On Cornel West and Pragmatism

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This introduction to a special issue of *Contemporary Pragmatism* about Cornel West argues that he remains, despite his recent self-descriptions, a critical voice within the tradition of pragmatism. West’s preoccupation with the tragicomic dimensions of our lives point to resources within the philosophies of pragmatism that have been underdeveloped or simply ignored.

Cornel West, these days, does not describe himself as a pragmatist. He is more apt to see himself as a Chekhovian Christian, a jazz man in the life of the mind, or as a dramatist of philosophic notions and historical narratives. Of course, he remains indelibly shaped by the pragmatist tradition. He continues to insist, with C. I. Lewis, that questions of truth of any kind cannot be separated from questions of the justifiable ends of action. He rejects the view that knowledge requires philosophical foundations in direct personal awareness, and he is adamant in his accent on the capacity of ordinary people to make a difference in their worlds. But West has always found the tradition of pragmatism, even when he tells its story, somewhat suspect. Pragmatists, he would have us believe, evade the night side of life. Their preoccupation with human powers often blinds them to the limit-conditions of the human journey, namely, to the stark realities of death, disease, and despair. Such evasions are all the more egregious given the evils of white supremacy that have colored American democracy. So, even as West continues to sound pragmatic notes, he draws on a wide array of resources outside of the pragmatist tradition – because of its blind spots – to address the tragicomic dimensions of human living. No wonder he no longer considers pragmatism an apt description.

I want to resist West’s rejection of the pragmatist label. Not so much because I think it appropriately describes his intellectual project. No label achieves that distinction. Instead, West’s turn to the darker dimensions of human living – the blues-inflected character of what it means to be human – expands the scope of the pragmatist tradition and, in this sense, calling him a pragmatist has some usefulness. When Stanley Cavell, for example, worries about labeling Ralph Waldo Emerson a pragmatist because Emerson’s concern with secret melancholy differs dramatically from John Dewey’s worry about unintelligence, Cavell effectively bans melancholy from our accounts of critical intelligence. As
he says, they are different ideas of thinking. But when we think about Dewey in relation to Emerson, we expand how we might read his philosophy of action and how we might understand Emersonian perfectionism; indeed, we come to find out that Dewey has resources to address what Cavell describes as the work of mourning. Much of the same can be said about West’s rejection of the pragmatist label. When he leaves pragmatism aside because of its perceived failure to address the darker dimensions of life, West in effect condemns the tradition to its blindnesses. But when we think of West as a constitutive part of the tradition, his work accents dimensions of pragmatism that are often obscured by the standard professional preoccupations of pragmatists. Indeed we come to find out that pragmatism as such has resources to address the darker realities of our living if only we would turn our attention to them.

Cornel West is the most sophisticated example of a grand tradition of African Americans who have drawn on the tools of American pragmatism to reflect on their conditions of living. From Anna Julia Cooper, W. E. B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, Charles Johnson, Ralph Ellison, to James Baldwin, African Americans have deliberately taken up the tools of pragmatism in light of the history and political economy of white supremacy in the United States. Theirs have not been a concern with the traditional questions of professional philosophy; instead, African Americans have taken up pragmatism in order to address the complex challenges of racism to our conceptions of democracy. In their hands (or should I say our hands), pragmatism encounters the underside of American life; it assumes the tragic dimensions of our living; it begins with the complex interplay of individual assertion and structural limitations; and it takes for granted the necessity for a fuller grasp of white supremacy and other forms of subordination that shape our self understanding. Pragmatism, whether Emersonian, Jamesian, or Deweyan, looks and sounds differently. It has been, as I have written elsewhere, colored a deep shade of blue.

West stands in this tradition. He argues in *The American Evasion of Philosophy* that “American pragmatism is less a philosophical tradition putting forward solutions to perennial problems in the Western philosophical conversation initiated by Plato and more a continuous cultural commentary or set of interpretations that attempt to explain America to itself at a particular historical moment.” No matter his self-description, West continues to engage in this project, one that is consistent with a venerable tradition of African American pragmatism and one that transfigures America’s grandest philosophical enterprise. In this regard, *Democracy Matters* constitutes his most powerful intervention to date. There he offers a particular account of the United States in this historical moment, a moment shaped by imperial ambition, corporate greed, religious sectarianism, and fleeting possibilities for genuine democratic life. West also recounts a democratic tradition that offers resources to resist the forces that threaten to undermine American democracy and that tradition has at its center the tear-soaked wisdom of a blues people.