

# DIRECTIONS IN HISTORICISM: LANGUAGE, EXPERIENCE, AND PRAGMATIC ADJUDICATION

by Sheila Greeve Davaney

*Abstract.* This article examines the current affirmation within theology of historicism, with its assumption that the historical realm, broadly construed, is the only arena of human activity and knowledge and its repudiation of traditional forms of foundationalism and correspondence theories of truth. The essay performs this task by analyzing the work of Gordon Kaufman and William Dean, setting forth their commonly shared historicism, pragmatism, and constructivist approaches to theology, as well as their differences concerning nonlinguistic dimensions of experience. The essay also focuses on the move by both thinkers to include nature in their understanding of history and to offer biocultural interpretations of human existence.

*Keywords:* constructive theology; historicism; nature; pragmatism; radical empiricism.

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In his recent book, *History Making History*, William Dean contends that an outlook and set of assumptions are emerging within contemporary American thought which he labels an *American historicism* (Dean 1988, 12). According to Dean, this historicist orientation characterizes a wide range of thinkers and intellectual perspectives, including philosophical neopragmatism, forms of literary criticism, neopragmatic philosophies of religion, postmodern and constructivist theology, radical empiricism, and historicized naturalism. While the thinkers who are forging these perspectives represent various disciplinary commitments and work out of disparate intellectual and political agendas, increasingly they share a set of presuppositions that suggest a common ground for conversation and

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[*Zygon*, vol. 26, no. 2 (June 1991).]

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debate, if not the basis for a readily agreed-upon and widely affirmed consensus. Among the fundamental premises these thinkers espouse, Dean states, are acceptance of “only historical references,” affirmation of “pragmatism, pluralism and the constructive power of the imagination,” and “the rejection of foundationalism, the transcendentalized subject and a correspondence-theory-of-truth realism.” In sum, Dean argues, “they acknowledge that historical reality is created through interpretation of the historical subject—that it is history that makes history” (Dean 1988, ix).

It is my present task to focus on two representatives of this orientation who are working out its implications for the disciplines of philosophy of religion and theology. By examining the constructivist theology of Gordon Kaufman and the radical empiricism of William Dean, we may clarify what these positions hold in common and elucidate divergences, whether of emphases or more fundamental premises.

A central lament of Dean’s book is that, while he discerns a historicist orientation, typifying much American thought today, it is characterized by an ironic amnesia, a forgetting of the very history that has provided, at least in part, the context for the renewed historicism of today. With this in mind, it is perhaps appropriate to begin this paper by historically locating the thinkers upon whom I will be focusing my analyses, for they come to *this* conversation from other, different conversations, and it is important to note these, if only briefly and in passing.

#### GORDON KAUFMAN AND CONSTRUCTIVIST THEOLOGY

Gordon Kaufman’s constructivist view of theology has been forged in relation to a set of influences that include a Mennonite religious background, with its insistence that the quality of life is more important than claims to truth; an intellectual heritage shaped by Kant and Hegel and the Continental rendering of the modern project; the neo-orthodox visions of Barth and H. R. Niebuhr, with their emphases upon the problem of idolatry and the critical function of God-talk; and the American strand of theology and philosophy associated with James and Dewey and the Chicago School, with their naturalistic and sociohistorical orientation and their articulation of an American pragmatism. Moreover, certain contemporary insights and issues have also shaped Kaufman’s theological agenda. In particular, recognition of religious pluralism, realization that we live under a self-imposed nuclear threat and the possibility of the annihilation of

all life, and acknowledgment that not only is experience shaped by language and culture, but that such shaping has to do in the most profound way with power and its unequal distribution—all of these have given particular direction to Kaufman's thinking.

In conversation and critical struggle with these influences and issues, Kaufman has developed a view of theology as imaginative construction that stands in contrast to a number of other theological options on the current scene. In particular, this understanding of theology is in opposition to authoritarian models of theology (whether they discover some final truth in the past, or in ahistorical reason, or in experience, or in revelation) and to more recent deconstructionist efforts that, while they historicize everything, appear to give up all interest in or hope of normative visions in which persons might live fruitful and humane lives. In contrast, Kaufman has steadfastly argued for an interpretation of theology that is thoroughly historicist in character, eschewing all claims to absoluteness or certitude but insisting upon the possibility, indeed the necessity, of normative visions in relation to which we might live our lives.

William Dean comes to this discussion from a different dialogic location than Kaufman. For Dean has developed his position in primary conversation with the line of American thought that stretches from James and Dewey to contemporary American pragmatists, though he rejects the repudiation of religion and the radical empiricism that has marked so much of neopragmatism today. On the other hand, he has attempted to engage more rationalists and speculative process thinkers in conversation concerning the repercussions of an empirical rendering of process thought, and to move away from the metaphysical and rationalistic emphases still prominent in much process thinking. By so doing, he hopes to bring process thought more fully into the current theological and philosophical debates, upon whose fringes it has so long lingered. Finally, Dean has forthrightly sought to converse with other historicists, such as Kaufman, and deconstructionists such as Mark C. Taylor, to see what these positions might contribute to one another.

