17 Pragmatism, politics, and the corridor

In *Pragmatism*, William James says of the pragmatic method that it lies in the midst of our theories, like a corridor in a hotel. Innumerable chambers open out of it. In one you may find a man writing an atheistic volume; in the next someone on his knees praying for faith and strength; in a third a chemist investigating a body’s properties. In a fourth a system of idealistic metaphysics is being excogitated; in a fifth the impossibility of metaphysics is being shown. But they all own the corridor, and all must pass through it if they want a practicable way of getting into or out of their respective rooms. (P, 32)

James identifies this method with the principle according to which “to develop a thought’s meaning, we need only determine what conduct it is fitted to produce: that conduct is for us its sole significance” (P, 29). That is, if we want to know what, if anything, a given theory means, we must figure out what it tells us to do: a difference that makes no practical difference is no difference. This principle is a “corridor” from concept to concept or theory to theory in that it provides a concrete way of entering or understanding a given thought or theory, and of stepping outside of it to test it and compare it with others.

James’s version of pragmatism also contains a theory of truth. This theory, according to which “true” names “whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief” (P, 42), is certainly the more famous of these ideas, and its elaboration is one of James’s distinctive contributions to the pragmatic movement. According to what we can call Jamesean pragmatism, then, the “corridor” is a means of evaluation and, crucially, of escape. Theories and concepts are to be entered by comprehending the conduct they call for, and exited once

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and for all if they consistently lead to bad or unproductive conduct, or to no conduct at all. Theories to rest in, "true" theories, lead, \textit{ceteris paribus} and in the long run, to profitable things and better living.

This philosophical theory has its perplexities and deceptive simplicities, but I think that it is fundamentally straightforward and comprehensible, and that the truly hard work of understanding pragmatism is understanding the opposition. Or, at least, that the difficult thing is understanding pragmatism in relation to its opposition, and seeing how this comparatively simple set of ideas mounts a challenge to very complex philosophical thought. Therefore I attempt, in the following discussion, to explain the lucid in terms of the more obscure. I describe some of the Marxist political criticisms of Jamesean pragmatism that are offered in passing by Antonio Gramsci and in detail by Gramsci’s adherent Cornel West, and I offer a response. I hope that along the way I make clearer the nature of the pragmatic corridor among theories, and the uses that corridor may have even for political thinkers.

\section*{I PRAGMATISM, REALISM, IDEALISM}

At bottom, what both Gramsci and West criticize in James’s pragmatism is what they criticize in other, more traditional philosophies, namely a relative lack of engagement with concrete, down-to-earth political and social conditions. This may seem surprising: James’s philosophy displays such a real-world, brass-tacks focus that readers have sometimes perceived it to be unprincipled and unreflective, and therefore “unphilosophical.” James was determined to offer theories of meaning and truth that accorded with the ways real people — “geologists, biologists” and philologists, for example — actually do develop ideas and beliefs \cite[(P, 34)].

Moreover, James begins \textit{Pragmatism} with an allusion to politically based criticisms that can be made of unpragmatic philosophical views. He refers to a pamphlet called \textit{Human Submission} by “that valiant anarchistic writer Morrison I. Swift”: Swift tells of John Corcoran, a clerk who lost his job due to illness, and who, after having spent his little savings and having been fired from a temporary job shoveling snow, returned home to find his wife and children had been evicted and were without food. Corcoran poisoned himself...
the next day. Swift deplores the “guileless thoroughfed thinkers” Royce and Bradley for their rationalist idea that human suffering like this contributes to the absolute goodness of the world, and James agrees that the well-ordered principles of rationalist moral philosophy and epistemology can be no more than a distraction from the painful and tangled experiences of life in “our civilized régime” (P, 20–3).

Nevertheless, the pragmatist may still be hopelessly disengaged from the real world if pragmatism is a kind of idealism. Idealism was the original philosophical target of Marxism: it was Hegel whom Marx “stood on his head” and attacked for a kind of otherworldly unrealism. And if one thinks of pragmatism as a method of interpreting and criticizing beliefs and ideas solely in terms of their goodness or satisfactoriness to us human believers, it is easy to conclude that, despite James’s critique of Royce and Bradley, pragmatism must itself be a kind of idealism, insufficiently appreciative of the concrete and coercive world beyond thoughts, language, and desires.

I think that Gramsci and West do something like this, and that this is why they ultimately reject James’s pragmatism. Let us therefore consider the connections among pragmatism, realism, and idealism, before we try to assess the criticisms of Gramsci and West.

