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An Evolving Dialectic: Contesting Conceptions of Nature in American Ideas, from Transcendentalism to Pragmatism

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Abstract

This essay explores one way of understanding how concepts of human nature and the natural world evolved during the course of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American philosophical thought. It traces changing conceptions of human nature in relation to the natural world through the respective philosophies of transcendentalism (as represented by Ralph Waldo Emerson), idealism (as represented by Josiah Royce), and pragmatism (as represented by John Dewey), with reference to environmental historian Donald Worster's discussion of the "arcadian" and "imperial" intellectual traditions in his book *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas*. It argues that Worster's thesis regarding the dialectical relationship between these two traditions and the eventual ascendancy of the imperial perspective to predominance in American culture generally is also applicable to certain successive transformations that occurred in American philosophy specifically, as exemplified by Emerson, Royce, and Dewey. However, as Worster also suggests, although American history reflects this dialectical trend, none of its philosophical exemplars conform simplistically to either an arcadian or imperial ideology, and the arcadian-imperial dialectic should be regarded as only one limited — albeit illuminating — view of the intellectual tradition from the early nineteenth century through the progressive era to today, and from which environmental conservation thought has emerged.

Introduction

Noted environmental historian Donald Worster's landmark book, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas*¹ makes an important distinction between two contrasting conceptions of the natural world and humanity's place within it. These schools of thought (or, perhaps more accurately, frames of mind), "arcadian" and "imperial," are important because the tensions and harmonies between them throughout American history have done much to shape the contemporary cultural/intellectual ethos in and from which environmentalists and policy-makers are presently thinking. This paper will examine the thematic trend in conceptions of nature presented by Worster, from the arcadian to the imperial (or "Linnaean" — hereafter the terms "imperial" and "Linnaean" will be used interchangeably), as expressed in three successive

¹ Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). The 1994 edition followed the initial 1977 edition, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books). The 1994 edition remained the same as the original, except for the addition of two concluding chapters on the diversity of academic discourse in ecological thought from the post-war years to the present, and further reflections on the course of environmental history, which are referenced in this paper.

schools of American philosophical thought: transcendentalism as articulated by Ralph Waldo Emerson, idealism as articulated by Josiah Royce, and pragmatism as articulated by John Dewey. Specifically, it will assess the extent to which each of these thinkers conceived of humanity and nature from either an arcadian or an imperial perspective, as these terms are defined in Worster's work.

This paper will test whether and to what extent American philosophy and culture, as represented by these thinkers, evolved from an initially more arcadian view of nature to a relatively more imperial perspective, as Worster claims. An examination of Emerson's transcendentalism, Royce's idealism, and Dewey's pragmatism in chronological succession, and within the historical context of their ideas, seems to reveal this trend at work in attitudes about the natural world, with Emerson representing a more arcadian approach, Royce a transitional one, and Dewey a more imperial one. While their ideas are obviously not simply reducible to Worster's categories, viewing them within this framework can help to illuminate their respective multivalent, problematic, and sometimes dissonant conceptions of nature from a historical perspective. Since Worster's thesis is well-known but little-examined in the literature, exploring this trend can add a dimension of insight to scholarship on environmental philosophy and history.

In discussing "The Disorder of History" Worster concludes that:

Historians of every sort can no longer claim that there is a single universal narrative of change that all species, all communities, all places must conform to. 'History' has given way to 'histories'. Each needs the space in which to play itself out. That is precisely what modern conservation must aim to do: provide the space so that all the many earthly histories can coexist.²

Only by acknowledging the diversity and holism, the discord and the harmony, in the ways that these historical narratives unfold, can we begin to appreciate their richness and depth. Constructing a kind of dialectical narrative that encompasses both arcadian and imperial views of the natural world, sometimes in tension and sometimes in unison — while understanding that this narrative is neither exclusive nor privileged, is always evolving, and never ultimately reconciles the dissonance between these views — provides a more accurate and subtle vision of American intellectual and environmental history than any universal or "single narrative of change" can. Indeed, this may be a particularly effective way to do justice to the changing subtleties and complexities of environmental philosophy and thought within the larger movement of American history.

Other classic comprehensive treatments of environmental thought have sought to view its history from this perspective. For example, Roderick Nash' *Wilderness and the American Mind*, Max Oelschlaeger's *The Idea of Wilderness*, and Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden* envision Western

² Worster, *Nature's Economy*, 433.

conceptions of nature in complex dialectical terms.³ Bob Pepperman Taylor also traces a similar strand of dialectical synthesis between what he calls the “pastoral” and the “progressive” traditions in American environmental political thought: he locates pastoral ideology (like Worster’s arcadian vision) in the tradition from Thoreau to deep ecology, and progressive ideology (like Worster’s imperial vision) in the tradition from Gifford Pinchot to environmental utilitarianism and pragmatism.⁴ Indeed, there is a direct personal and intellectual lineage from Emerson to William James to Dewey (Emerson being both godfather of and formative influence on James, who was then integral to Dewey’s development) that might actually represent a true Fichtean dialectic, with the zeitgeist of Emerson’s transcendentalism as the “thesis” generating James’ radical empiricism as “antithesis,” and culminating in Dewey’s later naturalism as the “synthesis.”

Placing environmental thought within these kinds of historical narratives can highlight basic assumptions and over-arching paradigms that have configured the character of current ecology. Specifically, placing representative figures in the history of American philosophy within the context of Worster’s narrative offers enhanced possibilities for conceiving and re-conceiving the foundational role that each may have played in reflecting (or even shaping) the ethos of environmental thought from the early nineteenth century to the Progressive Era and now.

Worster’s Concept of Arcadian vs. Imperial Worldviews

Worster begins his inquiry into the “history of ecological ideas” by contrasting what he calls the arcadian conceptualization of nature (originating, in its modern form, largely in the writings of eighteenth-century naturalist and natural philosopher Gilbert White), with the imperial or Linnaean conceptualization (exemplified by the work of Francis Bacon and Carl von Linne or Linnaeus, the eighteenth-century biologist and founder of modern taxonomy in botany) which culminated in the “imperial ideology” of modern science. These two traditions differ from one another in several fundamental respects. One difference involves attitudes toward modern instrumental science as a cultural/intellectual institution and as a medium through which humanity relates to the natural world. The arcadian tradition has been critical of instrumental science, while the imperial tradition has embraced its methods and paradigms. Worster points out that although Gilbert White “was at times strongly utilitarian in his science. . . there was still another important element in White’s concept of ecology, one to which later generations particularly would respond with enthusiasm and delight, and that contrasts sharply with his more manipulative purposes. This element was the arcadian harmony with nature he found in his rural life.”⁵ The arcadian sense of “harmony” with nature inspired subsequent critiques of the Baconian-Newtonian paradigm and the culture of modernity configured by it. From poets such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge to philosopher-activists like John Muir, thinkers inspired by White’s

³ Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982); Max Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991); Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁴ Bob Taylor, *Our Limits Transgressed: Environmental Political Thought in America* (Kansas: Kansas University Press, 1992).

