Is there such a thing as transcendental pragmatism, or a pragmatism that fits within the Kantian transcendental tradition? If so, can it provide us with a way to analyze the meaningfulness of religious experience, especially theistic religious experience? I contend that we can answer these two questions as follows. Yes, Virginia, there is a Kantian transcendental pragmatism, and Sami Pihlström’s naturalistic transcendental pragmatism is a contemporary example of it. And, yes, there is a transcendental pragmatism that can provide us with a way to analyze the meaningfulness of religious experience. It is not Pihlström’s naturalistic transcendental pragmatism, however. That honor goes to Josiah Royce’s absolute pragmatism. This paper explains why we are warranted in answering these questions this way.

Let us examine the answer to the first question posed in this paper. As I stated in the last paragraph, there is a contemporary transcendental pragmatism that fits within the Kantian transcendental tradition and that it is Pihlström’s naturalistic transcendental pragmatism, or “transcendental pragmatism” for short. Pihlström has written several books making a plausible case for interpreting the classical American pragmatist tradition along Kantian transcendentalist lines. He thinks that this can be accomplished once we recognize that there are many features of classical American pragmatism, especially in Charles S. Peirce’s pragmaticism and William James’s pragmatism, and of Hilary
Putnam’s neopragmatism that are compatible with a naturalized Kantian
transcendentalism. His own transcendental pragmatism is the result of combining a
Kantized Peircean-Jamesian pragmatism and Putnam’s post-analytic neopragmatism.¹

To distance his historicized and naturalized version of Kant’s transcendental
philosophy from the more traditional, non-naturalist versions of Kantian
transcendentalism, he adopts Henry Allison’s term “epistemic conditions”² as a suitable
replacement for the more traditional Kantian concepts of “a priori form of sensible
intuitions” and “categories of the understanding.” He thus conceives of transcendental
philosophy not as a search for the a priori and necessary conditions of the possibility for
human knowledge acquisition like Kant does, but as an inquiry into the epistemic
conditions necessary for us to experience an objective reality (not in the sense of being
completely mind-independent, but in the sense of a world that is partially constituted by
us and partially resistant to our acts of sense-constitution).

From this standpoint, transcendental philosophy is the ongoing philosophical
“research program” where its practitioners investigate “transcendental facts,” or the
relatively necessary conditions for the possibility of us acquiring knowledge about
ourselves and our world. These facts serve as the conditions for the possibility of our
experience of an objective reality, meaning that they do not require any further epistemic
explanation or justification under our current cognitive practices.³ However, these
conditions are contingent for Pihlström in that “[t]hese ‘facts’ about us are not sacrosanct

¹ See, for example, Sami Pihlström’s Naturalizing the Transcendental (Amherst, N.Y.: Humanity Books, 2003), chap. 2.
² Henry Allison introduces this notion in Kant’s Transcendental Idealism: An Interpretation and Defense, rev. and enlarged ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), chap. 1.
³ Pihlström, Naturalizing the Transcendental, 174.
but may (slowly) change in the course of our historical existence." This means that as our environment changes and our practices change so that we are better able to dwell in our changing environment, our epistemic conditions also change. Moreover, this means that our epistemic conditions are not timeless, a priori categories and forms of sensible intuitions; rather, they are the operative epistemic norms that govern our actual social practices and norms governing those practices. And we unearth these embedded norms through a critical investigation of our actual practices. Transcendental pragmatism, then, is first and foremost a sort of critical philosophical anthropology – i.e., a philosophical anthropology that not only describes our actual practices, but also makes recommendations and suggestions concerning how we could improve our practices as critical participants in those very practices.5

Here we can take Pihlström’s transcendental pragmatism to represent one of at least two different ways of interpreting the Kantian transcendental tradition.6 The first way, which is the way that Pihlström conceives of the Kantian transcendental tradition, is to understand it as a philosophical position that investigates the necessary conditions for the possibility of human experience and knowledge acquisition. With respect to this way of interpreting the Kantian transcendental tradition, Pihlström’s efforts to redefine “naturalism” in a non-reductive manner are worthwhile. Unlike contemporary analytic philosophy’s version of philosophical naturalism, which often presuppose a methodological atheism (i.e., the only legitimate way to acquire knowledge about

