

Krzysztof Piotr Skowroński, (Ed.). *Practicing Philosophy as Experiencing Life: Essays on American Pragmatism*. VIBS Series, Vol. 287. Brill | Rodopi 2015. 132 pp. £59.00 GBP (Paperback ISBN 9789004301986).

No title better announces the historical goal of pragmatists: namely, to forge a closer connection between the theoretical promises and lived practices of philosophy. This book is part of the Central European Value Studies (CEVS), and is volume 287 in the Brill Rodopi's Value Inquiry Book Series (VIBS). In the preface, editor Skowroński urges that American pragmatism, in particular, is 'especially sensitive to the tangibility of the intellectual efforts of professional philosophers and, no less importantly at all, in the applicability of the results of these efforts into the social functioning of the general public' (vii). Skowroński, a professor of philosophy at the Institute of Philosophy, Opole University, Poland, has assembled a varied and engaging selection of authors speaking to this goal.

The book is comprised of six chapters. It also includes an editor's preface, brief bibliographies of the contributors, and a workable index.

The first chapter, 'The Obligations of Philosophers' by John Lachs, starts with a provocative question: 'What can philosophy offer in return for the support of the community' (1)? His answer, refreshingly, does away with the standard canard that academic philosophy is justified by doing the tough work of answering those 'eternal' questions. Instead, Lachs focuses on outcomes that philosophy shares with my disciplinary home of speech communication: that is, 'it teaches when and how to question favorite certainties' while also championing the good pragmatic tendency to celebrate the irritation of doubt' (3-4). He further argues that pragmatist philosophers must lead through action, championing a wide interplay of ideas and pushing hard into realms beyond those Ivory Towers. But pushing hard isn't the same as being so. No, Lachs urges that philosophers must 'be decent human beings' (12), willing to test their own assumptions while also being charitable to those of others.

The second chapter, 'Prolegomena to Pragmatist Conception of the Good Life' by Emil Višňovský, also starts with a question, though unstated: what is the good life? Batting away the current emphasis on social status and the cult of the celebrity, he notes that a good life—however conceived—is predicated on living in an equally good society. Taking pages from Dewey and Goldbraith, among others, Višňovský urges that a good society is not an abstraction. Rather, it is a living place where *access* is given to all (18) chiefly because members strive to create a communal space open to all. This is, as he amply demonstrates, no blanket call for traditional forms of deliberative democracy. Digging further, Višňovský ranges across a host of pragmatist figures past (F.C.S. Schiller, thankfully if problematically) and present (Rorty and Putnam, namely) to arrive at the observations of the aforementioned Lach: 'to address the problems of daily living... in the service of improving life' (24). This answer raises a secondary question: what is the pragmatist conception of (human) life? Višňovský's answer is threefold: it is naturalistic, active, and always in flux. Pragmatists, then, should never treat any one aspect of life as a given, or as resistant to further change. Ultimately, he settles on James and Dewey in urging that the 'good life cannot be expected to come to us effortlessly, passively, without our strenuous effort.... Practical action is necessary to create the good life as well as to resist the sufferings of the bad life' (30).

The third chapter, 'Practicing Philosophy in the Experience of Living: Philosophy as a Way of Life in the American Philosophical Tradition' by Kenneth W. Stickers, takes up the pragmatic project

of connecting philosophy to lived experience, while resisting the fall into sceptical abstraction that befell many a European counterpart. In so doing, he argues that the American aversion to ‘epistemology-centered philosophy’ traces back to American Puritanism (37). Leaning on the works of thinkers like Jonathan Edwards and Emerson, Stickers highlights the importance of similitude in cultivating a pragmatic bent. He also highlights the uniquely American aversion to pigeonholing philosophy in academic settings. It is this last characteristic, exemplified in the works of African American thinkers like Fredrick Douglass and female activists such as Jane Adams, which points the way forward for Stickers. If pragmatists wish to truly embrace their calling, they need to incorporate ‘marginalized perspectives’ by ‘listening sympathetically with others’ (46).

The fourth chapter, ‘Classical American Pragmatism: Practicing Philosophy as Experiencing and Improving Life’ by Jacquelyn Ann K. Kegley, tackles two related themes central to pragmatic philosophy: balancing the roles of the individual and the community, and providing a space for marginalized ‘others’ to flourish (58). Working as a compliment to the previous chapter, Kegley again champions the works of thinkers such as Adams and Du Bois as providing the activist compliment to the individual-community theory-building done by pragmatists such as James and Dewey. She notes that these themes remain important in contemporary society. A renewed appreciation of the symbiotic relationship between the individual and the community can help to undercut the modern tendency of, as Sherry Turkle labels it, ‘being alone together’ (66). A continued focus on inclusion also remains a pressing concern. Accordingly, pragmatists still need to create spaces where they can promote ‘social progress through sympathetic understanding’ (73).

The fifth chapter, ‘The Problem of Evil and Pragmatic Recognition’ by Sami Pihlström, strikes out in an entirely different direction: the pragmatic notion of *recognition* and its relationship to the philosophy of religion’s handling of the problem of evil. His project is ‘a call for a certain kind of *moral growth* for all of us, a development of learning to better recognize what is required of us in a world in which there is, clearly, evil’ (79). After engaging in a detailed discussion of the differences in theistic and atheistic responses to evil, Pihlström zeroes in on a pragmatic throughway ‘that will be more sensitive to the human (existential) dimensions of the problem’ (87). Central to this approach is dismantling any sense of theodicy while, at the same time, avoiding a simplified lapse into anti-theodicy. Taking a cue from James, Pihlström argues for recognition, which ‘can be regarded as lying between mere toleration, on the one hand, and full agreement on the other’ (94).

The sixth and final chapter, ‘Richard Rorty’s Neopragmatist Philosophy as a Kind of Humanism’ by the editor Skowroński, argues that Rorty’s approach ‘weaves together practicing philosophy with experiencing life as to enjoy a more qualitative and worthy existence’ (x). After parsing out distinctions and similarities between various humanisms, Skowroński champions ‘the normative character of Rorty’s humanism’ (114). Rejecting claims that Rorty’s approach reduced to frivolity and relativism, he nonetheless challenges Rorty’s approach to the relationship between the individual and the community, especially where the influence of ‘socio-political factors’ are concerned (123). Critical questions notwithstanding, Skowroński concludes by highlighting Rorty’s focus on ‘*philosophical practice*... to step by step ameliorate the society in the direction of more and more humanism’ (124).

In the preface, Skowroński notes that the book ‘covers a whole variety of themes related to the pragmatist philosophy of life, and discusses its main figures so as to explore the potential of the philosophical tradition of American pragmatism with its sundry versions: pragmatism, instrumentalism, neopragmatism, and others’ (vii). That range poses problems relative to consistency. Certain essays,

such as those by Stickers and Kegley, read as complimentary explorations of a unified theme. Others, such as Pihlström's, feel like outliers. Still others, such as Lachs', argue for a popular resurgence in philosophy generally and pragmatism specifically but fail to offer much that is concrete. These criticisms are important when one considers that Skowroński and the contributors celebrate pragmatism's relationship to lived experience. A general lack of specificity leaves the engaging arguments raised disconnected from the world of actual practice.

Those quibbles aside, this is a book that helpfully reminds the reader of the myriad of ways in which pragmatism has resisted tendencies toward abstraction and obfuscation. In so doing, it also serves as a good primer for those unfamiliar with pragmatism. While Skowroński may well be right that pragmatists are especially sensitive to the conditions necessary to promote a good life lived well, the assembled contributions ultimately yield a lively but underdeveloped sketch of how that process might work in practice.

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