In light of the fact that both Kaufman and Dean eschew any spectator view of knowledge, it is perhaps important to note that I, no mere spectator, have been influenced by both these perspectives. I was a graduate student of Kaufman and John Cobb, and through the vagaries of history have found myself teaching at Iliff School of Theology, long a bastion of naturalism and radical empiricism, and presently have as my colleague in theology Del Brown, with whom conversations more often than not turn to the issues I will be exploring here. Hence, it has increasingly seemed appropriate that I look

at these perspectives in light of one another, and to that task I now turn.

Gordon Kaufman has been arguing for years for a view of theology that he terms *imaginative construction* (Kaufman 1975, 1981, 1985). Such a constructivist approach is grounded in an interpretation of human life as emergent from and shaped within both a long natural process of biological evolution and a historically formed social and cultural matrix. Through these natural and historical processes, human consciousness, and with it distinctively human life, appeared and developed. From early on, human life was characterized not only by blind physiological adaptations to the natural environment but also by the development of culture and language. In this view, culture was not added to a finished animal but was integral to the evolution, survival, and development of the human form of life. Hence cultural resources have been both created by and creative of distinctively human life; indeed, without them, human life would not have been possible.

For Kaufman then, culture and language are ingredient in all human forms of being and modes of activity. The possible ways humans enact their humanity, the roles they can take, the forms of activities open to them, *and* their interaction with the natural world are all made possible through and are dependent upon the linguistic and symbolic visions that human communities create. This dependence upon culture and language is manifested on all levels of human life, but it finds fundamental expression in our need for overarching frameworks of interpretation by which reality is organized and the human place within the scheme of things is given definition. According to Kaufman, the absence of such a broad and inclusive vision of reality and of humanity's place within the cosmos would render human life impossible: "We cannot gain orientation in life and cannot act without some conception or vision of the context within which we are living and moving, and without some understanding of our own place and role within that context" (Kaufman 1981, 27). Moreover, these frames of orientation are not merely broad interpretive schemes without much definition, but are focused and given specification through central symbols that embody their fundamental convictions about reality and the values that are embedded in such convictions.

If Kaufman argues for an anthropological theory in which overarching schemes play a central role, he also insists that these interpretive grids within and through which humans gain orientation are not the result of a direct reading of the nature of reality, or of reality itself, or of some direct access to the nature of things. They are,

rather, imaginative pictures, built up through history and culture, of what we take existence to be about and of our human place within the cosmic context. That is to say, these networks of meaning, these worldviews, are quite thoroughly cultural and social creations that are developed through historical processes. And the symbols that focus them are equally the product of human imaginative activity (Kaufman 1981, 28).

Furthermore, such inclusive visions grow out of, reflect, and often reinforce the societal contexts in which they take shape, including the values and power arrangements of those contexts. Hence human visions of the nature and meaning of reality as a whole and of humanity's place within the cosmos are not disinterested accounts of a readily accessible and objectively knowable reality, but value- and interest-laden interpretations of life and its purposes.

Kaufman extends his theory of worldviews and their human constitution to what we have come to call religious understandings of reality and the symbols that center them. That is, the comprehensive frameworks we label religions and their symbols are also cultural artifacts. This is so no less for Christianity than for Buddhism, Islam, or Marxist humanism; no less for the theistic idea of God than for such symbols as emptiness, humanity, and nature. Such religious visions and symbols are also imaginative renderings, not names for directly or even indirectly experienced realities. They are human constructs, fabricated out of the bits and pieces of human life, embodying the basic convictions, values, and hopes of the traditions within which they emerged, and in turn shaping, undergirding, and giving direction to life within these historical strands (Kaufman 1981, 100–101).

Out of such presuppositions Kaufman has fashioned an interpretation of theology as imaginative construction whose primary task is not the articulation of apodictic truth claims about reality or God but the “analysis, criticism and reconstruction” of comprehensive frameworks and, in particular, their symbols so that these might better serve their function of ordering and giving direction to human life (Kaufman 1985, 22). Theology is thus, for Kaufman, carried out for the highly pragmatic purpose of providing orientation in life. Comprehensive interpretive systems and their symbols are human products, arising from the fundamental human need for order, meaning, and a sense of purpose for life. Hence our theological thinking is not an end in itself but seeks to contribute to the evaluation and restructuring of such systems so they may further enhance human life in the contemporary period. Therefore, in Kaufman's view, both theology, as a form of reflection, and the worldviews and

symbols to which it attends are, in the final analysis, to be judged by the modes of human life they make possible. Kaufman focuses such pragmatic criteria by stating that the ultimate norm for theology and for worldviews and their symbols is humanization, or the creation of more humane forms of human existence (Kaufman 1981, 168, 199). In *The Theological Imagination*, Kaufman states his case bluntly when he says, "The central problem facing the present generation is the construction of a genuinely humane order—lest we destroy ourselves completely. If theological reflection is to be justified in this crisis, it must contribute to this work. A theology that makes an essential contribution to our humanization is the *only* sort we can afford today" (Kaufman 1981, 168).

