

Research Article

Shawn Welch*

A Pragmatic Piety: Experience, Uncertainty, and Action in Charles G. Finney's Evangelical Revivalism

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Abstract: This article focuses on the evangelical theology and revival practice of Charles Grandison Finney, popular in his time yet critically under-explored in American philosophy, specifically regarding his role in the emergence of American pragmatism. Spearheaded by American philosophers like Charles Sanders Peirce and William James, pragmatism argues that the significance of abstract concepts lies in their practical consequences in lived experience, as opposed to their internal logic or conformity to intellectual traditions. Whereas this philosophical method is often seen as predominantly secular in its origins, this article approaches pragmatic thinking and practice from the point of view of the spiritual conversion strategies of Charles Finney and antebellum evangelical culture more broadly. I expand on what Leonard I. Sweet has called Finney's "pragmatic philosophy of revivalism," addressing his theology and revival practice to disclose its latent pragmatic tendencies and those within antebellum evangelical culture. I argue that by looking at Finney as an early practitioner of this method, we must reappraise his and evangelicalism's role in the emergence of philosophical pragmatism, challenge its putative secularity, and – as Charles Taylor has recently demonstrated – reassess what academic disciplines mean when they cite the presumed distinction between the religious and the secular.

Keywords: American evangelicalism, pragmatism, Charles Finney, New Haven Theology, secularism, homiletics, experience

In his foreword to Charles Hambrick-Stowe's biography of the antebellum revivalist Charles Finney, Allen Guelzo noted that "few biographers have found much of interest in Finney as a theologian, and even those who hang his importance on his fame as a preacher of mass religious revival usually find little that was permanent or even admirable in Finney's revivals."¹ In recent years, much scholarly work has been done to address this gap, most notably by Ann Taves, Gregory Jackson, and Melanie Ross. Contributing to this ongoing interest, this article situates Finney in the American tradition of pragmatism, the philosophical method that identifies the significance of abstract claims, not exclusively by their logical coherence or fidelity to intellectual traditions, but by their experienced effects. Seeing Finney in this light allows us to think more closely about what scholars have shown to be the shared history of two defining movements in America's cultural and intellectual history: pragmatism and evangelicalism.

1 Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism*, viii.

* **Corresponding author: Shawn Welch**, Independent scholar, Durham, North Carolina, United States of America, e-mail: shawn.welch101@gmail.com

I focus specifically on the pragmatism of William James – and not, for example, that of Peirce or Dewey. Whereas Peirce's pragmatism was a logical system intended only for academic elites and scientists and not churchgoers in pursuit of salvation, James's pragmatism valorized individual experience and its impact on religious life, aligning it with the personal, spiritual concerns of evangelicalism. Pragmatism, Peirce said, should not be understood “in too individualistic a sense.”² For James and Finney, however, pragmatic forms of thinking and acting were best suited to registering the “truth” of one's lived experiences. In the evangelical context, “forms” (to use Finney's word) of religious experience, like conversion morphologies or accepted traditions, were evaluated based on their practical effects. “James constituted ‘religious experience,’” Ann Taves rightly says, “as an object of study, defining it as a generic ‘something’ that informed ‘religion-in-general’ apart from any tradition in particular.”³ Jamesian pragmatism, therefore, uniquely respects and attempts to explain the open-ended vagaries, the “generic ‘somethings,’” of experience that some might and often did interpret as religious in nature.

Despite biographer Keith Hardman's attribution of Finney's popularity to his “new, pragmatic, and optimistic approach to evangelism,”⁴ or Marianne Perciaccante's observation that Finney's methods reflected a “pragmatic understanding of the best way in which to reach the mass of people,”⁵ Finney has not figured as prominently in the pre-Jamesian history of pragmatism as Jonathan Edwards or Ralph Waldo Emerson. Cornel West's claim that “Emerson is the appropriate starting point for the pragmatist tradition” indicates this familiar trend.⁶ Influential efforts, like Ann Taves's *Fits, Trances, & Visions* (1999), Thomas S. Kidd's *The Great Awakening* (2007), and Tracy Fessenden's *Culture and Redemption* (2007), among others, have recognized Protestant evangelical practice and theology as impactful forces on even nonreligious zones of American culture. Furthering these efforts, this article contributes to reconsidering the role of evangelical theology, via Finney, in the shaping of nineteenth-century American philosophy and the allegedly secular origins of pragmatism. As Randall Balmer writes, “Finney's pragmatism and his brand of Arminianism carried the day among evangelicals – in the antebellum period and ever since.”⁷ If we are willing to see Emerson and others as precursors to this tradition, we ought to view Finney in a similar light as both responder to and cultivator of the broad appeal pragmatic logics held for antebellum Americans. If, as Melanie Ross writes, “[t]he pragmatism of Charles Finney is but one historical piece of the evangelical worship story,” what makes Finney's theology and practice “pragmatic” and in what sense?⁸ Without retrojecting aspects of a movement that came after him, precisely *how* does Finney's theology and practice reflect logics of philosophical pragmatism in ways that are not simply explained by mere practicality or describing Finney (erroneously) as a kind of Machiavellian minister for whom the ends justify the means? Exactly what intellectual pressures in antebellum evangelicalism led Finney and other revivalists to adopt these pragmatic logics? Building on the work of the above scholars and others, I examine specifics of Finney's theology and practice to see precisely how, as John G. Stackhouse puts it, “Finney's ‘New Measures’...extended evangelicalism's confident pragmatism into the Second Great Awakening.”⁹

One of the primary threads connecting Finney's theology and Jamesian pragmatism is their shared preoccupation with experience. Like Jamesian pragmatism, Finney's revival strategies sought to resolve epistemological limitations of Enlightenment mainstays like the Cartesian skepticism toward experience and the Lockean implication that experience is something that *happens* to passive agents. Among the forms of Enlightenment philosophy repudiated by American Protestants, Mark Noll observes, it was this skeptical form that was seen to produce, not avenues to truths, but moral and spiritual passivity.¹⁰ For Finney, this

² Peirce, *Collected Papers*, V: 402, P2.

