural objects are solely what quantitative models say they are, then your conception of who you are as a human being means that you are simply a body in space,

to be explained and predicted. Your loves, your cares, your anxieties, your frustrations, that is very much like the aesthetic surface of this table. It is pushed aside. But there is a fundamental link between what you understand the nature of reality to be and your conception of yourself as a human being. Again, ethics and epistemic claims go hand-in-hand.

Dewey himself, I think, captures this best when he says that philosophy is a form of desire, an effort or action of love, namely of wisdom, but we add as a proviso not attached to the platonic use of the word, that wisdom, whatever it is, is not a mode of science or knowledge. Philosophy which was conscious of its own business and province

would then perceive that it is an intellectualized wish. An aspiration subjected to rational discrimination and tests. A social hope reduced to a working program of action. A prophecy of the future, but one disciplined by serious thought and knowledge. Philosophy is a quest for wisdom. A wisdom is not reducible to knowledge. It is not a trashing of knowledge. We must avoid the situating of knowledge that falls short of wisdom.

Royce chimes in on the same theme. He says opinions about the universe are counsels as to how to adjust your deeds to the purposes and requirements which are a survey of the whole of one's life.

This notion of truth as a species of the good is to define the good in relation to temporal consequences, meaning that the future has ethical significance. And actually, if there is a distinctive feature of pragmatism, it is precisely this notion. That the future has ethical significance. Its emphasis on the ethical significance of the future provides pragmatism with a new way of talking about possibility and potentiality of human organisms.

Dewey, I think, captures this best in his 1922 essay entitled "The Development of American Pragmatism" where he says, pragmatism presents itself with an extension of historical empiricism, but with a fundamental difference. It does not insist upon antecedent phenomena, but on consequent phenomena. Not upon the precedence, but on the possibilities of action. This change in point of view is almost revolutionary, he says, in its consequences for the history of philosophy. An empiricism which is content with repeating facts already past, has no place for possibility and for liberty. Pragmatism thus has a metaphysical implication.

The doctrine of the value of consequences leads us to take the future into consideration and this takes us to the conception of a universe whose evolution is not finished, of a universe which is still, in James's term, "in the making." In the process of becoming. Up to a certain point, still plastic. For pragmatism, in the future has ethical significance be-

cause human will, human thought, and action can make a difference in relation to human aims and purposes. There is moral substance in the fact that human will can make the future different and possibly better. This preoccupation with the perspective leads Dewey to quip, "what should experience be but a future implicated in a present?"

Based on what I presented last night, I hope we can begin to see what happens in our moment when a distinctive philosophical tradition of this country that puts such a premium on the future clashes with the breakdown in social systems of nurturing children in which their conception of the future narrows, hollows, and hence a moment in a very unique civilization and culture, in which the possibility, the sense of possibility, is more and more called into question.

My query, of course, is whether in fact, looking at this distinct philosophical tradition, there are ways of teasing out some resources that can speak to our moment. To sustain some sense of possibility, some sense of a different and better future. And this is why the sense of the tragic becomes very important for me because we have to recognize the degree to which the sense of defeat and disillusionment is quite real indeed. This makes important Jefferson's notions of periodic revolutions, of course, that one finds in the Declaration of Independence, every generation or two, people's accountability should be enacted by radically changing American government. It is one of those moments in the Declaration of Independence that people aren't comfortable with. They say, Jefferson, you had your revolution, that is enough. Jefferson says no, we need to be cleansing. I think it upset people in 1969 that the Black Panthers used to sit in front of state capitals and read that portion of the Declaration of Independence. I saw Huey Newton read it himself when he was released from jail. And people would say what revolutionary doctrine is he reading now. It is Jefferson's Declaration of Independence.

Similar to this is Emerson's talk about onward transitions and upward crossings. Everything good is on the

highway, Emerson would say. The pragmatist's emphasis on the future terrain for humans making a difference results in a full-blown fallibilism and experimentalism. All facts are fallible, all experience is experimental.

This is the common ground of pragmatism upon which both Dewey and Royce stand. Unique selves acting in and through participatory communities give ethical significance to an open, risk-ridden future. The slogans are, then, of voluntarism, fallibilism in which every claim is open to revision. And experimentalism, calling into question any form of dogmatism, orthodoxy is criticism and self-correction. It is a central component of any human enterprise.

