

# FUNCTIONALISM, FALLIBILISM, AND ANTI-FOUNDATIONALISM IN WIEMAN'S EMPIRICAL THEISM

by Nancy Frankenberry

*Abstract.* Empirical philosophy of religion is usually appraised in light of its theological uses, rather than in terms of its relation to philosophical forms of empiricism. The present paper examines the empirical theism of Henry Nelson Wieman by relating it to Carl Hempel's critique of functionalism, Karl Popper's use of falsifiability, and the growth of post-empiricist anti-foundationalism in epistemology. It is concluded that Wieman's argument commits the fallacy of affirming the consequent; that his theistic perspective nevertheless offers an important heuristic device in line with fallibilism, and that his radical empiricism anticipates recent anti-foundationalist trends.

*Keywords:* American radical empiricism; anti-foundationalism; critique of functionalism; Popperian fallibilism; religious empiricism; Henry Nelson Wieman.

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In assessing the significance of Henry Nelson Wieman's empirical philosophy of religion in the wake of the centennial year of his birth, it helps to be reminded of Langdon Gilkey's appraisal over fifteen years ago. What concerned him was the difficulty of the method from the side of contemporary philosophy. "For while many contemporary theologians may ask 'Is this *theology*?',” Gilkey wrote, “almost all present-day philosophers will apodictically assert, ‘This is not *empirical*’” (Gilkey 1969, 348). I do not know which present-day philosophers Gilkey had in mind, but the ones I will be concerned with are principally those who have been associated with three episodes of twentieth-century empiricism: (1) the critique of functionalism as a theory, (2) the

Nancy Frankenberry is associate professor of religion at Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire 03755. This paper with the title “What Is ‘Empirical’ about Henry Nelson Wieman's Theism?” was originally presented at the Philosophy of Religion section of the American Academy of Religion during the annual meeting, November 1985, Anaheim, California. Most of the paper appears in chapter four of Nancy Frankenberry, *Religion and Radical Empiricism*. © 1987 by the State University of New York Press. It is reprinted in *Zygon* by permission of the State University of New York Press.

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use of falsifiability as a criterion, and (3) the critique of foundationalism. I shall be arguing that Wieman's empirical theism does not fare well with respect to (1) but that it adds new dimensions to (2) and accords well with (3). In conclusion I will offer a few general observations about the future prospects of post-Wiemanian religious naturalism.

#### THE CREATIVE EVENT AND THE FUNCTIONALIST FALLACY

The religious naturalism Wieman defended led him to insist that a transcendent god has no religious availability unless we can point to events in human life in which god functions. If we can do that, then it is these events in human life that take on religious meaning and command religious commitment. To say that god is a process, an event, a pattern of qualitative meaning, or creative interchange, is not simply to describe what god *does*. Rather, given Wieman's radical empiricism, it is to describe god's very *being*.

Wieman's attempt to specify the essential structure of god was most fully developed in *The Source of Human Good*. His argument was set in the context of competing value theories and alternative interpretations of the locus of value. Without siding with any particular theory—whether subjective, transcendental, contextual, or instrumental—Wieman's bold objective was to demonstrate that value, however it is defined or wherever it is located, *increases* in just one way. This was a remarkable claim and Wieman clearly intended to establish it empirically. In fact there *is* human good. Values *do* get promoted. There must be sources of that good. Is there, he wanted to know, that which is *invariably* at work whenever there is an increase of human good?

Wieman first identified something common to all good, which he termed "qualitative meaning." By this he meant "that connection between events whereby present happenings enable one to feel not only the quality intrinsic to the events now occurring but also the qualities of many other events that are related to them" (Wieman 1946, 18). The richness of qualitative meaning is a function of the connections particular events have to other events.

Yet even qualitative meaning as a created good can become demonic. Wieman's question as to how the growth of qualitative meaning occurs was answered by pointing to the creative event as the activity within nature which increases qualitative meaning. In what he called the *creative* event, as distinct from *created* goods, Wieman found "something which retains its identity and its unity through all change in itself and through all change in other things" (Wieman 1946, 298).

Creativity and the creative event are inseparable in Wieman's discussion, but the two words carry an important distinction in meaning.

Creativity is the structure, the character, or form which an event must have to be creative. It is an abstraction from the concrete reality which is the creative event. Whatever unity the creative event has is the unity of the structure which it exhibits. The problem of the one and the many in connection with a naturalistic conception of god thus entails a dialectic between the concrete and the abstract. The creative event in every concrete instance displays multiplicity (as well as change and temporality). Its unity is an identity of structure which pertains to the abstract character of the event.