³ Taves, *Fits, Trances, & Visions*, 271.

⁴ Hardman, *Charles Grandison Finney*, 19.

⁵ Perciaccante, *Calling Down Fire*, 161.

⁶ West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, 6.

⁷ Balmer, “Critical Junctures in American Evangelicalism,” 50.

⁸ Ross, *Evangelical Versus Liturgical?*, 16.

⁹ Stackhouse, “Evangelicalism and Restorationist Ecclesiologies,” 265.

¹⁰ Noll, *America's God*, 95.

passivity, endemic to (mainly) Calvinist theologies, mandated “waiting God’s time” in the conversion process; i.e., justifying not active devotional practices, but spiritual inertia and salvific uncertainty. During his 1842 Rochester revival, Finney conveyed how he remedied this problem: “[s]inners were not encouraged to expect the Holy Ghost to convert them while they were passive, and never told to wait God’s time, but were taught unequivocally that their first and immediate duty was to submit themselves to God.”¹¹ Finney’s intellectual shift from his Calvinist roots to a more practice-based evangelicalism enabled his shift to highlighting *experience* as the starting point of the religious life. Because it forefronts experienced *effects* in determining the value of methods or concepts and urges tests of action to manifest them, a pragmatic piety would prove the antidote to spiritual indifference, securing conversions en masse.

Inducing this conversion experience – what many modern evangelicals refer to as being “born again” to a saving faith in Christ – was the chief aim of revival practitioners. Debates about the “proper” method of facilitating these experiences tended to center the role of human feeling, or “affections,” in the process. “True religion lies very much in religious affections,” Edwards wrote, not exclusively in ritual observance or ready-made conversion morphologies, but in embodied experiences whose activation of pious works supply the best evidence of their truth, a dictum Finney steadfastly followed.¹² In what seems like a deliberate dig to Cartesian skepticism, for instance, Finney argues for the fundamental validity of human experience: “[a]ll human investigations proceed upon the assumption of the existence and validity of our faculties, and that their unequivocal testimony may be relied upon.” “By virtue of its own laws,” experience offers sufficient testimony of truth.¹³ No longer subordinate to rationalistic forms of garnering truth like logic or scriptural hermeneutics, direct experience acts as the irreducible common denominator, a judge as it were, to which “human investigations” into the soul must appeal if a spiritual conversion was to be justified. In this way, “Finney completed the shift,” Michael A. Van Horn writes, “from a wholly divine act... to an experience fully within the grasp of the individual.”¹⁴

But why did Finney feel he had to make this argument? Respectful as modern audiences tend to be toward personal experience, this respect wasn’t necessarily taken for granted historically. Jim Egan observes that “colonial British-American writers had to argue for the very authority of experience that... American literary scholarship now take[s] as given.”¹⁵ Though Egan specifies “colonial British-American writers,” Finney and James wrestled with the same dilemma. While composing *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James fretted that “[t]he problem I have set myself is a hard one...to defend ‘experience’ against ‘philosophy’ as being the real backbone of the world’s religious life.”¹⁶ Finney, too, saw experience as the primary access point to spiritual truths. If the religious life as it was *lived* was to be understood on its own terms, an epistemological revaluation of experience as valid *in itself* was needed. Measuring preachers’ success by how *direct* they could make the experience of listening to a sermon, Finney wrote, “[w]ithout the direct teaching of the Holy Spirit, a man will never make much progress in preaching the Gospel. The fact is, unless he can preach the Gospel *as an experience*...his speculations and theories will come far short of preaching the Gospel.”¹⁷ Fixating on “speculations and theories” – what James dubs “vicious intellectualism” – cultivates little to no feeling for spiritual truths, hence their deficiency in producing pious action.¹⁸

And actions were paramount. “It is plain,” Edwards asserted, “that Christian practice is the best sign or the manifestation of the true godliness of a professing Christian.”¹⁹ Fostering an experience of sin through strategic homiletics and directly felt by congregants produced the practical effects justifying a conversion. The stipulation that, in order for the Gospel to have a justified effect it must show, to quote James, its

¹¹ Finney, *Memoirs*, 317.

¹² Edwards, *Religious Affections*, 127.

¹³ Finney, *Systematic Theology*, 5.

¹⁴ Van Horn, *Within My Heart*, 190.

¹⁵ Egan, *Authorizing Experience*, 7.

¹⁶ James, *The Letters of William James: Vol. II*, 127.

¹⁷ Finney, *Memoirs*, 43.

¹⁸ James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 60.