If Kaufman has found himself opposing those who seek or think they have found certain truth, of whatever origin, he has also differentiated himself from those who would argue that recognition of our radical historicity leads ineluctably to a chaotic relativism or a nonoffensive but vapid tolerance in which no judgments, relative or absolute, can be proffered. Humanization, in Kaufman's view, gives us a norm for adjudication; it provides us the means by which critically to engage our past, and to evaluate our present visions of reality as well as those of others (Kaufman 1981, 168). Such a norm is neither infallible nor absolute. Its content is utterly historical, forged in conversation with our history and our contemporaries, tested for validity in terms of the repercussions it generates, both for our sociocultural life and for our relation to the broader context of the natural world in which we live. The content of humaneness is certainly open to debate, but claiming it as the central theological norm allows us to acknowledge our responsibility for theological construction and to place our critical attention on the only issue that finally matters—what kind of lives are made possible by living our various interpretations of reality.

As I stated at the beginning, Gordon Kaufman has been proposing this view of theology for quite a while. But in his most recent book, *Theology for a Nuclear Age* (1985), he presents it with greater urgency, for he suggests that we face an unprecedented crisis which demands, if we are to survive, much greater self-consciousness of our role in the construction of our interpretations of reality and a more critical analysis of the repercussions of living out of (in particular) our Western theistic heritage. According to Kaufman, we face the possibility, which no other generation of humanity has ever faced, of total annihilation—not partial destruction, but the complete and final end of life, and not only human reality but also the web of life within which humanity resides. In light of this situation, Kaufman

asserts that the responsibility to reexamine our traditions in terms of their adequacy for today is imperative if humanity is to survive and, if it survives, to create more humane and just forms of community. Thus Kaufman in this work undertakes the constructive theological project he argued for in his methodological discussions, and he does so, in part, through reexamination of the Christian symbol of God. This critical analysis elucidates Kaufman's theological program as well as indicates the direction of his current thought.

According to Kaufman, the symbol *God*, as it developed in Western theistic history, has been envisioned as the ultimate point of reference, the most central reality, in relation to which all life is to be lived and in terms of which the meaning of human life is to be understood. As such, Kaufman argues, this symbol has come to fulfill two central functions: relativizing all human life and effort, and grounding all forms of humaneness (Kaufman 1985, 32-34).

As relativizer, the symbol God has functioned to remind humans of their finitude and that they are not ultimate, the center of all life and meaning. Again as relativizer, the idea of God has undercut the seemingly all-pervasive human tendency toward self-idolatry. As humanizer, the symbol God has embodied the conviction that humanity is of value, and that that from which human life originated and is sustained is supportive of human possibility and meaning.

Now while Kaufman contends that the symbol God has had these two functions (though not always in the same proportion), the images, metaphors, and concepts that embodied these functions have differed over the ages and in different historical communities. Yet Kaufman suggests that one strand has had, if not continual expression, a fairly consistent presence in Western theistic schemes, and that is the interpretation of God as omnipotent creator and controller of all reality. In concrete images, such omnipotent power has been embodied in the metaphors of God as Creator, Lord, King, Father, and the like.

A major contention of Kaufman's book is that, though he affirms the need for the symbol of God that continues to function as relativizer and humanizer, humans can no longer afford this understanding of God as omnipotent controller of reality. Such a view in a nuclear age is dangerous, for it contributes to the evasion of human responsibility for our situation. It leads humans to assume that either God will save us from such destruction or that the annihilation of life is part of the divine providential plan. In either case, such an idea engenders passivity and irresponsibility in the face of an enormous threat (Kaufman 1985, 7-8).

In light of this, Kaufman suggests that we reconstruct the idea of

God, forgoing the notion of omnipotence and the ancient images and metaphors that expressed this power. Instead, we should reconceive God as the symbol of those biological and historical forces that have brought forth life, both human and nonhuman, and have been the foundations out of which consciousness and history have emerged. "God should today be conceived in terms of the complex of physical, biological and historico-cultural conditions which have made human existence possible, which continue to sustain it and which may draw it out to fuller humanity and humaneness" (Kaufman 1985, 42). As such, the symbol-God would not be mistaken for the name of a personlike reality but would be identified as that which "holds together in a unity that complex reality which grounds and sustains our human existence" (Kaufman 1985, 43).

