Squaring the Triangle: A Stumpian Solution to the Major Frictions that Exist between Pragmatism, Religion, and Moral Progress; Richard Bernstein, Cornel West, and Hans-Georg Gadamer Re-Examined

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Abstract : This paper examines frictions that lie at the heart of any pragmatist conception of religion and moral progress. I take moral progress to require the ability to correctly analyse social problems, provide workable solutions to these problems, and then rationally justify the analyses and solutions used. I take religion here to involve, as a minimal requirement, belief in the existence of God, a god, or gods, such that they are recognisable to most informed observers within the Western tradition. I take pragmatism to belong to, and borrow from, the philosophical traditions of non-absolutism, anti-realism, historicism, and voluntarism. For clarity, the relevant brands of each of these traditions will be examined during the paper. The friction identified in the title may be summed up as follows: those who, like Cornel West (and, when he was alive, Hilary Putnam), are theistic pragmatists with an interest in realising moral progress, have all been aware of a problem inherent in their positions. Assuming it can be argued that religion and moral progress are compatible, a non-absolutist, anti-realist, historicist position nevertheless raises problems that, as Leon Wieseltier pointed out, the pragmatist still believes in a God who isn't real, and that the truth of any religious statement (including "God exists") is relative not to any objective reality but to communities of engaged interlocutors; and that, where there are no absolute standards of right and wrong, any analysis of (and solution to) social problems can only be rationally justified relative to one or another community or moral and epistemic framework. Attempts made to universalise these frameworks, notably by Dewey, Gadamer, and Bernstein, through democracy and hermeneutics, fall into either a vicious and infinite regress, or (taking inspiration from Habermas) the problem of moral truths being decided through structures of power. The paper removes this friction by highlighting the work of Christian pragmatist Cornel West through the lens of the philosopher of religion Eleanore Stump. While West recognises that for the pragmatist, the correctness of any propositions about God or moral progress is impossible to rationally justify to any outside the religious, moral or epistemic framework of the speakers themselves without, as he calls it, a 'locus of truth' (which is itself free from the difficulties Dewey, Gadamer and Bernstein fall victim to), Stump identifies routes to knowledge which provide such a locus while avoiding the problems of relativism, power dynamics, and regress. She describes "Dominican" and "Franciscan" knowledge (roughly characterised as "propositional" and "non-propositional"), and uses this distinction to identify something Bernstein saw as missing from Gadamer: culture-independent norms, upon which universal agreement can be built. The "Franciscan knowledge" Stump identifies as key is second-personal knowledge of Christ. For West, this allows the knower to access vital culture-independent norms. If correct, instead of the classical view (religion is incompatible with pragmatism), Christianity becomes key to pragmatist knowledge and moral-knowledge claims. Rather than being undermined by pragmatism, Christianity enables pragmatists to make moral and epistemic claims, free from troubling power dynamics and cultural relativism.

Keywords : Cornel West, Cultural Relativism, Gadamer, Philosophy of Religion, Pragmatism

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