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Pragmatism and Prophecy: H. G. Wells and the Metaphysics of Socialism

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All the great and important beliefs by which life is guided and determined are less of the nature of fact than of artistic expression.
H. G. Wells, *First and Last Things*

Introduction

H. G. Wells (1866-1946) was one of the most famous political thinkers in the early twentieth century Anglophone world. Having made a name for himself writing "scientific romances" during the 1890s, he turned to elaborating a bold and idiosyncratic socialist vision. To his admirers he was a prophet, divining the contours of the future with unparalleled insight. To his critics he was either a dangerous radical, intent on smashing the established order, or a dreamer of hopeless dreams. Wells, Bertrand Russell observed, was "one of those who made Socialism respectable in England," and he had a "very considerable influence upon the generation that followed him" (1956, 79). Even George Orwell, a fierce critic, acknowledged his impact. "Thinking people who were born about the beginning of this century," he wrote in 1941, "are in some sense Wells's own creation," and nobody writing in English in the first two decades of the century "influenced the young so much" (1970, 172).

Wells advocated a vanguardist cosmopolitan socialism. It was cosmopolitan insofar as it aimed to replace the system of sovereign states and empires with a world-state. It was socialist insofar as it sought a "regenerate world – cleansed of suffering and sorrow," a world in which the depredations of capitalism were substituted for a new order grounded in "universal brotherhood" (1908, 20; 2016b, 71). And it was vanguardist insofar as the primary agents of change – and the ideal rulers of the future society – were a transnational technocratic elite. In addition to advocating worldwide transformation, Wells was a vocal contributor to quotidian

political debate over a wide array of issues, including education policy, social reform, imperial governance, military strategy, gender relations, and the failings of existing democratic institutions and capitalism. His impact stretched far beyond Britain, and by the outbreak of the First World War he was a global intellectual celebrity. He found an especially receptive audience among Progressive thinkers in the United States (Bell 2018). During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Charles Merriam recorded in *American Political Ideas*, Wells was one of a select group of British writers who exerted a substantial influence on American political thought (1920, 467-8). The Chicago sociologists Robert Burgess and Ernest Park labelled him "our present major prophet" (1921, 496). Although not a great political theorist, Wells was a highly imaginative and provocative thinker, who helped shape public debate on both sides of the Atlantic and beyond.

Wells regarded philosophical reflection as an essential activity: "Every man who thinks must think upon a philosophical framework, explicit or implicit" (1904, 380). Ratiocination issued in action-guidance. "'What am I to do?' is the perpetual question of our existence. Our metaphysics, our beliefs are all sought as subsidiary to that and have no significance without it" (2016b, 53). He was clear about the connections between his philosophy and his politics. "[A]ll my thinking rests," he insisted in a "Note to the Reader" originally appended to *A Modern Utopia*, on "heretical metaphysical scepticism" (2005a, xxxi). Yet Wells's philosophical views, and their connection to his political though, have not been explored adequately. In this essay I reconstruct his philosophical commitments and demonstrate how they inflected his political vision in the two decades before the First World War. This was both the most intellectually fertile and creative period of Wells's life, and the time when he emerged as a major transatlantic public figure. During those years he elaborated many of the core theoretical and political ideas that he was to draw on throughout his extraordinary career.

I argue that Wells developed a *pragmatist* philosophical framework, indebted chiefly to William James. Coined by Charles Peirce in 1878, the term pragmatism only gained wide currency after it was employed by James in 1898. "The pragmatic movement," he wrote later, "suddenly seems to have precipitated itself out of the air" (2000, 1). James used it to designate various tendencies in philosophy – a focus on the practical consequences of arguments, recognition that empiricism had to accommodate Darwin, scepticism about absolute notions of truth and value, and a critique of intellectualism and abstraction – that had recently become "conscious of themselves collectively." The pragmatist, James wrote, turns away from "abstraction and insufficiency, from

verbal locutions, from bad *a priori* reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins," and looks towards "concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action and towards power." This necessitated the dissolution of philosophical dogma, including "the pretense of finality in truth" (2000, 27). Pragmatism was soon subject to ferocious debate, especially in the United States. While less popular in Britain, where philosophy was dominated by neo-Hegelianism, it nevertheless made inroads, chiefly through the evangelical zeal of F.C.S. Schiller (Porrovecchio 2011). Aligning himself with James and (to a lesser extent) Schiller, Wells believed that pragmatism was a revolutionary movement, capable of transforming society.

Wells's pragmatism had four main components: a nominalist metaphysics; a verificationist theory of truth; a version of William James's "will to believe"; and a view that philosophy should be dedicated to elucidating and clarifying problems to facilitate (better) practice. His pragmatism, which was recognised by both James and Schiller, issued in deep scepticism about abstraction, intellectualism, classification, and absolute truth, and it shaped both his general conception of politics and some of his specific arguments about political theory. For example, his nominalism grounded his conception of political liberty, his epistemological commitments underwrote his conventionalist account of rights, and his scepticism about classification motivated his critique of popular sovereignty, nationality and class. Wells was, I submit, the most high-profile pragmatist political thinker in the opening two decades of the twentieth century.

I adopt a "contextualist" interpretive methodology, seeking to excavate the character and purpose of Wells's arguments, the assumptions that animated them, and the debates he engaged in.[1] I utilise a wide range of Wells's writings, both published and unpublished, as well as the work of many of his contemporaries, especially James. Section II argues that while Wells's Darwinism was indebted to the eminent biologist T. H. Huxley, they disagreed on the political implications of evolution. Section III explores Wells's metaphysical arguments, while Section IV traces how his pragmatism informed his political thinking. Finally, Section V outlines his account of the nature and aims of socialism, concentrating on his attempt to reconcile "metaphysical

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[1] For influential accounts, see Skinner (2001); Freeden (1996).

scepticism" with a teleological picture of human destiny. Elucidating the philosophical basis of Wells's vision allows us to better understand one of the most celebrated political writers of the time and fills in a missing chapter in the history of pragmatism.

II. The Bounds of Nature: Autonomy and Constraint

Scholars of Wells's political thought often focus on his debts to Huxley (Partington 2003; Hale 2014, 252-300). According to John Partington, for example, the "ideological impact" of Huxley's work "did more than anything to shape Wells's thinking," providing him with a "philosophical basis upon which to establish his ideas about the future of human society" (2003, 4, 31). Although Huxley was the main source of Wells's biological ideas, they disagreed about the political implications of evolution. Furthermore, while Huxley furnished Wells with an empirical theory of evolutionary dynamics, the *philosophical* basis of his thinking – its epistemology, ontology, and metaethics – was buttressed by Jamesian pragmatism.

