Pluralism, Pragmatism and American Democracy
Pluralism, Pragmatism and American Democracy:

*A Minority Report*

By

H.G. Callaway

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Governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.
—Thomas Jefferson, Declaration of Independence, 1776.

Perhaps it is a universal truth that the loss of liberty at home is to be charged to the provisions against danger, real or pretended from abroad.

The meanings delivered by confirmed observation, experimentation, and calculation, scientific facts and principles, serve as tests of the values which tradition transmits and of those which emotion suggests. Whatever is not compatible with them must be eliminated in any sincere philosophizing. This fact confers upon scientific knowledge an incalculably important office in philosophy. But the criterion is negative; the exclusion of the inconsistent is far from being identical with a positive test which demands that only what has been scientifically verifiable shall provide the entire content of philosophy. It is the difference between an imagination that acknowledges its responsibility to meet the logical demands of ascertained facts, and a complete abdication of all imagination in behalf of a prosy literalism.

Jefferson was not an “individualist” in the sense of the British laissez-faire liberal school. Individual human beings receive the right of self-government “with their being from the hand of nature.” As an eighteenth century deist and believer in natural religion, Jefferson connected nature and Nature’s God inseparably in his thought.
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The aim here is to defend a famous quotation from Martin Luther King, stating that “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” The quotation is inscribed on the King Memorial in Washington, D.C. and President Obama had it woven into a new rug for the Oval Office in the White House. The quotation has become something of a contemporary proverb, and is certainly worthy of our close attention. In order to evaluate the dictum, questions concerning its meaning will first be addressed and clarified, and various possible misinterpretations will be set aside. It will be argued that the appeal, and an effective defense of this moral claim, depends upon the pre-existing values of the people to whom the claim is addressed. It is clearly intended to support hopes of social change and to encourage support for ideals of racial equality, but we want to know whether it is true or false and exactly what it means. King’s dictum can easily be taken as involving a doctrine of “divine Providence” or “historical inevitability.” But many are skeptical of these ideas and hold that we cannot be sure that the future will eventuate in desired moral outcomes. But, if so, what would it possibly mean to claim that the “moral universe” or the human world “bends toward justice”? On the other hand, holding that the moral universe “bends toward justice” claims more than saying that we can now act or organize to support justice; instead, it tells us that there is some pre-existing support for our related activities. What, then, is this pre-existing bend of the moral universe?

* An earlier version of this paper was first presented at the Pittsburgh Area Philosophy Conference, Washington and Jefferson College, Washington, PA, September 2016. I would like to thank the conference organizers and participants in the session for helpful comments and discussion.
1. Background for the arc of the moral universe

The King quotation has been traced back to a similar dictum in the writings of the Unitarian minister and abolitionist, Theodore Parker (1810-1860), who used much the same language in the following passage:

I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight, I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice.¹

According to Parker, on the same page, if we “look at the facts of the world,” we will “see a continual and progressive triumph of the right;” this is an optimistic doctrine of historical inevitability. Parker maintains that “God has made man with the instinctive love of justice in him, which gradually gets developed in the world;” and because “in [God] himself justice is infinite,” in accord with Parker’s theology, “This justice of God *must* appear in the world, and in the history of man.” For Parker, the claim of a bend in the arc of the moral universe rests on a doctrine of divine Providence—with a claim of historical inevitability following in its wake. Though he admits that he “cannot calculate the curve” by sight, he does claim to “divine it by conscience,” and he rests assured that “it bends toward justice.” Conscience here appears to play the role of Emerson’s “moral” or “religious sentiment,” and one might immediately suspect a transcendentalist conception of the “inner light” deriving by emanation from a transcendentalist “Oversoul.”²

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2. Cf. Emerson in the opening of his 1860 essay “Fate” in *The Conduct of Life*, pp. 1-2 in the Harvard edition: “We are incompetent to solve the times, our geometry cannot span to huge orbits of the prevailing ideas, behold their return and reconcile their opposition. We can only obey our own polarity. ‘Tis fine for us to speculate and elect our course, if we must accept an irresistible dictation.”
Given that Dr. King was a Baptist minister, and a religious leader, it is quite natural to assume that King’s dictum makes some similar religious or epistemic and historical claim. I think there can be little doubt that King’s dictum is an expression of his religious faith and sensibility. No one would reasonably deny that King was a man of faith. Yet King appealed beyond his own denomination and even beyond the religious sentiment of the nation in his work. Need the dictum rest on a theology of divine Providence? Can it be defended without appeal to theology?