¹⁹ Edwards, *Religious Affections*, 411.

“cash value in experiential terms,” makes Finney’s ministry exemplary of antebellum evangelicalism’s pragmatic character.²⁰ While the longstanding Protestant theological distinction between justification by *faith* and justification by *works* would seem to emphasize the former as exclusively characteristic of American evangelicalism, Finney and other revivalists helped shift popular conversion morphologies toward the latter.

What did this emphasis on immediate experience look like in practice though? Perhaps the most well-known account comes from the suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton:

I can see him now, his great eyes rolling around the congregation and his arms flying about in the air like those of a windmill. One evening he described hell and the devil and the long procession of sinners being swept down the rapids, about to make the awful plunge into the burning depths of liquid fire below.... He suddenly halted and, pointing his index finger at the supposed procession, he exclaimed:

‘There, do you not see them!’

I was wrought up to such a pitch that I actually jumped up and gazed in the direction to which he pointed.... Fear of the judgment seized my soul. Visions of the lost haunted my dreams. Mental anguish prostrated my health. Dethronement of my reason was apprehended by friends.²¹

Stanton’s recollection of Finney’s harrowing oratory illustrates the preacher’s radical use of appeals to direct experience, sundering the boundary between the worlds of matter and spirit, temporality, and eternity. If rationalist philosophies like dualism split the experienced universe into subject and object, mind and matter, Finney’s homiletic realism – to use Jackson’s term – exposed that duality as a fabricated intellectual category imposed on the mind and thus disrupting the process of witnessing spiritual realities firsthand.²² Because Locke, as James believed, “made the word ‘idea’ stand indifferently for thing and thought,” experiencing a virtual “idea” of sinners writhing in hellfire could be, for all practical purposes, identical to the “real” thing.²³

The strategy seemed to work phenomenally well. The Broadway Tabernacle pastor Joseph P. Thompson reported that Finney’s “preaching searches the conscience, convinces the judgment, and stirs the will either to assent or to rebellion.”²⁴ Finney’s grandson William Cox Cochran recalled that his preaching “was an exposition of merciless justice; of what guilty men had the right to expect ... and of the terrors that would overtake them when judgment was at hand. Then, right before our eyes, he conjured up such a fearful storm of wind, rain and hail that I grew chilled through and through. I shivered and buttoned my coat up tight and I saw uneasiness and apprehension depicted on the faces of all around me.”²⁵ Finney’s description of hellscapes of exquisite suffering cultivated an imaginative hyper-reality that was practically indistinguishable from parishioners’ lived experiences.

Stanton’s account tells us more. As Jackson has cogently pointed out, one easily overlooked aspect of Finney’s preaching is his regular use of the second person pronoun “you,” an innovation in traditional homiletics intended to personalize the sermon for congregants as a means “to increase homiletic realism’s aesthetics of immediacy.”²⁶ Addressing criticism toward the apparent triviality, Finney recalled that “I could name ministers who... were greatly ashamed of me when I first began to preach because I was so undignified in the pulpit, used language in such common use, addressed the people with such directness, and said ‘you,’ and because I aimed not at all at ornament, or at supporting the dignity of the pulpit.”²⁷ In *Lectures on Revivals*, Finney expanded on his reasoning: “[n]o individual is ever benefited by preaching

²⁰ James, *Pragmatism*, 88.

²¹ Stanton, *Eighty Years and More*, 41–3.

²² Jackson, *The Word and Its Witness*, 87.

²³ James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, 10.

²⁴ Thompson, *Last Sabbath in the Broadway Tabernacle*, 15.

²⁵ Cochran, *Charles Grandison Finney*, 68–9.

²⁶ Jackson, *The Word and Its Witness*, 81, 235.

²⁷ Finney, *Memoirs*, 79.

unless he is made to feel that it *means him*. [...] It often appears so personal, to wicked men, that they feel as if they were just going to be called out by name before the congregation.”²⁸ An effective sermon “works” – to use James’s notoriously vague word – if it works for *you*. Finney’s preaching was designed to cut through such obstacles to raw experience as dogmatic “ornament,” the conventional “forms” of religious devotion, and the traditional “dignity of the pulpit,” activating pious works in the process. While Stanton’s account is often the go-to in Finney scholarship to illustrate his preaching, it further illustrates how Finney’s underpinning logic was a pragmatic one.

Finney wasn’t alone in mining experience for justifying works. A growing impatience with strict dogmatic loyalties to the exclusion of practical action had, as the antebellum revivalist Barton W. Stone claimed, “driven many into opposite extremes, and kept them from that happy medium, where truth commonly lies.”²⁹ His contemporary and Restorationist minister Alexander Campbell shared the view that “[t]he Christian religion is indeed a *personal* concern. [...] It is not confidence in a doctrine, nor love to a party.”³⁰ Financier of the Broadway Tabernacle Lewis Tappan griped that there was “too much ‘theology’ in the church now and too little of the Gospel,” contending that revivalism “is the field for ardent and practical men.”³¹ This emphasis on practicality over dogmatism, experimental *method* over a preoccupation with theological niceties, and a reorientation of religious duty around individual effort and experienced effects rather than intellectual rigor, I argue, are the means by which antebellum revivalism cultivated novel conceptions of truth and practice that helped marshal liberal evangelicalism into the aborning logics of what would also come to constitute Jamesian pragmatism.