Evolutionary arguments were common currency among British political thinkers throughout the nineteenth century, although their meaning was fiercely contested (Claeys 2000; Hawkins 1997). By the 1890s liberals and socialists were debating whether Malthusian interpretations of Darwin were compatible with progressive politics, and in particular the extent to which evolutionary imperatives constrained the ability of humans to establish new forms of community (Hale 2014). Huxley used his great authority to prescribe the form and limits of evolutionary explanation. While propagating a strict Malthusianism, arguing that natural history was a story of "ceaseless modification and the internecine struggle for existence of living things" (1989b, 61; 1888), he famously distinguished "cosmic" from "ethical" evolution. The former comprised the "competition of each with all" that applied to every living thing; the latter referred to the development of human moral sentiments that repudiated the "gladiatorial theory of existence" (1989a, 62; 1989b 140). As D. G. Ritchie put it, "when these ideals have once arisen, they make social progress become something different from mere organic evolution, though, of course, such progress must, for a metaphysical theory, fall within evolution as a conception applicable to the universe as a whole" (1894, 110-11). Among other things, Huxley sought to refute Herbert Spencer's naturalised evolutionary ethics, a task also pursued by Henry Sidgwick and G. E. Moore, though he also took aim at socialist visions of political transformation. In principle the Huxleyean configuration of autonomy and constraint was flexible, leaving considerable scope for

human flourishing, but the conclusions he drew from it were bleak: cosmic and ethical processes were locked in unremitting conflict (1989b, 139; Hale 2014, 206-220). Cosmic evolution – a "tenacious and powerful enemy as long as the world lasts" (Huxley 1989b, 143) – was vastly more powerful than the ethical process, and it would eventually annihilate human progress. Settler colonialism illustrated this Malthusian point. After a colony had established peace and affluence its population would increase rapidly, catalysing resource conflicts and the "cosmic struggle for existence" (1989a, 79). There was no escape from evolutionary fate. "Eden," Huxley sighed, "would have its serpent" (1989a, 78).

Wells adopted Huxley's framework. An avid reader of his work (1901, 211), Wells agreed that the social and political world should be viewed as "aspects of one universal evolving scheme" (1903, v), and he shared Huxley's Malthusianism, declaring in *Anticipations*, his first sustained excursion into political writing, that "[p]robably no more shattering book than the *Essay on Population* has ever been, or ever will be, written" (Wells 1999, 162; also 1903, 409; 2005a, 105, 124). "Man," Wells declaimed, "is the creature of a struggle for existence," and life was driven by "reproductive competition among individualities" (1999, 125; 2005a, 95). His early fiction experimented with these ideas, articulating a deeply pessimistic account of the human future. *The Time Machine*, Wells informed Huxley, was a fable of evolutionary "degeneration following security" (1998, 238; James 2012, 50-64; McLean 2009, 11-40). His non-fictional political writings of the following decade, however, offered a more optimistic account of human destiny. He accepted Huxley's distinction between cosmic and ethical. The process "now operating in the social body," he contended, was "essentially different from that which had differentiated species in the past and raised man to his ascendancy among the animals" (1975b, 211). "Civilised man" was thus a combustible admixture of two elements, an "inherited factor" – the "natural man" – produced by millennia of natural selection, and an "acquired factor" – the "artificial man" – shaped by "tradition, suggestion, and reasoned thought" (1975a, 217). Human norms and values were the contingent products of historical development, not inscribed in or legitimated by nature. "Morality is made for man, and not man for morality" (1975c, 226).

Huxley would have viewed Wells's political prescriptions as incompatible with the dictates of evolution. An exponent of classical political economy, his scientific naturalism underwrote attacks on Spencerian laissez-faire and political radicalism alike. He eyed the socialist currents of the 1880s and 1890s with horror. "He needed a competitive Nature. He needed to undercut the socialist legions" (Desmond 1997, 217). Huxley regarded fierce competition between individuals

and states as perennial, rendering any hope of fundamental socio-political transformation a dangerous illusion (Huxley 1989b, 143). Human nature was not malleable. Wells concurred that political philosophers had to accept humans as competitive products of an ancient evolutionary process, but he rejected Huxley's fatalism, arguing that there was greater scope for autonomy – both collective and individual – than his teacher prescribed. The contrast between the metaphors they employed indexes the substantive difference. Whereas Wells spoke of humanity "steering itself against the currents and winds of the universe" (1975b, 218), Huxley invoked war (1989a: 70, 85; 1989b: 85, 141). For Wells, humans had considerable freedom of action to pursue their own ends within a spatiotemporal framework structured by evolution. With intelligent piloting, it was possible to create societies "cunningly balanced against external necessities on the one hand, and the artificial factor in the individual on the other," where everyone, and indeed "every sentient creature," could be "generally happy" (1975b, 218). Wells's modern utopia was characterised by universal peace and harmony, as competition was harnessed to beneficent social ends, education instilled discipline and a sense of duty, and a program of "positive" eugenics blocked the least "fit" members of society from reproducing. Degeneration could be postponed indefinitely.[2] In contrast, Huxley had declared that such happiness was impossible (1989a, 102).

"Philosophy," Wells observed, "correlates the sciences and keeps them subservient to the universals of life" (2016b, 213). It was essential for guiding thought and action. But what philosophy did Wells affirm? Huxley's capacious philosophical interests included Stoicism and Buddhism, though his primary interests were in eighteenth-century British thinkers, especially Hume (Huxley 1879, 1989b; Paradis 1989). Little of Huxley's philosophical armature is found in Wells's work. Instead, Wells came to regard *pragmatism* as both a reflection of and a solution to contemporary intellectual conundrums. Above all, James acted as inspiration, though Wells also drew on Schiller.[3] (He did not engage with Peirce or Dewey during this period). In *Anticipations* he described James's *The Principles of Psychology* as "that most wonderful book" (1999, 134). Looking back on his early career, Wells noted that as the century dawned he had laboured "under the influence" of James's *Will to Believe* (1942, 1). On hearing of James's death in 1910, he wrote to Henry James that the philosopher had been "something big and reassuring in my

[2] On the significant shifts in Wells's eugenic ideas (Partington 2003, 49-64).

[3] Although explicit about his debts to James, Wells rarely cited sources for specific arguments. He referenced *The Will to Believe* and *The Principles of Psychology*; textual evidence suggests he was also familiar with *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, and *Pragmatism*. He praised Schiller's "Axioms as Postulates" (Wells 1904).

background for many years" (1958, 124). Elsewhere, he anointed James his "friend and master" (1917, 203).

James reciprocated the admiration, lavishing praise on Wells: "You enrich the lean earth on which you have consented for awhile to incarnate yourself!" (April 15, 1908: 2004, 8).[4] He extolled *First and Last Things*, Wells's main philosophical text, as a "great achievement," pronouncing that it should be "used as a textbook in all the colleges of the world." Wells had put his "finger accurately on the true emphases and (in the main) on what seem to me the true solutions," and it was worth "any 100 volumes on Metaphysics and any 200 of Ethics, of the ordinary sort" (2004, 126). James was also clear about Wells's philosophical identity: "You're a *pragmatist*!" (2003, 290). Indeed he regarded Wells as one of the foremost proselytisers of the creed. In May 1906 James told the literary critic John Jay Chapman that a philosophical revolution was brewing, and that among pragmatists leading the charge, "H. G. Wells ought to be counted in" (2003, 225).

Wells's pragmatism was often acknowledged by his contemporaries. In 1909 the idealist philosopher J.H. Muirhead hailed him as the "latest and most brilliant recruit…to philosophy as well as to Pragmatism" (1909, 183). Reviewing *First and Last Things* the sociologist Charles Ellwood noted that Wells professed "a sort of individualistic pragmatism" (1909, 550), while in 1915 the literary critic Van Wyck Brooks wrote, in the first intellectual biography of the writer, that Wells was "perfectly American," not least because of his "thorough-going pragmatism." Like James, Brooks elevated him to the pragmatist pantheon: "Wells has inevitably become one of the leaders" (1915, 178).[5] A handful of literary scholars – Sylvia Hardy above all – have probed James's influence on Wells's fiction, though they rarely address his political thought (Hardy 1991, 2008; Parrinder 1995, 101). Indeed scholarship since the Second World War has tended to miss what was clear to many of his contemporaries. The relationship between Wells's pragmatism and his socialism is usually mentioned only in passing (Wagar 1961, 77, 106, 251; Wagar 2004, 30-2, 40-43; Partington 2008, 520), or it is ignored (Earle 1950; Hyde 1956; Partington 2003; Planinc

[4] See also his letters to or about Wells on May 8 & 30 1902 (2002, 41, 50); February 1, May 18, September 11 & December 4 1906 (2003, 308, 224-5, 267, 290); April 7 and July 26 1908 (2004, 3, 60); and April 29 1909 (2004, 206).

