

Book Review

Philosophy Americana: Making Philosophy at Home in American Culture

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Douglas R. Anderson, *Philosophy Americana: Making Philosophy at Home in American Culture*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2006. 294 pp. ISBN 0-8232-2551. \$28.00 (pbk.)

In *Philosophy Americana*, Douglas Anderson attempts to address “issues that arise in popular culture” (ix). He does so by drawing almost exclusively on issues that arise within his own experienced popular culture: a fairly limited, white, male, middle-class and country western perspective. He warns us of these limitations and believes a second, more inclusive volume may be forthcoming. Anderson further recognizes the perspective given to be a dominant and often privileged one, but argues that engaging this perspective should “be undertaken precisely because we often forget that ours *is* only one dimension of ‘America’” (7). While he does have some success at resisting the dangers of being “self-serving or even maudlin,” the essays at times look to be fairly “self-engrossed” (9). He successfully argues, however, that we cannot start from nowhere, as Dewey also emphasized, and thus reminds the reader that our own experience is a good starting point; but Anderson falls shy of his hope for inclusiveness and further admits to the narrowness of the volume.

Philosophy Americana is a collection of essays by a single author. The book begins by considering philosophy’s current impact on our culture. Anderson sees philosophers popularly portrayed as “insane angels.” Philosophers are dubbed thus because they want to transform not simply themselves, but their culture. Philosophy, understood this way, is “an important medium of transformation.” Inspired by Dewey, Anderson asks philosophers to avoid the trap of thinking themselves to

be “theoreticians.” We, philosophers, are more than this; we are “theoretically oriented practitioners” (16). Knowing that some of the founders of pragmatism, like Dewey, worked outside of the academy, Anderson believes pragmatism’s impact on our culture is much bigger than the reader might think (20). However, Anderson only references William James and John Dewey, neglecting, in this reviewer’s mind, the vast impact of Jane Addams, an omission too common when reflecting on the history and impact of pragmatism. It is an omission, moreover, made more significant by the masculine perspective of the book.

This same chapter, however, argues that philosophers have been made irrelevant to today’s “ordinary American” because they have “produced little or nothing that speaks directly” to them (3). “We [philosophers] blame the audience for their inattention” (4). Anderson does admit we are to blame. Looking at philosophy today, he notes our lack of community from within and our marginalization from without (48). In chapter 2, Anderson claims that we need to fight against our current troubles by reclaiming our sense of community within our profession as well as in the larger society. He suggests we meet our culture half-way. What is omitted here, though, is a consideration of the widespread habits of the “ordinary American.” In fact, most chapters in *Philosophy Americana* could benefit from a more thorough treatment of Dewey’s writings on habits, found especially in works like *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922) and *The Public and its Problems* (1927).

In chapter 4, “Working Certainty and Deweyan Wisdom,” Anderson attempts to find some middle ground between idealism and Dewey’s pragmatism. While there are “working stabilities,” these are not certainties. Anderson argues that we require faith, “an act of commitment and hope,” in order to act in this world (71). Yet it is misleading to call such an act a working certainty. While we do place our faith in and commit to certain beliefs in order to act, no beliefs are beyond question, beyond dispute, totally fixed. Dewey finds no need to praise a reliance on working certainties since they are a part of our lives and thus shape our future. Instead, Dewey’s focus is on the importance of recognizing such habits so that careful inspection and revision occur as change necessitates. Given the strong force such certainties play in our lives, Dewey emphasizes our fallibility and the continuously changing nature of life. Anderson unsuccessfully argues that Dewey’s understanding of wisdom—as good judgment in action—is equivalent to working certainty (78). Yet at the end of this chapter Anderson admits that this is not likely “an adequate reading of Dewey’s thoughts” and worries that Dewey’s fear of absolutes prevents him from seeing the value in working certainty (82-83).

In reflecting on the origins of pragmatism, Anderson sees a focus by its founders on the “gambling nature of human endeavor.” This gambling theme returns a couple times later in the book. At first, Anderson argues that an emphasis on gambling indicates recognition of our own fallibility, an acceptance of “the reality of loss” and a hope of betterment, of meliorism, within pragmatic thought (21). Thus, pragmatism that does not change over time is a failed endeavor because of its

“failure to be practiced” (31). He then invokes Dewey on the issue of gambling, but only to highlight Dewey’s suggestion that we create and test hypotheses in order to find out what does and does not work for us (29). The issue of gambling also finds purchase in Anderson’s focus on wilderness and wildness. “Wilderness,” Anderson says, “is a condition of maintaining our humanity” because it reminds us of how lost we are amidst life’s possibilities (62). It is because of the wildness around us that we cannot completely know something and thus approach it, and life more broadly, with respect, with an “adventurer’s attitude” (55). Anderson brings us back to Thoreau and argues we must lose ourselves, wander in wilder fields, before we can find ourselves. Wilderness, as a physical space, can remove us from the pressure of our social space, thus giving us an opportunity to explore a more genuine version of ourselves. Note here that the opportunity to pursue such a path in our culture is most likely to be given to able-bodied men with various forms of power and independence within whom some amount of wildness and independence is often encouraged or expected; for others, this path is a far less likely option. Anderson observes this limitation in chapter 6 by noting the role such wildness has played in the lives of male country music stars and the collateral damage it often involves (94). So, while wildness can lead to liberation, it can and has also often led to “conflict, violence, and substance abuse” (98). There must be a return from the wilderness, a “recivilizing prescription” (107). This could have been a great opportunity to discuss the values of community life. While Anderson does not broach this topic, he does highlight how the adventurer’s attitude is featured in Dewey’s writings through the innate curiosity of children. Here, again, would be an important point of entry to consider Dewey’s concern for the ruling nature of habit. This avenue, however, is left unexplored. Instead, in chapter 8 Anderson seeks to reconstruct what he calls Dewey’s “sensible mysticism” (130).