The majesty of community goes hand in hand with what Royce called the true spirituality of genuine doubting. Nothing blocks the road to inquiry. That the road to inquiry is open to all travelers to the degree to which they are willing to allow their relative ignorance or naked power to be put in the spotlight. Yet, Dewey and Royce part company in response to Lincoln's challenge. A deep sense of evil affects Royce more than it does Dewey. In fact, Royce clings to his post-Kantian idealism, even after his appropriation of Peirce's theory of interpretive communities, owing to his philosophic grappling with suffering and sorrow.

Jamesian injunctions about the strenuous move against evil did not suffice for Royce. Nor Dewey's leaps of faith in critical intelligence. Royce holds on to his Christian-like dramatic portrait of reality with his hope for and assurance of ultimate triumph precisely because his sense of evil and his sense of the tragic is so deep.

What separates Royce from other American pragmatists and most American philosophers, though Adorno is the only present day philosopher who comes to mind here, is Royce's prolonged and poignant engagement with the thought of Arthur Schopenhauer. Arthur Schopenhauer is a name that is rarely talked about in America, and maybe less so in Tulsa. Given the evangelical zeal of this particular area

of the country. Arthur Schopenhauer is not simply a footnote prior to Friederich Nietzsche.

But he is a profound philosopher of pessimism with elected affinities to Buddhism and he serves for Royce as a major challenge concerning how one talks about pervasive suffering and sorrow and human life. Royce's response to Lincoln's challenge takes the form of a lifelong struggle with pessimism.

The first course that Royce ever taught in the United States was taught on Arthur. Very un-American, given the land of idealism and optimism. The first graduate course ever taught in America was on Schopenhauer, 1877, and of course, at Johns Hopkins, the first research institution in this country. His classic text, *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy* published in 1892 contains 33 pages on Kant, 28 on Fichte, 37 on Hegel and 36 pages on Schopenhauer.

This is an atypical history of modern philosophy. Most modern philosophers spend 80 pages on Kant and 3 pages on Schopenhauer. I know of no other history of modern philosophy where Schopenhauer's treated so extensively and respectfully. For Royce, Schopenhauer is, and I quote, "a great thinker, significant. A philosopher of considerable dignity. Equipped with an erudition vast rather than technical." That is a wonderful phrase. Erudition vast rather than technical. "Enjoyed manifold labors rather than professional completeness." Wonderful phrases here.

Royce states that Schopenhauer's principal work, *The World As Will and Representation* is the most artistic philosophical treatise in existence, with the exception of Plato's dialogues. This is a kind of praise that Royce provides and gives Schopenhauer. Furthermore, Schopenhauer is a further transition of figure from the romantic idealism to the modern realism. In every major text of Royce, including his lectures on modern idealism, published posthumously, Schopenhauer makes a significant appearance.

In short contrast, Schopenhauer, along with Lincoln's challenge of a deep sense of evil in the tragic makes no

appearances in Dewey's volumes. No Schopenhauer. This is where I find Royce profound and poignant, while I find Dewey sane, fascinating, but unsatisfactory. Like Melville, Matthiessen and Niebuhr, I believe a deep sense of evil in the tragic must inform the meaning and value of democracy.

The culture of democratic societies require not only civic virtues of participation, tolerance, openness, mutual respect and mobility. But also dramatic struggles with the two major culprits, death and disease, that cut-off the joys of democratic citizenship. Such citizenship must not be so preoccupied or obsessed with possibility that it conceals and represses the ultimate facts of the human predicament. This is neither the time nor place to plunge into Royce's rich reflections on evil.

I recommend his 1897 essay, "The Problem of Job," which in many ways exceeds that of his classic essay "The Practical Significance of Pessimism" that he wrote in 1879, but instead, just very briefly, I will end by saying something about his notion of irrevocable deeds as a source of his conception of the absolute in his most straightforward book, *Sources of Religious* insight, he published in 1912. Royce introduces this notion in the midst of a complimentary discussion of pragmatism.

