

THE ALLEGED PRAGMATISM OF T. S. ELIOT

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WHEN T. S. ELIOT returned to Harvard in 1911 to begin his graduate work in philosophy, it had been nearly four years since William James resigned from the department that he had helped to form. James's legacy remained strong through his influence both on the work of George Santayana, one of Eliot's professors during his M.A. year, and on that of Josiah Royce, who supervised Eliot's doctoral research and christened his own idealist philosophy "absolute pragmatism" in a gesture to James. Eliot himself was strongly dismissive of pragmatism, James's anti-essentialist philosophy of truth, not only during his years of graduate study but throughout his life. In a paper of 1914, we find Eliot claiming that pragmatism strikes him not "as a great emancipation," but "as a tedious truism." He presents pragmatism as a philosophy of whimsy that says things such as, "You choose a point of view because you like it. You form certain plans because they express your character. Certain things are true because they are what you need; others, because they are what you want." Pragmatism consists of "making fictions and swallowing them alive & whole," an unacceptably crude theory of truth in which things are true simply because you want them to be. "The error of pragmatism," the young Eliot finally suggests, is its sophistical insistence that "man is the measure of all things."¹ In a 1917 *New Statesman* article, he associates pragmatism with the very absolutism it claims to reject, arguing (in a familiar phrase) that the "error of Pragmatism" has been to treat concepts like "usefulness" and "success" "as

if they had the absoluteness denied to truth.”² Still later, in an essay on F. H. Bradley appearing in *For Lancelot Andrewes*, Eliot alters his usual formula to lament that, “the great weakness of Pragmatism is that it ends by being of no use to anybody.”³ In other words, while seeming to judge a philosophical doctrine on the basis of its utility, a gesture which might be read as “pragmatic” (practical), the judgment Eliot renders is a denunciation of philosophical pragmatism.

In spite of these repeated dismissals of James’s philosophy of truth, pragmatic readings of Eliot’s writings have accumulated in step with the resurgence of pragmatism since the end of the Cold War. Eliot has been characterized, to one degree or another, as a philosophical pragmatist by critics from Walter Benn Michaels and Donald Childs to Richard Shusterman.⁴ Louis Menand, both an Eliot critic and a historian of pragmatism, writes that Eliot has, “if this matters, a much firmer claim to the pragmatist philosophical tradition than Frost or Stein or Stevens ever did.”⁵ Today, the most influential and widely accepted interpretation of Eliot’s doctoral dissertation, the longest and most developed work of philosophy the poet ever produced, remains Michaels’s “Philosophy in Kinkanja: Eliot’s Pragmatism,” in which Eliot’s thesis is presented as a work of nihilistic, anti-foundational pragmatism.

The dissertation’s fundamental philosophical stance is so ambiguous that critics have been divided even on the question of whether Eliot is offering a defense of his primary subject, F. H. Bradley, or a critique of Bradley’s most central claims. Hugh Kenner, whose 1959 study *The Invisible Poet: T. S. Eliot* helped bring widespread critical attention to the dissertation, never seems to have considered the possibility that a strain of pragmatism might lurk beneath its surface. For him, Eliot’s practical-sounding skepticism, attention to holistic relations and qualified resistance to grandiose metaphysical claims are all simply reflections of the same elements in Bradley’s philosophy. Eliot’s frequent invocations of “practice” in the dissolution of epistemological problems passes unremarked, just as neither Michaels nor Kenner argues for the striking similarities that other critics have found between the dissertation and Heidegger’s philosophy. The problem in identifying the basic point of view of Eliot’s dissertation seems to result less from its resistance to categorization than from the ease with which it can be molded to fit any number of philosophical positions. In the introduction to his *From Philosophy to Poetry*, Donald Childs is able to fill nearly fifty dense pages with an overview of the critical reception of Eliot’s philosophy. We encounter not only the Bradleyan, anti-Bradleyan and pragmatist

Eliots, but also the Bergsonian, "Indian," poststructural, semiotic, analytical, existential, phenomenological (that is, Husserlian), hermeneutic (that is, Heideggarian) and mystical Eliots. As Jeffrey Perl notes, "By the centennial of his birth, Eliot had been associated with nearly every school or category of philosophy with which he could conceivably have been familiar."⁶ Perl's statement is in fact rather conservative, given the associations that have been made between Eliot's thought and much later phenomena such as poststructuralism. In the dissertation, Eliot's constantly shifting qualifications and evasions seem to point in every direction but back to themselves, until we are finally left—as Kenner insists we are always left with Eliot—unsure in the most basic sense about what the dissertation means to say.