⁵ Worster, *Nature’s Economy*, 9.

arcadian vision criticized “both the industrial society and the new methods of scientific analysis. Narrow specialization, mathematical abstraction, and extensive reliance on elaborate instruments of measurement were all cited as causes for what was seen as the alienation of scientists — and mankind generally — from nature.”⁶

This critical attitude by arcadian thinkers toward the influence of science upon humanity’s relationship with nature was combined with a sense of appreciation, even reverence, for those dimensions of living experience in the natural world which, they felt, the scientific mentality could never comprehend. Indeed, although American romantics tended to be more pragmatic in temperament than their European counterparts, they nonetheless shared a respect for the kind of vital experiences through which nature could be appreciated in a deeper way than could possibly be countenanced by the scientific method. Henry David Thoreau in particular remained skeptical toward science for most of his career, wary of the “self-centered and calculating” quality of “scientific opinion” even as he used it in his own environmental research. Even in his more “scientific” later writings, nature always retained a deep intrinsic dimension irreducible to scientific data.

In stark contrast to this arcadian attitude, the imperial attitude was (and has been) one of unreserved enthusiasm for an imperial ideology in which the “equilibrium between man and nature . . . would be replaced by a more aggressively artificial, humanized landscape; a new world in which science would give mankind absolute power over the land and its creatures.” According to Worster, this view has its philosophical roots in Francis Bacon’s thought and has been the dominant influence upon western civilization’s paradigm since that time. Imperial thinkers “knew how to put every piece of nature in its precise place,” thus accommodating their metaphysics to the requirements of an increasingly “rational, pious, and bourgeois” modern cultural ideal. One consequence of this has been “a general indifference to natural life on the part of American society,” which has largely marginalized the arcadian attempt to highlight and revitalize mankind’s encounter with nature. The triumph of the imperial ethos in American culture generally has thus promoted the kind of “insensitivity toward living beings” characteristic of modern science in particular. Arcadian thought has sought to provide a counterpoint to this view of nature as inanimate data for scientific analysis.⁷

The arcadian tradition has assumed an intrinsic correspondence — even an identity — between nature and the human condition, while the imperial tradition has generally viewed the natural world as largely indifferent to human interests. For arcadian thinkers from Coleridge to Emerson, human nature mirrored a natural world that encompassed and animated the very human experience that reflected it. According to Worster, romantic literature always expressed “a longing to reestablish an inner harmony between man and nature through an outer physical reconciliation,” and contemporary environmental philosophy has been influenced by the arcadian “search for a lost pastoral haven” in which mankind’s inherent place within nature can be recovered.⁸

⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 8-16.

In contra-distinction, Linnaean (imperial) thinkers “were eager to enlist Lord Bacon’s imperialist cause” in the human conquest of an alien natural world.

That world was not to be studied through love or sympathy — indeed, could not be, for it was widely subscribed to by scientists that nature had to be cleansed of sentiment and so deliberately made unappealing to human feelings. Such had been the Baconian mission from the first. The quest for objectivity also meant that the outer physical world was to be kept firmly separated from all religious experience. Science was laying claim to nature, warning the pious to go elsewhere for their inspiration.⁹

This humanistic imperialism also had its intellectual roots in Descartes’ dualistic metaphysics: “From the work of Galileo, Descartes, and Newton in particular there emerged the figure of a vast celestial contrivance set in operation by an omniscient mathematician” and proclaiming simultaneously “the kingdom of mind over matter and man over nature.” Alien and inanimate, the natural world became valuable to humanity solely as a resource for human exploitation. Cartesian dualism had remote ideological origins in the Judeo-Christian separation of heaven and earth, spirit and flesh, God and humanity. However, in the cultural milieu of the Enlightenment especially, “reason was to be the weapon by which this empire would be won” via rationalism, empiricism, and the scientific method.¹⁰ From these origins, through Darwinism, utilitarianism, positivism, and contemporary evolutionary naturalism, Descartes’ vision of humankind’s “mastery and possession of nature” has configured the world-view of western culture.

Conversely, the arcadian paradigm has been predicated upon an assumption of radical interdependence between humanity and nature. This holistic ontological orientation in contrast to Cartesian dualism has “ebbed and flowed with extraordinary persistence throughout the modern period”¹¹ in spite of dominant imperial cultural trends. While imperial science acknowledges a certain affiliation between human life and the natural world (that the human organism depends upon the resources around it to thrive, for instance) its paradigm remains strongly influenced by the Baconian-Cartesian subject/object dichotomy that manifests itself in the perceived division between the vital intellect and the abstract natural world. The arcadian perspective, however, assumes no such separation, does not view the natural world as inanimate or an abstraction, and does not see nature as a resource to be observed and exploited via a critically detached and disembodied mind. From Emerson’s transcendentalism to (the later) Aldo Leopold’s “land ethic,” arcadian thinking has been inspired by the belief that human nature is inextricably involved with the natural world from which it springs, and cannot be adequately conceived apart from this animating ground.

Arcadian holism has also, therefore, involved a conception of nature that is “vitalistic,” in that it envisions the natural world as alive and intelligent (a view which stands in obvious contrast to the imperial vision of nature as essentially unconscious matter). Moreover, it is vitalistic in the

⁹ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 39; 87-92.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

sense that it views nature's intelligence as meaningful and purposeful rather than blindly mechanistic. Nature actively seeks the fulfillment of ultimate goals rather than being driven exclusively by mindless "efficient causes." From Hegelian idealism to Alfred North Whitehead's organicism and Arne Naess' deep ecology, arcadian thinking has retained a sense of purpose (or purposes) in nature's design. In contrast to the meaningless imperial universe driven by mechanistic causation, the arcadian universe is a living expression of divine or transcendent intelligence. While imperial science has eradicated all purposes from the natural world except for purposes imposed on it by the Baconian-Cartesian intellect, arcadian thinking has tended to integrate human interests intimately with the larger interests of the natural world to which they belong.

In comparing what he terms the "pastoral" legacy (which shares many similarities with the arcadian) with the "progressive" legacy (which shares much with the imperial) in American political environmental thought, Bob Pepperman Taylor notes that the "pastoral" has traditionally assumed an "outsiders" critique of popular culture while the "progressive" has almost always taken on an insider's role, accommodating its worldview to the prevailing ethos of commercial and established public interests.¹² Similarly, in Worster's paradigm it is the imperial tradition (like the progressive) which has come to play a dominant role in intellectual and cultural life, while the arcadian tradition (like the pastoral) has been largely marginalized. Worster suggests that the concept of human nature in relation to the environment can be understood historically in terms of a dialectical interplay between these opposing perspectives, with the imperial finally superseding (though being simultaneously influenced by) the arcadian. Examining the succession of ideas regarding humanity's relationship with the natural world in the metaphysics of Emerson, Royce, and Dewey, with reference to this imperial-arcadian dynamic, appears to affirm Worster's thesis in many important respects.

Emerson as an Arcadian Thinker

As both an original thinker and as an intellectual product of his historical milieu, Ralph Waldo Emerson remains an exemplar of the arcadian conception of nature. From the publication of *Nature* in 1836 virtually until his death in 1882, Emerson's transcendentalism reflected the course of American intellectual culture, and the sources of his worldview — developed gradually during the course of a prolific and complex career — are multifarious. In the perennially relevant *Main Currents in American Thought*, Parrington famously notes that Emerson's thought was influenced by the liberal strain of Arminian Unitarianism in nineteenth-century New England, but was inspired primarily by the romantic vision of "Continental Idealism, with its transcendental metaphysics," particularly as articulated by Goethe and re-interpreted by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Thomas Carlyle.¹³ In his *Religious History of the American People*, Sydney Ahlstrom comments that a synthesis of continental idealism and romanticism "seals his bond with the Romantic's tendency to combine post-Kantian idealism with an enthusiasm for Spinoza and the

¹² Taylor, *Our Limits Transgressed*, 133 -51.

