

TOWARD A PRAGMATIST ACCOUNT OF HUMAN PRACTICES

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1. Introduction: A Significant Lacuna in the Pragmatist Movement¹

It is somewhat curious that *pragmata*² and practices do not occupy a more central place in the writings of the classical pragmatists. Charles Peirce, William James, John Dewey³, George Herbert Mead, and C. I. Lewis⁴ hardly overlooked them, but compared, say, to experience, belief, or inquiry, this topic is closer to the periphery than the center of attention⁵. Even so, pragmatism is not infrequently characterized as a perspective affirming the *primacy of practice*. Properly understood, this is an illuminating way of identifying the pragmatic orientation. But this characterization can too easily lead to misunderstanding, as though this perspective either crudely subordinates theory to practice or, worse, rules out theory altogether. This alone suggests how important it is to frame a pragmatist understanding of our shared practices, more detailed than anything found in the writings of either the classical pragmatists or those who have been influenced by these thinkers⁶. The lack

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² «The term [*pragmatism*] is», James does note, «from the same Greek word *πράγμα*, meaning action, from which our words ‘practice’ and ‘practical’ come»; James 1978, 28. Max H. Fisch offers a fuller gloss when he notes: «the deed, action, behavior, practice, affair, pursuit, occupation, business, going concern»; Fisch 1986, 223. «The Latin *factum* emphasizes the completed actuality, the pastness of the deed; [in contrast] the Greek *πράγμα* covers also an action still in course or not yet begun, and even a line of conduct that *would* be adopted under circumstances that may never arise. The Latin is retrospective: the Greek is, or may be, prospective»; Fisch 1986, 223-24. Cf. Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit*; Heidegger 2010 [1927], 68, 214.

³ It is however illuminating that Dewey takes Peirce to be more of a pragmatist than James and he does so because of Peirce’s greater appreciation of human practices. See *The Pragmatism of Peirce* (1916) in Dewey MW 10, 70-78. Also, see Dewey’s reviews in «The New Republic» of Peirce’s *Collected Papers*.

⁴ Though Lewis was the most Kantian of the classical pragmatists, his *Our Social Inheritance* (1957) is a work in which one encounters, in most respects, what I judge to be a pragmatist orientation toward our human practices.

⁵ Cf. James, *The Principles of Psychology*, James 1981 [1890], 249, 271. What James asserts about human consciousness in general is true of philosophical consciousness in particular. The history of philosophy is marked by dramatic shifts to topics previously on the fringe of thematic consciousness, if that.

⁶ In asserting this, I have no intention of slighting the effort or accomplishments of such authors as James D. Wallace, James J. Liszka, and others. They have gone no small distance toward filling this gap. But, from a historiographical perspective, they have not shown in great detail how their articulation of a theory of practice carries forward the insights of the classical pragmatists. This is mainly due to the fact that they are putting pragmatism to work, not doing the history of the movement. And in this they honor the spirit of the

of such is an account is a significant lacuna in the pragmatist movement as a living tradition.

Even James, the pragmatist who sometimes gives warrant for this misunderstanding, however, could not be clearer on this point: «It is ... simply idiotic to repeat [as the critics of pragmatism are wont to do] that pragmatism takes not account of purely theoretic interests» («The Meaning of Truth», James 1978, 280). In fact, all of the pragmatists took our purely theoretical pursuits to be paradigmatic instances of human practices, having complex relationships to other forms of human practice. That is, they saw theory as itself a practice or, more precisely, a widely extended family of human practices.

The pragmatists conceived theory in this manner in part to block a certain move, namely, the transcendental justification of any given practice (cf. Maddalena 2019). A widespread assumption is that human practices require a strictly theoretical justification, and the form of this justification involves the identification of a foundation. Whatever the theoretical elaboration of a given practice aims at, it does not (at least as far as pragmatism is concerned) aim at providing a theoretical *foundation* for that distinct practice. Though certainly no pragmatist, Alasdair MacIntyre finely articulates this point when he stresses, «*we need to begin with practice*, since theory is the articulation of practice and good theory [is the articulation] of good practice» (MacIntyre 1999, 8, emphasis added; cf. Whitehead's *Process and Reality*⁷). In this context, the function of theory is not taken to be that of providing a foundation or justification for a practice, but to render the practice «reflectively thoughtful and so to remedy what have been its defects and limitations» (MacIntyre 1999, 8). This becomes especially pressing when a practice, largely due to its successes, is thrown into crisis (e.g., when democratic institutions become more inclusive and, as a result, seemingly less stable; or, when the adherents of an intellectual culture are confronted by those of a quite different culture⁸; or, when an immanent movement of reform evolves

movement. In addition, they do not, from a philosophical perspective, elaborate anything comparable to, say, what Pierre Bourdieu does in either *Outline of a Theory of Practice* or especially *The Logic of Practice*. Indeed, the insights of Heidegger, Gadamer, Bourdieu, Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida, and other Continental European authors would enhance the efforts of contemporary pragmatists to articulate a truly pragmatist understanding of human practices.

⁷ «Philosophy destroys its usefulness», Whitehead contends, «when it indulges in brilliant feats of explaining away. It is then trespassing with the wrong equipment upon the field of particular sciences. *Its ultimate appeal is to the general consciousness of what in practice we experience*» (Whitehead 1978 [1929], 17); emphasis added. I would amend this to read: What is *generalizable* in our consciousness of what we experience in practice. Good theory is, in part, the accurate generalization of what is implicit in our experience as participants in one or more practices. Such generalization is undertaken for the sake of enhancing practice, not least of all coming to a clearer consciousness of our actual motives and varied objectives.

⁸ «Now the great factor in the development of the Egyptian mind was», Peirce suggested, «undoubtedly the physical geography of the country which probably produced its effects in a reasonably small number of generations after it was first felt. So with the Greeks. Their thought remained in its primeval condition until the extension of commerce brought them within the sphere of influence of other peoples, the Phoenicians, the Egyptians, and the

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into a revolutionary development). The issue then becomes principally one of *going on* and, when it does so, the task at hand concerns *how* to go on (cf. Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*). It is hardly clear or certain whether it is any longer even possible for some individuals to go on (it appears they might have to divest themselves of certain allegiances – e.g., after Galileo and Descartes, is the Aristotelian science of the natural world any longer viable?). Like species, practices might become extinct.