He says, one of the central facts about life is that every deed one does is *ipso facto* irrevocable. That is, at any moment you perform a given deed, you cannot deny it. If you perform it, it is done and cannot be undone. This difference between what is done and what is undone is, in the real and empirical world, a perfectly absolute difference. The opportunity for a given individual deed returns not, for the moment that that individual deed can be done, nothing recurs. Here is a case where the rational constitution of the whole universe gets into definite relation to our momentary experience. And if anyone wants to be in touch with the absolute, with that reality which the pragmatists fancy to be peculiarly remote in abstract, let him or her simply try to

undo that deed.

This is very important, because Royce's notion of the absolute has been associated with floating in platonic skies with forms and so forth. But we say no. The absolute actually is the most practical, tangible, on-the-ground reality. Let the experience teach him or her what one means by calling reality absolute. Let the truth which that experience teaches any rational being show them what is meant by absolute truth. Now Royce's point here is not simply to draw attention to the limits that the past imposes on the future, because keep in mind what is distinctive about pragmatism is the premium on the future, the sense of possibility, potentiality as we see it.

And Royce wants to affirm this as do I. But he also wants to talk about the pastness in the present. And the way in which the pastness in the present does impose constraints on the future and here, of course, he echoes that famous essay of 1919, of Thomas Stearns Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent." Where he talks about the past and of the present. He talks about how, in fact, tradition is something you don't inherit. It is something you gain by great labor, you see. A fairly Eliotic moment in Royce's formulation here. Royce is trying to show just how concrete and practical the notion of the absolute or the weight of the past can be.

His aim is to unhinge notions of the absolute from their association with the unpractical and the inaccessible. He wants to better enable unique selves to act in the present and give ethical significance to the future by providing standards that transcend the present. Royce recognizes there must be some notions of standards with regulative and critical force, though always partial and fragmentary, which sustain our strenuous mood and the perennial fight against what he calls the capricious, irrationality of the world and the blind irrationality of fortune.

He defends his version of the absolute because he looks to the truth for aid in that battle. On the one hand, he

accepts the interplay of what he calls the no longer and the not yet, of the past and the future. Not just a stress on the not yet, but also the no longer, so that fulfillment never at one present instance is to be found. Like Hegel's unhappy consciousness, dissatisfaction reigns and temporal peace is a contradiction in terms. Yet, he is ready to accept the deep sorrow of possessing ideals and taking his share of the divine task. In this way, he defines absolute reality. The sort of reality that belongs to irrevocable deeds. Absolute truth, the sort of truth that belongs to those opinions which for a given purpose counsel individual deeds when the deed in fact meets the purpose for which they were intended. These two are not remote affairs invented by philosophers for the sake of barren intellectualism. Of course, that is a term from William James.

Such absolute reality and absolute truth are the most concrete and practical and familiar of matters. The pragmatist who denies that there is any absolute truth accessible, has never rightly considered the very most characteristic feature of the reasonable wheel, namely that it is always counseling irrevocable deeds and therefore is always giving counsel that is for its own determinate purpose irrevocably right or wrong precisely and insofar as it is definite counsel.

Now what I suggest is that something deeper is going on. That Royce believes more is at stake in warding off subjectivism and relativism than the pragmatists admit. That reality and truth must be in some sense absolute, not only because skepticism lurks about, but also and more importantly because it is the last and only hope for giving meaning to the strenuous mood for justifying the worthwhileness of our struggle to endure. For Royce, James' promotions for heroic action, Emersonian claims at heroic action in and of themselves, are insufficient or Sisyphysian, pushing a rock up a hill, but no progress, unless there is a deeper struggle with the sense of the tragic. One of the great moments in Royce's corpus, a moment not to be found in Dewey is when Royce questions his idealist

response to the problem of evil. After pushing pessimism to the brink, struggling with Schopenhauer, like Daniel with the angels, he holds on for dear life. And he says, I do not feel that I have yet quite expressed in full force of the deepest argument for pessimism.

The full seriousness of the problem of evil. Pessimism in the pure sense isn't the doctrine of the merely peevish man, but of the man who, to borrow a word of Hegel's, has once feared not for this or that moment in his life, but who has feared for all of his nature. So that he has trembled through and through and all that was most fixed in him has become shaken. There are experiences in life that do just this for us.

