

BOOK REVIEW

JOHN RYDER: *THE THINGS IN HEAVEN AND EARTH. AN ESSAY IN PRAGMATIC NATURALISM*
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How many versions of pragmatism there are? This question has been haunting non-pragmatists since the times of Lovejoy. But today this is an issue for us pragmatists as well. Some time ago I myself have distinguished basically two recent versions of “new” pragmatisms: 1. Rortyan postanalytic (postlinguistic) neopragmatism, and 2. Neoclassical pragmatism with its three versions: Neo-Peircean, Neo-Jamesian, Neo-Deweyan.¹ Meanwhile, two other “classifications” of “new pragmatism” have appeared: one put forward by Ch. Misak drawing on Peirce, and thus Neo-Peircean, while another one promoted by A. Malachowski developing the Rortyan version in a quite radical way. To make things more complicated, there are authors who see the relation between the “old” and the “new” pragmatisms as more complex and who do not even think of Rorty as a pragmatist, S. Haack being the most important among them. And, moreover, there are authors who suggest another variety of recent pragmatism by promoting “pragmatic naturalism”. One of these is based on the conception developed by Justus Buchler (1914-1991)², who is not well known either in the US or outside it, and his mentor at Columbia University in NYC, John Herman Randall Jr. (1899 – 1980), labeled as so called “Columbia naturalism” or “New York naturalism”.³ In 1972, Buchler was one of the

¹ See Višňovský, E (2000). O súčasnom neopragmatizme.“ *Filozofia*, 55, 10, 777-787.

² His main works include: *Charles Peirce's Empiricism* (1939), *Toward a General Theory of Human Judgment* (1951), *Nature and Judgment* (1955), *The Concept of Method* (1961), *Metaphysics of Natural Complexes* (1966), *The Main of Light: On the Concept of Poetry* (1974).

³ See Anton, J. P., ed. (1967). *Naturalism and Historical Understanding. Essays on the Philosophy of John Herman Randall, Jr.* New York: State University of New York

founders of the “Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy”, of which many of his former students are active agents up to the present.⁴

This conception of naturalism has been revived recently by several authors who regard themselves pragmatists, though they draw on James and Dewey rather than on Buchler and Randall, or even on another school of ideas established in Buffalo by Marvin Farber (1901-1980) and his follower Paul Kurtz (1925-2012).⁵ The other pragmatists who sympathize with or even endorse this or that version of naturalism (or pragmatic naturalism, for that matter) include a whole host of authors from S. M. Eames to Mark Johnson to S. Pihlström, etc. There is also a concept of “liberal naturalism” proposed by M. de Caro and David Macarthur which includes among its proponents also Putnam and Rorty, along with such analytic philosophers as T. Scanlon, P. F. Strawson, J. Hornsby, and B. Stroud, which I take to be controversial.⁶

John Ryder was a student of Buchler at Stony Brook and has been active in “pragmatist circles” for decades, focusing mostly on the issues of social and political philosophy and interpretations of American philosophy abroad, primarily in Soviet Russia. His interest in developing a pragmatist version of naturalism is a long-term affair dating back at least to the excellent anthology of resources he edited in 1994.⁷ Now he has offered a more substantial contribution aligning him with the authors who advocate a more traditional approach in the philosophy of contemporary pragmatism that is preserving philosophical disciplines

Press.

⁴ Some of Buchler's students published the joint volume which may be regarded as his late *Festschrift*; see Marsoobian, A., K. Wallace, R. S. Corrington, eds. (1991). *Nature's Perspectives. Prospects for Ordinal Metaphysics*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

⁵ See Shook, J. R., and P. Kurtz, eds. (2009). *The Future of Naturalism*. Amherst, NY: Humanity Books.

