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Margolis's Pragmatism of Continuity

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It is my privilege and honor to examine and criticize the work of Joseph Margolis with you, and him, today.¹ This is a happy occasion. It has been quite meaningful for me to know Joe (as a philosophical fellow-traveler) over the years; his encouragement and support of my work has been supremely valuable. He has taught me so much.

Because Margolis's oeuvre is so magisterial, I feel I can relieve myself of an obligation to refute him; to borrow a sporting metaphor, *I refuse to wrestle out of my weight class*. Instead, I draw attention to themes in his work especially important for pragmatism's future and to raise one fundamental question about the starting point of Margolis's own pragmatism. Because the question raised (toward the end of the essay) may perhaps be my only critical contribution here, let me introduce it briefly now and then return to it after some explication of those points in Margolis's work relevant to it.

Entertain, if you will, the following statement about Hegel by American philosopher John E. Smith. I shall insert, for rhetorical effect, the name "Margolis" alongside Hegel to telegraph the gist of my critical question. Smith writes,

One of the problems to be faced by anyone seeking to understand and to evaluate Hegel's [Margolis's] treatment of other philosophers is that he [Margolis] never seems to regard their thought as having any tenure beyond the framework of his own philosophical account of the history of philosophy. All philosophical standpoints and systems are

¹ This essay is a slightly expanded version of the paper given at the "Metaphysics of Culture: The Philosophy of Joseph Margolis", in Helsinki, Finland, 21 May, 2013.

understood by him in terms of his own comprehensive philosophy of spirit".
 Smith 1973, 438

In no way does Margolis deserve the full cutting force of Smith's remark, here. Still there is a way in which Margolis's overarching design is to sum up everything which has gone before him—philosophies and histories and the full sweep of human biological and cultural development—in order to present us with a Pragmatism capable of ferrying us into the 21st century. On one hand, this is a magnanimous gesture, made possible only by decades of Margolis's unflinching dedication to systematic thinking; on the other hand, this gesture is very much in tension with the active, piecemeal, instrumental, and melioristic starting point initiated by the scientific Peirce, effloresced by the humanist James, and put to work by the activist-educator Dewey. The concert of their pragmatisms, as I hear it, is one which decries any philosophical approach beginning from a theoretical starting point. This is not simply the matter of a philosopher relying on a priori stipulations; Margolis is seasoned enough to eschew such crutches. Rather, it is a question at the deepest level of how and where a philosopher ought to *stand* as they assert what they take to be *their* philosophical position. And so the question I raise about Margolis as a philosopher is about where he *stands*. My answer, readers will see, is that the evidence is inconclusive. I do not know where Margolis stands on what is perhaps *the* deepest methodological issue for a pragmatist.

The essay proceeds as follows. First, I briefly rehearse Margolis's recent constructive efforts in pragmatism, with some focus upon his central notion, the "artifactual self". Second, I discuss the larger context for this artifactual self, namely, Margolis's "continuity thesis", which re-situates familiar philosophical terms (such as subject and object, experience and language) onto a continuum. This continuity thesis, I explain, helps mediate a tension amidst pragmatists that is especially acute right now. Finally, I raise the aforementioned question (about Margolis's own philosophical stance) by comparing it with Dewey's. Evidence is offered which indicts Margolis's approach as theoretically-loaded and, at a deep level, more continuous with the tradition of philosophical system-making than the pragmatist radicals with whom Margolis unquestionably self-identifies. Further evidence is then offered to, perhaps, exculpate Margolis from the charges raised. Thus, the essay concludes in something of an *aporia*.

I. Recent efforts: moving beyond philosophy's three-sided agon

Because Margolis's project draws together so many threads with so many implications, I can best set the stage for my questions if I first provide a potted account. Margolis is not one to hide his main game; his advocacy of philosophical pragmatism is broadcast clearly with titles announcing that pragmatism has a "trajectory", an "advantage", and is "ascendent". We must see why he uses these terms.