I have long been convinced that no philosophical tradition is adequate unto itself. This as much as anything underlies my philosophical pluralism (see, e.g., Colapietro 2014). Take the tradition of pragmatism itself as an example of this point. For an adequately pragmatic account of, say, experience, inquiry, or especially practice, one must draw upon resources from other philosophical traditions. Or take the tradition of Marxism as another illustration. For a truly revolutionary understanding of radical revolution, one must likely turn to traditions other than Marxism. Of course, the insights of Marx and his followers cannot be gainsaid; their sufficiency however might be. Finally, we might consider the psychoanalytic tradition as a third example. For a sufficiently nuanced and deep-cutting conception of the unconscious, we discover that Freud and his progeny are not altogether adequate. As illuminating as the perspective detailed by these theorists is, a pragmatist understanding of experience and, in addition, a hermeneutic account of interpretation aid psychoanalytic theorists in framing a more adequate theory of the dynamic unconscious. In general, no tradition, certainly not pragmatism⁹, is sufficient unto itself. Its most fundamental insights can only be adequately articulated if we deploy resources from other philosophical and indeed intellectual traditions, perhaps ones somewhat removed from disciplinary philosophy (again, Colapietro 2014). Regarding any effort to articulate a pragmatist understanding of human practices, the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Michel de Certeau, Tim Ingold, and numerous others (perhaps especially authors who are *not* philosophers, but are philosophically literate) is manifestly relevant¹⁰.

On this occasion, then, I want to sketch, mostly in broad, bold strokes, what I take to be a pragmatist account of human practices, drawing upon a variety of sources. My efforts are not primarily historical or philological, though I will attend to several texts in their historical context as an aid to formulating my theory. Stated positively, my aim is principally

Babylonians, and then within a few generations they made great strides in thought, to be succeeded by a slower movement of another kind. At first, we have a rather servile copying of the ideas of those countries, a syncretism such as we see in Pythagoras. But soon the foreign ideas begin to react with the ideas and faculties peculiar to the Greeks, and a great original life commences. So it was again, when in the 13th century, the ideas of the Dark Ages were rudely shaken up by contact with the more civilized Saracens»; C.S. Peirce, CP 7.270.

⁹ It should be noted that I assert this precisely as a pragmatist.

¹⁰ While I have been deeply influenced by Pierre Bourdieu, Michel de Certeau, Tim Ingold, I have of course also been influenced by philosophers, certainly not least of all two associated with the University of Milan – Carlo Sini and Rossella Fabbrichesi – as well as other Italian theorists (Rosa Calcaterra, Giovanni Maddalena, Susan Petrilli).

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philosophical. I take the theory I will sketch to be, at once, rooted in the pragmatist sensibility, as that sensibility is embodied in the writings of the classical pragmatists, *and* to go beyond anything explicitly found in their texts.

So, our focal concern is human practices. Since the American pragmatists were thoroughgoing evolutionists¹¹, however, we ought not to place too much weight on *human* practices. Despite the bias of philosophers even today, we are not the only animals with culture. There are continuities here as well as virtually everywhere else in nature. This is, then, part of what I want to urge in this presentation, a broad vision of human practices in which the alleged gulf between the human animal and some other species is neither as deep nor as univocal as has historically been claimed (occasionally, by the pragmatists themselves! (see, e.g., Singer 1985 on Dewey's slighting of animals). The practical life of the human animal is, to some extent, akin to that of certain other animals.

An even greater part of my present preoccupation concerns *historicity* more than continuity. It is not just that our practices are historical (it is not just that they are historically evolving and evolving affairs), but also that *a dramatic consciousness of their historical character* becomes, at a certain point, a defining feature of human practices (Colapietro 2020, Esposito 1984). In time, historical self-consciousness tends to become a central feature of human practices, making the present a phase of mediation between a usable past (James Baldwin) and a contestable future. The disputes among practitioners about the future often take the form of disputes about the past and, in turn, controversies about the future frequently assume the form of contestations about the past. Our actual present is irreducibly the triad of present-past-future (Dewey's *Events and the Future* [1926]; Dewey LW 2, 62-68). In a sense, we do not begin in the past but always in the present. The chaos, confusions, and conflicts inherent in the present drive us to confront the past, to reconstruct it (Miller 1981, 174-92; Colapietro 2003).

There is in William James' *Pragmatism* a very quick allusion to law, language, and truth, implicitly as practices, which sets the stage for our exploration of practices. His purpose is clear. He is using the development of both language and law as a way of understanding truth. As much as he is concerned with consequences and results, James is far from being neglectful of origins and processes of genesis. In this, he is like Peirce, Dewey, Mead, and Lewis, thinkers who were critically attentive to inaugural conditions and putative origins¹². On the one hand, James could not be more emphatic: pragmatism is «an attitude of orientation». It practically means: «*The attitude of looking away from first things, principles, 'categories,' necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits consequences, facts*» (James 1978, 32). On the other hand, his actual procedure is more nuanced than this formal pronouncement

¹¹ Peirce insists, «philosophy requires thorough-going evolutionism, or none»; C.S. Peirce, *The Architecture of Theories*, CP 6.14.

¹² To take but one example, consider the degree to which Dewey's magnum opus, *Experience and Nature* (1925), is preoccupied with such conditions and origins.

suggests. It might even seem to some readers paradoxical that James offers «a genetic theory of what is meant by truth» (James 1978, 37), that is, a theory which at once stresses consequences and traces truth to its *genesis* in processes of mediation (‘its marriage-function’). There is however nothing paradoxical, certainly not anything contradictory, in his procedure. Origins *and* outcomes, genesis *and* arcs toward the future, the historically solidified *and* the presently unsettled fall within the scope of his concern. Though he formally tends to emphasize one of the poles in these pairs (outcomes over origins, the future-in-the-making over genesis, the presently unsettled over the historically solidified) James hardly ignores the opposite pole. He traces truth-seeking to its genesis in processes of a deep-rooted yet open-ended character and does not hesitate to identify the result of this effort as «a *genetic* theory» (emphasis added).

Let us accordingly attend very carefully to what he in this context writes about these topics, even if it is quite brief and seemingly cursory. How did language emerge and evolve¹³? How did law? What do these phenomena in their historicity possibly disclose about human practices of truth-seeking and, more generally, about other human practices (arguably, about *all* human practices)? These are thus the questions on which I intend to focus at this juncture. What is implicit in James needs to be made explicit. Beyond this, the topic of practice needs to be made central in ways that more fully draw upon anthropology, history, and philosophical traditions other than pragmatism than we have done thus far.