King’s dictum of the arc of the moral universe, can be found, e.g., in a speech he delivered in 1967, “Where Do we Go from Here?”: “Let us remember” King said,

That there is a creative force in this universe working to pull down the gigantic mountains of evil, a power that is able to make a way out of no way and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows. Let us realize that the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice. Let us realize that William Cullen Bryant is right “Truth, crushed to earth, will rise again.” Let us go out realizing that the Bible is right: “Be not deceived. God is not mocked. Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.” This is our hope for the future, and with this faith we will be able to sing in some not too distant tomorrow, with a cosmic past tense, “We have overcome! We have overcome! Deep in my heart, I did believe we would overcome.”

This passage, from the ending of King’s speech is clearly a testament of his faith. There is a “creative force in the universe,” which is “working to pull down the gigantic mountains of evil.” This appears to be a higher power and a matter of divine Providence, to use the traditional term; and as in the text from Parker, a conception of divine Providence is introduced in order to assure the listener of an historical inevitability, e.g., the moral universe “bends toward justice,” “Truth crushed to earth will

rise again," and there will be a “not too distant tomorrow” when we will encounter from the perspective of a “cosmic past tense” that “We have overcome!”

2. Divine providence and historical inevitability

There are versions of the concepts of divine providence and historical inevitability which depend on an implicit or assumed knowledge of the end of time or a backward glance at the world or at episodes of life viewed as a completed or consummated whole. This is especially evident in version of divine providence premised on divine omniscience and the “infinite justice” of the creative force of the universe. One persistent problem with this concept is that we, mere human beings, lack for omniscience. In consequence, calling on support of divine providence for any high social or political aim or purpose is frequently viewed as extremely contentious and doubtful. If our political and religious leaders were to call us to war for God’s purposes, I think we would all, or most of us, be extremely skeptical, though historically, this has often happened on both sides of various wars.

Calling on historical inevitability usually has a similar status. In general, we are skeptical of predictions of the future course of human affairs which depend on convictions concerning what the abstract morally desirable outcomes might be and especially where there are prominent moral conflicts involved; and predictions of the ultimate outcome of human history are especially doubtful. As a matter of common sense, how history will turn out, and how particular episodes will turn out clearly depends on what we will do, and what we will do depends in part on what we will come to know. Yet what we will come to know is unpredictable in principle. If we could sit back and predict the outcome of our inquiries in the sciences and scholarly disciplines, then there would apparently be little need to pursue them in the usual fashion. Yet

4. William Cullen Bryant (1794-1878) was an American poet and journalist. King’s quotation comes from Bryant’s poem, “The Battlefield,” stanza 9 (1839) and can be found e.g., in Bryant 1903, The Poetical Works of William Cullen Bryant.
the unpredictability of the details of the growth of knowledge implies the unpredictability of the future course of history.\textsuperscript{5}

Our acquiescence in persuasive predictions of long-term benefits or doom may nevertheless help bring about the predicted result. That is part of the reason we have to be skeptical. Prediction of the human future is more plausible, however, within time-limits bounded by a more or less constant state of knowledge and pre-existing social values. Long term predictions are more doubtful, short term predictions less so. The point is often better appreciated in retrospect. For example, in 1858, when Abraham Lincoln drew upon the ancient wisdom that “A house divided against itself cannot stand,” he was right; and he was right again in holding, just prior to the Civil War, that America could not long exist “half slave and half free.”\textsuperscript{6} Often enough, the future course of history is more plausibly predicted (and managed) in the face of an on-going crisis where the existing state of knowledge and pre-existing values are more or less constant. Even in such cases, however, the very plausibility of the prediction may evoke action either supporting or subverting it. In that way, the outcome depends on pre-existing values.

3. Understanding the King dictum

Consider again the quotation from King:

The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.

The dictum certainly has a metaphorical character, or maybe it is another kind of literary trope. There is a comparison or analogy to motion and geometric shape: “the arc” of the moral universe is said to “bend” toward justice. Reading this through, we may imagine a trajectory, as with a projectile moving through space. Something is launched

\textsuperscript{5} Cf. Karl Popper 1957, \textit{The Poverty of Historicism}. “There can be no scientific theory of historical development,” says Popper, “serving as the basis for historical predication.” See the brief version of the argument in the Preface to the 1959 edition, p. vii.

\textsuperscript{6} See Lincoln’s “House Divided Speech” of June 16, 1858: “A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved—I do not expect the house to fall—but I do expect it will cease to be divided.”
from one position, partly upward, and given a certain "bend" of the moral universe it curves back down tending to hit the mark of justice or greater justice. It is as though "the moral universe" has a certain geometric shape and that motions within it favor the direction of justice.

The concern is with a movement toward justice. Asserting the dictum, justice is what one hopes to see realized or established by the movement. We are warned that the "arc is long." This implies that we should not be discouraged by short-term disappointments. But something is guiding us or directing us toward justice. Entering into the "moral universe" or, in other words, the domain of our moral concerns and actions, we hope for justice, and the assurance is given that in this domain of moral concerns, movement "bends" toward the very object we hoped to reach or establish. But what is this "bend" and is the moral universe everywhere the same?