In this reconstructed view, God would no longer be interpreted as the omnipotent controller of reality who could save us from our madness by divine fiat, but the symbol for those life-engendering aspects of reality that we, in this age unlike all others, can destroy. God, in this vision, is a source of ongoing support for life and humane possibilities but can provide no guarantee that we will not put an end to not only present life but the prospect of all future life. Such a view, Kaufman thinks, is more adequate to our situation and more productive of creative and responsible action on our part (1985, 45).

Before leaving the thought of Gordon Kaufman, I want to highlight several points that I think may focus the comparison with Dean's proposals. First, language is central to Kaufman's understanding of experience and reflection upon experience. *Experience* is a fairly specified term for him, indicating those dimensions of human existence that can be identified and delineated linguistically. This is not to say that we humans do not interact with our environments on nonlinguistic levels, nor that humans are not receptive of influences from those environments. It is to say that we can only know and attend to such interaction through linguistic means.

Second, theology is a complex and high-level form of reflection whose primary focus is on complex linguistic and conceptual constructions. Its attention is not to the "non-linguistic depths of experience," nor does it purport to refer to "reality" in any direct descriptive manner. Instead, theology entails linguistic constructions dealing with other linguistic and symbolic constructions.

Third, this view does not mean that theology has, so to speak, nothing to do with "reality"—an accusation often leveled at Kaufman. Our comprehensive frameworks and their symbols are built out of our local and episodic experience—all, of course, linguistically mediated—and our reflection on them should be carried out to



enhance our experience—that is, to enable us to function better in the world. As such, these frameworks and their symbols “intend the real”; that is, they embody our most fundamental convictions about the nature of reality, and it is our at least implicit, if not uncritical, confidence in their adequacy that allows us to function more or less effectively.

Fourth, despite our intentions, we never are in a position to verify which of our worldviews and symbols refer most adequately to reality. Reality has, in a sense, the final word, in that if we utterly destroy ourselves, we can assume that the principle of falsification is at work. Short of that, however, we are confronted with multiple interpretive schemes and symbol systems, each offering illuminating and plausible pictures of reality and of human life and purposes. The only way to evaluate these internally and to adjudicate their competing claims is therefore by reference, *not* to a self-attesting reality, but only to the pragmatic consequences of living in each.

This last point is important, for Kaufman’s recent move to speak of God in naturalistic terms has been read by many, friends and critics alike, as a major shift toward more directly referential language in relation to God (Cole-Turner 1986, 31; Pailin 1986, 5–36). Depending on the perspective, Kaufman’s conception of the God symbol in terms of biological and historicosocial forces is interpreted either as inconsistency or the dawning of truth. Either reading is, I think, mistaken. Rather, I believe the idea of God articulated in *Theology for a Nuclear Age* and other recent writings is precisely the embodiment of Kaufman’s constructivist project, not its repudiation. For this idea, no less than its theological and religious predecessors, is a symbolic construction built up through our imaginative activity, just as were earlier notions of God as transcendent and omnipotent creator. Hence the test of its validity continues to be the insight and guidance it gives us, not suddenly its adequate correspondence to the “way things really are.”

This interpretation of Kaufman is reinforced by his increasing use of the term *mystery*. In his 1972 book, *God the Problem*, Kaufman distinguished between the “available” and the “real” God, depicting the former as our humanly created notion of the ultimate point of reference and the latter as that limiting idea which undermines all our tendencies to think we have it right (Kaufman 1972, chap. 5). Kaufman has replaced the notion of a real God, with its unintended but powerful theistic prejudices, with the vaguer notion of mystery. This idea confesses, Kaufman says, to our “unknowing.” It is “an acknowledgment . . . that we do not know how the images and metaphors in terms of which we conceive God apply; since they are

always our own metaphors and images, infected by our limitations, interests, and biases” (Kaufman 1989, 43–44). Again, he states: “Today we are forced to take with greater seriousness the fact that we do not know, and we can see no way in which we will ever be able to plumb the true meaning of human life—or whether there even is such a thing” (Kaufman 1989, 43). Thus the Kaufman of today is more of an agnostic than ever and just as committed to his constructivist project (Kaufman 1989, 44).

With these thoughts in mind, we now turn to the proposals set forth by William Dean.

#### WILLIAM DEAN'S HISTORICISM, RADICAL EMPIRICISM, AND PRAGMATISM

I am considering the work of Bill Dean because I think that, of all the people working on the revival of radical empiricism, his sympathies and vision most closely approximate Gordon Kaufman's. In his two recent books, *American Religious Empiricism* (1986) and *History Making History* (1988), as well as some current articles, Dean carries on a dialogue not only with his naturalist and radical empiricist forebears in the figures of James and Dewey and Meland and Loomer and the like, but also with more contemporary historicist thinkers such as Richard Rorty, Mark C. Taylor, and Gordon Kaufman (Dean 1986, 1988). From his exploration of what some might term disparate positions, Dean has begun to fashion an intriguing (if not always clear) position that intertwines historicism, radical empiricism, and pragmatism. The combination of these three dimensions represents, according to Dean, a third way beyond the impasse of a foundationalism that seeks sure ground for our ideas and claims to truth, outside the vagaries of the historical process, and a subjectivism that forgoes all interest in broader appeals for justification, being content with seemingly arbitrary statements of preference. In developing his view, Dean does not claim to be offering a definitive metaphysics, cosmology, or epistemology. Instead, he offers something of an imaginative world-picture and a theory of experience that, from the outset, admits its tentativeness and speculative character while suggesting good reasons for proceeding in this manner.