[5] Other explicit references to Wells's pragmatism include James (1909, 297); Crauford (1909, 11, 68, 70-71, 77); Stewart (1918, 20).

2016; Toye 2008; Smith 1986, 122-28). Yet his pragmatism was integral to his political vision, and that vision was one of the most widely discussed of the day.

This poses an interpretive puzzle: why did Wells's pragmatism drop from view? There are many possible answers to this question. Two concern Wells scholarship. First, the bulk of work on Wells has been produced by literary scholars, and they frequently downplay or sideline his nonfictional philosophical, social and political writings. They approach his vast oeuvre – over one hundred books, hundreds of shorter documents, thousands of pieces of correspondence – with their own disciplinary training, questions, and interests. Moreover, Wells scholars have tended to overlook the significance of the texts in which he outlined his pragmatism most explicitly, especially "Scepticism of the Instrument" (1904) and *First and Last Things* (1908). Second, while Wells repeatedly affirmed his commitment to nominalism, he rarely mentioned James during the interwar period. Strikingly, James plays little role in Wells's *Experiment in Autobiography* (1934), whereas Huxley is celebrated. But as he later confessed, Wells's account of his intellectual formation is misleading. In 1936 a German scholar, Fritz Krog, questioned Wells about the absence of James. In reply, Wells admitted that the *Experiment* was deficient. "I assimilated Pragmatism so completely that I failed to do justice in the Autobiography to William James…The omission was not deliberate. It is an incompleteness. *I took him for granted*."[6] That omission has helped to distort understanding of Wells.

The historiography of pragmatism has ignored Wells. Once again, there are numerous possible reasons to explain this omission. Two are especially pertinent. The first is that work on pragmatism often adopts canonical interpretive protocols, plotting the early story of the tradition through reference to a select group of pivotal figures, above all James, Peirce and Dewey. This means that the wider intellectual environment in which pragmatism flourished, both in the United States and abroad, is often passed over. This narrow focus is reinforced by a second problem. Bruce Kuklick has recently lamented the "disorder" besetting historical work on pragmatism (2017, 17). The subject is spread across three scholarly fields – American philosophy, American Studies, and intellectual history – each of which narrates a different story. He argues that scholars working in all three have exhibited a tendency to "Americanize" the tradition, reading pragmatism as a phenomenon originating from, and speaking mainly to, a particular national community, thus severing it from the transnational circuits of debate and

[6] Krog to Wells (1 May 1936); Wells to Krog (4 May 1936), Wells papers, K-161. They are discussed in Hardy (2009), 142-3, from which my account draws. Italics added.

reception that shaped its early years. A similar point could be made about the historical understanding of pragmatist political theory. Scholarship across all of these interpretive perspectives has ignored Wells, despite his global reputation and the significance he had for James and others (Festenstein 1997; Pihlström 2015; Shook & Margolis 2009; Thayer 1968).

Traditions of thought can be conceptualised as the sum of the arguments that have been classified as X, and recognized as such by other self-proclaimed X's, across time and space (Bell 2014). On this "summative" account, if a thinker self-identifies with a tradition and this claim is recognised by a significant group of others who self-identify with it – especially if they include at least some of its most influential proponents – then we can argue that they belong to that tradition. Wells clearly meets these criteria: he described himself as a pragmatist, and was seen by others – including two of the leading pragmatists of the day – as such. Recognising Wells's pragmatism necessitates a remapping of the early history of pragmatism.

III. The Life Kinetic

Lacking any formal training in philosophy, Wells developed his metaphysical views in the late 1880s and early 1890s though reflecting on his education in biology. "Zoology," he proclaimed, was a "philosophy and a literature to those who can read its symbols" (1894, 131). By the turn of the century, he was reading widely in philosophy, which sharpened his untutored arguments and allowed him to locate them in relation to contemporary schools of thought. His philosophical project had deconstructive and reconstructive elements. The deconstructive, the focus of this section, challenged orthodox accounts of truth and meaning. The reconstructive, the subject of Section V, aimed to reconcile his corrosive scepticism with an optimistic belief in human (socialist) destiny.

Wells sketched two general lines of reasoning – one ontological, the other epistemological – which when combined issued in his "heretical metaphysical scepticism." First, the world was constituted in a particular way – it was composed of "uniques," non-identical particulars. Second, the human cognitive apparatus was poorly designed to grasp reality. "The forceps of our minds," he wrote "are clumsy forceps and crush the truth a little in taking hold of it" (2016b, 24-5). This had deep implications for what could be known about the world and how people should act in it. Wells fused these distinct claims, chiefly in his account of the limits of language. He argued that

speech induced delusion through convincing people of its "unreal exactness, its actual habitual deflection from fact" (2016b 35). The dappled world invariably eluded its signifying capacity.

The central argument of Wells's earliest philosophical essay, "The Rediscovery of the Unique" (1891), was that while "*All beings are unique*, or, nothing is strictly like anything else" (1975a, 23), humans were incapable of adequately registering this fact. Although he later admitted that the essay was flawed (1904, 383; 2008, I, 223-4), nominalism remained the keystone of his metaphysics. It was, he believed, an intellectual whirlwind coursing through society.

> The essential characteristic of this great intellectual revolution amidst which we are living today, *that revolution of which the revival and restatement of nominalism under the name of pragmatism is the philosophical aspect*, consists in the reassertion of the importance of the individual instance as against the generalization. All our social, political, moral problems are being approached in a new spirit, in an inquiring and experimental spirit, which has small respect for abstract principles and deductive rules (1912, 163; italics added).

His nominalism is discussed at length in "Scepticism of the Instrument," which he subsequently published in *Mind*, the esteemed philosophy journal, and reprinted as an Appendix to *A Modern Utopia*. It originated with an invitation to lecture to the Oxford Philosophical Society, which had been founded in 1898 to combat both naturalism and neo-Hegelian Absolute Idealism. The main fruit of their deliberations was an edited collection, *Personal Idealism* (1902), a book that James hailed as "rich in style and exceptionally rich in ideas" (1903, 7), and which Wells referenced. In particular, he praised "Axioms as Postulates," the programmatic chapter written by Schiller, observing that his own ideas fell "somewhere near to and parallel with" it (1904, 381; cf 393). A friend of James, Schiller was the leading European pragmatist (Porrovecchio 2011; Skodo 2015; Thayer 1968, 272-303). Subsequently, he and Wells engaged in a productive correspondence and exchanged writings. Schiller commended "Scepticism" as "a great deal better than most of the stuff that gets into *Mind*," and expressed pleasure when Wells informed him that *First and Last Things* was written on "sound pragmatic lines."[7]

[7] Schiller, letters to Wells, 14/2/03 & 1/3/08, Folder S-080, Wells Archive, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. See also Schiller's letter to William James, August 1904 (James 2002, 622). Schiller cites "Scepticism" in (1912, 96-7).

