

**DEMOCRACY AS A WAY OF LIFE AND DEATH:  
RETHINKING PRAGMATISM'S DEMOCRATIC VISION<sup>1</sup>**

**Don Morse**

*Webster University, USA*

"Philosophers make dying their profession."  
--Socrates<sup>2</sup>

This paper is part of a book I am writing called *Existential Pragmatism*. The idea for the book is that pragmatists have something important to say about issues of pressing existential concern—of matters of life and death. In the present paper, I want to show how the pragmatist vision of democracy, in particular, can help us to come to terms, of all things, with our own mortality. To show how the pragmatist conception of democracy can respond to death will point to a current inadequacy with its traditional conception and also point the way toward a new, modified conception that I will develop. I hope to shore up a potential flaw I detect in the pragmatist vision of democracy by showing how it can be modified and improved to help us to deal with the perennial problem of death.

The paper consists of three parts. In the first part, I provide an account of the traditional pragmatist conception of democracy. In the second part, I show how the fact of death would seem to pose the ultimate challenge the traditional conception. In the third part, I sketch the key features of a new pragmatist vision of democracy and show how the new vision can respond to the fact of death in such a way as to have a distinct

---

<sup>1</sup> This article is a revised version of a paper I presented at the sixth annual meeting of the Central European Pragmatist Forum in Cadiz, Spain, May 2010. I am grateful to the participants of the conference for their helpful comments and suggestions, especially to Larry Hickman, Miklós Nyírő, and Scott Pratt. This article is dedicated to the memory of Michael Eldridge (1942-2010).

<sup>2</sup> As quoted by Plato in "Phaedo," in *The Last Days of Socrates*, trans. Hugh Tredennick and Harold Tarrant (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 121.

advantage over the traditional conception. I conclude by calling on pragmatists to adopt my new, modified, existential pragmatist vision of democracy as a supplement to the traditional vision.

**Democracy as a Moral Vision**

I begin with a reminder of what democracy means for a pragmatist. Everyone knows that it is first and foremost "a way of life," a way of life in which everyone is treated as equal.<sup>3</sup> This is the first clue that the pragmatist conception of democracy should pertain to death. For death is a part of life, its end stage; any *way of life*, to be coherent and complete, should have something to say about life at its end stage, about how to *live* up to and within the event of dying.

Another thing to note about the pragmatist conception of democracy is that it is primarily a moral "vision," that is, a *projection* of a way of life. The pragmatist, as Dewey notes, is someone who first develops "moral convictions," as for example the conviction that democracy is good.<sup>4</sup> The pragmatist, being a philosopher, does not simply wish to see this conviction dogmatically asserted and enforced, however, but wants to know that it is a reasonable and plausible vision to pursue, one that is consistent with the facts. The moral aspiration for a democratic way of life is thus "an intellectualized wish," a reasonable choice, based on a solid and defensible account of the way the world is, according, for example, to "the best science" available.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> For the famous sentence, "democracy is a way of life," see John Dewey, "Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us," in *The Essential Dewey, Volume 1: Pragmatism, Education, and Democracy*, Ed., Larry A. Hickman and Thomas M. Alexander (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), 341. For more on Dewey's conception of equality, in which he holds that "every existence...has something unique and irreplaceable about it" and "must be reckoned with on its own account," see John Dewey, "Philosophy and Democracy," in *The Essential Dewey*, 77-78.

<sup>4</sup> For the term "vision," see John Dewey, "Philosophy and Democracy," in *The Essential Dewey*, 78. For the phrase, "moral convictions," and its meaning, see *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 72, 74.