James is in effect trying to *naturalize* human efforts to ascertain the meaning of truth. His is indeed a thoroughly naturalistic account of truth-seeking and –certification. Nothing supra-natural or trans-experiential is needed to explain the origin, development, *or* normativity of our processes of truth-seeking and –validation (on validation see Buchler 1979, Chapter VI). We are confronted with «that typical idol of the tribe, the notion of *the* Truth» (James 1978, 115). James is quick to stress: «*The* Truth: what a perfect idol [in particular] of the rationalistic mind!» (James 1978, 115). Oracular answers, usually «the great single-word answer», elicit and hold the

¹³ «Languages grew out of», Dewey notes, «unintelligent babblings, instinctive motions called gestures, and the pressure of circumstance. But nevertheless language once called into existence is [despite this origin] language and operates as language. It operates not to perpetuate the forces which produced it but to modify and redirect them. It was such a transcendent importance that pains [often the most exacting pains] are taken with its use. Literatures are produced, and then a vast apparatus of grammar, rhetoric, dictionaries, literary criticism, reviews essays, a derived literature *ad lib*. Education becomes [given this historical evolution] a necessity: literacy an end»; J. Dewey MW 14, 57. Cf. Maddalena 2015; also, Marshal 2010, 131. Literatures grow out of languages and, in turn, explicit grammars, rhetorics, lexicons, and much else grow of these literatures; *then*, (to use Dewey’s curious expression) «a derived literature *ad lib*». Nothing in pragmatism precludes the possibility of granting, in a strictly historicist sense, ‘transcendent importance’ to certain features of our shared practices. The painstaking care with which we attend to linguistic usage *rises above* any specific situation in which such care is called for. It emerges into an overarching ideal of the most conscientious practitioners.

admiration of the philosophical tradition¹⁴. But James implies we should question the question (cf. Wittgenstein) and, in doing so, we will be led to see «“what is *the* truth?” is no real question at all» (James 1978, 115-116). In making such remarks, James is endeavoring to break the spell of certain words, exerting a virtually magical fascination for traditional philosophy (see, e.g., James 1978, 31). The «whole notion of *the* truth is an abstraction from the fact of truths in the plural, a mere useful summarizing phrase like *the* Latin Language or *the* Law» (James 1978, 116). We can avoid confusion and opacity by attending to the concrete contexts in which such abstractions are made and, of even greater assistance, those in which such abstractions presently function. By implication, the pluralization of truth (the move from *the* Truth to truths of myriad forms) entails the *contextualization* of processes and practices (both seeing these processes and practices as themselves contexts *and* responding to the challenge of contextualizing these processes and practices themselves in the natural world and, more proximately, a social setting).

In brief, pluralization implies contextualization. *Natural processes* such as groping and guessing are taken to be virtually primordial, whereas *social exchanges* in which conflict and contestation are prominent provide a vivid sense of the social settings in which truth-seeking and –validation have taken their recognizable shapes (cf. James; Hegel on shapes of consciousness). James’ inclination toward nominalism tends to thrust into the foreground the topic of plurality, but his pragmatism offers a counterbalance in recognizing that, in this context, certain differences can be shown to be experientially negligible, i.e., certain affinities can be crucial and demand recognition (practically, *this* is the same as *that*, for the purpose at hand). Ironically, his pluralism does not deeply enough qualify his contextualism, for he tends to use a blanket-word – *experience* – to cover the totality of contexts (see, e.g., his *Essays in Radical Empiricism*). That is, experience is for him the context of contexts, the one in which all more specific contexts must themselves be situated in order to be rendered pragmatically intelligible (cf. Dewey’s *Context and Thought* [1931], Dewey LW 6, 3ff.)¹⁵. In itself, this does

¹⁴ «Metaphysics has usually followed a very primitive kind of quest. You know how men have always hankered after unlawful magic, and you know what a great part, in magic, *words* have always played. ... So the universe has always appeared to the natural mind as a kind of enigma, of which the key must be sought in the shape of some illuminating or power-bringing word or name. That word names the universe’s principle, and to possess it is, after a fashion, to possess the universe itself. ‘God’, ‘Matter’, ‘Reason’, ‘the Absolute’, ‘Energy’ are so many solving names» (James 1978, 31). Cf. Freud 1978 [1926], 6.

¹⁵ «The significance of ‘experience’ for philosophic method is», Dewey suggests, «but the acknowledgment of the indispensability of context in thinking when that recognition is carried to its full term» (Dewey LW 6, 20). He identifies three especially important contexts. There is, first of all, «the range and vitality of the thinker himself [or herself], that is, his most direct personal experience – which, however, only systematic misunderstanding to be merely an experience *of* his own person» (Dewey LW 6, 6). That is, the personal context is not necessarily anything merely personal or subjective. In addition, there is «the next wide circle or deepened stratum of context» – the actual cultural in which individual thinkers are rooted (Dewey LW 6, 7). Third, «there is the context of the make-up of experience itself»

not pose a problem. But since James is trying to twist free from debates about the function of knowledge, he unwittingly perpetuates the very problematic he is struggling to deconstruct¹⁶. At times, however, he takes pains to specify the differential contexts in which human experience, concretely conceived (cf. Smith 1981), alone arises, evolves, and, in some cases, devolves or even withers, perhaps dies. For instance, the context of religious experience is not that of experimental inquiry, though they inevitably overlap, at least when both reach a certain stage in their historical development. Or, the context of artistic innovation is not that of political institutions, though art and politics are historically linked in deep and complex ways. I at least am reminded here of Wittgenstein's concept of 'language-games' as both myriad and, in crucial respects, heterogeneous (Lyotard; Rorty). Much like James' own, Wittgenstein's anti-scientism is evident in his refusal to elevate the language-game of experimental science into the paradigmatic form of human discourse, judging all other language-games by the extent to which they measure up to the ideals and norms definitive of science.

