

WILLIAM JAMES: POLITICS IN THE PLURIVERSE. By Kennan Ferguson. Series, *Modernity and Political Thought*, Morton Schoolman (ed.). Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007. Pp. xxv + 111. \$25.95.

Kennan Ferguson's *William James: Politics in the Pluriverse* is the latest in a growing list of books which propose to take William James seriously as a political thinker. James was long ago canonized for his work in psychology, epistemology, and (according to many) ethics. But his contributions to social and political theory are often downplayed, disregarded, or even outright denigrated. The standard assessment is well represented by Cornel West's evaluation of James in his important *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (University of Wisconsin Press: 1989). West put the point simply and forcefully: "In regard to politics, James has nothing profound or even provocative to say" (60). It is Ferguson's wager, as it was that of George Cotkin in *William James, Public Philosopher* (Johns Hopkins University Press: 1990) and of Joshua Miller in *Democratic Temperament: The Legacy of William James* (University of Kansas: 1997), that there is something in the political and social thought of William James worth recovering today.

Ferguson takes up this project by focusing on James' pluralism. His view is that James is a pluralist in the first place and a pragmatist only secondarily. James's pluralism, Ferguson argues, better captures the core of his thinking in all of its dimensions, though especially with respect to his hitherto misunderstood political thought. One might say that in betting on a Jamesian political philosophy Ferguson lays nearly everything on pluralism.

This strategy of bringing James into focus through the lens of his pluralism is particularly timely given recent scholarly debates. There have been vigorous exchanges on these matters over the past few years amongst pragmatists. Some provocateurs, including Robert Talisse in his impressive *A Pragmatist Philosophy of Democracy* (Routledge: 2007) as well as in earlier articles leading up to that book, have argued that pragmatists cannot be pluralists. Many have responded to the provocation by defending the connection between pragmatism and pluralism. Ferguson adds to these debates (though he unfortunately does not cite them) a possible new third position. The claim is

neither the bristling challenge that pluralism undermines pragmatism nor the standard view that pluralism flows from pragmatism, but rather the sensible idea that pluralism can proceed where pragmatism is not already in place in such a way as to prepare us for the latter.

Ferguson's book opens in Chapter One with a recounting of James's visit to the utopian community of Chautauqua in upstate New York. James recognized in Chautauqua an American iteration of sweetness and light. But flowing out of those perpetually running soda water fountains was a slow and steady decay. With everything so well prepared for the visitor, there was nothing for the visitor to do except to atrophy into a readymade routine. Ferguson suggests that we find the paradigmatic motivation for James's pluralism in his reaction against the hotel world of Chautauqua where struggle is not only unnecessary but also impossible.

This sets the stage for the end of Chapter One and Chapter Two where Ferguson contrasts Jamesian pluralism to contemporary liberal pluralism. This is the core of the book for it is here that we find the crux of Ferguson's interpretation of James's politics and the contribution it can make to political theory today: "liberal pluralism and James's radical pluralism are distant cousins" (9). At the core of Ferguson's contrast here is an interpretation of contemporary liberalism as a theory that accepts plurality but with the goal of subsuming it within greater unity. Is this an accurate interpretation of liberalism today?

If Ferguson is right that contemporary liberals countenance pluralism only as a descriptive fact to be overcome by a wider norm of political unity, then surely James helps us go beyond this. But we should consider at this point exactly what part of such a liberalism James presses past. Ferguson suggests that James moves past the descriptive pluralism of the liberal in that he not only describes pluralism but more importantly prescribes it (cf. 10, 15ff.). Yet I find it tough to see how anyone could coherently prescribe pluralism: for there are always doctrines which demand the cessation of some other doctrines (e.g., evangelism towards atheism) and so prescribing pluralism requires ruling such doctrines out, even though pluralism was supposed to rule nothing out, but invite all in (this, by the way, is also Talisse's argument).