Beginning in the first chapter, Eliot presents Bradley's idea that something called "immediate experience" lies at the "starting point" of all knowledge. Eliot quotes Bradley's description of immediate experience as "the general condition before distinctions and relations have been developed, and where as yet neither any subject nor object exists."⁷ Subjects and objects are abstractions from the unity of immediate experience, which is difficult to discuss in itself because our language leads us to think of "experience" as the experience *of* some consciousness. In fact, all subjective consciousness derives from the undifferentiated ground of immediate experience, "a timeless unity which is not as such present either anywhere or to anyone. It is only in the world of objects that we have time and space and selves" (*KE*, p. 31). Immediate experience is without relation and without temporal or spatial specificity. These aspects of our world derive from it. Immediate experience, which Eliot sometimes refers to as "pure feeling" or simply "feeling," lies before language and before knowledge, making both of them possible. It is the finally unspeakable ground and background of all distinctions, all meaning, all things.

If Eliot's dissertation, which was originally entitled *Experience and the Objects of Knowledge in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley*, offered a defense of Bradley's conception of immediate experience, the question of Eliot's pragmatism would be easily answered. Immediate experience, in itself, is the foundation of Bradleyan absolute idealism, easily identified as metaphysics in the tradition of Hegel, similar perhaps to James's radical empiricism in some respects, but having little in common with his pragmatism. At the end of his first chapter, however, Eliot begins to place some distance between his own project and Bradley's. After suggesting that our everyday experience lies between the poles of immediate expe-

rience on the one hand and “complete experience” on the other, Eliot writes that “the ultimate nature of the Absolute does not come within the scope of the present paper. It is with some of the intermediate steps that the following chapters are concerned” (p. 31). The dissertation will remain mute on certain of the most pivotal questions in a Bradleyan world. But it remains unclear at this point what precisely Eliot means to ignore, and why.

We have at least four key terms: “feeling” (or “pure feeling”), “immediate experience,” “complete experience” and “the Absolute.” “Feeling,” “pure feeling,” and “immediate experience” seem to be synonymous in Eliot’s argument, as do “complete experience” and “the Absolute.” But while the Absolute is “immediate,” in the sense of being unmediated by anything, a perfectly and timelessly self-present principle; and while it is in some sense “experience” (though, like immediate experience, it is not the experience *of* a consciousness), there remains a difference between the two sets of terms. “Feeling” or “immediate experience” is located conceptually prior to the subject-object split, while “the Absolute” or “complete experience” arrives conceptually afterward. The Absolute encompasses and resolves all the polarities opened up by the abstraction of subjects and objects from immediate experience, while such polarities are only latent within immediate experience itself. We can say that immediate experience (in the sense of “feeling”) “contains” finite human experiences as their source, but it is the Absolute that achieves a truly comprehensive unity. In the beginning of experience is its end; but only by passing through the mediated polarities of ordinary experience can immediate experience return to immediacy and know itself, as the Absolute, for the first time. If the realm of subjects and objects is conceived as a sort of discord, then we might describe immediate experience as the silence lying before the discord and giving rise to it, while the all-enveloping Absolute is a perfect harmony subsuming and transcending the discord which it—conceptually, not temporally—follows.

The important question for us is whether Eliot believes, with Bradley, that what is usually taken as ordinary human experience (the “intermediate steps” Eliot proposes as his topic) is “grounded” in immediate experience. Michaels’ argument for Eliot’s pragmatism rests on the claim that Eliot does not agree with Bradley about immediate experience, and that earlier critics failed to address Eliot’s rejection of the foundations in Bradley’s thought. He reads Eliot as offering a pragmatist “critique of the notion of ground” (“PK,” p. 174), a refusal of “the consolations

of the absolute" (p. 189). According to Michaels, far from arguing on the basis of immediate experience, Eliot repudiates it. Referring to the pragmatic "middle" between the poles of immediate experience (at the beginning of Bradley's conceptual scheme) and complete experience (at the end), Michaels argues, "the story of Eliot's philosophy really is the story of the middle, a middle which not only takes its place alongside the beginning and the end but takes its place finally at the expense of its beginning and its end . . . Eliot's pragmatism is not the link which joins the relative with the absolute; it is instead a way of understanding the identity of relative and absolute and denying them both" (p. 200). On Michaels' reading, the dissertation is a work of nihilistic pragmatism, proposing conceptual foundations only to undermine them later on. Eliot's nihilism seems self-evident when he writes, for example, "The virtue of metaphysical analysis is in showing the destructibility of everything" (*KE*, p. 157). In a letter from 1915, Eliot goes so far as to describe his planned revised version of the thesis as an "entirely destructive" account of Bradley's theory of judgment.⁸ Did Eliot see immediate experience as an element in Bradley's theory of judgment to be obliterated along with all the rest? If so, how could he conclude his paper with the claim that "all of the conclusions I have reached are in substantial agreement with [Bradley's] *Appearance and Reality*" (p. 153)? And how could such an unrelenting repudiation of metaphysical grounds have been interpreted for so long, by scholars from Kenner and Anne Bolgan to John Lynen and J. Hillis Miller, as an acquiescence in Bradley's foundational doctrine of immediate experience?