As a further specification of the character of the creative event, Wieman lifted up for analysis four sub-events, all of which call attention to the processive and relational character of the creative event. These are: (1) emerging awareness of qualitative meaning derived from other persons through communication, (2) integrating these new meanings with others previously acquired, (3) expanding the richness of quality in the appreciable world by enlarging its meaning, and (4) deepening the community among those who participate in this total creative event of intercommunication (Wieman 1946, 58). The creative event, he stressed, is constituted by the simultaneous happening of all four sub-events working together and not by any of them alone.<sup>1</sup>

This, then, was the character of the creative event or what Wieman later called creative interchange. This was what he considered worthy of ultimate human commitment. This was what he discerned as capable of producing the deepest human transformation. To whatever extent one can speak of god working in human experience, this fourfold process is exemplified empirically. Anything else one may mean by salvation or by god, if it is to be experienced, is experienced concretely as this natural process. If we accept the view that processes are the ultimate and only concrete reality, then Wieman's theism follows empirically. This was *not* the argument that, wherever god is manifest, there is creative transformation, but precisely the opposite—wherever one finds creative transformation, *there* one finds what has been meant by *god*.

Wieman's conviction that the creative event functions to transform us as we cannot transform ourselves suggests the presence of a strong functional analysis in his method. Even while disclaiming any source of human good that is "metaphysically transcendent," Wieman explicitly claimed that such a source is "functionally transcendent" (Wieman 1946, 77n, 264). Furthermore, his identification of *god* with the creative event assumed that god is known and described only in terms of certain functions found within human life. The very title *The Source of Human Good* suggests an interest in uncovering antecedents in terms of which creative transformation is possible.

The question must be asked whether any explanatory import can be claimed for Wieman's analysis. Does the fourfold creative event as so described furnish the necessary and sufficient conditions of transformation toward the greater good? It must be shown to be a sufficient condition in order to be certain that the required transformation will actually follow from the creative event. It also must be shown to be a necessary condition in order to guarantee that, whenever the required transformation occurs, the creative event occurs. If Wieman's argument cannot be shown to satisfy both of these conditions, then his theory of the creative event is, in W. V. Quine's words, "a cog which turns no explanatory wheels."

If we examine closely the logic of Wieman's argument concerning the creative event, we discover that it follows the form of functional analysis. Further, if we compare the logic of Wieman's argument to several well-known critiques of functionalism, it appears to suffer the same fate as other functionalist theories.<sup>2</sup> In particular, the work of Carl Hempel in appraising "The Logic of Functional Analysis" calls into question the logic of Wieman's procedure.

According to Hempel's schematic characterization, a functional analysis takes the following form:

- (a) At *t*, *s* functions adequately in a setting of kind *c* (characterized by specific internal and external conditions).
- (b) *s* functions adequately in a setting of kind *c* only if a certain necessary condition, *n*, is satisfied.
- (c) If trait *i* were present in *s* then, as an effect, condition *n* would be satisfied.
- (d) Hence, at *t*, trait *i* is present in *s* (Hempel 1965, 310).

The problem with the logic of such an argument is that it commits the fallacy of affirming the consequent with regard to conditional premise (c). The fallacy of affirming the consequent can be simply illustrated. For example, I might assert the factual case that I was late for the meeting and then argue for the following explanation. If I get caught in a slow elevator, I will be late for the meeting. I was late for the meeting; therefore, I was caught in a slow elevator. The conclusion is obviously invalid. I may have overslept, or taken the stairs, or lost my way. As Hempel notes, "it might well be that the occurrence of any one of a number of alternative items would suffice no less than the occurrence of *i* to satisfy requirement *n*, in which case the account provided by the premises of [the argument] simply fails to explain why the trait *i* rather than one of its alternatives is present in *s* at *t*" (Hempel 1965, 310).

In order to validly infer (d), (c) would have to assert that *only* the presence of trait *i* could effect satisfaction of condition *n*. Otherwise, the reasoning really amounts to no more than saying: if I am late, then something must have happened. But it is extremely doubtful that conditional premise (c) could ever be shown to be a *necessary* condition in any such argument.

Transposed to the terms of Wieman's discussion, Hempel's schema yields the following internal structure of Wieman's argument:

- (a) At a given time, value increases, *s*, in a certain setting of kind *c*.
- (b) Value increases, *s*, in a certain setting only if a certain necessary condition of transformation towards the greater good, *n*, is satisfied.
- (c) If the fourfold creative event is present in *s*, then as an effect transformation towards the greater good occurs.
- (d) Hence, at *t* the fourfold creative event is present in *s*.