Wells sketched three arguments, about classification, negative terms, and levels of cognition. Classification was both "a necessary condition of the working of the mental implement" and a "departure from the objective truth of things" (1904, 384). The human mind, on this account, only functions by "disregarding individuality and treating uniques as identically similar objects...so as to group them under one term," and consequently, "it tends automatically to intensify the significance of that term" (1904, 389). Consider chairs.

> Chairs just as much as individual organisms, just as much as minerals and rock specimens, are unique things…and it is only because we do not possess minds of unlimited capacity, because our brain has only a limited number of pigeon-holes for our correspondence with an unlimited universe of objective uniques, that we have to delude ourselves into the belief that there is a chairishness in this species common to and distinctive of all chairs (2016b, 24).

We encounter a world of multiplicity but our language tricks us into thinking in terms of identity and patterned regularity.

Nominalists are committed to the view that everything is concrete or particular. James, unlike Peirce, placed nominalism at the heart of pragmatism (James 2000, 28; Dewey 1998, 5). Wells followed his lead. "[C]ounting, classification, measurement," indeed the "whole fabric of mathematics," was both "subjective and deceitful," while the "uniqueness of individuals is the objective truth" (1907, 197; see also 1975a, 25).

> I consider all objective beings as individual and unique. It is now understood that conceivable only in the subjective world, and in theory and the imagination, do we deal with identically similar units, and with absolutely commensurate quantities. In the real world it is reasonable to suppose we deal at most with *practically* similar units and *practically* commensurable quantities. But there is a strong bias, a sort of labour-saving bias, in the normal human mind, to ignore this, and not only to speak but to think of a thousand bricks or a thousand sheep or a thousand Chinamen as though they were all absolutely true to sample (1904, 37; see also 1907, 195).

Classificatory schemes were "merely unavoidable conditions to mental activity – regrettable conditions rather than essential facts" (1904, 325). Scepticism about classification challenged the

validity of classical logic – a favourite topic of James and Schiller. Syllogism, Wells argued, was based on classification, and "all hard logical reasoning" implied confidence in the "objective reality of classification and number," whereas the "final absolute truth of things" was impossible to grasp (1904, 385, 386). Wells returned to the theme in *A Modern Utopia*, writing that it was commonly assumed that "rules of logic, the system of counting and measurement," and "general categories and schemes of resemblance and difference," were fixed and eternal (2005a, 20). Reanimating a "philosophy long lost to men," contemporary thinkers had demonstrated that this was mistaken (2005a, 20).[8] In *A Preface to Politics*, Walter Lippmann observed that "Scepticism of the Instrument" was the best accessible account of the critique of classification adduced by James (1913, 118).

This line of argument had important implications for empirical political analysis and political philosophy. The "uniqueness" of particulars meant that the orthodox methodological precepts of social science, based on sweeping classifications of society, were more misleading than illuminating. In *Mankind in the Making*, for example, Wells criticised the characterisation of gender roles. We are told what "women" and "men" want or believe, he complained, yet there was "no such woman and no such man, but a vast variety of temperaments and dispositions, monadic, dyadic, and polymeric souls," and it was impossible to build any adequate "code" on such classifications (1903, 299). The same was true of attempts to categorise social classes, nations, and races. Wells was thus hostile to the project of modelling social science on the natural sciences (1907; Bell 2018). In 1891 he had argued that moral principles needed to be reimagined as conventions, valuable only insofar as they helped realize human ends. While they were often "convenient as a missile weapon," such principles dissolved when confronted with metaphysical scepticism (1975a, 29). He reaffirmed this position in *First and Last Things*, arguing that "nothing possessing the general validity of fact" could be ascertained about normative questions (2016b, 42). This argument dovetailed with James's account of morality (1979a, 206). In both cases, nominalism meant that common forms of reasoning about human life were faulty, at least if they were taken to reveal "absolute" truths about the world rather than providing revocable conceptual technologies for navigating it.

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[8] He identified Alfred Sidgwick's *Use of Words in Reasoning* (1901) as exemplary. Sidgwick argued that formal logic was so abstract that it was largely useless (1901, 311; Walton 2000). Elsewhere Wells noted the relevance of "contemporary American metaphysical speculation" (1907, 192).

Wells's second argument concerned "negative" terms. Such terms, he explained, were "in plain fact just nothing" – "Not-A is the absence of any trace of the quality that constitutes A, it is the rest of everything forever." Drawing a boundary creates a negative class and "passes away into the illimitable horizon of nothingness" (1904, 388). The human mind, however, had a tendency to treat A and Not-A as equivalents, with Not-A seen as a "thing mysteriously in the Nature of A" (2016b, 28). This was a profound mistake. Take the colour pink. In identifying something as pink, you draw a demarcation line. "Beyond is the not pink, known and knowable, and still in the not pink region one comes to the Outer Darkness." An infinite regress looms. "That same Outer Darkness and nothingness of infinite space and infinite time, and any being of infinite qualities, and all that region I rule out of court in my philosophy altogether" (1904, 388). Wells's examples included such loaded terms – central to philosophical reflection at the time – as "absolute" and "infinite." The mind had a tendency to treat them as "real existences" (1904, 387), when they were meaningless. Furthermore, Wells argued, many "apparently positive terms" are, or had become, "practically negative terms," and suffered from the same conceptual problems. "Omniscient" was his favoured example. "[K]nowing," he averred, is the "relation of a conscious being to something not itself, that the thing known is defined as a system of parts and aspects and relationships, that knowledge is comprehension, and so that only finite things can know or be known." It followed that when talking of a "being of infinite extension and infinite duration, omniscient and omnipotent and Perfect, you seem to me to be talking in negatives of nothing whatever" (1904, 388). Idealists, James wrote to Schiller, "simply have 'absoluteness' so ingrained in them that they can't conceive of what any alternative can mean" (2002, 447). Wells concurred: "When you speak of the Absolute you speak to me of nothing" (1904, 388). This scepticism implied, among other things, that the popular idealist political thinking of Green, Bradley, Bosanquet, and Ritchie was based on incoherent, even unintelligible, philosophical foundations.

Recognition of the intrinsic fallibility of classificatory schema demanded a philosophically-induced therapeutic regime – a form of care of the self. "Essentially we have to train our minds to think anew, if we are to think beyond the purposes for which the mind seems to have been evolved" (Wells 2016b, 35). Artificial man could work on – and potentially bring under control – the apparatus that natural man had inherited. Having undergone such therapy, the inhabitants of Utopia adopted a pragmatist "science of human association" to govern their society. Adhering to a "philosophy of uniqueness," they rejected "anything beyond similarities and practical parallelisms" (Wells 2005a, 201) while accepting the necessity of provisional classifications. "The

social theorists of Utopia," Wells wrote, discarded orthodox classifications such as labour and capital, regarded them as mere "accidental categories." Instead they distinguished between four types of human temperament – the poietic, kinetic, dull and base (2005a, 179) – which roughly mapped the "range and quality and character" of the imagination. Only those possessing one or other of the first two were eligible to serve as members of the ruling "Samurai" class. Yet no Utopian made the mistake of viewing this as "classification for individual application," such that persons could be characterised as belonging exclusively to one type, for in reality the qualities were intermingled. It was a "classification to an end" – the end of virtuous governance – not a "classification for Truth." Unfortunately, Wells never provided any guidance on how to distinguish apt from inapt classifications, other than specifying the epistemic criterion that aptness necessitated acknowledging their provisional and rough-grained character.