⁶ See De Caro, M., and D. Macarthur, eds. (2004). *Naturalism in Question*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

⁷ See Ryder, J., ed. (1994). *American Philosophical Naturalism in the Twentieth Century*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.

like metaphysics or ontology and epistemology, unlike Rorty and his followers, as necessary endeavors if philosophy is to remain philosophy. Thus their pragmatism is still modern, or late modern, rather than postmodern. The reason for such an approach is simply that pragmatists today should not pose the same old traditional philosophical questions that comprise those disciplines, rather on the contrary, they 'would do better to ask different sorts of questions' (p. 2). However, no matter what kind of issues we are trying to solve, "we invariably have some more general conceptions of how things are" (p. 3).

In his latest book, John Ryder offers what I would like to call his "mature" philosophy and a very well-balanced conception of all philosophical issues with which he decides to engage. Even though many of the chapters in this book have been published elsewhere before, often in somewhat different versions, the author has rewritten them and cleverly combined them into a piece of work that amounts to a coherent whole in order to cover what he considers to be some of the most important "things in heaven and earth". What kinds of things are these, according to Ryder?

First of all, and this is what he starts with, it is philosophy itself. He is discontent with what philosophy in its history has achieved and how it is approaching both the world and humanity. The upshot is "a distorted understanding of ourselves, our world, and the many problems, personal and social, that we face" (p. 2). Simply put, Ryder calls for a new philosophy, or at least for a "renewed" one (and here he is in line with all those pragmatists who advocate the "new" as opposed to the "old", including Rorty) that would become a pragmatist alternative to both traditional analytic and continental schools, and yet be a sort of rapprochement of three major approaches, as advocated recently e. g. by Bernstein, Margolis, Hickman. The choice for adopting a single philosophic perspective for Ryder is clear: it is a non-reductive pragmatic naturalism drawing on the

Columbia Naturalist tradition whose central point is a theory of relationality (pp. 6-8). This is a pluralistic philosophical *Weltanschauung* (since "nature is complex") which, among other things, openly declares that "philosophy is not mathematics", and should not even be modeled on mathematics as its paradigm (p. 8, 43, 50-51, 291).⁸ The aim of Ryder's effort is to "describe a pragmatic pluralism" and to show its "value and wisdom" (p. 11).

I take it that the motivation for such a conception of philosophy is clearly a "pragmatic" as well as a "pragmatist" one in the sense of the non-reductive humanism which is inherent to "pragmatic naturalism". Philosophy as one of the human enterprises should not play God from high above in the Heavens in order to rule those miserable creatures down here on the Earth, since philosophy is just one of the tools they have developed to enrich their transitory life and existence on the Earth, even while looking to the Heavens for such reasons as moral hope, aesthetic inspiration or political authority. But philosophers should not escape the Earth for the sake of the Heavens, nor the Platonist Cave for the sake of the Realm of Ideas. Philosophy is vital here on the Earth so that the human world does not turn into a Hell, even if it cannot be made a Heaven. This may be considered a humanistic mission of any kind of philosophy to which Ryder's pragmatic naturalism subscribes, with all its pervasiveness.

One of the strands of Ryder's thought is the "reconciliation" he attempts in many ways. For him, there are no good reasons to draw a strict and sharp line between modernism and postmodernism, classical pragmatism and new pragmatism, constructivism and objectivism, all the more between pragmatism and naturalism and between naturalism and humanism. Neither are there good reasons to take the standpoint of

⁸ No doubt, Peirceans and Peirce himself would have been appalled by such a radical claim.

one against another.⁹ This conception is based on the understanding (which is mostly Deweyan) that there is a relational continuity between nature and experience (or nature and culture for that matter). Simply put, nature is not only given and objective with respect to our experience, it is also creative (by itself) and constructed (by us). And *vice versa*, experience is not only constructed and subjective, it is also determined (by its conditions) and objective (by natural relations). Naturalism in its pragmatic vein is no pure absolutism or objectivism, and pragmatism in its naturalistic vein is no pure relativism or subjectivism.