Of course, this is not to suggest that Finney and James were in some way participating in the same intellectual project. James mentions Finney, “[o]ur great American revivalist,” several times in his lectures on “Conversion” in *Varieties*, but it isn’t clear that James read anything other than Finney’s *Memoirs* (James’s copy was published in 1876).³² And whereas the agnostic James intended pragmatism as a flexible, religiously neutral method for anyone’s use in living well here and now, Finney was a Christian theologian who endorsed the redemptive power of Christ and whose eye was always fixed on the life to come. This cultural turn toward pragmatic logics in nineteenth-century American evangelicalism, with its clear emphasis on individual experience, however, asks us to scrutinize more closely why these logics emerged and how they were justified.

1 The function of uncertainty and Finney’s theology of process

Despite the differences in their intellectual allegiances, however, Finney and James responded to similar aspects of nineteenth-century American culture. Among these were the intellectual dilemmas raised by uncertainty, an epistemological quandary pragmatism seeks to resolve by recourse to practical effects; in other words, a thing or belief is “true” or “certain” for an individual if it “works.” Uncertainty’s significance, though, is sometimes missed in how it informs American evangelicalism, specifically with regard to knowing if one is destined for salvation. This oversight is somewhat surprising, given that the uncertainty surrounding one’s salvific status is what prompted Edwards himself to question the value of Puritan conversion patterns. On the morning of August 12, 1723, Edwards confided to his diary that “[t]he chief thing, that now makes me in any measure to question my good estate, is my not having experienced conversion in those particular steps, wherein the people of New England, and anciently the Dissenters of Old England, used to experience it.”³³ Deeply concerned about his salvific state, the young Edwards

²⁸ Finney, *Lectures*, 219.

²⁹ Stone, *An Address to the Christian Churches in Kentucky, Tennessee & Ohio*, 10.

³⁰ Campbell, “Letters to England – No. [...],” 318.

³¹ Weld, *Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimké Weld, and Sarah Grimké 1822–1844*, 52.

³² James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 215.

³³ Dwight, *The Life of President Edwards*, 93.

couldn't explain why the process of his own conversion experience failed to adhere to the pattern inherited from his Puritan forebears. To resolve the uncertainties surrounding conversion, Edwards would eventually articulate a more personalized model that reimagined uncertainty and individual variety as not the intractable conditions of a hopelessly corrupted human sensorium, but the very occasions for salvific investigation.

What Paul Jerome Croce, writing about science and religion in the era of William James, called "the eclipse of certainty," then, can be seen to emerge earlier in ways that resonated with many antebellum revivalists.³⁴ Uncertainty was, in fact, at the center of an evangelical tradition deeply invested in securing knowledge of salvation and, as I argue, particularly by way of culturally appealing logics that preceded and yet informed Jamesian pragmatism. As the preeminent evangelical for nineteenth-century preachers, Edwards informed Finney's personalization of conversion based on direct experience and justified by practical action. Ever suspicious of the determinism inherent in Calvinist doctrines like predestination, prevenient grace, and election, Finney exhorted his congregations to an active volition that made salvific uncertainty the experimental field in which individual converts could eke out a personalized knowledge of grace.

In exactly what ways did Finney think about uncertainty? Contrary to more conservative approaches to revivals like those of his contemporaries Lyman Beecher and James Waddel Alexander, Finney's revivalism did not seek rationalist or traditionalist answers to the unpredictability about the "proper" measures of conversion. "God has established *no particular system of measures* to be employed and invariably adhered to in promoting religion," he said. The "forms" under the "Jewish dispensation" "were all *typical*, and were designed to shadow forth Christ. [...] Therefore they were fixed, and all their details particularly prescribed by Divine authority. But it was *never* so under the Gospel."³⁵ According to Finney's theology, the Gospels do more than simply fulfill "typical" Judaic Old Testament narratives; they make epistemological uncertainty – hence the possibility for personalized knowledge of grace – unique to Christianity.

The response to uncertainty for Christians raised on Gospel scripture was focused not on religious "forms or measures" but on spiritual *doing*. Finney continues:

We are left in the dark as to the measures which were pursued by the apostles and primitive preachers, except so far as we can gather it from occasional hints in the book of Acts. [...] When Jesus Christ was on earth, laboring among his disciples, he had nothing to do with forms or measures. He did from time to time in this respect just as it would be natural for any man to do in such cases, without anything like a set form or mode of doing it.³⁶

Here, Finney reads Christ's ministry as foremost *experimental* (versus a reliance on preestablished "forms"), offering a practical model for how to render salvific uncertainty productive in revivalism. (That Finney focuses on the book of *Acts*, I think, is no accident.) It's no obstacle if we know little about the circumstances of ancient Christian practice; Christ – who in this passage appears as a practical man of experimental action – provides a heuristic model that sees salvific uncertainty not as an epistemological dead end or as a reason for falling back on traditional "forms or measures," but as the optimal occasion for individual action and pragmatic experimentation. In Finney's account, "[w]hen Christ came, the ceremonial or typical dispensation was abrogated, because the design of those forms was fulfilled, and therefore themselves of no further use."³⁷ Recognizing that the "forms" have "no further use," Christ does the "natural" thing: to experiment with the expediency of forms and to preach "the Gospel in the *most effectual way*, to make the truth stand out strikingly, so as to obtain the attention and secure the obedience of the greatest number possible."³⁸ Finney's reading of Christ's method of preaching to the *experience* of hearers and not to particular doctrines makes him sound like the first pragmatist.

