

Nathan Crick

Democracy and Rhetoric: John Dewey on the Arts of Becoming.

Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press 2010.

248 pages

US\$49.95 (cloth ISBN 978-1-57003-876-1)

This new book by Nathan Crick explores the integral relationship between philosophical pragmatism and rhetoric. Unlike Robert Danisch's earlier work on the topic, *Pragmatism, Democracy, and the Necessity of Rhetoric* (University of South Carolina Press 2007), Crick's project focuses almost exclusively on the rhetorical resources found in John Dewey's pragmatist philosophy. To trace the connections between pragmatism and rhetoric, the first obstacle the author must overcome is the time-honored tradition whereby philosophers denigrate rhetoric or sophistry because it deals only with appearance and persuasion, not with truth and knowledge. The second is that Dewey wrote very little about rhetoric *per se*, even though he highlighted the importance of communication to democracy in *The Public and Its Problems* (1927) and praised eloquence in *Art as Experience* (1940). Still, sparking a conversation between scholars of rhetorical studies and philosophical pragmatism, particularly Dewey's version, is among the most significant goals of the work. 'In fact', Crick writes in the introduction, 'one of the core arguments of this book is that it is only by bringing rhetoric to Dewey, and by creating something new through transaction, that we can produce a novel perspective on the arts of rhetoric and of democracy' (10). The work is organized into three main sections: i) on rhetoric and politics, ii) on rhetoric and science and iii) on rhetoric and art.

In the first section, Crick examines those ethical and ontological commitments that any integration of discursive practice and democratic politics must take seriously. Crick contrasts two ontologies: i) the ontology of being, which is associated with Plato, and ii) the ontology of becoming advanced by Protagoras. Philosophers will likely be more familiar with two earlier exponents of these ontological commitments: Parmenides and Heraclitus, respectively. Within this framework, the author argues that what rhetoric and pragmatism share in common is their equal commitment to the ontology of becoming. Hence, all 'things' posited are events or practices in process, and as such neither constituted to fit our whims and fancies—as if anything goes (relativism)—nor given in advance as the 'real' or 'really real'—as if all truths are independent of human wants and desires (absolutism). Drawing on the work of Kenneth Burke, Crick insists that rhetoric is a form of symbolic action, that is, a process of converting linguistic symbols and non-linguistic signs into action, either reflecting selecting or deflecting cultural norms and values. Sites for evaluating the rightness or wrongness of rhetorical-political action include the 'self' or speaker, the 'other' or audience, the 'situation' or environment conditions (including opportunities and obstacles), and the 'message' or what the speaker says (22). Most rhetorical theory speaks to one or more of these sites. For instance, Lloyd Bitzer, borrowing directly from Dewey, theorized the 'rhetorical situation', or the whole set of problematic conditions in one's environment that give rise to discourse (26).

The second part of the book speaks to the issue of whether science is no more than a series of rhetorical episodes. The framing of this issue presumes, as many philosophers do, that such scientific practices resemble *mere* rhetoric, not a disciplined and well-reasoned logic of inquiry. Since, for Dewey, logic is ‘inquiry into inquiry’ and inquiry itself is the common-sense counterpart of scientific method, to ‘study the rhetoric of science is to explore the different rhetorical formations that compete with one another for institutional support and public authority in an ever-changing social environment’ (96). The two clearest formulations of inquiry’s generic steps can be found in Dewey’s *How We Think* (1910) and *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (1938). Sifting Dewey’s twin accounts through the filter of rhetorical theory, Crick identifies six stages of inquiry (as compared to Dewey’s five phases in *How We Think* and six slightly different steps in the *Logic*): i) ‘signaling’ or expressing some undesirable element that enters and disturbs the situation, ii) ‘defining’ or locating ‘the nature of the problem to be solved,’ iii) ‘proposing’ or trying to ‘posit what a solution to the problem might look like,’ iv) ‘reasoning’ or developing ‘the logical framework of an operative plan,’ v) ‘warranting’ or delivering ‘warranted assertions directed toward the resolution of a problematic situation’ (111-19), and vi) ‘transacting’ or applying the results of inquiry to the problem at hand and communicating those results in a politically uncertain environment.”

Although Crick does not discuss the broader field of environmental communication, he does illustrate how the expressive and constitutive roles of rhetorical inquiry operate in the global climate change debate. In doing so, he embeds both rhetoric’s ‘expressive function... a kind of “signaling” that calls attention to events and objects’ and its ‘constitutive function... promot[ing] hypotheses and experimental ideas for more formal consideration’ in a robust account of pragmatic rhetoric (110). In contrast, one of the pioneers of environmental communication, Robert Cox, distinguishes the constitutive and pragmatic roles, treating the latter as language’s purely instrumental ability to influence action (see *Environmental Communication and the Public Sphere*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications 2006, 12). Since Crick avoids reducing pragmatism to mere instrumentalism, his picture of eco-rhetoric as expressive and constitutive is more deeply pragmatic than Cox’s.

In the third section, Crick addresses the relationship between rhetoric and aesthetics. While debate has persisted since antiquity over whether rhetoric is a practical or instrumental art, praxis or poesis, Crick believes that it is worthwhile to rehabilitate its creative and poetic qualities. Both are neglected in widely held instrumentalist theories of rhetoric, which exalt the rhetor’s skill at convincing, flattering and manipulating her audience. According to Crick, Dewey’s pragmatism reveals rhetoric’s imaginative, artistic and ethical qualities: ‘Read through the lens of imagination, [Dewey’s account of] the moral function of art begins to take on a rhetorical character insofar as it opens possibilities that can be taken up experimentally by a culture as it progresses into the future’ (158). Aesthetic rhetoric, the author contends, is instrumental or kairotic (that is, meant to exploit an opportune moment to persuade) and substantive or eloquent (that is, aesthetically pleasing as a ‘formal unity of relations in a particular act’ of speech) (181).

Democracy and Rhetoric takes its reader on exciting cross-disciplinary trek,

crossing boundary lines between disciplines (philosophy and communications) as well as sub-fields (pragmatism and rhetoric). In so doing, Crick ably demonstrates how scholars of rhetorical studies and philosophical pragmatism might begin to engage in fruitful dialogue and collaboration. However, the book is not without its faults. Oddly enough, no reference is made to the groundbreaking collaborative work by Dewey and Arthur F. Bentley, *Knowing and the Known* (1949), in which the communicative concept of transaction—a concept Crick regularly invokes—receives careful attention. Also, little space is devoted to discussing the relevance of Dewey's vision of democracy to contemporary and historical debates about democratic theory, including exchanges between Dewey and his contemporaries (for a better example, see Melvin Rogers, 'Dewey and His Vision of Democracy', *Contemporary Pragmatism*, vol. 7, no. 1, June 2010, 69-91). So, it would perhaps be more accurate to title Crick's book *Pragmatism and Rhetoric*—or even better, *Dewey's Pragmatism and Rhetoric*. Still, the book goes a long way towards countering the philosophical prejudice, dating all the way back to Socrates' exchange with the sophist Gorgias, that philosophers should be wholly concerned with truth and knowledge, rather than with *mere rhetoric*. Still, Crick's Dewey does not entirely dismiss the philosopher's concern for truth and knowledge, for pragmatic rhetoric encompasses a rhetoric of scientific inquiry aimed at establishing 'warranted assertions', Dewey's term of art for outcomes of inquiry that are tentatively true and known. Notwithstanding these two minor complaints, *Democracy and Rhetoric* is an excellent contribution to the growing literature on the implications of John Dewey's pragmatism for rhetorical theory and practice.

Shane Ralston

Penn State University Hazleton