Both sides can draw on ample evidence. Because of Eliot's intricate qualifications and syntactical convolutions, sometimes it becomes possible for both sides to cite the same evidence. One particularly ambidextrous passage illustrates the problem. "We are forced," Eliot writes, "in building up our theory of knowledge, to postulate something given upon which knowledge is founded" (p. 17), suggesting that something given, perhaps like immediate experience, is necessary for making sense of whatever knowledge we construct. Then Eliot seems to switch positions. "But on the other hand," he writes, "if all the same constituents [of knowledge] were present in every case of knowing . . . all analyses of knowing would be equally tenable. There would be no practical difference: for when there are no bones, anybody can carve a goose." In other words, if Bradley says that all knowledge consists of a subject and object abstracted out of the timeless unity of immediate experience, and Hegel sees such constituents abstracted from the self-positing of *Geist*,

and Kant says that all knowledge consists of a subject and categories and things-in-themselves, and another philosopher presents an entirely different set of constituents of knowledge, in each case no instance of knowledge can refute the philosopher's chosen scheme, and we seem to have no way of choosing between them. We would be able to carve up the goose of knowledge any way we please, without our specific choice making any "practical difference." That is, "the fact of their difference would be a perfect example of useless knowledge" (pp. 17–18).

If, as William James argued, pragmatism is above all "a method of settling metaphysical disputes that otherwise might be interminable,"⁹ then Eliot's approach to the validity of competing epistemological theories would seem to be a fine example of the pragmatic method. Beginning from the claim that a theory of knowledge requires that knowledge be founded on something "given," a foundation like Bradley's immediate experience, Eliot adopts an apparently pragmatic perspective to suggest that any metaphysical foundation that succeeds in "explaining" all actual instances of knowledge will be no more "tenable" than any other, because there will be no practical differences by which to judge between them. Eliot's suggestion of an equivalence between epistemologies *sounds* a lot like James's claim that there can be no differences in abstract truth where there are no practical differences. "There can be no difference which doesn't make a difference—," James writes, "no difference in abstract truth which does not express itself in a difference of concrete fact, and of conduct consequent upon the fact, imposed on somebody, somehow, somewhere, and somewhen."¹⁰ But Eliot does not develop his apparently pragmatic language to a pragmatic conclusion. He does not make the strong, Jamesian claim that where there are no practical differences, there can be no difference in truth, or that because there are no practical differences between sufficiently elaborated theories of knowledge, there can be no question that one of them is right and the others wrong. Eliot only walks in step with pragmatism far enough to say that *we* will have just as much trouble holding one theory as another, that *we* have no way of determining which theoretical grounding of knowledge is the right one. Only if, as in Eliot's protagorian vision of pragmatism, "man is the measure of all things," would *our* inability to decide among competing theories of knowledge by itself indicate that one theory is no more true than another.

Eliot's already ambiguous description of epistemological dispute is delivered in a stream of conditional "if"s and "would"s and "were"s. He seems to leave open the possibility that some especially clever

epistemology could cash out in a practical difference after all. We might even surmise that Eliot means to exempt Bradley from the waste-bin of apparently “useless knowledge,” until he adds, “In the philosophy of Bradley we shall find this difficulty [of being useless knowledge] in an aggravated form, although a form no more fatal, I think, than the form which it may take in any other philosophy.” (Note the suggestion that being “useless knowledge” is *not fatal* to a philosophy. Is Eliot making the more descriptive claim that throughout history useless philosophies have refused to die, or the more normative claim that philosophy, as an activity aiming at something beyond utility, namely at truth, deserves to be pursued in spite of its uselessness? We will later find evidence of Eliot’s sympathy for both points of view.) Working within Bradley’s system, Eliot continues, “There is no absolute point of view from which real and ideal can be finally separated and labeled. All of our terms turn out to be unreal abstractions; but we can defend them, and give them a kind of reality and validity (the only validity which they can possess or can need) by showing that they express the theory of knowledge which is implicit in all our practical activity” (p. 18). A pragmatist would find much sympathetic material in this passage. So would a Kantian. Eliot never explicitly rejects the necessity of a ground for knowledge, though Michaels would argue that the rejection is implicit. All that Eliot questions directly is whether it makes any difference *which* epistemological foundation we choose. Even on this limited point, his statements are far from being unequivocally pragmatic. He writes of “*the* theory of knowledge” implicit in our practical activity, suggesting that there is, in fact, a single way of conceiving of knowledge that would get things right, a single constitution of knowledge lying beneath the surface of all our lives. And he never repudiates the notion that, so long as we want a theory of knowledge, we must postulate “something given upon which knowledge is founded.”