Margolis identifies what he calls "a three-legged contest" among the philosophical movements he collects as *pragmatists*, *analysts*, and *continentals*. Through interpretation and critique, he illuminates the groups' similarities and differences to force hard decisions about which ingredients should be included in any philosophy that takes on the circumstances and challenges of the new century. There is much to be kept and much to be cut; indeed, all three movements have real handicaps. But each movement also has more local failings which also must be excised:

The reductionism of the analysts seems likely to fail to accommodate the unique emergence of our historicized, enlanguaged, and encultured world; the extranaturalism of the continentals may be ruled out by the actual facts of the evolution of a particular species [...] that has invented its own mode of being. [...] And the pragmatists, though they plainly rely on Darwin's discovery, have hardly begun to articulate the conceptual linkages and differences between the metaphysics of physical nature and the metaphysics of human culture in any fine-grained way.

Margolis 2010a, 10

This gives a fast sense, I trust, of why no movement can, by itself, simply lead philosophy forward. However, pragmatism is the least encumbered of the three movements because pragmatists believe "that analysts are likely to favor scientism and that continentals are likely to exceed the bounds of naturalism, and both tendencies are more extreme or extravagant than their policies require". (Margolis 2010a, 3) Margolis is quite forthright about a revitalized pragmatism's potential to sweep away contemporary philosophical garbage—removing at a single stroke, he says, "Aristotelian essentialism and teleologism and Kantian transcendentalism" along with "analytic philosophy's scientisms". (Margolis 2010a, 56, 57)

More positively, of the three movements, classic pragmatism is equipped with an apparatus most worth preserving. Of chief importance are the classic pragmatist emphases upon, as Margolis puts it,

the primacy of the practical, the historicity of the human, the instrumental and provisional nature of conceptual categories, the absence of fixity in the encultured human world, the artifactual nature of knowledge and understanding, a sense of passing order endorsed within continual change, a tolerance for the endless diversity and contingent conflicts among norms, principles, theories, convictions of every kind affecting practical and theoretical matters, the holism of such a vision, and the deep informality on which all the forms of precision rest.

Margolis 2012a

That last remark, about pragmatism's "deep informality", stands out, for it gestures toward a topic I will elaborate upon a bit later, namely pragmatism's practical starting point. In this context, we can see that a pragmatic attitude provides the best fulcrum to leverage the tradition.

As Margolis puts it,

pragmatism's best intuitions have been applied to eliminating the extravagances of its Kantian sources (by Charles Peirce) and of its Hegelian sources (by John Dewey) in such a way as to lead us back to the ordinary aptitudes of *human beings* (ourselves) viewed within a generously Darwinized ecology, without transcendental, revelatory, or privileged presumptions of any kind.

Margolis 2010a, 13

1.1 The artifactual self

What, one might wonder, can move philosophy beyond this three-sided impasse? A new conception of the self, Margolis answers, for "the analysis of what it is to be a human self" is "philosophy's most essential reflexive question" (Margolis 2012b, x); he adds that it is "disputes about the right analysis of the self [which] are precisely what distinguish in the most pointed way what separates the pragmatists, the analysts, and the continentals in our own time". (Margolis 2010a, 6)²

In an 1893 review Peirce published in *The Nation* Margolis finds the inspiration he needs to reformulate our conception of the self. That motto is

² Indeed, he identifies this analysis of the self as the "most important" and "most neglected" aspect of present and future philosophy: "What beckons beyond all that is the attraction of the concept of the artifactual self and all that that may contribute to enhancing pragmatism's new ascendancy. Of course, we must bear in mind that the analysis of the self, of the enlanguaged and encultured human world, of the very idea of historied existence, is the most neglected—incomparably the most important—part of current and future philosophy: suppressed (thus far) by the saliency of the most reductive tendencies of analytic philosophy during the very interval in which pragmatism suddenly revived". (Margolis 2010b, 191).

"Darwinizing Hegel and Hegelianizing Darwin." This encapsulates Margolis's idea that an adequate account of the self must avoid choosing between a scientific biological/naturalist approach and one which stresses culture and history to the exclusion of empirical facts. Both approaches, in combination, are necessary. As he puts it:

the most reasonable key to the entire unity of the Eurocentric movement lies with *the historicity and artifactuality of the self and the self's encultured world*; I take this to provide the most straightforward paraphrase of Peirce's motto that can be imagined. Margolis 2012a