(Dewey LW 6, 7). The «boundless multiplicity of the concrete experiences of humanity ... will naturally terminate in some sense of the structure of any and all experience». In Dewey's judgment, this structure is that of an ongoing, cumulative transaction between the organism and its environment. It is however «dangerous to begin at this point». Striking a Jamesian note, Dewey in this essay advises us to attend to the particular features of the specific contexts in which our present inquiry is undertaken. While a sense of the structure of experience can assist us in understanding the particulars and specificities of such contexts, nothing is more important than attending by close observation to the salient details of these plural contexts. Dealing 'gently and humanely' with these contexts fosters a sense of the structure of experience as transaction, but (to repeat) nothing is more important than close, critical attention to the *particular go* of the situation.

¹⁶ What I have in mind here is James in his struggles to address such critics of pragmatism as F. H. Bradley, Josiah Royce, and Bertrand Russell could not help but be drawn into narrowly epistemological disputes. While his intention was to shift the center of concern, he could not address his critics without engaging them, to some extent, on their terms. This practically meant perpetuating the form of philosopher against which he was pitting himself, might and main. Specifically, consider this claim in his «The World of Pure Experience»: «The only function that one experience can perform is to lead to another experience; and the only fulfillment we can speak of is the reaching of a certain experienced end [or terminus]» (James 1976 [1912], 32). In a sense, this rudimentary *cognitive* function is operative in all the distinct contexts of human experience (e.g., the narrowly practical, the formally theoretical, the moral, the political, the aesthetic, and the religious). But the exclusive focus on this cognitive function tends to occlude the various roles played by experience in these divergent contexts. In other words, James' own pluralism is somewhat blunted by his preoccupation with *the* cognitive function discernible in any experiential continuum. The polemical context forced him to fight too much of the time on enemy territory and, as a result, his robust pluralism was to some degree neutralizing in these predominantly epistemological disputes. In identifying the true as a species of the good – moreover, as a species concerned with the comportment of agents – James however pointed the way toward how epistemology-centered philosophy might be transformed into a discourse focused more generally on the constitutive norms of various practices. *The* function of cognition needs to be deconstructed no less than *the* Truth or *the* Law. Pluralization and contextualization are integral to the process of accomplishing this deconstruction, this loosening of the hold of traditional frameworks and simply inherited preoccupations, so that we might free ourselves to move in different and more promising directions.

Let us, now, return, to what James so suggestively, but elliptically, says in *Pragmatism* about law and language. Judges and teachers of language ‘sometimes talk’ in such a way as to imply that *the Law* or *the Language* being taught (e.g., Greek or Latin) are ‘entities pre-existent’. This point is absolutely crucial. Their allegedly antecedent existence or actuality can seem to determine their features ‘unequivocally’ and even to require judges or speakers to obey this actuality (often to obey it obsequiously).

In actuality, however, neither *the Law* nor (say) *the Language* being taught (be it Latin or some other tongue) is a set of abstract principles embodied in an actuality of a preexisting nature. James insists: «both law and latin [sic] are results». They were not originally given in advance of adjudicating or speaking (in Saussurean terms, *langue* is a distillation of *parole*). What is called the Law and the Latin language are rather the *result* of these processes or practices. They are derivative, not primordial: they are derived from processes and practices in which every one of their features (lexicon, syntax, and even grammar) are emergent functions of an evolving actuality. Stated more simply, they *came to be* out of what was inchoate and tacit. Formal, abstract principles emerged and evolved out of informal, concrete processes; and, of even greater moment, these principles have their point and purpose *only* in the context of processes which have evolved into recognizable practices. In brief, principles are not antecedent but consequent (or derivative); moreover, they are functional and thus contextual, not transcendent or timeless. Of course, when you or I came upon the scene, language and law were in a sense already in place (solidly – even authoritatively – in place). No view regarding the Law or the Latin language could have taken root, in the form it has, were it not the case that both law and language actually do confront us (individuals at this point in history), to some extent as *fait accompli*¹⁷.

The solidity and authority of either a legal system or a given language are, however, to some extent illusory. For both are truly – and ineluctably – always *in the making* and, moreover, to a far greater degree than we tend to appreciate. James is emphatic about this: «Truth, law, and language fairly boil away from them [from *the Truth*, *the Law*, *the Latin language*] at the least touch of novel fact. These things *make themselves* as we go» (James 1978, 116). On this account, self-generative and –constituting practices owe their being and authority to the historical processes in and through which they emerge and evolve. Their apparent destiny is to become normatively reflexive and critical undertakings, shared practices in which their constitutive goals are, more often than not, matters of intense and indeed sustained dispute¹⁸. The

¹⁷ «The activities of the group are», as Dewey notes, «already there, and some assimilation of his [the individual’s] acts to their patterns is a prerequisite of a share therein, and hence of having any part in what is going on. Each person is born an infant, and every infant is subject from the first breath he draws and the first cry he utters [if not before then] to the attentions and demands of others» (Dewey MW 14, 43). It is significant that Dewey uses language to illustrate this point.

¹⁸ Think here of how disputes about the very purpose of education becomes an integral part of most developed forms of education institutions (ditto for the purpose of an

crucial question often turns out to be, how to go on (cf. Wittgenstein; also, Cavell)? These are ongoing, open-ended processes in which questions regarding the validity of their prolongation – the justification of their very existence – not infrequently hang in the balance. The crises time and again befalling, say, an *epistémé* (or framework of intelligibility) make this plain. A paradigm by virtue of its success generates crises of legitimation. As, say, Christianity evolves and becomes nothing less than the religion of the Emperor – moving out from the darkness of the most clandestine catacombs into the halls of secular power – its own identity undergoes a transfiguration. Or, to take another example, Galileo’s new dialogue with nature confronts the traditional understanding of that engagement, not least of all because of his elevation of mathematics as *the* language of nature, in a polemical spirit, desiring to show especially the Aristotelian conception of that dialogue to be so much idle, ineffectual chatter (Luther; Marx; Freud).

By virtue of their successes more than anything else, then, practices are susceptible to crises. Put more strongly, their very successes tend to be generative of crises, crises in which the identity of the practices becomes a question for practitioners. Søren Kierkegaard’s question, «What does it mean, especially in the realm of Christendom, *to be* a Christian?» is emblematic of the point I am driving at. So, too, is an array of questions newly relevant (for the first time, even intelligible), after Darwin has so painstakingly made his detailed case for natural selection by means of chance mutation. How are we to understand even the notion of *species* in light of his theory – do they even exist? In general, the traditional ideal of an intuitive grasp of immutable forms gives way to a discursive reconstruction of the history of evolving forms, a reconstruction inherently open to objections (the fossil record, for one thing, is extremely fragmentary, moreover, the forms are inevitably open to transformation and even extinction). We are being initiated into a world shot through with chance, contingency, and transience. This is truly *our* world (it has always been this), but we are almost for the first time catching a clearer glimpse of its actual character than ever before.