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4 Ibid.
6 This way of understanding the Kantian transcendental tradition is inspired by David Carr, Paradox of Subjectivity: The Self in the Transcendental Tradition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).
ourselves and the world is through the method of the sciences), Pilhström thinks of naturalism in a more modest and pragmatic manner. This lets his pragmatic transcendental naturalism view all facets of human existence in a nonreductive manner. This breathes some life into his naturalistic descriptions of such features of human existence as our ethical lives and our aesthetic values. An apt description of his pragmatic transcendental naturalism is that it is a “‘philosophy with a human face,’ … a philosophy relevant to deep human concerns, to our pursuit of a worldview enabling us to feel at home in the world.”

Even though Pilhström’s pragmatic transcendentalism recognizes the importance of appreciating the meaningfulness of human existence on its own terms, he does not quite go far enough in safeguarding the meaningfulness of human existence from the specter of scientism. This is why I think Pilhström should not so easily reject the Kantian dichotomy between scientific inquiry and transcendental argumentation or between viewing ourselves as objects of scientific inquiry and viewing ourselves as noumenal selves. Indeed, one could regard this Kantian dichotomy as being a pragmatically useful one since it guards against reducing important elements of human existence into vicious scientific abstractions, e.g., the reduction of human eros to being epiphenomenal. Rather than describing human eros in its messiness and richness, there is always the temptation for a scientific explanation for the phenomenon of erotic love; that is, to explain all cases of erotic love as really being only causal, physical phenomena.

Unlike Pilhström, I am not confident that contemporary scientific inquiry can be nonreductionistic in a pragmatist (especially in a Jamesian or Deweyan) sense. Actually,

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7 Pilhström, *Naturalizing the Transcendental*, 57.
8 Ibid., 59.
9 See ibid.
even if a nonreductionistic scientific inquiry is a viable option in our contemporary
milieu, a nonreductionistic pragmatist conception of scientific inquiry is not sufficient to
depict certain human experiences, specifically ethico-religious experiences that are
apparently non-natural. For example, not even a nonreductionistic naturalism such as
Pilhström’s is able to describe the genuinely eternal and super-human dimension of
certain types of religious experience on its own terms. And I am inclined to agree with
Edgar S. Brightman when he writes that any “naturalism, which tends to exclude our
experiential personal relations to divinity, is not empirical enough…,”¹⁰ but not for the
rationalistic reasons that Brightman cite. Theism is not, as Brightman thinks, “…‘an
hypothesis about the rational interpretation of experience as whole,’ thus subject to
verification, modification, or even rejection.”¹¹ Rather, theistic religious experience is a
particularly mode of personal being-in-the-world where the world is seen as welcoming to
our efforts at intergenerational and intra-generational communion with one another and
as the stage where we participate in the ongoing transhistorical drama of life where the
finite yearns to commune with the divine.

I think we should now answer the second question posed at the beginning of this
paper. To appreciate this sort of human religious experience transcendentally, we have to
move from the first way of understanding the Kantian transcendental tradition to the
second available one. The second way is to understand it as a philosophical position


where there is a genuine yet paradoxical distinction between (a) viewing ourselves as empirical objects of scientific inquiries, and thus subject to either mechanistic and/or statistical physical laws, and (b) viewing ourselves as ethico-religious agents who partially constitute their world. Stated differently, this second way to interpret the Kantian transcendental tradition can be understood as a philosophical approach that examines the irreducible distinction between human existence as an object of scientific inquiry (however broadly scientific inquiry is defined) and human existence viewed transcendentalistically, that is to say, human existence viewed in light of the perennial religious, ethical, and aesthetic concerns of human persons. This is the transcendental tradition that Royce’s pragmatism is a part of.