Margolis argues that his account "constitutes an utterly new chapter [...] sparked by "plain facts" rather than philosophical ideologies". (Margolis 2010a, 57) Put another way, Margolis is interested in *both* the way societies acculturate their young ("internal Bildung") as well as how, in fact, *homo sapiens* have evolved to have that capacity ("external Bildung"). It is the import of this latter process, external Bildung, which Margolis says "is the metaphysically decisive novelty that Darwinian evolution makes possible but cannot rightly explain" and which "the entire trajectory of Western philosophy has barely explored". (Margolis 2010a, 11)³ Again, it's important to understand that in Margolis's view, the classic pragmatists only *started* us down this path. "The trouble", he writes,

is that the original pragmatists somehow sold us short with regard to both historicity and enculturation and with regard to the artifactuality of the self favored by a naturalistic reading of Hegel along lines made possible by Darwin's innovation but not confined to any sort of biologism. [...] [A]s a single movement pragmatism is a disappointing hodgepodge that must be redirected. Margolis 2010a, XIV, 13

Younger pragmatists need to understand, Margolis urges, that unless they pay attention to the questions raised by other movements, there is the very real danger that pragmatism will squander its resurgent popularity. Pragmatism's present esteem, Margolis warns, comes to it *gratis*—that is,

³ "The entire tradition from the beginning to its provisional end [...] Is committed to what we may call "internal Bildung"—the effective process of instructing the young of a human society in some preferred way of living [...] drawn from that societies more inclusive cultural resources....[However, Margolis notes] the entire trajectory of Western philosophy has barely explored the import of what I shall call "external Bildung", the long evolutionary process that accounts for the emergence of the unique primate gifts [...] that bridge [...] the advanced forms of primate communication and their transformation into [acculturating, self-reflexively cultural] true speech" (Margolis 2010a, 11)

without it “advancing any fresh doctrine in its own behalf in a satisfactorily ramified way”. He warns “it will die a second death if it cannot redeem its revival convincingly”. (Margolis 2012a)

The advantage which pragmatism find itself with, in other words, can only be sustained if a new vision is constructed. Margolis provides a preliminary sketch of that vision to help identify the locus for future pragmatist efforts; as mentioned earlier, this entails devising an ontological account of

the human self as a “natural artifact”, an evolutionarily new form of “being” that depends on the *sui generis* emergence of true language; and the capacity to use language and the cognate cultural resources that it makes possible develop along lines that can no longer be explained in terms confined to the physical and the biological—in accord with which, in truth, *we* actually constitute ourselves (developmentally), both individually and species wide, as selves. [...] We have become the continual re-creation of our own technologies.

Margolis 2010a, 52, 57⁴

Still, it is worth noting that while Margolis’s account will not *confine* itself to the physical or biological sciences, it will also not neglect the possible significance of any of their relevant discoveries, nor those of other more culturally oriented ones, either.⁵

⁴ This account by Margolis offers a revised version of Mead’s dialectic between the “I” and the “Me”. About that duality, Margolis writes, “My own account has it, as I’ve suggested, that the self is a cultural artifact, defined functionally first, “naturally” generated by the invention and generationally transmitted mastery of language and the enlanguaged culture that the first makes possible; hence, that the dialectic of the “I” and the “me” is the very life of the self-viewed dynamically, not the prior effectivity of social forces (not already thus qualified) by which the self is first formed”. (Margolis 2012a). See also Margolis, 2012b, 140–1.

⁵ As Margolis explains, an account of the artifactual self requires both biological and cultural sources. The “the explanation of the natural artifactuality of the self I take to require a Darwinian or (better) a post-Darwinian account of the continuum of prelinguistic and linguistic evolution (essentially cultural rather than biological) spanning at least the cultural competences of prelinguistic human species (early species of the genus *Homo*, very probably then early phases of *Homo sapiens* as well) and proto-culturally apt human societies that have been able to bridge the difference between prelinguistic and linguistic communication. I name the enculturating process that first formed language and (therefore) the human self, “external *Bildung*” and the intergenerational processes by which language and its associated culture are transmitted to new cohorts of the infant (or primate) members of *Homo sapiens*, “internal *Bildung*” (Margolis 2012a)

II. Margolis's experience/language continuity thesis

As we have seen, Margolis calls for contemporary pragmatists to offer a bold vision capable of meeting the challenges of the new century. Since I have clearly not offered such a vision myself, I will just comment upon what the attractions of Margolis's thesis and the questions it provokes.

