

BOOK REVIEW

MEMORIES AND PORTRAITS

Justin Bell

H. G. Callaway, *Memories and Portraits: Explorations in American Thought*. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2010. 223 + xxi pp. ISBN 978-1-4438-2427-9. \$67.99 (hbk).

In *Memories and Portraits*, H. G. Callaway presents us with the memoir of a philosopher. I will, as readers of this review will hardly find surprising, be reviewing this book with two foci. First, I will address the merits of the work itself and, second, with an eye toward our shared interests in John Dewey, other pragmatists, and how the work incorporates or neglects pragmatism's contributions to the themes Callaway discusses. However, in many ways this second task is auxiliary. Callaway does not present us with a systematic text in philosophy, but rather a text that is a memoir *about* the author as much as it is about a philosopher, specifically, how the philosopher's experiences have demonstrated the importance of location, pluralism, and identity to the author. Callaway tells us his story, that of an academic from Philadelphia who finds himself working in Africa, Europe, and the United States. He punctuates his stories, as many philosophers do, with digressions and philosophical points. Those looking for a systematic argument will likely be disappointed—although Callaway's intention does not appear to be either systematic or argumentative. Rather, Callaway presents a readable memoir of an interesting life. Through his story, we can see how one individual develops as a thinker and how his development shows us something about, to borrow the final chapter's title, locality and natural grace. Those who are wonderstruck by the stories of philosophy will be interested in this work. While Callaway's narrative style is engaging, those interested in straightforward argumentation will not care for it. This book requires some personal and emotional reflection. I found myself in an imagined conversation between reader and writer, which allowed me to grasp Callaway's project. Much like listening to a conversation with a scholar, the reader is treated to snippets and comments that show a depth of philosophic insight and intellectual history without the need for full argumentation at all times. But, again, this work is not about arguments. Instead, it is about Callaway's story.

Callaway, intriguingly, writes as an American philosopher who comes to understand his own experiences in light of his travels abroad. He frames the work by reference to William James's distinction between the foreignness of habits of wariness and the intimacy of trust (xiii). Importantly, he understands his time in

foreign lands to be important for how he developed his own awareness of the distinctiveness of American philosophy (xii). On the first page of chapter 1, James is referenced again and we are asked to contemplate the intimacy of knowing how to move around a familiar city. At the end of the work, in a telling sign of Callaway's pluralism, James is quoted approvingly: "the notion of the 'one' breeds foreignness and that of the 'many' intimacy" (201). Here Callaway reflects on how plurality becomes an intimate reminder of his connection to place and how unity connotes what is alien and separate.

Callaway begins his story in Philadelphia, the city where he feels most familiar—where he has an intimate connection. The first four chapters tell us about his city and his own story growing up there. Though we are being told a story, I believe that Callaway wants us to keep something other than the narrative in mind. It is telling that even in the beginning of his Philadelphia story, Callaway discusses the importance, by way of Santayana, of imagination for "active engagement with life and the environment" (10). We are left with an open question about engagement and imagination—one that readers are directed to think about while reading the text. The practical imagination has a role to play and

has its own moral and social conditions. Practical cooperation and joint enterprise do not often arise in an archaic moral vacuum. They do not exist everywhere. What philosophy will sustain the practical imagination and yet sustain itself and thus the general social and institutional conditions within which the practical imagination is free to operate? There must be a law of freedom. (ibid.)

This is Callaway's invitation to start thinking about pluralism in a diverse society in a way that parallels his own story of growing up in Philadelphia.

Callaway continues his story with an account of his time at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria. Callaway's appointment in Ibadan afforded him not only the opportunity to spend summers traveling in Europe but also an intimate view of life in different cultures. From here, Callaway eventually moves to Germany. Callaway's anecdotes about his travels are interesting and build a context for the exploration of locality.

In the final chapter, "Locality and Natural Grace," Callaway gives us more philosophic reflection. He argues for an understanding of naturalized grace and of the importance of location for a pluralist. These themes are of possible interest to pragmatists. Rejecting the traditional idea of grace—that God absolves the sinful who have not otherwise earned election—Callaway preserves the idea that benefit and hardship are often beyond the control of individuals. Callaway holds that his *naturalized* grace

does involve the idea of receiving a benefit—from sources in nature and human society which are beyond our knowledge or control. But, while

agreeing that grace is not earned, I am arguing with or resisting the idea that grace is bestowed or given arbitrarily. (192)

Callaway believes the concept of naturalized grace gives us an ability to move beyond responsibility for what we cannot do (192). Instead, we depend “upon powers and forces [that] may be fairly thought of in terms of what may come to the aid of our contributions,” but do not depend wholly on anything an individual has created by herself (195). Thus, Callaway suggests that we ought to acknowledge pluralism in society and move toward persuading others as opposed to controlling or dominating them. Callaway ends the final chapter by reflecting on the significance of locality. Action in one’s location—and Callaway’s intimate connection with Philadelphia illustrates this—involves specific potencies, not all of which are under his control. Callaway holds, citing Royce, that loyalty to the location one finds oneself in calls for a localized consciousness. Given natural grace, this opens the way for *meliorative* activity. This local loyalty allows for persuasion but avoids the single-mindedness of centralized control. I believe this is the philosophic payoff of Callaway’s examination of the various localities he explored in his own life.

While Callaway’s book does not offer a systematic argument, I do have a criticism to offer on his use of Dewey. In the introduction, Callaway interprets Dewey as an optimist who did not fully apprehend the negative side of possibilities in precarious situations (xix). Dewey, on my interpretation at least, is no optimist but rather a meliorist. He identifies ways to bring intelligence to bear on various situations in order to improve the interaction of organism and environment. This does not imply that things *will* always get better, no matter what the activity or technological development, only that there is a possibility that human activity will bring about better situations. Thus, when Callaway reduces Dewey’s view of development to optimism that rapid change itself is improvement, he makes a critical error (xix). This interpretation ignores the problems associated with liberalism, individualism, and optimism, each of which Dewey carefully criticizes in works like *Individualism: Old and New*, *Liberalism and Social Action*, and *Freedom and Culture*. For example, Dewey, on Callaway’s reading, holds “that ‘mental change’ and ‘material and economic changes’ naturally complement each other in such a way as to produce something positive” (xx). This view does not bear out in Dewey’s commitment to melioration in the face of possible tragedy. Further, Callaway will run afoul of many Deweyans in his call to apply the rigor of contemporary naturalism and analytic philosophy to the pragmatist tradition (xix). What is odd about Dewey’s use in the introduction is how it stands in contradiction to what Callaway says about Dewey’s works in the final chapter, “Locality and Natural Grace.” Citing Dewey’s concept of natural piety in *A Common Faith*, this second account of Dewey’s position supports Callaway’s idea of naturalized grace. Callaway goes so far as to claim that Dewey recognizes that there are “powers beyond our understanding and control, since the plans and activities of our fellow human beings,

and developments or changes in nature, are always beyond our complete control” (195). The passage is a fine example of meliorism—whereby intelligence can make lives better but without guarantee. The reader is left wondering, though, which Dewey Callaway agrees with. This problem is, I admit, a minor squabble given the consistency of themes throughout the memoir.

While sustained argumentation is not the purpose of a text like this, I found myself wanting more philosophic reflection in the final chapter. Callaway leaves us with a sketch of his idea of naturalized grace that I would like to see worked out more fully. The idea is one that deserves more time and care, as it is an interesting one. Yet, the book has an interesting thematic idea—building intimacy through becoming familiar with a place—and is a pleasant read.

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