The problem with Wieman's analysis is, as above, that completely different events—for example, a collectivity of diverse activities or a multiplicity of environmental conditions—might also suffice to produce the same consequences. As an argument, it commits the fallacy of affirming the consequent. Indeed, it may be precisely because of his entanglement in this fallacy that Wieman was unable to guard his theistic claims against John Dewey's alternative humanistic inference. Logically, there is little basis for deciding between a theistic naturalism and a humanistic naturalism.<sup>3</sup>

Two revisions can be made in Wieman's argument which would make it formally valid, but neither is very welcome. Briefly, Wieman could rule out the possibility of functional equivalents to the creative event by definitional fiat. That is, he could treat the creative event as the necessary condition that is functionally indispensable to the transformation towards the greater good, thus amending (c) above to read: *Only* if *i* were present in *s* then as an effect condition *n* would be satisfied. This would safeguard the postulate against any conceivable disconfirmation, but at the price of abandoning it as an empirical hypothesis and conceding that it is a covert tautology.

A second alternative is available. Let us suppose that Wieman could replace the troublesome premise (c) by the following statement supplied by Hempel:

- (c') *i* is the class of all empirically sufficient conditions for the fulfillment of requirement *n* in the context determined by system *s* in setting *c*; and *i* is not empty (Hempel 1965, 313).

Here, however the best that one is able to infer from the premises (a), (b), and (c) is the weak conclusion that some one of the items included in class  $i$  is present in system  $s$  at time  $t$ . This conclusion still offers no grounds for expecting the occurrence of any particular item from  $i$  rather than one of its functional alternatives. Moreover, as Hempel shows, this kind of inference is trivial.

Both of these moves, which Hempel believes render the argument logically valid,<sup>4</sup> reduce it either to a tautology or to a triviality, neither of which is very helpful to the claims of an empirical theism. My conclusion is that Wieman's theory of the creative event, when mapped against Hempel's model of empirical explanation, is unable to meet the criteria for successful explanation.

At most, Wieman's functionalist method explains only the function (creative transformation) by reference to some phenomenon by which it is achieved (the creative event). This still leaves us with no explanation for the phenomenon itself and no theory of an empirical sort. His functionalism gives us an explanation of transformation, perhaps, but not of god as the creative event. As far as theism is concerned, it makes Wieman's model heuristic, but not empirical.

#### FALLIBILISM AND COMMITMENT

There are, however, various ways to be empirical, in philosophy as well as in the study of religion. Wieman's functionalist theory of the creative event fails as a theory, but the *distinction* he made between created goods and the creative event has another, heuristic, function to perform. By means of this distinction Wieman was able to view all created goods (e.g., our present structures of knowledge, achieved values, and highest ideals) as subject to testing, revision, and correction. None is necessary; all may and should be criticized. In this respect the overall spirit of Wieman's philosophy of religion is very much in line with the important perspective of Karl Popper's falsifiability/criticizability criterion. Popperian empiricism allows us to see that "what characterizes the empirical method is its manner of exposing to falsification, in every conceivable way, the system to be tested. Its aim is not to save the lives of untenable systems but, on the contrary, to select the one which is by comparison the fittest, by exposing them all to the fiercest struggle for survival" (Popper 1959, 42).

Despite his announced dissociations, Popper was still close to the positivist tradition in his delineation of the *kinds* of available falsification which he saw as falling into the familiar bifurcation of conflict with hard fact and logical contradiction. Later, when he stressed the criterion of criticizability, that is, willingness to make our claims vulnerable, to innovate, and to treat nothing as exempt from revision, he intro-

duced something far more important, something already central to Wieman's understanding of religious inquiry. When Popper extended his method to apply to political institutions as well as to empirical science, he was advocating a method which Wieman was extending to religious beliefs. Just as Popper argued that the question is not the traditional one about the source of knowledge but rather the question of how can we hope to detect and eliminate error, Wieman articulated a view of all religious knowledge and belief as conjectural, tentative, and provisional—unremittingly fallibilistic.