Pihlström himself has identified Royce’s pragmatism as a transcendental one in his article “Peirce’s Place in the Pragmatist Tradition.” As far as I know, he has not examined how Royce’s pragmatism fits into the Kantian transcendental pragmatism. Yet, it is obvious that Royce’s pragmatism is transcendental since the Kantian distinction between viewing ourselves as empirical selves and viewing ourselves as ethico-religious agents who partially constitutes our world is at its heart. And this distinction is not a traditionally metaphysical one, since Royce, like all the fellow pragmatists in the late 19th and early 20th century, emphasizes a transactional account of human experience (at least on the level of human existence) and jettisons Kant’s concepts of a transcendental object that is not experiencable and is in actuality a thing-in-itself, the permanence of Kant’s categories of the understanding, and Kant’s version of noumenon.

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Indeed, Royce’s conception of the absolute is a result of his rejection of an inexperienceable thing-in-itself; that is to say, his absolute could be plausibly conceived as his attempt to “safeguard” conceptually the commonsensical intuition that the objects in the world exist in some form even when we finite persons do not perceive them. Unfortunately, Royce’s absolute still resembles Kant’s thing-in-itself, because it is something that we do not directly experience, but rather something that we must presuppose as the necessary condition for the possibility of experiencing anything at all. I consider this to be the major conceptual weakness of Royce’s absolute pragmatism. I have addressed this weakness in Royce’s absolute pragmatism elsewhere. Yet, one could still advance a Roycean absolute pragmatism without suffering from this weakness in Royce’s own absolute pragmatism. One could interpret Gabriel Marcel’s religious existentialism and H. Richard Niebuhr’s liberal theology as two ways of doing just that. The remainder of this paper concentrates on how Royce’s pragmatism is a transcendental one that is sensitive to human religious experience, particularly religious experience originated from what one can call an ethico-religious insight.

Royce’s absolute pragmatism is a transcendental pragmatism that has attempted to examine the super-human depth at the center of our reality is Royce’s absolute pragmatism. His pragmatism is perhaps the form of classical American pragmatism that is the most traditionally transcendental in its argumentation. It is also the pragmatism that is the most sensitive to the yearnings of finite persons to commune with the eternal.

14 I do so in the first section of my article, Concerning the God that is Only a Concept: A Marcellian Critique of Royce’s God,” Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society: A Quarterly Journal in American Philosophy 42.3 (Summer 2006): 395-404.
Yet, it is not surprising that contemporary transcendental pragmatists such as Pilhström have not studied Royce’s pragmatism in more detail, given that they apparently are not interested in performing an extended critical examination of the divine from a pragmatic point of view.

What is perhaps most disconcerting for many contemporary pragmatists of all stripes about Royce’s absolute pragmatism is that Royce conceives of its transcendental arguments for the absolute’s existence to be pragmatic in nature. Why would he think that this is the cases? Cornel West suggests an answer to that question in his comments on Royce’s *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy*:

Royce believes more is at stake [with his transcendental arguments for the existence of absolute truth and an absolute knower of that truth] than warding off willful subjectivism and epistemic relativism. Reality and truth must, in some sense, be absolute not only because skepticism lurks about, but also – and more important, because it is the last and only hope for giving meaning to the strenuous mood, for justifying the worthwhileness of our struggle to endure.\(^{15}\)

West recognizes that Royce uses transcendental arguments as “teleological weapons of the mind” to combat the all-too-real specter of moral relativism in late-nineteenth century and early-twentieth century America and the thoroughgoing moral nihilism that accompanies such relativism. This is precisely what Nietzsche warns Western European intellectuals against in many of his writings. Of course, we should not minimize the differences between how Royce and Nietzsche sought to combat the specter of moral

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relativism and its accompanying nihilism in their philosophies. For the purposes of this paper, let us simply pass over Nietzsche in silence and examine Royce’s response to this specter.