When the foundations of the great deep are once thus broken up and floods have come, it isn't over this or that loss of our green earth that we sorrow. It is because of all that endless waste of tossing waves which now row cubits deep above the top of what were our highest mountains. No, the worst tragedy of the world is the tragedy of brute chance to which everything spiritual seems to subject against us. The tragedy of the diabolical irrationale of the so many among the folds, of whatever is significant.

An open enemy you can face, he says, but the temptation to do evil is indeed the necessity for spirituality. But one's own foolishness, one's ignorance, the cruel accidents of disease, the fatal misunderstandings that part friends and lovers, the chance mistakes that wreck nations. These things we lament most bitterly, not because they are painful, but because they are farcical, distracting.

Not full men worthy of the sword of the spirit, nor yet mere pains of our finitude that we can easily learn to face courageously as one can be indifferent to physical pain. No, he says. These things do not make life merely painful to us, they make it hideously petty. He has gone as far as he can go.

At this point, he seems virtually to throw up his hands and throw in the towel. Fresh memories of his own nervous

breakdown only three years earlier, which led him on a trip to Australia, loom large. He concludes, from our own finite point of view, there is no remotely discoverable justification for this caprice.

Yet, he refuses to give in to Schopenhauer and holds that we must dare to hope for an answer. Were our insight into the truth of *logos* based upon a sort of emperical assurance, it would surely fail us here. But not, as it is, if we have the true insight of deeper idealism, we can turn from our chaos to him the suffering God, who in our flesh bears the sins of the world and whose natural body is pierced by the capricious wounds that hateful fools inflict upon him. It is this thought, Royce says, that traditional Christianity has in its deep symbolism first taught the world that in its fullness only an idealistic interpretation can really and rationally express.

What in time is hopelessly lost, is attained for the suffering God in his eternity. We have found in a world of doubt but one assurance. Only one and yet how rich. All else is hypothesis. Royce's leap of faith. Evidence under-determined. The only option to Schopenhauerian pessimism.

I quote at length to convey Royce's response to Lincoln's challenge through Schopenhauer. The point here is not to raise a deeper question as to whether his argument is actually persuasive. That is the subject for a different lecture. Whether this argument is convincing, whether his appropriation of Christianity is persuasive, but rather to highlight the depth of Royce's efforts to sustain some sense of possibility. The strenuous mood in the face of the deep sense of evil.

Never in the tradition of American pragmatism has Lincoln's challenge been taken so seriously. Yet, the democratic legacy in our time of Jefferson, Emerson and Lincoln in our ghastly century, millions gone, dead, burned, murdered, maimed. The democratic legacy demands nothing less so that the encounter between Dewey and Royce may help us preserve the ethical significance of the future of our

children.

And tonight, I will be reflecting on what that future may look like in light of the discernment put forward yesterday and in light of Royce's grappling with the philosophical tradition preoccupied with democracy and whether it can speak to the depths of the tragic that we now live and face in our own time. Thank you so very much.

Responses to Questions

(The questions were inaudible on the tape; only the answers are available.)

West: The pragmatist conception of human beings is one of an organism whose faculties are integrated, who is interacting and transacting with an environment. So that when you talk about truth, you are talking about the consensus forged by human beings who agree upon certain common ends and aims. And that consensus forged is a dynamic consensus because nothing blocks the road to inquiry. All claims are in no way immune to revision.

Therefore, truth talk for Dewey, the truth was actually what was warranted assertable at a particular moment that would change over time. I think Richard Rory and others, especially Hilary Putnam, have shown this to be quite unconvincing. The truth is something very different than warranted assertability. But warranted assertability is the best thing that finite human beings do at any particular moment.

And you accept the best truth available at the time, in the same way that 50 years from now we may discover that there is no such thing as electrons and neutrons and Brownian motion is linked to something else. Then we will rewrite all the textbooks, all those years that we believed in protons and neutrons, we just believed the best available theory.

Now, if we accept that notion, then truth talk becomes part of the conditions under which particular communities do forge assertable claims, with values such as appeal to evidence. Publicity of arguments. A whole host of other

values. Tolerance, ability, mediating, dialogue and so on. And then the question becomes, what are the aims of these particular communities?