Margolis's thesis of continuity (between experience and language) is of immediate interest and value because it provides resources which *might* help mediate tensions between those pragmatists who take language to be a sufficient fulcrum for pragmatism and others who see experience as enduringly central.⁶ Margolis's developmental account depicts experience and language upon a continuum, and he enlists a range of empirical facts of human development for support.⁷

From my point of view, this naturalistic account appeals, because it simultaneously shows why neopragmatist efforts (to eliminate "experience" from pragmatism) are misguided while *also* refuting outrageous claims (e.g. by Rorty) that experience-centered pragmatist accounts (such as Dewey's) amount to metaphysical panpsychism!⁸

His language-experience continuity also helps establish a crucial point about pragmatic fallibilism: namely, that fallibilism is not merely a clever dialectical move by the classic pragmatists but constitutes, indeed, a full-bodied, naturalistic *Weltanschauung*.⁹ As Peirce explained, continuity and fallibilism are two sides of the same coin. He wrote, "The principle of continuity is the idea of fallibilism objectified. For fallibilism is the doctrine that our knowledge is never absolute but always swims, as it were, in a con-

⁶ Examples of the first group could include Rorty, Huw Price, and Robert Brandom. The second group could include Richard Bernstein, Thomas Alexander, Douglas Brown-ing, William T. Myers, Gregory Pappas, and myself. For a collection of essays addressing this specific question, see the *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*, 6:2 (2014), edited by David Hildebrand.

⁷ As Margolis points out, "Darwinian evolution applied to consciousness, thought, belief, language, and knowledge entails the continuity (in the context of survival of the species) of the sentient and the nonsentient, the conscious and the non-conscious, the conceptual and the nonconceptual, the linguistic and the nonlinguistic, the cognitive and the noncognitive". (Margolis 2002, 119)

⁸ See Margolis 2007, 21.

⁹ Contrasting Dewey and Peirce, Margolis writes that "for Dewey, philosophical adequacy mirrors animal survival and evolving human purpose within the life of a viable society; for Peirce, it requires an additional mythic reconciliation between what is 'given' in experience in the here and now and what, in accord with our seemingly changeless instincts of inquiry, yields a plausibly spare but ample picture of how the 'habits' of nature might evolve into universal laws (ultimately governing the entire cosmos)". (Margolis 2007, 238)

tinuum of uncertainty and of indeterminacy.” (Peirce 1897, 171) Dewey, too, understands fallibilism in the light of the practically possible—that is to say, the melioristic. Dewey’s formulation of a fallibilism both useful and comfortable in the mundane world is one to which Margolis happily cottons.¹⁰

Finally, Margolis’s continuity thesis helps pragmatism lay claim to having a viable “realism”, and one which can be repurposed along more effective lines. By attending pragmatically to the contributions of both nature and culture (and all their dynamic entanglements) Margolis can confidently claim *why* a constructivist realism is (nevertheless) a “realism” after all.

In short, it is our *embeddedness* in situations of inquiry, especially our inquiries into truth and reality, which together make *this* realism. I believe—and this is something I will seek to confirm in my final section, coming up—that Margolis, like Dewey, views our embeddedness *not* as a posit borne of architectonic requirements; rather, *it is how we find ourselves in the world*. This is what Dewey means by *experience as method*, or, if you will, “the denotative method”. It is what I (and others) mean by *the practical starting point*. We find ourselves—presuppositionlessly—in and amongst a changing (or “fluxive”) world, one which visits upon us occasions for both inquiry and enjoyment. *Our description* of this condition—for example “as being embedded in a fluxive world”—*is, however, an instrumental act*; it is the deployment of descriptive tools which, depending on the inquiry, may or may not take us where we want to go.

III. The question of Margolis’s standpoint

I must elaborate on this last issue—that of the starting point—because I take it to be pragmatism’s crucial innovation, especially as pronounced and explicated in John Dewey. I raise it in order to gain clarity about where, on this issue, Margolis stands.

To get hold of Dewey’s starting point, consider his attacks on “intellectualism” in philosophy of all stripes—that tendency to use the results of past theorizing as a way to “take” (or “pre-judge”) new encounters.

