

## BOOK REVIEW

### Colin Koopman's *Pragmatism as Transition: Historicity and Hope in James, Dewey, and Rorty*

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Colin Koopman, *Pragmatism as Transition: Historicity and Hope in James, Dewey, and Rorty*. NY: Columbia University Press, 2009. 288 pp. ISBN 9231148747. \$47.50 (hbk.)

In *Pragmatism as Transition*, Colin Koopman argues for a vision of pragmatism that is at once old and new, seeking to overcome the divide between classic pragmatism and neo-pragmatism through a vision of pragmatism whose central feature is “transitionalism.” Transitionalism, for Koopman, is a thoroughly historicist outlook that is present in all forms of pragmatism, even if not as well thematized as it might have been. On his reading, then, “pragmatism’s most important philosophical contribution is that of redescribing the philosophical practices of thought, critique, and inquiry such that these practices take place in time and through history.”<sup>1</sup> Adopting such an historicist outlook on the development of pragmatism enables Koopman to navigate the fraught relationship between the pragmatisms of James, Dewey and Rorty, drawing on what is best in each while rejecting the old shibboleths of their respective defenders—“experience” and “language,” respectively.

Transitionalism, for Koopman, is characterized not only by attention to the historicity of our philosophical practices, but just as importantly, by a commitment to meliorist cultural critique. Thus, the temporality of Koopman’s vision of pragmatism is purposively multidirectional: the truly engaged cultural critic is not a utopian, but “stand[s] against some specific historical reality in the name of some specifiably better, and actually possible, historical reality.”<sup>2</sup> The philosophical outlook Koopman advocates is thus, in many ways, standard for pragmatists (though it does, importantly, explicitly exclude the work of Peirce from the realm of exemplary pragmatism, as Peirce was “simply not invested in the project of cultural critique,”<sup>3</sup> even if some of his followers have attempted to formulate moral and political theories on the basis of Peircean epistemology). And yet, the particulars of Koopman’s cashing-out of “pragmatism as transition” make for a reconstruction of pragmatism that many pragmatists, particularly Deweyans, will find surprising and challenging.

Koopman begins pointing to transitionalist themes in the history of pragmatism in chapter 2, but the core of the argument—and the most impressive argument of the book—is in chapter 3, where Koopman argues for what he calls a “third wave

of pragmatism<sup>54</sup> that follows on the first wave of classicopragmatism (exemplified by James and Dewey's emphasis on experience) and the second wave of neo-pragmatism (exemplified by Rorty's emphasis on language) in such a way that it "cumulatively washes in upon the other two waves rather than disaccumulatively draining them away."<sup>55</sup> This wave metaphor is important, for readers should not make the mistake of thinking that Koopman comes only to initiate hand-holding and reconciliation: his transitionalist pragmatism, while emerging from waters clearly shared by James, Dewey and Rorty, comes crashing in upon all three in this chapter, and Koopman argues forcefully that we contemporary pragmatists ought to be swept along, too.

The crux of Koopman's argument for transitionalism is epistemological: despite their varying emphases, the classicopragmatists and the neo-pragmatists are ultimately united by the inadequacy of their attempts to circumvent the problems of modern, foundationalist, representationalist epistemology, which Sellars famously described as "givenism."<sup>56</sup> Though classical pragmatists were eager to distance themselves from the modernist epistemological project, Koopman argues that appeals to the immediacy of experience show up repeatedly in the work of Dewey and James (and in their readers) in ways that appear to be "dangerously near to foundationalism."<sup>57</sup> The issue, for Koopman, is not merely that Dewey (for example) posited the existence of a raw, immediate, given experience, but that he "expended enormous energy precisely specifying the havings of primary experience in his epistemology and ethics,"<sup>58</sup> which suggests that they are carrying significant epistemic weight, and indeed, that they function as covert foundations. Rorty and Brandom, of course, attempt to avoid the pitfalls of foundationalism by fully embracing the linguistic turn. This strategy, while wildly divergent from classicopragmatism and partially on target (insofar as it takes seriously the mediation of experience), serves pragmatism no better in Koopman's view. For, in reducing knowledge to instances of linguistic justification, Rorty and Brandom commit themselves to an impoverished notion of knowledge that is unable to account for the practical knowledge of "skills, performances, and technologies" that is not reducible to language or propositional content.<sup>9</sup> Thus, although classical pragmatists were right to suggest that we must begin our inquiries and practices of cultural critique with the experiences in which we find ourselves, and neo-pragmatists were right to rejoin that those experiences, as mediated, could not serve as foundational grounds of inquiry, a thoroughly historicist, transitionalist pragmatism must not take either of these approaches on entirely.

