

On the Normative Function of Metatheoretical Endeavors

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Abstract: I reconstruct an historical understanding of metatheory that emphasizes its *normative function*. The pioneering work of James Mark Baldwin inspires an account of how metatheoretical constructs emerge developmentally and come to serve a discourse-regulative function—overseeing, organizing, and regulating whole fields of discourse. Then I look to Charles S. Peirce as an exemplary normatively oriented metatheorist and explain how both continue a philosophical tradition concerned with the normative function of humanity more broadly. Thus, while I think it is valuable to pursue a variety of metatheoretical endeavors, including descriptive and empirical ones—mapping the terrain of various discourses, or summarizing their contributions—I argue for a specific vision of metatheory as a *normative* endeavor with rich intellectual and historical precedence. Unpacking some of the implications involved with this way of viewing and doing metatheory lead to considerations about the differences between two general types of metatheory (scholastic-reductionist and cosmopolitan-comprehensivist), the role of philosophical interlocutors in the public-sphere, and the trajectory of human evolution in the coming decades.

Key words: Charles S. Peirce, Integral Theory, James Mark Baldwin, metatheory, normativity, 19th Century thought.

Introduction: We metatheorists?

[With] self-consciousness comes the possibility of *transforming* ourselves by adopting new vocabularies, redescribing, and so reconstructing our selves and discursive institutions. While all of us are in some sense *consumers* of such new vocabularies, it is the special calling of some to *produce* them. And among those producers some take the construction of unique, potentially transformative vocabularies as the project by commitment to which they understand and define themselves. Among that group, some seek to produce those new vocabularies precisely by trying to understated the phenomena of sapience, normativity, conceptuality, reason, freedom, expression, self-consciousness, self-constitution, and historical transformation by subversive, empowering vocabularies. Those are the philosophers. They are charged neither with simply understanding human nature

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(human history), nor with simply changing it, but with changing it *by* understanding it. (Robert B. Brandom, 2009, p. 150)

In general, we humans are a self-interpreting species for whom the practice of recollecting and redescribing ourselves is a crucial necessity. For us the reconstruction of identity is a continuous process wherein the *past* is selectively crafted into a *history*. It is a creative and self-constitutive exercise. We come to know each other and ourselves not by exchanging resumes (mere inventories of events), but by telling our stories. And our stories change as we do; they reflect what actually happened and what we think is worth remembering, they reflect who we were, who we are, and who we would like to become. Neglecting this retrospective task results in identity confusion, leaving us fragmented, meandering, directionless. Some argue that the species as a whole faces an impending identity crisis as the unchecked proliferation of informational and biological technologies create abrupt discontinuities in the intergenerational fabric of the lifeworld, catapulting us out of history and into forms of life that are incongruent and incomprehensible (Habermas, 2003; Fukuyama, 2002). These concerns about possible futures appear realistic when they are seen in the context of the obvious identity confusions that already characterize large swaths of the academy, especially in the humanities and social sciences (Kagan, 2009; Menand, 2010). The disciplines traditionally responsible for the self-interpretation of the species do not have a coherent self-interpretation themselves.

This paper is a preliminary articulation of how I think we metatheorists should understand our endeavors. I articulate this self-understanding by pointing to certain specific historical figures and their ideas, which I think exemplify the character and trajectory of our field. This proposed self-understanding addresses both aforementioned loci of identity confusion. Remembering (recollecting and redescribing) who we are as metatheorists should go a long way toward bringing order to the disorder and fragmentation of the academy. It should also allow for the emergence of profoundly substantive and coherent voices in a public sphere that is increasingly irrational, inarticulate, and superficial.

What follows is a certain type of scholarly intervention. It involves an historical reconstruction of core intellectual themes that have shaped a given field, addressing this reconstruction to participants in that field, and thus affecting how they understand their efforts. Both Brandom (2002; 2009) and Habermas (1971) have executed projects of this type—in philosophy and critical theory respectively—and both have discussed the unique methodological issues involved. Historical reconstructions of this kind are not uncontroversial. As mentioned above, and unpacked in the methodological clarifications of both Habermas and Brandom, the *past* must be crafted into a *history*. The reconstruction of a cumulative trajectory or tradition is both a discovery and a creation. It is also both descriptive and prescriptive. We remember what we think is worth remembering, which depends in part on who we want to become, yet who we want to become is a reflection of who we think we have been all along. This kind of complex hermeneutic exercise is indispensable for assuring the continuity of intellectual traditions. Retrospective reconstructive work sets the necessary staging for concerted constructive efforts.

Importantly, these kinds of reconstructions are always partial. The story I tell here is but *one* story (and a regrettably brief and unelaborated one at that). There are other stories worth telling. And I encourage the reconstruction of different stories. In one sense this paper can be read as

having a merely *expressive* intent, as opposed to its being read as if it were crafted to persuade or convince. Taking it this way amounts to seeing it as akin to the declaration: “This is how I understand what I am doing. Who is with me?” This does not mean what follows is arbitrary or irrelevant, or that it cannot be persuasive. The long tradition of expressive philosophical projects—from Schelling, Nietzsche, and Emerson through Derrida, Rorty, West, and Brandom—would suggest quite the opposite. Many have been *influential* while yet only claiming to express themselves, especially regarding issues too deep to really argue about. So while I am adopting a somewhat unconventional argumentative strategy, it is not an unreasonable one.