In *First and Last Things* Wells identified another "infirmity of mind." He drew the argument from a paper by Amber Reeves, who had developed a "suggestion" of Schiller's.

> The current syllogistic logic rests on the assumption that either A is B or it is not B. The practical reality ... is nothing so permanent; A is always becoming more or less B or ceasing to be more or less B. But it would seem the human mind cannot manage with that. It has to hold a thing still for a moment before it can think it. It arrests the present moment for its struggle as Joshua stopped the sun. It cannot contemplate things continuously, and so it has to resort to a series of static snapshots. It has to kill the motion in order to study it, as a naturalist kills and pins out a butterfly in order to study life (2016b, 31).

The mind was thus limited both by the failures of language and its inability to recognise the nature of time. It registered a dynamic reality in largely static terms (2016b, 31). James contended that while experience was fluid, language was static. As Dewey noted, pragmatism had "a metaphysical implication. The doctrine of the value of consequences leads us to take the future into consideration. And this taking into consideration of the future takes us to the conception of a universe whose evolution is not finished, of a universe which is still, in James' terms, 'in the making,' 'in the process of becoming,' of a universe up to certain point still plastic" (Dewey 1998, 8). Wells shared this obsession with the flux of time, the unfinished nature of evolution, and the importance of consequences (1902). He often contrasted "static" and "dynamic" conceptions of the world. What made his Utopia *modern* was its "kinetic" character, the fact that

it was constantly changing – not a "permanent State" but a "hopeful stage leading to a long ascent of stages" (2005a, 12). There was "no being," he declaimed, but instead "a universal becoming of individualities," and Plato had erred "when he turned towards his museum of specific ideals" in *The Republic* (2005a, 20-1). As Huxley had once done, Wells cited Heraclitus, whose creed – "[t]here is no Being but Becoming" – encapsulated his vision (2016b, 10-11; 2005a, 21; Huxley 1894b, 107, 127). A mutually reinforcing combination of Jamesian metaphysical commitments and Huxleyean evolutionary theory provided Wells with a framework through which to comprehend a world of becoming.

His third argument focused on the "stratification of human ideas." The universe can be seen, Wells suggested, "in many different fashions and expressed by many different systems of terms, each expression within its limits true and yet incommensurable with expression upon a different system" (2016b, 32). His main example was the clash between free will and determinism. James used this issue to demonstrate the "pragmatic method" – the attempt to "interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences" (James 2000, 25) – in dissolving philosophical disputes. Once we have asked about the practical consequences of believing in either claim, we see that there is no conflict (1981, 1179; 1979b). Wells followed the same strategy. He defined free will – contra James, he noted – as self-determination and predestination as "equivalent to the conception of a universe rigid in time and space," wherein it was possible in principle to predict all human action (2016b, 49). If placed on the same plane these ideas were irreconcilable. Wells rejected this conclusion, endorsing *both* while asserting that the "important belief is free will" (2016b, 49). Since predestination had "no practical value" (2016b, 49), and in particular since it did not impinge on everyday decision-making, it could be ignored, even if it was theoretically true. "I am free and freely and responsibly making the future – as far as I am concerned. You others are equally free" (2016b, 50). Practical, purposeful activity grounded in lived experience dissolved such hypothetical disputes.

In good pragmatist fashion, Wells thought that the disclosure or resolution of philosophical confusion had great public significance: "most of the troubles of humanity are really misunderstandings" (2016b, 14). Recognizing the roots of conflict in metaphysical differences facilitated deeper cooperation. In addressing such confusions, he stated, "lies not only the cures of war and poverty" but also the "general form of all man's duty and the essential work of mankind" (2016b, 147). Few grander claims have been made about the value of philosophical reflection.

IV. Beyond the Schoolmen: Nominalism and Political Theory

In *The Outline of History* Wells cautioned that "many people today blunder dangerously through their neglect of the [nominalist] issues the schoolmen discussed" (2004, 210). Such blunders could be eliminated by absorbing the lessons of (Jamesian) pragmatism. As he later put it,

> To escape Realism [in the medieval sense] is to escape from hard classifications, from the harsh judgements, assurances, uncompromising attitudes and dogmas that arise from hard classifications, and to move towards qualified statements, the examination of individual qualified statements, the examination of individual instances, enquiry, experiment and careful verification (1934, 66).

Justice, democracy, nationality, rights, the people: all fell foul of his scepticism. All required metaphysical deflation. For Wells, as for James, pragmatism meant "looking away from first things, principles, 'categories,' supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts" (James 2000, 29).

The idea of the people, for example, was dangerously misleading. The "most impossible and the most incredible" of "personifications," it designated an entity composing more than the sum of its parts. An elusive emergent property irreducible to identifiable concrete persons, this "individuality of a higher order" established the legitimacy of government authority (1914b, 245). Lacking powers of speech or action, there was a "need of rulers and interpreters," who comprised the priesthood of politics. "If they express its will in law and fact, in book and song, they prosper under its mysterious approval; if they do not, it revolts or forgets or does something else of an equally annihilatory sort" (1914b, 246). The people, then, was conceptualised as an agent. The problem was that this understanding was the result of an unjustifiable intension of the term, a common vice that elsewhere Wells suggested "explains a large proportion of human prejudice and misunderstanding" (2016b, 28). He insisted that the human world was constituted only by individuals and that collective action was simply the "algebraic sum of all individual action" (1914b, 246; 2016b 158-9). The term was thus ideologically mystifying, shaping behaviour and reproducing political divisions. Banishing this deceptive anthropomorphic idea, and recognising the existence of "only an enormous differentiating millions of men," would catalyse new possibilities (1914b, 250). The implications

for his critique of state sovereignty were clear. Wells utilised this kind of argument throughout his career.[9] In *The Work, Wealth and Happiness of Mankind,* a vast conspectus of human affairs published in 1934, he reaffirmed the importance of the still incomplete nominalist "emancipation of the human mind" that had found its most recent expression in the pragmatist revolution. Metaphysical disagreements, he argued, were at the root of the "greatest dangers that threaten our race" (1934, 69, 68). Nationalism and racism were based on the same type of misleading abstraction as "the people." Recognising such cognitive errors, he suggested naively, could banish the scourge of xenophobia and war.

Wells also offered a (Jamesian) pragmatist gloss on rights. Given his nominalism, the idea of natural rights – or any "absolute" conception – struck him as absurd. However, it did not follow that rights were irrelevant. They were "merely conventional," like the "rules of a game, the rules of etiquette," or "forms of address" (2016b, 163). Moreover, they had emerged in the "mercantile phase of human development" (2016b, 162). Wells seems to have meant two things here. First, that the language of rights was only intelligible within a modern capitalist system that modelled interpersonal relationships as a quasi-legal contract – interpellating persons as "litigious units" observing "nicely defined relationships" (2016b, 162). It thus excluded duty and service. And second, that it implied a form of equality between persons that was empirically false. Evolutionary theory demonstrated that "all men are individual and unique," and consequently that people were "superior and inferior upon countless scores" (1999, 163; 1903 26). The "appeal to justice" is thus an "inadequate attempt to de-individualize a case" (2016b, 163). It invariably missed the specific qualities or circumstances necessary to make sound judgements. "We perceive more and more clearly," he wrote,

> …that the study of social organization is an empty and unprofitable study until we approach it as a study of the association and inter-reaction of individualized human beings inspired by diversified motives, ruled by tradition, and swayed by the suggestions of a complex intellectual atmosphere. And all our conceptions of the relationships between man and man, and of justice and rightfulness and social desirableness, remain something misfitting and inappropriate, something uncomfortable and potentially

[9] While he later came to think that James's account of the will-to-believe exaggerated the power of will (1942, 1), he remained committed to nominalism, verificationism, and a pragmatist conception of the purpose and value of philosophy.