Michaels responds that this notion of theory, as grounded in something given, “in both its realist and idealist forms, is what Eliot sets himself against” (“PK,” p. 173). In other words, Michaels reads Eliot as saying: if you want a theory of knowledge, you need a foundation; but we have no need for such a theory of knowledge. This pragmatist reading is reinforced by Eliot’s repeated rejections of realism (with its ground in the object) and idealism (with its ground in the subject) throughout the paper. But there is a third possible location for ground that Eliot never explicitly repudiates: immediate experience, which places the foundation conceptually prior to the subject-object split. If we locate the foundation

of knowledge in immediate experience, we can still say with Eliot that the real and the ideal are “unreal abstractions,” in the sense that they derive, in such a way that we can never clearly distinguish one from the other, from what is fully and truly real, the postulated “timeless unity” of immediate experience itself.

Donald Childs, probably the foremost expert on Eliot’s dissertation, supports Michaels’ pragmatic reading by arguing that Eliot rejects Bradley’s use of immediate experience as an epistemological ground. “The point of the dissertation,” Childs writes, “is to argue that the assumption that the [objective and subjective] points of view are united in feeling or immediate experience is metaphysically false, or at least irrelevant.”¹¹ He cites as evidence a line from the following passage, which appears at the end of Eliot’s chapter on solipsism. (I have placed Childs’ citation in italics.)

The issue here hangs only on the exact meaning which we are to attribute to the word “knowledge” . . . [A]s we need to be reminded, we have no direct (immediate) knowledge of anything: the “immediately given” is the bag of gold at the end of the rainbow. Knowledge is invariably a matter of degree: you cannot put your finger upon even the simplest datum and say “this we know.” *In the growth and construction of the world we live in, there is no one stage, and no one aspect, which you can take as the foundation.* Radical empiricists assume that we have an “immediate” knowledge of a mysterious flux, and criticists assume that we know sense-data, or universals, immediately, as we do not know objects or other selves. But where we are first interested in knowing, there is the first thing known. (*KE*, pp. 151–52)

Childs interprets the italicized section as a rejection of the foundational role Bradley gives to immediate experience, and it certainly sounds like a thorough repudiation of metaphysical grounds. But the narrow context for Eliot’s anti-foundational claim is his discussion not of immediate experience but of the “immediately given.” Is the former an example of the latter, as Childs seems to assume? Typically, Eliot leaves ample room for uncertainty. His meaning hinges, as he presciently suggests, on how we take the word “knowledge.” What Eliot explicitly rejects is the idea that we *know* one thing or another (such as the mysterious flux, or sense-data) so immediately, and hence so unquestionably, that we can take it as the keystone for all our other knowledge, the Archimedean point upon which our other beliefs can rest in security from skeptical conjectures such as solipsism. Yet it is entirely possible,

as strange as it might sound, to reject the idea of an “immediate given” such as this, and still support the notion of immediate experience. Eliot never claims that Bradley’s concept of immediate experience would be an “immediately given” knowledge, something we could apprehend so directly and incontrovertibly that we could point to it and say “this we know beyond any possible doubt.” On the contrary, Eliot insists (as we will soon see in more detail) that immediate experience must be postulated, and can only be arrived at through the mediation of logical inquiry: “although we cannot know immediate experience directly as an object,” Eliot writes, “we can yet arrive at it by inference” (p. 19). By the time there is a subject on the scene, able to have knowledge of objects, immediate experience has fled into the shadows, only to be grasped indirectly, through logical investigation. It is anything but immediately given to us as an *object* of knowledge, yet this does not mean we must deny its validity.

