

*Rethinking Pragmatism: From William James to Contemporary Philosophy*. By Robert Schwartz. West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012. 184 pgs. \$96.95.

Upon reading the title of *Rethinking Pragmatism: From William James to Contemporary Philosophy*, I hoped Robert Schwartz would reconstruct the vitality of classical pragmatism within the context of contemporary philosophy, yet feared his book might be another "eclipse narrative" that laments the decline of pragmatism after the death of John Dewey.<sup>1</sup> I was pleased to discover that Schwartz avoided the latter by creating an insightful work of modest scope. While he references the work of early pragmatists like C.S. Peirce and John Dewey, Schwartz focuses on the *Pragmatism* lectures of William James, and provides a masterful set of commentaries that relate each lecture to James's contemporaries, his other works, and to contemporary debates. Unfortunately, he does so by apologizing for the novelty that makes classical pragmatism and specifically James's *Pragmatism* lectures engaging.

Schwartz orients his project with a quick history of the decline of pragmatism in the twentieth century due to the insistence of the early pragmatists on "the close examination of the 'context of discovery' as well as the 'context of justification'" with regard to scientific inquiry and to their stylistic concern that "excessive logical rigor was replacing serious critical analysis of the very ideas their critics were attempting to formalize" (3). Schwartz hopes that "when the Pragmatists' views are put in modern dress their ideas can be better explained and evaluated" and "when so understood... many of their positions do not look as peculiar and problematic as they are frequently taken to be" (3). Schwartz sees the scholarship of Willard V.O. Quine and Nelson Goodman as the most useful for translating the insights of the classical pragmatists to the contemporary scene.

Rather than rethinking pragmatism as a philosophical movement, Schwartz narrows his focus to James's 1907 *Pragmatism* lectures. He selects James as the "spokesperson" for the movement because of his function as an "intellectual pivot looking back to Peirce and pointing ahead to Dewey," but also because James's particular accounts of belief, religion, truth, inquiry, and pluralism are taken as the canonical statement of these positions," are the "most criticized," and because James is a "most engaging writer and a real joy to read" (4). He admits the difficulty of selecting a single authoritative text by James because his views "changed over time" and "are not always clear and consistent" (4). Therefore, despite their broad target audience, Schwartz chooses James's 1907 lectures as the best medium for rethinking pragmatism since they were composed late in James's career and were intended to be a "summary statement of his core pragmatic convictions and positions" (4). This focus allows Schwartz to rethink pragmatism by way of a lecture by lecture commentary, and he hopes this approach will illuminate not only James's relevance to contemporary issues, but provide further detail and explanation of James's ideas and orient them within the context of turn of the century philosophy and science alike (5). He also cautions that James's pragmatic philosophy can be understood separate from both James's general thesis of radical empiricism and his "deepest and constant concerns" in the *Pragmatism* lectures "to find an account of our place in the natural world that would engage his own spiritual sentiments and needs" (6).

Schwartz follows this introduction with masterful commentaries on each of James's lectures by providing concise but insightful historical contextualizations, cross-references to James's other works, and translations of James's arguments into contemporary terminology. He lays the groundwork for

the project in Chapter 1, "The Place of Values in Inquiry," by explicating and defending James's contention that "temperament is a legitimate and non-eliminable influence on the evaluation of hypothesis" (23). In Chapter 2, "The Pragmatic Maxim and Pragmatic Instrumentalism," Schwartz excels at comparing and contrasting James's articulation of pragmatism with the versions developed by Peirce and Dewey, enabling him to tease out the themes experimentalism, fallibilism, holism, and pluralism that unite classical pragmatists without minimizing their respective variations and divergences. Schwartz engages James's metaphysical concerns in Chapter 3, "Substance and Other Metaphysical Claims," and explains how James applies the pragmatic maxim to religious claims. He tentatively defines James's concept of faith as a "religious hypothesis" requiring openness to the idea that "future inquiry may undercut their faith" (57). Schwartz also admits to finding James's "handling of all these 'meaning of life' questions problematic in places" and submits a promissory note to discuss these concerns more fully in Chapter 8 (62). Chapter 4 contains a concise explanation of why pragmatists following James avoid metaphysical dualisms as unproductive and Chapter 5 places this evasion of dualism within the context of contemporary disputes about realism.

