

SUSANNE ROHR and MIRIAM STRUBE, eds., *Revisiting Pragmatism: William James in the New Millennium* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2012), 233 pp.

It is true, as Susanne Rohr and Miriam Strube suggest in the introduction to this volume, that American pragmatism in general and William James in particular still count as something of an embarrassment in mainstream European philosophical and cultural quarters: an embarrassment in the double sense that pragmatism in its “evasion” of “epistemology-centered philosophy” or systematic conceptualization (119-20) has always appeared, on the one hand, slippery or glib (or, worse, expressive of American capitalism) and, on the other hand, predestined to highlight the limitations of traditional European philosophical practices. Quoting Joseph Margolis, Rohr and Strube view pragmatism’s advantage as “favoring the flux of history over fixity, invariance, universalisms of every sort, cognitive privilege, abstract truths” (10).<sup>1</sup> This antifoundational stance also motivates pragmatism’s preoccupation with practice, with method, and with process—with unfinished and unfinishable business, so to speak.

The aim of this volume is an inquiry “into the role pragmatist thinking currently plays and could play in the future” (10). In order to do this, the book presents four sections: “William James: Foundations” (a somewhat ironic title for an antifoundational theory, assembling essays on James’s strategies), “The Truth and Nature of/in Pragmatism” (essays on the concept of truth, James’s idea of man, and pragmatism’s swerve towards cultural criticism), “Pragmatism and Cultural Politics” (articles on pragmatism’s affinity with radical political, critical race, and Native American thinking), and “Current Debates in Politics, Ethics and the Sciences” (essays on recent practical utilizations of pragmatism). In other words, the volume presents a wide variety of explorations into pragmatism’s claims and validity.

I have greatly enjoyed reading the essays in this collection. One has to keep in mind that this is neither an introduction to pragmatism nor to William James (a difficult enterprise,

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Margolis, *Pragmatism’s Advantage: American and European Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2010) xii.

anyway; and there are already a number of helpful entries into the topic)<sup>2</sup>; and it is not a systematic collection of specific issues or topics within pragmatist practices. Rather, the volume probes a range of current debates and applications of Jamesian thinking. As such it is inspiring, sometimes surprising, and always interesting. I suspect that Susanne Rohr and Miriam Strube aimed at reminding the reader of how productive, fascinating, and momentous William James’s ideas can still be—and they certainly succeeded, at least with me.

The first section deals with William James’s modes of thinking (he would perhaps call them his *denkmittel*). It is the liveliest section, owed to Heinz Ickstadt’s sagacious (and helpful) responses to essays by Joan Richardson and Herwig Friedl. Richardson engages in an imaginative conversation with some of James’s remarks on religion in *Pragmatism*, *The Principles of Psychology*, and *Varieties of Religious Experience* as well as Wallace Stevens’s lecture “The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet,” recuperating the aesthetic, musicking (and musical) element in James’s thought. Ickstadt, in turn, does not question this element, yet points out that James “places himself on borderlines, Janus-faced, between poetry and philosophy, between his fascination with the irrational and his need to put it under the control of reason and of habit” (49). In a similar way, Ickstadt wonders whether Herwig Friedl’s emphasis in focusing on the ontology of William James (his exploration of the fluid experience of Being) as “a *methodos*, a leading of our imaging and thinking towards conceptualization *and back again*” (66; my emphasis) does not underrate James’s investment in civilization and control:

William James stands curiously in-between: He is torn between a fluid, self-dissolving vision of the marginal, of the pre-conscious and pre-linguistic realms of the irrational which

<sup>2</sup> For German-speaking readers I would recommend Rainer Diaz-Bone and Klaus Schubert, *William James zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius, 1996) or Hans-Joachim Schubert et. al., *Pragmatismus zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius, 2010). Readers preferring an English introduction can turn to Cheryl Misak, *The American Pragmatists* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013) or Michael Bacon, *Pragmatism. An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity P, 2012).

powerfully attracted (yet also repelled) him, and a felt need to control, through the reign of habit, this newly discovered contingent and chaotic territory of knowledge. (75)

Ickstadt's responses do not contradict Richardson's demonstration of James's affinity with Stevens or Friedl's brilliant analysis of James's imagery of stuff and water as "indispensable bridges between the mute and true ('unbegriffliche') presence of reality in or as perceptual awareness on the one hand and later conceptual articulation on the other" (62). Rather, in league with both, they contextualize and complicate James's movements of thought between available but insufficient models. Joseph Margolis's argument, which places James in a line with Kant and Hegel, naturalizing idealism and rendering Hegel pragmatic, pursues, if I understand his rather foreshortened reflections correctly, a similar line: James is characterized through his methods (playful and musical in Richardson, perceptual and emerging from images in Friedl, intuitive and introspective in Margolis) more than through concepts or statements.

