

## BOOK REVIEW

### John McGowan's *Pragmatist Politics*

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John McGowan, *Pragmatist Politics: Making the Case for Liberal Democracy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012. 231 + xxxii pp. ISBN 978-0-8166-7904-1. \$22.50 (pbk).

Given how much the tradition owes to Dewey's pragmatic reconstruction of philosophy, that more is not written of a political bent by those working under the sign of pragmatism is to me always surprising. John McGowan's *Pragmatist Politics* is a shining exception. The book's aim is "to articulate and practice a liberal democratic ethos inspired primarily by the American pragmatist tradition."<sup>1</sup> Two compelling opening chapters lay out McGowan's melioristic conception of pragmatism as a philosophy of possibility animated by a belief in progress, drawing most heavily from James and Dewey but ranging well beyond them, both within the pragmatist tradition and outside it. Three subsequent chapters articulate "a vision of a possible liberal democracy" in the spirit of this philosophy of possibility and progress, devoted, respectively, to the liberal democratic ethos itself, human rights, and an alternative vision of that ethos as "secular comedy." Most prominent in this vision is a Deweyan conception of democracy as "a moral idea" and a "way of life."<sup>2</sup>

For McGowan, pragmatism is, at bottom, a philosophy of action and possibility. And it is by "reconfiguring what can be meant by 'the possible'"<sup>3</sup> that his pragmatist politics generates its transformative, melioristic energy. When tied to a "liberal democratic ethos," cashed out primarily in Deweyan terms that emphasize lived relations and communicative associations, McGowan's "liberal democratic pragmatics" is a countervailing force in the face of four existing threats that it is well-placed to oppose: the expanding income and wealth inequality; the continued growth of American imperialism; ever-present nativist fears and antipathy toward non-English speaking immigrants; and the ill effects of globalization and changing technologies. In the face of these and other challenges to the democratic ethos, pragmatists, in McGowan's view, "strive to close the gap between the few and the demos."<sup>4</sup>

McGowan's is a capacious pragmatism that draws a common-sense realism from Peirce, James, and Dewey, at the same time that it learns from Rorty, Putnam, and Cavell. Wittgenstein, Arendt, Nussbaum, and Latour ("the most important contemporary descendant of the pragmatists") occupy prominent places as well. Those looking for ammunition to wage battle in the various internecine

wars among classical, paleo-, neo-, and new pragmatists, thankfully, will find none here. “Nothing significant,” he tells us, “hinges on whether what I say deserves the name ‘pragmatist’ or not.”<sup>5</sup> Yet it is nonetheless clear that pragmatist philosophy is at the center of democratic action for McGowan. Most interesting is McGowan’s use of Kenneth Burke, a figure—at least the pre-1940 Burke—whom he has argued over the last decade is best understood as a pragmatist. Indeed, there is much in Burke’s account that echoes and enriches Peirce’s semiotics, Dewey’s transactionalism, James’s emphasis on relations, and Mead’s account of interpretive activity. Yet Burke also offers McGowan a framework for bringing these disparate elements together in novel and productive ways—for instance, how Burke’s understanding of literature as providing “equipments for living” suggests ways to bridge language and experience.

Among the signal contributions of this book is the explicit, extended attention to a “qualified ‘reconstruction’ of the idea of the progress” that forms the second chapter. Highlighting the melioristic commitments behind the progressivism of James, Dewey, and Addams, as well as the philosophical orientation informed by “the positivist faith in science’s ability to improve human life” shared by Peirce, James, and Dewey, McGowan sees a reconstruction of progress as essential to pragmatism’s ability to spirit us through current doldrums of “leftist quietism” by crafting animating visions of an alternative future.<sup>6</sup> Importantly, this reconstruction entails attending to the ways in which a standard of progress has justified colonial and imperial projects of the past by offering “a metric to determine which lives are ‘more precious’ than others.”<sup>7</sup> McGowan usefully reminds us that James and Dewey already were enacting a reconstruction of the 19<sup>th</sup> century notion of progress they inherited, with its Hegelian ontological guarantees. James and Dewey, on his view, “refuse to believe progress is necessary or that human action is necessarily futile,” but also “refuse to condemn or embrace modernity tout court.”<sup>8</sup> For both, revision is always possible. This chapter draws on and illuminates James and Dewey on progress in familiar and fresh ways, intertwining it with their commitments to pluralism. While perhaps not an issue for all readers, somewhat surprising is the absence of attention to moral progress we find in Rorty, a figure on whom McGowan elsewhere in the book is a reliable, non-polemical interpreter.