Beliefs are made true, on a realist philosophical picture, by a relationship to facts and objects that are “external” and mind-independent. “Idealist” philosophers look “inward” to the contents of the mind for the truth-makers (or -maker, as the case may be), but not to facts or objects that depend on what any concrete individual person thinks. Both realists and idealists distinguish between true and false beliefs about the world without reference to individual beliefs and believers: both kinds of philosophers have taken it for granted that the point of individual beliefs – a point beliefs can and often do fail to serve – is correct representation of these individual-belief-independent entities (or, in the case of Hegelian idealists, of a single, individual-belief-independent, mind-of-God-like Entity). However, James attacks this idea, and he thus challenges both realism and idealism in all their rationalist and empiricist varieties.

He does this when he criticizes the Hegelian idea of truth as existing ante rem or “before the things” (cf. P, 104–7). James complained that Hegelians regarded truth as a relation that somehow existed as a “tertium quid intermediate between the facts per se, on the one
hand, and all knowledge of them, actual or potential, on the other” (P, 322). He offered in response a naturalistic picture of truth as a “function” or a “habit” that existed in rebus or “in the things” — the “things” here being true beliefs themselves. For James, truth exists inside “truths” or beliefs as a function or habit of delivering good experienced consequences. It is not a set of reserved slots waiting patiently for beliefs to come along and fit in: truth comes and goes with the concrete beliefs that contain it and the individual persons who, through interactions with the world and each other, generate those beliefs. It is an internal function of human beliefs, a thing some beliefs sometimes do.

James thinks that we have a tendency to treat “-th” words like “strength” and “truth” as names of abstract things separable from their instantiations and sublimely unaffected by the pressing, changing circumstances that make them valuable. But truth, says James, is no more an abstract and fixed “relation” than strength is an independent abstract quality. It’s obvious that without particular persons involved in various concrete events of heavy lifting, no strength would ever come into being; and, equally clearly, no one cares about strength except insofar as it makes further similar concrete events possible. Analogously, without individual believers, their beliefs, and the concrete events in which some of those beliefs meet the reality we experience and are “verified” by the encounter, no truth would come into existence. At least no truth of the kind we care about, the kind that actually helps us in life, would come to be. That kind of truth exists only inside the individual beliefs or “truths” we believers generate, residing there as a timebound, mutable “habit” those “truths” have of getting verified or being useful. To adapt the terminology of Donald Davidson and Richard Rorty, true beliefs are not “made true” by any external, abstract, rationalistically discoverable relation to the world (see Rorty 1986).

Thus, pragmatism, like Marxism, originates in a clash with Hegelian rationalism. The main motivation for the above argument is the defense of the individual person, individual experiences, and individual freedom from the “vicious abstractionism” that James associated with the Hegelian view of truth: James thought that Hegelian monistic idealism declared genuinely separate individuals and individual experiences unreal, and thus denied the power of individuals to react freely to their unique experiences and actually make the world
better. The world could not possibly be made better on the Hegelian view because it was "simple, clean and noble": its ultimate goodness could be logically – and, James thought, speciously – demonstrated along with its total unity (cf. P, 17–18). James wanted to attack this picture of the world by challenging its picture of truth as a rationally knowable relation independent of individual belief and experience, and showing how individuals and their discrete experiences in time were prerequisites of the very existence of truth.

However, James did not attack Hegel's idealistic story by offering a traditionally realistic one in response. Instead, he criticized the whole realism-versus-idealism debate. That was (and is still) a debate about what kinds of objects are represented by our true ideas, beliefs, and words. James's response to both realists and idealists is, in effect, that this is the wrong question. Truth, our goal in thinking and speaking, is best understood not as representation of any kind of objects, but rather as usefulness in solving problems. The goal of improving our search for truth, of ending meaningless disputes and integrating our different views of things, is best served by this pragmatic conception.

Marx, like James, criticized not only idealism but the whole philosophical conflict between realism and idealism, and he, too, did this by paying more attention than idealist philosophers had to the way problems are actually solved in the "material" world of nature and human action. The famous eleventh of his "Theses on Feuerbach" – "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it" – sounds a clearly pragmatic note. Marx deplores empty, abstract philosophical theorizing, and calls for discussion of conditions and practices in the public world, with the goal of changing those conditions and practices if they are confused or "contradictory." Despite this, however, the critiques of pragmatism offered by the "philosophers of praxis" Gramsci and West parallel Marx's criticism of Hegelian idealism. Let's now turn to consider those critiques.