For example, people who believe in democracy believe that each individual either is or can become an autonomous agent, capable of directing him or herself, as well as their society, well. This belief by itself would be fruitless however, if the world were such that everyone was physically determined and no one could change. But if science—for example, the science of evolution—shows that we can change and adapt, we can become educated and improve, then the case for a democratic life, in which each person is able to help direct the whole with insight and maturity, becomes a more reasonable belief, if we can only provide the right conditions for helping individuals to become autonomous.<sup>6</sup>

The pragmatist moral vision, in any case, is one that strives to be consistent with the facts, to be supported by what we know of the world, rather than being a blind desire. In particular, it is a moral vision that seeks to give primacy to the individual, by which I mean that it seeks to persuade us that each person is important and vital, indeed that each person is as important and as vital as any other. As Dewey has said, “individuals will always be the centre and consummation of experience.”<sup>7</sup> They are what most fully matter in the course of things, and each one in his or her own way.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 76. Here Dewey partially sketches out such an idea. More specifically, he connects the democratic concept of freedom with the concept of a changing universe. See also the preface to *Democracy and Education*, where he links democracy with “evolutionary ideas in the biological sciences,” although the example I mention above also resembles in part what he calls “the superficial explanation” of how democracy relates to education. See John Dewey, *Democracy and Education in The Middle Works of John Dewey, Volume 9: 1899-1924*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1985), 3; 93. In any case, it is a standard account of democracy to see it as requiring educated, autonomous individuals and this account serves to illustrate the point under consideration.

<sup>7</sup> John Dewey, “I Believe,” in *The Later Works of John Dewey, Volume 14: 1939-1941*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), 91.

I borrow a phrase, too, from Dewey’s early philosophy, which I would argue informs this Deweyan emphasis on the individual. The early Dewey is determined “that personality shall not be the playground of natural forces, but shall itself be a moving force counting for something in the universe.”<sup>8</sup> Dewey finds value in the person, the individual; he would like to believe that each individual is significant and is even somehow essential to the world. The democratic belief is a moral vision about the importance of individuals; and a pragmatist wants to know if it can be supported by the facts.

#### How Death Challenges the Moral Vision

It is at this point, however, that the pragmatist conception of democracy, as traditionally formulated, begins to show its limitation.<sup>9</sup> When it comes, above all, to the ultimate challenge of death, to the certain annihilation of the individual, the facts of the world would seem to flatly contradict any way of life that gives primacy, or even any importance, to the individual. The pragmatist vision that each individual (or each personality) shall possess some meaning in the makeup of events is robbed of its realism by the sharp fact of death, which destroys the individual and his person forever, as if he or she counts for nothing, and in fact never even existed in the first place.

<sup>8</sup> John Dewey, “The Lessons of Contemporary French Literature,” in *The Early Works of John Dewey, Volume 3: 1889-1892*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1975), 42.

<sup>9</sup> Charlene Seigfried also sees death as posing a challenge to pragmatism, seeing it “as a limit-concept for the deliberately earth-bound philosophy of pragmatism.” The present paper focuses more specifically on death as potentially restricting pragmatism’s conception of democracy in particular. Later in the paper, I will also speak of death as a restriction that helps us to define individuality. See Charlene Haddock Seigfried, “A Pragmatist Response to Death: Jane Addams on the Permanent and the Transient,” in *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, Vol. 21, No. 2, 2007, 138.

Let me linger over this last point for a moment. The singular fact of death, its true horror, I take it, is that when death occurs, and we cease to exist, we do not simply cease to exist. We enter a space or zone, so to speak, in which, for all practical purposes, *we never did exist*. If it was possible to think of some actual occurrence that renders any and all occurrences as if they had not, in fact, taken place, then we could perhaps sufficiently understand the predicament of death. From what we know about the world as we grow up and take a serious look around, and especially from the perspective of modern science, it seems that death robs us of everything. It is the total eradication of what actually once was and had substance, a sheer nothing. In it, we enter a kind of blackness in which our entire world is dissolved and destroyed forever. Indeed, so total is death's annihilation that it renders every "what is," as if it never was. For consider: when we die, we enter eternal nothingness; time stops, one moment is as good as the end of all time, and surely by the end of all time, all humans and all records of our very existence will have completely vanished. When we go, we enter a space in which everything is already gone, without anything leaving a trace to remind anyone of the presence of anything having been there at all.