When I talked about the physicist, it is very clear that for them what is at stake is a high level prediction. If somebody presented to the physicist a grand theory that was true, that didn't explain or predict anything, they would say you don't understand our game that we are playing. You have missed the point. A true theory is one that predicts. I have got a true theory, but it doesn't predict anything. No tenure in this department. You missed the point. Because the end and aim, the conception of the good that regulates that community is that prediction is of paramount importance. Explanation is of paramount importance. That is what we are after. Why? Because through prediction and explanation, it leads toward the expansion of human powers over nature.

And that is what is of primary importance. Once you call that into question, then they figure you must be part of a different community. Well, I am not interested in human control over nature. Well, you are in the wrong department. You should be somewhere else. You see that is a certain conception of the good which is surreptitiously tucked away in the truth talk of that community. And of course, pragmatists want to make that visible. If there are other conceptions of the good, there are going to be other kinds of focuses, as with meaning and value of life, for example, in which high levels of prediction aren't helpful to us.

Question.

West: I appreciate that question you asked because it takes us right to the center of the dialogue between various postmodern theorists, who would want to put forth a social constructivist thesis and pragmatists, who themselves claim to endorse social constructiveness thesis, but do not render in their own writings a consciousness of the degree to which they are deploying terms which themselves are constructs.

Now, see, I would opt for the latter. That is to say that

I would opt for the pragmatist who does in fact affirm social constructs from culture to culture, civilization to civilization. It is a historical claim about sheer historical contingency and the way in which various notions, and rubrics and metaphors and what-have-you are always constructs. But in saying they are always constructs, it in no way denies that these constructs themselves are strong enough in the same way that when Royce talks about irrevocable deeds, there is a sheer facticity which is constructed, but is constructed in such a way that it appears natural.

Why? Because it is so unavoidable given the kind of socialization and acculturation human beings undergo in a particular culture. So, we can accent the constructive character of individual deed and whathaveyou. Once we have done that, I am not sure we have done as much as various postmodern theorists think we have done. That is the beginning it seems to me. Do you see what I am saying?

And once pragmatists embrace that, the question still becomes then how do we analyze, discern, respond, overcome, the very constructs that have such a tremendous weight in gravity within the various cultures, in this case, our own culture?

Question.

West: I think that you are onto something very important. And I think that it has to do with the ambivalent character of pragmatism vis-a-vis American market culture. That pragmatism emerges in a culture that is more thoroughly market driven and commodified than any other culture in the modern period. Therefore, you are going to find elective affinities. A stress on mobility, fluidity, border crossing, transgression, calling authority into question. That is what markets do, that is what pragmatism does. The difference, though, I think is that for pragmatism, I think they are trying to present what they view to be the best of that market culture, which are precisely those non-market values such as community which are central going back to Peirce.

But not just community, but as you know, love. The Agapish of Peirce is all about an evolutionary love. And that love was something that was irreducible to market culture, even as the pragmatism has elective affinities to the market culture, you see.

And part of the problem that we are going to have, and this is so true for prophetic thought, is how does one extract certain elements from market culture while working through market culture and still bring a critique of market culture? Because the market culture has much to teach us in a positive way just as it has a negative way.

That is part of the grappling that is going on here. So I think you are absolutely right. There are deep elective affinities and in fact when you look at pragmatism from outside of a U.S. context, it looks as if pragmatism is nothing but a justification of a market culture. I mean the great Bertrand Russell would say over and over again, pragmatism is just a justification for American commercialism. He was absolutely wrong, he never got the point. But it is understandable from Britain. Because he sees this mobility and fluidity. We are not talking about absolute truth, and so forth and so on. Because none of those terms sound like the market. Pragmatism, on the other hand, looks like commercialism and so forth. Because there were elective affinities, he was not careful and cautious enough to see that Peirce and James were using a language that looked very much like the market when James talks about the cash value of truth. For Russell that is all market talk.