Let us pause for a moment, take a step back and consider again the line that Childs quotes: “In the growth and construction of the world we live in, there is no one stage, and no one aspect, which you can take as the foundation.” What could be more anti-foundational than this? How can the author of such a claim support the idea that “immediate experience,” the *aspect* of experience in which subjects and objects are not yet distinguished, is the *foundational* conceptual *stage* in the *construction of our world*? Should we infer that immediate experience, by virtue of its subjectless, objectless immediacy, is not a part of the “growth and construction of the world [of subjects and objects?] we live in,” but rather the basis of that growth—in other words, that what is most immediate to us, our immediate “feeling,” is in some sense also irreconcilably distant from the world in which we live? Here we see the difficulty of arriving at a definitive reading of Eliot’s dissertation. His richly evocative phrasing and ambiguous, shifting, sometimes apparently contradictory uses of central concepts make it possible to find traces of any number of philosophical positions. Perhaps it should be no surprise that two decades of critics were able to find in the dissertation a defense of Bradley’s metaphysics, despite Eliot’s frequently nihilistic claims, or that two more decades of critics were able to find a pragmatic rejection of Bradley’s metaphysics, despite Eliot’s casual suggestion that his conclusions are in “substantial agreement” with Bradley’s *Appearance and Reality*.

Even if, as I have proposed, we do not read Eliot’s rejection of the immediately given as a rejection of immediate experience, we have already seen that he qualifies the notion of immediate experience in

much the same way a pragmatist would. He argues that *we give* our terms whatever “reality and validity” they have: their truth is not found, but made. To say that what is real or true can depend on us for its reality is one of the central ideas in *Pragmatism*, in which James famously claims that, “truth *happens* to an idea.”¹² For Eliot, our conceptual terms derive whatever reality they have from the role they play in our theories, from the necessity we have of postulating them, given certain theoretical goals, such as the desire to conceive of a structure uniting all points of view into one. Nevertheless, the pragmatist critic will have trouble finding a single instance when Eliot actually denies the necessity of the concept of immediate experience. As in his comment from *For Lancelot Andrewes* (“the great weakness of Pragmatism is that it ends by being of no *use* to anybody”), Eliot uses seemingly pragmatic tools to arrive at a highly unpragmatic conclusion. He suggests that whatever reality “immediate experience” has is given by us, on the basis of our theoretical goals, a very pragmatic notion; but he immediately turns away from pragmatism and suggests that immediate experience could potentially be demonstrated to be the foundational term implicit in all our practical activity. The latter move is elided, intentionally or unintentionally, throughout Michaels’ reading. On the basis of his article, one might never be aware of the Kantian, transcendental strain in Eliot’s dissertation. But it is through a transcendental move that Eliot can be seen to arrive at the foundational necessity of immediate experience, the position that two decades of critics before Michaels ascribed to him.

When Eliot writes of a theory of knowledge “implicit in all our practical activity,” a natural question would be whether Bradley’s theory of immediate experience is itself the implied theory. Perhaps we need only ask whether immediate experience is a condition of possibility for knowledge, whether knowledge or consciousness or practical life could be possible without it. Eliot seems to conclude that immediate experience is necessary in precisely this way. He writes, “although we cannot know immediate experience directly as an object, we can yet arrive at it by inference, and even conclude that it is the starting point of our knowing” (p. 19). The Kantian, transcendental nature of this “inference” becomes evident when he continues, “immediate experience seems to be in one aspect a *condition* of the conscious subject” (p. 20, my emphasis). In order that thought and will “may be possible, feeling must have been given.” “Feeling,” which is “self-transcendent” (p. 21), seems to be interchangeable in Eliot’s argument, as was previously noted, with “immediate experience.” Bringing these claims together,

we can say that Eliot sees immediate experience, at least in this early stage of his argument, as a self-transcending, necessarily (though not “immediately”) given condition of possibility for the conscious subject, thought and will.

The goose has a fixed set of bones after all. They are implicit, but no less real for being so, and we can reach them with the proper Kantian knife. If knowledge requires a ground in immediate, undifferentiated, pre-subjective, pre-objective experience, then immediate experience is a necessary foundation for our theories and in our lives, even if we can never have “knowledge” of it as we have knowledge of objects. If we cannot reify immediate experience into a “term,” that is precisely because it is what makes our epistemological terms (subject, object, knowledge) possible: “Relations can hold only between terms, and these terms can exist only against the background of an experience which is not itself a term” (*KE*, p. 27). Arguing that some ineffable, non-relational substratum is necessary in order for any effable, relational objects and subjects to exist, is a philosophical move that has been used variously to defend the necessity of God, things-in-themselves, the groundless ground of Being, the logical structure of *différance*, and any number of other foundation-stones in the castles of philosophy. As has been frequently noted, if you want to find the most central element in a philosopher’s system, look for the one that cannot be spoken. For Eliot, this element is immediate experience, which is “annihilation and utter night” (p. 31), which can only be approached through the most refined transcendental inferences, which defies knowledge and practical difference, but which nevertheless, from a certain point of view, has a validity that cannot be denied.