As early as *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy*, Royce voiced his worry over the pragmatic consequences of accepting moral relativism, e.g., of living in a world that has at most a concatenated unity, where the fragmentariness of human experience is all we have, and where moral meanings are not tied to anything absolute. One can read Royce’s transcendental argument for the existence of a unitary foundation for morality in Book 1 of *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy* and his more well-known argument for the existence of absolute in chapter 11 of *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy* as pragmatic ways of warding off the nihilistic specter haunting him and his sociohistorical milieu. Given the almost century-long history of genocides, concentration camps, eugenics programs, world wars, global *dis-ease*, and civil wars following the publication of *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy*, one could argue that Royce was rightly worried about the specter of moral nihilism and its consequences. Many today might not agree with his monistic and theistic approach to warding off that specter, but we cannot dismiss his concern about it or his efforts to battle it. In light of his sociohistorical period, Royce’s attempt to marshal transcendental arguments in the service of constructing an idealist philosophy in which the entire cosmos is understood as the absolute personally working to unify all things within its chronosynoptic vision, seems plausible.

However, Royce’s concern about relativism was not restricted to the realm of moral life, narrowly understood. He was also concerned about epistemic and ontological relativism. This is what he sought to battle indirectly in his 1895 Berkeley lecture, “The
Conception of God.” This is not to say that his concern about epistemic and ontological relativism is not intimately related to his concern about moral relativism. One can think of CG as a shift in emphasis, not of substance. He thought that the epistemic, and even ontological, relativism that results in conceiving of human knowledge as the result of hypotheses founded on inferences from fragmentary human perceptions would lead to the weakening of scientific inquiry. That is to say, Royce thought that without an actual Omniscient Being who unifies all fragmentary human perceptions and phenomena within its own chronosynoptic “Experience,” there would be nothing to guarantee that our scientific concepts refer to anything existing beyond ourselves. Without an actually existing Omniscient Being, we would not even have anything to guarantee that our perceptions and conceptions of other people refer to actually existing people. Stated otherwise, for a human percept and a concept to refer to a non-conceptual entity, that non-conceptual entity ultimately has to be experienced by Someone who can experience it in its entirety. Since no human can experience anything in its entirety, this means that there has to be Someone who experiences everything in its entirety. This Someone happens to be called the “Omniscient Being” in his 1895 lecture.

Some recent scholars of classical American pragmatism (for example, Christopher Hookway) have criticized the theory of reference implicit in Royce’s position in “The Conception of God.” However, Royce was never comfortable accepting the realist position that Hookway takes for granted. In terms of reference, he was a thoroughgoing

idealistic. This is why Royce interprets the Peircean dictum that to exist is to signify something along these lines: To signifying something is to be the object of significance for someone, namely a minded being. To be an object of significance, in turn, is to be experienced by someone. Since everything is significant, for Royce, he thinks that there is someone who experiences everything’s significance. And since no finite being could ever experience everything’s significance, he could not help but infer that there has to be a minded being that experiences everything for eternity. Again, we come across one of Royce’s transcendental arguments that seem unintelligible unless one already is sympathetic to Royce’s ethico-religious insight, or at least the desire to view the universe as a unified whole.

This is true of Royce’s later transcendental arguments as well. For example, in his transcendental argument against Jamesian theories of truth in The Philosophy of Loyalty, he contends that epistemic truthfulness matters not only because it allows us to accurately describe actual states of affairs in the world, but also because it improves us ethically and religiously. Indeed, truthfulness’ central value is an ethico-religious one and only secondarily an epistemic one. Or, more accurately, truthfulness has an epistemic value precisely because it improves us ethically and religiously.

Once Royce’s transcendental argumentation is seen as a smokescreen for advancing the plausibility of his ethico-religious insight, one can see how Royce’s philosophy is rooted in his experience of this insight. We can also agree with George Holmes Howison when he critiques Royce’s transcendental argument in chapter 11 of The Religious Aspect of Philosophy as depending not on logic for its persuasiveness, but

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on an extra-logical (that is, ethico-religious) source.¹⁹ I think we should let Howison’s critique of Royce’s idealism be a reason to search for the pragmatic foundation of Royce’s transcendental arguments.