¹³ Louis Vernon Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought: An Interpretation from the Beginnings to 1920* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1930), 386-95.

mystical spiritualism of Swedenborg.”¹⁴ Daniel Walker Howe has examined how both the theology of Cambridge Platonism and the “faculty psychology” of the Scottish Enlightenment shaped Emerson’s conception of self-identity. Others, like William Goetzmann, emphasize the influence of popular charismatic religious movements stretching as far back as the First Great Awakening on transcendentalism’s appreciation for nature-inspired spiritual enthusiasm.¹⁵ In the social context of a pious, increasingly egalitarian, still largely pre-industrial America in the midst of the Second Great Awakening, this combination of intellectual forces shaped a concept of the natural world that became arcadian in Worster’s sense.

Emerson, for instance, has an arcadian faith in nature’s inherent beneficent design and in human nature’s harmonious interdependence with the natural order. In opposition to the imperial depiction of a meaningless natural world valuable only as an object of exploitation, he writes:

All things are moral, and their boundless changes have an unceasing reference to spiritual nature. Therefore is nature glorious with form, color, and motion, that every globe in the remotest heaven, every chemical change from the crystal up to the laws of life, every change in vegetation from the first principle of growth in the eye of the leaf, to the tropical rainforest and coalmine, every animal function from the sponge up to Hercules, shall hint or thunder to man the laws of right and wrong.¹⁶

Emerson views this vital spirit and transcendent intelligence animating the natural order in direct contrast to aimless Cartesian mechanistic cause. The cosmic order is purposeful or teleological, rather than merely mechanistically causal. Both its eternal laws and evolving dynamics reflect an ultimate meaning and spirit. Nature, and humanity as involved in nature, is the actualization of a transcendent destiny.

Emerson’s vision of nature is also arcadian by virtue of its holistic character. As Ahlstrom states, he “commits himself wholly to the organic metaphor: the identity of mind and nature was his first postulate.”¹⁷ The natural order both mirrors and informs the human experience through which its intelligence is realized.

We learn that the highest is present to the soul of man; that the universal essence, which is not wisdom or love or beauty, but all in one, is that for which all things exist ... does not act upon us from without . . .but spiritually or through ourselves . . . therefore that spirit, that is the Supreme Being, does not build up nature around us, but puts it forth through us, as

¹⁴ Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 604.

¹⁵ David Walker Howe, *Making the American Self: Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 189-211; William Goetzmann, *Beyond the Revolution: A History of American Thought from Paine to Pragmatism* (New York: Perseus Books, 2009), 185-96.

¹⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature,” *Selected Essays, Lectures, and Poems*. ed. Robert Richardson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 34-35.

¹⁷ Ahlstrom, *A Religious History*, 604.

the life of the tree puts forth new branches and leaves through the pores of the old.¹⁸

In contrast to Baconian-Cartesian dualism sundering human intelligence from the natural world, Emerson dissolves much of the distinction between mind/matter, ideal/real, and man/nature that makes this dualism possible. Nature, for Emerson, is the manifestation of an omniscient and ubiquitous “over-soul” which remains co-extensive with human nature. Worster observes that “Emerson as much as other romantics perceived nature’s marvelous unity, in which nothing can exist apart from the whole,”¹⁹ and Philip Cafaro similarly reads Emerson as a “virtue ethicist” whose transcendentalist values are shaped largely by the romantic legacy and inspire Thoreau’s belief in humanity’s interdependence with nature.²⁰

Of course, Emerson’s thought has some dualistic overtones that occasionally sound more imperial than arcadian. He sometimes refers to humanity and nature in terms that echo Bacon more than Gilbert White. “Nature is thoroughly mediate,” he says. “It is made to serve. It receives the dominion of man as meekly as the ass on which the Savior rode. It offers its kingdom as raw material which he may mold into what is useful.”²¹ Notwithstanding the predominant influence of romanticism and idealism, Emerson’s world-view, no less than Bacon’s, was also rooted in science and the Judeo-Christian tradition. Worster notes that “Emerson’s sharp hunger for power,” just as Bacon’s, is grounded in the Christian tradition’s imperial view of nature as “a subordinate world requiring man’s reformatory zeal,”²² and this may echo what Charles Taliaferro describes as an ideal of “divine ownership” or “sovereign stewardship” over nature, popular in the colonial theology of New England to which Emerson was heir.²³ Peter Hay and others have claimed that, although transcendentalist thought often approached the kind of biocentric orientation found in contemporary ecological thought, its “desire to immerse in wilderness was less that of an ecological sensibility than its opposite: A mechanism of individual salvation,” the romantic impulse being more anthropocentric than biocentric in character.²⁴ In *The Idea of Wilderness*, Max Oelschlaeger goes even farther by claiming that, just like his transcendentalist contemporaries with the exception of Thoreau, Emerson’s view of nature remains “enframed by a Baconian-Cartesian perspective: Nature is mere putty in human hands, bestowed by God on His most favored creation, *man*.”²⁵

Emerson’s glorification of “progress,” as Worster mentions, often does sound similar in tone to “the Baconian notion of progress (. . . he [Emerson] frequently spoke with expansive pride of

¹⁸ Emerson, “Nature,” 49.

¹⁹ Worster, *Nature’s Economy*, 104.

²⁰ Philip Cafaro, *Thoreau’s Living Ethics: Walden and the Pursuit of Virtue* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2006).

²¹ Emerson, “Nature,” 35.

²² Worster, *Nature’s Economy*, 106-7.

²³ Charles Taliaferro, “Land, Labor, and God in American Colonial Thought,” *The Agrarian Roots of Pragmatism*. ed. Thomas Hilde, Paul Thompson (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2000), 77-100.

²⁴ Peter Hay, *Main Currents in Western Environmental Thought* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002); Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 1982; Philip Gura, *American Transcendentalism: A History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007).

²⁵ Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness*, 135.

the westward march of civilization by means of the steamboat and railroad),” and Carolyn Merchant also emphasizes Emerson’s propensity to “fuse enthusiasm for nature with enthusiasm for the market.”²⁶ In *The Machine in the Garden*, Leo Marx also describes an inclination toward “the rhetoric of the technological sublime” in much of Emerson’s work. Emerson, he points out, often talks as though he envisions the railroad to be just as worthy of veneration as the hills and the stars.²⁷ More recently, studies like Robert White’s *The Organic Machine* consider how these dimensions of Emerson’s thought may have also helped to inspire a legacy of imperial values and policies that regarded nature as an energy resource for human cultivation: Emerson’s tendency to “rejoice in the ability of the machine to subjugate and control nature” being at least as influential as his celebration of “the spiritual truth that nature provided.”²⁸ And as Corrington and many others have observed, Emerson’s later thought (beginning with “Experience” in 1844) began to portray nature itself as more sublime than pastoral, and humanity as more separate from than in harmony with the natural world, “as if nature begins to mock the imperial self that was once so sure of its place in the world.”²⁹

Unlike Bacon or Descartes, however, Emerson more often speaks of humanity’s moral redemption arising from and realized within nature, rather than through its domination.

