

Review of *Pragmatist Egalitarianism*, by David Rondel.
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David Rondel's *Pragmatist Egalitarianism* contributes to a surge of recent scholarship showcasing the relevance of pragmatism for contemporary debates and problems in political theory and practice. Where scholars like Alexander Livingston and Melvin Rogers have highlighted the political thought of traditional pragmatist figures like William James and John Dewey, respectively, Rondel demonstrates the productive application of pragmatism—through the work of James, Dewey, and Richard Rorty—to reconcile a longstanding disagreement among egalitarians. The dispute consists in two seemingly conflicting ways of understanding the ideal of equality. Shall equality be understood as a fundamentally *distributive* ideal, concerning the distribution of rights and resources, whose achievement depends on institutional design and obligations of the state? Or, shall equality be understood as a fundamentally *relational* ideal, where people are understood as standing to one another as equals, and whose realization depends on the *ethos* and transformation (in situations of inequality) of a culture? As the title of Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth's 2003 exchange puts it, shall equality be understood as a matter of redistribution or recognition?

Following the reconciliatory lead of pragmatists like James, Rondel questions the false dilemma posed by the debate and the question upon which it hangs, and advances a pluralistic, pragmatist conception of egalitarianism. His negative argument, advanced in Part One of the book, is that both distributive and relational egalitarians commit to a kind of reductionism and foundationalism about equality. The question at the heart of the dispute, "which egalitarian ideal is the fundamental one," presupposes, Rondel argues, "that, insofar as we prize equality, there must be some

fundamental ideal that we are prizing. But why must there be some such fundamental ideal?"¹ This presumption of fundamentality has resulted in overly reductive accounts of equality and inequality by either side. Distributive, or "vertical" egalitarianism, as Rondel prefers to call it, reduces equality and inequality to a matter of distributive duties belonging to a state.² This form of egalitarianism is championed specifically by those working in the liberal tradition of political theory, such as John Rawls and Ronald Dworkin. For vertical egalitarians, equality fundamentally pertains to the relationship between the state and the governed, that is, those upon whom the state has a legitimate claim to exercise its coercive power. The problem with such a conception is that it tends to overemphasize the causal influence of institutions in matters of equality and inequality at the expense of other factors, like the cultural or individual. Under this picture, the relational aspect of equality "is conspicuously omitted."³ Conversely, relational or "horizontal" egalitarianism, to use Rondel's term, reduces equality and inequality to a matter of equal standing "between and among the people of a society," thus envisioning a society "in which people do not humiliate, dominate, oppress, or subordinate others."⁴ Rondel maps this type of egalitarianism onto Marxists and socialists, but also to the cultural turn among members of the intellectual Left in the late twentieth century. For horizontal egalitarians, inequality fundamentally pertains to relations found in civil society, "between people in everyday social and productive interactions."⁵ These egalitarians commit the inverse mistake of liberal egalitarians in overemphasizing the causal force of cultural valuations in matters of equality and inequality at the expense of institutional factors.

Rondel advances his positive argument in Part Two of the book where he outlines the reconciliatory position of pragmatist egalitarianism by drawing on the insights of James, Dewey, and Rorty. These thinkers are uniquely positioned to aid in overcoming the impasse between vertical and horizontal egalitarianism given their "unique predilection for mediation and reconciliation."⁶ Here Rondel follows a range of intellectual historians and commentators of pragmatism, like James T. Kloppenberg and Richard J. Bernstein,

in emphasizing pragmatism's signature proclivity for the "*via media*," to use Kloppenberg's phrase.⁷ Reconciliation, on this view, does not consist in the dialectical synthesis of two opposing terms into a higher third; rather, Rondel deploys a Rortyan strategy of *redescription*, recasting the variables of equality in terms of "three interrelated and mutually reinforcing variables."⁸ These irreducible yet interconnected variables—the "institutional," the "personal," and the "cultural"—are exemplified in the respective pragmatisms of Dewey, James, and Rorty. Rondel clarifies that in turning to Dewey, James, and Rorty, his claim is not that these thinkers are alone in emphasizing one of these factors, or even that only one of these variables can be found in their work. Rather, he reads them "as *exemplars* of the 'institutional,' 'personal,' and 'cultural,' respectively."⁹ The benefit of this pragmatist egalitarianism is that it is *pluralistic* insofar as it takes all three variables seriously for the diagnosis and rectification of inequality.