While Royce seems not to provide any detailed account of the experiential nature of his ethico-religious insight in any of his published writings, I think that his distinction between the world of description and the world of appreciation in The Spirit of Modern Philosophy and The World and the Individual is a leading clue that can assist us in examining the existential nature of his transcendental arguments. Once we view Royce’s description-appreciation distinction as a leading clue, it can be interpreted as a twist on the Kantian distinction between viewing ourselves as objects of human cognition and scientific inquiry and viewing ourselves as ethico-religious and aesthetic actors in the world. Royce conceives of the world of description as the world understood abstractly whereas he conceives of the world of appreciation as the world experienced by us personally. He recognizes that, at most, philosophic inquiry only indirectly describes the world of appreciation through the fog of human cognition, along with its accompanying cognitive and interpretative abstractions.²⁰ Yet, Royce thinks that the world of description (i.e., the world as viewed through the universal and general categories used in the natural and human sciences) presupposes the world of appreciation (i.e., the world viewed as an interrelated nexus of actual human persons, non-human organisms, and non-


organic objects) for its meaningfulness. This is somewhat similar to Edmund Husserl’s contention in *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Philosophy* that the sciences acquire their meaningfulness by being rooted in the lifeworld (*Lebenwelt*), i.e., the world of everyday living, rituals, and social practices.

Yet, Royce in his later years recognizes that his earlier distinction between the worlds of description and appreciation is intelligible only because we construct it from the vantage point of the world of interpretation. He describes the world of interpretation in some detail throughout the second volume of *The Problem of Christianity*. If we allow ourselves to interpret *The Problem of Christianity* and its discussion of the relation between perception, conception, and interpretation in terms of *The World and the Individual*, we can describe these three ways of understanding ourselves and our world this way: While conception and perception cannot transcend the world of description, interpretative acts are rooted in and sustained by our appreciation of the people and things we experience or think about. Or, at least, this is the way I prefer to describe Royce’s “will to interpret” in terms of the capacity and exercise of interpreting the meaningfulness of phenomena we experience (that is, in terms of “interpretive acts”). If one conceived of interpretative acts in this manner, one can understand our appreciation of people, things, and even the Universal Interpreter Spirit as the existential contents of our interpretative acts. Of course, Royce thinks that all finite interpretative acts are underwritten by the

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21 For his most sustained explanation of the distinction between the world of description and the world of appreciation, see Royce, *World and the Individual II*, Lectures 2, 4-5. See also Josiah Royce, “Is There a Science of Education?” in *Educational Review* 1 (1891): 15-25 and 121-32 for how he distinguishes between his students as objects of scientific knowledge (namely, as subjects of psychological inquiry) and his students as genuine individuals whose uniqueness is not exhausted by the categories imposed upon them by human cognition. In this article, he intimates that the world of appreciation is accessible only in artful practices that are sensitive to the uniqueness that it attempts to express or love the person for whom one has dedicated her artist services and/or creations.
temporally all-inclusive interpretative acts performed by the Universal Interpreter

Spirit.\textsuperscript{22}

Unfortunately, Royce seems to have never worked out a sufficient justification for the existential significance of interpretative acts. This, in turn, weakens Royce’s claim that his transcendental arguments are pragmatic in nature. Had Royce worked out the experiential basis for his distinction between the worlds of appearance, description, and (later) interpretation, he would have had to outline the existential orientation from which his transcendental arguments are intelligible – not only logically, but also experientially – in phenomenological terms. This is where Mark Sacks’ work on situated thought serves Royce’s philosophy well.