One mind is everywhere active, in each ray of star, in each wavelet of the pool . . . All things proceed out of the same spirit, and all things conspire with it. Whilst a man seeks good ends, he is strong by the whole strength of nature . . . It makes the sky and the hills sublime, and the silent song of the stars is in it. By it, the universe is made habitable, not by science or power.³⁰

Emerson’s vision is thus arcadian in the sense that it rejects the Baconian-type conquest of nature which the imperial tradition embraces. Marx acknowledges that, overall, Emerson’s goal is always to reconcile the material potentialities of inevitable technological progress with the more important spiritually redeeming powers of the natural world in a way that leaves nature, if not unchanged, at least undefiled. And as a cultural icon Emerson remains the premier exemplar of “romantic American pastoralism.”³¹ Worster agrees that Emerson is “not an uncritical advocate of all technological progress”: he rejects any ontology that divests nature of inherent value or that separates human interest from its natural context. His worldview is pastoral in Taylor’s sense, and he certainly does not advocate any ruthlessly imperialistic science, technology, or public policy that divides nature from human nature, with the former regarded merely as an object of exploitation by the latter. And whatever imperial ideas or projects his celebration of “the technical

²⁶ Worster, *Nature’s Economy*, 75.

²⁷ Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 230.

²⁸ Robert White, *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* (New York: Hill/Wang, 1995), 35.

²⁹ Robert Corrington, “Emerson and the Agricultural Midworld,” *The Agrarian Roots of Pragmatism* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2000), 140-152.

³⁰ Emerson, “Divinity School Address,” *Selected Essays, lectures and Poems*. ed. Robert Richardson (New York: Bantam, 1990), 264.

³¹ Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 230.

sublime” may have, however indirectly, engendered, the most significant influence of the “Emersonian Legacy” (to use Bradley Dean’s term) was clearly on the deeply arcadian environmental philosophies of Thoreau and Muir.³² Ultimately, Emerson believes that “[i]n the woods, we return to reason and faith.”³³ He embraces science and technology as one limited means by which nature realizes its own purpose via the human purposes through which nature’s “spirit” becomes manifest.

The Idealism of Royce as a Transition from the Arcadian Vision of Nature toward a More Imperial Vision

Emerson’s Arcadian worldview was fostered largely by the cultural context of the nineteenth century — a context that began to change, of course, with the onset of new social and intellectual developments as the twentieth century approached. Between the publication of Emerson’s *Nature* in 1836 and Dewey’s *Experience and Nature* in 1925,³⁴ America underwent social and demographic transformations that led from rural towns to teeming cities, from family farms to industrial assembly lines, and from (relatively) tranquil village life to the confusion and competition of urban sprawl. William Cronon has noted how the transcendentalist’s “primitive sublime” nature-aesthetic in the early to mid-nineteenth century was rapidly changing by the outset of the twentieth century to a more “domesticated” management-friendly ideal, reflected in the art, natural histories, and conservation movement of the Progressive era.³⁵ Moreover, the intellectual paradigm exemplified by Newton’s cosmology, Locke’s rational psychology, and Paley’s “chain of being” was being reconfigured radically by Darwin’s “struggle for existence,” the irrational drives of the Freudian unconscious, and Einstein’s new physics. During an era that Dewey’s contemporary, Henry Steele Commager, in *The American Mind* describes as “the watershed of the 1890’s,” social transformations such as urbanization, industrialization, immigration, and technology created a pronounced divide between an older American ethos conducive to the arcadian worldview, and a newer spirit more conducive in many ways to the imperial perspective.³⁶

On one side lies an America predominantly agricultural; concerned with domestic problems; conforming, intellectually at least, to the political, social, and moral principles inherited from the seventeenth and eighteenth Centuries . . . on the other hand lies the modern America, predominantly urban and industrial . . . experiencing profound changes in population, social institutions, economy, and technology; and trying to accommodate

³² Bradley Dean, “Natural History, Romanticism, and Thoreau,” *American Wilderness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 77-81.

³³ Emerson, “Nature,” 18.

³⁴ John Dewey, *The Later Works of John Dewey Vol. 1, 1925-1853: 1925, Experience and Nature*. ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008).

³⁵ William Cronon, “Wilderness Lost,” *American Environmental History*, ed. L. Warren (Boston: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 213-36.

³⁶ Henry Steele Commager, *The American Mind: An Interpretation of American Thought and Character Since the 1880s* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1950).

its traditional institutions and habits of thought to conditions new and in part alien.³⁷

The philosophy of Josiah Royce in many respects exemplifies this transition in “the American Mind.” His views on nature and human consciousness in particular are illustrative of the transition from the more arcadian vision of pre-twentieth century America to the relatively more imperial vision of the twentieth century. As a philosopher anticipating this transition, Royce attempted to reconcile imperial elements of the pragmatism of his contemporaries with the more arcadian idealism of his predecessors. Representative of a brief time during which “Emerson’s Transcendentalism had lost its hold and James’ Pragmatism was still to come,” Royce was nonetheless a contemporary of both James and Dewey. Unlike Emerson, Royce’s desire for an arcadian conception of humankind’s place in the natural world was influenced by adverse intellectual and cultural circumstances, when historically “the neat orderly universe of the enlightenment was disintegrating under the blows of Darwinian evolution, the new physics, and the new biology.”³⁸

Though Darwinism undermined somewhat the strict, stable, mechanism of Cartesian metaphysics upon which the imperial conceptualization of nature was predicated, it was even more subversive of the arcadian vision of pastoral harmony and ultimate purposes in nature’s cosmology. Darwin, Worster notes, did much to eradicate Cartesian mind-body dualism that separated the human soul from its natural context: dislodging the human species from its privileged hierarchical status in the Enlightenment’s cosmic “chain of being” (celebrated equally by poets like Alexander Pope and theologians like William Paley) and relocating it in the tumultuous rout of wild nature. However, the Darwinian concept of human experience within nature, though biocentric, is hardly holistic in any harmonious arcadian sense. Darwin-inspired metaphysics tend to involve the human organism in perpetual struggle with the very environments that sustain it, and this gives rise to a new kind of Darwinian-imperial kind of dualism that is, in many respects, even more adversarial than the Enlightenment-imperial dualism of Descartes and Bacon (ecology after Darwin, says Worster, supplanted economics as the truly “dismal science”).

Royce attempts to salvage an arcadian conception of nature via idealism in the face of this hostile new imperial realism. Jackson Lears has interpreted American cultural changes from 1880 to 1920 as part of a larger perpetual quest for “regeneration” that had its roots in early American Protestant notions of spiritual rebirth, and re-emerged in the political, socio-economic, and moral-religious reform movements of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era.³⁹ In *Ministers of Reform*, Robert Crunden interprets the moralizing reform-minded tone of this generation’s thinkers and activists as a kind of secularized missionary zeal.⁴⁰ Royce’s thought may be productively read in this way, as an attempt to somehow fuse an earlier Calvinist eschatology of divine determinism with a pragmatic urge for social justice. His formative religious influences were evangelical

³⁷ Ibid., 40.

³⁸ Ibid., 39-41.

³⁹ Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009).

⁴⁰ Robert Crunden, *Ministers of Reform: The Progressives’ Achievement in American Civilization 1889-1920* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1985).

through his father's affiliation with the Disciples of Christ, but even more strongly liberal-protestant via his mother's membership in the Congregationalist Church (the same denomination as Dewey). Having studied in Germany from 1875-76, Royce was deeply affected during his nascent stage of philosophical development by the idealist tradition, from Fichte to Schopenhauer. However, his thought after 1882 was also influenced largely by pragmatist colleagues at Harvard like Charles Sanders Peirce and William James, and his mature work reflects the desire to reconcile this pragmatist influence with his religious and idealist predilections. To accomplish this, he employs a Hegelian-type dialectic to synthesize both perspectives within an ultimately harmonious world-view. His thinking thus shares elements of Emerson's arcadian transcendentalism and more imperial Darwinian strains of Dewey's pragmatism, although its perspective remains largely arcadian in spirit.