> injurious, as if we were trying to wear sharp-edged clothes made for a giant out of tin, until we bring them to the test and measure of realised individualism (1912, 162-163).

It was thus important, Wells asserted in *Mankind in the Making*, to reject all "abstract, refined, and intellectualized ideas" including Right and Liberty as "starting propositions." Although potentially valuable, they were not "primary" (1903, 8). Rather than seeing them as "quasi-absolute standards" (2016b, 163), rights should be judged on their usefulness in particular contexts. They could, for example, solve co-ordination problems, "economize thought" or "facilitate mutual self-understanding and codify common action" (2016b, 163). Neither idols of modern democratic politics nor timeless truths of the moral cosmos, they were instruments for helping to govern a society.[10]

Given that his own work was awash with typologies and sweeping classifications, Wells was susceptible to the criticism he levelled at others. In January 1902 Henry James queried the categories used in *Anticipations* to map contemporary social classes. "There were more kinds of people than could fit into them," he worried. (1998, 76). Much the same could be said of Wells's other political writings. Occasionally Wells admitted that he had not followed his own philosophical admonitions. In *First and Last Things* he acknowledged that the Samurai of *A Modern Utopia* were too homogenous in beliefs and behaviour (2016b, 122). A vanguardist "aristocratic method" of progress was important, even inevitable, but it had to embrace difference and individuality. "All organized aristocracy is manifestly begotten by that fallacy of classification my Metaphysical book set itself to expose" (2016b, 158). This moment of auto-critique epitomizes Wells's approach to political theorising. He was constantly revising his ideas in response to criticism and new experiences. Simon James argues that the "rewriting of his utopian vision also constitutes a kind of forward revision, as if by periodic repetition of the same process of literary creation, reality might each time be improved" (2012, 125). Sarah Cole (2018) suggests that his thought can be characterised as "dialectal." His twists and turns can also be seen as expressions of a pragmatist commitment to experimentation. "Pragmatism as I conceive it," he wrote, involved the "extension of the experimental spirit to all human interests" (2016b, 43).

As well as challenging some of the conceptual shibboleths of modern political thought, Wells directed his scepticism at both critics of socialism and other socialist thinkers. Many of them

[10] In the 1940s, Wells advocated universal human rights (Planinc 2016; Partington 2003). The connection between Well's early and late accounts of rights deserves further scrutiny.

were hamstrung by their failure to acknowledge the profound limitations of the "instrument" and the complexity of a world of "uniques." In *New Worlds for Old* he contended that most objections to socialism were marred by the "commonest vice" of reasoning, based on the "queer old scholastic logic." Critics were unable or unwilling to think beyond binaries (1908, 177). He singled out William Hurrell Mallock, a leading British anti-socialist. "[G]oing about arranging his syllogisms, extracting his opponents 'self-contradictions,'" Mallock attacked socialism "in quite the spirit of the young medieval scholar returning home to prove beyond dispute that 'my cat has ten tails' and, given a yard's start, that a tortoise can always keep ahead of a running man." His chief mistake was to believe that something was always either A or Not-A, "either a thing is green or it is not green; either a thing is heavy or it is not heavy" (1908, 177-8). Mallock claimed, for example, that socialists demanded the abolition of private property and the family (1908, 179-80). But this was to place the doctrine under a blanket classification, equating all positions with the most radical. "To any person with a philosophical education this is a ridiculous mental process, but it seems perfectly rational to an untrained mind – and that is the usual case with the anti-Socialist" (1908, 178). This mistake was compounded by an "error of overstatement" (1908, 182), of thinking, for example, that a challenge to some forms of property meant an assault on *all* property. G. K. Chesterton and Max Beerbohm were likewise guilty of this vice. "The method of reasoning in all of these cases is the same: it is to assume that whatever the Socialist postulates as desirable is wanted without limit or qualification; to imagine whatever proposal is chosen for the controversy is to be carried out by uncontrolled monomaniacs" (1908, 184). Critics of socialism were unable to acknowledge "qualified statements".

In his popular semi-autobiographical 1911 novel *The New Machiavelli*, the hero of the story, Richard Remington, declares that "my sympathies have always been Pragmatist. I belong almost by nature to that school of Pragmatism that, following the medieval Nominalists, bases itself upon a denial of the reality of classes, and of the validity of general laws." In contrast, the Baileys – Wells's parody of the Fabian socialists Beatrice and Sidney Webb – "classified everything," and as such they were philosophical "Realists" committed, as were most of those with "no metaphysical aptitude and no metaphysical training," to the belief that "classes were *real* and independent of their individuals" (2005, 174). This disqualified them as serious students of society.

Wells was also scathing about orthodox political economy. While its exponents displayed many failings, he argued that their use of language lead them to depart "more and more from reality"

(1908, 222). Utilising terms like rent, capital, and value, as if they were precise elements of scientific terminology rather than hopelessly vague attempts to capture a fluid reality, they falsely claimed the authority of the natural sciences (see also Wells 1907). The result was a literature "more abundant, more difficult and less real than all the exercises of the schoolmen put together" (1908, 222). Wells condemned Marx for replicating many of the same mistakes. Among other faults, he erred in accepting the "verbal instruments" of the political economists while seeking to "reclassify and redefine" them. Marx had constructed an elaborate theoretical edifice on quicksand.

Wells's criticisms of other socialist positions often blended metaphysical scepticism and evolutionary argumentation. Early socialists, including Saint-Simon, Proudhon, and Fourier, fought a valiant battle against the forces of industrial capitalism, but their ideas were "extremely imperfect." They required the creation of a new type of (socialist) person, and thus sought to transcend the constraints of natural man (1908, 207-9). Moreover, they too frequently made "unqualified statements," especially concerning property. Rather than distinguishing between defensible and indefensible forms of ownership, they claimed that all property should be abolished. As "unreal as mathematics," early socialist thought displayed "much the same relation to truth as the abstract process of calculation has to concrete individual things." They were incapable of adopting the "reasoned middle attitude," of refusing binary choices (1908, 210; 1903 399-400). It was essential for socialists to absorb the lessons of both Huxley and James.