One promising line of inquiry forwarded in the book is the *realist* orientation of pragmatist political thinking and theorizing. Rondel positions pragmatism squarely on the realist side of a recent debate between ideal and non-ideal, or, more specifically, realist political theorizing. He frames this realism through pragmatism's prioritization of problems as the loci of political and ethical inquiry and struggle. In contrast to ideal theories which theorize the ideal conditions of equality, pragmatism's "problem-centric" approach grants priority to "questions about how inequality is actually experienced, reinforced, and struggled for in the real world, and to questions about the specific problems (political, moral, cultural, economic) to which this gives rise."¹⁰ Additionally, where ideal theory tends to draw on timeless *a priori* principles for theorizing about equality, pragmatism adopts an experimental perspective toward the problems that need to be solved. As James observed in the context of moral philosophy, this entails that there can be no political theory of equality "dogmatically made up in advance."¹¹ What we have, rather, is a messy and complex world of struggles for equality that involve the tripartite convergence of institutions, individuals, and culture.

Rondel draws on Dewey's democratic egalitarianism as an exemplar for thinking about the role of institutions in struggles for equality. Dewey's conception of institutions is productive insofar as it regards institutions as experimental instruments or "a set of tools with which to tackle specific problems."¹² On this view, institutions are normatively judged in terms of their utility for solving concrete moral, social, and political problems, rather than in terms of their conformity with abstract liberal norms of individual liberty or restricted government. As Rondel contends, for Dewey, institutions are not valuable in themselves (an assumption associated with vertical egalitarianism), but only for the people they serve. He explains, "We cannot evaluate institutions apart from their effects on individual citizens. Institutions exist for people, not the other way around."¹³ Institutions thus function as crucial tools for creating a flourishing democratic, egalitarian society, but they need supplementation by the individual and cultural.

In his chapter on James's contribution to a pragmatist egalitarianism, Rondel follows the lead of commentators like George Kateb and Stephen S. Bush in highlighting James's individualism. This feature of James's pragmatism is an oft-contested site of critique and defense among James scholars and Rondel navigates perspicuously between both positions, defending the egalitarian dimensions of James's democratic individualism and denouncing James's overdrawn suspicion of institutions, social structures, and other representatives of "bigness."¹⁴ James's individualism is egalitarian insofar as it holds that "we are all fundamentally equal *as individuals*, in being possessors of a unique inward view, and we are to be treated as equals—by other people and by political institutions—in light of this fact."¹⁵ This entails, Rondel argues, not only a commitment to tolerate the views, perspectives, and unique inwardness of others, but to examine one's own "moral blind spots" or the extent to which "one might be oblivious to, and complicit in, the frustration of others' individuality."¹⁶ James gives us a way of rectifying such blind spots through the effort of willful attention and revision of our intolerant, inequalitarian habits. Here Rondel's reading of James resonates with

the work of Shannon Sullivan in underscoring the malleability of habit for disruption and refashioning through the exercise of the will.¹⁷

If James is the exemplar of the individual, then it is perhaps no surprise that Rondel draws on Rorty to flesh out the role and import of the cultural for egalitarian struggles. Rorty famously described philosophy in terms of “cultural politics,” contributing to the liberal utopian task of imaginatively transforming cultural formations through practices of redescription.¹⁸ While his work is often framed as detrimentally negative and deflationary, Rondel emphasizes the positive agenda behind Rorty’s theoretical interventions and inventive readings and couplings of a motley crew of philosophers (such as Jacques Derrida, John Dewey, and Wilfred Sellars). He frames this positive agenda through the anti-authoritarian and meliorist implications that follow from Rorty’s embrace of Darwinism. I find Rondel’s Darwinian reading of Rorty productive for pushing contemporary pragmatism beyond the oppositional confines of traditional, “experience-centric” pragmatism and neo, “linguistic” pragmatism insofar as it underscores the Darwinian continuity between these two positions. Rorty’s attentiveness to language brings to the fore an important tool for the transformation of culture and social meaning. This can be witnessed, for instance, in strategies of redescription that reconfigure the social meaning of a term like “queer,” or those strategies of redescription that name previously un-identified harms and create legal policies around such harms, thus “inducing” (but not guaranteeing) changes in social practices, as in the case of sexual harassment.¹⁹