Sacks describes his notion of situated thought amid his attempt to explain the sort of proofs presupposed in transcendental arguments, particularly those found in Kant’s \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}. More specifically, Sacks attempts to demonstrate how transcendental arguments are unintelligible in a phenomenological sense unless they are supported by plausible transcendental proofs. For our purposes we are not required to summarize Sacks position concerning the nature of transcendental proofs and their relation to transcendental arguments. What concerns us is how Sacks’s notion of situated thought enables us to view Royce’s transcendental arguments as founded upon a particular existential orientation. For us to appreciation how Sacks’s notion lends itself to a plausible interpretation of Royce’s transcendental arguments, we first have to offer an existentialist interpretation of Sacks notion of situated thought. Then, we must examine how this notion alters how we understand the purpose of transcendental arguments in

\textsuperscript{22} See, for example, Josiah Royce, \textit{The Problem of Christianity} (1913) (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 318-19, 340-42 and 362.
general. Only then can we appreciate how Royce’s transcendental arguments are founded upon his particular existential orientation.

Sacks defines situated thought as follows: “In saying of a thought that it is situated, I mean that it is construed as being the thought that one would have from a particular point within a framework, the content of which is informed by it being grasped as if from that perspective.”\(^{23}\) He goes on to write, “It is not bare propositional content considered as if from nowhere, but is rather informed by being phenomenologically embedded and directed.”\(^{24}\) A situated thought does not require that the one examining the argument actually experiences the transcendental argument as the arguer experiences it. It only requires that that person be sympathetic the phenomenological orientation of the arguer and appreciate how, given the arguer’s position, the arguer seems led to make the inferences that he or she makes.\(^{25}\) Once transcendental arguments are seen as requiring one to entertain a situated thought to fairly evaluate their plausibility, we can see how these arguments depend on more than their logical inferences and propositional content. We can see how they also depend on their phenomenological content, or “situated thought contents.”\(^{26}\)

We are now prepared to reading Sacks’s notion of situated thought in existentialist terms. By considering situated thoughts existentially, we move beyond epistemic concerns to the lived experiences at the root of transcendental arguments. That is to say, when we understand situated thought contents as the existential orientations that one should adopt in order to sympathetically follow the inferential claims of

\(^{24}\) Ibid.
\(^{25}\) Ibid.
\(^{26}\) Ibid., 446, 451.
transcendental arguments, we will appreciate how transcendental arguments are intelligible only to the extent that we have the capacity to imagine the lived experiences of the ones who advance those arguments. Furthermore, Sacks’s notion of situated thought reminds us that we cannot sense the plausibility of transcendental arguments unless we first appreciate the plausibility of the lived experiences underlying transcendental arguments. Otherwise, we will see them, at best, as valid deductive arguments, devoid of existential content.

Let us now return to our discussion of Royce’s pragmatic transcendental arguments. Royce’s transcendental arguments can be understood as rooted in his ethico-religious insight. In addition, for these arguments to be considered plausible by someone, that person would need to entertain the situated thought at their foundation. Unfortunately, Royce never seemed to realize this fact, and sometimes constructed his arguments as though logical inferences alone could not only guarantee their validity, but also their truthfulness. This problem arises, in large part, because he neither adequately roots any of his transcendental arguments in a well-articulated phenomenology of ethico-religious experience nor does he offer a compelling epistemology that ties his arguments to the world as experienced by us. Viewing Royce’s ethico-religious insight as the situated thought on which he builds his argument goes a long way towards providing him with the tools to bridge the gap between lived experience and propositional content in his transcendental arguments.

Translated into the terms of The Problem of Christianity, this means that, for Royce, every genuine interpretative act involve our adoption of the “third attitude of will.” This attitude involves our recognition that no one can escape the crushing weight
of human existence unless one devotes oneself to a cause, more specifically to a community dedicated to a cause. Moreover, this willingly chosen cause should ultimately promote the further actualization of the Beloved Community. Royce’s transcendental arguments, at least the ones mentioned in this paper, all seem to presuppose this third attitude of will and the ethico-religious insight motivating us to adopt it. We have just unearthed the one thought that anyone has to take seriously and appreciate sympathetically before any of Royce’s transcendental arguments make sense. Is it immodest to ask someone to appreciate the ethico-religious insight that births Royce’s transcendental arguments and sustains them existentially? I think not! It might even be pragmatic to do so, if one has similar religious sensibilities to Royce’s.

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