Another option is to see James not as moving beyond liberalism descriptivism about pluralism but rather only the liberal attempt to subsume of pluralism in a higher unity. Rawls's liberalism professes to describe a fact of "reasonable" pluralism, but a better name may have been "shallow" pluralism. James, by contrast to Rawls but in anticipation of later liberals like Isaiah Berlin, accepts the irreducible fact of "deep" pluralism. One need not prescribe deep pluralism to descriptively accept it as an unavoidable condition of our political modernity. James can thus be seen as rejecting any liberal attempt to subsume plurality in a greater unity without being seen as prescribing pluralism. This raises the possibility that perhaps Ferguson attributes to liberalism a view which describes only some, but certainly not all, liberals.

If the core issue at stake in Jamesian versus liberal pluralism is not that of prescriptivism and descriptivism, but rather that of subsuming plurality under unity then we ought to assess Ferguson's interpretation of liberalism in terms of this issue. I find Ferguson insightful in his diagnosis of a prevalent "statism" in contemporary liberal theory according to which liberal pluralists aim to subsume plurality under the unity of the state. But does this diagnosis really extend to all liberal pluralists? It surely describes the liberal pluralism of John Rawls and the tidal wave of work which it washed in. But does it capture Isaiah Berlin, Bernard Williams, Amartya Sen, and Martha Nussbaum as precisely as it does Rawls? Does it even come close to describing John Dewey? Ferguson seems to suggest as much. But I worry that liberalism is here being painted with too big a brush. This little review is not the appropriate venue for a pointillist rendering of liberalism in enormous detail, so let me just register a worry that some may have about Ferguson's argument: liberalism for some is sufficiently capacious to accommodate Jamesian pluralism as Ferguson develops it. If this is correct, then Jamesian pluralism is perhaps not an alternative solution to the ills of liberalism so much as a statement of the work that liberalism now ought to engage itself in and, in the case of at least a few contemporary theorists, is already attempting. James's pluralism is perhaps a viable path forward, but I think it unnecessary and unpragmatic (in the colloquial sense) to suggest that it is an anti-liberal path. So here is a suggestion: replace "liberalism" with "statism" in Ferguson's argument and there you have a nice liberal pluralist argument against liberal statism.

Any pluralist, statist, liberal, pragmatist, or Jamesian who cares about these important matters will benefit from the questions Ferguson's book raises as well as the answers it proposes. This book further repays reading in that it offers interventions into other debates of interest to we who read, interpret, and love the work of William James. I have here focused almost exclusively on Ferguson's centermost themes of the pluralism made available by James, but there are indeed other worthy topics broached in these pages. One is the interconnection between James's philosophy and politics in terms of his reciprocal pluralism and anti-imperialism (Chapter Three). Another is the Jamesian pluralization of the role of sovereignty in international affairs (Chapter Three). Another theme engaged with particular ability in the book concerns the relation between Pragmatist and Continental Philosophy as anticipated by the invigorating interchange between William James and Henri Bergson at the beginning of the twentieth century (Chapter Four). As this last issue has gained some interest in recent scholarship, I will conclude with a brief consideration of Ferguson's treatment here.

Ferguson aims to contest the familiar narrative that recent American 'theory' takes its antifoundationalist aspirations over from French 'postmodern' thought. He favors an alternative narrative according to which French pomo-ism is itself a borrowing from an earlier iteration of American pragmatism-cum-pluralism. The birth of antifoundationalism in recent intellectual discourse is thus actually a rebirth of an originally American, or at least originally Jamesian, contribution. Ferguson uses the interchange between James and Bergson to make his point. He concludes that, "The connections between the two thinkers, their mutually constituted recognition that truth and thought often have lacunae between them, echo throughout the century that followed them" (61). But in tracing this mutual influence Ferguson moves much too quickly to satisfy the intellectual historian. He also neglects the work of other intellectual historians on related matters, most notably Chapter Three of James Livingston's *Pragmatism, Feminism, and Democracy* (Routledge: 2001).

The lines of influence between James and Bergson which Ferguson traces should, he concludes, serve as cautions against interpretations of philosophy that are "intrinsically ahistorical" such that they "reinforce boundary disputes within philosophy rather than investigate what seemingly difference branches can say to one another" (64).

Ferguson is himself as Jamesian as one can get in offering this point. He is asking us to not close off our philosophies to one another, but to let them interact to see what we might make of such engagements across the divide. This restates the pluralistic message of the book in a context where it very much needs to be heard.

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