³⁴ Croce, *Science and Religion in the Era of William James*, Vol. I, 87–110.

³⁵ Finney, *Lectures*, 238.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 238–9.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 238.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 239.

This image of Christ as a proto-pragmatic preacher wasn't missed by the classical pragmatists. By Peirce's own admission, pragmatism's fundamental rule was also Christ's. The pragmatic maxim, he wrote, "is only an application of the sole principle of logic which was recommended by Jesus; 'Ye may know them by their fruits,' and it is very intimately allied with the ideas of the gospel."³⁹ As in Finney's revivalism, knowing the fruits depends on knowing the roots. At the end of *Literary Remains*, James too invoked the same gospel moment, asking, "[m]ust not the more radical ways of thinking. appeal to the same *umpire of practice* for corroboration of their more consistent views? [...] By their fruits ye shall know them."⁴⁰ By this maxim, James and Peirce disclosed the logic by which the truth value of propositions or beliefs was justified by their practical effects. Though it's quite possible James got his reference directly from Peirce (and while both belonged to a predominantly Christian culture), the connection between the pragmatic maxim and "the ideas of the gospel" illuminates the intellectual proximities between pragmatism and Christian evangelical theology.

Emphasizing the pragmatic logic of Christ's preaching, Finney interprets Christianity as a practical endeavor uniquely responsive to a variety of unpredictable and idiosyncratic circumstances. "Forms and measures" function only provisionally, perhaps enhancing the experience of garnering spiritual truths but never sufficient vehicles for them. "Whenever the churches get settled down into a *form* of doing things, they soon get to rely upon the outward doing of it, and so retain the form of religion while they lose the substance."⁴¹ While a certain "form of religion" – a ritual, an anxious bench, a prayer – may aid in spurring conversions, its heuristic function (i.e., underived from a predetermined "form") ought never be conflated with the "substance." Illustrating the Protestant emphasis on substance over form, expressed in such scriptures as Amos 5:21 ("I abominate those sacrificial festivals where there is no piety."), Finney's revivalism locates the "substance" of religion in pious works. While Finney's language of "form" and "substance" might reflect a rationalist (i.e., non-pragmatic) discourse, at bottom, Finney reinterprets conversion experience as James would later understand it: as fundamentally a *process* born in uncertainty and in dynamic flux with changing circumstances.

Like uncertainty, process as an epistemological category informed Darwinian ideas about species formation and mental development that defined identity as a *becoming*, versus identity as a static form or ultimate *being*. This emphasis on process impacted Finney's theology in no small measure. His monumental *Systematic Theology* begins by making process a necessary condition of experience. What Finney calls "Christian consistency" attempts to blend Christian practice with scientific inquiry, an investigative process inherently tentative and non-teleological:

The discovery of new truth will modify old views and opinions, and there is perhaps no end to this process with finite minds in any world. True Christian consistency does not consist in our stereotyping our opinions and views[...]. Christian consistency implies continued investigation and change of views and practice corresponding with increasing knowledge.⁴²

"New truth" is a telling phrase. Finney is thinking less in terms of absolutes than contingencies, echoing James's famous statement that "truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events."⁴³ Finney's argument that truth for "finite minds in any world" is an ongoing process turns the experience of capturing that truth into an open-ended journey of discovery, not wholly evacuated of predetermined teleology, but never reducible to it. Balancing teleology and flux, James too makes "mutation" fundamental to pragmatism's epistemology: "[s]o far as reality means experienceable reality, both it and the truths men gain about it are everlastingly in process of mutation – mutation towards a definite goal, it may be – but still mutation."⁴⁴ The emphasis here is less on a "definite goal" than the mutative process of a thing's coming

³⁹ Peirce, *Collected Papers*, V:402, P2.

⁴⁰ James, *The Literary Remains of the Late Henry James*, 119.

⁴¹ Finney, *Lectures*, 255.

⁴² Finney, *Systematic Theology*, 3.

⁴³ James, *Pragmatism*, 89.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 99.

into being. Finney and James reinterpret process and uncertainty not as intractable epistemological categories demanding rationalist or logical solvency, but as the very grounds of individual experimentation and possibility. By accepting the irreducible and teleological ambiguity of “experienceable reality,” Finney at once shifts attention away from loyalties to traditions and “forms” for their own sakes and squares evangelical Christian practice with the flexibility and experimentation distinctive of scientific inquiry and pragmatism.

Significantly though, Finney does not say “discovery of *the* truth.” His “Christian consistency” strives to reconcile scientific inquiry with Christian practice *vis-à-vis* the epistemological affordances of process and uncertainty, but not to associate either with claims about absolute, unchanging truth (virtually inconceivable in a pragmatic universe). In doing so, he embraces experiential variety while muting suggestions of a monolithic veridical order that may cancel possibilities. A method’s “truth” is necessarily tentative and must be open to its own obsolescence when it ceases to “work.” He would say as much to ministers who challenged his preaching methods: “[s]how me a more excellent way. Show me the *fruits* of your ministry; and if [they] so far exceed mine as to give me evidence that you have found out a more excellent way than I have, I will adopt your views.”⁴⁵ Being Christian and being a scientist involve intellectual adaptability in the face of new evidence, a nondeterministic approach to saving souls signaling that the attitudes driving American pragmatism weren’t exclusive to late nineteenth-century Boston, but were culturally entangled with a wider interest in *works* that involved New England’s antebellum evangelical culture and its investment in spiritual conversion.