Royce shares Emerson's pastoral pre-industrial-era concept of a vital and beneficent nature, which fosters a relatively non-dualistic relationship between human nature and the natural world. His conception of nature is vitalistic in a Hegelian sense: nature is the dynamic through which the Absolute Universal Spirit, in its relative particular incarnations, seeks consummation with itself through historical synthesis. "God cannot be one," he writes, "except by being many. Nor can we various selves be many, unless we in Him are one." The Absolute, experienced as "my fellow and myself with nature between us," moves toward ultimate fulfillment through its own self-realization. "The whole of reality is the expression of a single conscious purpose or the realm of one internally harmonized experience."⁴¹

In this way Royce also shares Emerson's arcadian concept of nature as holistic. Nature is the active expression — in a pluralistic and material world — of a single universal spirit. "We propose to answer the question: What is it to be?" he writes "by the assertion that to be means simply to express, to embody the internal meaning of a certain absolute set of ideas — a system, moreover, which is genuinely implied in the true internal meaning or purpose of every finite idea, however fragmentary."⁴² In this manner, nature as the realization of "Absolute Spirit" achieves a continuous unity of internal meaning and external experience, subjective idea and objective fact, and transcendent spirit and immanent materiality.

For Royce, as for Emerson, the natural world is fulfilled in the human consciousness through which its "purpose" is realized. The ultimate fulfillment of human potentiality is realized most completely when it is experienced in harmony with the benign will and spirit of nature, where "nature" is understood as an aspect of the divine order. This leads Royce, like Emerson, to posit an idealism that ultimately reconciles material nature and spiritual nature rather than to posit a Gnostic mysticism that simply exalts the human spirit at the expense of a debased corporeal world. In his history of panpsychism in the west, David Skrbina describes Royce's early idealism, through *The World and the Individual* (published in 1899 and 1901), as thoroughly panpsychic, identifying the "Absolute Self" with "conscious nature" and depicting the natural world as infused with the same animating spirit as humanity.⁴³

⁴¹ Josiah Royce, *The World and the Individual* (New York: Octagon Books, 1969), 210-86.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 273.

⁴³ David Skrbina, *Panpsychism in the West* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007).

Yet, despite its important continuities with the arcadian tradition of Emerson, Royce's thought also shares important similarities with his more Darwinian imperial-oriented pragmatist contemporaries. Often, for instance, in work like *Self-consciousness, Consciousness, and Nature*, Royce seems to depict humanity's relationship with nature in holistic Emersonian-sounding terms: "The nature experience, so our hypothesis supposes, is in a considerable degree, relatively continuous with ours. There is experience in nature which closely resembles human experience . . . all this experience hints to its presence."⁴⁴ Deeper examination of this experience, however, yields an even more fundamental Darwinian kind of dualism between conscious agent and physical environment that anticipates Dewey's instrumentalism:

Consciousness as we know it in man and interpret its presence in animals, is an incident of interrupted adjustment . . . that involves alteration of old habits to meet new conditions [and hence] nature, as such, would neither be a world of fixed habits or yet a world of mere novelties, but rather a world of experience with permanence everywhere offset by change.⁴⁵

Royce's opposition between organism and environment in nature tempers an Emersonian-arcadian appreciation for holism and stasis, with a more Darwinian-imperial concept of nature characterized also by conflict and change.

An address by Royce to the National Geographic Society in 1896, later published as *The Pacific Coast: A Psychological Study of the Relation Between Climate and Civilization*, perhaps best illustrates the simultaneous influence of, and departure from, the arcadian ethos.⁴⁶ In it, he describes daily life in the natural environment on California's coast with insight and sensitivity reminiscent of *Walden*. Here and elsewhere, his appreciation for pastoral and agrarian communities living close to and connected with their natural environments, his sympathy with the kinds of worldviews and values that such communities engender, and his "mistrust of industrial modernity," is in many respects, as Hilde suggests, "closer to that of Emerson and Thoreau than it was to Dewey's techno-optimism."⁴⁷ However, even though its discussion of the effects of topography, climate, foliage, and fauna on human community and psychology is subtle, Royce — unlike Emerson and Thoreau — views these relations in more abstract terms: as interrelated rather than interdependent. Two unreconciled aspects, perhaps, of a dialectical movement toward union in an as yet unrealized "Absolute Spirit" that embodies nature's ultimate purpose.

For the transcendentalists, nature is a vital experience intrinsic to human consciousness itself. Human promise and potential is fulfilled in communion with the natural world: "The Beauty of nature," writes Emerson, "reforms itself in the mind, not for barren contemplation, but for new

⁴⁴ Josiah Royce, "Self-consciousness, Social Consciousness and Nature," *Basic Writings of Josiah Royce*. ed. John McDermott (Fordham: Fordham University Press, 2005), 451.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 454-61.

⁴⁶ Josiah Royce, "The Pacific Coast: a Psychological Study of the Relationship between Climate and Civilization," *Basic Writings*, ed. John McDermott, 181-204.

⁴⁷ Thomas Hilde, "Provincialism, Displacement, and Royce's Idea of Community," *The Agrarian Roots of Pragmatism*. ed. Thomas Hilde, Paul Thompson (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2000), 171-172.

creation.”⁴⁸ For Royce, in contrast, nature is incomplete in itself and, “man’s relations with nature . . . are in general, a neutral material on which ethical relations may be based.”⁴⁹ The natural world and its experience becomes much more abstract, intellectualized, and dispassionate in Royce’s thought than in Emerson’s.

As John Stuhr has observed: “The puzzling aspect” of Royce’s thinking “was its peculiar contrast” in many ways “to the pluralism and open-endedness of the growing, dominant American pragmatism” of James and Dewey; yet at the same time, “Royce’s thought is not out of touch with the American pragmatic tradition, but fully in consonance with it in a number of places.”⁵⁰ And while the traditional consensus often places Royce within the idealist tradition, it is not uncommon for many recent commentators to stress his Pragmatist affiliations. Jacquelyn Kegley, for instance, claims that “from the outset, Royce is a pragmatist” and discusses his views on issues like self and community as continuous with those of Peirce, James, and Mead. Ben Minter highlights how his later “work is quite compatible with his pragmatic brethren” and even exerted an important influence on the “civic pragmatism” of Progressive Era environmental activists.⁵¹ Royce himself calls much of his later philosophy “absolute pragmatism” and shares many concerns and perspectives with James, Peirce, and Dewey. “Truth,” he states, “means, as pragmatism asserts, the fulfillment of a need.”⁵² And like Dewey, he embraces the instrumental value of science as mediator between human purposes and the natural world from which they both derive and in which they become manifest.⁵³

This position suggests a more accommodating attitude toward modern science and technology than that of his more arcadian transcendentalist predecessors, including Emerson. Although Royce shares many of Emerson’s metaphysical assumptions regarding human nature in relation to the natural world, his thinking nonetheless takes a significant step in the direction of imperial, Darwinian, and of pragmatist, attitudes toward humankind and nature which is perhaps an inevitable consequence of its material, social, and intellectual context.

