

Review of *Pragmatism Applied: William James and the Challenges of Contemporary Life*, by Clifford S. Stagoll and Michael P. Levine (Eds.). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2019. 266 pp. \$90.00.

**W**hat if William James was alive today to weigh in on the pressing issues of our time? What would he say regarding the increasing political divide and how it has impacted policies on guns and gun violence? How would we use his philosophy of pragmatism to inform business practices with managers? How might he speak about disability studies taking into account human flourishing and what makes a life significant? In *Pragmatism Applied: William James and the Challenges of Contemporary Life*, editors Clifford S. Stagoll and Michael P. Levine draw together a collection of essays that attempts to consider Jamesian pragmatism applied to some of these contemporary issues.

The editors' aims are two-fold. First, they consider how Jamesian pragmatism can be applied to current issues in America on a range of topics and themes, from practical daily life to political life to personal and professional life. The purpose of this book is, then, to extend James's abstract philosophies into practical engagements. Second, the editors "desire to do justice to James's own emphasis on the action-orientation, consequences, and use-value of philosophy."<sup>1</sup> The editors argue that the purpose is to fill the gap that exists in the "paucity of literature that attempts to apply his philosophy to real-world issues."<sup>2</sup> Perhaps a reason why there is a

dearth of scholarship pertaining to this issue is that it is a large and challenging task to achieve. Additionally, there are multiple interpretations (and misinterpretations) of Jamesian pragmatism. The result is often conflated “Jamesian/Deweyan” models of pragmatism in action without the discernment of the unique qualities of each.

In attempting to take on this huge task, some authors are successful in presenting the potential *and* realized action-orientation together, while others leave the reader still worried that the hopes are too idealistic (understandably so in such a politically tumultuous time) or that the premise and conclusion remain in the world of ideas instead of allowing for practice and action. As the editors explain, “This volume means to encourage an alternative enterprise, emphasizing various ways in which James’s theories can be used to conceive of and cope with challenges in contemporary life.”<sup>3</sup> Continuing, they note that the

point is not just to locate the inherent usefulness of James’s ideas for such matters, but rather, [to draw] out some of the ways in which pragmatism might be made ‘pragmatic’ (in the common sense of that word), to promote James’s own concern with actions and consequences.<sup>4</sup>

For any Jamesian scholar, scholar of pragmatism, or philosopher attempting to find purchase with current events, questions, and issues plaguing (or existing) in our present society, this is a fine book to add to one’s shelf. This text exists as an exercise of public philosophy in action.

James’s pragmatism is “melioristic,” as the editors note, thus lending itself to considering problems and issues in the world today—meaning that pragmatism can be a tool used to consider the good in humankind working towards a better society. The editors explain that James participated in public philosophy, the public sphere, and public affairs through much of his later life, and this book serves to extend this vision of the role of philosophers. James’s

unique pragmatism is personal, experiential, and purposefully open, which lends itself to multiple fields of study.

The uniting factor of this book (and James's thought) is that "the point [of pragmatism and philosophy] is not so much to predefine a problem using philosophical concepts so as to enable a more focused analysis of it, but rather to analyze and propose new ways in which those experiencing the problem might conceive of and respond to it."<sup>5</sup> The question remains, why James? The editors explain that James's pragmatism is approachable and "encourages bold exploration of ways in which pragmatism might help to realize melioristic intent."<sup>6</sup> Although a major critique of James is that sometimes his ideas are "inconsistent," his ideas provide an "open-endedness that invites fresh engagements."<sup>7</sup>

The book is organized into three parts, each embodying a different model of applying Jamesian pragmatism to societal problems today. Part 1 is titled "Issues: Putting James to Work." Within these first five chapters, the contributing authors ask questions on topics ranging from gun violence to college breeding to animal ethics to disability studies to race relations. In Part 2, "Theory: Clearing the Way," the editors group authors together for their philosophical interrogation of pragmatism applied to specific philosophical issues, from what it means to live a moral life to understanding experience to understanding self. Each author takes a deep dive into their respective area of philosophy and then includes James as a supplement to their claims. Part 3, "Practice: Living with James," "gets personal," and the aim in this part is to consider how "James's ideas might be adopted to help guide one's own philosophical and professional practice."<sup>8</sup> Of the three parts, the third is the strongest, taking a direct approach to the book project at hand by addressing Jamesian pragmatism applied to the challenges of contemporary life (that being said, there are highlights throughout the rest of the text.) The topics in Part 3 include nature, business management and ethics, human nature, habit, and war.