I would like to call this idea that death renders actual things as if they had never been, "negative actuality," in order to have an easy way to refer to a difficult concept throughout the paper. Mersault has in mind something like negative actuality when, at the end of the *Stranger*, he says that "it doesn't much matter whether you die at thirty or at seventy." It makes no difference because death foreshortens every length of time, however long. "It would all come down to the same thing anyway."<sup>10</sup>

In addition to negative actuality, what renders death horrible is that *I* must die. As Mersault again says, either way it is *him* that is going to die, "I would still be the one

dying."<sup>11</sup> What this means, I take it, is that with each of us dies a world. The unique record of *our* personal experience, so important to each one of us, occurring in our own individual mental life, and wrought into our very bodies and bones, it all goes. Each of us contains within him or herself a world of experience. But all of that—everything of any importance to us, all importance itself—perishes with us. It seems like a pretty hopeless situation for the individual.

I say these things about death with one major qualification, however, remembering the warning of Socrates, who was, at the time when he issued the warning, on death's very door. He said that "To fear death, gentlemen, is no other than to think oneself wise when one is not, to think one knows what one does not know. No one knows whether death may not be the greatest of all blessings for man, yet men fear it as if they knew that it is the greatest of evils. And surely it is the most blameworthy ignorance to believe that one knows what one does not know."<sup>12</sup> In other words, only a fool thinks he knows what death has in store for us. Given this warning from such a wise person, I would not be so foolish as to say that somehow I know for sure that the above description of death, or something like it, is correct. But what I do want to say is that this is the account of death that modern science seems to leave us with; this is what our best known facts *seem* to say. And it to these facts that, as pragmatists, we are supposed to turn, at least according to Dewey, as we try to confirm that our moral vision of democracy is actually a reasonable moral vision, one supported by the facts.

Peering into the face of this version of death, at any rate, how can we possibly consider the individual to count for anything substantial in the course of things? What a naïve illusion it is to suppose that we count for anything. Death will get each of us in the end, you and I will cease

---

<sup>10</sup> Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, trans. Matthew Ward (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 114.

---

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>12</sup> Plato, "Apology," in *The Trial and Death of Socrates*, Third Edition, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indiana/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Co., 2000), 29b, 32.

to exist, and negative actuality will do its grisly work and it will be as if we never even had existed.

### Modifying the Vision

Suppose, then, that these are the facts about death. They upend any moral vision that would have us believe that individuals have real worth and should count for something in existence, should each be capable of directing the course of things in their own special way. For death defined in this way is the ultimate director: it folds the curtain, collapses the set, and destroys all records of the play. As J. Glenn Gray puts it, "death seems to make a mockery of all human potentialities and dreams."<sup>13</sup>

Now a reasonable moral vision about the importance of individuals, one responsive to the facts, would modify itself in light of these facts of the individual's existence. I do not have humility in mind here (nor, I hope, undue pride). I would not say that we should see ourselves as less important after all. On the contrary, seeking to preserve what is best about the moral vision, I would say that we need to find a way that lets us continue to assert the importance of individuals, but in a way consistent with the grim facts of death.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> J. Glenn Gray, "The Problem of Death in Modern Philosophy," in *The Modern Vision of Death*, ed., Nathan A. Scott Jr. (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1967), 66.

<sup>14</sup> For an alternative pragmatist response to this problem, see Josiah Royce's reflections on this issue. Royce and I agree that significant projects help to make people more memorable individuals. There are, however, differences between our two views, as the remainder of my paper should demonstrate. Royce holds that "the death...which here concerns us is the ending that seems to defeat all the higher types of individual striving known to us." Josiah Royce, *The Philosophy of Josiah Royce*, ed. John K. Roth (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1971), 262. For Royce, death seems to render insignificant our projects, which in fact help to define us as individuals, and thereby to render us insignificant. However, as Royce sees it, the failure of our individuality thus to be achieved in the world points to the reasonable expectation and promise that it will be fulfilled in a life to come in which each person finds an adequate place in the life (and the life project) of the

We know about the pragmatist conception of democracy that one of the ways in which the individual is supposed to get his or her importance is through other individuals. My suggestion for how to modify pragmatism's vision builds on this perspective. In order to more adequately give importance to the individual in a world where death is certain, I believe that we must recognize several principles, which as pragmatists should guide our conduct.