Well, yes and no, Russell. You see it is an appropriation of a commercial metaphor in order to ultimately as we know in James's case of bringing critique to bear upon what he viewed to be some of the pernicious effects of a market culture. Just as he could also observe some of the positive elements of a market culture. So it is that kind of complexity and subtlety that we have to be after in talking about pragmatism's relation to this hotel civilization or business civilization, a market civilization. I will try to talk about that

tonight. Any other questions or queries?

Question.

West: Well it is a critique in the interest of revisioning the pragmatism because I do still want to talk about the future and the sense of possibility and so forth. But I do not think that the last option that you put forth, Michael, is actually historically possible. That is to say, when you claim that postmodernists think that somehow they can view the past as just a construct and simply by means of an interpretation, choose which one will have weight or not. That to me is historically impossible. It might be an illusion of intellectuals, but it is historically impossible because of these constructs.

We are talking about the blackness/whiteness discourse in American history, right? That you can talk about it as a construct, but it has been institutionalized, it has been socialized over time so it has a weight or gravity. So on the one hand we know that whiteness and blackness are constructs. But when we talk about the weight of constructs, you see, there is no escape. They are elastic enough to be changed, but you simply don't push it aside by one interpretation. And only a deluded, isolated, ahistorical postmodernist view would argue that that can be done.

It is historically impossible. But I think you are certainly right to say that my concern is trying to keep alive what I called yesterday a nuance historical sense, which is to say, keep alive traditions of critique and resistance, and the use of tradition there is quite deliberate. This is why I invoked Eliot. Eliot had a different concept of the tradition in terms of which one keeps alive. Mine are much more related to the underside of history and the unsaid in history.

He highlights those who tend to be near the top. But there is still much to learn from Thomas Stearns Eliot in terms of how you talk about the relation of past or present. That is what I am preoccupied with. Like Raymond Williams, I think, in *Modern Tragedy*, he is also preoccupied with this from a different vantage point than Eliot politically, but still concerned with the relation of past and present.

And I think you are absolutely right that my critique of pragmatism is an attempt to criticize the way it talks about tradition. Dynamic conceptions of tradition. And traditions that are waning which serve as a springboard for prophetic thought and action given market culture which effaces the past. Undermines traditions and so forth. So that I am in a bind, but rightfully so, there is no escape from dealing with this pragmatist market culture on the one hand and an attempt to recover tradition on the other hand. And thereby, in conversation with people who have talked about traditions in various ways, we see what one can learn from them and then using whatever insights I have to keep alive a tradition of critique and resistance in our present moment.

Question.

West: I think there is a number of different levels on which to respond to that very important question. At the intellectual level in terms of the battle over ideas, we have got to go back and re-examine those exemplary democratic thinkers and figures to evaluate and assess what went into what they thought about democracy.

And I think that links between democracy and humility are very important here, for example at the level of individual living. Because humility is a form of self-criticism that I mentioned before. Self-criticism and self-correction sits at the very center of any human enterprise for pragmatism. But to reconstruct the democratic tradition from past to present, to see what insights we can bring intellectually, that means rereading Walt Whitman closely. He is one of the few democrats of the nineteenth century. Dewey, Du Bois, in our own time Ella Baker, Fanny Lou Hamer, Martin Luther King, Jr., Dorothy Day, Michael Harrington. There is a whole host of persons who are radically democratic individuals as well as fighters for democracy.

And this has been a problem with the Left, because the

Left has always been ambivalent about democratic values. Promoting it at certain times, rejecting it under elitist values at other times. Managerial politics under Leninist auspices, and then pro-democratic sensibilities under democratic socialist auspices. So there is a real ambivalence on the Left. The Right has been quite explicit about what it thinks about democracy: As little as possible, as little as one can get away with. Reform bills in Britain in 1832, 1867, 1887. Look at some of the discussions that go along with the expansion of democracy and what very subtle and sophisticated right wing intellectuals have to say about it. Look at the debate between Walter Lippmann and John Dewey in the 1920s, when Lippmann wrote a book called *The Phantom Public,* and another book called *Public Opinion.* And Dewey responded with *The Public and Its Problems.*

