
Roger Ward’s *Conversion in American Philosophy* is eminently readable, meticulously researched, and refreshingly gutsy. Ward insightfully compares the theological notion of conversion to the concern with individual and communal transformation found throughout classical American philosophy. The connection may seem tenuous, but Ward shows how the notion of transformation is a key theme in both the writings of these philosophers and in their intellectual environments. This is important, because while conversion remains important for many Americans, it seems to have vanished from the map of professional American philosophy. But if we ignore the hope of conversion in American religion we isolate American philosophy from the very places where personal and communal transformation is taken seriously. In other words, if we refuse to talk about conversion, we widen the gulf between philosophy and a broad swath of American culture.

Ward’s book follows an outline similar to the outline of a Puritan sermon: text, doctrine, and improvement. First he presents the classic texts through excellent commentaries. The next few chapters show what ties all these classic texts together: the themes of dwelling in absence, and freedom as transformation. Finally, he casts a critical eye on some of our most significant contemporaries: West, Rorty, and Corrington, showing how the strengths and weaknesses of each come more sharply into focus when seen through the lens of conversion.

Ward begins with Edwards’ *Religious Affections*, showing how Edwards played a key role in opening the door to creative theological, psychological, and philosophical thinking about the nature of conversion. This is followed by a chapter on Peirce’s “Neglected Argument for the Reality of God,” and chapters on Dewey’s *A Common Faith* and James’ *Varieties*. The commentaries are lucid and erudite contributions to extant scholarship, and they’re written clearly enough to be good for an upper-level undergraduate class or graduate class.

The middle chapters detail two of Classical American Philosophy’s strengths. The first of these Ward calls “dwelling in absence.” Absence is Ward’s term for the awareness that transformation requires recognition of insufficiency or error. The modern philosophical tradition evaded absence by attempting to deny it. Postmodernism eludes the problem of absence by
embracing it and claiming that absence is all there is. But at the heart of American philosophy, Ward contends, there is an awareness of absence that considers absence as both a check against hubris and a spur to inquiry that results in the second strength of American philosophy: the view of human freedom as the real possibility of personal and communal transformation.

Like any good homiletician, Ward writes not only to elucidate but to provoke. One of his assertions is that since Dewey there has been a strong fear of religion or anti-religious bias in American philosophy. This has resulted in what Ward calls (pace West) “the American evasion of conversion,” evinced in various ways and degrees by West, Rorty, and Corrington. This evasion has not been a careful one, but has thrown the baby of vital transformation out with the bathwater of religious dogmatism and theological political agendas. Ward critiques James for his inconsistent treatment of conversion in the Varieties, spawning the dominant and antagonistic view of conversion in contemporary philosophy. James’ insistence that conversion need not appeal to a source outside the one converted has become the dominant position—in Rorty, for instance—and has closed the path of inquiry concerning some other transfinite source.

In contrast to James, Ward calls Dewey “a spiritual partner of Jonathan Edwards.” Ward recognizes that Dewey claimed that religion was never a “leading philosophical problem” for him, and that, were they to meet, Dewey and Edwards would likely condemn one another as promoting dangerous views. They nevertheless share a concern for “dwelling in absence,” and both speak passionately and provocatively in favor of a turn towards a new form of life. Dewey’s resistance to tradition undercuts his intentions, but Ward sees him as “an instructive failure.”

This is a book we should probably all read, if only to remind us that for most of the classical American philosophers, this reflection on the transformation of individual and culture alike have been of central importance. It’s also a good reminder that for many of our students, conversion—religious or otherwise—is a constant aim and a real fact. Ward’s book might help us to connect with those students of a stronger religious stripe, and perhaps help them to connect positively with American philosophy in a way that may well produce unforeseen transformations.
Ward never gives us a hard-and-fast definition of conversion. This can be frustrating, but it is also instructive. Ward’s contention is that in Christian theology there is similarly no unitary doctrine of conversion. Conversion stems from soteriology, and since soteriology was developed fairly late in the early Christian era, the doctrine of conversion has always been a flexible one. Its vagueness and plasticity make it a useful locus of connection between Christian theology and Pragmatism.

Regrettably, the book is historically broad but not deep. Ward covers American philosophy from Edwards to the present, but a number of key figures are absent. Emerson and Royce pop up from time to time but never receive systematic treatment. Mead, Du Bois, and Addams are total no-shows. Still, if it fails to be a comprehensive history, it is only because it never aimed to be one. But as an insightful commentary on important texts, it is a glowing success.

This is not to say that you’ll agree with everything in the book, of course. Ward is writing provocatively. But it is just that provocation, combined with Ward’s careful attention to detail that makes this such a valuable book. The book is wide-ranging and ambitious, and most of its ambitions are fulfilled, as far as they can be, by Ward’s careful presentation and painstaking research. Whether Ward’s ambition of provoking the rest of us to a more favorable view of the religious elements in the American philosophical canon, and to taking conversion seriously, succeeds must remain to be seen.

David L. O’Hara  PennSylvania State University


In the preface to On Pragmatism, de Waal states that this book is intended to be a concise introduction to pragmatism. In fact, On Pragmatism is, for the reader, much more than a superficial first meeting with a new acquaintance. Rather, it is an immersion in the journey of the life of that stranger.

This journey begins with the Metaphysical Club of the 1870’s, out of which emerges Charles Peirce. Peirce is the first pragmatist to which de Waal gives robust treatment; this