“Tributes to Richard Bernstein,” by Mark Lombardo


The publication of these two edited volumes within the last three years on Richard J. Bernstein would seem to suggest that there is a certain timeliness to the (re-)investigation of his work. This may very well be the case given Bernstein’s longstanding role of facilitating a dialogue between currents of philosophy which are often sharply distinguished in terms of their respective methods, temperaments, pedagogical approaches, and/or ethical commitments. If both of these volumes, each in their own way, fail at fully capturing the consequences of what such a dialogue would entail for the philosophical community and related fields of social, political, and historical inquiry this likely has less to do with a shortcoming of the collections themselves than with the immensity of the project. This being said, it is quite possibly the case that the format of an edited volume in which a series of authors of heteronymous perspectives address a heteronomy of subjects is not particularly well-suited to the necessary task of developing a synoptic account of what a more synoptic philosophy would look like. On the other hand, such a project would likely fall into an unsalvageable parochialism of one kind or another unless it actively confronts the challenges of accuracy and adequateness, consistency and completeness, universality and particularity, equality and diversity as they are addressed by more specialized descriptions of ontological, logical, moral, and political situations. While these volumes on Bernstein might not provide the most congenial forum for a coherent and comprehensive response to these challenges, when taken together they certainly do offer valuable suggestions and provocations regarding whether such a vision is possible or even desirable and how this vision might look regardless of its lack of sturdy foundations or ultimate justification.

For Bernstein, the task of outlining the interdisciplinary and anti-parochial future of philosophy that is to come is inextricably related to the task of rewriting philosophy’s recent history. The idea of The Pragmatic Century named in the volume’s title is to recast the intellectual history of the 20th Century as it might be approached by rejecting the avowed disjunctions and quarrels promulgated amongst the era’s various philosophical and scientific camps in favor of an account of their combined movement towards a somewhat mutual set of questions and approaches that can most appropriately be named pragmatism. Such an approach, which Bernstein speaks of here in the conditional as a project that could or might be written, is not without its own attendant dangers. For example, by using the term in a manner broad enough to describe certain aspects of both logical positivism and poststructuralism, isn’t it possible that pragmatism would lose any relatively unique meaning of its own? Or, as Vincent Colapietro asks in his contribution,
by moving this institutionally marginalized movement to the center of the historical account doesn’t this hinder the adequate appraisal of the consequences of the very real hostility that was directed at pragmatism in the context of philosophy’s professionalization in the 20th Century? This is certainly a serious question as the consequences of pragmatism’s marginalization among philosophical disciplines are still being experienced by many of us who use that label as a descriptor of our work.3

One of the joys of Davaney and Frisina’s collection is that the reader doesn’t have to be content merely to wonder how Bernstein would reply to the various essays as his response to each contribution is included. In response to Colapietro, Bernstein acknowledges the importance of accounting for the way that the ideology of analytic supremacy has attempted to curtail other philosophical approaches but he also argues that this ideology must always be sharply distinguished from “the philosophic contributions of analytic philosophy” (70). In fact, it is often this ideology which actively gets in the way of the extension of analytic philosophy’s contributions to more pluralistic approaches. However, as Bernstein is quick to point out, the best philosophy never hesitates in transcending theoretical orthodoxy—he cites Robert Brandom, John McDowell, and Bernard Williams as a list of contemporary philosophers who are influenced by the contributions of analytic philosophy rather than its ideology. This list should be supplemented by the mention of Alain Badiou, who has utilized these contributions on the other side of the Atlantic for the project of constructing a political ontology. However, if a large-scale conversation between different philosophical approaches is to take place it will likely require a common intellectual and institutional framework. It’s quite possible that with its attention to pluralism and particularity and its suspicion of ossified categories, pragmatism might indeed be the best means of bringing philosophy’s disparate approaches into dialogue.

Nancy Frankenberry’s contribution to The Pragmatic Century can be taken as demonstrating a case in which an attention to pragmatism’s unique ability to preserve differences amidst a common engagement could’ve been used to deflate a longstanding philosophical quarrel. One of the goals of Frankenberry’s piece is to save Rorty from the charge that he conflates truth and justification. On this point, Frankenberry gives a very subtle reading of the evolution of Rorty’s understanding of justification in the light of criticism he received from Bernstein. In this task, she successfully shows that Rorty’s view of justification was more subtle than he at times made it appear and that he did not in fact equate it with truth. However, as Bernstein points out in his response to Frankenberry, by arguing that Rorty should be put on the side of upholders of a strict distinction between justification and truth like Donald Davidson she brackets the radicalism that made Rorty’s views so intriguing in the first place. Moreover, I would

3 However, as John Stuhr has recently argued, the perception of marginalization among pragmatists and the ressentiment which follows may very well be one factor hindering the possibility of a rapprochement between the analytic and pragmatic traditions. John J. Stuhr, "Education, Pragmatism, and Ressentiment" (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy, Columbia, SC, March 9, 2007).
argue that by limiting the question to whether truth and justification are or are not the same, Frankenberry forecloses the possibility for the nuanced position on the issue that pragmatism has had at least since William James' book of that name.