We naturally want to ask about the nature or character of this "bend" toward justice, and we need to understand as well the relationship of a pre-existing bend of the moral universe to our needed, contributing efforts. How can it be that there be a pre-existing bend toward justice, if the establishment of justice depends on our efforts? What is this "bend"? If there is already a bend toward justice in the domain of our moral thought and actions, then why are our efforts needed? Wouldn’t a pre-existing bend toward justice in the moral universe, the very scene of our related thought and action, amount to historical inevitability of justice—as suggested by both Parker and King?

One tendency of thought in answer to these questions is to think that a pre-existing "bend" toward justice is a mystery at best. What really matters is our related thought and actions. On such a view, it is not any pre-existing character of the moral universe which matters but instead the work we contribute toward making it bend. The only "bend" of interest, then it the one we now intend to introduce. However, this approach to understanding the King dictum is really quite alien to it. Not just any efforts made together will plausibly result in greater justice. That is why many are skeptical of the call to get on "the right side of history." We cannot define justice as simply the actual result of what "we” together establish by our efforts in the face of a moral problem. If
that were so, then the old regime of segregation, long established in the American South would have counted as just, because established in a long history. Justice would be something arbitrary. According to the dictum, a bend toward genuine justice is already there in the moral universe, and we can expect it to support our efforts. It is not that we now create the only bend toward justice which is to be defined merely by reference to joint efforts or collective action.

A chief problem in understanding the King dictum comes in seeing how to combine a pre-existing “bend” toward justice, which is claimed, with the need of our actions to bring about justice. That our actions are needed shows that the bend is not an historical inevitability. Justice won’t be established by our simply sitting by and waiting for it.\(^7\) Passivity is one imaginable “method” which won’t work. Equally, it is implausible to hold that simply subverting the positions of anyone who disagrees with us, would be a good method. But since arbitrarily selected joint actions and unguided interactions are not sufficient for just outcomes, this shows us that the “bend toward justice” is not merely a matter of whatever bending of the moral universe we might be inclined to introduce. We need means which are appropriate to the goal, and we need to clearly understand what it is we hope to achieve.

### 4. Reform and pre-existing moral values

How are we to understand a pre-existing “bend” toward justice of the moral universe? If there is such a bend, then justice must be something independent, in principle, of various possibly conflicting efforts made toward establishing justice. In a sense, we need to imagine a “truth maker” for the claim that the moral universe bends toward justice, and one approach to this problem arises from asking what may be meant by “the moral universe.” The brief suggestion above was that we may understand the moral universe as the domain of our though and action

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regarding human beings and human interaction. I suppose this is also encompassed by the domain of social and political philosophy. But more narrowly construed, the specifics of various times and places provide needed focus.

In his “House Divided” speech of June 1858, Abraham Lincoln, who had just been nominated to run for the U.S. Senate from Illinois, against Democrat Stephen A. Douglas, opens his remarks to the state convention by saying that “If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could then better judge what to do and how to do it.” The problem he addresses is a kind of pre-existing bend in the political universe toward the expansion of slavery in the Union. Signs of this trend included the Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854), the Supreme Court’s decision in the Dred Scott case (1857), and the election of President James Buchanan in 1856 who accepted the Court’s decision. The Kansas-Nebraska Act allowed for “popular sovereignty” in the territories. The idea was that the people in the territories could decide for themselves whether to found a slave state or a free state. But the actual result of this plan was a minor Civil War between two factions each with its own proposed constitution and “bleeding Kansas.” The Dred Scott decision (1857) held that a slave could not become free by being brought to a free state. In effect the Supreme Court, under heavy southern influence, washed its hands on the national conflict; slaves have no rights, and the states could not give them rights. Lincoln was tracing or attempting to “calculate the curve and complete the figure,” of the recent political developments, and he believed that the next step would be to put in question the state constitutional bans on slavery in the North. He argues that Senator Douglas, who was among the most important advocates of “popular sovereignty” regarding slavery in the territories, was politically unsuited to resist such a development. If “a house divided cannot stand,” and the Union to survive must become either all slave or all free, then, rejecting slavery on moral grounds, Lincoln argues for rejection of Senator Douglas.

Implicitly, Lincoln appealed to something deeper than the political developments he described and projected; and the point might be put by saying that there was a *contrary bend* in the moral universe, a bend or tendency prevalently ignored in the pro-slavery political developments of those times. In one of his sermons, Dr. King spoke of “midnight within the moral order”:

> At midnight colors lose their distinctiveness and become a sullen gray. Moral principles have lost their distinctiveness. For modern man, absolute right and absolute wrong is a matter of what the majority is doing. Right and wrong are relative to likes and dislikes and the customs of a particular community. We have unconsciously applied Einstein’s theory of relativity, which properly describes the physical universe, to the moral and ethical realm.¹⁰

Just as Lincoln could identify tendencies and developments within the political order, by reference to political events, King here identifies negative moral tendencies of modern society which assimilate moral rightness to majority opinion, “likes and dislikes” or particular customs. Clearly, King rejects contemporary moral relativism in this passage.¹⁰ Otherwise, the slave system of the *ante bellum* South or the social regime of segregation, exclusion and racial discrimination would have had equal standing with King’s contrary aims and aspirations.

