Editor’s Note

An academic journal is a creature of words. You know this already. Yet there are occasions when one wishes to venture into semiotic spaces that go beyond words. For this particular issue, the expressive mode of choice would be diagrams—in particular, that hoary old stand-by, the Venn diagram. A staple of corporate presentations and at least one coffee table book (Venn That Tune, which visualizes representations of popular music titles through the magic of interlocking circles: recommended), the Venn diagram is wonderfully suited for capturing the blend of connections and distinctions that characterize the present issue. Instead of subjecting you to an actual Venn diagram, however, I will instead sum up its relevance in four simple words: William Hart’s AJTP Lecture.

Entitled “Sense and Sensibility: IARPT’s Four Existential Orientations,” Hart’s essay leads the present issue. It has been adapted from the AJTP lecture Hart gave in November 2022 at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Denver. In addition to being richly autobiographical, not to mention remarkably successful in its balancing act between personal engagement and analytic detachment, the essay’s “existential orientations” confront the reader with categories perfectly suited to Venn-like thinking. In Hart’s telling, there have been four such orientations that have anchored and defined IARPT across its four-decade history: pragmatism, process, naturalism, and empiricism. Subject neither to conflation nor separation, these orientations reflect commitments that have been held in dynamic tension/harmony through conversations that in many cases have carried on for decades. To understand this is to understand not just IARPT, but also the very journal you’re reading now. It’s also a helpful way to approach the material collected within the present issue.

Aside from Hart’s magisterial essay, three articles comprise the present issue. The first is “Prelude to Tackling Contemporary Crises: William James and a Psychological Springboard to Political Change,” by Paul Croce, which, in drawing from James to explore the psychology by which one attends to urgent public issues, seeks to bridge the “divide between the committed and the distracted.” The second article is “American Gods: Debunking the Symbolic Dimension of Early American Naturalism,” by Antonio M. Nunziante, whose diligent traversal of the American naturalist tradition both affirms the historical link between naturalism, humanism, and religion and demonstrates the power of naturalist symbols not merely for academics, but for the public at large. The
third article is “The Note of Interpretation: Theistic Finitism as an Aesthetics of Religious Naturalism,” by Andrew Stone Porter, which interrogates a particular philosophical-theological position—theistic finitism—and, with great patience and precision, threads a needle between its aesthetic and social relevance within contemporary American life.

Aside from being—of course—trenchant, well-researched contributions to scholarship and eloquent exemplars of contemporary academic prose, these pieces are all exquisitely Venn-able. For example, one finds herein at least two of Hart’s existential orientations: naturalism (Hart, Nunziante, Stone Porter) and pragmatism (Croce). One also finds testaments to the social power of naturalist thought (Nunziante, Stone Porter) or of American thought more broadly (Hart, Croce, Nunziante, Stone Porter). More subtly, one finds convincing cases for reflecting on the nature of difference as a key to capturing and mobilizing public attention (Croce, Stone Porter). Such are just a few of the connective threads woven across the materials collected within the present issue. Go ahead, make your own connections, Venn diagram or no. In any case: happy reading!