We see the highlights of the first part of the book in the specific authors' abilities to first, understand and define Jamesian pragmatism; second, to apply the philosophy to a pressing issue; and

finally, to suggest an action-oriented model or theory that holds weight. Chapter 1: “Listening to the ‘Cries of the Wounded’: Jamesian Reflections on the Impasse over Gun Control,” by James M. Albrecht, defines a key problem in rhetoric surrounding gun control policies and attempts to apply Jamesian pragmatism using an ethical lens to suggest that the ever-growing political divide might find common ground. This chapter is well-argued and clearly laid out. But a lingering question for the author is, can this divide ever truly be closed? And is Jamesian pragmatism still too idealistic to achieve success in finding political common ground? Albrecht admits his idealism but presses forward. He clearly outlines his interpretation of pragmatism and James’s ethics, and while the editors note that some may find the argument “misguided,” the overall impact is that the application of James’s ideas can be provocative and timely.

Additionally, Chapter 4, “Significant Lives and Certain Blindness: William James and the Disability Paradox,” by Nate Jackson, presents a fresh, novel, interesting, and much needed analysis of James within disability studies. Jackson again presents a philosophical issue within disability studies and calls forth Jamesian pragmatism to address the significant lives of those who are differently abled. Jackson considers James’s pragmatism, pluralism, and inclusion by “examining James’s thought as a possible resource for conceiving of disablement in conjunction or as compatible with human flourishing.”<sup>9</sup> The editors interpret Jackson’s purpose,

James is a source for an ethics of tolerance and for recognition of limitations to judgements of values. He promotes and recommends a type of ‘epistemic humility’ that counters any tendency to dismiss the testimony of others regarding the value, meaning, and quality of their lives.<sup>10</sup>

Moving forward, a clearer analysis of Jamesian pragmatism would enhance the argument.

In Part 2, Chapter 6, “Applying Jamesian Pragmatism to Moral Life: Against ‘Applied Ethics,’” Sami Pihlström considers the connection between pragmatism, applied ethics, and moral theory.

One of many clear and thoughtful points Pihlström argues in this essay is that “James’s pragmatic method was, not only a ‘method of making our ideas clear’ as it primarily was for Peirce, but arguably a method of making our ideas ‘ethically clear’—of tracing out the conceivable ethical implications at the core of our concepts and conceptions, even the most abstractly theoretical ones.”<sup>11</sup> This chapter takes the purpose of the book to task with fidelity, honesty, effort, and creativity. Part 2 represents a more theoretical and abstract approach to analyzing pragmatism. This process leaves the reader with questions regarding how the author’s considerations of theory connect to practice and represent pragmatism *applied*.

As noted above, Part 3 is the most relevant and engaging part of the book. Each author in this section attempts to consider what pragmatism would look like when applied to the challenges of contemporary life. In Chapter 9, “William James and the Woods,” Douglas R. Anderson considers the significance of James’s time in the country, liberated from “the city and cosmopolitan philosophy,” and finds it to have been integral to human flourishing.<sup>12</sup> Anderson’s chapter is a highlight in this book. He begins with a clear understanding of James—the man (and his history)—before embarking on an analysis of his thought. More philosophers would do well to incorporate historical and personal biographies of James to enhance their philosophical arguments. The author notes “I think . . . James’s philosophical life offers us a significant reminder of the importance of contemplation, meditation, and the practice of ‘musement’ that allow our ideas to work freely.”<sup>13</sup> Anderson argues that Dewey’s advice to seek experimentalism and community pales in comparison to contemplation and “solitary communion.”<sup>14</sup> However, in the politically tumultuous times we live in, one might ask whether it would be more, or as helpful, to build community in an ever-dividing present. On this note, I wonder what Anderson might have to say to Albrecht’s claims in Chapter 1.

