

RICHARD J. BERNSTEIN AND THE PRAGMATIST
TURN IN CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY:
REKINDLING PRAGMATISM'S FIRE

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Judith M. Green, ed., *Richard J. Bernstein and the Pragmatist Turn in Contemporary Philosophy: Rekindling Pragmatism's Fire*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. x+234 pp. ISBN 978-1-137-35269-9. \$95.00 (hardcover).

As the title of the book indicates, Bernstein's 2010 work *The Pragmatic Turn* is the common ground for this collection of twelve essays, with each contributor taking a theme from Bernstein's volume and using it as a foundation to raise further issues concerning pragmatism after the "pragmatic turn." Many essays also offer constructive criticism of Bernstein's thought and positions, often suggesting possible alternatives. In a style reminiscent of the long-running Library of Living Philosophers series, Bernstein provides a short response to each essay, clarifying his thought in light of the points raised by the contributors. For those interested in Dewey specifically, rather than pragmatism more broadly, there are several chapters dealing with Deweyan democracy.

In her introduction, Judith M. Green sets out the goals of the book and offers a concise summary of each of the essays. As she notes, *The Pragmatic Turn* is essentially Bernstein calling on a new generation of philosophers to take up the classical pragmatists and their ideas, rather than sliding back into the Cartesianism the pragmatists strove to avoid. As such, *Rekindling Pragmatism's Fire* is offered as "a response by younger pragmatists to Bernstein's call" (4). Green highlights the intergenerational and conversational tone of the book, suggesting that this type of interaction offers the ideal form for pragmatic philosophy (and indeed, all philosophy) to be enacted and advanced. If this intergenerational call-and-response is the primary aim of the book, we should not forget that the book also endeavors "to create a reader's companion to *The Pragmatic Turn*" on the one hand, and also to "serve as a stimulating introduction to pragmatism for educated readers" (5). These three aims function together as the heart of the book, and it is the success or failure of these aims that will serve as the criteria upon which I will evaluate the book at the end of this review.

Following Green's introduction, Bernstein has written a five-page introduction of his own, entitled "Prelude to a Critical Conversation with Fellow Pragmatists."

In the prelude, Bernstein makes three general comments. The first has to do with the difficulty of finding a common ground upon which all the various thinkers labeled as “pragmatists” might stand. Bernstein finds that while there are similarities between the classical pragmatists, a pluralistic pragmatist approach allows for differing opinions on what “counts” as pragmatism, given sufficient reasoning.

In Bernstein’s second comment, he laments the occasionally hostile relationship between pragmatist and “analytic” philosophers, taking care to distinguish between “analytic ideology” and the good work many linguistic thinkers actually perform, and he goes so far as to call the “linguistic turn” a deeply misleading myth.

Bernstein’s third and final note in the prologue is apologetic. He notes that, while he asserts that the pragmatic turn cuts across both American (North and Latin American) and Continental philosophy, he failed to fully develop the Continental and Latin American import of the movement in *The Pragmatic Turn*, despite gestures in that direction.

The main content of the book begins with a first essay entitled “Hegel and the Classical Pragmatists: Prolegomenon to a Future Discussion,” by Michael J. Baur. As a Hegel scholar, Baur seeks to emphasize the influence that Hegel had on the early pragmatists, especially Peirce, James, and Dewey, while also doing an admirable job describing the pragmatists’ critiques of Hegel. Bernstein agrees that the relationship between Hegel and the pragmatists was rich (albeit complicated); Bernstein also points to Josiah Royce as another figure whose influence needs to be better accounted for.

In “The Inferences That Never Were: Peirce, Perception, and Bernstein’s *The Pragmatic Turn*,” Richard Kenneth Atkins discusses Peirce’s theory of perception, and seeks to show that Peirce’s system ultimately depends on a type of “given” perception, and thus runs up against Sellars’s “The Myth of the Given.” In response, Bernstein sees Peirce as having *anticipated* Sellars’s (and others) challenges to the given, rather than running afoul of those challenges.

The third essay is “Peirce’s Theory of Truth and Fallibilism,” by Hugh McDonald. McDonald challenges Bernstein for advocating fallibilism, which McDonald seeks to demonstrate ultimately leads to a logical paradox. In Bernstein’s response, he notes that McDonald seems to have a narrower understanding of the term fallibilism than Bernstein himself, who sees it as “a set of virtues and attitudes” (76) rather than an epistemological key.

In “Bernstein’s Deployment of Jamesian Democratic Pluralism: The Pragmatic Turn and the Future of Philosophy,” Judith Green considers James a “democratic pluralist,” and compares Bernstein’s own thinking with this democratic pluralist tradition that she associates with James. Bernstein is honored by Green’s comparison, but he admits that he finds James’s theory of “pure experience” to be too vague.

The fifth essay is “The Turn *within* the Pragmatic Turn: Recovering Bernstein’s Democratic Dewey,” by Shane J. Ralston. Ralston seeks to situate Dewey

within a modern landscape of democratic theory, ultimately describing Dewey as a proponent of “developmental democracy.” Bernstein appreciates Ralston’s work, but he is cautious about using labels of this type to describe Dewey’s thinking, and instead urges that we take what is useful in each of these approaches without worrying about where Dewey best belongs.