---

Absolute, or, on a different reading, Royce at least holds that our belief in our own individuality is not thwarted by the fact of death because it is meaningful to think of ourselves as now living in the Absolute and counting for something within its life and its works. See Josiah Royce, *The Conception of Immortality* (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1900), 78-80. One difference between Royce's view and my own is the fact that Royce downplays the role of the individual as such, with her unique, idiosyncratic qualities, preferring instead to see the individual in light of her general projects, and he seems to say that it is the self as defined by these projects who lives on after death. As Royce says, "it is, in fact, the ideally extended self and not, in general, the momentary self, whose life is worth living, whose sense outlasts our fleeting days." My own view, however, while it recognizes the role of one's projects in getting one remembered, emphasizes the importance of remembering, and keeping alive in our memories, the peculiar, unique self, or what Royce calls the momentary self. Even so, for both Royce and myself, there is something vital in the act of remembering, which to some extent prevents personal loss, and this vital aspect depends on the people who are doing the remembering, or people who make up what Royce calls "the community," although this would be true in different respects for Royce and I, since Royce focuses on the individual who remembers past achievements of others in order to see herself as part of them, while I focus on the person who remembers others who are dead in order to afford these others a continuing measure of individuality (as well as on the individual who strives herself to be memorable). See Josiah Royce, *The Philosophy of Josiah Royce*, 373, 372-373. For more on Royce and death, see Matthew A. Foust, "Tragedy and the Sorrow of Finitude: Reflections on Sin and Death in the Philosophy of Josiah Royce," *The Pluralist*, Volume 2, Number 2, Summer 2007: pp. 106-114. PDF file, accessed through the *Philosopher's Index* via EBSCOhost (<http://web.ebscohost.com.library3.webster.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=4&hid=104&sid=035f64e2-375d-4a8a-8a83-f2e36548e974%40sessionmgr115> (6/3/2011)). I am grateful to Scott Pratt for referring me to Royce in this context.

1) We have an obligation to remember.

Just as we can support living individuals today through our interactions with them (support them in being individuals), giving them recognition and the conditions for individual action, so we can do things for the dead that will help to promote their individuality, their uniqueness as persons. When I remember the dead, I keep them alive in some sense. As Charlene Seigfried has pointed out, in reference to the thought of Jane Addams, people who die “are not unquestionably immortal, but can be made so by us, the survivors, insofar as we immortalize their lives and works in our own.”<sup>15</sup> We can keep alive “the principles, beliefs, and values” that the dead person stood for, and in this sense we can preserve the dead.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, I would add that when we explicitly remember the dead person as an individual, a wholly unique self, then we allow her personality as well as her principles and beliefs to continue to amount to something, although the person is physically gone. We should have equality here too: although memorable events help us to remember a person, these events should only be an aid; we should remember the person, the unique self who participated in the events, remember them *as* individuals. That is the goal. Re-visioning the dead individual in this way takes to its final logical outcome democracy as a way of life; for I am then letting each individual still assert herself as an individual even when she is gone, and so still be able to count for something in the course of things, although otherwise she loses all force and power, if we leave the matter to nature alone. I value the other person’s individuality so much that I let it continue to exist in my memory to the extent that I can. As a pragmatist, then, valuing the individual, I owe a duty to the dead, which is to learn to cultivate my remembrance of them.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Charlene Haddock Seigfried, “A Pragmatist Response to Death: Jane Addams on the Permanent and the Transient,” 136.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>17</sup> For an interesting account of democracy conceived in a similar fashion, see David L. Hall and Roger T. Aimes,

But a democratic approach to death does not only involve a duty that I have to the dead, but also involves a duty that I have to the living. Knowing we will die, and that those who will live on after us have a duty to remember us, we owe them a duty too; we have a duty to the living to be memorable to them. We, the future dead, have an obligation to the future living, something to take into account before we die:

2) We have an obligation to be memorable.

Richard Rorty can help us to see better what I mean here. As I read him, Rorty’s conception of “the strong poet” is a conception primarily motivated by death and concern for death. The strong poet is someone who is trying to be memorable. One feels “terror” at the prospect “that one might end one’s days in . . . a world one never made, an inherited world.”<sup>18</sup> What one wants is to create an entirely new vocabulary, one in which one defines oneself in one’s own terms. If one would have achieved one’s own unique vocabulary, “then one would have *demonstrated* that one was not a copy or replica.”<sup>19</sup> Achieving this demonstration is important because then “one would know what one has succeeded in becoming.”<sup>20</sup> To die and be like everyone else is dreadful; but to die as oneself, as a unique being, a distinct self, is to have achieved something special. One at least knows “what it is that will die,” what it is that is really lost.<sup>21</sup> The strong poet achieves a kind of self-recognition that takes away some of the sting of death, the sting of dying a generic death.