Dewey’s Pragmatism as a Transition from the Arcadian to the Imperial

In his history of American ideas, William Goetzmann writes that four particular schools of thought exemplify larger cultural trends occurring at the beginning of the twentieth century: Darwinism in the sciences and social sciences, legal positivism, aesthetic realism, and, most prominently, pragmatism.⁵⁴ Although contemporaneous with that of Royce, Dewey’s philosophy can be (and often is) read as anticipating an entirely different historical era. While Emerson and Royce can be seen as direct successors to the romanticism and idealism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Dewey (notwithstanding his self-characterization as a “modern” thinker

⁴⁸ Emerson, “Nature,” 25.

⁴⁹ Royce, “The Pacific Coast,” 198.

⁵⁰ John Stuhr, *American Philosophy: Essential Readings and Interpretive Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 178-9.

⁵¹ Jacquelyn Kegley, *Josiah Royce in Focus* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008); Ben Minter, *The Landscape of Reform: Civic Pragmatism and Environmental Thought* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

⁵² Josiah Royce, *The Philosophy of Loyalty* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1908), 259.

⁵³ John Clendenning, *The Life and Thought of Josiah Royce* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1999).

⁵⁴ Goetzmann, *Beyond the Revolution*, 389.

and heir to the legacy of Bacon) is sometimes read as a progenitor of the post-modern ethos.⁵⁵ Insofar as post-modernity represents the culmination of many modernist assumptions rather than simply a rejection of the enlightenment, Dewey's interpretation of modern science and instrumentalism exemplifies this trend in many ways. Publishing his first scholarly paper in 1882, he remained prolific and increasingly popular until the mid-twentieth century. His intellectual influence has been persistent and, from Gifford Pinchot to Aldo Leopold to current "environmental pragmatism," environmental thinkers have shared elements of Dewey's instrumentalist and naturalistic outlook.

While Emerson and (somewhat more ambiguously) Royce can be seen as arcadian thinkers with respect to their conceptions of humankind and nature, Dewey is arguably far more imperial in perspective. Like Royce, Dewey attempts to synthesize arcadian and imperial perspectives on the natural world. However, Dewey proceeds in a manner that often tends to emphasize imperial themes and assumptions much more than Royce, and certainly more than Emerson. While Royce can be seen as taking some hesitant steps in the general direction toward which American thought and civilization were headed at this time, Dewey forged ahead ambitiously in this direction and consequently hastened the transition from an arcadian to an imperial perspective on the natural world, as Worster describes it.

Dewey's metaphysical orientation does share much with that of Emerson, Royce, and the arcadian tradition. In *The Agrarian Roots of Pragmatism*, Corrington and Hickman highlight values and themes that fostered a common "agrarian" legacy from transcendentalism through pragmatism. The turn in Emerson's later thought emphasized a tension between, on one hand, human nature that craves order and harmony, and on the other, the unceasing flux of chaotic cosmic forces in wild nature. From this vantage-point "nature was no longer the nurturing mother, but the indifferent fate and power that surrounded and mocked the self." Emerson saw the self's symbolic salvation in the agrarian ideal of the farmer who cultivated a "midworld" between wild nature and the domesticated world,⁵⁶ and this ideal is echoed in Dewey's instrumentalist concept of "intelligence" mediating the relationship between organism and environment. Dewey's "edible schoolyard," involving students cultivating classroom gardens at the University of Chicago Primary School, is a perfect example of this concept in action,⁵⁷ and was an endeavor that Emerson would no doubt have supported.

Like Royce, Dewey was influenced early-on by the Hegelian tradition, and idealist influences were never entirely absent from his thinking. Stuhr points out that like the transcendentalists and idealists, who also never subscribed to the strict Cartesian dichotomy between nature and human consciousness, Dewey similarly rejects any such division between conscious experience and the wider reality of which it is a part. Moreover, "in turning to Royce's view of the self, again like the Pragmatists, we find Royce affirming a strongly anti-Cartesian view. The self is not a thing."⁵⁸ Commenting on "John Dewey's pragmatic naturalism," Larry Hickman describes Dewey's

⁵⁵ Most famously, of course, by Richard Rorty in *The Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) and elsewhere.

⁵⁶ Corrington, "Emerson and the Agricultural Midworld," 149-152.

⁵⁷ Larry Hickman, "The Edible Schoolyard: Agrarian Ideals and Our Industrial Milieu," *The Agrarian Roots of Pragmatism* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2000), 195-207.

⁵⁸ Stuhr, *American Philosophy*, 180.

thought as holistic in a very arcadian sense. "As a committed evolutionary naturalist," he writes, "Dewey accepted and argued for the view that human beings are in and a part of nature, not over against it."⁵⁹

Certainly, Dewey's conception of the natural world was complex, and evolved considerably during the course of his "early," "middle," and "later" career (characterized by Raymond Boisvert as his "Hegelian," "instrumentalist," and "naturalistic" phases, respectively). Nonetheless, Dewey (born in the year that Darwin's *Origin of Species* was published — 1859) was indeed more an "evolutionary naturalist" than anything like a "transcendentalist" or "idealist" as were Emerson or Royce, and this continuity runs through the entire course of his work. In much more imperial terms, Dewey depicts humankind's involvement with nature as characterized by Darwinian struggle rather than arcadian harmony. The human condition is essentially configured by "The fulfillment of an organism in its struggles and achievements in a world of things."⁶⁰ In *Dewey's Metaphysics*, Boisvert also notes that the influence of Darwinian struggle on Dewey's thought ensured that "Dewey was a naturalist who stressed the interaction of existents with their environments as the primordial trait of existence."⁶¹ And even Hugh McDonald, who defends an arcadian-type interpretation of Dewey's environmental thought, acknowledges that, "Dewey was above all a student of Darwin . . . With humans described as organisms interacting with other organisms in an environment they are in and of."⁶² Dewey writes:

Where ever there is life, there is behavior, activity. In order that life may persist, this activity has to be both continuous and adapted to the environment . . . It does something to the environment . . . In the interests of the maintenance of life there is transformation of some elements in the surrounding medium. The higher the form of life, the more important is the active reconstruction of the medium.⁶³

Along with this metaphysics of Darwinian struggle comes an admiration for modern science and instrumental reason as "mediums" through which humanity transforms its natural environment via active "intelligence." In this way, Dewey is an advocate of the imperial-Linnaean tradition's imperial or "Baconian" science. Unlike Emerson or Royce who seek to "keep science in its place," Dewey wishes to "transfer the experimental method from the technical field of science to the wider field of human life generally."⁶⁴ Dewey, in fact, lauds Bacon's imperial science as the great liberating intellectual event of modernity: "Bacon's watchword that knowledge is power and his dream of continuous empire over natural forces by means of natural science have been actualized. The industrial revolution by steam and electricity is the reply to Bacon's prophecy . . .

⁵⁹ Larry Hickman, "John Dewey's Pragmatic Naturalism," *Environmental Pragmatism*, ed. Katz and Light (London: Routledge, 1996), 51.

⁶⁰ John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty* (New York: Random House, 1929), 962.

⁶¹ Raymond D. Boisvert, *Dewey's Metaphysics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1988), 198.

⁶² Hugh McDonald, *John Dewey and Environmental Philosophy* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2004).

⁶³ John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1920), 84-85.