II GRAMSCI AND THE PRAGMATISTS

Gramsci and West both applaud the efforts of all the pragmatists to challenge traditional philosophy's ahistorical tendencies. These tendencies, in the views of both Gramsci and West, lead philosophy to
neglect or even to help hide the injustices of the political world. And West holds that his own view, "prophetic pragmatism," takes pragmatism to a still higher level of political engagement. But Gramsci associates the name of James with a philosophical effort to reform "language" that is bound to fail; and West thinks that James's version of pragmatism is an immature, naively optimistic view that pays too much attention to the individual and her or his beliefs. These criticisms, on closer examination, resemble the Marxist political critique of idealism. Let's try to see whether they are fair.

Gramsci thinks of philosophy as "a cultural battle to transform the popular 'mentality'" (Gramsci 1971, 348). Gramsci emphasized the importance of this kind of cultural battle to Marxist political ends. He is one of the Marxists who transformed the concept of "ideology," originally a negative term for capitalism's distorted picture of the social and moral world, into a label for all forms of social and cultural consciousness, including Marxism itself. The Gramscian theoretician accordingly sees her or his struggle with political society as in part a contest of wills and ideas. Gramsci is not a practitioner of "crude economism": he does not take simple class-based self-interest to be at the bottom of all political actions and all thought (163ff.). He recognizes the ability of a dominant class to rule through moral and intellectual leadership and intelligent compromises with lower-class allies. This "hegemony" includes the exchange of philosophical ideas, an important aspect of ideology in which not only intellectuals but all thinkers and users of language engage to some extent. This kind of leadership, information exchange, and compromise results in the consent of the governed, and Gramsci ultimately interprets the special historical role of the proletariat as the expansion of this consent, or the development of a "regulated" society, and the diminution of "political" constraint.3

James's pragmatism is, on Gramsci's theory, only one of "a number of idealist currents" that have absorbed Marxist elements, reflecting the efforts of "pure" intellectuals to "moderate an excess of speculative philosophism with . . . historicist realism," this in the interest of maintaining hegemony (389–90). Of James's commitment to think in terms of practical differences, Gramsci says: "one can see from this the immediacy of the philosophical politics of the pragmatists. . . . The pragmatist . . . wishes to tie himself imme-
diately to practice” (372–3). And this immediate connection to action establishes pragmatism as an “‘ideological party’ rather than a system of philosophy” (372). It makes pragmatism, like the Marxist “philosophy of praxis,” a way of motivating action in the social world.

However, the similarities end with the connection to action. Gramsci takes pragmatism to be chiefly an effort to reform language in order to avoid illusory philosophical disputes, and thus presumably to remove, in a quasi-positivist way, the hindrances that philosophical confusions and religious hangovers can offer to rational and moral action. But Gramsci thinks that this effort at linguistic reform has to fail because it still reflects insufficient engagement with the public world and insufficiently revolutionary political goals. Pragmatism manifests “the absence of a critical and historicist conception of the phenomenon of language,” and this leads to “errors in both the scientific and the practical field” (451). When pragmatists direct us to avoid empty disputes by understanding concepts in terms of practical consequences, they only “theorise abstractly about language as a source of error.” This “abstract” theorizing will be unhelpful because “Language is transformed with the transformation of the whole of civilisation,” and the pragmatic theory will not foster widespread social change.

Gramsci thinks, curiously enough, that because of pragmatism’s Anglo-Saxon Protestant historical origin, German and Italian philosophers—both idealist and Marxist—have made and will make all the serious cultural contributions in this struggle. In Catholic countries, religion and the practical everyday culture have been so firmly separated that philosophers, who are thinkers from the religious side of the line, cannot think of themselves as dealing immediately with the practical: they deal with “higher” issues. There is no such split among the Anglo-Saxon Protestants, and so:

the Italian or German type of philosopher is more “practical” than the pragmatist who judges from immediate reality, often at the most vulgar level, in that the German or Italian has a higher aim, sets his sights higher and tends . . . to raise the existing cultural level. Hegel can be considered the theoretical precursor of the liberal revolutions of the nineteenth century. The pragmatists, at the most, have contributed to the creation of the Rotary Club movement and to the justification of conservative and reactionary movements. (373)
Thus, in Gramsci's view, pragmatism is an idealism that is not idealist enough to be realistic: it is an attempt to make a cultural change that cannot succeed because it is focused too closely on the concrete and the particular, and therefore can't contain the grander moral or social vision necessary for genuine change.

III WEST'S GRAMSCIAN CRITIQUE

In his book *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, West claims affinities with Gramsci and his criticisms of the historical pragmatists. In setting out his own view, West offers a kind of pragmatist manifesto: "The goal of a sophisticated neo-pragmatism is to think genealogically about specific practices in light of the best available social theories, cultural critiques, and historiographical insights and to act politically to achieve certain moral consequences in light of effective strategies and tactics" (West 1989, 209; emphasis in the original). Thus, the contemporary pragmatist should leave behind the old goal of demolishing traditional philosophy and instead take on present-day political evils.