I have adopted this argumentative strategy mainly in response to the state of the discourse surrounding the term *metatheory*, which has been so variously characterized (e.g., Edwards, 2008; Fiske & Shweder, 1986; Overton, 2007; Ritzer, 1991; 1992). At first pass the term can simply be understood as referring to a type of super-theory built from overarching constructs that organize and subsume more local, discipline-specific theories and concepts. Roughly: whereas a theory within a discipline typically takes the world as data, metatheory typically takes other theories as data. Beyond this first pass, however, the discourse about metatheory gets very complex very fast (see Ritzer, 1992). A highly abstract, ornate, and self-referential academic niche has emerged. And as a result there has been a flowering of interesting intellectual work concerning metatheory. This is not a situation unique to the discourse about metatheory. Nor do I write this intending a criticism of the field. This is how things stand in most fields, even those with seemingly straightforward subjects, such as *human memory* (see: Hacking, 1995).

But things get even more complex and contested if *philosophy* is not partitioned off from metatheory (a move I have never seen justified) and if the whole discourse about *interdisciplinarity* and *transdisciplinarity* is also thrown into the mix (e.g., Gibbons, Limoges, Nowontny, Schwartzman, Scott, & Trow, 1994; Klein, 2005, Stein, 2007). When the net is cast broadly what comes into view is an expansive and unprecedented proliferation of reflective activity about knowledge production processes in post-industrial socio-cultural contexts. The task of cataloging the various genus and species that populate this intellectual landscape is a daunting one. And the idea of offering some new theoretical creature that might survive seems misguided, as the diversity on the current scene suggests probable redundancy. So my strategy has been to look back to a time before the Cambrian Explosion, as it were—a time before the contemporary cacophony—to find the key progenitors in hopes that this approach might allow for clarity about the core properties that characterize metatheoretical endeavors.

What results, I think, is a compelling account wherein metatheory is understood as a unique extension of more traditional modes of philosophy. First emerging in America in the later half of the 19th Century, metatheory grew up as a response to advances in psychology that would transform epistemology, and to socio-economic transformations affecting the institutionalization of knowledge production—the birth of the complex departmentalized research university. It emerged to serve a normative function as a result of cognitive, disciplinary, and discursive necessities, ultimately positioning itself as a locus of responsibility for setting the trajectory of high-level discourses and reflective cultural practices. Of course, today metatheorists claim to be doing all kinds of things, such as serving descriptive, deconstructive, or even decorative functions. I am aware of the various ways we metatheorists might understand ourselves, but I

choose to offer a vision that emphasizes the distinctly normative core of metatheoretical endeavoring. Others are welcome to tell stories that construe metatheory differently, perhaps as a more recent and poly-focal form of academic activity. I personally prefer to see metatheory as the continuation by new means of classic philosophical efforts, where highly reflective individuals take responsibility for discursively constructing conceptual innovations aimed at bringing coherence to the state of knowledge for the sake of shaping human history.²

Below I profile James Mark Baldwin and Charles S. Peirce, characterizing them as key progenitors of contemporary metatheory. They both self-consciously appropriated and transformed the philosophical traditions they inherited in order to address the rapidly changing contexts of knowledge production they faced. The results are best understood as metatheoretical endeavors that are explicitly related to a specific philosophical tradition concerned with the function, role, and purpose of humanity in an evolving universe. So Peirce and Baldwin are two of the missing links (though there are others) that relate contemporary metatheory to the full richness of its philosophical inheritance. I will offer more on that philosophical tradition in the penultimate section below. First I will briefly explain Baldwin's metatheoretical ambitions, including a look at his model of human development, which was, in part, an account of the genesis of metatheoretical constructs. Then I will discuss Peirce's philosophical work as a way of demonstrating Baldwin's ideas about the normative function of metatheoretical constructs that are understood as high-level emergent properties of cognitive developmental processes. Peirce's work exemplifies the kind of normatively oriented metatheory that was (and still is) struggling to emerge and to meet the needs of our self-interpreting species, which must create the metatheoretical languages it would use to re-create itself.