No turn has been more inherently dramatic or potentially transformative than the historical turn, the turn toward history (cf. Ortega; of course, Vico; Colapietro 2020). The relationship between the pragmatic turn, especially when it is conceived as a turn toward our practices, in all of their heterogeneity and irreducibility, *and* the historical turn is a complex one. On the one hand, these practices are historically evolved and evolving affairs. On the other, the historical impetus to make the pragmatic turn was and remains a need, an exigency, to insert ourselves, more self-consciously and self-critically, in the drama of history (Peirce NEM IV, 376, 379; Colapietro 2020) as improvisational actors who are in part rewriting inherited scripts.

economy, a government, an *ecclesia*, a marriage, a career, or virtually any human endeavor, institution, or role). Think also about how the function of language inevitably becomes a dispute among linguists and other theorists.

Thus, we are at once actors in, and co-authors of, this drama. The drama is unfolding in the present, making itself up as it goes along. As enmeshed in this drama, we also are making ourselves up as we go along (cf. Morrison 1993). This drama is nonetheless a complexly constrained and even overdetermined process. Self-conscious practitioners are historically engaged actors animated by a dramatic sense of what not infrequently is a conflictual present¹⁹. This is especially true in a discipline such as philosophy or a field such as the arts. It is however also true in those practices in which consensus is not only taken to be attainable but also has been solidified in monumental achievements and their continuing influence (e.g., Newtonian physics²⁰ or Darwinian biology).

A human practice is an ongoing, open-ended process in which the very identities of practitioners are, time and again, put at risk. For the most part, a practice is a tacit, informal affair, though of course there are practices in which explicitness, formality, and written codes of strict conduct are defining features of a given one (e.g., the comportment of subjects in the presence of a sovereign, the prescribed performance of a religious ritual within a given tradition).

In their origin, however, the most basic practices such as speaking, fighting, mating, medicine, child-rearing were not consciously instituted or deliberately fashioned. To take but one example, we can hardly imagine in adequate detail how any natural language arose. But we are united in taking as its origin a phase, possibly the very longest one in a protracted development, when lexicons and grammars were far off in the future. Let me however touch upon a point here. It is both speculative and borrowed. In his book on Vico, David Marshall suggests that human speech began not with human utterers, but with human hearers. If this is so, the first words were not spoken by us, but *to* us by the gods or at least forces of a terrifying or at least enigmatic character, ones before which our forebears trembled, likely in abject terror. One obvious possibility is lightning or lightning-and-thunder (Marshall 2010, 131). The significance of the phenomenon (or utterance) in the sense of *importance* could not be gainsaid, while the significance in the sense of its *import* was anything but evident, save if being in the presence of the terrifying carries its meaning on its face.

In light of such considerations, a certain vision of human agency begins to come into focus. Human beings are creative respondents to enigmatic phenomena – the very capacity to respond to the dubious as dubious – to perceive a phenomenon as enigmatic – is arguably the defining trait of

¹⁹ «The mind is», Dewey insists, «within the world as part of the latter's own ongoing process. ... From knowing as an outside [or spectatorial] beholding to knowing as an active participation in the *drama* of an on-moving world is the historical transition» to which Dewey and, more generally, the classical pragmatists devoted themselves (Dewey LW4, 232; emphasis added; Toulmin 1988, xvii). See James' *Remarks on Spencer's Definition of Mind*.

²⁰ Kant of course took Newtonian physics as a *fait accompli* and made this unquestionably monumental achievement in effect a timeless framework, an ahistoric paradigm, of scientific rationality.

human intelligence (Dewey LW 4, 179)²¹. When the spell of a sign is, as it were broken, when it ceases to function effectively and thus unreflectively as a sign, therein becoming a locus of uncertainty and doubt, we become aware of the sign as a sign. Until the spell is broken, we follow the promptings or guidance of the sign without hesitancy, but also without awareness (Dewey LW 1, 72; also, cf. Polanyi 1962, 288-90; also, cf. Tillich 1958, Chapter III).

It just might be that we draw inferences as naturally (or instinctively) as we breathe, we catch the contextual significance and salience of objects and events even more spontaneously than we do isolated qualities or features. Our survival and wellbeing depend on our ability to ‘catch on’ to the significance of objects and events – or presume that we have done so (MS 318; quoted by Deely 1994, 376). The process of ‘catching on’ also concerns signs themselves: *they* not infrequently catch on among a widening community of users (interpreters and utterers). They come to be *pivots in our practices* around which much turns (think here of the name *God* in the context of practices of religious worship or the word *force* in the context of practices of experimental inquiry). Such pivots are in principle alterable and, in fact, have been altered (e.g., the word *species* as used by the scholastic was such a pivot for several centuries and then was displaced by the modern idea of idea – above all, by the Cartesian and Lockean concepts of concepts). In general, they have their significance primarily, perhaps solely, in the contexts – that is, in the practices – in which they function in this way. Their meaning is the role or set of roles which they play in one or more practices. Because most of them are deeply rooted in one or more social practices, however, they are not easily alterable. Whatever role individual innovators play in this alteration, they play as *social* actors and their effectiveness depends to a great degree on luck (or chance)²².

2. Historicist Acknowledgment of a ‘Timeless’ Classic

For anyone defending a pragmatist account of human practices, it is imperative to confront the question of how some achievements or works appear, practically, to have attained the status of ‘classics’ (and, seemingly by implication, works transcending the vagaries and vicissitudes of time or history). Arguably, *philosophical* classics are more akin to musical than literary classics,

²¹ «Many definitions of mind and thinking have been given [by philosophers and others]. I know of but one that goes to the heart of the matter: – response to the doubtful as such». «As organisms become more complex in structure and thus related to a more complex environment, the importance of a particular act is establishing conditions favorable to subsequent acts (...) becomes at once more difficult and imperative. (...) Conditions of the environment become more ambivalent. (...) Behavior is thus compelled to become more hesitant and wary, more expectant and preparatory. In the degree that responses take place to the doubtful *as* the doubtful, they acquire *mental* quality. If they are such as to have a directed tendency to change the precarious and problematic into the secure and resolved, they are *intellectual* as well as *mental*» (Dewey LW 4, 179).