I think that few actually doubt the fact that “moral values are grounded on societal conventions, historical conditions, metaphysical belief, etc., which vary from one society of social grouping to another.”¹¹ But this is far from saying that there can be no “better and

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10. Cf. e.g., Baghramian 2004, *Relativism*, p. 272: Moral relativism is the claim that “question of right and wrong, good and bad, etc., are inexorably bound with specific societal or cultural conventions. Furthermore, it is argued that there are no neutral standards available to us for adjudicating between such competing claims.”
worse” among moral values or competing sets of moral values. At the same time, we may wonder if the pre-existing values and mores of a particular society are sufficient, at a particular time, to enact reforms viewed as theoretically needed. If the Union had been broken in the 1860’s, then, surely, this would have preserved slavery in the American South for some time to come.

If we look for naturalistic support for the “bend toward justice” in the King dictum, then there is a very simply argument involved, not unrelated to the nineteenth-century abolitionist call upon “higher law,” standing above the compromise with slavery in the U.S. constitution of 1789. All human beings “are created equal” and have “certain inalienable rights.” The country was morally wedded to these founding words from the Declaration of Independence. Yet everyone acknowledges that African-Americans are human beings. It is a very short inference to the conclusion that slavery is morally defective. It denied to some what was due to all. In spite of the simplicity of the argument, it took the Civil War to put through the inference and to begin to institutionalize it. That was in part because of the obvious economic motivation of the slave-holders, but also because the prosperity of the North was tied to the political compromise between the North and South.

This is a paradigm case argument. The better and worse of moral rules and of law cannot be identified or defined merely by reference to prior social or social-political agreement or established law. Needed reform and improvement of pre-existing values may be possible and recognizable, e.g., the abolition of slavery, in spite of the most intensive social-political resistance to change and reform. Moreover, there is always a more or less objective question of what would count as an

12. Following, e.g., Hilary Putnam, “we make ways of dealing with problematic situations and we discover which ones are better and which worse.” See, Putnam 2002, The Collapse of the Fact/Values Dichotomy and Other Essays, p. 97.


improvement (and what would not), given the full array of pre-existing values of a given society and the particular problems it faces. While it is true that “moral values are grounded on societal conventions, historical conditions, metaphysical belief, etc., which vary from one society or social grouping to another,” this is in fact the very condition of a pre-existing “bend” in the moral universe of any given society.\(^\text{15}\)

Any living person or society already has values in place. Or, in other words, people and peoples are carriers of values. In particular, the American people have been largely committed to the Jeffersonian republican values of freedom and equality. One must call upon the actual, pre-existing array of values to motivate and justify reform in the face of problems encountered. This is to say the values advocated in reform require some moral purchase in the society under reform. What is needed is a reconfiguration and perhaps some complementation of the pre-existing array. This contrasts with the idea of simply replacing the pre-existing array.

With the need of reform in mind, it is completely implausible to suppose that if we key reform to pre-existing values and draw upon them for support, that this implies preserving the full, pre-existing configuration of values. Reform of values is a call for change—but not a call for starting over from an imagined blank slate. Reform is properly keyed to the actual history and pre-existing values of particular societies. They may have or lack an appropriate bend toward justice.

It is empirically possible, regarding a particular society, long subject to erosion of moral values, that there may no longer be a \textit{sufficient} pre-existing bend toward justice in the public mores and customs. For example, we can imagine a society so infatuated with “the leader” that no other values can, factually, prevail against the perceived social and political advantages which accrue to a mass of faithful followers practicing deference to power. Again, we can imagine a society so intensively set on the pursuit of economic self-interest that no contending values will prevail against economic self-interest and simple deference

\(^{15}\) Contrast Cohen 2010, p. 20, who is “… not concerned principally with the causal importance of moral convictions … .”
to economic power. Acquiescence in growing inequalities may then come to appear the natural means of economic and social advancement. Economic self-interest is frequently counter-posed against reform and greater justice, and may, in fact, suppress expression of the values emphasized by reformers.

In consequence, where there is a pre-existing bend toward justice in a given society, there is some need of a conservative moment in projects of reform. We have seen a paradigmatic appeal to founding values of the American republic from both King and from Lincoln. As in their thought and practice, the pre-existing bend toward justice in our particular society requires our recognition and support, if we are to be able to draw on it and effectively argue for greater justice.