The transcendentalizing philosophical theories of the Western tradition have come under a wave of criticism in both America and Europe. West describes this wave as a burgeoning rejection of armchair philosophizing in favor of new theories that address concrete social, political, and moral issues from perspectives informed by literary theory, economics, sociology, and the rest of the humanities and social sciences. West locates himself within this movement, and he announces a new, politicized pragmatism that offers a "heterogeneous genealogy," or a historicist theory that recognizes practically significant differences not only among individuals but among people in different political groups.

West acknowledges that democratic ideals do and should operate both in pragmatic epistemology and pragmatic politics, but he points out that, for example, "not one [of the original pragmatists] viewed racism as contributing greatly to the impediments for both individuality and democracy" (147). He bitterly accuses pragmatists like James of "pandering to middle class pieties" (66), and of blindness to "the plight of the wretched of the earth, namely, the majority of humanity who own no property or wealth, participate in no democratic arrangements, and whose individualities are crushed by hard
labor and harsh living conditions” (147–8). Pragmatism both argues for and depends on the freedom and problem-solving abilities of individuals. When confronted with hard political facts about the lives of many of the world’s inhabitants, pragmatism can seem naive and trivial, especially if its account of the origin and justification of beliefs and language neglects to mention explicitly those social ills. A sophisticated pragmatism, West thinks, will stop treating people simply as believers and language users with particular small problems to solve in a piecemeal way, and start focusing on them as objects or imposers of larger-scale domination.

West sees James and the other pragmatist philosophers as, in Gramsci’s term, “organic intellectuals”: they destabilized the moral status quo, and both reflected and energized a constituency capable of producing social change. They didn’t write as disinterested users of pure reason: their status as particular members of a particular social group was explicit in their writings, as was their contagious personal desire for changes in the way that group lived. They were, however, too individualistic and indifferent to the deepest problems of the human beings around them to be really effective. They refused to join radical political associations, and they remained fearfully and myopically committed to the fundamental structures of “civilized” America.

In particular, James was fundamentally motivated by a desire to put “distance” between his views and “the working class, women, and people of color” (62). The centerpiece of West’s evidence for this is James’s “crucial and peculiar” lecture “The Social Value of the College-Bred.” There James says that:

The sense of human superiority ought, then to be considered our line, as boring subway is the engineer’s line and the surgeon’s is appendicitis. . . . The best claim we can make for higher education is . . . it should enable us to know a good man when we see him. . . . [I]n our democracy, while everything else is so shifting, we alumni and alumnae of the colleges are the only permanent presence that corresponds to the aristocracy in older countries . . . and, unlike them, we stand for ideal interests solely, for we have no corporate selfishness and wield no powers of corruption. We ought to have our own class consciousness. “Les intellectuels!” (ECR, 108–10; see West 1989, 62)

West takes this passage to reveal clearly a patrician and discriminatory attitude that colors James’s pragmatism generally.
West’s response to these remarks is, to say the least, hasty. He deprecates their “elitism” (62), though it seems clear that James is declaring college-educated persons to be an “aristocracy” only in that they are the best at recognizing the best men and women, and not at all in that they themselves are necessarily the best. West asks about this educated class, “no selfishness? no corruption?” But James says only that there is no “corporate” selfishness on the part of this group, probably meaning that few interests will be shared by all the different persons who manage to get college degrees; and James says that they wield no powers of corruption, intending no doubt to imply that they will lack the law-giving power of old-world nobility. And as for the idea that working people, people of color, and women are intentionally excluded from this aristocracy, even supposing James knew of no working-class people who had ever managed to scrape through and get degrees from any college, he knew of at least one person of color in the group, for his student W. E. B. Du Bois already had his Ph.D by the time James gave this speech; and it’s hard to see how James could have intended to exclude women by giving this address to the American Association of Alumnae as they were meeting at Radcliffe.

Still, whatever the psychology behind James’s pragmatism, West wants also to do as Gramsci did, and locate impediments to revolution in pragmatism itself. West thinks that James’s theory of truth, with its “conservative” attachment to the body of prior beliefs, constitutes a “gradualism” and reflects “a preoccupation with continuity” that “minimizes disruption and precludes subversion” (65). West cites James’s claim in Pragmatism that any true account of a new experience will, as an essential part of its “working,” getting “verified,” or being true, always “[preserve] the older stock of truths with a minimum of modification, stretching them just enough to make them admit the novelty” (P. 35; see West 1989, 65). West seems to think that this commitment to [most aspects of] the epistemic status quo will hinder efforts to destabilize the political status quo – or at least that it will unless we politicize this story more, and take account of the hidden political conditions that shape both the individuals who seek truth and the prior truth-stocks they start out with.