Finney’s deployment of a productive uncertainty in the conversion of souls offers a companion narrative to the conventional understanding that the nineteenth-century interest in uncertainty, possibility, variety, and the relationship between practical behavior and one’s “nature” drew mainly from theories of evolution stemming from Darwin. James believed that “in the psychology of our own day, the emphasis is transferred from the mind’s purely rational function ... to the so long neglected practical side. The theory of evolution is mainly responsible for this.”⁴⁶ So too did his son Henry claim that “the tide of contemporary inquiry, driven forward by the storm of the Darwinian controversy” called on philosophy to “embrace the new reality.”⁴⁷ Modern commentators on pragmatism like the philosopher Hilary Putnam continued the trend: “the pragmatists came after and were deeply influenced by the discoveries of Charles Darwin.”⁴⁸ Louis Menand has cited James’s “functionalism – [the] idea that beliefs are instruments for action” and its source in Darwinism.⁴⁹ The 1859 publication of *On the Origin of Species* did in fact coincide with the emergent interest in Anglo-American intellectual culture in probability, in growth and variety as constituents of identity, and in the struggle for existence as it comes to bear on physical and mental development. And it seems intuitive to read the pragmatic definition of “truth” as that which “works” as an extension into philosophy of the (mis)perceived Darwinian creed of “survival of the fittest.”

But as theologian Gary Dorrien remarks, the discourse of evolution intersected with that of religion as well – specifically liberal Protestantism: “The Darwin-accommodating liberals gave religious meaning to evolution by interpreting divine reality as a creative, personalizing factor in the evolutionary process.”⁵⁰ When we look at the practicality, process, and openness to possibility characteristic of pragmatism and usually ascribed to Darwinism, we find these features earlier in evangelical culture as responses to epistemological pressures surrounding the uncertainty endemic to the process of spiritual conversion, an accurate knowledge of which many believed quite literally put their eternal lives on the line. Despite current conceptions of evangelicals as invariably hostile to Darwinism or evolutionary theories, what was imperative for liberal Protestants of Finney’s tradition and the religiously inflected evolution they espoused was the centrality of pious *action* to demonstrate potentially ambivalent or uncertain interiorities. For an

⁴⁵ Finney, *Memoirs*, 66.

⁴⁶ James, *Talks to Teachers on Psychology*, 33.

⁴⁷ James, *The Letters of William James: Vol. 1*, 54.

⁴⁸ Putnam and Putnam, *Pragmatism as a Way of Life*, 46.

⁴⁹ Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 364.

⁵⁰ Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology*, 402.

internal biological trait or – in a religious sense – a spiritual truth unmanifested and so marooned in uncertainty is as good as meaningless.

2 Sin, action, and being in New Haven Theology

Such preoccupations with the relationship between salvation and works in antebellum evangelicalism recall Edwards's insistence "that Christian practice is the best sign or the manifestation of the true godliness of a professing Christian." Rather than occupying two distinct epistemological zones or being intellectually irrelevant, then, action is the yardstick by which the truth of one's salvific being can best be measured. How Finney contends for this relationship between action and being is one of the most important facets of what I have called his pragmatic piety and elucidates the connection between the more liberal antebellum evangelicals and philosophical pragmatism. One of the major innovations in antebellum theological thought, New Haven Theology, sought to retool Calvinist orthodoxy so as to make purposive action central to justifying the "true godliness of a professing Christian." Continuing the tradition of New England divines like Samuel Hopkins and Timothy Dwight, New Haven Theology attempted to liberalize what it deemed orthodox Calvinism's oppressively deterministic theology that sanctioned spiritual lassitude – "waiting God's time" – and vicarious punishment brought on by the Fall of Man. Historians like Douglas A. Sweeney and Gary Dorrien have extensively explored the critical role this theology has played in the shaping of American Protestantism. But what I deem interesting about this theology is how it uses a pragmatic logic to reconfigure the very meaning of sin.

This is because the concept of *sin* was exactly where the pragmatic logic connecting action and being – that your being is vitally connected to your behavior – took shape. The doctrine of original sin, so central to traditional Calvinist theology, alleged that all humans contain an inherent nature that is irremediably depraved, regardless of individual actions. But if Finney's revivalism argued that true religion was justified by pious action and not by reference to some inherent nature or timeless essence or outdated form, what did this mean for how his practical evangelicalism understood the nature of sin and its effects on the soul? New Haven Theology and its major proponent Nathaniel W. Taylor had an answer. Rather than understanding being or essence as distinct from action or behavior, New Haven Theology argued that the two could not be understood apart from one another. Because Finney alleged a practical identification of action and being, of one's works and the knowledge of one's spiritual state, this more liberal theology driving his revivalism made sin incomprehensible apart from sinful actions. Understanding Taylor's theology helps both to contextualize Finney's practice and highlight the ways in which antebellum evangelicalism can be seen as a precursor to a shift in American attitudes toward pragmatism.