I found the most valuable chapter of *Rethinking Pragmatism* to be Chapter 6, "Pragmatic Semantics and Pragmatic Truth," in which Schwartz rebuts the most common criticisms of James's pragmatic theory of truth and its implications. Against Alfred Tarski's criterion of adequacy, the claim that truth is merely "what works," that pragmatism cannot account for historical truths, or that truth is "mutable," etc. (92-99), Schwartz contends that "pragmatic semantics seeks to capture the diachronic or ambulatory nature of meaning and reference"; thus, while "assuming fixity when describing the assumptions that underlie the functions of a language for a time being" is permissible, pragmatists recognize that "this immutability assumption is a transitory idealization that has no metaphysical or epistemic prescriptive force on past or future users." As such, common misunderstandings of pragmatism stem from "semantic realists' failure to take into account the ambulatory nature of language" (107). Schwartz effectively dramatizes the distinctions between realist and pragmatic semantics by concluding the chapter through reference to several dialogues from *The Meaning of Truth* where James presents these common criticisms and their pragmatic rebuttals (110-115). Even if these dialogues strike any reader sympathetic to pragmatism like déjà vu, by allowing James to address his critics, old and new, Schwartz reveals the epistemic humility and fallibilism of pragmatic semantics behind the more familiar caricatures. In similar fashion, Schwartz uses Chapter 7, "Worldmaking," to relate pragmatic semantics to the work of late twentieth century pragmatists like Quine and Goodman, as well as to Thomas Kuhn's work on scientific revolutions.

Although Schwartz attempts to honor James's personal sentiments in Chapter 8, "Belief, Hope, and Conjecture," through a careful examination of faith as a religious hypothesis, the results are mixed. Undoubtedly, his careful and thorough references to "The Sentiment of Rationality" and "The Will to Believe" clarify James's pluralistic philosophy of religion and rebut the common criticism that James endorses "willing our beliefs to suit our subjective preferences independent of the empirical evidence" as "incompatible with a pragmatic account of belief and the fixation of belief" (142). However, Schwartz's clarification of James's positions through contrast with Dewey, while helpful, reveals the remarkable absence of reference to Josiah Royce not only from this chapter, but also from nearly the entire book.<sup>2</sup> The *Pragmatism* lectures reference Royce more often than either Dewey or Peirce, and Royce was James's most frequent professional as well as personal interlocutor on

religious topics, specifically on the question of the One and the Many. Schwartz clearly feels that the sooner we disaggregate these concerns from the larger implications of James's work the better, yet some attention to how James was summarizing his personal conversations with Royce would help explain why he "focused on the absolute and last things" even though he "urged others not to focus on the Absolute and last truths" (155).

Most readers will probably respect Schwartz's desire to keep James's professional insights separate from his personal sentiments, but I myself marvel at how well James blurs the distinction between professional and personal inquiry, especially in the *Pragmatism* lectures. While I cringe when James shamelessly appeals to his own confirmation bias declaring in his opening lecture that "You want a system that will combine both things, the scientific loyalty to facts and the willingness to take account of them... but also the old confidence in human values and the resultant spontaneity," I cheer when James asserts that we desire a "philosophy that will not only exercise [our] powers of intellectual abstraction, but that will make some positive connexion with this actual world of finite human lives."<sup>3</sup> This second concern remains a legitimate need to many of philosophical temperament and one that contemporary professional philosophy often fails to acknowledge. Thus, when Schwartz concludes that James's "constant mingling of these concerns with his straightforward philosophical theses has colored the reading of his work in ways that have hindered and continue to hinder appreciation of his forward-looking ideas on inquiry, truth, and language" (154) his claims are descriptively true, but they apologize for the novelty of these lectures that continues to make them engaging. He correctly describes James's religious and metaphysical concerns (like the One and the Many) as "cosmic," rather than "local," especially in comparisons to the immediate concerns that vexed social pragmatists like Dewey and Jane Addams, yet these concerns were very local to James's experience as well. Perhaps James's depression could have been ameliorated through less preoccupation with these ultimate concerns and his lectures could have been clearer without including his idiosyncratic experiences, but those concerns and experiences motivated *his* inquiry and formed the values *he* used to judge the pragmatic worth of ideas.

In conclusion, *Rethinking Pragmatism* provides a succinct commentary on the *Pragmatism* lectures that helps the reader to connect to the broader work of William James, dispels unfair caricatures of pragmatism, highlights James's contributions to the emergence of Classical Pragmatism, and establishes his continuing relevance. Schwartz sufficiently warrants the need to separate of James's professional and personal concerns for greater clarity, but he does so at the expense of the idiosyncrasies that make the *Pragmatism* lectures engaging. Perhaps rather than re-thinking *Pragmatism* for clarity we should re-read *Pragmatism* for inspiration, however, allowing it to remain one of "those dried human heads" that fascinates as it informs, despite its oddity and imperfections, rather than transforming his lectures into a "crystal globe" prepared for exhibition by polishing unsightly blemishes.<sup>4</sup>

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**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Robert B. Talisse and Scott F. Aiken, eds. *The Pragmatism Reader: From Peirce Through the Present* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), pp. 5-9.

<sup>2</sup> Schwartz references Royce only once and in passing on page 5.

<sup>3</sup> William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (New York, NY: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907), 20.

<sup>4</sup> William James, "A World of Pure Experience." *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Method*. Vol. 1, No. 20 (*The Journal of Philosophy*, Inc: Sep. 29th, 1904) 535.