The key values of pragmatic naturalism lie in both its traits and virtues. Its basic trait is to conceive of everything as existing within nature and without the need to postulate or search for anything “supernatural” (p. 37). This “does *not* mean – first, that nature is equivalent to the material world, and second, that scientific inquiry is the only method that can produce knowledge of nature” (p. 38). Pragmatic naturalism is not reductive in terms of materialism or scientism. The pragmatic naturalistic category of nature, its broadest and most basic, includes the conception of the whole sum of human experiences and human artifacts that can exist only within nature, even if nature itself cannot be understood as “a whole” since its relational character implies that it is always open (pp. 42, 60, 89). Pragmatic naturalism “is a relational philosophy; it is a philosophy for which nature is a category sufficient for all things...” (p. 43). Among its main virtues is its avoidance of traditional philosophical dualisms of which I would select as the most basic the dualism between (human) subjectivity and (natural) objectivity. In particular the concept of “objectivity” has become suspicious among

pragmatists, along with its critique of Cartesian subjectivity. Pragmatism conveys the sense that this is a philosophy in line with a Nietzschean vein of “human-all-too-human” perspectivalism, or as purely anthropocentric, due primarily to the Jamesian/Rortyan interpretations of human experience and knowledge; in other words, that pragmatism appears to be a “philosophy of human subjectivity”. This impression apparently has to be corrected and Ryder is doing so (pp. 46-49). Rather than abandoning both concepts of subjectivity and objectivity, or emphasizing one at the expense of the other, they should be reconstructed in a pragmatic naturalist, relational way: neither is to be eliminated since neither is absolute. Experience is not only humanly subjective, but it includes natural objectivity as well, nor nature is only naturally objective, but it includes human subjectivity as well. The “dialectics”, i.e. the complex relations (transactions) between experience and nature, include the dialectics between subjectivity and objectivity.

The key idea that Ryder suggests, develops and defends is the idea of relationality. This is combined with the central target that Ryder identifies for pragmatic naturalism to supercede – the Newtonian atomistic, and thus anti-relational, vision of the world which has held us captive to the present.¹⁰ Taking all “things in the heaven and earth”, no matter whether given or created, live or inanimate, nonhuman or human, including human beings, as ‘discrete individuals independent of all the others’ (p. 33), as self-independent, autonomous or even isolated atoms “like balls on a billiard table” (p. 53), has seemed very ‘natural’ to the human mind. A mainstream intellectual tradition has been established that regards substances as ontologically primary and relations as

⁹ One exception to this is Rorty's neopragmatism which, according to Ryder (pp. 17-24), is no pragmatism at all due to his complete neglect of naturalism and the concept of experience. This may, however, be debatable at least for two reasons: 1. Rorty's early references to Darwinism, 2. Rorty's late conception of panrelationalism.

¹⁰ Ryder dubs it also a “Baroque atomism” (10, 33-35 etc.) which fits well into his conception except that Baroque as a cultural epoch is more complex; see Deleuze, G. (1988/1993). *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*. Trans. by T. Conley. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

secondary, if they are acknowledged at all. There must be something existing first (Peirce's Firstness) in order to interact with another thing (Peirce's Secondness), as the traditional ontological understanding would have us think at least from the times of Plato and Aristotle. However, there is no such thing that could have existed without any relations to some other thing because with any given thing, relations (Peirce's Thirdness) exist inherently as well.¹¹ There is no such thing that might be constituted without relations to some other thing. Thus relations are ontologically constitutive and pragmatic naturalism provides "a relational, ordinal ontology" (p. 54).

Such is the upshot of Part 1 of the book, laying down the key concepts and attitudes in its summary. The next five chapters of Part 2 provide the elaboration of these foundations as applied to ontology (chapters 3 to 5), faith and God (chapter 6), and art and knowledge (chapter 7). With respect to ontology Ryder follows his mentor Buchler (and Buchler's mentor Randall) as he revives their "relationalism" in the understanding of both the world and human being. Nature as a whole, a person or a society, or any kind of particular entity, is just relational through and through, despite the fact that the standard or traditional ontology is non-relational.¹² However, Ryder does not present the alternative view that "whatever there is" is "to be constituted relationally" (p. 88) as the "only one and necessary truth". Rather, he articulates it as a reasonable "attempt" and a "more modest claim" (pp. 89-92). Thus as a pragmatist and naturalist he does not claim that all being is necessarily relational; he just claims that to understand it as relational is "at least possible" (p. 93), and that whether this understanding "works" better or is

more "useful" than the traditional one, can be decided only on a "pragmatic test" (p. 43).