In the sixth essay, “Dewey as a Radical Democrat and a Liberal Democrat: Considerations of Bernstein on Dewey,” Colin Koopman argues that Dewey should be read as a liberal democrat rather than a communitarian. Bernstein rejects Koopman’s definitions of liberal and communitarian, as well as the attempt to oppose the two concepts in the first place.

The seventh essay is “Democratic Community Participation: Bernstein between Dewey and an Achieved Deeply Democratic Future,” by David W. Woods. As a sociologist and urban planner, Woods shows how we might use Dewey and George Herbert Mead as guides for how to build communities and spaces that promote a democratic public. Bernstein is worried that Woods might have failed to see some of the deep-rooted challenges that stand in the way of such progress.

The eighth essay is “Ideals after the ‘Pragmatic Turn,’” by S. Joshua Thomas. Thomas points to the important role “ideals” have in the thinking of the classical pragmatists, yet he notes that they failed to come to any real consensus on the issue. Thomas pushes Bernstein to be clearer on his conception of ideals, with the hope that Bernstein might push back on the way Putnam, Habermas, and others have appropriated the classical pragmatists on the concept of ideals. Bernstein suggests that ideals can only be developed out of specific situations, and that we need to turn to each context in seeking our ideals.

In “Abstract Objectivity: Richard J. Bernstein’s Critique of Hilary Putnam,” Brendan Hogan and Lawrence Marcelle focus on Bernstein’s claim that Putnam does not provide enough concrete solutions to ethical problems, and they seek to outline a defense of Putnam against this criticism, utilizing his efforts in softening the fact/value dichotomy. Bernstein responds that Putnam still fails to provide guidance on making moral judgments in concrete situations.

The tenth essay is “Pragmatism’s Constructive Project,” by Philip Kitcher. Kitcher also focuses on Bernstein’s relationship to Putnam and asserts that what they both need for a more fully realized “constructive” pragmatist project is an emphasis on a certain brand of historicism. Bernstein is cautious about Kitcher’s use of the term historicism, and he believes that even with such a historicism Kitcher has not managed to escape the need for guidance in moral judgment for which Bernstein has critiqued in Putnam.

In the eleventh essay, “Truth, Objectivity, and Experience after the Pragmatic Turn: Bernstein on Habermas’s ‘Kantian Pragmatism,’” Jeffrey Flynn defends Habermas against Bernstein’s charge that Habermas’s account of objectivity is lacking due to his overly rigid Kantianism. Flynn seeks to establish Habermas’s thought

as similar to Brandom's position, but ultimately superior. Bernstein is utterly convinced by Flynn, and recants his earlier position, admitting that Habermas's account of objectivity is fully acceptable, although still a bit too Kantian.

The twelfth and final essay of the book is "Now What? Richard J. Bernstein and Philosophy after Rorty," by David E. McClean. In this essay, McClean presses Bernstein to provide a more thorough critique of Rorty than he has provided previously, and to offer an alternative vision to Rorty's. In a certain sense, Bernstein sides with Rorty, noting that he (Bernstein) has no real wish to offer such a critique of Rorty, for he agrees with Rorty on many points.

Now that the book has been laid out in its entirety, I would like to evaluate it based on the three aims that were outlined by Green for the book, namely: (1) to provide a forum for a fruitful intergenerational conversation, (2) to provide a companion book to Bernstein's *The Pragmatic Turn*, and (3) to function as an introductory text for educated readers unfamiliar with pragmatism.

In terms of the first goal, I believe the book functions well: Bernstein displays a nuanced ability to understand the work of the contributors while also gently displaying their blind spots. In the process, we learn much about Bernstein's own positions. My only concern here is that nearly all of the contributors are based in the state of New York, and thus the conversation, while perhaps intergenerational, is somewhat limited geographically; I would have liked to have seen participation from a wider range of scholars both within the US and internationally, although I understand the logistical reasons why the book came together as it did, given that it "grew out of a round of face-to-face commentaries and live replies" (30).

I believe that the book shines brightest in terms of its second aim: anyone planning to teach (or better understand) *The Pragmatic Turn* would do well to consider carefully supplementing that work with selections from this book (or indeed, the whole work). Getting a chance to hear Bernstein respond to critiques and suggestions in his own voice is invaluable as an aid in understanding his efforts in *The Pragmatic Turn*, and by extension, his thought as a whole. In this respect, I find that Chapter 11 by Jeffrey Flynn is perhaps the most valuable portion of the book, as here we see Bernstein recant his earlier position on Habermas. This interchange is a very valuable piece for anyone interested in Bernstein, Habermas, or even the direction of pragmatism today.

Of the three aims, the book is weakest in terms of the third. In my opinion, there are other works more suited to introducing newcomers to pragmatism. For while the book does indeed cover a wide variety of topics, many of the essays focus on technical arguments between Bernstein and other pragmatically minded thinkers who have familiarity with the history of the debates and the relevant concepts. Those looking for introductory texts would do better with Susan Haack's *Pragmatism, Old and New: Selected Writings*, or perhaps Cornel West's *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, if one is hoping to avoid primary texts.

In the end, I share Green's sentiments that philosophy is best practiced through conversation, and this book does well to record for us the vital back and forth between a widely regarded philosopher and a range of scholars whom we might loosely categorize as part of the "future of pragmatism," if they should choose to carry that torch. I hope that this book inspires similar conversations, and I believe that it can.

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