The strong poet, however, does not want to achieve this understanding of who distinctly dies only for himself. He

---

*The Democracy of the Dead: Dewey, Confucius, and the Hope for Democracy in China* (Open Court: Chicago and Lasalle, Illinois, 1999), 186. I am grateful to Larry Hickman for making me aware of this book.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 29.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

also wants his new vocabulary to be adopted by others, which would mean that he succeeded in becoming a “genius.” Everyone has their “idiosyncrasies,” but not everyone is a genius. “The difference between genius and fantasy . . . is the difference between idiosyncrasies which just happen to catch on with other people” and those that do not.<sup>22</sup>

The strong poet is the person who wants to be a genius, a memorable person, someone that others will recall as the creator of their way of speaking and acting. We remember our geniuses, those that paved the way toward our own self-understanding. The genius gives us a reason to remember him. The genius presents before our minds a true individual; someone we can distinguish from the mass of men, someone we can remember and be thankful for.

Another example of the memorable person would be the person who performs his social role exceptionally well with a distinctive excellence in the performance. Alasdair MacIntyre helps us to understand this type of person when he discusses the virtues. Someone who is virtuous has the kind of skill that allows him “to achieve those goods which are internal to practices.”<sup>23</sup> The virtues are a kind of excellence in our actions, relative to specific practices; the skill to perform those actions well. I would add that we remember people for their virtuous actions. Some examples would be, to borrow and slightly alter one from MacIntyre, Achilles, who is renowned for his heroism;<sup>24</sup> or Socrates, who is remembered for his courage and his philosophical prowess; or Hypatia, who is remembered for her exceptional acumen, which enabled her to transcend the intellects of all the men of her time in an age when women were not encouraged to be intellectuals.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>23</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, Second Edition (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 191.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 123. MacIntyre uses the Achilles example for a somewhat different purpose, but I believe the example of Achilles can fit the present case as well.

As Hannah Arendt observes, this ability to get ourselves remembered may well be what is distinctive about human beings. “The task and potential greatness of mortals,” she says, “lie in their ability to produce things—works and deeds and words—which would deserve to be and, at least to a degree, are at home in everlastingness, so that through them mortals could find their place in a cosmos where everything is immortal except themselves.” We have the ability, even in the face of inevitable death, to make things, which will make people remember us.<sup>25</sup>

I would like to claim that we all have an obligation to be memorable in ways like this, that is, to be distinctive either in words or deeds, either as strong poets or virtuous people. I believe we possess this obligation, first, because others are under an obligation to remember us when we are dead. We ease their burden if we give them something to remember. Second, we owe it to our democracy to be memorable individuals, because then we will be shining lights of individuality, teaching others the value of being a distinctive self and not a generic rendition. Third, I believe we owe it to ourselves to be memorable, for then we ourselves will be more likely to be remembered. If Rorty is right, and one feels terror at the prospect that one will die without knowing what distinct individual one managed to become; that one will die as *any man or woman*, utterly interchangeable, indistinct, and easily forgettable, then one will want to try to overcome this terror by trying to become oneself, a distinct self, a memorable self.

<sup>25</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*. Second Edition (Chicago and London: the University of Chicago Press, 1998), 19. Arendt emphasizes the importance of this conception for the Greeks, saying that their community was itself a special arena for the efforts of individuals to become immortal. As Arendt puts it, “the *polis* was for the Greeks...first of all their guarantee against the futility of individual life, the space protected against this futility and reserved for the relative permanence, if not immortality, of mortals.” Hannah Arendt, “The Public Realm: The Common,” in *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, ed., Peter Baehr (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 203. I am grateful to Miklós Nyirő for his comments about Arendt.

