

*Jesus and Philosophy: New Essays.* Edited by Paul K. Moser. Cambridge University Press, 2009. 236 pages, \$26.99

One's first impression of "Jesus and Philosophy" is that it is one of these works of popular philosophy that address, in thoughtful but irreverent fashion, the relationship between philosophy and sundry topics in popular culture, particularly television and movies. But the intention of Paul K. Moser's authors seems not to be that of thoughtful irreverence to Jesus, but rather careful consideration of him, a consideration that implicitly promotes Jesus as a philosophically interesting character.

Yet the personality of Jesus is generally elusive, a point which is made by contributor Craig A. Evans, who says that "we can know nothing of Jesus' inner life and personality. Quests for a psychologically understood Jesus were misguided and were without hope of success" (33). What we are left with here is a (not unhelpful) discussion of Christian philosophy, with some intimations that the best way to understand Christianity is through pragmatism.

For example, in the chapter "Jesus of the Gospels and Philosophy," Luke Timothy Johnson advocates "focusing on how the Gospel narratives render the character of Jesus, not least in the ways in which what he proclaims is *embodied* in what he does, so that the *bios* of the human Jesus becomes an example to readers" (69, emphasis added). This suggests a transaction of ideal and action, something promoted by pragmatists, and shows how Jesus is not to be understood simply someone who enacted preexistent ideals, and also not simply as an arbitrary authority who determines the ideals by doing whatever he wants, but rather as a man of pragmatic virtue who lives what he believes, and lets his beliefs be further modified by how he lives. Yet Johnson veers away from pragmatism when he critiques forms of liberation theology that reject "any transcendental understanding of sin and salvation." "The loss here is extraordinary," he says. "God entered into human existence not so that human social arrangements might be altered, but so that the very frame of human existence might be transformed; the goal that we call salvation is not a utopian society, but participation in God's glory" (79). A pragmatist would reject such a dichotomy, believing that human existence can be transformed through the modification of social arrangements (and such arrangements can be transformed through changing the concepts of human existence). She might also believe that God's glory can be articulated in an earthly utopia, even if this utopia is understood simply as an amelioration of suffering, not as a perfection of human health and happiness. I fail to see how this is a huge loss.

The best chapter in the book could be "Jesus and Forgiveness," by Nicholas Wolterstorff. This essay deals with the ethics of which Jesus speaks, such as his claim that one should not resist evil. Wolterstorff helpfully points out that, on a literal reading, this statement is not the basis for non-violent direct action, nor passive resistance, but simply passivity. The most philosophically interesting part of his essay is his contrast of Jesus and stoicism. Stoics, he says, maintained that it is impossible not to be angry at an injustice—such as that resulting from an abusive relationship—but that it behooves us to "alter our ordinary judgments as to what is truly good and bad for a person. The only true good in a person's life is virtuous action on his or her part." Injustice, then, results necessarily in anger, but also presents an opportunity to distinguish apparent harm from real harm, with the latter resulting only if one chooses not to act virtuously and forget the anger. But Wolterstorff concludes that

Jesus was not a Stoic. Being abused by one's spouse is a genuine evil in one's life; to be abused is to be wronged. Yet Jesus urges forgiveness—not forgetting but forgiveness. And forgiveness involves forgetting one's anger.

He thus addresses one of the most difficult—and yet crucial—ideas in Christian ethics, concluding that “forgiveness—overcoming one's anger at the doer while continuing to condemn the deed—is possible only if one believes that there was then, or that there is now, a space between the doer and the deed” (205). Now would we also apply this space to considerations of the virtues, so that the doer cannot identify themselves with the deed? Perhaps, and we could call this the Christian virtue of humility. But either way, we are left with a situation where we have to mark a person's essence, and distinguish this from their actions. This seems unpragmatic (although admittedly, this cannot be taken as a major criticism, since no one is professing pragmatism in this book).

In “Paul, the Mind of Christ, and Philosophy,” Paul W. Gooch says that what St. Paul learned from Jesus was that “to bring thoughts into the obedience of Christ is to attempt to carry out thinking in a spirit of appropriate humility and self-emptying so that space is made for truth” (99). With a pragmatic revision, this thought is not banal: To be Christian is to eschew ideologies so that truth can be made. This view is contrary to the evil alter-ego version of pragmatism, according to which ideology makes the world into its own truth. Christian pragmatism, on the other hand, says that truth is made in the world, the result of non-ideological deliberation from humble sisters and brothers. “Christian philosophizing,” says Gooch, “displays an attitude, an approach of mind and heart, regardless of specific method or systematic content.” Yet this statement is softened by his further statement that “the emphasis on attitude is also too narrow, for even if there is no agree upon philosophical method that is demonstrably Christian, there are recognizably Christian beliefs that should form the subject matter of Christian philosophizing.” Finishing off his thought, Gooch invokes a question similar to that which often comes up among American philosophers: “Surely there is ‘Christian philosophy’ as well as philosophizing by Christian thinkers” (101).

So is there a Jesus philosophy? It's hard to tell. I would offer that the scholastic understanding of Jesus is probably better left to literary analysis than to philosophy, but maintain that this book is useful as a work in Christian philosophy of religion nonetheless.

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***John Dewey's Ethics: Democracy as Experience.*** Gregory Fernando Pappas. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008. 341 pages. \$24.95.

Gregory Pappas' book is “the first comprehensive interpretation of John Dewey's original and revolutionary moral philosophy” (1). He also connects Dewey's ethics to several debates in the mainstream contemporary literature. Pappas is well-versed in a dazzling array of Dewey's work and he weaves the parts together into a seamlessly integrated and coherent picture, but like any major philosophical work, his is not without its limitations.

In Part I, Pappas argues that the heart of Dewey's empiricism in ethics is its reliance on “experience as method,” Dewey's faith in the capacity for experience to develop norms sufficient