⁶⁴ Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, 273.

Philosophical reconstruction for the present is thus the endeavor to . . . permit Baconian aspirations to come to a free and unhindered expression."⁶⁵

Of course Dewey is not simply a naive advocate of Baconian science, utilitarianism, or of the imperial world-view. In *The Metaphysical Club*, Louis Menand actually describes the pragmatism of both Dewey and James as a kind of refutation of imperial science in a manner that is reminiscent of their arcadian predecessors.⁶⁶

Pragmatism seems a reflection of the late nineteenth century faith in scientific inquiry — yet James introduced it in order to attack the pretensions of late nineteenth century science. Pragmatism seems Darwinian — yet it was openly hostile to the two most prominent Darwinists of the time: Spencer and Huxley . . . and it had nothing to do with people like William Graham Sumner and the eugenics movement, which was based on the work of Darwin's cousin, Francis Galton. Pragmatism seems to derive from statistical thinking — but many nineteenth century naturalists were committed to principles that were alien to everything James and Dewey wrote. Pragmatism shares Emerson's distrust of institutions and systems, and his manner of appropriating ideas while discarding their foundations.⁶⁷

Similarly, in his examination of the connection between "civic pragmatism" and environmental thought during the Progressive Era, Ben Minteer explores how Dewey shared the belief with contemporaneous conservationists that "human interests and goods were thoroughly enmeshed in the parts and processes of the natural world, and fullness of experience could not be achieved by following the purely utilitarian strategy so dominant in urban life."⁶⁸ Dewey's metaphysics, therefore, stresses holism rather than a simple Platonic or Cartesian dualism, and much like Emerson and Royce depicts humanity as radically involved in nature. In *Experience and Nature* and elsewhere he contends that nature configures, and is in turn configured by, human experience. "Environment," he explains, "is not something around and about human activities in an external sense; it is their medium and their milieu, in the sense that a medium is inter-mediate in the carrying out of human activities, as well as the channel through which and by which they go on."⁶⁹ Nature, therefore, is involved in shaping human reality and values for Dewey much as it is for Emerson and Royce.

Certainly much of Dewey's later work emphasizes arcadian-sounding themes as well, suggesting that he also shares many aesthetic and spiritual views with Emerson and the Romantics. Philip Jackson notes that, much like Emerson and Carlyle, who tended to reject abstract art-objects in favor of active aesthetic appreciation of ordinary experiences in the natural world, Dewey "speaks of art as being a quality of doing and what is done, rather than a noun

⁶⁵ Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, 52.

⁶⁶ Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, 2001).

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 370.

⁶⁸ Minteer, *The Landscape of Reform*, 29.

⁶⁹ John Dewey, *Knowing and the Known* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1949), 276.

substantive," which in turn fosters a reverence for natural "objects and events not solely in terms of how they might serve us, but also as centers of attention in their own right."⁷⁰ Dewey writes that "[a]rt is the solvent union of the generic, established, ordered phase of nature, with its phase that is incomplete, on-going, and hence still uncertain, contingent and novel," and suggests that nature as experience is perhaps best appreciated in its harmonious (arcadian) unity.⁷¹ McDonald also lauds the "organic holism" that characterizes Dewey's attitude toward nature, and claims that his values are arcadian in spirit: involving holism, genuine kinds of intrinsic value in nature, and reverence for the natural world.⁷² Indeed, the kind of "natural piety" that Dewey endorses in *A Common Faith* certainly sounds reminiscent of Emerson's experience of the divine (or that of Coleridge, who Dewey so much admired), even if devoid of Emerson's (or Coleridge's) metaphysical overtones.⁷³

However, Dewey (perhaps more often) also sounds like an unreserved apologist for the imperial conception of the natural world and "Baconian aspirations" which, when "freely expressed," amount to nothing less than the complete construction of nature according to humankind's instrumentalist requirements. Hickman declares that "Dewey's instrumentalism" depicts "nature as a complex of objects of knowledge" which "is neither complete in itself apart from human interaction, nor the locus of extra-human deliberation . . . Nature is instead a multi-faceted construct that has been slowly and laboriously built up over thousands of years of human history by means of various tools of inquiry."⁷⁴

Dewey's thinking likewise lends itself to imperial uses in its rejection of spirit, vitalism, or any sense of ultimate transcendent purpose in nature. "His anti-transcendentalism," states Hickman, "would have led Dewey to reject attempts by some environmental ethicists to sacralize nature as a thing-in-itself with values, interests, or rights that are purely intrinsic to it."⁷⁵ Though Dewey rejects any mechanical and dualistic Cartesian ontology, he likewise rejects any idealistic vitality or absolute ground of meaning in nature. Skrbina contrasts Dewey's "half-hearted" brand of vitalism in the natural world — devoid of transcendent or purposeful substance — with Royce's full-blown panpsychism,⁷⁶ and indeed, rather than being any kind of transcendent archetype or originating ground, nature for Dewey is no more or less than open and radically contingent possibility. It is the sheer potentiality for "experience" and "growth," and is the "medium" for a "radical empiricism" in which these potentials are actualized. As James Campbell emphasizes, Dewey's nature is delimited to possible experience because, in an important sense, nature *is* experience, and experience is the medium in and through which organism and environment meet, engage, and transform both themselves and the reality of experience and nature itself. "Experience is to be understood in the sense of a process of interactions between an

⁷⁰ Philip Jackson, *John Dewey and the Lessons of Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale Press, 1998).

⁷¹ Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 359.

⁷² McDonald, *John Dewey and Environmental Philosophy*.

⁷³ P. Eddy Wilson expounds upon this precise distinction. See: "Emerson and Dewey on Natural Piety," *Journal of Religion* vol. 75, 3 (1995): 329-346.

⁷⁴ Hickman, "John Dewey's Pragmatic Naturalism," 53.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁷⁶ Skrbina, *Panpsychism*, 171-173.

organism and its environment, a process that finds the organism undergoing change and striving for control."⁷⁷

Dewey writes that metaphysical idealists of Emerson's or Royce's stripe wish, vainly, to see some ultimate, eternal, and universal "structure" at the foundation of nature, and "they agree in supposing that structure has some superlative reality" that transcends nature's dynamic flux. However "the isolation of structure from the changes whose stable ordering it is, renders it mysterious," and this remnant of Platonic dualism is not only mysterious, but also incoherent and ineffectual as a depiction of nature.⁷⁸

Rather than some transcendentalist or idealist expression of absolute immutable Truth, nature for Dewey is instead the medium in and through which an instrumental human intelligence transforms the very environment that shapes human intelligence itself. Thus the human domination of nature is, in this sense, one of nature's own supreme achievements. "It was not until ends were banished from nature that purposes became important as factors in human minds capable of reshaping existence. A natural world that does not subsist for the sake of realizing a fixed set of ends is relatively malleable and plastic; it may be used for this or that."⁷⁹ In this way, Dewey might also be appropriately described as a progressive as opposed to pastoral thinker in Taylor's lexicon, generally rejecting an idealized (arcadian) kind of "return to nature" and allowing for (imperial) "scientific control of the environment," and even a "technocratic approach to environmental problems."⁸⁰ Dewey's metaphysics is therefore (notwithstanding his arcadian sympathies) amenable to interpretation as being in accord with what Jackson Lears has labeled "The Official Modern Culture in Industrial America" and what Samuel Hays has called the "Gospel of Efficiency" — emphasizing scientific/technocratic organization, resource management, and anthropocentrism — which, during Dewey's formative years as a thinker at the outset of the twentieth century, characterized the Progressive Era's conservation ethos.⁸¹

Conclusion

Worster states that:

There is no escaping the persistence of the past. Ecology in the late twentieth century is inevitably the product of its long and complex intellectual tradition. Failing to accept that indebtedness to the past, or to realize how diverse and contradictory that past has been, we will not make much headway toward a deep understanding of our current ideas about nature.⁸²

⁷⁷ James Campbell, *Understanding Dewey: Nature and Cooperative Intelligence* (Chicago, Illinois: Open Court, 1995), 71-72.