An influential contemporary of Finney's and Yale Professor of Didactic Theology, Taylor elaborated this key doctrinal shift in one of his most well-known sermons, "Concio ad Clerum." A reinterpretation of the Calvinist doctrine of moral depravity and also a defense of individuals' inherent freedom, Taylor's 1828 sermon argued that humans' depravity does not "consist in a sinful nature, which they have corrupted by being *one* with Adam, and by *acting in his act*."⁵¹ Flatly rejecting the Calvinist doctrine of imputation as irrational, New Haven Theology by the same stroke made one's moral state determinable not by the action of another consignable to all persons through all time, but by an individual's particular voluntary actions here and now.

The Calvinist conception of sin as the result of a preexisting depravity acquired by Adam and Eve is, then, logically at odds with a voluntaristic doctrine that, as Mark Noll has said, rested "explicitly on an active moral agency and implicitly upon the rejection of all external, coercive, or 'physical authority.'"⁵² Moral depravity, Taylor asserts, cannot "consist in *any disposition or tendency* to sin, which is *the cause of*

⁵¹ Taylor, *Concio*, 5.

⁵² Noll, *America's God*, 314.

all sin,” adding that, “that which is the cause of *all sin*, is not itself sin. The cause of all sin itself sin! Whence then came the first sin?”⁵³ This *reductio ad absurdum* allows Taylor to expose the orthodox conception of sin as tautological, but more importantly it makes our understanding of sin inseparable from action, tendency, disposition, its *process* of coming into being. By denaturalizing sinful *nature* and hitching the meaning of sin to *practice*, Taylor reduces the essential *being* of sin to its practical actions performed by individuals. Sin is what sin *does*.

Taylor concludes that moral depravity “is *man’s own act, consisting in a free choice of some object other than God, as his chief good*.”⁵⁴ Whatever “depravity” is is inseparable from volitional acts. As such, “Concio ad Clerum” reflected the antebellum evangelical turn of making ontological essences (like moral depravity) significant only in reference to the actions that manifest them. It was a turn from “speculations and theories” to practice, legible in works like Jacob Abbott’s highly popular *Young Christian* book series, which were “designed to enforce the *practice*, not to discuss the *theory* of religion.”⁵⁵ Following this ethos, one contributor to Lyman Beecher’s *Spirit of the Pilgrims* wrote that “[t]he spirit of religion in this country is active rather than contemplative.”⁵⁶ Because it is impossible for God to be the author of sin, and because sin cannot be a part of some preexisting inborn nature or essence, Taylor drew the evocatively pragmatic conclusion that “there is no such thing as sinning without acting.”⁵⁷

Taylor, then, was instrumental in the pragmatic turn in antebellum evangelical theology, and his influence extended directly to Finney. As Sweeney points out, “Finney...did more than anyone else to popularize...Taylorite views.”⁵⁸ In perhaps his most widely published sermon “Sinners Bound to Change Their Own Hearts,” Finney incorporated Taylor’s emphasis on spiritual piety as constituted by active voluntary consent: “*The spiritual heart is the fountain of spiritual life, is that deep seated but voluntary preference of the mind, which lies back of all its other voluntary affections and emotions, and from which they take their character*.”⁵⁹ Reflecting antebellum America’s emerging voluntaristic and republican attitude, Finney’s Taylor-inspired theology aimed to abolish the rationalist pillar of an inborn, morally defective nature to replace it with a “voluntary preference” that alone determines the “character” of outward “affections and emotions.” By vivifying the volitional responsibilities of sinners in their conversions and justifying those conversions by an appeal to their immediately experienced effects, Finney effectively cultivated experiential strategies for antebellum evangelicalism decades before these strategies became constitutive of Jamesian pragmatism and its core emphases on action and experience, regardless of ready-made doctrine.

We can see this hamartiological shift in how Finney also explicitly equated being and action. In a passage that reflects New Haven Theology’s insistence that sin can only be understood by reference to sinful actions, Finney drew a hard line in the theological sand:

What is sin? Sin is a transgression of the law. [...] Sin is not mere negation, or a not willing, but consists in willing self-gratification. [...] Sin must be voluntary. It consists in willing, and it is nonsense to deny that sin is voluntary. The fact is, there is either no sin, or there is voluntary sin.⁶⁰

“Sin is not mere negation” – a clear rejection of the Augustinian notion of evil as privation of the good: “evil is not a positive substance: the loss of good has been given the name of ‘evil.’”⁶¹ Finney’s uncompromising insistence that “there is either no sin, or there is voluntary sin” exploded any notion that sin exists as some sinful nature or essence independent of our voluntary actions. Whatever the “being” of sin is can only be understood in reference to human action. Framed in pragmatic terms, the sum of our knowledge of sin is the

⁵³ Taylor, *Concio*, 7.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵⁵ Abbott, *The Young Christian*, 5.

⁵⁶ “Review of *Lectures on Christian Theology*,” 524.

⁵⁷ Taylor, *Concio*, 24.

⁵⁸ Sweeney, *Nathaniel Taylor, New Haven Theology, and the Legacy of Jonathan Edwards*, 150.

⁵⁹ Finney, *Sinners Bound to Change Their Own Hearts*, 6.

⁶⁰ Finney, *Systematic Theology*, 127.