¹⁰ Margolis writes, “Dewey’s fallibilism (a fortiori, his pragmatism) makes no use of the notion of infinite inquiry, though inquiry remains open ended, lacks any assignable limit, and is thoroughly constructivist. Ascriptions of truth, knowledge, the actual and the real are characteristically provisional, practical, instrumentalist, and never rely on assumptions of nomological or normative invariance or the disjunction of reality and thought”. (Margolis 2007, 238)

Again—I cannot emphasize this enough—this is *not* merely the recognition that the new experiences we have are somehow “funded” with the results of past inquiries. It is *not* simply an observation about how meanings become integrated into habitual actions. It *is*, rather, Dewey’s insistence that philosophers actively fight the predilection toward imposing theories upon primary experience before those experiences have had a chance to unfold. (“Act as if novelty were real”, one might say.) As Dewey put it,

Philosophers have exhibited proper ingenuity in pointing out holes in the beliefs of common sense, but they have also displayed improper ingenuity in ignoring the empirical things that everyone has; the things that so denote themselves that they *have* to be dealt with.

Dewey 1997 [1925], 374

By fighting this predilection, Dewey argues, philosophers can retain a pragmatic sense of why knowledge has power:

If we start from primary experience, occurring as it does chiefly in modes of action and undergoing, it is easy to see what knowledge contributes—namely, the possibility of intelligent administration of the elements of doing and suffering. We are about something, and it is well to know what we are about, as the common phrase has it.

Dewey 1997 [1925], 29

Dewey, then, commits to a practical (natural, living, and social) starting point which eschews positing anything as metaphysically absolute or essential. “We must begin”, Dewey writes, “with things in their *complex entanglements*” (Dewey 1997 [1925], 387, emphasis mine), with “gross experience” that “is loaded with the *tangled and complex*” (Dewey 1997 [1925], 32, emphasis mine). Unlike our theories, which are by nature structured to the point of completion, experience at the starting point has “*potentialities in reserve* [...] [and] *potentialities which are not explicit*” (Dewey 1997 [1925], 32, 28, emphasis mine)

Let us turn back, now, to Margolis to investigate the nature of his philosophical starting point. In several places, Margolis announces his own program in terms which sound “intellectualistic”, in Dewey’s sense of that word. In “A Pragmatist Trajectory” he writes that

the future of pragmatism lies with themes centered, first, on the analysis of the self and its encultured, enlanguaged, and historied world, and, second, on the analysis of the metaphysics and epistemology of the entire range of human inquiry within the terms of the self’s “natural artifactuality.”

Margolis 2012a

In *Pragmatism's Advantage*, he states that

[Pragmatism] isolates as distinct the question of the right analysis of the human being as such, in the very context in which we arrive at a realistic picture of the world ample enough for all intelligent life... Pragmatism is committed to bringing the account of the human down to scale [...] Margolis 2010a, 18

Finally, in *Historied Thought, Constructed World* Margolis writes that in light of analyst's insistence that

reality must possess invariant structures, and [...] that the structure of language may be examined independently of the structure of the world [...] [pragmatism can offer an alternative, namely that] language and world form an indissoluble symbiosis: the "world" is "language," and "language," is "worlded"; effectively, the analysis of the world and the analysis of language are one and the same.

Margolis 1995, 70

These quotations collect together familiar motifs: the self as artifactual, the world as encultured, enlanguage, and historied. Together, they suggest that pragmatism contributes to the question of "the right analysis of the human being as such" and offers a vision of an indissoluble symbiosis between language and world. Put otherwise, pragmatism's future, as Margolis projects it, lies primarily in the shape it will take as a *theoretical* object more than an ameliorative plan-for-action in the world. Margolis's conception of pragmatism—leaning, as it does toward the abstractive-theoretical and against the concrete-practical—finds expression not only in his more proleptic theses but also in the way he assesses the figures of classical pragmatism.¹¹