One school of thought which has never relied on the move to transcendental “conditions of possibility” is pragmatism. A pragmatist simply does not say, with Eliot, that we may draw “certain inferences as to the nature of reality” (p. 159). Thinkers in the tradition of James’s *Pragmatism*, for whom beliefs are seen as tools and not as representations made true by correspondence to “reality,” can no more make sense of “reality” having a “nature” than they can make sense of a hammer demanding that we hold it a certain way. This is not to say that pragmatists never use inference, only that their account of truth runs counter to the kind of vast inferential leap that leads from the existence of everyday activities to the necessity of a metaphysical concept like immediate experience. Inside the artificially stabilized environments of symbolic logic, true propositions may indeed form a perfect network of inferential relations, allowing the philosopher to move from one true proposition to the next

over a potentially infinite number of inferential connections, without ever having to worry about a loss of truth so long as each inference is properly executed. Outside these simulated worlds, however, inference looks less like a crystalline logical network and more like a series of rickety bridges, frayed ropes and planks strung between propositions, connections which become less and less trustworthy the longer one is forced to follow them.¹³

For a pragmatist, if the difference between theories of knowledge makes absolutely no practical difference, as Eliot suggests, then the question of which is true, which gets the implicit nature of our being correct, which finds the goose's bones, is empty. If, however, truth can be grasped through the investigation of transcendental conditions of possibility, as Eliot also suggests, then it is entirely possible that one theory might be true and another false, though no practical difference were at issue between them. If Kant's transcendental approach is valid, and there are determinable differences of truth and falsity where no conceivable practical differences exist, then James's account of truth is wrong. If Eliot agrees with Kant, then he is not a pragmatist. Finally, though, does he agree, or was he only presenting the transcendental defense of immediate experience as a possible move in the game of philosophy—something a reasonable person might think, but which he himself does not necessarily believe?

To understand the difficulty of answering such questions, we must return to the ambiguity of Eliot's language in the dissertation, and particularly his language relating to practicality. Near the end, for example, he writes, "a metaphysic may be accepted or rejected without our assuming that from a practical point of view it is either true or false. The point is that the world of practical verification has no definite frontiers, and that it is the business of philosophy to keep the frontiers open" (p. 169). Donald Childs cites these lines as evidence that Eliot holds the "pragmatic conviction . . . that metaphysics as the science of ultimate questions is none of our business" and supports the "pragmatic insistence that truths be tested and verified instead of referred to an inaccessible ideal standard."¹⁴ Yet we could just as reasonably take Eliot's point to be a critique of pragmatism's inadequacy: it can only see things from a practical point of view, while philosophy (thankfully) can accept or reject metaphysical ideas even when it is unclear what verification might entail. For example, philosophy can accept or reject ideas based on investigations of conditions of possibility. We can read Eliot as calling into question the pragmatic assurance that practical verification has

definite frontiers, an assurance which might be seen as underlying the pragmatist's dismissal of theoretical differences. "I checked whether it made any practical difference, and it didn't," the pragmatist seems to say, as if it were clear what would constitute a sufficient "check" in this situation, as if there were a signpost marking the end of the frontier of practical verification, the point at which all possible practical differences have been explored. Far from setting aside the search for ultimate answers, Eliot could be calling on philosophy to keep open the frontiers into the metaphysical that pragmatism closes when it dismisses certain metaphysical claims whose truth or falsity would (allegedly) make no practical difference.

Eliot is never so transparent as to fully and finally embrace or reject either the transcendental Kantian or the deflationary pragmatic method. Complicating matters, it is often unclear whether he writes in the voice of his own argument, pronouncing views he holds to be true, or in the voice of a more or less distant opponent. As we already saw, his suggestion that adopting different theories of knowledge makes no practical difference is couched in a series of conditional clauses. How are we to negotiate Eliot's strange vacillations between the boneless goose of pragmatism and the foundational bone-structure of inferred truth? How are we to reconcile such self-consciously anti-pragmatic statements as "truth never *is* utility" (*KE*, p. 167) with Eliot's insistence that we hold our theories to the "pragmatic test" (p. 161)? Does Eliot's thesis finally fail to cohere, as might be suggested by the feverish indecision of its final pages?¹⁵