⁶¹ St. Augustine, *City of God*, 440.

sum of the practical effects of sinning. Because under the new liberal doctrine of moral responsibility sinners could not be imputed the “nature” of Adam’s transgression, and because it is a theological absurdity to say God could be the author of sin, Finney followed New Haven Theology’s pragmatic logic that constituted sin by its actions, of practically identifying being and action. You *are* what you *do*.

Though Finney was not often forthcoming about the sources of his theological thought, there is historical warrant for Sweeney’s connecting Finney to Taylor’s ideas. Samuel Baird wrote that Finney “was the first preacher who adequately attempted to employ the theology of New Haven, in its practical relations.”⁶² A fierce critic of Finney’s, John Williamson Nevin judged that “Finneyism is only Taylorism reduced to practice, the speculative heresy of New-Haven actualized in common life.”⁶³ Finney biographer George Frederick Wright remarked that “[w]hen Finney... went to New York, and came in contact with the Tappans, he was brought into the circle of influences then radiating from Dr. Taylor, of New Haven, who was then the great advocate of the self-determining power of the human will.”⁶⁴ Despite the fact that Finney didn’t often reveal his influences directly, his indebtedness to “Taylorism” is clear and situates him squarely within emergent American evangelical attitudes that reflect what H.S. Thayer has called “latent pragmatisms.”⁶⁵

Suturing active volition to the essential meaning of sin had profoundly liberating effects for potential converts who were otherwise instructed by orthodox Calvinists – like Finney’s mentor George Gale – to observe a pious noninterference in God’s design. But this liberation came with a cost. If being and voluntary action are practically identical – if you *are* what you *do* – the implication is that individuals themselves are solely responsible for anything deemed sinful in their actions, to the exclusion of other potential contributing factors. Neither Finney nor Taylor suggested the possibility that sin, in addition to being a choice, could be the result of other factors (we might reference environment, culture, or genetics, for example). In their strenuous efforts to move beyond the moral determinism implicit in doctrines like total depravity and predestination, Finney, Taylor, and other New School revivalists reconfigured sin (and by extension any interpretation of “evil”) within the individualistic model of deliberate choices made solely by private, self-possessed citizens. If you are what you do, it follows that if you cannot do you cannot be. Despite what Descartes’s famous maxim says, it is not enough to merely think in order to be; one must act.

3 Conclusion

This article attempts to clarify certain core features shared between liberal antebellum evangelicalism and Jamesian philosophical pragmatism via the theology and revival practices of Charles Finney. This is not to suggest that intellectual pressures in such evangelical circles necessitated pragmatism, or that this development was somehow inevitable. It is to say that the Protestant doctrine of justification by *works* so central to evangelical cultures then and now does cast light on an unlit corner of the history of American pragmatism. It may be, as Richard H. King has said, that pragmatism “can be considered as a secularized version of justification by works.”⁶⁶ While many modern evangelicals still subscribe to the crucial role of faith in conversion and devotional practices, this emphasis on works aligns the history of American evangelicalism with pragmatic thought.

Turning on that head: the identification of pragmatic logics in earlier religious movements is one more step toward disclosing the historical entanglements of what we term the religious and the secular. In what ways does the identity of the “secular” rest on that of the “religious,” and *vice versa*? By recognizing the

⁶² Baird, *A History of the New School*, 217.

⁶³ Nevin, *The Anxious Bench*, 114.

⁶⁴ Wright, *Charles Grandison Finney*, 179.

⁶⁵ Thayer, *Meaning and Action*, 6.

⁶⁶ King, “Religion, Sociology, and Psychology,” 55.

intellectual proximities between pragmatism and evangelical theology and practice, we see how these ostensibly separate outlooks have more in common than what at first appears. With scholars like Ernest Sandeen and Timothy Weber, we may also recognize how “our evangelical neighbours” – as the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops described them – continue to influence the shaping of American cultures beyond local religious beliefs or political demographics.⁶⁷

When religion and pragmatism are spoken of today, it’s usually in the sense of using pragmatic perspectives to justify religious faith – as in the cases of Michael Slater’s *Pragmatism and the Philosophy of Religion* (2014), Robert C. Neville’s *Realism in Religion* (2009), or in the interdisciplinary field of lived religion, in works by scholars like David D. Hall and Meredith McGuire. But from what this article argues, the preexistence of incipient “latent pragmatisms” in antebellum evangelical culture compels us not only to further reconsider the historical imbrications between American evangelicalism, theology, and pragmatism, but also pragmatism’s “secular sources,” sources that even James himself identified in figures like Locke, Shadworth Hodgson, and J.S. Mill. Biases can create historical astigmatism when it comes to viewing how different disciplines – like philosophy, religion, and theology – despite their disciplinary boundaries share a common pedigree, and how the complex attitudes and interests that inform them can and do migrate across those boundaries. As Leigh Eric Schmidt observes in *Village Atheists*, “[t]he religious and the secular, belief and unbelief – these are not zero-sum games, but relationships of tangled complexity, fluctuating rivalry, and constitutive mutuality.”⁶⁸ By rethinking the shared history between those things habitually regarded as cloistered in their sacred or secular bastions, we come to recognize that neither term, uttered as if it were absolute, fully justifies our lived experiences.

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⁶⁷ “Our Evangelical Neighbours.”

⁶⁸ Schmidt, *Village Atheists*, 20–1.

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