²² «The community stagnates», James asserts in *Great Men and Their Environments*, «without the impulse of the individual. The impulse dies away without the sympathy of the community» (James 1956 [1896], 232).

since they are the communal focus of intense, sustained criticism and simply devotional engagement often of unbroken duration²³. For example, some part of the critical community stretching from his death in 1274 to the present devoted itself to reading the texts of Thomas Aquinas with painstaking care. Much like Bach, he was never entirely lost to a segment of an inter-generational community of critical interpreters. The parallel with performance needs to be stressed (see especially Barthes 1977, 162)²⁴. Even though they were not publicly performed, Bach's compositions were performed by an admittedly small circle of passionate devotees in private settings (Coetzee 2001). To read a philosopher is to re-enact the debates in which that author was entangled, especially in the case of a medieval author whose philosophical consciousness was so profoundly shaped by the oral *practice* of *disputatio*. Just as the musician simply reading a score of music is always to some extent *performing* that score, so too a contemporary philosopher reading the inscribed arguments of a historical author is almost always drawn into the very movement of thought, trying delicately to balance charitable interpretation and critical assessment. In a word, philosophical reading is *performative*. It is an instance of enacting (or re-enacting) some scene from the drama of thought²⁵. It demands both identification and distanciation (cf. Gadamer 1979, 83²⁶).

A classic is historically constituted and the processes by which a work attains this status are essentially critical. What transcends history can only be historically determined and, as a result, whatever has *proven itself* thus far to secure and maintain such a status might ultimately fail to do so in the future. «No human acquisition is», as José Ortega y Gasset notes, «stable» (Ortega 1963, 25). Put otherwise, everything human is precarious. Nothing absolutely guarantees Plato, or Dante, or Shakespeare, or Bach's status as a classic. Each one is susceptible to the vagaries and vicissitudes of history, though the *inherent* merits of these monumental achievements are not in the least slighted by this acknowledgment. On these merits, you and I might judge these works worthy of being available to future generations. But, then, that judgment defines a responsibility as much as anything else.

Take an example close to home, at least if one happens to be a philosopher. Some essentially and hence irreducibly vague sense of, say, *clarity*

²³ I have been guided in my thinking about this topic by J. M. Coetzee's essay *What Is a Classic?* (Coetzee 2001).

²⁴ It is one thing to consume passively a text, quite another to play actively a text. «In fact, reading, in the sense of consuming is», Barthes insists, «far from playing with the text». He is quite explicit about his meaning: «'Playing' must be understood here in all its polysemy: the text itself *plays* (like a door, like a machine with 'play') and the reader plays twice over, playing the Text as one plays a game, looking for a practice which reproduces it, but, in order that that practice not be reduced to a passive, inner mimesis (the Text is precisely that which resists such a reduction), also playing the Text in the musical sense of the term. The history of music (as a practice, not as an 'art') does indeed parallel that of the Text fairly closely, etc.» (Barthes 1977, 163).

²⁵ «Every case of consciousness is», Dewey suggests, «dramatic; [in turn] drama is an enhancement of the conditions of consciousness» (Dewey LW 1, 232).

²⁶ Quoted by Bernstein 1983, 250, note #36.

asserts itself as an ideal. This sense is never completely identifiable with any historical achievement, though the ideal might widely (universally?) be recognized as paradigmatically exemplified in actual works. Such works serve as exemplars in which the ideal is manifest in an especially imitable and illuminating form. The ideal as embodied in a work is one locus of the ideal, but then so too is the consciousness or perhaps simply the psyche of the practitioner, since the ideal might be outside of explicit, focal consciousness, though animate and guide the conduct of that practitioner by a commitment to honor the ideal *in practice*. The pedagogical relationship is yet another critical site, actual locus, of our operative ideals.

3. The Practice Turn

In my judgment, then, contemporary pragmatism needs a more fully developed conception of human practice. There are, ironically, at least as many resources for crafting such a theory outside of the actual writings of the classical pragmatists than within this philosophical tradition. The so-called *practice turn* in contemporary thought (see, e.g., Schatzki et al. 2000) is a central development, but all too many pragmatists seem to be entrapped in an all too narrow circle of ideas, texts, and thinkers. On this occasion, then, I have tried to sketch in broad, bold strokes the outline of a pragmatist theory of human practices. It cannot avoid having the appearance of being somewhat slapdash. But I assure you this is the result of a sustained effort to fill in a critical lacuna.

The sticking point for most professional philosophers (even for putative pragmatists drawn to a transcendental rendering of the pragmatist orientation – e.g., Sami Pihlström and Gabriele Gava) is likely to be the locus of norms and ideal (Maddalena). The appeal to practice will seem to many of them woefully inadequate, fatally flawed. That is, even an adequately articulately theory of human practices (adequate from the perspective of pragmatism) will be judged by them to be normatively *inadequate*. It allegedly does not give us what we need or, at least, what we feel we need.

Richard Rorty puts the point sharply when he observes: «at times like Auschwitz, when history is in upheaval and traditional institutions and patterns of behavior are collapsing, we want something which stands outside of history and institutions» (Rorty 1989, 189). Or, the «philosophical battles between the formalists and the historicists – between those who want to isolate atemporal structures and those who think, with Freud, “chance is not unworthy of determining our fate” – follow», as Rorty puts it elsewhere,

the same scenario whether the issue is scientific truth or moral agency. Philosophers *on the one side* want something to rely on, something that is not subject to change. Philosophers *on the other side* try to find ways of preserving most of common sense while keeping faith with Darwin: with the realization that our species, its faculties

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and its current scientific and moral languages, are as much products of chance as are tectonic plates and mutated viruses. They try to explain how social democrats can be better than Nazis, modern medicine better than voodoo, Galileo better than the Inquisition, even though there are no neutral, transcultural, ahistorical criteria that dictate these rankings. (Rorty 1995, 36; emphasis added)

On the one hand, then, some individuals appear to be driven to posit a realm beyond nature and history in order to do justice to normativity. On the other hand, others argue strenuously that the natural world and human history provide the only possible bases for our norms and ideals.

