

Review Essays:

“The Central European Pragmatist Forum,” by Matt Pamental

Ryder, J., & Wegmarshaus, G.-R. (Eds.). (2007). *Education for a Democratic Society: The Central European Pragmatist Forum, Volume Three* (Studies in Pragmatism and Values). Amsterdam: Rodopi.

Ryder, J., & Wilkoszewska, K. (Eds.). (2004). *Deconstruction and Reconstruction: The Central European Pragmatist Forum, Volume Two* (Studies in Pragmatism and Values). Amsterdam: Rodopi.

The Central European Pragmatist Forum (CEPF) is a bi-annual opportunity for European and American scholars to discuss Pragmatism in a changing social and political landscape. The proceedings of two of these meetings are reviewed here. The reader will find that these volumes bear out the organizers’ belief that pragmatism is a valuable tool for promoting democratic transformations. My plan is to proceed thematically, in order to show how the volumes complement one another, and to make a few critical remarks along the way and by way of a summary.

John McDermott sets the stage for DR, calling forth three familiar Deweyan themes: First, that there is no “canopy of explanation” or foundation which would ground certainty (DR 3). Second, that the disconnectedness Camus saw in the human condition is a call to reconstruct, to “create a distinctively human habitation” (DR 4-5). Finally, that we ought to have hope. “To hope,” McDermott says, “genuinely, is to do, amelioratively. ... Always and again, there is work to be done and in its doing is the only grace that I take as mattering, as meaningful” (DR 6). In EDS, John Lachs’ twin themes are schools and possibilities (chapter 17). Learning about what is, about “the real” is by no means a sufficient condition for successful reconstruction. One also needs to learn how to envision—and then enact—the possible (EDS 178). Thus, Lachs and McDermott challenge us to think about the possibilities and to act, hopefully, in the face of uncertainty and a troubling reality.

Dewey’s claim that democracy is *the* ideal of associated living is discussed by a number of authors. Gert-Rüdiger Wegmarshaus (DR chapter 2; EDS chapter 10) and Erin McKenna (EDS chapter 6) set out the elements of Dewey’s view of democracy as a middle ground between contemporary liberal and communitarian conceptions of the ideal community, and note that education can and should play an important ameliorative role. This claim is echoed by Carlos Mougan Rivera (EDS chapter 2), who argues for the necessity of a civic-democratic form of education that is much richer than that subscribed to by, e.g., Rawls, Macedo, or Gutmann. Martin Kilanowski (DR, chapter 3) focuses on the way Dewey softened the standard dichotomies of public/private, individual/community, and so on. The expansion of the definition of democracy is not new, having been treated before in the secondary literature, and one wonders why these authors chose not to engage with the secondary literature on it—the work of Judith Green

or Bob Talisse, for example. However, that the issue is being raised in the context of post-communist central Europe gives urgency as well as a sense of possibility to the discussions.

Following Lachs' and McDermott's suggestions, social reconstruction plays a significant role in both books. In "Institutions and their Reconstruction" (DR chapter 5), James Campbell argues that social institutions ought to serve the interests of those who fall within their purview. When they do not, they can and should be adjusted. However, he is skeptical as to how much needed social reconstruction is going on. He follows this with "Reconstruction through Education" (EDS chapter 9), wherein he argues that the method of reconstruction should be a democratic form of education as preparation for both economic and civic participation.