Given this emphasis on process and emergence, at first glance the task of the three following contributors seems paradoxical. Helmut Pape delineates James's idea of truth, Kai-Michael Hingst turns to his concept of man, and Ulf Schulenberg asks which pragmatist ideas led to its revival in the 1980s and 1990s. Yet all three are completely aware of the necessity of understanding their respective concepts in a dynamic way in order to do justice to pragmatism. A case in point is Helmut Pape's essay (my favorite in this section), which literally renders the idea of truth "psychodynamic" in illustrating how individuals attain truth, which "happens or occurs at a specific point in time and that requires specific individual experiential and representational processes" (88). Pape shows that James was never interested in, say, the truth that water boils at 100 degrees Celsius but rather in how a child (and by extension an adult with more abstract truths) validates, assimilates, and corroborates the idea that water, at a certain heat, dissolves into scalding hot steam. Kai-Michael Hingst, who does display a systematizing passion that James would have found slightly amusing, convincingly demonstrates that James's idea of man cannot be separated from practice; in other words, living means doing (in its widest sense), and, since there is no absolute certitude, life must be understood

as a "venture" (101) rather than a state. Finally, Ulf Schulenberg prepares the reader for the third section by looking at James as a public philosopher, a practical mind in the context (even though, of course, not exclusively) of progressivism and the reform movements at the turn of the century. Schulenberg suggests that there has always been a modicum of (leftist) romanticism involved in pragmatist philosophy: in its affinity to the "strong poet" (115), in its religious and prophetic aspects, in its tendency toward boundary crossing (art, literature, and theology come to mind), its future-orientation and forward-thinking. Thus, the logical consequence for pragmatism, Schulenberg asserts, was a swerve towards "a kind of cultural criticism [such as in the work of Cornel West] in which the meaning of America is continually questioned and debated" (120).

The third section of the book explores some of the exchanges between pragmatism and cultural politics. Patricia Rae's essay on George Orwell as a companion in spirit to James lucidly discusses Orwell's pragmatist modernism in writings such as *Homage to Catalonia*, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, "Notes on Nationalism," "Looking Back on the Spanish War," and even *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Georg Schiller explores the capacity of James's radical empiricism to translate, for instance, the mystic experience of a Sioux medicine man and the meaning of stories in an indigenous society "without reducing [them] to the familiar within European American frameworks" (156). Thus, Schiller refrains from explaining or assimilating concepts; he rather shows how American Indian modes of thinking can be better understood with the help of notions of experience, relationality, and processes of emergent truth as James described them. In a discussion centering on African American revisions of pragmatism, Miriam Strube shows (very cogently and productively) how pragmatism can help overcome the troubling tension between ideologies of color-blindness on the one hand and essentialism on the other. Strube advances from Alain Locke through W.E.B. Du Bois and Cornel West to Paula Moya; in a daring but ultimately convincing move she co-opts Moya into the camp of pragmatism.

The fourth section brings in additional disciplinary orientations and debates from Barack Obama's political philosophy (Trygve Throntveit) through the function of belief and hope,

Jamesian “overbelief” (185) in healing (Andrew Flescher). It explores the dissolution of the natural/artificial dichotomy in environmental ethics (Robert Main) and the undertheorized role of process in scientific theories and practices of research, which may unhinge the opposing positions on underdetermination in the field (Michael Anacker). In all four papers, Jamesian thinking allows a redescription of problems and practices, which might otherwise be left suspended between stifling binaries.

In this manner Rohr and Strube’s volume enlarges the circle from basic strategies in James’s thinking to some of the most often discussed and debated ideas extracted from pragmatism to questions of cultural sense-making

and on to current issues in politics, medicine, ethics, and science. Readers will agree more with some essays than with others (especially when they touch political matters like Throntveit’s) and, depending on prior knowledge, find some more charged with jargon than others (I was a bit put off by Margolis’s demands). Taken together, they form a fine collection, often cross-fertilizing each other. And perhaps, if, by some chance, the book finds its way into the shelves of European philosophy departments, some may be infected by James’s fascinating and “unstiffening” (27; 128) processes and methods of thinking.

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