In the face of radical conflict, there just might *not* be anything to which we can effectively appeal. The best we can do seems to be to *invite* others into an evolved and evolving form of human life – and be open to their invitations. There is likely something in their form of life which might render our invitation audible, perhaps even to some degree enticing; just as there might be something in our own. Some of us however want – indeed, demand – nothing less than a *coercive* argument showing demonstrably how one or another of the warring parties engaged in a radical conflict is wrong. Without at least the possibility of such an argument, it is further alleged that we have in effect levelled all moral differences. At the level of commitment, the committed autocrat is taken to be morally on a par with the committed champion of democratic practices. This in turn is taken to be a *reductio ad absurdum* of the pragmatist position, as I am defending it.

I of course do not take it to be a *reductio* at all. The human condition is one in which radical conflicts erupt, time and again. Over the course of history, we have attempted, with remarkable persistent, ingenuity, and patience, to institute neutral fora in which radical conflicts might be rationally adjudicated. The institution of such fora has been among the most praiseworthy achievements of historical actors entangled in seemingly irreconcilable disputes. But they have proven largely ineffective in preventing all too many radical conflicts about momentous issues becoming violent conflicts. At this moment²⁷, the impotence of the United Nations and World Court could not be more manifest.

There are countless things to which we might appeal, but is there anything (including self-interest) on which a coercive argument might be based? I see no rational basis for the persisting hope that such an argument is, even in principle, possible. In the absence of such an argument, all is not lost. We are where we have always been – inextricably entangled in the ongoing pursuits of heterogeneous practices, intricately woven together (cf.

²⁷ On February 24th, 2022 – i.e., less the three weeks before I presented this paper – Russia invaded Ukraine. It would be impossible for me, as a pragmatist, to reflect about human practices in abstraction from the historical context in which our everyday actions are unfolding, no matter how far I am physically removed from the tragic consequences of this military conflict.

Sini 2009, Chapter 7). If we take a radical conflict as it stands, it is virtually certain that it will prove to be intractable. When the stakes are high, such intractability almost always proves to be an invitation to violence (see Smith's Introduction to *Radical Conflict* [Smith 2016]). Accordingly, what is required of us is nothing less than a creative re-imagination of the radical conflict itself. As Jonathan Lear suggests in *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*, this falls to «the 'poet' ... [in] the broadest sense» – «a creative maker of meaningful space». «The possibility for such a poet is», Lear adds, «precisely the possibility for the creation of a new field of possibilities. No one is in a position to rule out that possibility» (Lear 2006, 55), no matter how much in our inherited practices tends to foreclose the political imagination and vitiate moral resolve. The very possibility of such a 'poet' is bound up with the possibility of transforming intractable conflicts into humane disputes in which the methods of cooperative intelligence replace those of brute force (Dewey LW 11, 57).

4. The Nature of the Challenge Confronting Us

The challenge is at bottom *moral* and *rhetorical*, not formally logical, certainly not essentially transcendental. We have to invent²⁸, circumstantially, persuasive arguments for which antecedent forms provide, at most, *very* rough templates. Nothing guarantees success. Human history is in no small measure a jumbled heap of horrific scenes of radical conflict in which eloquent appeals to the loftiest principles and ideals have rationalized the most destructive impulses and disheartening cruelty (systemic and institutional even more than episodic cruelty).

The appeal to history (including the appeal to nature) *appears* to provide no way out of the return of the repressed, the inexorable repetition of past folly. «Rulers, statesmen, and nations are told», Hegel astutely observes, «that they ought to learn from the experience of history. But what experience and history teach us is this, that nations and governments have never learned anything from history, nor acted in accordance with the lessons to be derived from it» (Hegel 1988, 8). But what else is there?

The transcendental ground of our ultimate ideals is, in my judgment, a historical illusion. It is neither necessary nor possible. Our historical practices are sufficient unto the day and the day after tomorrow (cf. Nietzsche's 1994 [1878]). Our practices are shot through with contingency, change, and transience, but in the complex course of their ongoing histories contingent necessities and endurable forms of indefinite duration and largely untested generalizability have not only emerged but have taken deep root. What is *necessary* for our form of life might be a function of a history which could have been otherwise, but at this point it is indisputably necessary.

Language, law, and truth-seeking and –validating trace their roots to natural processes of an unreflective character. A naturalistic account in which historical emergence plays a central role is one holding out the possibility of offering a plausible story about not only the genesis of these

²⁸ Topics is that branch of rhetoric concerned with invention and discovery.

practices but also their *functioning*. The evolution of many of our practices encompasses nothing less than a series of transfigurations, a history in which these practices seem so far removed from their origins as to be not anything which could be traced to these origins. After Darwin, however, this understanding of our practices (they trace their origins and development to the humblest sources) has become increasingly plausible, though many still so dread historicism as to feel the necessity to take flight from the contingencies and accidents of history, altogether. In truth, everyone is in some measure a historicist. So, too, everyone is appreciative of the importance, if not the primacy, of our practices. The only question is, how radical is one's historicism, how wide-ranging and deep-cutting is one's appreciation of the practices in and through which one defines oneself? A radical historicism can take the form of a thick historicism which is as opposed to facile forms of historical relativism as it is to trans-historical approaches. Moreover, a radical pragmatism can take our ungrounded practices to define the ultimate context of human endeavor. The impulse to ground (or justify) our practices in terms utterly at odds with the character of those practices is, from a pragmatist perspective, deeply suspect (cf. Wittgenstein 1969, #47²⁹). It is almost certainly an instance of what Dewey would identify as «a failure of nerve» (cf. Hook 1963, 71-94), though it is an expression he borrowed from Gilbert Murray. How to *go on* in more critical, thoughtful, and imaginative ways, without feeling the necessity to ground our historical practices in an ahistoric manner, signals an embrace of our animality, historicity, and fallibility, thus an acceptance of our contingency, transience, and mutuality. The antecedently fixed is displaced by the historically emergent and, in turn, the historically emergent holds within itself the possibility and, perhaps in some instances, even the promise of self-transformation and –transfiguration. The dream of eliminating the very possibility of radical conflict is arguably an indication that the human animal has lost a measure of its irrepressible vitality, rendering it to that degree unfit for the unending struggle to maintain its distinctive form of human life. This need not devolve into a blind or crude struggle for power or even a conscious and crafty quest for power unmediated by other ideals (not least of all such ideals as justice and beauty). Indeed, «the measure of civilization is», as Dewey underscores in *Liberalism and Social Action*, «is the degree to which the method of cooperative intelligence replaces the method of brute conflict» (Dewey LW 11, 57). Alas, cooperative, creative intelligence has been *conscripted* into what ought to be called by its name, war regimes³⁰.