Of course, there is an important objection that presents itself here in that one can be memorable by being evil; and we certainly do not want to promote this kind of activity. My response is to say that we then have a third principle of obligation imposed upon us by a pragmatist vision of democracy, which is this:

3) We have an obligation to be worth remembering.

By "remembering," I mean a quality of mind of recalling someone that also includes other qualities like cherishing, willingly preserving, sustaining, keeping alive, his memory; and I would argue that these qualities are typically only brought to bear on someone who is worthy of being remembered. In this sense of remembering, it is better to forget evil individuals; to deny their worth as individuals; not to cherish their memories. Of course, we should remember evil individuals in the sense that, by understanding who they were, we can try to prevent someone like them from occurring again. But we should not do evil people the honor of giving them any glory.

For us, as individuals trying to be memorable, this third obligation means that we should try to behave in such a way as to be worthy of being cherished, to be an individual whose memory others will want to keep alive, which means we should be good, or excellent, or truly creative, and so forth, anything except evil.

I would also argue that there is one more duty that pragmatists owe to one another, according to a vision of democracy as a way of death (and not only a way of life). This is the duty to create conditions by which to promote remembering.

4) We have an obligation to make remembering more feasible.

What I have in mind here are rituals; habits; education; tombstones and memorials. A society that truly values individuals will make it possible to raise monuments to

the dead; it will practice rituals that to some extent keep the dead with us in our memories. It will be a society in which we read the great dead authors, and so on. In this sense, it would be less of an individualistic culture than one might suppose. For too often in our highly individualistic culture, we praise youth at the expense of the aged; the living over the dead. We make short work of history (at least in America). But increased historical understanding would be necessary to make remembering more feasible. We should not see our dead as dead. We should see history as part of ourselves; and the dead as part of the living. This is because, for one thing, we owe an obligation to them as individuals under a pragmatist conception, but also because, as exemplars of individuality, dead individuals can provide us with valuable clues for how we, too, can become individuals.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

To speak of democracy as a pragmatist would, we would say, with Dewey, that "individuals are the finally decisive factors of the nature and movement of associated life."<sup>26</sup> We would place great value in the individual. But we would also want to say that this value is realistic and rational; that the physical and social worlds within which we live will allow us to harbor this value. And then we are confronted by the grim fact of death, which annihilates each individual one by one forever. We are confronted by a great "army" of the dead, to borrow and modify a passage from James, who refers to suicides in particular, "an army whose roll-call, like the famous evening gun of the British army, follows the sun round the world and never terminates."<sup>27</sup> Each individual is leveled. And ultimately we will all pass away and be forgotten. And thus the grim fact of death would seem to prevent us from harboring the value of the

---

<sup>26</sup> John Dewey, "I Believe," 91.

<sup>27</sup> William James, "Is Life Worth Living?" in *Essays on Faith and Morals*, selected by Ralph Barton Perry (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, 1962), 6.

importance of the individual in a world like ours, where death is the undisputed king.

But then again, and on the other hand, there are things we can do, and ought to do, to reassert the value of the individual in the world, even if it is a world ruled by death. For while we are still alive, we can remember; we can be memorable; we can be worth remembering; and we can make remembering each other more feasible. These goals are realistic; they are not beyond all human power. And what they give us is something significant: a fuller and richer democracy, a democracy not only of the living, but also a "democracy of the dead."<sup>28</sup>

Ultimately, however, I do not see how even democracy conceived in this way can overcome negative actuality. In the end, everything will be as if it had never been. In the end, there will be no one to remember anybody. Therefore, no one will be remembered. Everything will be lost. But perhaps it is only in this eventual loss of the individual that democracy is even possible. Perhaps one can be an individual (and hence, one can have a democracy) only by having limitations, a delimited field in which one can act and relative to which one can define oneself.<sup>29</sup> That there is the sorrow of infinite loss

<sup>28</sup> See David L. Hall and Roger T. Aimes, *The Democracy of the Dead*.

