

Diana Heney. *Toward a Pragmatist Metaethics*. Routledge 2016. 156 pp. \$150.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781138189492).

This is a small book that takes on a large challenge. To wit, Diana Heney wants to demonstrate ‘that a certain strain of thought in the pragmatist tradition has contemporary currency specifically for the terrain of metaethics’ (xiii). Heney has transformed her earlier dissertation at the University of Toronto into a vigorous attempt to lay out just such a framework. While it falls a step or two short of its larger goals, it is likely to attract academic readers already interested in ethical and moral issues, no less pragmatism’s relationship to them and C.S. Peirce’s pivotal role in that process.

Toward a Pragmatist Metaethics begins with a preface that lays out the aims of the book. It also includes a short acknowledgements section that tracks the origins of the work. The main section is comprised of two parts, each including four and three chapters, respectively, that are accompanied by useful footnotes and reference lists. The index at the end provides a detailed reference to the work as a whole.

The first part, ‘Ethics & Experience in Early American Pragmatism,’ features four snapshots of figures central to pragmatism’s historical development. As Heney suggests, this portion of the book ‘is about one way of exploring pragmatism as a historical movement where interesting things happen with respect to ethical theory’ (xii).

In ‘Charles Sanders Peirce: The Roots of Pragmatist Ethics,’ Heney provides an elegant defense of this philosopher’s consideration of truth: that a full conception of an object ‘requires understanding its use in practice’ (4). The middle section of the chapter takes up Peirce’s way of establishing a belief, *in* experience and *via* inquiry. The remainder of the chapter is a thoroughgoing defense of Peircean pragmatism as suited to ethical concerns, even in light of his idiosyncratic musings and quibbles with his younger benefactor, William James. As Heney notes, Peirce urges for a form of inquiry that pointed toward resolutions that were independent of clannish affiliations (25). Such an approach, to her mind, tends toward assumptions, and thus judgments, that take account of interested others and contextual realities.

‘William James: Radical Empiricist, Moral Philosopher’ paints James as a follower of Peirce who nonetheless extended the latter’s work in important ways. While sharing a suspicion for *a priori* appeals of the sort championed by British Idealists, James was also more aware of the ‘inherently moral dimensions’ that groomed inquiry (35). But Heney’s critical reading also points to places where James, to her mind, extends his pursuits too far. By championing personal over communal beliefs, he misread the best parts of the pragmatic model for inquiry (43). By also granting the right ‘to believe ahead of the evidence’ (45), James also opened the door for proponents of neo-pragmatism like Richard Rorty.

In ‘John Dewey: Champion of Inquiry,’ Heney again suggests both important points of inspiration and departure. While championing Peirce’s views of logic and inquiry, Dewey also worked to give ‘careful and detailed critiques of dominant ethical theories’ that held sway at the time (55). Heney criticizes Dewey for setting loose the parameters of moral situations, particularizing them to the point that ‘there seems to be no non-arbitrary way to delineate’ them (62). But she also applauds Dewey for opening up pragmatic inquiry in important ways, not the least by being attentive ‘to the range of difficulties faced by inquirers as human beings, as persons living together in communities’ (65).

‘Clarence Irving Lewis: The Bridge to Today’s Pragmatism’ makes the case that Lewis ‘stands as a bridge’ between the classic canon and contemporary philosophy, partially due to the

fact that he never had to directly deal with the Peirce's personal idiosyncrasies (71-72). Heney then does heavy lifting to reinsert Lewis into the discussion and to do away with a host of criticisms about his work generally and his place in the pragmatic tradition specifically. She posits that Lewis, not James or Dewey, is the pragmatist most suited to a Peircean metaethics. Even more, Heney champions the view that Lewis improves upon Peirce by more thoroughly developing the idea of ethics as a 'normative science' (82).

The second part, 'Pragmatism & Problems in Contemporary Metaethics,' attempts to meld the aforementioned snapshots into a picture of what pragmatism can offer to ethical discussions. Here Heney aims to 'begin developing a new pragmatist position' as relates to moral reasoning and judgment (xvi).

'A Pragmatist View of Truth in Ethics' returns to the questions of truth and experience first raised in the chapter on Peirce. Heney frames the issues at stake in the form of a question: 'do we have reason to treat moral judgments as capable of being true or false' (89)? The answer that follows is predicated on severing any ties that pragmatism might have with non-cognitivism. The alternative is to move toward cognitivism; the viewpoint 'that moral statements express beliefs and are truth-apt' (90). To her mind, this removes the need to prove the truth of any given moral judgment. Instead, the focus is on 'the aspiration to truth' which grounds and motivates moral deliberation (110-11).

'A Pragmatist View of Principles in Moral Inquiry' also doubles back to the first chapter; specifically, to the relationship between assumptions and principles. Given that we aspire to truth even as we admit of our fallibility, Heney puts forth the argument for a qualified form of generalism, one that does not lean on *a priori* principles in matters of moral inquiry. She also takes aim at the view that pragmatism is an especially particularist philosophical method. To do so, Heney points to the problems with marrying pragmatism to the particularism of the sort advanced by Jonathan Dancy. In light of this refutation, she arrives at an observation predicated on her Peircean reading of pragmatism: 'moral principles are deeply entrenched in our everyday practices,' a signal that they are thus essential 'for moral learning and improvement' (134).

The conclusion, 'Making Metaethics Matter,' provides less than six pages with which to summarize the work as a whole. Heney argues that it is now 'worthwhile to consider anew the connection between philosophy and the vital matters of everyday human lives' (143). What follows, however, is strangely general and particularly academic. As regards the first, Heney notes that 'moral life is communal' (145), raising here concerns about the pluses and minuses of technology while highlighting the Toronto-based aid organization *Room for More*. As regards the second, she again comes down on the side of a Peircean view of truth, if but read against the other philosophers discussed in the first part of the book. What is missing is some larger discussion of actual points of contact that more completely bring the theoretical and the practical together.

Given that metaethics is concerned with the nature, meaning, and defense of moral judgments, Heney's project is a daunting one. The book might have been aided in its goals if each of the two main sections were supplemented by introductory comments which framed the materials to follow and went beyond the observations in the preface. She might also have further considered some of the qualifications that she makes in the preface and elsewhere. They highlight the limits of her project. At the same time, they raise questions about the range of her observations and the selectivity of her reading of the pragmatist tradition. There is a sense in which the book might have been better served if the focus was more exclusively on Peirce.

An alternative to each of the previous two suggestions might have been to extend the seventh chapter, to 'cash out,' in the Jamesian sense, the larger terrain upon which she urges

pragmatist interventions. Heney is right to suggest that pragmatism, regardless of its origins or variations, stresses ‘an emphasis on engagement with practices’ (xii). That her defense of that suggestion remains largely academic is both its strength and weakness. She offers a spirited defense of a tradition already well understood amongst its defenders, along the way contributing some novel readings of the same. But the work of animating that tradition, of making metaethics matter, in the lived experiences of those beyond academia remains in process.

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