“The older stock of truths”: this is equivalent, for James, to the initial set of beliefs with which we begin our inquiries. This is in
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turn the same as what we usually think and affirm about things in the world, or the way we conceive of things. That is, it is our “philosophy,” or our conceptual system, and “our conceptual system” is also as good a way as any to think of our “language.” Gramsci acknowledges something like this set of equivalences when he says that “Language also means culture and philosophy (if only at the level of common sense)” (Gramsci 1971, 349). When we recognize this, it is easy to see that Gramsci and West both make what is at root the same point: if pragmatism is ever really to leave behind sterile philosophical debates and cease being a minor obstacle to serious and beneficial change, it must leave behind its insular obsession with language – established truths, older beliefs – and look to a more inclusive political reality.

IV POLITICS AND THE WORLD BEYOND BELIEF

The sophisticated pragmatist, in West’s view, will never lose sight of the extralinguistic conditions that pull the strings of our language-games and control the formation of our beliefs. Language does not constitute or control “modes of production” or other extralinguistic determinants of power. We language users have needed structuralists, poststructuralists, and politically minded pragmatists to help us to awareness of the “materiality” of language, or its location among the rest of the things that get moved around by economic, physical, and political forces. Now that we have this awareness, we can begin to look past language or our previous “truths” to the enduring powers that control our “transient vocabularies” (see West 1989, 209).

Of course, prophetic pragmatists also know better than to be realists or foundationalists: they recognize human fallibility, and refuse to take any particular vocabulary or set of beliefs as fundamentally justified by a direct, unmistakable relation to reality. But though our attempts to know the physical and social world in detail are always error prone, we can still turn to our best-developed social theories and try to use them to motivate action, interventions in the public world that will both test those theories and begin to ameliorate our bleak political situations (209–10). Antifoundationalism should not turn into a fixation on language: the task of a mature pragmatism may include the critique of linguistically induced false consciousness – as
exemplified, perhaps, in idealistic or non-"prophetically" pragmatic
tendencies to understand the human cognitive relationship to the
world in vaguely mentalistic terms of beliefs and language, rather
than in material terms of power relations – but that is the only rele-
vance of language or truth to our new pragmatist project.

However, the Jamesean pragmatist will respond to this that there
simply is no relief from the skewings and warpings of prior "truths"
or language, which must figure even in the accounts of the world
offered up by revolutionary political thinkers. In the view of the
pragmatist, all consciousness is "false" in the sense that it is at least
partly linguistic, or at least partly a product of humanly verified
"truths." It is never a pure reaction to the extralinguistic world of
things and facts.

James makes this point when he describes the "reality" we know
and speak of in our truths as consisting of three parts, one of which
comprises "the previous truths of which every inquiry takes ac-
count" [P, 118; emphasis in original]. The other parts, if such things
really do exist out beyond the realm of truth, constitute the "core"
of reality, the mutely existing stuff that we knowers wrap up in
organizations and classifications of our own making. These other
parts of reality are described as "sensations" and their relations,
though James construes "sensations" broadly enough so that this
"core" of perceived things might turn out to be what "scholasti-
cism" identifies as "matter" [cf. P, 120]. James has nothing final to
say about either the existence of this primal stuff or the extent to
which we can theorize philosophically about it: he insists only that
the final true account of it will be, like the final true account of
anything else, "the one that proves most satisfactory" [P, 120]. But
while he provisionally holds that it is out there, James says that this
primal core is not the only thing we have to answer to when we set
out to say true things about reality. Sensations and relations would
not even come to our attention if not for the "previous truths" or
prior beliefs in which they arrive prewrapped.

James says that

Every hour brings its . . . own facts of sensation and relation, to be truly
taken account of; but the whole of our past dealings with such facts is
already funded in the previous truths. It is therefore only the smallest and
recentest fraction of the first two parts of reality that comes to us without
the human touch, and that fraction has immediately to become humanized
in the sense of being squared. . . to the humanized mass already there. As a matter of fact we can hardly take in an impression at all, in the absence of a preconception of what impressions there may possibly be. (P, 119)

Thus, paradoxically, unless we have already sorted perceived things and their essential and accidental relations into our own categorical schemes for our own convenience, we are unlikely ever to notice them in the first place; and even if we do somehow attend to an “aboriginal” reality on its own, we find it “absolutely dumb and evanescent.” If we try to say anything about it, we ultimately wind up appreciating and discussing a substitute for it that has been “peptonized and cooked for our consumption” by our prior categorizations and beliefs (P, 119–20).