Baldwin's Dictionary and His Views of the Higher Stages

We see experience establishing, of itself, a synthetic mode of apprehension. To our mind, the course of the history of thought makes it plain that the quest for such a mode of experience presents the only hope of a lessened strife among points of view; for in such a mode of process evidence would be present to show that the entire system of experience is expressive of reality, and that only in the organization of the whole are the respective roles of this and that function to be made out. [Thus] the need of carrying out to their legitimate outcome all the hints that consciousness gives as to its unreduced and undivided epistemological calling. [This calling] does not deny the epistemological value of any of the mental functions, or the force of any of the theories which are based respectively upon one or other of the functions; on the contrary, its aim is to discover the synthetic adjustment of their claims with the larger whole. (James Mark Baldwin, 1915, p. 226)

² It may be that I am merely reconstructing part of the lineage of a certain *type* of metatheory. Perhaps the type of metatheory I am reconstructing here is better understood as a species of *philosophical* metatheory, which can be set apart from *scientific* metatheory (Ritzer, 1991). Or perhaps it should be called, *integral* metatheory (Edwards, 2007; Esbjörn-Hargens & Zimmerman, 2009; Hamilton, 2008; Laszlo, 2004; McIntosh, 2007; Mascolo & Fischer, in press; Wilber, 1995; 1999). I have no objections to the idea that what follows is merely a reconstruction of a certain *type* of metatheory. It may be that what I have in mind is not even metatheory, but a kind of philosophy. Call it what you will in the long run, I call it metatheory here for rhetorical purposes. I return to this issue in the conclusion.

James Mark Baldwin was a massive figure on the intellectual scene of his day. During the height of his influence he was mentioned in the same breath as William James, John Dewey and Pierre Janet, on both sides of the Atlantic. He was arguably the most significant American psychologist of the 19th Century—while James gave psychology a face, publishing the indelible *Principles of Psychology*; Baldwin gave it legs, institutionalized it, building labs and starting journals. His writings were widely cited, translated into many languages, and several of his books were considered as standards in the field.³ And though his theories have had a lasting impact on a variety of areas—from developmental psychology (Kohlberg, 1981; Piaget, 1932) and psychoanalysis (Lacan, 1977) to evolutionary biology (Weber & Depew, 2003), evolutionary epistemology (Campbell, 1987), and integral theory (Wilber, 1999)—he is not the household name he once was.

Given his former stature and the continuing relevance of his ideas, many have speculated about the reasons for his present obscurity (Broughton & Freeman-Moir, 1982). A scandal did leave him blacklisted in American academia, and his departure did clear the way for behaviorism, as John B. Watson assumed control of Baldwin's prestigious faculty position and numerous journal editorships (see: Wozniak, 2001). However, Baldwin did continue to write prolifically while exiled in France, was eventually elected a foreign correspondent to the French Academy (the highest honor that can be given to a non-citizen), and then bestowed the Legion of Honor for his charity and relief work in France during World War I. The standard story is that institutional rearrangements and broad changes in the academic *Zeitgeist* secured his fate as a footnote in the history of psychology. There is certainly a moment of truth in that account, but there is a deeper reason for Baldwin's neglect, I believe. It has to do with the fact—and the parallels with here Peirce are remarkable, as I will show below—that he was doing metatheory when it was unacceptable to do so.

His later works are nearly universally considered to be obscure, speculative, and worthless to contemporary psychology (Boring, 1922; Richards, 1987; Weber & Depew, 2003; although see: Broughton & Freeman-Moir, 1982).⁴ This is, I believe, because these works (Baldwin, 1911, vol. 1-3; 1913, vol. 1-2; 1915) unlike his earlier works (1895; 1897) are not offered in the spirit of experimental psychology. Baldwin's later works are offered as metatheoretical interventions, aimed at organizing the existing state of discourse in the human sciences, biology, and the humanities into a common framework, a *comprehensive developmental theory of reality*.

Baldwin's moves beyond psychology toward metatheory were undoubtedly catalyzed by his work as editor of the *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology* (Baldwin, 1905).⁵ The *Dictionary* stands as one of the most impressive trans-national scholarly efforts ever. Explicitly comprehensive in its ambitions, its four massive volumes cover the majority of academic knowledge that existed at the turn of the last Century. It contains contributions from hundreds of academics on well over a thousand topics, serving as a veritable *who's who* and *what's what* for the 19th Century academy. The *Dictionary* remains unrivaled as a scholarly achievement in certain respects—getting a remarkable amount of knowledge under one roof, with attention to

³ For an account of Baldwin's life and work see: Boring, 1922; Richards, 1987; Wozniak, 2001.

⁴ Yet even Broughton only really pays attention to the first volume of Baldwin's three-volume *magnum opus*.

⁵ For an account of how profoundly the project affect Baldwin's thought see: Wozniak, 2001.

codifying common terminology and efforts at clarifying the structure of the epistemological relations between the disciplinary perspectives in play. And Baldwin oversaw the entire project, making emendations or substantial contributions to almost every entry.

Importantly, the ambitious encyclopedic effort coincided with Baldwin's appointment to John's Hopkins University, the first modern research university in America. This was a dynamic time in the history of academic institutions (Cremin, 1988; Kerr, 1963; Menand, 2010). The sciences began to gain hegemony and the disciplines were subdividing and multiplying at a dizzying rate. No student of 19th Century thought can ignore the profound and pervasive impacts resulting from the professionalization and concomitant departmentalization of knowledge production in the years immediately preceding the publication of Baldwin's *Dictionary*. It was in these years that the academy began to assume the shape it has today, with a vast array of siloed, specialized disciplinary areas. It is hard to see Baldwin's *Dictionary* as anything but a response to what was becoming an increasingly fragmented and sprawling intellectual landscape, an unprecedented academic landscape he found himself in the middle of at Johns Hopkins.