The first leg, so to speak, of Dean's position is his historicism. For Dean, there is no reality that we can know, have experience of, or have access to or relationship with outside historical time and space, nor are there extrahistorical principles to which we might have recourse as the basis for our understandings of reality. There are, instead, only the contingent realities of history and our time-

and place-conditioned understandings of them. Stated even more strongly, the history we have is composed not of facts or things or events that we can know with some kind of pure objectivity but rather is an endless chain of interpretation whereby the past is appropriated in ever-changing and new ways (Dean 1989, 108). Hence Dean's historicism sets itself in opposition to foundationalist approaches that seek certainty in extrahistorical sources, to realisms that assume the capacity for unbiased and objective access to reality, and to views of the human subject that, in their emphasis on universal common characteristics, dislocate individuals from their concrete, particular locations in history.

On these points, Dean is in clear agreement with many forms of historicist thinking that are so prevalent today. However, he is convinced that the historicism of many of these thinkers does not go far enough, in that it confines itself to human social and cultural history. The natural sphere is either completely ignored or rendered in nonhistorical categories. The "new historicists," as he labels them, "limit history to language and culture, thus omitting natural events." Contrary to this humanistic historicism, Dean proposes a historicized naturalism in which nature too is seen as a process of interpretation upon interpretation whereby the natural world constitutes itself. This move permits Dean to overcome the bifurcation of human cultural history and the processes of nature. Although language deeply shapes the interpretive process within human history and makes it distinct from the natural sphere, nonetheless, Dean contends, there is a parallel interpretive process by which nature constitutes itself—a kind of nonlinguistic hermeneutics, if you will. Moreover, this historicized view of nature is important, not only because it rejects the dualistic opposition of nature and history, but because it will be seen to complement Dean's radical empiricism (which includes a theory of how such natural events can be ingredient in human experience) and his pragmatism (which argues that we must test our ideas and beliefs, not only in terms of human culture and history but also in terms of the sphere of nature).

The second "leg" of Dean's position is radical empiricism. If Dean's historicized naturalism sets him apart from most of the other historicists today, his theory of experience, centered on the claims of radical empiricism, represents an even greater departure from these thinkers and constitutes his most distinctive contribution to these conversations. Dean insists that the linking of historicism, radical empiricism, and pragmatism has a long history in the thought of James and Dewey and the Chicago School. This history, Dean suggests, has been unfortunately forgotten not only because amnesia

distorts these persons' positions but because the severing of historicism, radical empiricism, and pragmatism weakens the viability of these approaches (today in particular) by moving historicism and pragmatism toward a form of subjectivism.

Many present-day historicists and pragmatists, including Gordon Kaufman, have focused upon the linguistic character of human experience and have claimed that there is no such thing as unmediated, nonlinguistically structured experience and that the only world we have, so to speak, is constituted through the power of language. As Kaufman recently stated, "There is no such thing as 'raw experience'; experience completely free of all symbolic and linguistic coloring and interpretation and, thus, the real focus of 'realities' to which our words and symbols can only lamely and abstractly 'point'" (Kaufman 1991).

For Dean, the insights into the role of language and culture articulated by these thinkers are an all-important part of a theory of experience. They are, however, partial, leaving out much and truncating the explanatory power of their interpretations of human experience. In particular, they leave out of their accounts all non-linguistic forms of human awareness and nonlinguistic elements in human knowledge; they remain essentially dualistic, shutting the body off from the human imaginative spirit, the human off from the natural world. Again for Dean, radical empiricism can give a fuller account of these dimensions of human experience, while not denying that in many (though not all) ways, language plays a constitutive role in the determination of experience.

In the radical empiricist version of experience, linguistically shaped and interpreted experience is not the only way human beings relate to our world. Instead, in this view, we are also aware of and connected to our world in a largely prelinguistic or nonlinguistic and mostly unconscious manner. Human beings not only perceive their world through the five senses, and conceptualize and shape such perception linguistically, but have another, fundamental mode of relationship with their environment, both social and natural, by which we literally feel the world, physically and causally, impinging upon us.