Walter Lippmann once suggested that Wells and James "come nearer to having a vocabulary fit for political uses than any other writers of English," as they had the rare ability to "convey some of the curiosity and formlessness of modern life (2000, 97). James was similarly impressed by Wells's communicative ability, declaring that, like Tolstoy, he possessed the gift of "contagious speech," an extraordinary talent that allowed him to set a "similar mood vibrating in the reader" (November 28 1906: 2004, 126). James regarded the Englishman as one of the most inventive and effective advocates of pragmatism. He was effusive about his philosophical and political writings. *Anticipations*, James wrote to the archaeologist Joseph Thatcher Clarke, was "tremendously bold" and would exert a "big liberating influence on some men's minds" (May 8, 1902: 2002, 41). He blessed *The Future in America* "as good a service as a foreigner has ever performed" for the American people (December 4, 1906, 2003, 290), while asserting that *A Modern Utopia* demonstrated that Wells's "virtues are unparalleled and transcendent," and that his work would give a "shove to the practical thought of the next generation that will be amongst

the greatest of its influences of good" (6 June 1905: 2003, 56). *New Worlds for Old*, James predicted in April 1908, would be seen as an "'epoch-making' and tremendously influential document" (2004, 8). While exaggerating the quality and impact of Wells's work, these assessments highlight the public role that James hoped his pragmatist vision could play. Indeed it is arguable that reading Wells had a significant effect on James's thinking. In his most famous political essay, "The Moral Equivalent of War," James quotes extensively from Wells, endorsing his arguments about the unintended social effects of military organisation: "H. G. Wells, as usual, sees the center of the situation" (2016, 284).[11] By then, James had converted to a utopian account of socialism. "I will now confess my own utopia," he wrote: "I devoutly believe in the reign of peace and in the gradual advent of some sort of a socialistic equilibrium" (2016, 281). However, as we shall see, their political views diverged considerably.

V. The Project of All Things: Socialism as Spiritual Ethos

For both James and Wells the human mind was a creative instrument. James had written in *Pragmatism* that the world "stands really malleable, waiting to receive its final touches at our hands" (2000, 112). Wells saw his role as helping to craft a socialist future, to realize the full potential of the species. His views on how to combine metaphysical scepticism and a vision of a future world-state were elaborated in *First and Last Things*, though his discussion left many theoretical issues unresolved. He regarded moral and political beliefs as expressions of will guided by practical interests. "I adopt certain beliefs because I feel the need for them, because I feel an often quite unanalysable rightness in them." As such, his belief in them "rests on the fact that they *work* for me and satisfy my desire for harmony and beauty." He was happy to admit that such beliefs were "arbitrary"; but they were nevertheless beliefs he saw fit "to impose upon my universe" (2016b, 43; 1903, 240). This imposition had clear political intent. "My beliefs, my dogmas, my rules," he asserted, "are made for my campaigning needs, like the knapsack and water bottle of a Cockney soldier invading some stupendous mountain gorge" (2016b, 197). "[A]rbitrariness" did not mean that social agreement or truth was unattainable. If beliefs were sufficiently convincing – and in particular if they could be verified through experiment – then convergence on their truth-value could be reached. "[I]t is the indefensible truth that lasts; it lasts because it works and serves. People come to it and remain and attract other understanding and

[11] Ralph Barton Perry attributed much of James's late socialism to Wells, though he misidentified *First and Last Things* as Fabian (1935, 289).

enquiring people" (2016b, 43). While such knowledge was always provisional, it was secure enough to navigate the world.

Pragmatists were often criticised for the corrosive effects of their philosophy. The physicist Edwin Herbert Hall wrote to James, castigating him and Wells for advocating a dangerous will-to-believe, a charge that James rejected (November 7 1909: James 2004, 363). Schiller denied that pragmatism fostered intellectual anarchy.

> …is it anarchical to declare that each man has the right, and the duty, to interpret his experience, and to construct a philosophy adequate to that? Is it not rather a tardy recognition of human freedom and responsibility? And could it possibly seem anarchy to those who have fully grasped man's social nature and his desire...to co-operate with others and to discover or devise a ground for common action? (1907, 604).

While conceding that his scepticism destroyed the "universal claim of ethical imperatives," as well as the "universal claim of any religions teaching" (1904, 391), Wells maintained that it was a matter of "practical necessity" to hold ethical beliefs, not least because they motivated action. The impossibly of ascertaining certain knowledge about the world, or grounding normative claims, was no bar to political understanding or transformation.

Wells claimed that his metaphysical beliefs could be reconciled with his optimism about human affairs through an act of *faith*. "Our lives and powers are limited, our scope in space and time is limited, and it is not unreasonable that for fundamental beliefs we must go outside the sphere of reason and set our feet upon Faith" (1902, 331). Moral and political beliefs were equivalent to artistic creation, "as much self-expression as one's poetry or painting or music" (1904, 391; 2016b, 42). Worlds were made by acts of will. "Will," he proclaimed, "is stronger than Fact, it can mould and overcome Fact" (2005a, 245). As Wells acknowledged later, his early work was written "under the influence" of James's *The Will to Believe*, which led him to (over)emphasize the "wilful element in belief" (1942, 1). For Wells, beliefs crystallized into social practices, legal regimes and political institutions, and it followed that a change in beliefs could change the world. Wells's early socialism focused principally on altering beliefs as a necessary preliminary to transforming institutions and public policies (1908, 203, 265). Political thinking went badly astray when it concentrated on the latter, a failing he discerned among many contemporary socialists. Property was one such idea. The capitalist regime of private property was an historically-

contingent cluster of beliefs (1908, 62). Wells's ideational view of socialism attracted criticism. Blaming his pragmatism, Brooks charged Wells with abandoning materialist economic analysis for "psychology" (1915, 68).

The connection between Wells's short-term practical demands – old-age pensions, public health and education, national insurance schemes, financial recognition of "motherhood" (1908, 248-9) – and his long-term goal of a world-state was straightforward. The former were prudential steps necessary to help bring about the latter. It was for similar reasons that prior to the First World War he promoted both a union of the "English-speaking peoples" and the continuation of the British empire as agents to precipitate a post-Westphalian order (1999, 138-55; 1903, 1-33; Bell 2016, 189-96). For Wells, socialism was institutionally indeterminate – various policies or organisational structures were viable as long as they contributed to the synthesis of human purposes and the creation of a world-state (2016b, 86-7). Socialism was both a reflection of the collective consciousness of humanity and a diffuse movement seeking to attain its full flourishing.

> I have decided for myself that the general business of life is the development of a collective consciousness and will and purpose out of a chaos of individual consciousnesses and wills and purposes, and that the way to that is through the development of the Socialist State, through the socialization of existing State organizations and their merger or pacific association in a World State (2016b, 128).

In *Pragmatism* James advocated a philosophical sensibility that balanced "scientific loyalty to facts" with the "old confidence in human values and the resultant spontaneity, whether of the religious or romantic type" (2000, 14). Wells proffered a similar view – pragmatism allowed him to reconcile evolutionary theory with an account of human life that allowed for volition, creativity, and spirituality. Wells argued that science did not rest on secure epistemic foundations – though this had little impact on its *practical* value – and that other forms of knowledge incapable of empirical verification may nevertheless be useful for particular purposes (2016b, 36; James 1979a). Here too James was a fellow traveller, arguing that pragmatism encompassed the spiritual: "She will count mystical experiences if they have practical consequences" (2000, 39-40). Even as Wells's philosophical commitments dissolved claims to certainty, they opened the door to mysticism. His position, he admitted, "restores special providence and unverified assertions to the stock of credible things, and liberty to the human imagination" (1975a, 22). He was clear

about his own will to believe. Even those who reject "each and every transcendentalism that is offered to us," nevertheless "find it imperative to believe in spite of the absolute darkness that the whole of being has an interaction and a correlation beyond the system of causes that the scientific method reveals" (1975d, 45). This was a fair description of the reconstructive dimension of Wells's philosophical system.