²⁹ «Forget», Wittgenstein advises us, «this transcendent certainty, which is connected with your concept of Spirit» (Wittgenstein 1969, #46). Cf. Wittgenstein 1953, #107: «Back to the rough ground!».

³⁰ Dewey's observation on the conscription of intelligence are deep-cutting and far-ranging. There is perhaps no more tragic figure in this regard than Leonardo. Almost certainly Bronowski and Bruce Mazlish go too far in asserting, he «was fascinated and dominated by powers in others; he lay under the spell that has bound men for [at least] 500 years, so that they cannot tear themselves away from the loved and brutal image of the gangster and the

As Dewey also observes, «we have not said anything so long as we have merely said power» (*Intelligence and Power*; Dewey LW 9, 109). Insofar as we abstract from the historically specific forms of power, the socially situated actors who deploy and resist power, the observable consequences of its exercise, and other historically specific considerations, we have said virtually nothing in invoking the name of power. The *intelligent* exercise of power tends not to result in diminishing or eliminating the efficacy of the form of power being deployed; it tends rather to enhance and augment that power. Practically situated actors, caught up in historical movements over which those actors can exert only very limited control and about which they possess (if anything) even more limited cognizance, are in most cases not simply unwitting dupes. Ordinarily, such actors are intelligent practitioners having a deep, if largely tacit and inevitably partial, understanding of what they are doing.

5. Conclusion: Creative Reframing of Radical Crises

The pragmatist ideal of the *intelligent* practitioner – hence, of intelligence as itself a power enmeshed in the engagements of that practitioner³¹ – is almost certainly a more heroic figure than is ordinarily appreciated, even by the defenders of pragmatism. What Dewey says about «personal rationality or reflective intelligence» is relevant here: such rationality or intelligence is «the necessary organ of experimental initiative and creative invention in making customs» and hence reconstructing practices (Dewey MW 14, 56). We must ultimately fall back on the innovative exercise of historically situated intelligence – that is, human ingenuity, a descendent of animal cunning (cf. Whitehead’s *The Function of Reason*). As much as principles might guide this exercise, ingenuity, while norm-shaped, is rarely norm-governed in any thoroughgoing sense (but it is always norm-*guided* without having its conduct dictated by those norms). We live and move and have our being in a *space of norms*, that is, in overlapping fields of shared practices. What John McDowell identifies as «bald naturalism» (McDowell 2008, 53, 75-76, 85, 142n, 155) is but another philosophical fantasy (much like the «state of nature» or «the egocentric predicament») from which we have to extricate ourselves. To take such a vision of nature as our point of departure, thereby making norms and ideals ‘naturalistically’ inexplicable, imposes an impossible task and hence condemns us to a futile exercise. In contrast, to take nature to be the matrix from which human practices have emerged and the arena in which they have evolved orients us toward nature, history, and those practices in such a way that we can tell an illuminating story about human practices in their irreducible heterogeneity and unimaginably complex linkages. Nothing precludes the possibility of instituting fora in which universal principles command extremely wide authority. Nothing, alas, guarantees whether such

tyrant» (Bronowski-Mazlish 1986 [1960], 19). Alas, there is nonetheless too much truth in this historical observation.

³¹ Dewey told William Pepperell Montague, his «effort had not been to practicalize intelligence but to intellectualize practice» (quoted by Eldridge 1988, 5).

fora will prove to be effective deliberative assemblies or to provide adequate resources for individual disputants to resolve radical conflicts in a rational or intelligent manner³². This does not point to any inherent flaw in our human practices, only to a central feature of human existence, the seemingly invincible intolerance of individuals and groups toward other individuals and groups (the ideal of peaceful co-habitation proves too elusive, the lure toward annihilating our enemies too strong). Granting primacy to our practices of course does not resolve any of these conflicts. It merely points us to the sites in which the creative exercise of human ingenuity is most urgently needed. A pragmatist orientation toward these historical sites betrays itself when it flies off in a transcendental direction or becomes entangled in the futile exercise of offering a theoretical foundation for one or another of our shared practices. It proves itself to be pragmatic when it joins historians, anthropologists, social theorists, political activists, and others in trying to articulate better what these practices presuppose and imply, in the hope that good theory is an ever-better articulation of a good yet inevitably flawed practice. Enhancing the efficacy of our practices crucially depends on articulating what these practices entail and, above all else, what our practices demand of us.

Nothing matches our preparations for war and hardly anything is more tragic than, intimately tied to these preparations, the most eloquent appeals to creative intelligence, *after* blood has been spilled, almost always prove to be impotent (cf. James' *The Social Value of the College-Bred* [1987]). If only we could match these preparations for war with ennobling experiments in creative intelligence of a manifestly public character, «the party of 'red-blood'» might have a counterweight in those whom it ridicules as '*Les Intellectuals*' (those who are passionately devoted to the cultivation of intelligence, especially in forms yet not embodied in traditions or institutions) (James, «*Social Value of the College Bred*» [1987], 110). A pragmatist vision of human practices holds within itself nothing less than the moral vision of the innovative practitioner as a cultural hero. Is it necessarily a deficiency of pragmatism that the depiction of such a figure *as a hero* is more likely to be greeted with a smirk or a smile of contempt than even a momentary consideration by historically shaped actors rigidly encased in seemingly immutable cynicism? Nothing less than faith conjoined to faith and charity is needed to sustain and revise a practice. Are those who so 'instinctively' smile in contempt of intelligence disposed to reflect on the sources or roots of their cynicism, i.e., have they the courage and imagination to trace their contemporary sensibility to their historical roots? Theirs is a practice-shaped and – shaping sensibility (cf. Bourdieu) in which effective transformations of our ongoing practices are, time and again, short-circuited by a lack of historical imagination and of political resolve. The contemporary world once again bears brutal testimony to this historical failure. Must the lesson

³² See *Radical Conflict* (2016), edited by Andrew R. Smith; also, my review of this anthology (Colapietro 2017).

of history continue to be, as Hegel pointedly observed, that humans are incapable of learning from the history of the failures of their practices?

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