In his conclusion, Rondel puts pragmatist egalitarianism to work on a contemporary problem: the struggle for racial equality in the context of the United States. Rondel’s deployment of pragmatist egalitarianism is more diagnostic than robustly normative in his treatment of racial inequality, exploring “how the institutional, personal, and cultural variables work together to cause and maintain it.”²⁰ This pluralist approach has the benefit of avoiding reductionist accounts that construe the problem of racial inequality solely in either structural/institutional terms or in terms of individual bias and

prejudice. Instead, Rondel argues that “social, legal, and political institutions play a role in reinforcing and deepening racist cultural biases..., and that such cultural biases covertly fold back into the institutional realm.”²¹ Such biases enfold the individual and the cultural insofar as they represent culturally encoded meanings that can be held and perpetuated by individual persons.

Rondel’s discussion of racial inequality left me with many questions about the pluralism at the heart of his pragmatist egalitarianism. Is this pluralism understood to be exhausted by the vectors of the institutional, individual, and cultural? Might there be other vectors that pertain to the diagnosis and rectification of inequality? I am thinking here of the ways in which our use and reliance on contemporary technologies create new social, political, and ethical problems, or reinforce and exacerbate existing forms of inequality. As scholars like Simone Browne, Ruha Benjamin, and Safiya Noble point out, technology has been historically instrumental in practices of racialization and contributes to the continued marginalization of Black Americans through practices like predictive policing, surveillance, facial recognition, search engine algorithms, and predictive risk assessment deployed for determining things like credit scores, banking and loan services, parole, and recidivism.²² The role of technology in perpetuating racial inequality has also become a significant site of struggle for activists and organizations like the Stop LAPD Spying Coalition and the Carceral Tech Resistance Network. Irreducible to the individual, cultural, or institutional, technology can function as a relay between these three vectors (for instance, by perpetuating racialized stereotypes through search engine results),²³ but it can also function as a distinct vector through which to critically interrogate and contest conditions of inequality that need amelioration. It may be that pragmatism offers fruitful resources for conceptualizing the role of technology in questions of equality and inequality—indeed, Larry Hickman’s work on Dewey’s philosophy of technology may prove useful for this purpose—or, it may be that political theorists need to take pragmatism’s pluralism seriously and look to other traditions, thinkers, methodologies, and disciplines for inquiring into the

technological. That is, perhaps pragmatism itself should not just tolerate the perspectives of others; perhaps in Jamesian fashion it also needs to disrupt, examine, and rectify its own well-worn habits by inhabiting the view of another.

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NOTES

- ¹ Rondel, *Pragmatist Egalitarianism*, 210.
- ² Rondel, 24.
- ³ Rondel, 45.
- ⁴ Rondel, 48–9.
- ⁵ Rondel, 59.
- ⁶ Rondel, 73.
- ⁷ Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victories*, 3.
- ⁸ Rondel, *Pragmatist Egalitarianism*, 75.
- ⁹ Rondel, 76.
- ¹⁰ Rondel, 80.
- ¹¹ James, “The Moral Philosopher,” 141.
- ¹² Rondel, *Pragmatist Egalitarianism*, 90.
- ¹³ Rondel, 97.
- ¹⁴ James, *Correspondence*, 362.
- ¹⁵ Rondel, *Pragmatist Egalitarianism*, 123.
- ¹⁶ Rondel, 115.
- ¹⁷ See Sullivan, *Revealing Whiteness*, and Sullivan, *Physiology of Sexist and Racist Oppression*.
- ¹⁸ See Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, and Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*.
- ¹⁹ Rondel, *Pragmatist Egalitarianism*, 168.
- ²⁰ Rondel, 188.
- ²¹ Rondel, 191–92.
- ²² See Browne, *Dark Matters*; Benjamin, *Race After Technology*; and, Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*.
- ²³ Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*, 1.