Wells attempted to harmonise difference and unity. His celebration of individuality was derived from his nominalism. In Utopia acknowledgement of the unique lead to an "insistence upon individuality and the individual difference as the significance of life" (2005a, 20). This sense of individuality underpinned his conception of freedom: accepting metaphysical uniqueness "steadily intensifies the value of freedom, until at last we begin to see liberty as the very substance of life, that indeed it is life" (2005a, 28; see also 1908, 192ff). To be fully human was to be free because freedom was necessary for individual personalities to flourish and for healthy competition to catalyse progress, allowing "artificial man" to tame "natural man." Wells argued that individual freedom had to be balanced against the freedom of others and the "welfare of the community as a whole" (1908, 191), though he failed to specify the appropriate equilibrium. He contrasted his account with "individualistic individuality," the egotistic self-interest defended by Spencer (1903, 13). "The State is for individuals, the law is for freedoms, the world is for experiment, experience and change," he proclaimed: "these are the fundamental beliefs upon which a modern Utopia must go" (2005a, 66).

Individuality was embedded in a wider whole. The "oneness of the species," Wells asserted, "is a greater fact than individuality" (2016b, 93). Human history was characterised by the glacial unfolding of racial consciousness. "In that awakening of the species, one's own personal being lives and moves – a part of it and contributing to it" (2016b, 62). Humanity was capable of self-consciousness. "You see that from this point of view – which is for me the vividly true and dominating point of view – our individualities, our nations and states and races are but bubbles and clusters of foam upon the great stream of the blood of the species, incidental experiments in the growing knowledge and consciousness of the race" (2016b, 63). This argument relied more on bold assertion than systematic argumentation. Wells expressed faith that humans had meaning and purpose in the universe, and that given the right conditions they could prosper. "On the whole – and nowadays almost steadily – things *get better*," he divulged in *New Worlds for Old*. "There is a secular amelioration of life, and it is brought about by Good Will working through the efforts of man" (1908, 5). Humanity could create a utopia on (or beyond) earth. "In

the ultimate I know, though I cannot prove my knowledge in any way whatever," he concluded *First and Last Things*, "that everything is right and all things mine" (2016b, 199). This was a dynamic picture of human evolution as purposeful and teleological. It had profound political implications, underwriting the eventual dissolution of exclusive human collectivities – states, nations, peoples – and pointing towards a vision of universal political association. Not just a model of socio-economic order or a reformist movement, socialism was a "common step we are all taking in the great synthesis of human purpose" (2016b, 85). It was the "awakening of a collective consciousness in humanity, a collective will and a collective mind out of which finer individualities may arise forever in a perpetual series of fresh endeavours and fresh achievements for the race" (2016b, 86). Peering yet further ahead, he foresaw a posthuman future in which the species escaped its feeble organic shell to conquer the unknown. The planet, he hymned, "will someday bear a race beyond our most exalted and temerarious dreams, a race begotten of our wills and the substance of our bodies, a race…who will stand upon the earth as one stands upon a footstool and laugh and reach out their hands amidst the stars" (1908, 241). Socialism was the medium and the means for achieving this "higher anarchism," a world beyond law, rights, property, and jealousy (1908, 238).

Wells's attempted synthesis of nominalism and spiritual-cosmic evolution was riddled with philosophical tensions, not least (in James's terms) that between pluralism and monism. James was sceptical of Wells's attempt: "you are more monistic in your faith that I should be" (2004, 126). Despite his fulsome praise for Wells, this was not James's only criticism. Elsewhere he challenged Wells's account of human nature and his admiration for technocratic leadership (2002, 50, 41; 2004, 8). They also differed over the appropriate *scale* of socialist politics: Wells was obsessed with vast "synthetic" projects, seeking to agglomerate existing polities into a world-state, while James was suspicious of "big" politics, fearing the will to imperial power (Livingston 2016). However, James suggested that Wells's synthetic account *could* be rendered coherent: "as long as you only call it 'faith,' that's your right and privilege" (2004, 126). However, he didn't elaborate on this advice. A Jamesian reading posits that the practical consequences of the concepts Wells's invoked – whether the people or the cosmic mind – are yoked to our epistemic stance towards them.[12] If understood as absolutes, they mislead and can be dangerous, but if regarded as arbitrary but powerful objects of faith, they can be affirmed and mobilised insofar as they conduce to particular human purposes. In Jamesian terms, Wells's cosmic-evolutionary proposition can be seen as a "live" and "momentous" hypothesis rather than a "dead" or

[12] Thanks to Alex Livingstone for discussion on this point.

"trivial" one (1979a) – though not verified, dropping it would rule out the possibility that it might be true and hamper the valuable political action that such a belief motivated.

Schiller, a proud conservative, was more critical of Wells's political thought. While finding it "most enjoyable and stimulating," he challenged the socialism of *First and Last Things*. He charged Wells with failing to discuss institutions in sufficient detail. "I cannot see how any Socialism cd exist without universally powerful political machinery. And the chances are that this machine wd be both tyrannical, wasteful, inefficient and weak in its different functions." Moreover, he found Wells's account of freedom "quite inadequate," for socialism and individualism were incompatible. "You I know realise the importance of this individualism as no political theorist has ever done before, but I am sure that even your Utopia does not sufficiently safeguard its possibility." Indeed he questioned Wells's socialist credentials, labelling him a "Platonic aristocratic individualist," who wanted to "change the current values and to upset the ruling types of man, in favour of better ones."[13]

Starting with scepticism, Wells ended up with belief. He acknowledged that his vision of socialist destiny and the interconnected nature of the universe was a form of "religious faith" (2016b, 94-5). This was a long way from Huxley's stern agnosticism and the pitiless conflict between nature and human morality. Indeed at times Wells sounded like the Christian Absolute Idealists whose metaphysical foundations he so thoroughly rejected. This was no coincidence: "I write in phrases that the evangelical Christianity of my childhood made familiar to me, because they are the most expressive phrases I have ever met for the psychological facts with which I am dealing" (2016b, 82). The kinetic utopia of *First and Last Things* was a secular theodicy reconciling artificial and natural man in an earthly paradise. It is little wonder that only a few years later Wells entered a brief religious phase, drawing explicitly on James's notion of a finite deity in *God the Invisible King* (1917; Smith 1986, 230-2).

VI. Conclusion

H. G. Wells was one of the most celebrated and controversial political thinkers of the early twentieth century. An influential contributor to debates over socialism and progressivism, his prolific writings traversed an astonishingly broad range, spanning multiple topics and genres. For Wells, serious philosophical analysis was a prolegomena to effective political thought and action,

[13] Schiller to Wells, 8/3/08, Wells papers.

and a vital feature of a thriving public culture. It could not be avoided. I have argued that Wells's writing during the Edwardian years – the formative period of his intellectual development and the time when he emerged as a public figure – cannot be understood properly without recognising his creative fusion of evolutionary theory and Jamesian pragmatism. Although Wells later became more sceptical about James's account of the will-to-believe, he remained committed to nominalism, verificationism, and a pragmatist conception of the purpose of philosophy, throughout his long career. Wells's self-declared pragmatism was recognised by numerous contemporaries, including James, who hailed him as one of the most significant exponents of the doctrine. It infused his political thought. His vision of socialism was shaped by a Jamesian account of belief, will, value, and truth. His metaphysical commitments likewise underpinned his conception of rights, liberty, nationality, popular sovereignty, and a host of other subjects. Acknowledging his pragmatism sheds new light on both Wells and the early history of pragmatism.

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