This does not entail that our own beliefs and categories are the only things in the world for us to know. Again, James assumes, absent any good reason to say otherwise, that the human contribution amounts to only one part of the real world. But he asks, “Does the river make its banks, or do the banks make the river? Does a man walk with his right leg or with his left leg more essentially? Just as impossible may it be to separate the real from the human factors in the growth of our cognitive experience” (P, 120). And if it is impossible to do this, the idea of a reality beyond those “human factors” is empty. There is then nothing in our experience that we can isolate as an item located behind or apart from our human arrangements of categories, concepts, and beliefs, or what Gramsci calls our “language.” There may be such items, but they have nothing to say for themselves. They can’t point themselves out, and we can’t pick them out, so all attempts to rest our talk on them become idle.

Thus, when Gramsci and West criticize James for worrying too much about language and not enough about the dark, enveloping political powers that lie behind human beliefs, they draw an empty distinction. When they focus their attention on the political, “material” world, what they see there is indistinguishable from the language and beliefs that so interest James.

To put this another way, Gramsci and West are offering a new “language,” a new vocabulary and set of claims that, in their view, finally stops obscuring what really goes on in the world of action. In support of their new language they offer us not more talk but the full
political world. The pragmatists have so far failed to appreciate fully the language-independence of that world, and so Gramsci and West proceed to use a new language that is, they think, better connected to extralinguistic reality, especially in that it is better suited to provoke and promote action. But how can they tell that this new language has this better connection to the world beyond language? Why do they say it does? And why should we believe them, and adopt their way of looking at things?

There are three possible ways of answering these demands for justification. First there is silence, reflecting the fact that claims concerning the relationship between language and the world can be justified only in language. There are, of course, efficient ways besides offering justifications to get an audience to talk a certain way or accept certain claims: there is active demonstration of the new claims, for example, not to mention the weeding-out of dissenters with imprisonment or executions. These approaches are compatible with Gramsci's idea that "the whole of civilisation" must be transformed through action before a new way of looking at things will be adopted. But the idea that these methods will always be possible, or even always work, is not compatible with Gramsci's idea that "hegemony" is needed to get people's cooperation. If there really is sometimes a need for the exchange of philosophical ideas, surely it will surface in this particular context. And, moreover, if extralinguistic reality is, as James says, "like a client who has given his case to a lawyer and then has passively to listen in the courtroom to whatever account of his affairs . . . the lawyer finds it most expedient to give" (P, 118), wordless demonstrations will be among the realities that have nothing to say for themselves, and they will thus be subject to "expedient" interpretations that don't support the new way of looking at things. Thus, entirely wordless action is unlikely to be the right way to address these questions.

The second possible response is a justification of the new language in the old language; it is an attempt to account for the unfamiliar idea that, say, epistemology might have something to do with social problems by, for example, pointing to familiar epistemological or political problems and explaining how they can be solved or made less pressing by drawing this kind of connection. This is basically James's own procedure in his philosophical writings, and it reflects his idea that previous truth must be dealt with when we account for
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reality in new ways. This is as “conservative” a way of proceeding as James would require. James says that new beliefs must involve a “minimum of modification” to the old intellectual order, but, of course, a “minimum” need not be a small amount. James is not here declaring allegiance to the status quo: he is only indicating our real, general aversion to new theories that gratuitously disregard our hard-won previous beliefs, and suggesting that, according to our own actual procedures, our best new theories will engage with our old ones.

Finally, the Gramscian might deal with questions about the justification of his new views by explaining the relation between his new language and the world in the new language, ignoring all our old ideas about the mind and the world, and taking for granted his new ideas about the downtrodden and the intellectual world that abets their oppression. Only this third approach requires a response from the Jamesean pragmatist, who will quickly point out that this justification begs the question. Of course Marxists, like everyone else, see their beliefs as the best possible accounts of the world beyond beliefs: otherwise those particular thoughts would not be their beliefs. Still, Gramsci and West cannot justify either their new beliefs or their political actions by appeals to objects or obligations that entirely transcend familiar beliefs and concepts, except, again, circularly. James’s pragmatism does allow one to appeal to the world beyond language in justification of what one says and does, because pragmatism does not “idealistically” deny the existence of a belief-transcendent world. Nevertheless, James trivializes any possible result of any such gesture by pointing out that the world beyond language and belief cannot reach out and appropriate any descriptions of it. Explanations or justifications of a new way of speaking must come in some human language or other, must take some set of beliefs for granted; and unless those justifications come in more or less familiar terms, they are not really justifications.