But while he was in the middle of it institutionally, he was also in the middle of it theoretically, as his interests turned at this time toward articulating a metatheoretical developmental epistemology. He moved beyond the focused experimental orientations that characterized his earlier psychological works. Baldwin began to construct an overarching model that could account for the wide variety of knowledge he was compiling for the *Dictionary*, the various types of validity-claims, and the related methods of investigation. Moreover, it was a model that would ultimately account for his *ability* to organize this knowledge, providing an account of the genesis of metatheoretical constructs as high-level emergent products of cognitive developmental processes. From where I sit it is critical to see—although it is often overlooked—that the publication of the *Dictionary* immediately preceded Baldwin's work on *Thought and Things* (1911, Vol. 1-3).

In *Thought and Things*, his *magnum opus*, he offers a *convergent view* of human epistemological development, putting forward a model in which the higher-stages are mainly integrative and reconciliatory—functioning to transcend the dualisms and differentiations carefully and necessarily built up as the child develops in relation to culture and nature. Baldwin suggests that psychological growth is best thought of in terms of different *lines or domains of development*, which he refers to as *developmental modes*. Each mode is a relatively distinct skill or capacity, exercised in relation to different aspects of reality. Modes cluster together because they have similar external *controls*, thus forming distinct object domains. Different disciplines, methods, and their related validity-claims can be organized in terms of differential mode-recruitment profiles. And at a more abstract level this same strategy provides Baldwin with a way to build a system of epistemological categories. At its highest reaches the model contains a central division between *logical* and *practical* modes—a distinction that retrofits Kant's differentiation of *theoretical* and *practical* reason. This is the difference between science and morals, between objectivity and inter-subjectivity; I-It set apart from I-Thou-We. For Baldwin (and others, e.g., Habermas and Wilber), the two most basic modes of development are those that cluster around objects (I-IT; objectivity) and those that cluster around people (I-Thou-We; intersubjectivity/subjectivity).

In any case, late in the life course, according to Baldwin's model, these different lines reach a point of complexity and divergence such that they call for the creation of a specific type of new concept, built to transcend but include the differences between the logical and the practical—to reconcile science with the perspectives of the lifeworld. New constructs emerge and begin serving a discourse-regulative function—overseeing, organizing, and regulating whole fields of discourse. With a nod to Kant, Baldwin characterizes this emergent developmental capacity as the *aesthetic imagination*. In Baldwin's words:

The outcome of our investigation, broadly stated, is that in the aesthetic imagination . . . *the processes of experience [can] come together after having fallen apart*. Each of the cognitive modes [i.e., lines] . . . sets up, as is its nature to, a reference in which *the real for it, its real, is found*. But in each case *its real*, not *the real*, is postulated or presupposed, since the control that is discovered is the outcome of this or that special mode and stage of psychic function. The protest of the aesthetic imagination is against just this partialness of each of the modes of "real" meaning. Its own ideal, on the contrary, is one of completeness, of reunion, of *reconciliation*; it gives us the "real" which is absolute in the sense that its object is not relative to, and does not fulfill, one type of interest only to the exclusion of others. (Baldwin, 1911, Vol. 3, p. 13)

In Baldwin's model the aesthetic imagination emerges during the course of late-stage cognitive and socio-moral development. It leads to the construction of a variety of *trans-logical* and *trans-practical* constructs. These constructs function across multiple domains and disciplines to oversee, integrate, and regulate important reconciliatory syntheses. For example, Baldwin states that at this stage the individual begins to yearn for views that overcome the distinctions between mind and body, theory and practice, and the ideal and the actual.

Most relevant to this discussion is what Baldwin called *theoretical intuition*, a name he gives to what results when the aesthetic imagination is exercised in the domain of theoretical or logical pursuits, such as science. As Baldwin describes, "By theoretical intuition is meant the immediate apprehension or perception of rational principles as such, these principles being looked upon as constitutive or regulative of knowledge" (Baldwin, 1911, Vol. 3, p. 234). Thus, according to Baldwin's developmental model, whole theories, methods, and discourses come to be regulated by the products of late-stage psychological growth. A capability comes online that allows for the creation of metatheoretical constructs that serve a normative function.

This way of understanding the higher reaches of human epistemological development would buoy Baldwin's continued metatheoretical endeavors, most notably his ambitious attempt at building a *comprehensive developmental theory of reality* (Baldwin, 1915). According to this vision, human experience, as elaborated through cultural evolution, is the apex of cosmic evolutionary development, giving a unique significance to our moral, epistemological, and for Baldwin most importantly, our aesthetic strivings. For Baldwin, with homage to Kant's third *Critique* and the Romantics it inspired, it is in the reconciliatory immediacy and world-disclosing power of aesthetic experience that the fullness of reality is revealed, transcending but including all the partial modes of experience built up over the course of biological, cultural, and individual evolution. Thus do the aforementioned *aesthetic imagination* and its *theoretical intuitions* function to guide the trajectory of cultural evolution. And so the function of humanity in the

natural world is a normative one—to redeem, reconcile, and resuscitate the full reality and meaning of the universe. But this is getting ahead of our story.