⁷⁸ Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 71-73.

⁷⁹ Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, 70.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁸¹ T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Anti-Modernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1889-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 7; Samuel Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement 1890-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 110-30.

⁸² Worster, *Nature's Economy*, 420-1.

It is precisely because they have helped to engender the cultural and historical context from which contemporary ecological ideas have emerged that these three schools of thought, the philosophers that represent them, and their successive places in the arcadian/imperial dialectic demand examination. Their worldviews, and views of nature integral to these worldviews, represent varied attempts to both delineate and reconcile arcadian and imperial visions within a larger conception of humanity and nature.

The development of American philosophy as represented by these three thinkers appears to largely affirm Worster's contention that the dialectical unfolding of arcadian and imperial concepts of nature reflects a trend in the evolution of American intellectual history, with the imperial vision finally becoming predominant in many ways. Emerson's arcadian critique of instrumental science, his metaphysics of holism, his belief in transcendent meanings or ultimate purpose in nature, and his vision of human nature in harmony with the natural world was sustained but substantially mitigated in the philosophy of Royce. It was rejected in important respects by Dewey, who postulated instead a more imperial vision of instrumental science, a radically contingent metaphysics of nature, and a more problematic relationship between human interests and the natural environment, which involve a Darwinian dynamic of perpetual growth and struggle, offset by reconciliation. None of these philosophers is simplistically arcadian or imperial. However, Emerson, and to a lesser extent Royce, can be viewed as relatively more arcadian than Dewey in many respects, and the same might be said of the larger cultural milieu in which each did his thinking.

Dewey's philosophy is certainly not merely the "Baconian dream of maximum control over nature" as Richard Rorty claims in *Consequences of Pragmatism*.⁸³ Nor is Dewey's instrumentalism merely "a power philosophy," as Bertrand Russell has stated.⁸⁴ In fact, as previously illustrated, Dewey echoes a rather arcadian kind of harmony in orienting humanity within nature and lauding the value of possible aesthetic and religious experiences in the natural world. His pragmatism has certainly been read and interpreted in an arcadian light by an entire generation of "environmental pragmatists" and others — many of whom would argue, along with Dewey that it is actually the transcendentalists and idealists who seek to diminish and dominate the natural world by subordinating it to idealized abstract metaphysical constructs like "over-soul" and "absolute spirit." It is pragmatism, its apologists claim, that truly valorizes nature by conceiving and experiencing it empirically and authentically in terms of its own dynamic processes. And we must learn from and adapt to these processes if we wish to maintain a meaningful life, since we are an integral part of nature.

However, while Dewey claims that the flux of nature itself delimits and encompasses anything that can intelligibly or justifiably be known about it, Emerson and especially the earlier Royce counter-claim that the very limits of nature point beyond nature to an even more primordial Truth, which nonetheless expresses itself in the natural cosmic order in which it is realized. Thus, while Dewey's concept of nature has no ultimate essence or stable ground and may therefore conceivably be configured and re-configured without limit, Emerson's and Royce's concept of nature rests on and emerges from an absolute ground that both sustains and requires

⁸³ Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*.

⁸⁴ Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1940).

fidelity to the idea of a supreme — albeit mysterious — cosmic order which has an immutable essence and purpose. This in turn suggests that for Dewey “the natural world” is indeed “relatively malleable and plastic” and “may be used for this or for that” as utilitarian interests dictate, but for Emerson and Royce “we see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree, but the Whole, of which these are shining parts, is the Soul,”⁸⁵ and this absolute World-Soul ensures a constancy and sanctity in nature that cannot be justifiably violated for utilitarian purposes.

Unlike Emerson or Royce, who ground the flux of nature firmly on a sure foundation of ultimate cosmic meaning, Dewey renders the relation between nature and human nature radically contingent upon a dynamic interplay of struggle, reconciliation, and change mediated via “intelligence” or “growth” which is, itself, radically contingent. Emerson’s and Royce’s idealized absolutes, like the Over-soul and Absolute Spirit, may arguably entail unwieldy and overly idealized concepts of nature that risk separating human understanding and interests from real and vital involvement in the natural world, as Dewey contends. However, Dewey even more precariously postulates an idea of nature whose contingent holism seems to dissolve into vaguely shifting tautologies: “Nature” is defined in terms of organism-environment interaction, which is mediated by “intelligence,” which is understood in terms of “growth,” which emerges through “experience,” which is defined, again, in terms of nature. Human nature and the natural world are everywhere and always in the process of mutual redefinition and transformation, and the status of their relationship, indeed their very identity, remains an open question.

This post-Darwinian ontology steers Dewey’s philosophy in a more imperial direction than that of Emerson or Royce. If, as Dewey claims: “Nature as it exists at a particular time is a challenge, rather than a completion; it provides possible starting points, rather than final ends,” then “[n]ature as it exists at a given time” is properly viewed as “material for the arts to be brought to bear upon it to reshape it, rather than as a finished work of art.” And for this purpose Dewey prescribes modern experimental science which is “an art of control.” He thus suggests that “Nature as it already exists ceases to be something which must be accepted and submitted to . . . It is now something to be intentionally controlled. It is material to act upon so as to transform it into new objects which better answer our needs.”⁸⁶

For Emerson and Royce, in contrast, the arcadian natural world has a transcendent order and an ultimate purpose. The human condition is sustained by this order and humankind’s place in nature is assured by this purpose. The role of human intelligence, science, and technology is to serve, rather than to shape, this order and purpose. In this arcadian sense, humanity seems more “at home” in the natural world for Emerson and Royce than it is for Dewey. For Emerson and Royce, humanity can and should find a kind of final harmonious (arcadian) quietism in the natural world and its purpose. For Dewey, such harmonious dimensions of experience seem to occur as temporary respites within a larger (more imperial) flux of perpetual challenge and struggle between the human organism and its natural environment, and final or transcendent purposes have no place in Dewey’s nature.

⁸⁵ Emerson, “The Over-soul,” *Selected Essays*, 77.

⁸⁶ Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, 80-81.

Worster's thesis that the concept of nature in American thought has always involved a dialectical synthesis of arcadian and imperial attitudes through western history, with the imperial ultimately becoming predominant, would therefore appear to be fundamentally accurate (notwithstanding important qualifications in regard to specific thinkers, as noted). Certainly this dynamic can be seen in the development of American philosophical schools of thought regarding the metaphysics of nature as represented, in succession, by Emerson, Royce, and Dewey. Envisioning their legacy, and the larger forces that shaped and were shaped in part by them, as the confluence (rather than opposition) of diverse (and sometimes divergent) ideas, is perhaps the most accurate way to understand their contributions to the origins of environmental thought from the early nineteenth century through the Progressive Era . Ultimately, this understanding may also prove useful in assessing and appreciating the complexity of many current environmental debates and their origins.