This sensible mysticism comes out of the “qualitative immediacy of *an* experience” (131). The reflection following such an experience can be equated with worship, a sort of naturalized mysticism. This comes out most clearly in Dewey’s aesthetics, in moments where we lose ourselves in experience and thus find ourselves and our environment transformed. Anderson refers to such experiences as immediacies and argues that such immediacies pervade our lives through, for example, novels, music, and film (135). Anderson finds this Deweyan sense of mysticism quite apt for American life: “Ours is a mysticism of growth and possibility, not of enclosure and silence . . . they are meant to have a communal dimension, they are meant to be shared” (143). He focuses on a life “on the road”; again, an example apt primarily for privileged white men. The “ramblin’ man” is an image of men—for men—where drinking and violence play a significant role; such a life is not expected, let alone encouraged, for women, people of color, or the abject poor. Wildness in these other groups is in fact discouraged, thought to be far more dangerous to our social fabric. The ramblin’ man image speaks to a privilege given mostly to white men, stemming from some amount of social capital and independence. This life on the road can

certainly go wrong, as can any attempt at wildness, but for Anderson, salvation is found in the transitions and awakenings that wildness entails. In the end, he says, “we must achieve a streak of mysticism and wildness in our everyday being—*this* is an American mysticism” (152). Dewey, though, does not go so far as to endorse Anderson’s version of wildness. A bit of dissatisfaction and unease and a willingness to reconsider previous conclusions and long-standing habits along with a disposition to wonder can also bring about growth and transformation without the serious risk of harm to the wider community that wildness poses.

While natural mysticism is one avenue towards growth and transformation, education is another. A Deweyan focus on education is a precondition for a thriving democratic community. Philosophical conversation is essential to education because through such dialogue “one experiences freedom and self-awareness of the sort that enables one to be an individual within a society” (160). For Anderson, freedom is dependent on what he calls “world building,” the creation of a collective space for continuous individual advancement, for living “an enlightened, kindly, helpful, and noble social life” (161). In order for democracy to be successful, opportunities for learning are vital. Such opportunities should not be limited to what the university can provide. They ought to emerge from the broader community as well, because philosophy and teaching are really “life tasks essential to the development of democratic community” (166).

Teaching and gambling come together in chapter 11 when Anderson argues that an effective teacher must be willing to risk herself, thus encouraging students to do the same, enabling opportunities for growth. This is a serious gamble since “to fail when one has staked oneself . . . is to lose oneself” (169). Such a gamble is at the core of American philosophy, on the one hand; betting on failure, on the other hand, “stunts the possibility of our growth and deadens our everyday lives” (169). Anderson stresses how terrifying taking such a risk can be by employing Peirce’s writings on agape. Agape certainly provides us with a source of support for such risk taking, but a fuller explication of uninformed habits could also provide the reader with a powerful argument in support of the results of taking risks. Creating such a supportive classroom environment means that we must be tolerant of mistakes. What this means more precisely, however, is left open to the reader to decide. Risk taking on the teacher’s part is encouraged via autonomy and creativity along with an acceptance of one’s own responsibility and a willingness to try and fail. Dewey enters the picture here to provide such a teacher with a middle ground between “sheer routine and sheer spontaneity” where adaptation encourages “fruitful consequences” (179-80).

In closing, Anderson focuses on what it means to be a pragmatist in the twenty-first century—to be open to the loss of our own ideas and to “new angles of vision” (236). Pragmatism, as a method, is for what Anderson calls “both/and thinkers,” not either/or thinkers. For example, it is about both “theory and practice,” the public and the private, science and poetry (243). What we need still today

is “an attitude of openness in and through which one’s own questions may emerge” along with “a willingness to risk failure” (248). It is because of our fallibility that recognizing our own “amateur status” becomes important. Anderson is calling on us to remain aware of our “ordinariness” and to remain vigilant to the point that philosophy “grows out of questions that occur in the ordinary” (249). Reclaiming our own amateur status requires that we confess and acknowledge the “constraints of the environment” (251). In the end, our both/and-ness brings us “home to ourselves” while “launching us toward the gambling of constitutive thinking,” allowing “us to be at home in transition” (253).

Anderson himself acknowledges some of the tensions and inconsistencies within the collection. However, specific tensions between the positions taken in different essays are rarely made explicit. There is particular ambivalence about John Dewey’s work. He warns us that he has yet to make up his mind about Dewey, and yet individual essays do not often convey this indecision; it is only in comparing different essays that the troubling inconsistencies become apparent. He wards off this criticism by saying his aim is to “bear witness to a spirit and orientation of the philosophical life in America,” not to present consistent belief sets (31). While we are at times “undergoing creative transformations” and should not simply be “persons committed to propositions,” such transformations should be accompanied by careful examination not simply of how our beliefs operate, but also commingle and cooperate successfully in our lived experience. Anderson often fails to engage these tensions. Thus, the essays could have benefited from a closer inspection of their inconsistencies, especially in connection with Dewey’s work. His attempt, however, to use American philosophy in order to address issues within popular culture today is often quite successful. The chapters could have been more inclusive of a wider range of perspectives. The themes of wildness, gambling, loss, and transition resonate through American philosophy, but take on a distinctive, modern perspective through the eyes of the author, which will speak to some readers more than others.

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