Notice, moreover, that this claim about the unavailability of the world beyond “language” is not simply a point about human fallibility. The most unregenerate metaphysical realist would usually insist on the ever-present possibility of human error concerning what the world beyond our present set of categorizations and beliefs is really like. James, however, is not urging simply that we might be wrong, but rather that it would not make any difference if we were right.
James's pragmatism holds that both our world-views and their justifications originate in a world whose “non-linguistic” features are not distinguishable in any principled way from its “linguistic” ones, and that thus even the most wildly successful gesture beyond the humanized realm of language and belief is futile and empty. No such gesture could justify anything we might say, and we can get all the justification we could ever have without any such gestures.

Still, perhaps West would respond that although appeals to the world beyond our transient vocabularies may be philosophically trivial in this sense of “question-begging,” they may still be important in a more pragmatic or strategic sense: they may be indispensable as a means of motivating change. West thinks we need a way of upsetting the complacency that afflicts our inward-looking little communities, and opening those communities up to the influence of outsiders and “others” of all varieties. He might say, echoing Gramsci, that, for this vital political project, we need theory, not just more minor, tinkering, convenient changes in our talk. In that theory we must put language in its comparatively unimportant place and think of it as a surface phenomenon, though the subsurface conditions may be more complicated than previous grand theorists thought they were.

If we do not think of language and belief this way, we may lack motivation to question our familiar and anodyne social homilies, and we may not work hard for change. There are diversely arrayed groups of human beings – women, residents of the developing world, Americans of African descent, and others – who are coming in from the margins to describe, from their unique perspectives, hidden contours of the natural and social world. Those persons’ voices hold the world’s best hope for producing better and fairer ways of speaking and acting in the future, and we cannot listen carefully and with full seriousness to what they have to say unless we pull ourselves out of our philosophical self-absorption. The prophetic pragmatists and philosophers of praxis will therefore keep their eyes on the public world of objects, persons, and societies; pragmatic overemphasis on language or conserved prior “truth” threatens insularity and political stasis.

But should Jamesean cognitive conservatism, rightly understood, really incline one to complacent political conservatism? I cannot see why: “conservative” pragmatism in no way lessens our urgent
moral responsibilities to the miserable. You don’t have to look “beyond language” to see what an absurd state the world is in; you don’t have to think that truths do more than help us keep our other truths organized in order to see that right now, politically, economically, and morally, we are in dire need of some new truths. When the Jamesean looks out on all those victims of injustice, she is made aware that something must be done, and that along the way some unfamiliar thoughts must be had and assimilated; but what lets her know this is not the world beyond truth, language, and belief, but rather the dissatisfaction she feels with the relationship between her new observational beliefs (new experiences prewrapped in very familiar categorizations) and all those other, older beliefs that she is trying to hang on to. She knows that some of her beliefs and classifications are going to have to go, but which ones?

This problem may seem too solipsistic to allow any nonarbitrary solution. Fortunately, however, among the Jamesean’s new observational beliefs will be the realization that some of those suffering human beings are producing their own views of the world using their experiences just as she does. She will be able to see that their in-some-ways-unfamiliar beliefs may be a rich source for her to plumb in search of new ideas, as long as those outsiders share with her enough familiar ideas so that she can understand them and take them seriously. (Unfortunately, once in a while we find people suffering because they are deranged, developmentally disabled, or massively and irremediably self-deceived: they are then unable to participate in this process.) Serious consideration of ideas need not lead to their adoption, of course, and a Jamesean will disagree strongly with some of the ideas expressed by people outside her particular community of believers. She may even find that, after agreeing with the outsiders at first, she must later change her mind, if their ideas do not work out any better than hers did. (They may turn out to have been too close to their own problems.) But in no case is she prevented from agreeing with those outsiders and working with them to change political circumstances by her indifference to the world beyond language. Her “critical edge” will come not from that world, but instead from her own convictions and from human voices that she has not heard or listened to before.

This does represent a tinkering, reconstructive, individual-problem-solving approach to philosophy. No appeal is made to a world that
transcends individual concerns and local efforts to cope using language and thought. But there is no reason to believe Gramsci’s and West’s claims that this approach cannot let us see far enough to address pervasive moral and political problems, or that it cannot result in suitably grand or radical theories of the social world. We can be especially brief in dealing with Gramsci’s culturally chauvinistic version of this idea: although James’s pragmatism is not a “scientism,” or a view that takes the methods and assumptions of the natural scientist to be the only ones that can lead to genuine truth, James did model his general method of “marrying” new truth to old and looking to practical consequences on the procedures of working natural scientists (cf. P, 34–5), and science, of course, has had no shortage of radical revolutions or generalization-filled theories over its history. Revolutionary scientific ideas succeed if they work; and, likewise, if a radically new moral or political generalization works for us in some practical way, if it engages with our older beliefs and pulls its weight in the truth-process, then it too will be a pragmatic “truth.”