Both projects, Wieman's and Popper's, are engaged in criticism and the growth of knowledge, which is arguably the one feature of empiricism to survive the various assaults against empiricist philosophy in this century. Popper's aim was to construct a philosophical program for fostering creativity and counteracting intellectual error, instead of positing authorities in terms of which to guarantee or to secure beliefs and opinions. Wieman's aim was to construct a mode of religious inquiry into whatever does empirically operate in human life to create and transform human existence, regardless how drastically different it may be from received beliefs in any area. Within both programs the question is not the traditional "how do you know?" question, for we do *not* know. A different question becomes paramount: "How can our lives and institutions be arranged so as to expose our positions, actions, opinions, beliefs, aims, conjectures, decisions, standards, frameworks, ways of life, policies, traditional practice, etc., . . . to optimum examination" and ultimate transformation for the better? (Bartley 1983, 260). Popper wanted commitment to the process of criticism to produce growth of knowledge. Wieman wanted commitment to the creative event to produce growth of value and qualitative meaning.

I am trying to suggest not just that an interesting parallel exists between Popperian and Wiemanian empiricism, but something more: I think that Wieman's writings address a dimension of the problem not seen by Popper. Wieman's is an argument about concrete relations between *people*, not about semantic properties of *statements*. To Wieman, a "ruling commitment," as he called it, clearly should be directed only to the creativity operating in human existence to create, sustain, and transform all structures of life, doing for us what we are unable to do for ourselves. But what are we to make of Wieman's notion that a ruling commitment of a religious sort is to be given to the creative event? Is this no more than his naturalistic version of the old theological idea that human sinfulness and despair puts us in need of a power not our own that makes for creativity? Is the distinction between the *creative* event and *created* good simply Wieman's version of what Paul Tillich called the "Protestant principle," an injunction not to absolutize the

relative? Perhaps so, but I think it is susceptible to more than this. Disregarding the spirit of high Calvinism which sometimes colors Wieman's rhetoric about commitment to the creative event, I suggest that we can see it as a self-relativizing rule that has both existential and epistemological implications for an empirical philosophy of religion.

Existentially, it leads to cultivation of felt qualities of experience very much like those associated with Buddhist concepts of letting go and of existing without attachment to cravings and desires, even in the realm of belief and opinion. In this way, Wieman's formulation of the creative event is like the Buddha's raft, which is for crossing over, and not for getting hold of.

Epistemologically, it represents a release from the trilemma of dogmatisms, fideisms, and relativisms, the three most common standpoints assumed by philosophers of religion in answer to meta-level questions of justification. What is the final terminating point for chains of epistemic justification, if infinite regress is to be avoided? Relativists regard the problem as insoluble. Fideists simply call a halt at certain forms of life or language-games. Dogmatists apply arbitrary or circular courts of appeal declared to be ultimate. Wieman's radical empiricism, however, permits no principles, frameworks, beliefs, or forms of life that are immune to examination, revision, criticism, and the further working of the creative event. Invoking a Buddhist spirit of detachment from issues of right belief, Wieman's self-relativizing rule advises an ultimate commitment only to a continual *process* of testing and transforming any and all beliefs and commitments.

One may, with Popper and a host of other Western thinkers, simply submit to fallibilism as inherent in all empirical truth-claims and commitments, assenting to this as an ineluctable feature of modern rationality. And one may, with Charles Hartshorne and other process philosophers, press rationality to the point of postulating certain necessary truths for which we have no conceivable alternatives. Or, like Buddhist thinkers of many periods—and like Wieman, too—one may find in the very conditions of contingency a religious significance that informs the whole quality of life as lived. Contingency embraced without any nostalgia or yearning for necessary truths yields a different quality of life than contingency assented to as necessarily so in the absence of any conceivable alternative.

#### RADICAL EMPIRICISM AND ANTI-FOUNDATIONALISM

Wieman's work, which has been mainly appraised in light of its theological possibilities, needs now to be seen in the context of developments in post-positivistic empirical philosophy. When that is done, and when account is taken of the work of other American philosophers such as



Quine, Wilfrid Sellars, Donald Davidson, Nelson Goodman, and Thomas Kuhn, I believe that Wieman's type of empiricism will be seen to participate in the emerging trend toward anti-foundationalism in epistemology. One of the distinctive features, in fact, of American radical empiricism has been its indifference to the Cartesian quest for indubitable starting points, incorrigible data, and secure foundations for knowledge. Therefore, current arguments against epistemological foundationalism are not, as far as I can see, arguments against the kind of data which radical empiricism has located at the fringe, not at the foundations, of the web of experience. For Dewey, William James, Charles Sanders Peirce, and Alfred North Whitehead, as much as for Wieman and other American religious empiricists, these data include quality as well as quantity, relations as well as relata, valuations as well as so-called facts.