There are a number of elements in this claim that experience has to do with more than that which can be identified and expressed linguistically. First, what is experienced in this mode are not only things, separate facts, but primarily relations that are felt as *given* in experience. Second, experience in this mode of primal feeling is valuational. On one hand, the experience itself is not neutral but is laden with value and significance; on the other hand, that which

is experienced is also encountered as valuable and quality filled. Value is thus not something that is only imposed upon the world but is ingredient in the world as well. Third, this way of being aware of and connected to the world is often not separable from our linguistically defined knowledge and experience, but a dimension of them, and hence clear-cut distinctions between these modes are difficult. Moreover, even those moments of experience that are not primarily constituted by language are nonetheless always particular, concrete, and local (Dean 1990). That is, experience is always from a particular perspective, and that perspective shapes it, albeit not always linguistically. Hence it is always contingent and relative to its context; that is, in Dean's terms, it is always historical. And fourth, experience in this mode of feeling is always, in Dean's words, "dim, confusing, vague, unknowable, unabstracted, inchoate, at the margins, akin to the edges of sleep," and therefore not readily available for conscious consideration. Thus whatever we may say about it will not only be tentative and lack certitude but will also involve speculation and imaginative reconstruction.

When Dean speaks of religious sensibilities and God, it is to this dim, vaguely perceived sense of value and direction that he refers. For he argues: What appreciative awareness senses, albeit unclearly, is the movement toward greater historical value, understood as aesthetic complexification or the increase of diversity within unity. Such a "tropism toward complexity" is, as we have seen, always experienced locally and in a transitory fashion, but when such local experience of value is extended by a kind of leap of faith, to assume a general movement in history, then, Dean suggests, we can speak of religious sensibilities. Dean states, therefore, that "the religious person would be distinguished from the non-religious person by his or her faith" that the tropism toward greater historical value is real and that it can be sustained through greater reinterpretation (Dean 1986, 60). Moreover, it is this movement toward greater complexity and, hence, increased aesthetic value that, according to Dean, "provides much of that vitality that makes life, including human life, possible and valuable" (Dean 1986, 62). As such, it elicits wonder, mystery, and commitment and suggests an understanding of morality as loyalty to this directionality and pursuit of its increase through moral action (Dean 1989, 108). For these reasons, Dean asserts it is legitimate to refer to this tropism toward increased value as "God" (Dean 1986, 62).

Thus Dean can be seen to contend that there is a world, as he states it, "beyond the linguistically-positing world," that is apprehended through feeling, through a kind of affectional sensibility. The world,

so encountered, is heavy with significance and direction, but we are only aware of it from our particular locations in history, and we only sense it in a nebulous fashion. This version of radical empiricism keeps faith with Dean's historicism, for it asserts unequivocally that nothing that is experienced in this manner is outside history and that this mode of awareness represents, on a nonlinguistic level, a form of interpretive process that is replicated on conscious and linguistically shaped levels of experience.

Also for Dean, it represents a way of enriching historicism, by insisting that the historical world is not only given value through our linguistic construals of it, but that it is already rich in value to be appropriated. Moreover, Dean's radical empiricism is suggestive, not only of ways we exist within human history, creating meaning and receiving value from our social worlds, but also of how we live in interaction with the natural world and how we are aware, albeit dimly, of values that inhere there. Finally, Dean's radical empiricism delineates a naturalist and historicist interpretation of religious experience and God that does not appeal to any kind of immediate or pure experience, that rejects any extrahistorical referent for the divine, and that takes seriously the constructive character of our idea of God—for the *general* movement toward complexification is, for Dean, never experienced, but, through the imaginative extension of more local experience of value, comes to be affirmed.

If Dean argues that a fuller account of experience must include felt values and relations, it is also clear that, for him, this form of awareness does not yield clear or certain norms and criteria against which we can easily test our linguistic construals of reality and of humanity's place in the cosmos. Dean contends, therefore, that the norms for evaluating the viability of our ideas and beliefs must finally be pragmatic ones; that is, we must test our visions of reality against the effects and consequences they engender within history. But just as Dean develops his broader view of historicism, he offers a distinctive version of pragmatism that sets him off from other pragmatists on the scene today.

First, Dean concurs with many pragmatists that we assess our ideas and conceptual systems, including our religious and theological notions, in the arena of human culture and history through conversation in historical contexts and with historical traditions. Thus he can assert, with other pragmatists, that "history is both gatekeeper and judge, both stages of new variations and slaughterhouse of old ones" (Dean 1988, 105). But, in a manner parallel to his analysis of historicism, he contends that this stage is too small; it is too confined to human history. Against this narrowing of consequences, Dean

argues that we must also test our linguistic interpretations in terms of nature and natural events. Although we certainly construct our ideas of nature, nature exists, for Dean, in real independence from how we may conceive of it and, hence, as that against which we can, at least broadly speaking, check our versions of it. This does not reintroduce a new foundationalism or correspondence theory of truth, for Dean contends such tests are never exact, nor do they issue forth in any final confidence that our ideas have reality exactly right. Such tests do, however, indicate to us the limits of our ideas in a broader realm than the solely human ones of history and culture.