What’s more, James famously insists that there is just as much room in a pragmatic outlook for “tender-minded” moral and religious abstract theorizing as there is for “tough-minded” scientific attention to particulars (see P, 9–26, for example). It’s just that if an abstract theory turns out to be irrelevant, as a practical matter, to those – and especially to us – particulars, that is cause to reject the theory. This is, of course, just the kind of thing that Marxists say in criticism of Hegelians and “philosophers” generally. It is not the rejection of all abstract thought, but only of abstract thought without consequences in the world of experience and practice. Jamesean melioration and cognitive conservatism thus need have no more to do with the end of moral and political radicalism than Marx’s, Gramsci’s, or West’s own views.

V CONCLUSION

Nothing in the foregoing is meant to depreciate West’s or Gramsci’s projects of making philosophy worldly and making the world philosophical, or introducing political issues into our thoughts about thought. Nor have I intended only to carp at the scholarship of these two authors: Gramsci was a physically infirm political prisoner with no access to a library when he wrote about James, and West’s main
goals in discussing James are social and motivational rather than philosophical. Instead, my target has been the negative idea that bringing specific historical and social issues into philosophy is the "sophisticated" pragmatic objective, and that pragmatist interest in belief and language reflects only insularity and complacency. If it is foolish and vain to overlook politics in the attempt to study language and thought, it is equally foolish and vain to overlook language and thought in the attempt to study politics. Hence the search for Jamesean "truth," a search that is as much a matter of trying to see how we can organize and reconcile our thoughts as it is of pointing out material wrongs and having material effects on them, is still a reasonable thing to think about and a decent thing to try to carry on.

It is, of course, compatible with maturity and political commitment to be reflective about the ways in which preconceptions affect even potentially revolutionary thought and activity. Such reflection can make us harder to stampede into transformative actions that leave us less "empowered" rather than more. And it can make us less hard-headed in our political theorizing, and thus better able to appreciate or criticize intelligent alternatives.

Moreover, the most trenchant social critique by itself will not always produce needed change, even if it provokes some people to radical social activism, because that activity and change may provoke even more people to counterrevolution. Sometimes, in political matters, it will be enough to call attention to material circumstances no one has noticed or thought about; but sometimes the other side will have a different story to tell about those circumstances, and an abiding commitment to that story. What will be urgently needed then is common ground on which to argue, and a way to find that common ground. Pointing still more indignantly to a hidden world beyond the old beliefs, and insisting that our opponents try harder to match their thoughts up to that world, may not do the job: people who care about the oppressed have found, in some such cases, that ostensible evidence from that world can be shrugged off as a mere artifact of the way ideologues and bleeding-heart victimologists look at things. Which is to say, they have discovered that the "material" world, considered apart from language or prior beliefs, is ultimately immaterial to the justification of new belief and action.

If we human beings are going to decide thoughtfully and undog-
matically what to say and do about our moral and political condition, if we are going to quit preaching to our various choirs and start building genuine consensus and cooperation, we shall sometimes need another touchstone besides “material reality” to use in evaluating competing moral and political views. That is, we’ll need a corridor among those views, a way to take whatever prior beliefs we may share, combine them with our new experiences, and use the combination as a practical, flexible way of deciding what to believe and do. There will often be no other feasible way to proceed, even in bad and steadily worsening social circumstances. And that is why, even in a time when new ideas, direct advocacy, and straightforward calls to action are sorely needed and in short supply, we can still make use of a Jamesean pragmatism that takes no sides intransigently, and that thus may help all of us, even the skeptical and the confused, to pick thoughtfully the sides we want to take.

NOTES

I am indebted to Ruth Anna Putnam for extensive comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

1 In the second chapter of West 1991 there is a helpful discussion of the young Karl Marx’s renunciation of his own earlier “Young” or “Left” Hegelianism in favor of more “radically historicist” and politically aggressive views.

2 James’s picture of Hegelianism may not accurately represent anybody’s actual position: James had mixed feelings about his own comprehension of Hegel and blamed Hegel’s “abominable habits of speech.” Hegel’s views may also have changed through his different works.

In any case, this account does at least reflect James’s understanding of transcendentalist tendencies in especially the Hegel of the Science of Logic and the Lesser Logic and James’s view of his American Hegelian opposition, especially Josiah Royce. Cf. lectures 2 and 3 on Hegel and the Hegelians in PU.

3 A detailed discussion of these issues can be found in Mouffe 1979.