Chapter 10, “Taking James to Work: Pragmatism for Managers,” by Clifford S. Stagoll, may be one of the most successful chapters in the volume, as it conforms to the precise aims of the book. This chapter is also accessible to multiple audiences of

scholars, again providing evidence of the purpose of this action-oriented model of scholarship staying true to James. The purpose of this chapter considers “A Jamesian philosophy of management [that] would emphasize and explain the need for managers to draw information from diverse courses, for instance, to take account of qualitative factors in determining the meaning of quantitative measures, and to develop flexible plans for coping with unexpected events.”<sup>15</sup> Stagoll notes,

The point of a Jamesian approach is not to abandon theory, but to reorient it toward the experience it means to describe and aid. For philosophy of management to be relevant for practitioners, it must recover the concreteness and intricate complexities of management decisions and practices and the circumstances that frame them.<sup>16</sup>

The authors highlighted in this review consider Jamesian pragmatism directly and take the book project’s aim to task in their arguments. That being said, each author included in *Pragmatism Applied* provides a meaningful contribution to Jamesian scholarship, yet there is still more to be said in connecting these works to Jamesian pragmatism directly.

Pragmatism as a field of study is complex. Attempting to juxtapose Jamesian pragmatism, which is complex and often misunderstood, with each author’s chosen topic, requires deep knowledge and analysis of the branch of philosophy. Within this collection of works, some authors present a clear understanding of Jamesian pragmatism before connecting it to their chosen topics, while other chapters fall short of demonstrating a connection to Jamesian pragmatism and leave the reader wanting a more in-depth and charitable analysis of William James, his philosophy, and his connection to the world today.<sup>17</sup>

The strength of this collection shows in the bringing together of a number of authors from different fields, with different areas of expertise, which provides a diverse group of perspectives. This same strength also demonstrates an area for growth: The authors could

speak to one another. It would be helpful if these authors had the opportunity to revise and edit their chapters, considering the other chapters present in the book to see how they could build connections between their works and make the chapters feel more like an authentic conversation.

As a reader, it would have been helpful to see a more unifying theme executed with fidelity by each author. While some authors provide a clear understanding of Jamesian pragmatism, others continue to conflate Jamesian pragmatism with Deweyan pragmatism and also to potentially misunderstand the life of James and how it applies/connects to his unique philosophy. And while some authors demonstrate an attention to the strengths and weaknesses of James's thought, others do not provide a charitable reading of James and instead use him as a strawman for their argument. Additionally, the editors note James's own pragmatic views of society as seen in *Talks to Teachers*, where he discusses pedagogy and teaching, but if this book is missing anything it is a philosopher of education's perspective on James's pragmatism applied to education.

This ambitious work will hopefully invite other philosophers to the task of making their philosophy public, relevant, and action-oriented. To cite Albrecht's own spin on James, "The philosopher must be conservative" but also must be willing to "break the rules which have grown too narrow."<sup>18</sup> In attempting to find praxis between theory and practice toward an action-oriented public philosophy, the editors have compiled a selection of chapters that attempt to break the mold of philosophy in order to address pressing current issues.

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NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Clifford S. Stagoll and Michael P. Levine, eds., *Pragmatism Applied: William James and the Challenges of Contemporary Life* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2019), xv.

<sup>2</sup> Clifford and Levine, xv.

<sup>3</sup> Clifford and Levine, xv.

<sup>4</sup> Clifford and Levine, xvi.

<sup>5</sup> Clifford and Levine, xiv.

<sup>6</sup> Clifford and Levine, xiv.

<sup>7</sup> Clifford and Levine, xiv.

<sup>8</sup> Clifford and Levine, xx.

<sup>9</sup> Clifford and Levine, 73.

<sup>10</sup> Clifford and Levine, xviii.

<sup>11</sup> Clifford and Levine, 134.

<sup>12</sup> Clifford and Levine, xx, 198.

<sup>13</sup> Clifford and Levine, 200.

<sup>14</sup> Clifford and Levine, 200-1.

<sup>15</sup> Clifford and Levine, xxi.

<sup>16</sup> Clifford and Levine, 221-2.

<sup>17</sup> Clifford and Levine, see Chapters 1, 4, 9, and 10.

<sup>18</sup> Clifford and Levine, 13.