Mark Lovas (DR chapter 6) agrees with Campbell's claim that institutions need regular refinement, and argues for a general principle of Justice to help us to form criticisms of our institutions, the "Principle of Humanity" taken from the work of Ted Honderich (DR 54-56). Lovas makes no attempt, however, to defend his choice of principles from outside the pragmatic tradition, rather than, for example exploring Dewey's own discussion of such issues in *The Public and Its Problems* and elsewhere. John Ryder (DR chapter 23) argues that although American philosophy seems to have been blocked within its own culture from being a useful technology for social transformation, it may well work in the Central European context (DR 244). In EDS (chapter 11) he is more cynical, pushing Campbell's worries farther, questioning whether in fact pragmatic democracy can handle large-scale dissent. Ryder concludes, with Churchill apparently, that although democracy is insufficient to resolve some of our social problems, it remains an ideal worth pursuing as the best of the available options (EDS 120). Finally, Michael Eldridge responds, in DR to Campbell and in EDS to Ryder, offering us a more hopeful picture: pragmatism need not be universally committed to "thick" democratic methods. Pace Ryder, we begin where we are, Eldridge says, and so long as our practice "promotes growth of the values we associate with the pragmatic legacy within the actual situation" then even coercive or undemocratic methods may qualify as "pragmatic" under those circumstances (EDS 129). Further, Campbell's reliance on a linear conception of Dewey's pattern of inquiry is belied by Dewey's own description of the application of the method in *How We Think* (DR 61). Once we loosen what is to count as a Pragmatic social reconstruction, Eldridge finds that the work of pragmatic reconstruction is indeed taking place.

Education as a theme suffuses EDS, particularly in connection with preparing democratic citizens. Don Morse (chapter 1) engages with the thought of Derrida, arguing that the latter's notion of deconstruction can be harnessed to Dewey's notion of criticism as a complement (4). Alexander Kremer and Jane Skinner (chapters 3 and 4) point to the necessity of a cultural, contextual grounding for any democratic educational project. This position links their views to discussions by Emil Višňovský (DR chapter 16) and Vincent Colapietro (EDS chapter 15, DR chapter 19). Richard Hart (EDS chapter 13) links pragmatism's reconstruction of reason to social reconstruction, arguing that the trend toward more on-line and distance learning pedagogy may well not serve the purposes of

courses in the arts and humanities. For true understanding, he says, ideas need to be embedded in a cultural context; we learn best by engaging in intelligent inquiry into social problems, rather than rote memorization and recitation.

Pragmatic conceptions of human nature are the subject of essays by Colapietro, Kathleen Wallace, and Hans-Peter Krüger (EDS chapters 15-16, DR chapter 14). Discussing Dewey's concept of 'growth,' Colapietro reminds us of Dewey's claim that immaturity, as a precondition for growth, is *not* to be understood as some sort of lack, but rather as the *power* to grow, to "become variously engaged in the complex, variable scenes of its everyday endeavors" (EDS 155-156). Thus, Dewey might be thought of as a "philosopher of natality," enchanted by "the radiant intelligence of the healthy child."¹ But, Colapietro notes, for this power to be maintained, the individual has to come to recognize the "indispensable...role played by antecedently established environments" (160). The "ecological consciousness" that is thus required is "a detailed, nuanced awareness of the actual context out of which human intelligence has emerged and in which it operates" (163). And, Colapietro notes, this awareness should not be understood as absent natural piety, but instead should be understood to involve the felt connection between individuals and their enveloping world, the "natural and cultural matrix in its encompassing and sustaining presence in the ongoing evolution of experimental intelligence (163).

Two essays on the self depart from the predominantly Deweyan accounts of pragmatism in both volumes. Kathleen Wallace relies on the combination of Royce and Buchler, investigating the notions of autonomy as "reflexive self-mediation" (165) and of the self as "intersectional" (167). She suggests that autonomy "involves a constructive or "inventive" process of norm generation by the self; a norm in turn guides self-projection into the future" (165). Wallace argues that this broadening of the meaning of autonomy, with its links to the characteristics necessary for an ideally democratic society and citizenry, makes her account of autonomy preferable to more traditional, analytic conceptions. Krüger (DR chapter 14) offers a comparison between Dewey's account of human nature and that of Helmuth Plessner, whose philosophical anthropology compares with Dewey in two ways, though they differ in another. First, they both developed an approach to the self that overcomes the "dualism of matter and idea" (DR 131). Second, they both recognized that selves are pluralistic, leaving open the possibility of value conflicts, which require "civilized" methods for their resolution, namely democratic, intelligent inquiry (132). They differ, however, in their responses to what Krüger calls a "limitation problem," by which he seems to mean the limits of the self, such as the borders between different levels of the self (unconscious, conscious, self-conscious) or between health and pathology. Dewey and Mead, Krüger argues, do not offer us much in the way of a philosophical framework for making such distinctions consistently. On the other hand, Plessner proposed a phenomenological approach is complementary to that of Dewey and Mead (133-134). While the nature of the 'limitation problem' is not made

¹ Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, trans. James Strachey, p. 47, cited by Colapietro, EDS 155.

entirely clear to this reviewer, Krüger has offered a “transatlantic bridge between both philosophical traditions” (134).

