

Krzysztof Piotr Skowroński

Values and Power: Re-reading the Philosophical Tradition of American Pragmatism.

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The title of this book clearly signals the strengths and weaknesses to be found in its pages. The book, part of the ‘Central European Value Studies’ (CEVS) series, which is itself part of Rodopi’s ‘Value Inquiry Book Series’ (VIBS), seeks ‘to determine whether the philosophical tradition of American pragmatism can provide us with a more satisfactory interpretation of the problems of values’ as they relate to questions of power (2). The rationale for this re-reading is Skowroński’s claim that ‘American pragmatism should be analyzed as a form of American culture and as an important articulation of its character and vitality’ (8). Though not all of the discussions of values and power suggest a re-reading, and while some of the claims are too qualified and/or brief to carry truly revisionist force, Skowroński is to be applauded for placing a wide range of pragmatic theorists within a clear thematic structure.

The book is comprised of nine chapters. It also includes a brief preface, an introduction, some final remarks, a bibliography, information about Skowroński, and an index. The discussion is broken into three sections: 1) ‘Proto-Pragmatic Approach to Values and Powers’ (two chapters), 2) ‘Pragmatic Approach to Values and Power’ (six chapters), and 3) ‘Quasi-Pragmatic Approach to Values and Power’ (one chapter).

The introduction provides the first, if not the clearest, explanation of what Skowroński means when he refers to values and power. He notes that considerations of value—otherwise referred to as ‘axiological thinking’ (13)—are a common concern when dealing with pragmatism. Skowroński then explains the myriad ways that power can be understood: internally, externally, interpersonally, and inherently (16). Their relation to each other is predicated on an emphasis on values; that is, in ‘the accumulation of values when any sort of increase, enlargement, aggrandizement, concentration, or maximization of values takes place’ (18). The interplay of both values and power is clarified via pragmatism’s emphasis on democratic, social, and practical ends. What remains unanswered is the degree to which any of this is actually a revision of current thinking on pragmatism. Skowroński does himself no favors when, in setting up opposition to his approach, he is only able to reference arguments that were raised by Bertrand Russell in 1938.

The first section includes a chapter that deals with both Emerson and Thoreau and one that focuses on Peirce. As the section title, ‘Proto-Pragmatic Approach to Values and Powers’, suggests, Skowroński is interested in incipient strands of pragmatism and how they relate to values and power. Here, as in other crucial portions of the book, he equivocates when it comes to endorsing a specific path. While Skowroński will not reduce Thoreau or Emerson to his particular take on proto-pragmatic thought—the signal

aim of the section proper—he is willing to claim that they offer ‘a sort of prelude’ that ‘can be seen at certain points as proto-pragmatic’ and ‘paved the way for pragmatism’s better formulation of some issues’ (28). It is exactly at the point that he starts discussing social issues that Skowroński runs into the problem upholding the democratic, social, and practical aspects of pragmatism. He notes Emerson’s conception of ‘great men’ with nary a comment regarding the elitism contained in the idea that ‘the cultivated, trained, and educated man is stronger, better, and freer in different ways’ (34). Skowroński is on much firmer ground when noting how Thoreau, like James, ‘shifts the center of power from institutions to living people’ and how that ‘same shift takes place as regards values’ (37).

Skowroński’s handling of Peirce is the most nuanced of this first section and is largely free of the problems just noted. It is also hesitant. Skowroński does a careful job of showing how Peirce’s *pragmatism* differs markedly from his *pragmaticism*. He is also critical enough to demonstrate that Peirce’s belief in some objectively fixed realm of experience is outdated when it comes to a contemporary discussion of values and power. But at crucial points in this discussion he backs away from his critique of Peirce. For example, after listing off the difficulties he has with some of Peirce’s claims, Skowroński then backtracks and concludes, ‘I do not intend to claim that Peirce’s ideas...are naïve, old fashioned, and deprived of any meaning for future generations’ (42). Yet only a page later, he suggests he is ‘unable to find convincing arguments that would defend Peirce’s ontology’ (43). The result is a good discussion couched in qualification. What, then, gives rise to this equivocation? The issues are twofold. Skowroński seems hesitant to critically engage potentially problematic points. But that problem might have been overcome if he had provided a bit more context. Some awareness of and/or reference to works such as Menand’s *The Metaphysical Club* (2001) might have added texture to Skowroński’s handling of Peirce.

The second section makes up the bulk of the book. In chapters ranging nearly 140 pages, the discussion covers James, Royce, Dewey (twice), Shusterman, Margolis, Mead, and Rorty. The sweep of this coverage exposes both insights and oversights. In all cases, Skowroński is careful to tie the analysis to a discussion of values and power. This consistent focus pays dividends. His discussion of James in Chapter 3 contains a concise explication of the ground breaking, though often forgotten, *Principles of Psychology* (1890) and how it relates to the ‘individual and social life’ (64), with the latter occupying a central place in James’s pragmatic philosophizing. Skowroński’s consideration in Chapter 6 of the relationship between the melioristic tendency in pragmatism and aesthetics—specifically, as they relate to the works of Dewey, Shusterman, and Margolis—is wide-ranging, cleverly drawing in considerations of decidedly non-pragmatic thinkers such as Nietzsche and Freud (see, e.g., 119-21). Other discussions, however, raise concerns. In the chapter just cited, Skowroński critiques Shusterman for writing ‘more about troubled sexuality (homosexuality and sadomasochism) than about more “accessible” and practicable issues such as nudity, eroticism, and sexuality in general’ (126). Coming from a writer who clearly sympathizes with the democratic, liberal, and melioristic approaches to pragmatism, past and present, the claim that homosexuality is ‘troubled’ rings a discordant note. Still other chapters skim the

implications they raise. In discussing Mead in Chapter 7, Skowroński notes that democracy is ‘the system that best provides space for the freedom of individuals, liberty for the operation of social institutions, and openness to achieve a higher stage in moral development’ (149). But he fails to explore the degree to which a system such as democracy, by being a constantly evolving construct so well suited to the organic and fluid focus of pragmatism, is subject to forces that exist outside itself and beyond the control of thinkers such as Mead.

The third section is a single chapter dedicated to the ‘Powers and Perfections in George Santyana’s Abulensean Pragmatism’, and it is a bit of an outlier. It references debates that Skowroński has engaged in elsewhere. It also contains, by my count at least, the most references to primary sources relating to any of the figures discussed in the book. The argument boils down to what is essentially a long-standing reading: Santyana’s philosophical worldview contains substantial ‘parts that cannot be seen as pragmatic’ (183). Though detailed and cogent, this chapter signals an odd end to the main substance of the book.

The final remarks serve as a good précis on the book proper. Actually, they would have better served Skowroński if they had been included in the preface. Here, more clearly than in any other section, he explains that his re-reading is predicated on ‘a belief in the power of man and in the power of human institutions’ and on ‘a conviction that the moral community must be based on values’ (185). These remarks also suggest the degree to which the final section on Santyana, while playing to Skowroński’s strengths as a scholar, might have been better left out of this book. Most pointedly, this section points to the ambivalence of Skowroński’s implications. While he claims that ‘American pragmatism has enormous potentiality for future interpretations’ (186), Skowroński saps some of the vigor from his own interesting insights. Pragmatism’s strength lies in its forward moving and flexible approach to questions of value, power, and philosophy. The challenge is always to slow that movement down so we can savor the moments of illumination. Skowroński’s book is an engaging, if ultimately tentative, attempt to do just that.

Mark Porrovecchio
Oregon State University