Instead, Koopman insists that we take a transitionalist view, in which knowledge is a "*relation . . . between prior practical projections (for example, beliefs, skills) and the future practical eventualities at which they aim (for example, the objects of beliefs, the aims of skillful action)*"<sup>10</sup> that can be analyzed in a variety of ways, but which is always about "the process of getting from here to there"<sup>11</sup>—where "here" is always itself a product of an historical process.

This revisioning of knowledge (in chapter 4) is the first of three chapters in which Koopman offers an affirmative account of the particulars of his vision of pragmatism. These three chapters deal, respectively, with knowledge, ethics, and politics, and aim to explain the ways in which transitionalist pragmatism cashes out in each of these philosophical areas. Interestingly, Koopman chooses to articulate his accounts of knowledge, ethics, and politics almost entirely meta-theoretically, and in relation to wider debates in philosophy beyond pragmatism. The meta-theoretical character of the book is intentional, and Koopman declares these intentions as early as the Introduction, acknowledging the irony of a book that celebrates cultural criticism despite not engaging in it.<sup>12</sup> Such sustained attention to methodology might be surprising to some pragmatists, but it is a reasonable philosophical choice, particularly given Koopman's interest in articulating an approach to pragmatic inquiry that distinguishes itself from—even while drawing on—James, Dewey and Rorty.

And yet, it seems to me that Koopman's meta-theoretical or methodological points might have been strengthened through sustained attention to *examples* of transitionalist cultural critique, even if he did not construct such critiques himself. In his chapter on knowledge, for example, Koopman suggests that his transitionalism is closest to James's approach to knowledge, for he agrees that "if one experience satisfactorily leads us to another, then that satisfactory relation . . . sufficiently explains knowledge,"<sup>13</sup> despite the fact that "James's epistemology was subject to all of the deficits and defects rehearsed"<sup>14</sup> in Koopman's third chapter. The upshot of this tension is, simply, that "we should play up . . . emphatic invocations of temporality and historicity featured in the epistemology of [James, Dewey] and other pragmatists so as to overcome some of the persisting deficits that continue to plague pragmatism."<sup>15</sup> Such an emphasis on historicity is one to which I suspect many pragmatists would be amenable, so it would be helpful to hear more from Koopman about what "play[ing] up" temporality and historicity would entail in a concrete example, and how, if at all, it is different from the epistemological approach taken by Dewey, Rorty, or James himself. It is one thing, in other words, to talk about emphasizing the historical character of knowledge; it is another to *show* that this emphasis is the sort of difference that makes a difference.

Similarly, in his fifth chapter on ethics, although Koopman suggests that there is a problem with a Deweyan "experience-centric"<sup>16</sup> approach to pragmatic ethics, the practical implications of his own account could be further developed. Koopman turns here to James, following him in suggesting that moral action is primarily about the "effort of attention" that aims at "continuity of growth"<sup>17</sup>—what pragmatists will recognize as James's "strenuous mood," in which "we start from where we are and develop the resources within our situation . . . to improve it."<sup>18</sup> Koopman's emphasis is again on temporal development, and his aim in this particular context is to provide a pragmatic, transitionalist re-reading of Cavell's perfectionist ethics. Still, questions remain about what is to be gained from a specifically Jamesian ethic over (say) a Deweyan or Rortyan one, or what such "efforts of attention" might re-

quire in practice as distinct from an “experience-centric” ethic. The difficulty, here as in the knowledge chapter, is that because the conditions for the possibility of knowledge, or of ethical action, cannot be determined in advance—as Koopman and other pragmatists would agree—attempts to describe the practices involved in the production or attainment of knowledge or moral action in general, rather than specific instances of them, will inevitably be problematic.