For now it should be noted that Baldwin's theorizing ate its own tail. He offered a theoretical account of the very cognitive processes that he recruited in his metatheoretical endeavoring. He argued that metatheoretical constructs, which organize and regulate whole discourses and theories, were a necessary outgrowth of epistemological development. I pointed out that he began his forays into metatheory after executing a massive project that got him intimately acquainted with the full range of knowledge production processes then extant. So Baldwin's story teaches that the emergence of metatheory involves an *ability* to reflect on a range of knowledge production processes and recognize that they need regulating, organizing, and direction setting. This ability was inimitably exemplified by Charles S. Peirce, who faced the same unprecedented academic environment as Baldwin, and who also took the metatheoretical high road.

Peirce's Metatheoretical *Modus Operandi*

The word *normative* was invented by the school of Schleiermacher. . . . But we must trace its introduction into common speech, to Wundt. It is taken from the Latin verb *normo*, to square. . . . The majority of writers who make use of it tell us that there are three normative sciences, logic, aesthetics, and ethics. The doctrines of the true, the beautiful, and the good, a triad of ideals which has been recognized since antiquity. . . . Logic is the theory of *right* reasoning, of what reasoning ought to be, not of what it is. On that account, it used to be called a *directive* science, but of late years the adjective *normative* has been generally substituted. (Charles S. Peirce, 1931, p. 5)

Peirce was a towering but controversial figure on the intellectual scene of his day. He was by any measure a prodigious polymath, with a working mastery of well over a dozen sciences, a mathematician, logician, metaphysician, and an epistemologist. He was one of the few American academics on the world stage during the middle of the 19th century, and was the first American to be elected as a member of an international scientific organization. But he was never able to gain the institutional support and positioning in the American academy that many thought he deserved. Both his personality and the substance of his intellectual contributions made it difficult for him to secure a position. As would be the case for Baldwin two decades later, a scandal forced Peirce to leave John Hopkins University.⁶ And like Baldwin, Peirce was a metatheorist during a time when it was unacceptable to be one. During the last decade of his life he faded into obscurity, eventually dying in poverty in rural Pennsylvania. He was known as the greatest genius of his generation to a few (including William James and Theodore Roosevelt), but completely unknown to most.⁷

⁶ A footnote is warranted about the fact that both Peirce and Baldwin were dismissed from the academy due to sexual scandals. (Baldwin was caught in a club that also served as a brothel; Peirce got a divorce and married a (very) young French woman). But a full discussion of the shadows of these men, the mores of Victorian America, and the complex and personal nature of the academic politics involved would take us too far afield (See: Brent, 1998; Richards, 1987).

⁷ For an account of Peirce's life, which had the plot line of a Greek tragedy see: Brent, 1998.

Yet Peirce toiled away at his work, even as he was starving to death in the Delaware River Valley. He ultimately built what is one of the most profound philosophical systems ever constructed. As Peirce explained it,

[I intend] to make a philosophy like that of Aristotle, that is to say, to outline a theory so comprehensive that, for a long time to come, the entire work of human reason, in philosophy of every school and kind, in mathematics, in psychology, in physical science, in history, in sociology, and in whatever other department there may be, shall appear as the filling up of its details. (Peirce, 2000, p. 168)

This system has exerted a wide ranging influence, from philosophers like Popper (1966) to linguists like Chomsky (1979), both of whom see Peirce as one of the most significant philosophers to have ever lived. His continued relevance for a wide range of fields outside philosophy, including semiotics (a field which he founded), cognitive science, and computer science, is evidenced by what amounts to an academic cottage industry, where scholarship is burgeoning (see Misak, 2004).

For the purposes of the story I am telling here, it is important to see that Peirce's work was, in part, like Baldwin's, a response to the unprecedented transformations affecting academic knowledge production processes in the later half of the 19th Century (Ketner & Kloesel, 1986). On one reading, Peirce's philosophical system can be understood as a general semiotics, analytically equipped for *overseeing, explicating, and evaluating* different kinds of beliefs at multiple levels—from propositions, to arguments, to discourses. Peirce executes this ambitious project by utilizing a variety of philosophical methods—methods Baldwin would claim exemplify the exercise of aesthetic imagination, or theoretical intuition.

Peirce surveyed a broad expanse of sciences and inductively explicated an evolutionary hierarchy akin to a biological taxonomy (Kent, 1987; Peirce, 1931). He built a system of existential-graphs wherein the relations between propositions are explicated via logically uniform concept maps (Peirce, 1933; Shin, 2002). He also clarified the intersubjective conditions for the possibility of reliable knowledge production, arguing that inquiry-oriented communication communities must have an open and inclusive structure predicated on trust, honesty, and reciprocity (Apel, 1995; Peirce, 1984). And of course, as a final example, it is well known that underlying his whole system was a set of three *primordial concepts*—in Kant's sense of being transcendently basic—that he characterized as syncategorematic categories, and once correlated with the three basic pronouns, I, Thou, and IT (Habermas, 1992; Peirce, 1982). In all of these instances Peirce was out to build metatheoretical constructs that could play a role in adjudicative processes concerning the value of our cognitive wares.

