

Review of *Outline of a New Liberalism: Pragmatism and the Stigmatized Other*. By Nelson W. Keith. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2015. 255 pp. \$95

Nelson Keith's *Outline of a New Liberalism* is a must-read for anyone interested in social justice, pragmatism, contemporary political philosophy, or critical philosophy of race. It is a wonderful book about social justice that, on the negative side, focuses on the failures of modern rational-liberalism to achieve justice for those whose identities have been socially devalued, *the stigmatized Other* (peoples of color, women, sexual minorities, and other ethnic and cultural minorities); and, on the positive side, focuses on the promise of a different species of liberalism, one based on a pragmatism and phronesis (practical wisdom), which is conceptually equipped to attend to social exclusions and to produce ideals of justice that are sufficiently flexible and pluralistic so as to be genuinely inclusive. Focusing more specifically on how the political landscape and the political life of the US have been shaped by the combination of modern rational-liberalism and racism, Keith offers compelling arguments about how modern rational-liberalism has been complicit with racial injustices and how a pragmatist-phronetic pragmatism can address those injustices. These arguments draw on the insights of black intellectuals (such as Paul Dunbar and Ralph Ellison) and black philosophers (such as Cornel West and Eddie Glaude), who are put in fruitful conversation with classic pragmatists such as Dewey and James. I will review both the negative and the positive arguments of this book along two central ideas that structure its lucid reflections and highlight both what modern rational-liberalism misses and what the pragmatist-phronetic alternative can capture: (a) the critical concepts of *self-determination* and *emancipation*, and (b) the attention to the tragic. In both sections of my review I will bring to the fore how the author uses important insights from

William James and, in particular, how Jamesian naturalism and pluralism are vindicated as the centerpiece of a liberalism that can properly address social justice issues.

SELF-DETERMINATION AND EMANCIPATION

In chapters one and two Keith develops the critical and deconstructive work necessary to diagnose the failures of modern rational-liberalism, clearing the way for the more capacious form of liberalism outlined in later chapters. Keith argues persuasively that the major drawback of modern rational-liberalism is its commitment to “a science of measurement” that, in making everything a matter of calculation, fixes and homogenizes all aspects of human life. In chapter three, Keith finds a corrective in the pragmatism of James and Dewey and, more specifically, in the prioritization of *lived experience* proposed in their naturalism and pluralism: their naturalism underscores that everything in human life is in flux and, therefore, subject to change and uncertainty; and their pluralism celebrates the diversity and heterogeneity of human life and proposes a normative basis for vindicating forms of human identity and human living that have been excluded, devalued, and stigmatized. According to the arguments of chapter three, the *scientific* pragmatism of Peirce and his followers will not do for setting liberalism on a new path; but the promise of a new liberalism can be found in the *historical* and *experiential* pragmatism of James and Dewey, which understands human life as shaped by human self-determination in plural and unpredictable ways. Ultimately, Keith contends that it is only the notion of self-determination that we find in James that is uncompromisingly pluralistic and subject to flux and uncertainty without qualification, whereas the one we find in Dewey’s naturalism is ambivalent and often too close to a scientism that reduces the heterogeneity and uncertainty of human life to the principles of science and calculation. It is ultimately through James that Keith articulates his own notion of self-determination based upon the conditions of flux and uncertainty of human life, and open to irreducibly plural conceptions of meaning, knowledge, value, and purpose. Keith’s pragmatist liberalism centered around this notion

of self-determination is further expanded in chapter four by proposing *phronesis* as its method. He argues that it is only through a pragmatism-phronesis dialogic that the possibilities of redress and melioration toward social justice can be adequately pursued for all — not only for the stigmatized Other, but for the mainstream as well. Chapters five and six offer productive ways of appreciating social relationality without binaries that separate Self and Other. In these chapters Keith unmasks and criticizes the dualistic modes of thinking employed in identity-construction and shows how identity-deconstructionism can help us overcome those binaries in which identity politics and the identities of stigmatized Others become entrapped, offering “difference” theory as a conceptual way out for genuinely liberatory forms of political thinking and praxis. Anyone interested in social justice and liberatory political philosophy should find useful resources and provocations in the synthesis of pragmatism cum phronesis and “difference” theory contained in Keith’s liberalism.

Keith emphasizes throughout the book that the critical notion of self-determination that we should extract from pragmatism is one that is transformative and liberatory. That is, one that is at the service of *emancipation*: the emancipation of human identities and forms of life that have suffered social exclusion and stigmatization. As he puts it early on in the book: “what is needed is not an even-handed stance toward all experiences but a weighted pragmatism that stands for rectifying historical injustices and privileges, together with the retrieval of silenced voices and meanings” (24). The method of phronesis and the theoretical stance of a historical and experiential pragmatism provide “attractive possibilities for what the stigmatized Other seeks: a place where different experiments of living . . . can be fruitfully explored” (Ibid.). Converging with the critiques and correctives of contemporary classics such as Charles Mills’ *The Racial Contract*, Keith’s book offers a powerful liberal social-justice framework that gives center-stage to the experiences, needs, and aspirations of plural stigmatized Others.

ATTENTION TO THE TRAGIC

The crucial attention to the tragic appears at the beginning and at the end of the book (chapters one and seven), as bookends that nicely frame the discussion of the political sensibility that a pragmatist-phronetic liberalism needs in order to properly attend to the demands of social justice. A key component of Keith's indictment of modern rational-liberalism is its way of evading the tragic elements of social life. As he puts it, adapting a poetic image from Paul Dunbar, through the homogenizing and calculating approach of modern rational-liberalism (as exhibited, for example, in cost-benefit analysis metrics), the injustices suffered by stigmatized Others become "invisible" and are left "defensively hidden, via the use of masks behind which feigned smiles obscure deep pain (Dunbar) while inhuman treatment and injustice persist" (7). As the concluding chapter emphasizes, while modern rational-liberalism is ultimately anti-humanistic and turns human beings into "desiccated calculating machines", the promise of a pragmatist-phronetic liberalism is to help us all in the challenges of constructing self-determined lives as we come to terms with the tragic elements of everyday life. For Keith, pragmatism will not be able to facilitate genuine emancipation unless it has a place within it for tragedy. Arguing that Peirce, and at times even Dewey, fell short of offering a pragmatism with a tragic sensibility, Keith turns to Sidney Hook's "Tragic Sense of Life" (and Miguel de Unamuno's rumination) and invites contemporary pragmatists to go back to that tragic sensibility and to undertake the challenge of addressing the tragic aspects of our life in common with special attention to those who have been excluded and stigmatized. Keith's engaging and provocative book nicely sets the agenda for contemporary pragmatist discussions of social justice.

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