To briefly restate this position as I see it: we may at times find it useful to distinguish between the truth of a claim and the justifications which attempt to establish a claim as true, but this does not mean that we need such a distinction in all cases. If pragmatists do sometimes say that truth and justification are the same thing, it is because they are in that case viewed as two aspects of a common process. Alternately considered, these two aspects may be viewed as being as distinct, but no more so, than a means from an end or an organism from its environment. Thus, truth designates the end-point of a given inquiry, which may also to be taken as primary with respect to its role in initiating other inquiries. Justification, by contrast, is simply a name for the period of transition from one truth to another and the field of inquiry which stands between the two. That this field may extend indefinitely in any given inquiry does not mean that we cannot give proper names to its borders, whether or not we know where they stand. This is so if only because some conversations appear to start from where others end, whether or not the prior conversations have ever been definitively settled. I contend that this pragmatic viewpoint is the most reasonable means of those available to us for maintaining persuasive and useful accounts of truth which are as seemingly opposed as Davidson's demonstration of truth's primality and the early Habermas' description of truth as produced in the process of discourse.4

Pragmatism, Critique, Judgment draws upon a wealth of essays from an all-star list of contributors including Rorty, Habermas, Jacques Derrida, Charles Taylor, and Thomas McCarthy: a list which, to say the least, comprises no easily definable philosophical orientation. Given Bernstein's role in arguing for pragmatism as an appropriate conversation starter for differently tempered and attuned philosophical styles and modalities, it is somewhat regrettable that this theme is not taken up here in a more pronounced way in order to contemplate some of the consequences implied by such a heterogeneous collection of philosophers. Also, as compared with The Pragmatic Century, Bernstein's voice is notably absent and somewhat missed—only a couple of the contributions to Benhabib and Fraser's volume speak of him other than in passing, including the inadequate introduction. However, these shortcomings are easy to forgive given the singular and imaginative insights offered by many of the contributions, including those of the editors.

Charles Taylor's "What is Pragmatism?" is the only piece that explicitly addresses the philosophical movement that gives the book the first word of its title. Taylor's essay provides one of the most provocative and yet elegant formulations of that question that I have heard. For Taylor, pragmatism amounts to the attempt to reverse two of the key axioms of modern epistemology (namely: 1, knowledge of the self precedes

4 Habermas himself has tried to synthesize these distinct accounts, arguing that "it is the goal of justifications to discover a truth that exceeds all justifications." Jürgen Habermas, Truth and Justification (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), 40.
knowledge of the world and the others in it and 2, knowledge of facts precedes that of values) while in most cases accepting the third (knowledge of the natural world precedes the invocation of forces which transcend that world). Taylor goes on to offer a close reading of William James’ writings on religion in an attempt to show that unlike other pragmatists (Dewey, Peirce, Hook, etc.) James attempted to reverse this third component of the epistemological tradition in addition to the first two. Taylor’s reading of James on this point is very intriguing if not ultimately convincing.

While the other essays in the volume don’t address the question of pragmatism as directly, many of them do offer interesting considerations for a pragmatic point of view. Richard Rorty’s contribution is a fitting tribute to his mastery of the essay form, in which he passionately and persuasively defends the “decadence” of literary culture from the attacks made upon it by “proselytizing Christians, science-worshipping positivists, and Marxist revolutionaries” (24). Nancy Fraser offers a systematic account of the relationship between redistribution-based and recognition-based programs of justice, not only demonstrating their mutual interdependence but also showing something of how considering the two together may offer us a better understanding of the likely consequences of certain concrete political alternatives. Following on this theme, Thomas McCarthy deftly shows the inadequacy of Rawlsian accounts of justice for confronting the problems of racism in either theory or practice. Turning to the problem of internationalism, Seyla Benhabib sketches the aporias attendant upon the conceptualization of a global institution capable of insuring the Arendtian notion of human rights as “the right to have rights.” This strong series of essays on themes of justice is capped off with Jacques Derrida’s reflections upon the role of the death penalty as demonstrating the essential interrelationship between juridical, political, and religious concepts of sovereignty, which seem to persist despite (or perhaps because of) the modern attacks upon their foundations. Though it is not here articulated as such, these essays make a powerful argument for the role of theory and indeed philosophy in the task of bettering the conditions of those of us who find ourselves living together on this planet.

Pragmatism’s long-standing commitment to philosophy as a socially useful project, as made explicit by Dewey in his notion of reconstruction, might just provide the common ground necessary for a more pluralistic philosophical conversation. The success or failure of this conditional will depend less upon the a priori determinations of how this conversation should ideally take place than it will upon the contingent event of the conversation’s being attempted.

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