Patrick Shade’s thesis is that hope should be both practical and productive. It should be grounded in actual conditions and productive of new and better ones. These two modes make up what he refers to as “conditioned transcendence.” The idea is that impractical or unrealizable goals do not beget the production of live options and real possibilities of successful experience, but instead may promote futility and despair. Yet the contingency of human existence and the availability of means to any agent, both set limitations and ought to set limitations upon the object of hope. It is because of this limitation that we can transcend our current situation. You must develop habits of hope and ultimately hopefulness by recognizing practical limitations on your object of hope. The recognition of what is practically possible should lead to the successes that foster an attitude of hopefulness. Shade believes that a pragmatic theory is the best way to explain the practicality and productivity of hope. This is quite plausible since a pragmatic theory of action stresses a dynamic interplay between means and ends.

Patrick Shade’s foray into virtue ethics and moral psychology uses both literature to illustrate his theory and to suggest that fiction is a living force in the education of the moral imagination. Illustrations from works of fiction, including The Grapes of Wrath and Shawshank Redemption, contain characters that both exhibit and lack the requisite habits for developing the attitude of hopefulness. But the narrative structure of drama is itself a key resource for educating the moral imagination, since the narrative structure of drama parallels the narrative self of human agency. The link is provided through the education of the moral imagination. An autobiographical account of some agent’s desires and goals reflected in and through literature might help any agent to understand what is a real obstacle and what is a real possibility. In this way, a fundamental resource of human agency is the very ability to identify with the contingency of human existence through fiction. The educative goal is to recast limitation as a positive boon rather than a force which drives us to despair.

The basic problem, however, is to get people to act and to keep them acting. You must have some success before you can apply or care to apply intelligence to desires and ends. It
seems that if you have nothing, then you cannot foresee anything. It is not a case of being driven to despair, but instead that one has only despair. It is here that the fundamental noncognitive attitude of hope traditionally arises. No amount of reasoned persuasion and intelligence can stimulate the will to act. Hope in the unconditioned is then a live option. Shade is investing a cognitive dimension into what has been traditionally a noncognitive attitude. In doing so, a sense of hope is shifted onto the epistemically possible. But if one does not even know what they can do, and if one has never had a success, how can they employ the requisite intelligence to move the will to action? How or what may they appeal to?

Furthermore, the arduous nature of hoping suggests that sometimes we do not know what is practically possible, and when we neither know nor do not know what is practically possible, we might question what resources are available to help one stay focused and committed to the possibility of transcendent action. Yet, educating the moral imagination is something we do, though at times we need to be reminded and stimulated by various narrative forms; fictional or otherwise. It seems that natural piety is helpful at the point at which we cannot act. If we could act, however, it would be only towards those goals that are practically possible. This natural piety imbues the agent with patience, humility, and persistence in the face of a lack of means to stimulate the will. Natural piety is a function of knowing that the moral imagination can be educated without knowing what particular means are available for resolving some actual problem. But then, you need not fall back on an unconditioned power when you know what resources are available. Even if you do not know what resources are available, or that and how the moral imagination can be educated and how it may provide means to the solution of practical difficulties, falling back on that which sets no limitation would not appear to help.

Shade’s book is both interesting and illuminating. It should be of interest to those inclined towards pragmatism, moral psychology, religion, and the contemporary study of virtue.

City Colleges of Chicago

Jim Willgoose