Eliot himself seems to have been aware of his thesis' ambivalent relation to pragmatism. On the final page of the published version, he appears to struggle toward some synthesis of his inability to care about metaphysical differences with no practical consequences and his inability to deny, outright, not only immediate experience but even the Absolute. "If I have insisted on the practical (pragmatic?) in the constitution and meaning of objects," Eliot writes, "it is because the practical is a practical metaphysic. And this emphasis upon practice—upon the relativity and the instrumentality of knowledge—is what impels us toward the Absolute" (p. 169). Here we see the fundamental tension in Eliot's argument pared down to its essential form: an emphasis on the practical (pragmatic?) leads not to deflationary pragmatism, but to Bradley and the Absolute. Eliot suggests that we are impelled toward the Absolute because it *could* make a difference to our lives. If knowledge is instrumental, then belief in the Absolute might be a very worthwhile practical instrument for us.

By the final page of the dissertation, we find Eliot conceding that the Absolute is neither real, unreal, imaginary, nor from a practical point of view true or false, yet still refusing to deny the Absolute altogether. He seems to be making a distinction between two kinds of “practical difference” with reference to both the Absolute and immediate experience: if *they* were real or true, things would be just the same for us as if they were unreal or untrue, so in a sense, they make no practical difference; but if *we believe* them to be true, things might be very different for us, so in another sense, they (as objects of belief) can make a great practical difference. What is practical for us might turn out to be metaphysical, a “practical metaphysic”—or perhaps even a “practical theology”? Though Bradleyans insist on the differences between the Absolute and God, there are enough similarities between the two to make us wonder whether the thought processes we see at work here might have also played some role in Eliot’s later religious conversion. Far from a work of unrelenting nihilism, the dissertation begins to seem (like the final lines of the “The Waste Land” in some retrospective interpretations) part of the foundation work for an eventual return to belief in God: a justification for returning in spite of the lack of any foundation upon which to prove God’s existence.

Several decades of critical investigation have remained unable, as Eliot himself was, to offer a definitive answer to his parenthetical question. T. S. Eliot: practical in some respects, but a pragmatist? Eliot comes closest to a Jamesian view of belief in his dissertation when he writes of the endless ways we can carve up a goose without bones, a metaphor for our ability to take any side in an argument when there are no criteria for determining the single correct position. He flirts with the idea that any theory of knowledge might, practically speaking, be as good as any other, since all would offer the same conceptual grounding for knowledge and explanation of every instance of knowledge. But he refuses to adopt a pragmatic account of truth that would conclude from the practical equivalence of various epistemological theories that none gets “closer to the truth” than any other. Instead, he suggests that a correct answer to our epistemological questions exists in the “nature of reality,” and that this nature can be discovered through logical inference. Nowhere does Eliot’s writing suggest that he understands how it might be possible to set aside the common sense notion that beliefs are representations that correspond or do not correspond to “reality.”

Michaels writes that Eliot’s pragmatism is “a way of understanding the identity of relative and absolute and denying them both” (“PK,” p. 200).

But Eliot stops short of explicitly drawing this conclusion, though he seems attracted to it at various stages in his argument. It is “the business of philosophy to keep the frontiers open” (*KE*, p. 169), and accordingly Eliot leaves open the question of immediate experience and the Absolute. He not only leaves open the question of their possibility, a sentiment to which James would have gladly assented, but also the question of their necessity. The very idea that an ineffable “immediate experience” might be *necessary*, a reflection of the nature of reality, logically indispensable, inferentially foundational, unavoidable to all who would follow the high road of intellectual honesty and rigor, is incommensurable with a pragmatic account of truth, and philosophically speaking, an account of truth is all that pragmatism is. Long before he suggests that the Absolute might represent the fulfillment of the practical perspective, Eliot holds open the possibility that truth might exist *beyond* a practical perspective, that truth might distinguish itself from falsity in a situation where no practical difference is at stake. Through this door the entire tradition of foundational, metaphysical speculation that pragmatism attempts to isolate is allowed to flood back in. Faced with the question of whether to dive into the metaphysical current, Eliot suggests that reason can offer us no answers, for philosophy “can ultimately be founded on nothing but faith” (*KE*, p. 163).