The essays on ethics focus on the question of the “grounding” of pragmatic ethics. Leszek Koczanowicz (DR chapter 8) identifies three attempts to do so that might be considered pragmatic but rejects all three. Instead, Koczanowicz argues for the location of non-universal but non-relative norms within concrete situations and toward concrete others. Like Shook, Paul Thompson (DR chapter 9) takes up the connection between Pragmatism and Habermas’ discourse theory. Thompson argues that the triad of discourse ethics, practical (or applied) ethics, and American pragmatism do not make for a coherent philosophical picture. This view is caught between two contradictory goals: Peirce’s theory, on which Habermas bases his own, was a theory of scientific principles, not a theory of how to solve particular empirical problems, and so a discourse ethics that rests on this Peircean move will not be compatible with the goals of applied or practical ethics. On the other hand, since Pragmatist ethics aims at ameliorating problematic situations, it does not yield universal moral norms—the foundation of Habermas’ discourse ethics.

The authors in EDS are more hopeful about the possibilities for a pragmatic ethics. Sami Pihlström (EDS chapter 5) offers a Kantian, transcendental argument for a conception of ethics that is both absolute and “ineliminably personal” (42). Ethics is necessary, he says, in the sense that “our being able to hold any genuinely ethical views on anything...necessarily requires that certain ethical views are held by us, personally, as absolutely correct, that is, not as mere opinions, subjective attitudes, or beliefs” (49). Yet, ethics is ineliminably personal in that it is connected internally to a person’s “practical identity,” to use Korsgaard’s phrase. Dirk Jörke’s (EDS chapter 6) is on the relation between the social and the individual. He argues against Dewey’s notion that individuality is most fully realized in a specific kind of community, one in which substantive interests are shared. This view is implausible because “in pluralistic societies ‘these values prized in common’ no longer exist” (55). Jörke argues that Dewey’s later works abandoned the “substantive” conception of democratic community in favor of the ideal of citizens committed, not to substantive values, but to the values of collective, intelligent inquiry (59). This view demands a specific kind of civic education, one aimed at inculcating the shared habits of intelligent inquiry necessary to hold the community together in the absence of agreement on more substantive values.

A tension appears between the readings of Jörke and McKenna, on whether the Deweyan ideal of democracy is to be understood as large-scale, multi-cultural, and lacking what Jörke calls “substantive” values, or as requiring a smaller scale and more substantive, shared values. Both turn to *The Public and its Problems*, but Jörke ultimately rejects the books call for ‘The Great Community’ as impossible to sustain in modern, multi-cultural society, whereas McKenna is more hopeful, focused instead on the normative element of Dewey’s call for the “re-unification of the individual” in a community whose characteristics are the prerequisites for Growth.

The essays on aesthetics in DR focus on the question of the possibility and outlines of a uniquely ‘pragmatist’ aesthetics. Anthony Graybosch (DR chapter 10)

argues that a central component of such a view is the shift in emphasis away from the formal ‘object d’art’ to the investigation of the aesthetic quality of *any* or better, *every* experience. The emphasis on the aesthetics of everyday experience is reiterated in the chapters by Östman (DR chapter 11), Marsoobian (DR chapter 12), and Wilkoszewska (DR chapter 13, EDS chapter 8). Another topic that receives extended attention is the pragmatists’ extension of the function of art beyond the contemplation of ideals to the investigation of contemporary social and political problems, discussed in the essays by Marsoobian, Wilkoszewska, Östman, and Lyobov Bugaeva (EDS chapter 7).