Dean's pragmatism can therefore be seen to embrace both human history and the natural sphere as arenas of consequence within which to evaluate our human conceptual efforts, as well as the various modes of human activity in the world. But the distinctiveness of Dean's version of pragmatism does not stop with this inclusion of nature, for he is not only interested in the fact that finally we test our ideas and constructions pragmatically; he is also concerned with how we decide what counts as an acceptable or satisfactory consequence. "On what grounds," Dean asks, "is something declared valuable or not?" (Dean 1988, 82). Many pragmatists would simply answer that such decisions are made historically, through the contingent conversation of historical persons, and that there are no grounds or sources beyond such human deliberations. Dean sees in such an answer the dangers of subjectivism, of mere preference. While he agrees that what counts as valuable is indeed delineated in historical contexts, he again proposes that this is not a full enough account of how our conceptions of value arise. Instead, he turns to his radical empiricism and suggests that history, both human and natural, is the bearer of both conscious and unconscious value. While we are, at best, only dimly and occasionally aware of this value, attention to this deeper context of value provides a fuller way to understand how history yields criteria, and perhaps a way to develop, or at least argue for, notions of what is satisfactory and valuable in a less arbitrary manner. That is to say, we know not only our own local interests, but also, though vaguely, we are aware of the interests of broader segments of the world in which we exist.

This claim links Dean's pragmatism with his radical empiricism and may be the most interesting part of his whole project, yet it is also the most problematic. For on one hand, Dean has thoroughly acknowledged the constructive human role in the creation of norms; on the other, he has testified to the utter vagueness of our awareness of nonlinguistically transmitted value, so that it is difficult to see how appeal to this level of experience yields anything very concrete or

how, in fact, it avoids the subjectivism that he finds so dangerous elsewhere. Dean himself acknowledges this when, in *History Making History* (1988), he proposes that what is needed in a historicist epistemology that would clarify how “history yields criteria” and how the dim, vaguely felt values referred to by radical empiricists become ingredient in our conscious forms of knowledge (Dean 1988, 83). Until such an epistemology is more fully developed, the linking of radical empiricism and pragmatism will be an interesting but tension-filled proposal whose pragmatic repercussions are not all that clear.

In sum, William Dean is in the midst of developing a distinctive proposal that couples his versions of historicism, radical empiricism, and pragmatism and that purports to give a more adequate account of human experience in the context of nature and history and of the generation of the values in relation to which we assess our ideas of and actions within this world. I believe Dean’s proposals share a good deal in common with Gordon Kaufman’s, though their positions contrast with one another as well. It is to these similarities and to their critical differences that I want to turn in closing.

A number of similarities and shared assumptions characterize the positions of Kaufman and Dean. First, they both work in a historicist perspective that affirms that humans exist within an interdependent social and natural context that is dynamic and processive and is literally constituted by the chain of human and nonhuman appropriations of the past, which they call history. For both, moreover, there is no reality outside of this contingent human and natural web of existence to which we have access, and there is nothing within this historical matrix that will provide us absolute or unchanging foundations. Second, both men promote pragmatic norms for assessing the validity of our claims, and each includes the natural sphere as somehow a part of the conversation that will determine what is beneficial for humanity. Third, Kaufman and Dean are developing substantive ideas of God, along naturalistic lines, and these ideas have at least a family resemblance. Increasingly, Dean seems to be distinguishing his position from some fellow radical empiricists by emphasizing the speculative and constructive character of our idea of God and distancing himself from any claim that we *experience* the whole of reality or even a *general* direction within history. Thus Kaufman and Dean seem to be converging on a more constructivist position vis-à-vis God. Fourth, because of their shared historicism and Dean’s understanding of experience, these two thinkers eschew any idea that their formulations represent any claims to final or



absolute truth. They are positing, instead, explanatory models that each thinks offers an account of human experience that is illuminating and points in a viable direction for development of a normative vision of the human.

Although these similarities represent a “genuine convergence of interest,” differences remain between these two positions, and highlighting several of them may help us avoid too hasty an assumption of agreement while indicating problem areas in each position. One way to focus this final part of this exploration is to return to the beginning, to the conversations from which Dean and Kaufman come. In the end, the position of each man is deeply influenced by thoughts that, though they show certain convergences, take quite distinct directions.