With respect to these data, two kinds of empirical approaches are currently available. One attempts to reduce all that is to count as knowledge to the mathematical-deductive model; the other attempts to resurrect the meanings contained in human symbols, feeling-tones, and valuations. The problematic delimited by these two approaches is fundamental; it provides the background for contemporary discussions and barriers between the natural sciences, behavioristic sciences, linguistic philosophy in most of its analytic variations, and psychoanalysis, phenomenology, hermeneutics, and theology. The underlying dilemma not only confronts us with a choice between clear, distinct, and manageable data or dim, vague, and unmanageable data in conducting inquiry, but also with the question as to which modes of understanding are to be rewarded with the honorific title of *knowledge*. Due to the impressive ascendancy of modern science and the mathematical-deductive model as paradigmatic of knowledge in our culture, it is not surprising that Wieman's kind of religious empiricism has had an uphill battle in establishing its cognitive claims.

Yet Wieman's brand of anti-foundationalism, his denial of the possibility of intuitive knowledge, and his attempt to formulate public criteria for explicating the empirical meaning of religious belief anticipated much in contemporary philosophy. With the waning of foundationalism in epistemology and the prominence of post-positivistic developments in the philosophy of science, what remains of philosophical empiricism today is pretty much just what Wieman always insisted were the three marks of empirical method: observation, agreement between observers, and coherence with other propositions. "All three of these," he emphasized, "apply to every proposition alleged to be true, whether it is in the field of common sense, science, philosophy, or faith" (Wieman 1946, 211). In the end, what remained empirical in Wieman's

method of religious inquiry was this emphasis on observation, agreement, and coherence, to each of which he gave a Jamesian radically empirical construal.

This leads me, here too briefly, to the first of three general recommendations I want to make about the future prospects of Wieman's religious naturalism and of radical religious empiricism in general—if indeed it is to gain more of a contemporary hearing. First, at least part of the agenda has to consist in a new examination and articulation of the philosophical bases of this mode of empiricism in explicit relation to other (post-Wiemanian) developments in contemporary philosophy, in order to exhibit its distinctive place in the history of empiricisms.

Second, I think it must be recognized that the creative event or “god,” as Wieman himself depicts its structure, lacks sufficient unity to achieve what is claimed for it. Specifically, this means that Wieman's additional theistic claims, that the creative event is “absolute,” in the sense that it is good under all conditions and circumstances, that it is “unlimited,” “infinite in value,” “unqualified in its goodness,” and “entirely trustworthy,” are claims that do not appear to be derived from empirical observation of any sort nor verifiable by it (Wieman 1946, 79-82). It is doubtful that an *invariant* structure could ever be discerned empirically at all. Upon further investigation, then, the theism in question may turn out to be much more of a *polytheism*, as in fact it is coming to resemble in Charles Hartshorne's recent speculations.<sup>5</sup>

Third, I suggest that post-Wiemanian religious empiricism today needs to enter a less insulated, more cross-cultural phase, in which a new generation of scholars will attend to the great naturalistic religious traditions of China and Japan, engaging in the kind of comparative study not yet expected of philosophers of religion during Wieman's lifetime but incumbent upon our generation. Such dialogue is, after all, a most natural extension of Wieman's analysis of “creative interchange.”

#### NOTES

1. Wieman later added to this analysis a fifth sub-event, increase of freedom (cf. Wieman 1961, 61-62, 125-26).

2. See Hempel (1965), Jarvie (1973), Merton (1957), and Nagel (1957). These critiques all deal with functionalism in the social sciences and are applicable to explanations of religion in the anthropological and sociological disciplines. For the best criticism of functionalism as methodology in the study of religion, see the articles by Hans H. Penner (1971-72 and 1975). I know of no critique of functionalism as an implicit or explicit theory in the philosophy of religion or in theology.

3. The point I am making concerns the logic of argumentation and has nothing to do with adherence to logical positivism's model of explanation. The fact that Hempel was at one time associated with now outdated logical positivism is quite irrelevant to the fallacy of affirming the consequent.

4. In this connection, Penner has detected an error in Hempel's presentation of the revision, curiously overlooked by Hempel himself. The revised model, as Penner shows,

is "invalid on the same basis as the first" (Penner, unpublished working manuscript). Even though Hempel thinks that the suggested revisions make the argument formally valid, although its conclusion is either tautologous or trivial, Penner points out that the argument remains formally invalid, no matter how many revisions, unless conditional premise (c) can be shown to be a *necessary* condition.

5. For Hartshorne's recent speculations about the "seemingly strange and somewhat polytheistic idea" which he is "not prepared to accept or reject" as a way of reconciling his neo-classical theism with the absence of cosmic simultaneity, see Hartshorne (1982, 118-19).

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