Such an understanding may be applied not only to the world as "given" and "found" but also to the world as "made" and "created" (or constructed). The ontology of "objective reality" is "naturally" supplied by the ontology of "human artifacts", including the whole

"nonmaterial world" of human concepts, theories, visions, images, ideas, ideals, values, meanings, beliefs, knowledge, judgments, truths, etc. comprising together what is called "intellectual culture" (or "spiritual culture"). According to pragmatic naturalism there is no "mystery" here – all of these are created by various kinds of human cultural practices, which are also relational, ordinal, contextual, historical, etc. Cultural practices are creative. However, their cultural products do not represent a different kind of ontology, neither are they practiced arbitrarily (p. 116). Rather they fit into the general ontology of natural complexes which are being thus transformed, but by no means created *ex nihilo*. There is no tension between the ontology of (objective) nature and the ontology of (creative) human culture provided we understand the constitutive relations within and between them.

If humans are not creators *ex nihilo*, then they are not Gods, despite playing gods in many of their cultural practices. Pragmatist naturalist ontology also shows that the idea of God itself is one of the human cultural creations which have not been (and could not be) created *ex nihilo*. There are real and natural earthly grounds for such a creation. Religious belief and faith in God has a rich cultural meaning within a naturalist view, offering a host of important values such as humility, piety, trust, hope, sense of justice, etc. (pp. 129, 136-139). These are the values that provide the relational "common ground" between pragmatic naturalism and a religious life of faith (p. 140).

The sciences and the arts (in addition to religions) are

¹¹ Even though Ryder does not invoke the Peircean vocabulary, this fits well in his conception of pragmatic naturalism. Note that Ryder's teacher Buchler was a Peircean scholar.

¹² The key concept, with which this ontology stands and falls, is Buchler's concept of "natural complexes". See his *Metaphysics of Natural Complexes* (1966).

another important human creations created by and in human cultural practices. Based on the philosophical concept of human creativity, which pragmatic naturalism fully endorses, there cannot be a sharp divide between these two in terms of the old dualism that “science is cognitive” and “art is non-cognitive”. In order to make a breakthrough to a novel conception of science and art, a much richer concept of knowledge is needed than that provided by the traditional propositional concepts of “knowledge that” or “knowledge how”. In place of these rather narrow concepts, pragmatists have elaborated the concepts of “knowledge through” (J. Buchler) or “interpretive knowledge” (R. Shusterman), meaning the “knowledge of” in the sense of an “understanding of” or an “insight into” something. The latter accommodate very well to the arts, showing their natural cognitive dimension. Even more, Ryder invokes Buchler's original theory of judgment as the basis for relational integration of science and art into one coherent pragmatist naturalist theory (pp. 164-170).

Part 3 (chapters 8 to 11) is fully devoted to fields in which during past decades Ryder has become a respectable scholar – the social and political arena. Here he consistently applies the pragmatic naturalist philosophical *Weltanschauung* to develop the conceptions of democracy and international relations. These sections supply the most refreshing and innovative thoughts in the book concerning some crucial contemporary issues of our social experience, while Dewey rather than Buchler is the main source here.

Ryder does not wish to conceal at all that the current situation concerning democracy is “far more complicated” than often assumed (p. 180). He introduces and explains a host of examples from diverse parts of the world that show not only how difficult and hard the processes of democratization can be (which was already a truism for Dewey), but also how directly democracy has been challenged and even altered in both manifestly and covertly undemocratic ways. Democracy

as a very fragile and delicate idea has been stolen, diverted and distorted countless times, even in the name of democracy itself. There are also many real fundamental dangers to democracy in the country that considers itself a “cradle” of democracy – the USA, on which Ryder reflects in a very critical way. He boldly and bravely demands “a profound revision” of American “conception of national sovereignty” and national interests of the USA (p. 206). Democracy is “nominally and substantially” as well as globally “in need of rehabilitation before it can serve as a forceful ideal again” (p. 201).