First, Kaufman’s proposal is deeply indebted to his Kantian and Hegelian roots, and especially to Kantian assumptions concerning the constructivist and agential character of all human knowing. Although Kaufman has wanted to continue to affirm these Kantian epistemological insights, he has increasingly repudiated the dualistic ontology that historically accompanied them. Thus, with greater purposiveness, he has turned to nature and the body and to the question of their impact on human linguistic construction. Yet, despite this turn, Kaufman’s central (indeed, almost exclusive) focus has remained upon conscious and linguistically structured experience and upon the productive power of the imagination. While he acknowledges reality external to the human self and nonlinguistically determined elements of human existence, he nonetheless continues to insist that, ultimately, the nature of such modes of reality remains a mystery whose depths we will never be able to fathom and whose influence upon us we may assume but cannot clearly discern. Thus, even within his system, where both self and world are constructs of the imagination, he develops a picture of the relationship between the two that is unidirectional, in which the constructive agency is almost exclusively on the part of the human knower. And though Kaufman grants that if our imaginative construals of the world are to function, they cannot contradict reality, his proposal does not give an account of how such reality shapes, contributes to, constrains, or impacts our linguistic versions of it. This is especially the case in relation to what the radical empiricists have called the *affectional mode of feeling*, by which we interact with our environment. Thus while Kaufman concedes this level of experience and acknowledges that we receive physical input from our world, his position continues to have difficulty explaining how such input influences our eventual linguistic constructions or, in the end, judges them. Hence Kaufman’s human

self, while located in a biosocial world, often appears oddly disembodied, the possessor of a productive imagination whereby it creates a world but is not clearly a coparticipant with that world; and which has agency of its own, in the reciprocal creation of the natural and historical process. This lingering dualism stands in tension with and undermines much of the direction of Kaufman's current thought, and how it is resolved will determine how consistently and persuasively he can develop his present line of argument.

On the surface, William Dean does not have the same problems. His position is not grounded in such dualist assumptions, but in a vision that presupposes the mutual interaction and reciprocal influence of the human self and the human and nonhuman world it inhabits. Dean's analysis of affectional sensibility is precisely an attempt to show how such interaction takes place on the nonlinguistic, preconscious level of feeling. Thus Dean proposes a theory of human experience that does not leave the human self-enclosed in lonely agential isolation, but in real, mutual, and codetermining relation with the world. On the level of an explanatory theory, this proposal seems to avoid the problems of Kaufman's lingering dualism, for it overcomes (at least theoretically) the bifurcation of self and body and humanity and the rest of the world. Yet it runs into similar problems, as Kaufman's proposal does, for Dean has yet to tell us how, in fact, such primal and fundamental levels of experience shape, if at all, our linguistic constructions. Although Dean has acknowledged the need for a historicist epistemology that can provide the link, so to speak, between the nonlinguistic and linguistic levels of human experience, without such a theory, Dean finally leaves us in much the same position as Kaufman, acknowledging that, on a conscious level, experience and knowledge are primarily shaped by language; and while asserting other levels of experience, he has no clear way to speak of their creative role in our linguistic constructions.

Another issue in terms of which intellectual roots point to current differences is the idea of God. On one level, Dean and Kaufman appear to be headed in a similar direction. Each has rejected supernaturalistic renderings of God, and substantively each has utilized naturalistic metaphors that forgo notions of omnipotence. On a more subtle level, however, I think Kaufman's God remains the moral God of his Kantian intellectual heritage and Mennonite religious background, and Dean's deity bears all the marks of the process aesthetic God. For Kaufman, God is a construct whose purpose is to provide orientation in life and to guide human beings in the creation of a *humane* order—that is, the primary function of the idea of God is a *moral* one. Hence Kaufman, though using naturalistic

metaphors, does so because he believes they are more able to nurture a just, equitable, and sustainable human way of life today. Dean's process God is rather the symbol for the movement toward increased aesthetic value in reality. Commitment to this movement, as I noted above, involves a form of morality that is understood as loyalty to and service in the increase of beauty, and hence is not irrelevant to practical and moral concerns. However, when this idea of God is developed along the lines of Bernard Loomer's notion of a concrete God, embracing good and evil, it becomes less clear whether the aesthetic idea of God developed by Dean can be allied with the moral aims so central to Kaufman's position. The pursuit of goodness—interpreted here as humaneness—and the quest for aesthetic value may not be totally divorced, but neither can they be reduced to one another, and their relation to each other in these two proposals merits further clarification.

In closing, I want to point to one further issue among the many that might be raised. Both William Dean and Gordon Kaufman have done admirable jobs in focusing our attention on the fact that humans exist not only in human culture and history but also within the web of natural events, and they have rightly pointed out that if our conceptions of human life and the symbols that focus it are to be adequate for today, they must be framed in biosocial terms and images. However, it must be remembered that the webs of reality within which we exist are, especially on the social level, networks of power and that our construals of both human life and the natural sphere are not benign or innocent but are expressions of fundamental relations of power. As such, the processes by which we name these interconnected matrices, human and natural alike, are profoundly conflictual and bear enormous political and social repercussions. And while both Dean and Kaufman occasionally acknowledge this, their analyses rarely focus upon this dimension, and until they do, Kaufman's appeal to the "humane" and Dean's articulation of the empirical will fail to develop a fundamental insight of contemporary historicist consciousness, that is, the nature of power and its conscious and unconscious transmission in our world.

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