Koopman’s does contrast his normative claims with others, though this distinction focuses less on other forms of pragmatism than on wider debates within ethical and political philosophy. Koopman positions his pragmatic perfectionist ethics, for example, as a third alternative to utilitarianism and deontology more attuned to modern problems than the typical third alternative of the return to ancient virtue ethics.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, although Koopman’s sixth chapter on politics in the end offers an interesting argument for rethinking democracy in a way that draws on and diverges from both contemporary deliberative democrats and Dewey’s democracy-as-experience, much of the chapter is taken up with a description of pragmatism’s intervention into contemporary political philosophy more broadly construed. His ultimate suggestion, that viewing democracy “as a transitional practice” will enable us “to refine, sharpen, and deploy the valuable tools of democratic deliberation and democratic experience already featured in existing works of pragmatist political philosophy”<sup>20</sup> is an exciting and provocative one, as is his urging of pragmatists to move beyond the Deweyan romanticization of the local community, which he rightly points out is unable to grapple with the “plurality of polities”<sup>21</sup> of contemporary globalization and the urban metropolis. These ethical and political claims are worth further unpacking, perhaps using concrete examples of what viewing democracy as a transitional practice entails.

Koopman offers a more concrete suggestion about what steps transitionalist pragmatism would require in the final chapter, where he argues that a historicist approach to cultural critique would benefit from incorporating the genealogical method of Foucault. Foucault’s work is particularly useful for, as Koopman puts it, helping us to “be on the lookout for ways in which our own best practices are already rife with problems that we hardly suspect.”<sup>22</sup> Past pragmatisms, for Koopman, have not had good mechanisms in place to make us aware of our own limitations. Dewey, for example, “was simply too confident that ‘problems will abundantly present themselves.’”<sup>23</sup> While pragmatists like Dewey tend to be very good at thinking about ways to seek out improvements to our current situations, Foucaultian genealogy—possibly in addition to critical philosophies like feminism, critical race theory and queer theory<sup>24</sup>—are necessary additions, if we are to adequately conceptualize the problems of those current situations, particularly when they are non-transparent to us. Thus, Koopman concludes, transitionalist pragmatism requires genealogy as a diagnostic tool,<sup>25</sup> as the first step in a robust meliorism that truly seeks to help us move from “here” to “there.”

This final point is very well made, and it adds an important detail to Koopman's picture of pragmatism as transition. Combining this insight on the role of genealogy and critical philosophy with his chapters on knowledge, ethics and politics raises important questions for the future of transitionalist pragmatism. How, for example, might attending to feminist insights change the way we conceive the "we" of the deliberative democratic community, or what it means for a problematic situation to be improved? Does doing adequately pragmatist (which is to say, transitionalist) work require that we also be well versed in feminism, genealogy, queer theory, Marxism, or critical philosophy of race? These are questions that hover in the background for Koopman in the final chapter; it will be exciting to see how he takes them up in new work.

## NOTES

1. Colin Koopman, *Pragmatism as Transition: Historicity and Hope in James, Dewey, and Rorty* (NY: Columbia University Press, 2009), 2.
2. *Ibid.*, 40.
3. *Ibid.*, 41.
4. *Ibid.*, 72.
5. *Ibid.*, 72–73.
6. *Ibid.*, 76.
7. *Ibid.*, 85.
8. *Ibid.*, 79.
9. *Ibid.*, 99.
10. *Ibid.*, 109 (*italics in original*).
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, 35.
13. *Ibid.*, 132.
14. *Ibid.*, 133.
15. *Ibid.*, 134.
16. *Ibid.*, 150.
17. *Ibid.*, 151.
18. *Ibid.*, 152.
19. *Ibid.*, 143.
20. *Ibid.*, 193.
21. *Ibid.*, 190.
22. *Ibid.*, 211.
23. *Ibid.*, 200.
24. *Ibid.*, 200, 206.
25. *Ibid.*, 230.

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