Nonetheless, Ryder firmly advances a “modest claim” that “democracy is a desirable way of life” (p. 180-181), in comparison to non-democratic ways, allowing a majority of people (if not all) “to live full, rich, and developed lives culturally, socially and economically” (p. 181). This means that democracy still is, could be and should be the ideal of a social and individual life that is worth striving for; a valuable ideal despite being less than perfect (p. 223, 226). He develops the pragmatic naturalist concept of “thick democracy” all the way down based on Dewey's conception of “creative democracy”, distinguishing it very effectively from the concept of “thin” or just “formal” democracy as a way of government (mostly traditional liberal-constitutive). The latter should give way to the former wherever possible.

Ryder takes it that to ground the kernel of democracy in such a floppy concept as “human nature” does not make serve it well. The better pragmatic naturalist attitude can be based on the concept of “common interests” both across and beyond any specific human community. The “pursuit of common (shared) interests” is the “most significant component” (p. 188) of Ryder's understanding of democracy, and it seems to work well in his analyses. In line with it is his outline of an ideal of “a democratic individual” as “knowledgeable, thoughtful, critical, experimental, and ethically sensitive” (p. 189) to those common interests in the first place. This is also a

relational conception of democracy built on taking practical care of the shared ties that bind people together no matter how different their individual interests and ways of life could be. Where there is no common interest or a search for common interest, there can hardly be any thick democracy. This does not exclude plurality and dissent within the framework of democracy (even though Ryder is well aware, along with others such as R. Talisse, that this is “a serious problem”), but there is at least a hope for a solution. This solution may presumably consist mostly in the participation (hence “participatory democracy”) of as many participants as possible in the creation and practical support of the common interests. Another hope for a thick democracy may be in a possibility that such participation, cooperation and communication in the process of developing shared interests may “prevail by example” (p. 222).

Ryder further develops the Deweyan idea of “education for democracy”. It is a necessary condition that the democratic individual has to be educated in terms of his/her relation to community and an awareness not only of the crucial importance of common interests but also of the practical need to be willing and able to participate in the formation of these interests. But such an education requires a very different approach, one that is in direct opposition to the one built on “making people competitive in the marketplace” as its main goal, or teaching “young people not to be reflective, experimental, hypothetical, and open-minded, but rather to accept as absolute certain principles and truths and to apply them rigidly” (p. 221).

One of the most dangerous deformations of democracy to be identified today is its reduction to a “thin” democracy in a way of election procedures and traditional liberal-democratic ways of government. This really is just a “mask”, or even worse a caricature, of democracy (especially when combined with corruption) as evaluated from the standpoint of Deweyan pragmatic

naturalist conception. Things are even worse by an identification of democracy simply with market mechanisms or “marketization”, i. e. “the application of market principles and values to nearly all aspects of the society” (p. 227).¹³ There is, presumably, no need to invoke Marx (as Ryder is doing) in order to understand that there also might be a version of a “capitalist totalitarianism” when organizing all social institutions “in accord with market values” (p. 227). Market society is just one component of a democratic society, but when the former is totalized beyond the limits of its justified economic sphere, the latter begins to suffer substantially: because “democracy is characterized by ongoing pursuit of common interests, a democratic society requires that its citizens interact with one another in a spirit of mutual cooperation and collaborative pursuit of common ends” (p. 228).