Moreover, Peirce, like Baldwin, positioned his discourse-regulative project atop a broader evolutionary vision of the universe where the strivings of humanity are continuous with the evolution of the cosmos (Peirce, 2000; 1934; Esposito, 1980; Hausman, 1993). Peirce articulated a sophisticated and empirically grounded evolutionary ontology where all events are semiotic processes that co-evolve toward increasing complexity, autonomy, self-awareness, and possible harmony. Peirce's *pansemiotic* evolutionary theory was a unique (post-metaphysical) view in so far as it was explicitly offered as a hypothesis amenable to correction in light of forthcoming

empirical data. It greatly influenced Whitehead (1978) and continues to intrigue and inspire scholars in the physical and biological sciences (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984) and philosophy (Apel, 1994).

This understanding of evolution allowed Peirce, like Baldwin, to bring his overarching normative concerns about the trajectory of academic discourses in line with a venerable philosophical tradition that articulated the radical significance of humanity's cultural endeavors in terms of a cosmic evolutionary unfolding. Ultimately, Peirce, with a look in Kant's direction, envisioned humanity as capable of multitudinous self-correcting intellectual and ethical endeavors, which ought to result in an ideal communication community coterminous with the cosmos. In this post-metaphysical eschatology, the ideals of *harmonious love between all beings* and *unconditional knowledge about all things* stand as goals to be approached asymptotically. With this thought Peirce rearticulates a philosophical motif that can be traced back through Emerson, Schelling, and Kant to the obscure cipher of Bohme's mystical Protestant religiosity and its ancient Hebraic and Neo-Platonic roots.

What Does it Mean to Serve a Normative Function: Humanity's Task

We are symbols, and inhabit symbols. . . . Our expressions, or namings, [or theories,] are not art, but a second nature, grown out of the first, as a leaf out of a tree. What we call nature, is a certain self-regulated motion, or change; and nature does not leave another to baptize her, but baptizes herself; and thus through the metamorphosis again. (from *The Poet* by Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1895, p. 86)

Emerson was not the first to speculate about the function of humanity in nature; but he was one of the most articulate. Beyond merely positioning humanity in the natural world, Emerson offered a vision in which humans have a role to play, a task ordained—a function—in nature. The continuity of human history with natural evolution would become a theme in American philosophy (Schnieder, 1963). Following the influential examples of Herbert Spencer and Auguste Comte, a set of speculative Americanized 'cosmic histories' were articulated by the likes of John Fiske (1874) and Francis Ellingwood Abbot (1885). Lester Frank Ward (1883), the St Louis Hegelians (Leidecker, 2007), John Dewey (1898) and others (Mead, 1936), would all argue that cultural evolution should be understood as being in important ways continuous with cosmic evolution. These early voices, like those of Peirce and Baldwin, toiled in Emerson's shadow. Of course, Emerson toiled in the shadow of Kant, who first tentatively and cryptically suggested that the laws humanity gives itself are best read as an autonomous extension of the self-regulative processes of the natural world. According to this view, humanity's *autonomy*—literally, its self-legislating capability—represents nature's crowning innovation, wherein are found startling advances toward novelty and complexity. Importantly, a capacity for autonomy entails the acceptance of responsibility. This is the root of the notion that humanity is somehow accountable for the trajectory of evolution.

According to the tradition I am reconstructing here—from Kant through Emerson to Baldwin, Peirce, and Wilber—the function of humanity in nature is a *normative* one. It is a function contingent upon the autonomy of humanity in an evolving world and humanity's reflective

knowledge of this situation. This tradition suggests that we are responsible for directing the trajectory of evolution, and we know it (our ought to). Peirce wrote about it in terms of our having a responsibility to lay down new cosmic habits; Emerson offered his evocative and ennobling calls for self-determination with this broad context in mind; Kant argued that humanity ought to facilitate the transformation of the *kingdom of nature* into the *kingdom of ends* by proceeding such that the norms of our actions might be fit to serve as universal laws (akin to natural laws). These views highlight the directive, regulative, trajectory setting—that is, the *normative*—function of humanity in nature.

As I have suggested above, this philosophical tradition focusing on the normative function of humanity is the context from which the first metatheoretical endeavors emerged. Metatheories emerge, as Baldwin suggests and Peirce's work exemplifies, in order to regulate and oversee whole sets of discourses—serving a normative function vis-à-vis more local, discipline-specific theories and concepts. Metatheories set the trajectory for broad segments of culture and knowledge production. This saddles the metatheorist with unique responsibilities.

Along these lines, many of Kant's arguments were set in the context of specific views about the responsibilities of philosophers in the public sphere and beyond. In the final sections of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant (1998, B867) lays out a distinction between two general types of philosophers: scholastic-reductionist and cosmopolitan-comprehensivist. The former perpetuates the fragmentation of knowledge by exercising the power of philosophy in isolated contexts and for partial purposes. The latter embodies a post-metaphysical vision of philosophy wherein the philosopher serves a normative function in the public sphere, explicating the *teleologia rationis humanae*, being a legislator of reason's future, and an immanent catalyst of the *corpus mysticum*.