Eliot seems to have lost his faith in philosophy even before he submitted the dissertation. In the same (possibly very unreliable) letter in which he declares his intention to revise the thesis as a wholly destructive critique of Bradley and theories of judgment in general, Eliot writes:

In a sense, of course, all philosophising is a perversion of reality: for, in a sense, no philosophic theory makes any difference to practice. It has no working by which we can test it . . . It invariably involves cramming both feet into one shoe: almost every philosophy seems to begin as a revolt of common sense against some other theory, and ends—as it becomes itself more developed and approaches completeness—by itself becoming equally preposterous—to everyone but its author. The theories are certainly, all of them, implicit in the inexact experience of every day, but once extracted they make the world appear as strange as Bottom in his ass’s head.¹⁶

Here we see, again, the contradictory forces of the dissertation distilled into a single paragraph, now tied to the question of whether one should spend one’s life doing philosophy. Eliot puts philosophy to the “pragmatic test” and finds it lacking, as he does throughout the

thesis—in a sense. At the same time, he endorses the theories propounded by philosophers, because they find something undoubtedly “implicit” in everyday experience—all of them, simultaneously. If we had to formulate a conclusion regarding Eliot’s pragmatism during his graduate years, we might say that he was an ambivalent near-pragmatist with regard to philosophical questions that did not interest him, and a conflicted absolute idealist on questions of greater concern. As to which questions qualify for exemption from the pragmatic test, he seems to have been unable to decide, incapable of putting to rest his capacity for second thoughts, for indecision and revision. But the most prominent feature shared between these opposed philosophical faces, pragmatist and logical foundationalist, and indeed between all the philosophical and theological faces Eliot would eventually assume, is the unyielding skepticism of a boy from Missouri, America’s Show-Me State: a skepticism so unrelenting that it would eventually take as its object itself, and thereby open the way to orthodoxy and religious faith.

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1. Quoted in Donald Childs, “Risking Enchantment: The Middle Way between Mysticism and Pragmatism in Four Quartets,” in *Words in Time: New Essays on Eliot’s Four Quartets*, ed. E. Lobb (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), pp. 120–21.
2. Quoted in Jeffrey M. Perl, *Skepticism and Modern Enmity: Before and After Eliot* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), p. 91.
3. T. S. Eliot, *Essays Ancient & Modern* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936), p. 60.
4. Walter Benn Michaels, “Philosophy in Kinkanja: Eliot’s Pragmatism,” in *Glyph 8*, ed. W. B. Michaels (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), pp. 170–202, hereafter abbreviated “PK.” Donald Childs, *From Philosophy to Poetry: T. S. Eliot’s Study of Knowledge and Experience* (New York: Palgrave, 2001). Richard Shusterman, “Eliot as Philosopher,” in *The Cambridge Companion to T. S. Eliot*, ed. A. Moody (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 31–47. Richard Shusterman, “Eliot’s Pragmatist Philosophy of Practical Wisdom,” *The Review of English Studies* 40 (1989): 72–92. In his *The Early T. S. Eliot and Western Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), M. A. R. Habib offers a radically opposed view of Eliot as a thinker whose central intellectual concern is the rejection of the modern bourgeois-liberal ideology expressed in pragmatism.
5. Louis Menand, “Pragmatists and Poets: A Response to Richard Poirier,” in *The Revival of Pragmatism: New Essays on Social Thought, Law, and Culture*, ed. M. Dickstein (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 367. Though pragmatism does not play a prominent role

in Menand's *Discovering Modernism: T. S. Eliot and His Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), Menand characterizes the "genius of Eliot's literary strategy" as "the genius of a weak pragmatist" (p. 4).

6. *Skepticism and Modern Enmity*, p. 45.

7. T. S. Eliot, *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley* (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1964), p. 16; hereafter abbreviated *KE*.

8. Valerie Eliot (ed.), *The Letters of T. S. Eliot: Volume One, 1898–1922* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), p. 81.

9. John J. McDermott (ed.), *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), p. 377.

10. McDermott, p. 349.

11. Childs, "Risking," pp. 109–10.

12. McDermott, p. 430.

13. For a contemporary pragmatist's critique of the search for transcendental conditions of possibility, see Rorty's "Is Derrida a Transcendental Philosopher?" and "Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and the Reification of Language" in his *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers, Volume 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 119–28, 52–55. Wittgenstein accounts for the instability of inference in ordinary language by referring to the limited, imperfect rules we have for the use of any given word in unfamiliar situations. Rorty also wrote a series of articles in the 1970s criticizing the temptation to seek "noncausal conditions of possibility," cited in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, p. 124, n.15.

14. "Risking," pp. 119–20.

15. In a preface to the published version of the dissertation, Eliot reports that the curator of Harvard's Houghton Library, where the manuscript languished before being rediscovered in 1954 by Anne Bolgan, told him that the final page or pages "were missing when the script came into his care" (*KE*, p. 16). Eliot insists, however, that, "the argument, for what it is worth, is there."

16. *Letters*, p. 80.