Paramount in McGowan’s pragmatist ethics and politics is the notion of “human responsiveness to others and to situations.”<sup>9</sup> This conception of morality as responsiveness, derived primarily from James and Dewey, translates for McGowan into making “to what and to whom should I be responsible?” the most fundamental question of ethics.<sup>10</sup> The liberal democratic ethos that McGowan expounds eloquently and powerfully in Chapter 3 is defined by both our collective, cooperative responsibility to the world we inhabit and seek to create, and our individual responsiveness to the concrete others with whom we share this world—a social morality that nicely integrates Deweyan communication and deliberation with

James's attention to the "cries of the wounded." This "liberal democratic pragmatics" promises not a "formula for reaching agreement on moral or political issues," but a "modus vivendi for coexisting peacefully with disagreements."<sup>11</sup>

In its understated way, *Pragmatist Politics* offers one of the more developed statements of a pragmatist political theory that I have seen in some time, providing not just a rehash of Deweyan and Rortyan theoretical oppositions but a genuine, constructive forging ahead. Chapter 4's account of a pragmatist conception of rights, which McGowan defines relationally as "the *terms* of our relationships with others and with the ways those terms are produced, articulated, and enforced,"<sup>12</sup> is a case in point. Drawing on Dewey and Rorty, though refreshingly not in a weighty, explicit way that risks being dragged down by polemical baggage, as well as Hannah Arendt and Michael Ignatieff, whom he suggests gives us "the most convincing arguments for a pragmatist approach to rights,"<sup>13</sup> McGowan evinces a conception of rights as "claims" that "depend on an intersubjective recognition of their validity if those claims are to be satisfied, either legally or more informally."<sup>14</sup> Informed by Deweyan insights regarding our social, moral, and historical situatedness, McGowan understands rights dynamically, as arising in actual interactions and negotiating actual relationships, attentive to both individuals and groups. Here rights are "practices" created as "solutions to problems that arise in human interactions."<sup>15</sup> On this account, rights are not only performative but "educative," in Dewey's sense: "the struggles embodied in human rights involve an effort to expand the relevant senses of membership beyond citizenship to every human being, *and* the continual effort to improve the ways that people treat their neighbors."<sup>16</sup> McGowan's focus is "not on what rights are, but on what they can *do*."<sup>17</sup>

The closing chapter, "Liberal Democracy as Secular Comedy," is the book's most thought-provoking and ambitious. McGowan upends the familiar knock on pragmatism for its failure to plumb the tragic depths of human existence by presenting comedy as the quintessential pragmatist genre—and attitude. If tragedy reveals the way things really are, as Nietzsche suggests, then comedy imparts possibility. Comedy is "not metaphysical, but social"; it deals with selves in relation to each other rather than isolated individuals, moves from situations where fulfillment is blocked to its realization, celebrates change, and embraces the ordinary. Here too McGowan's orientation is recognizably Deweyan, though he also takes cues from Bakhtin, Burke, and Cavell. Because the comic attitude aims to produce a "'love of the world' of the sort Hannah Arendt championed,"<sup>18</sup> where love of the world entails "assuming responsibility for it," it meshes well with the liberal democratic ethos of responsiveness that forms the book's center of gravity. The comic attitude and vision are secular because our fate is always in the making: "love and justice are only to be won by our own efforts; there are no gods to hinder or aid us in that effort,"<sup>19</sup> including in the face of mortality and

death, where they repudiate sacrifice, as he illustrates through a supple reading of Iris Murdoch's *Bruno's Dream*. Conspicuously absent here is any mention of the tragicomic orientation of Cornel West. Given McGowan's sharp bifurcation of tragedy and comedy, an engagement with West's perspective—specifically, his view of comedy as not just about possibility but a way of acknowledging the constraints on our freedom and “the incongruity between those high aspirations and where one actually ends up”<sup>20</sup>—would have been a valuable contribution to this neglected strand of the pragmatist tradition.

The final chapter is also the most risky. Its music is rehearsed in a different key than the earlier philosophical arguments. For some readers it may veer too far from the score, striking chords, as it does, with Dante, Shakespeare, Austen, Auden, and sounding popular culture references to Van Morrison and to films from *It's a Wonderful Life* to *My Best Friend's Wedding* to *Witness*. In these moments, depending on one's perspective, McGowan is either in a zone, riffing and free-wheeling in an engaged pragmatist spirit, or the wheels have come off. For this reader, at least, it plays, and plays resplendently. The turn to secular comedy represents for McGowan a way to make political theory more pragmatist by “introducing issues of sensibility, desire, and fellow feeling—and crucially, the on-the-ground living out of our relations to others.”<sup>21</sup> He explains that bringing secular comedy into a discussion of liberal democracy “reconnects politics with desire in a way that more sober political theory does not manage.”<sup>22</sup>

Given the book's more pressing concerns, these moves also are an impassioned response to his background diagnosis of contemporary American society and democracy and his sense that the liberal democratic ethos must find “an idea that can inspire political action and an incentive for individuals to join in the effort to achieve it.”<sup>23</sup> That said, the book's salutary political bent may bend too far in the jeremiad we get in the book's last dozen or so pages against the decline of public morality, overpaid and unscrupulous CEOs, the growth of economic inequality in the US, FEMA's deficiencies in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, and the general sully of politics as “our collective creation of the world we want to inhabit together”<sup>24</sup>—certainly issues, among many, that deserve more attention from pragmatists. At the same time, for all the passion evident in these pages, more analysis and concrete proposals may have served the book's overall aims better.