Therefore it is fully understandable that in the area of education such a strategy is even more damaging. The “goal of a democratic education cannot be primarily about besting others in a competitive market” and there is “no room in a democracy for education construed to conform to market values or for market principles” (p. 228), in particular when it comes to higher education and the academic life at contemporary university in general. The university is an institution designed to play the key and irreplaceable, un-eliminable role in the formation of democratic society and its education. Ryder presents in a couple of pages (pp. 229-239) a very succinct and instructive analysis of the current situation of the university as seen from the standpoint of democracy. He depicts a realistic contextual, relational scene which is sufficiently complex due to its inclusion of a mixture of values and practices functioning in conflict rather than in harmony. Those individuals, in particular university administrators, who simply do not understand, or forget, or ignore that the university is an

¹³ Such a reduction of democracy has been implemented and entrenched in the post-communist countries, e. g. in Slovakia and others in Central Europe.

academic institution, which means that it stands and falls with its academic values and on how they are being nurtured and developed, and who attempt to manage or even replace these values with other social or economic values, commit a fatal mistake (p. 232). In such cases the university is being “commodified”, “marketized”, “economized” and even “ideologized” and “politicized” in terms of contemporary “academic capitalism”.¹⁴ Similarly, the vocabulary according to which “students are customers and the university is the provider of services for them” is deeply mistaken and harmful. This vocabulary should be replaced by the vocabulary of opportunities and responsibilities for growth on both sides, that of the students as well as that of the universities, in mutual interaction (p. 234). And those who rule the academic world, administrators and university managers, should strive to find the balance that has been hitherto almost tragically and regretfully lost – the balance between all the values and practices that comprise the life of the university – academic, social, political and economic values and practices (p. 238-239), but with one crucial caveat: academic values are to be taken as the goals, whereas all other as the means, when it comes to the issue of the quality of university education. Ryder writes clearly in this regard, though I would stress the latter point even more radically based on my own academic experience from the past decades in Central Europe.

The international situation and policy is the final area to which Ryder applies his pragmatic naturalist philosophical approach, and this in the most radical way. He calls for a substantial revision and reconstruction of the international order starting with a fundamental

rethinking of concepts on which this order has traditionally been constructed. The relational paradigm is, of course, the clue here as well. The concepts that need to be revised for such a pragmatic naturalist relational reconstruction include the concepts of borders, national sovereignty, national interests, foreign policy, international cooperation, internationalization, pacifism, militarism, etc., and the revision is necessary in order to bring them into accord with the declared democratic principles. What this all amounts to is a pragmatic naturalist conception of cosmopolitanism and humanism in which both are naturally the implications, or rather the inherent traits, of a thick democracy on the global level.

There is not much that is claimed in the book with which I would like to dissent. Perhaps one point of criticism would concern the author's exclusively positive references to European Union (pp. 199, 208, 264, 284-256, 301) as a paradigm case of a pragmatic naturalist democracy and a new kind of international relations. Even though there is quite a lot of truth in what he refers to, the overall process is much more complex. Apart from the generally infamous Brussels' bureaucracy, which applies also to the Bologna process of the unification of the European higher education area, several other factors such as tendencies to centralization, and the fact that a market ideology massively dominates political parties whether right- or left-wing, etc., show that the results of the “Europeanization” of Europe are far from ideal. The character of democracy within the Eurozone is still “thin” rather than “thick”. One of the reasons in the intellectual sphere is surely the fact that the European democratic tradition is prevalingly liberal-democratic, while any types of participatory or “direct” democracy, not to say the pragmatic democracy, is very weak, indeed almost negligible. The task of a Deweyan creative and intelligent democracy is still the task before the European pragmatists.

John Ryder has written a useful and intellectually

¹⁴ For the conception of academic capitalism see: Slaughter, S., and L. L. Leslie (1999). *Academic Capitalism: Politics, Policies, and the Entrepreneurial University*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University; Slaughter, S., and G. Rhoades (2009). *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy: Markets, State, and the Higher Education*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University.

valuable book, presenting his philosophical views from ontological to political to aesthetic to ethical in a single coherent volume that deserves to be read by the contemporary generations of pragmatists of various brands. They can learn from this reading to become wiser and to adopt a more balanced pragmatist *Weltanschauung*.