Lippmann's argument was, I once was a democrat, but I have given up on it because I don't think ordinary people can do anything right. I vest my faith in those elites who can at least guide society through its crises. Common folk are simply gullible to irrational symbols. I don't think they have the capacity for self-government any more. Abe Lincoln would turn over in his grave. Abe Lincoln had said self-government is better than good government. That's Lincoln. What did he mean? Well, the good Alexander II of Russia was a good government. He died. Alexander III came in and all hell broke loose. Why? Because there was no check. No check. No accountability. So you might have good government for a moment because you have a nice benevolent despot or what-have-you. Then he or she dies and boom, you have another malevolent despot. Self-government, always messy, difficult, compromising and so forth, but it is on a democratic track. And that is precisely in part what Dewey said to Lippmann and his book. He said the cure for the ills of democracy is more democracy. Of course, this is so very important for people below.

You remember Malcolm X's technical definition of a black person, of a nigger. He said a nigger is a victim of

American democracy. That was his formulation. It is oxymoronic. How can there be victims of American democracy? Well, there have been. Jeffersonian democracy: black folk pushed further back; slavery consolidated. Poor whites in the South move to the center. Jim Crow. On two different tracks democracy is expanding for certain folk, curtailed for others. And yet, the irony is only more democracy would enhance the plight of victims of American democracy.

Malcolm understood that. King did. Ella Baker did as well. And hence, how do we talk about this tradition of democracy? And it gets, as you can imagine, quite complex. Because most democracies that we know have been predicated on empire or imperialism. From the Greeks to the Brits and the United States where democracy is predicated on slavery. What does it mean to talk about democracy in a world in which colonies are gone for the most part?

The empire is still here in economic form, but colonies are gone. And slavery for the most part is gone. That is what I mean by prospects of democracy. It is very difficult to talk seriously about this. There is a wonderful book out by Eli Sagan called *On Democracy and Paranoia in Greece and America.* Precious honey and deadly hemlock. And democracy has both at the same time.

This is one of the interventions presently in terms of struggling with this issue of what we mean by democracy. I think a tradition that we ought to be rereading is a tradition of British new liberals. A tradition of John Morley, the old radical independent, L.T. Hobhouse, J.A. Hobson, C.P. Clark and others at the turn of the century who were concerned about severing democratic forms of liberalism from British forms of imperialism.

It fundamentally shapes around the Boer War in the 1890s. There is a wonderful book by Hobhouse called *Democracy and Reaction* which ought to be read by every American citizen, not because it is right, but because it has some insight. Most libraries don't even have the book but it was published in 1903 and it is fascinating, in fact.

In this book—in the same year Du Bois was talking about the problem of the twentieth century, the problem of the color line—Hobhouse says that the problem of the twentieth century will be the relation of democracy to white racial domination and the women's struggle. In 1903, 1904, come on Hobhouse, how did you get it right, partly at least?

He is trying to rethink the notion of democracy and he is a liberal, but he can't go with Chamberlain and the other pro-imperialists. He has to rethink democracy in relation to race and empire and gender and so on. I know it is getting late and we need to go eat lunch. Thank you so very much for coming in today.

The Future of Pragmatic Thought

When talking about the future of prophetic thought, you recall last night, I began by highlighting those four fundamental components: human discernment, human connection, human hypocrisy and human hope. I would think that if I can leave you with any sense of hope, convince myself that the hope that I have is not a delusion in our present times, then I would have made some contribution. I also want to acknowledge the degree to which any reflection about human hope has as much to do with the battle of ideas as it does the battle for resources. So the first thesis I want to put forward is that the future of prophetic thought depends on our capacity to preserve, cultivate and expand traditions of critique and resistance. These have to do with trying to deepen those four components that I talked about last night.

Human discernment is in a very very deep and profound intellectual crisis of our time, that has much to do with what we mean by freedom. What do we mean by democracy and what are the prospects of freedom and democracy? That is one of the reasons why I highlighted the pragmatic tradition this afternoon. Because without a serious intellectual reflection about what we mean by these precious terms, much of our energy will be spent in our struggles for freedom and our struggles for democracy without a clear meaning of what we have in mind.

I am going to be using as a case study black America tonight because it seems to me any serious reflection about the possibilities for expanding freedom and democracy in the USA have to do with coming to terms with this hard case. These people of African descent, many of whom have been here nine generations—it is the best of times and the