<sup>29</sup> This view follows Heidegger's concept of "being-towards-death," which involves the idea that only as we realize that we move toward the end of ourselves in death are we able to see our lives as a whole and as lives in which we can develop ourselves freely as individuals. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 307-311. For an excellent account of Heidegger on death, one that shows how, for Heidegger, the awareness of death is what make our truly individual efforts possible in the first place, see Kenneth W. Stickers, "Commentary on Matthew A. Foust, 'Tragedy and the Sorrow of Finitude: Reflections on Sin and Death in the Philosophy of Josiah Royce,' Volume 2, Number 2, Summer 2007: 115-118. PDF File, accessed through *Philosopher's Index* via EBSCOhost, <http://web.ebscohost.com.library3.webster.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=4&hid=104&sid=035f64e2-375d-4a8a-8a83-f2e36548e974%40sessionmgr115> (6/3/2011). The whole debate between Foust and

is something we know accompanies death; nothing can avoid this fact and this fate. But such a fate is not the whole story. Limitation, even ultimate limitation, is the circumscribed field of activity which is a precondition of individual effort.<sup>30</sup> And so, although everything will be lost, much can nonetheless be gained. The individual, who we value in a pragmatist vision of democracy, can once have been, and can once have been remembered and cherished, even if, paradoxically, the condition for this reality is that, in the end, the individual and his memory never will have been.

It is an idea as old as the poets. Beauty and sorrow go together, the permanent with the impermanent.<sup>31</sup> I like how Whitehead puts it, quoting "a famous hymn":

Abide with me;  
Fast falls the eventide.<sup>32</sup>

Stickers brings out nicely some aspects of the contrast between Royce's view of death and my own, which in some respects pertains more to Heidegger's than to Royce's.

<sup>30</sup> This is similar to what Karl Jaspers meant by a "limit situation," as discussed, for example, by Jean T. Wilde, William Kluback, and William Kimmel. See Jean T. Wilde, William Kluback, and William Kimmel, "Introduction," in Karl Jaspers, *Truth and Symbol*, translated by Jean T. Wilde, William Kluback, and William Kimmel (New Haven: College and University Press, 1959), 10-11. The difference between Jasper's view and this one, however, is that Jaspers make the limit situation an occasion for seeing beyond human life, or what he calls "transcendence," whereas the present view only makes it an occasion for seeing and appreciating finite human life all the more, as I go on to clarify. Both views, however, suggest that a limit reveals new perspectives. For Jasper's account of transcendence, see Karl Jaspers, *The Philosophy of Existence*, trans., Richard F. Grabay (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 81. For more on the difference between the awareness of death as transcendence and as fuller immersion in life, see Sean Ireton, *An Ontological Study of Death: From Hegel to Heidegger* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2007), 1 ff.

<sup>31</sup> Seigfried sees this tension at work in Addam's philosophy, as can be seen in the subtitle of her essay. See Charlene Haddock Seigfried, "A Pragmatist Response to Death: Jane Addams on the Permanent and the Transient," 133.

<sup>32</sup> As quoted by Alfred North Whitehead in *Process and Reality*, Corrected Edition, ed., David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York and London: The Free

We want to persist, even as we perish. Hegel, too, has a similar idea in mind when he writes: "*there is nothing which is not an intermediate state between being and nothing.*"<sup>33</sup> Everything shimmers and fades; but this is the condition of anything existing at all, and of our appreciation of anything's existence. Crispin Sartwell also invokes the idea when he speaks of the connection between death and beauty. "That we can lose things," he says, "that in fact we are always in the process of losing everything we have, underlies the longing with which we inhabit the world. And in that longing resides the possibility of beauty . . . Grief and death and beauty call on us to yearn, and perhaps they call on us to yearn impossibly, to yearn for an object that is always slipping from our grasp."<sup>34</sup> There is no getting around death; but beauty is its consolation. It all fades away; but *there are moments*; there is this moment here; there is the poignancy of what is fading. In a similar fashion, I submit that, although negative actuality conquers all in the end, and it reigns supreme over individuals, nonetheless something like the philosophy of remembering, as I have sketched it here, may be the best chance that we have in the face of such overwhelming odds. To keep individuals alive in our memories as long as we can before everything is finally annihilated is not to conquer death in the end; it is only conquer death for a little while. It is something small, but it is something; and this something, this semblance of individual value, may be the best that we can hope for in a world like ours, a world in which we are all, each one of us, fated to live and to die and ultimately to be forgotten.