¹¹ For example, William James's "anthropocentric excesses" leads Margolis to call him "the weakest of the classic figures". Commenting on the overall thrust of the classic pragmatists emphases, Margolis writes, "In effect, Dewey marks out a middle ground between Peirce and James, siding with James in the direction of limning a world congenial to human interests (conduct), though without James's anthropocentric excesses". Still, while James has these excesses, Margolis retains respect for him: "But though many see James as a heroic figure favoring an anthropocentrically contrived world, he must be counted as the weakest of the classic figures, at the same time his courage in broaching unfashionable themes deserves our admiration". (Margolis 2012a) This rank ordering is a bit puzzling; James was inspirationally central (along with Jane Addams) in urging Dewey (who Margolis champions) away from theoretical apriorisms, toward a philosophical stance capable of greater humanism and melioristic outcomes. Given Margolis's own strong commitment against apriorisms (of all kinds) one imagines he would give greater credit to James for establishing a direct connection between empathy for human interests and the philosophical innovations he finds estimable in Dewey, and pragmatist method more generally.

My question, then, is simply this: are Margolis's claims (regarding the "indissoluble symbiosis" of language and world, the self as "artifactual", etc.) to be taken as "posits"? And if so, is their status not, in fact, one of a theoretical conclusion assumed *in advance* of inquiry? Considering that Margolis is proposing what is *itself* supposed to be a *pragmatism*, it is important to ask about the role of these posits *vis a vis* the starting point of inquiry.

This is not my own, original, question. In a review of Margolis's 1995 book, *Historied Thought, Constructed World*, Douglas Browning raised this issue. But I do not know Margolis's position, which is why I seek it. About Margolis's 1995 thesis Browning wrote, approvingly, that

Among other things, [Margolis's thesis] means that, whatever theories we might come up with about the actual world or the knowing or experiencing or languaged subject, we cannot derive a privileged standpoint from them. Browning 1997, 180

Nevertheless, Browning believed that implicit in Margolis's thesis there *was* an assertion of cognitive privilege (even as it decried it in others). Browning writes,

To start with symbiosis, even holistically understood, is to start with a *theory*, and to *start* with a theory is to start by assuming a certain cognitive privilege. But Dewey is as insistent as Margolis that no such privilege is warranted". Browning 1997, 183

The difference between Dewey and Margolis, according to Browning, is that Dewey successfully avoids this philosophical bad faith but Margolis does not. He writes,

Dewey could not take as his starting point anything quite so commissive or theoretically privileged as Margolis' symbiotic, holist, and historicist perspectives. [...] Dewey's starting point is pre-theoretical; Margolis' is not. Browning 1997, 183

In essence, Browning's claim is that while Margolis is very consciously trying to avoid concocting yet another totalizing philosophy, he winds up doing just that. This is caused by his philosophy's neglect of a genuinely practical starting point. This results in a position less distinguished from contemporary neopragmatist and analytic peers than Margolis explicitly prefers. Because this is a serious charge, and easily misunderstood, please forgive me for restating the point.¹² It has become conventional wisdom

¹² This restatement paraphrases Browning from his review, cited earlier.

that our experience is “intractably ‘theory-laden,’” and that it no longer makes sense to peel away those theories in search of a theory-neutral “given.” (The same goes for the language or vocabulary-laden nature of experience, too.) Thus, this conventional wisdom goes on to assume that given the inaccessibility of neutrally given experience—as well as the fact that experience is laden with the accretions of “our varied social, cultural, and historical backgrounds”—we may therefore conclude that “our experience is variously ‘interpretable’ *all the way down*”. (Browning 1997, 184)

This final conclusion—that experience must be endlessly interpretable—violates, in Browning’s view, the edict against cognitive privilege. As Browning put it,

My point in bringing this up is not to criticize the theory [Margolis’s] at hand [...] [but] rather to emphasize that *it is a theory about our experience* which is acceptable only to the extent that it is adequate to that about which it is framed as a theory. As such, it is open to considerations of warrant, support, acceptability, legitimation (whatever) which cannot be such as to assume the theory itself.

In spite of this obvious point, some contemporary philosophers seem to think that we should simply start our new philosophical endeavors with a view of experience as theory-laden and go on from there. Margolis’ problem lies along this track. We cannot start where he starts without begging the question. We cannot start where he claims we must start without accepting the cognitive privilege provided by a theory.

Browning 1997, 184

I am unsure of how Margolis would (or did) respond to this charge—that is, to the charge that his view is theory laden and, in a sense, invariant. Knowing his response could help make clearer why, as mentioned earlier, the classic pragmatists “sold us short” regarding the historied and artifactual nature of the self.