Kant (1983) articulated one of the earliest and most influential normative global meta-narratives in a series of publications about the history of human civilization and the necessary future emergence of a global governance system.⁸ In its wake Habermas and Apel have both articulated normative global metatheories concerned with the trajectory of cultural evolution—both trace a lineage to Kant via Marx, Weber, the American Pragmatists, and other 19th century European thought-leaders. It seems Wilber can trace a lineage to Kant via Baldwin, Peirce, and Emerson, all cosmopolitan agents building metatheories to fit normative functions. With this backward glance we are positioned to consider the shape of metatheories to come.

Conclusion: The Shape of Metatheories to Come

[Post-modern capitalistic social structures] have evidently found some functional equivalent for ideology formation. In place of the positive task of meeting certain needs for self-interpretation by ideological means, we have the negative task of preventing holistic self-interpretations from coming into existence. . . . *Everyday consciousness* is robbed of its power to synthesize; it becomes *fragmented*. . . . The attempts at an *Aufhebung* of

⁸ For the full scope of Kant's ideas concerning socio-cultural evolution see: Fennes, 1991. For Kant's life and the political complexities and editorial compromises surrounding his radical views see: Cassirer, 1981. And for the contemporary relevance of Kant's cosmopolitan political vision: see Habermas, 2006. Finally, for Kant's views on *normativity*, a concept central to his whole philosophy, see: Brandom, 2009; Korsgaard, 1996)

philosophy and art were rebellions against structures that subordinated everyday consciousness to the standards of exclusive expert cultures developing according to their own logics . . . Everyday consciousness sees itself thrown back on traditions whose claims to validity have already been suspended; where it does escape the spell of traditionalism, it is hopelessly splintered. In place of “false consciousness” we today have a “fragmented consciousness” that blocks enlightenment. (Jürgen Habermas, 1987, p.355)

At the outset I raised the possibility of a species-wide identity crisis that would render humanity incomprehensible to itself. This is one way of recasting the idea—handed down from Dewey, through Habermas, to Wilber—that non-synchronic patterns in socio-cultural development have resulted in a situation where our techno-scientific capabilities far outstrip our ethico-political visions and organizations. Just as unprecedented scientific advances expand the reach and efficacy of our communication and biomedical technologies, the fields tasked with expressing an understanding of what humanity is have been rendered speechless by their own confusions. The proliferation of self-descriptions provided by contemporary biologically oriented human sciences offer a fragmented and reductionistic picture, while the humanities and social sciences, underfunded and undervalued, pursue opportunistic and conservative research agendas (Kagan, 2009). In the same historical moment we find ourselves with the knowledge and power to reliably and strategically affect the central nervous system as a means for canalizing behavioral conformity, our *normative discourses* are in disarray—the normative sciences, as Peirce would call them—these are the discourses that address how things *ought* to be with society and its discursive institutions. In the coming decades, as the global information explosion continues and networks of communicational connectivity encircle the earth, we will be using them to debate the meaning of our humanity—striving to articulate a set of global values that might allow us to understand ourselves as the inhabitants of a globalized techno-economic and communications infrastructure. The academy—the so-called ‘multiversity’—is not built to provide humanity with a coherent picture of itself. The desperate trumpeting of interdisciplinary approaches in colleges and research labs is a testament to this (Menand, 2010).

In a set of publications I have addressed issues of quality control at the level of interdisciplinary knowledge production and education, and suggested that metatheoretical constructs play a necessary role in epistemologically responsible approaches to interdisciplinarity (Stein, 2007; Stein, Connell, & Gardner, 2008). Specifically, I suggested that metatheoretical constructs, such as the four quadrants (Wilber, 1995), the ideal speech situation (Habermas, 1998), and the classic syncategorematic categories (Peirce, 1984), play an important function in both disciplinary and interdisciplinary discourse. This function can be characterized variously, as the setting of quality control parameters, or the clarification of our epistemic and ethical responsibilities. Metatheoretical constructs can be built to *oversee*, regulate, and direct disciplinary and interdisciplinary knowledge production. Metatheory, as I see it, serves an important normative function on the contemporary academic scene.

But the contemporary relevance of transforming knowledge production processes goes beyond the academy. Problem-focused interdisciplinary think tanks are beginning to play an increasingly important role in an emerging global network of change-oriented institutions. While some—such as the Club of Rome and branches of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)—have been around since the 1970s, the past decade has seen a

proliferation of action-oriented institutes that span traditional disciplinary boundaries for the sake of producing usable-knowledge about pressing global problems. The State of the World Forum, Integral Institute/Research Center, and the Future of Humanity Institute at Oxford, are three examples out of literally dozens. The United States Federal Government and the United Nations continually create specific problem-focused interdisciplinary initiatives, and readily draw from those already producing usable-knowledge in the public sphere. Above I have expressed what I think the role of metatheory is in this constellation of conditions, in the academy and beyond. It is to weave a coherent overarching set of normative constructs, organizing and regulating the specialized discourses in view, with an eye to comprehensiveness, and a voice resonant with the lifeworld.