Remember me, the dead person says to us. And we will remember you, we say to him or to her. And we say to those who are still living when we die: remember me, too, for as long as you can. And we all say this for just so long as there is someone to hear our plea, until none of us will say anything anymore.

---

Press, 1979), 209.

<sup>33</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1999), 105.

<sup>34</sup> Crispin Sartwell, *Six Names of Beauty* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 4.

## Bibliography

- Arendt, Hannah. *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, ed., Peter Baehr (London: Penguin Books, 2000).
- . *The Human Condition*. Second Edition (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).
- Camus, Albert. *The Stranger*, trans. Matthew Ward (New York: Vintage Books, 1989).
- Dewey, John. "Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us," in *The Essential Dewey, Volume 1: Pragmatism, Education, and Democracy*, ed., Larry A. Hickman and Thomas M. Alexander (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998).
- . "Philosophy and Democracy," in *The Essential Dewey, Volume 1: Pragmatism, Education, and Democracy*, ed., Larry A. Hickman and Thomas M. Alexander (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998).
- . "I Believe," in *The Later Works of John Dewey, Volume 14: 1939-1941*, ed., Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991).
- . *Democracy and Education in The Middle Works of John Dewey, Volume 9: 1899-1924*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1985).
- . "The Lessons of Contemporary French Literature," in *The Early Works of John Dewey, Volume 3: 1889-1892*, ed., Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1975).
- Foust, Matthew A. "Tragedy and the Sorrow of Finitude: Reflections on Sin and Death in the Philosophy of Josiah Royce," *The Pluralist*, Volume 2, Number 2, Summer 2007: pp. 106-114. PDF File, accessed through the *Philosopher's Index* via EBSCOhost, <http://web.ebscohost.com.library3.webster.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=4&hid=104&sid=035f64e2-375d-4a8a-8a83-f2e36548e974%40sessionmgr115> (6/3/2011).
- Gray, J. Glenn "The Problem of Death in Modern Philosophy," in *The Modern Vision of Death*, ed., Nathan A. Scott Jr. (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1967).
- Hall, David L. and Roger T. Aimes, *The Democracy of the Dead: Dewey, Confucius, and the Hope for Democracy in China* (Open Court: Chicago and Lasalle, Illinois, 1999).
- Hegel, G. W. F. *Hegel's Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1999).
- Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).
- Ireton, Sean. *An Ontological Study of Death: From Hegel to Heidegger* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2007).
- James, William. "Is Life Worth Living?" in *Essays on Faith and Morals*, selected by Ralph Barton Perry (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, 1962).
- Jaspers, Karl. *The Philosophy of Existence*, trans., Richard F. Grabay (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995).
- Plato. "Apology," in *The Trial and Death of Socrates*, Third Edition, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indiana/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Co., 2000).
- . "Phaedo," in *The Last Days of Socrates*, trans. Hugh Tredennick and Harold Tarrant (London: Penguin Books, 1993).
- Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
- Royce, Josiah, *The Philosophy of Josiah Royce*, ed. John K. Roth (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1971).
- . *The Conception of Immortality* (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1900).
- Sartwell, Crispin. *Six Names of Beauty* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006).
- Seigfried, Charlene Haddock. "A Pragmatist Response to Death: Jane Addams on the Permanent and the Transient," in *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, Vol. 21, No. 2, 2007.
- Stickers, Kenneth W. "Commentary on Matthew A. Foust, 'Tragedy and the Sorrow of Finitude: Reflections on Sin and Death in the Philosophy of Josiah Royce,'" *The Pluralist*, Volume 2, Number 2, Summer 2007: 115-118. PDF file, accessed through *Philosopher's Index* via EBSCOhost, <http://web.ebscohost.com.library3.webster.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=4&hid=104&sid=035f64e2-375d-4a8a-8a83-f2e36548e974%40sessionmgr115> (6/3/2011).
- Wilde, Jean T., William Kluback, and William Kimmel. "Introduction," in Karl Jaspers, *Truth and Symbol*, translated by Jean T. Wilde, William Kluback, and William Kimmel (New Haven: College and University Press, 1959).
- Whitehead, Alfred North. *Process and Reality*, Corrected Edition, ed., David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York and London: The Free Press, 1979).