Still, I am ambivalent about whether Browning’s charge can stick because I also see evidence in Margolis to the contrary. There are, in contrast to the passages just cited, many places in Margolis’s work where he recognizes and seeks to formulate a pragmatism which (I think) avoids this trap. In *Pragmatism’s Advantage*, he distinguishes two types of “given” and supports (as Dewey’s) one which is “presuppositionless in intent, hence not privileged in any epistemic way though finally accessible to human inquiry”. (Margolis 2010a, 23)¹³

¹³ To economize, I won’t cite additional examples but I will mention that elsewhere, recently, we can find Margolis defending Dewey and James against the charge of cognitive

Moreover, in "A Pragmatist Trajectory" he attempts to tamp down the expectations usually raised by large philosophical visions, writing that

we cannot do more than construct (according to our lights) what seems best in whatever direction we choose to press our inquiries [...] without foreordained purpose [and] corrected in piecemeal ways within the shifting limits of human tolerance and interest and rational imagination.

Margolis 2012a

I confess to a hung jury—I am uncertain how to judge the issue. I see clearly how Dewey's starting point—his presuppositionless primary experience—functions in his philosophy. It provides philosophy with a way of utilizing theory and conceptual abstraction by tying them to the future amelioration of problems. Dewey addresses such problems (of education, war, labor relations, etc.) in many writings. There is no vicious intellectualism in Dewey because theories subsist only insofar as they can demonstrate how their energies connect up with the wider arena of living, problematic situations.

As I read Margolis, I sense an intense and caring moral presence—and also an unsparing critic of those pragmatists (Putnam, for example) who, fearing relativism, retreat to Reason rather than extend the ethical import of their own pragmatic themes.¹⁴ What I simply confess is that I have a much harder time grasping, specifically, how Margolis's elaborate meditations have energies which extend to a world he'd seek to heal.

IV. Conclusion

To conclude, this paper has tried (a) to offer a brief summary of Margolis's recent metaphilosophical themes as they relate to pragmatism, (b)

privilege by insisting on the correct notion of given just mentioned. *Viz.*, "The general charge of cognitive privilege has been made regarding James and Dewey's emphasis on what is "given" in experience, but I think it depends on an equivocation on the meaning of "given" (phenomenologically): if you read the pertinent texts and Hegel's sense rather than in the empiricists', you cannot fail to see that "given" is likely to be presuppositionless rather than privileged". (Margolis 2010a, 47)

¹⁴ See, for example, this critique of Putnam by Margolis: "Our remarkable appetite for the dictates of Reason, which already appears at the beginning of Western philosophy, is a dreadful trap that has siphoned off our energies from the better prospects of what to believe and do under the conditions of practical life. Putnam is the victim (it seems) of a deep longing that apparently will not subside, it takes the form (in him) of worrying whether our grip on objectivity could possibly survive admitting any form of relativism. At the very least, it is a little startling to find that he senses no incongruity between the ideal function of his *Grenzbegriff* and the standard pragmatist resistance to invariances of any kind". (Margolis 2010a, 105–6)

to offer an appreciation for how his theme of continuity might mediate a contemporary debate among pragmatists about the role of language and experience, and (c) last, I have tried to raise what I take to be a central methodological question for any pragmatist, that of the starting point.

The point of philosophy, as Dewey put it, was to make choice less arbitrary and more significant. Choice, Dewey wrote,

becomes significant when reason for the choice is found to be weighty and its consequences momentous. [Choice becomes] [...] an experiment to be tried, not an automatic safety device.

Dewey 1997 [1925], 35

Margolis does not offer us safety; he has labored to detail the dangers and dead ends of the past and to suggest which paths might be worth following. From reading his work, I am most clear about the nature of *past* dangers; I am more uncertain about what Margolis is driving towards. I am uncertain as to the purpose of a *rapprochement* between the three movements—is it to advance a new conception of the self? Or is the new conception of the self the key to achieving *rapprochement*?

And regardless of the order of means and ends, what is the further purpose of these things? Margolis says he seeks “the main lines of an acceptable theory of the human world”. (Margolis 2010b, 200) I suppose the pragmatic question is “Why?”

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