As mentioned in the first footnote, this view of metatheory is controversial. But the idea here is not to displace or replace the self-understanding of metatheorists who take themselves as scientists pursuing descriptive projects with objective methods. Rather, the intention is to remind big-picture thinkers that this kind of scientific self-understanding is not the only option. Putting arguments about the crypto-normativism of ostensibly descriptive projects aside (Habermas, 1987), I claim only that we metatheorists might want to think differently about what we do. I sketched the contours of a tradition that weds the normative function of metatheory to ideas about the *autonomy* and *self-directedness* of human cultural evolution. I suggested that metatheorists are those concerned about the trajectory of knowledge production processes and reflective cultural practices. According to this view metatheorists build specific kinds of high-level constructs that have a normative thrust. Their interventions aim at affecting the proprieties of our discursive practices.

Hand wringing about the liabilities accompanying these kinds of explicitly normative projects is to be expected. While performative contradictions plague arguments against normative endeavors—prescribing the wholesale rejection of prescriptions—there are legitimate worries worth attending to. Worries about the institutionalization of centralized discursive authorities are warranted, as are concerns about the nefarious political affordances of *evolutionary ideologies* (Farber, 1998). Yet these are not necessary accoutrements to the vision of metatheory outlined above.

The key players in my account, including Kant, Peirce, and Habermas, are stanch, articulate, and influential proponents of the free and open discursive practices that characterize the best scientific communities and democratic public spheres. Against the backdrop these thinkers provide, the criticism that normative metatheoretical endeavors would be coercive enterprises, aimed at stifling discourse, innovation, and free inquiry is misguided. The idea that metatheorists *oversee* and *regulate* various discursive practices does not entail that metatheorists are *overseers*. Rather they are just the most reflective and visionary *participants* in knowledge production processes, arguing about preferable or regrettable trajectories for sets of disciplines, suggesting syntheses, but wielding nothing other than the unforced force of the better argument. I support the institutionalization of metatheoretically guided knowledge production because the exercise of normative authority in these contexts is *not* merely a matter of power-broking. Sweeping arguments to the contrary betray a lack of nuance about what normative authority looks like and reflect the sorry state of our normative discourses more generally.

As the quote beginning this concluding section suggests, we inhabitants of the post-industrial West share a lifeworld characterized by the devaluation of overarching and totalizing ideologies (see also Bell, 2000). And we still associate the very idea of normative authority with the dark legacy of politically operationalized all-encompassing worldviews. The story told above about the fractioning (and factioning) of the modern research university is but one sub-plot in a larger narrative about recent transformations in the self-understanding of the species. No doubt, the specter of an evolutionary ideology has loomed at least since Darwin first articulated an objective mechanism governing evolutionary processes. But the slow and persistent emergence of an evolutionary worldview has not counteracted broader tendencies toward a radically polycentric and conflict-ridden cultural environment. Even putting aside its rejection by traditionalists preferring non-scientific accounts, evolution is an ambiguous and contested concept, especially with regards to its broader ethico-political implications (Wilber, 1995; Wilson, 1975). The suggestions I offered here assume that heterogeneity and pluralism will continue to characterize cultural evolution. Exercising the normative function of metatheory does not entail the homogenization of cultural practices and discursive institutions in the name of evolutionary progress. Placing metatheory in an evolutionary context does not entail taking on the worst baggage from over a Century's worth of attempts at resuscitating ideology in evolutionary garb (Farber, 1998).

Shadow boxing aside, the goal of this paper has been to *remember* and *express*—to reconstruct a thread in the history of metatheory with the hope of affecting the shape of metatheories to come. More work remains to be done filling out the rest of this history, and more importantly, building metatheories that fit the specifications thus reconstructed. I have already begun this constructive metatheoretical work in a series of publications that address the use of *metrics* in contexts where human lives are under scrutiny, from the diagnostic categories that structure the delivery of psychopharmacological interventions to the standardized testing infrastructures that frame educational opportunity (Stein, Dawson, & Fischer, in press; Stein, della Chiesa, Hinton, & Fischer, in press; Stein & Hiekkinen, 2009). Overseeing complex multi-disciplinary areas of concern, these interventions involve the construction of metatheoretical constructs that serve as normative parameters. I argue the merits of setting a new trajectory for the various discursive practices involved with the institutionalized measurement of human functioning, suggesting directions more comprehensive, responsible, and responsive to the singularity and vulnerability of individuals. Moreover, as others have shown (Jaques, 1976; Nussbaum, 2006; Sen, 1999), the possibilities of cultural evolution and justice in the coming decades hinge on the kinds of *metrics* we choose to build and use when assessing the properties of human lives that bear on political and economic decision making. Our systems of measurement determine who we think we are and what we do to each other. Consider how SAT scores and GDP reports affect the self-perceptions of individuals and nations respectively, how partial they are as indices, and how drastically they alter the distribution of resources. But these considerations bring us full circle, back to the idea that we are responsible for the creation of the metatheoretical languages we would use to re-describe and re-create ourselves.

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