Wilkoszewska provides a brief summary of the work of McDermott, Alexander, and Shusterman in her contribution to DR, and then applies the notion of a pragmatic aesthetics to the question of moral education in EDS chapter 8. Bugaeva makes an interesting comparison between Dewey’s aesthetics and the views of European Constructivism about art, as illustrated by the German Veshch and Dutch De Stijl schools of art. Finally, Östman’s essay contains an intriguing—if unfortunately brief—examination of the experience of a family participating in the design of their home, illustrating the back-and-forth paradigmatic of Dewey’s account of inquiry, in his argument that those involved in the design process ought to be aware of the way the aesthetic quality of experience influences different stages of that process. Östman’s argument is extended by Bugaeva’s, who adds that on Dewey’s view, the aesthetic dimension of experience is itself educative, and so consciously links Dewey’s aesthetics to his views on inquiry and social transformation (EDS 84).

Pragmatist conceptions of knowledge, as illustrated by the work of Santayana, Dewey, and Habermas, are considered by Bugaeva, Višňovský, Skinner, and Igor Hanzel (DR chapters 15-18, respectively). Although each conception of knowledge differs according to its source, these authors see knowledge as residing not essentially in thought but in action. Bugaeva argues that, for Santayana, ideas are “signs of things that turn into beliefs in the case of latent mechanical reaction of the body to the object generating the idea” (146). Similarly, Skinner, in her discussion of Dewey, points out that on his view knowledge is “an emerging adaptation (modification)” of the environment by the organism (169). Another sub-theme running through these essays is the pragmatists’ reconstruction of the notion of rationality. Višňovský brings this out when he describes Dewey’s rejection of the traditional, cognitivist and *a priori* conception of reason, substituting in its place his (Dewey’s) theory of embodied intelligence. This theme is discussed in Skinner, who then makes the striking claim that both “how we know and what we know, if seen in ... entirely pragmatic and realistic ways...are non-material” (173). While I believe that Skinner’s claim is belied at least by Dewey’s view of knowledge and the knowledge-objects, her challenge to pragmatism to ally more closely with the phenomenological tradition is worth considering. Finally, Hanzel returns us to the work of Habermas, giving a thorough analysis of the latter’s earlier work, as exemplified in the *Theory of Communicative Action* (Boston, Beacon Press: 1987). Hanzel then subjects that view to a tripartite critique, followed by an investigation of whether Habermas’ more recent work overcomes those objections. Unfortunately, Hanzel does not say, in the end, whether he thinks Habermas’ views succeed, but he has done a service in laying out the details of the original view and of the transformation.

The final theme I will discuss is the relation of pragmatism to analytic philosophy. Numerous essays already discussed make overtures in this direction. In DR Part Five, however, these themes become the central focus, instead of side-concerns or oblique references. First, there is the convergence of some primarily analytic views on pragmatic themes and positions. Tadeusz Szubka (DR chapter 20) reveals several links between Dummett's views on truth and knowledge and Dewey's views on warranted assertibility. Second, both Piotr Gutowski and Mateusz Oleksy (chapters 21 and 22) argue that pragmatism can be seen as having answers to the realism-anti-realism problem. On that score, however, one could wish that they had engaged not just with Dewey and Putnam, but also with David Hildebrand's *rejection* of the notion that Dewey was engaged in that same debate.²

In all, the combined forty essays in DR and EDS offer an impressively consistent level of scholarship, though not without controversial claims. Those wanting to see the breadth of pragmatic themes can find them in DR, along with ties both to the socio-political context of central Europe and to the European, or 'Continental' philosophical traditions. In this regard DR does better than EDS—far fewer discussions of non-American authors occur in the latter volume than the former. On the other hand, EDS, in its focus on education and democracy, includes more discussion of the socio-political context and its dangers and obstacles to democratization. One notable problem, though it may be excused by the fact that the essays for the two books came from conference submissions, is the lack of engagement with several key pragmatic thinkers. William James, for example, is not mentioned more than tangentially, Santayana's aesthetics is ignored by the essays presented on aesthetics, and Peirce's semiotics and theory of knowledge receive no sustained attention. And, interaction with the voluminous secondary literature on American pragmatism is lacking in places. That said, the organizers of the CEPF, and the authors and editors of these volumes, are to be congratulated for the breadth and quality of scholarship that came together as a result of their efforts.

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² David L. Hildebrand, *Beyond Realism and Anti-Realism: John Dewey and the Neopragmatists* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2003).