Nonetheless, this book has much to offer not only Deweyans, but pragmatists of all stripes. Given his focus on meliorism and transformative action, McGowan wisely seeks to steer clear of the “philosophical disputes that swirl around pragmatism,” aspiring to “metaphysical parsimony” in his account.<sup>25</sup> Still, he is attuned to the inevitable reminder from “philosophical police” that even his pared-down embrace of contingency and possibility over necessity constitutes a metaphysical position. Quite perceptively, he acknowledges his commitments and the baggage they

bring, while insisting that pragmatism ought to resist, in a nice turn of phrase, the “transcendental blackmail” of traditional philosophical arguments that amounts to, “I am aiming to get you to accept that metaphysical vision in order to then argue that it has (inevitable, or at least reasonable) consequences for how you should behave”<sup>26</sup>—a move that he observes both Dewey and Rorty sought to undermine in their critiques of necessity. In McGowan’s view, the productive “meta” question for pragmatists is, “What justifies the movement from a belief or a moral commitment to a new belief or commitment?”<sup>27</sup>

Among the many benefits of McGowan’s not pausing to parse the intramural debates among contemporary pragmatists is being able to push beyond these entanglements to offer a meaningful and reasonable account with the potential to move the tradition forward. A good example is his brief engagement with Robert Brandom, which yields “a dynamic understanding of everything involved in the articulation of reasons” that assimilates Brandom’s “rationalist” dimension of the conferral of conceptual content, Dewey’s social and cultural contextualism, James’s relationality, and Rorty’s answerability to one’s peers, yet without explicitly advertising it as such and setting off the alarms of any “philosophical police.” Contextualizing the game of giving and asking for reasons such that one’s interlocutors are “real people . . . rooted in a place and a time” prompts two levels of responsiveness to which pragmatists should attend: the first order question of “What reasons—and how convincing are they—does this person articulate as underwriting her actions, beliefs, recommendations, and (ultimately) ways of being in the world?”; and the second order questions, “To what specific others does this person feel answerable? Whom does she think she should—even must—address? To whom is she responsible?”<sup>28</sup> With little fanfare, McGowan effectively integrates Brandom’s conception of deontic scorekeeping with Rorty’s critique of its abstraction from particular audiences, and wraps it all in gleaming Deweyan and Jamesian dress.<sup>29</sup> An understanding of the articulation of reasons which pulls the self out into relation with concrete others is an important contribution that I hope others will take up.

In sum, *Pragmatist Politics* not only is a rich statement of what pragmatism is; its pages thoughtfully depict what pragmatism can become. “Liberal democracy,” McGowan tells us, “has a story to tell.”<sup>30</sup> This book seeks to inspire pragmatists to start telling it, in ways that only they can.

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## NOTES

1. John McGowan, *Pragmatist Politics: Making the Case for Liberal Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), xi.
2. *Ibid.*, 79.
3. *Ibid.*, xi.
4. *Ibid.*, xxxi.
5. *Ibid.*, xvii.
6. *Ibid.*, 49–50.
7. *Ibid.*, 53.
8. *Ibid.*, 62.
9. *Ibid.*, xviii.
10. *Ibid.*, xx.
11. *Ibid.*, 97.
12. *Ibid.*, 119.
13. *Ibid.*, 125.
14. *Ibid.*, 120.
15. *Ibid.*, 125.
16. *Ibid.*, 131.
17. *Ibid.*, 132.
18. *Ibid.*, 156.
19. *Ibid.*, 159.
20. Cornel West, *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 557.
21. John McGowan, *Pragmatist Politics: Making the Case for Liberal Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 168.
22. *Ibid.*, 166.
23. *Ibid.*, 95.
24. *Ibid.*, 173.
25. *Ibid.*, 31.
26. *Ibid.*, 32.
27. *Ibid.*, 39.
28. *Ibid.*, 105.
29. For their respective views, see the exchange between Rorty and Brandom in Robert B. Brandom (ed.), *Rorty and His Critics* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000).
30. *Ibid.*, 184.

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