

BOOK REVIEW

PRAGMATIST EPISTEMOLOGIES

(Edited by R. Frega, Lexington, Lanhan, 2011)

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Many students and scholars think of pragmatism as a local and peripheral school of thought, wittingly unable to deal with serious metaphysical issues. This book edited by Roberto Frega is strongly recommended to those who share this naïve and superficial point of view. It is also a precious tool for scholars involved in more specialized ongoing debates. Each one of the essays composing *Pragmatist Epistemologies* shows how authors like C.S. Peirce, John Dewey, C.I. Lewis are still able to provide practical tools for contemporary theoretical inquiry. The revolution started by Richard Rorty has been very useful in broadcasting a tradition of thought which has been underrated for too many years. However, reading the whole pragmatist movement through the lens of Rortian anti-foundationalism might be misleading, even if fascinating. For instance, it is hard to label authors like Peirce and Putnam as non-pragmatist because of their commitment to realism. In order to avoid these misunderstandings, Roberto Frega aims at showing that “epistemology has always been and still remains a central concern for pragmatism, but that this concern radically refashions the very concept of epistemology”. As the editor points out, this new epistemology evolves around the “threefold core” of consequences, practice, and experience, and refers to a reason which is unavoidably immanent to the process of inquiry.

Each one of the essays composing *Pragmatist Epistemologies* provides an interesting insight about these manifold issues spinning around the central epistemological topic. In some cases, the authors deal with little known and overlooked subjects: see for instance Frederic R. Kellogg’s essay about legal fallibilism, which provides an interesting

multidisciplinary approach inspired by the preeminent member of “Metaphysical Club” O. W. Holmes. Most likely, also Rosa M. Calcaterra’s paper on C. I. Lewis shines a light on a author who is still unfamiliar to many contemporary scholars. On the other hand, David L. Hildebrand, Giovanni Maddalena and Douglas Anderson try to open new perspectives starting from classic pragmatist authors. Hildebrand shows how the concept of experience in John Dewey’s thought must be necessarily considered as something more than a mere method of inquiry. In turn, Maddalena and Anderson focus on C.S. Peirce: the former by elaborating an original and interesting theory of figural identity, the latter by analyzing the importance of attention in relation to the process of inquiry. There are also chapters discussing more general topics like realism (Sami Pihlström) and moral philosophy (Joseph Margolis), which show how precious pragmatism is in dealing with basic philosophical issues.

All these papers are interesting and insightful. However, while reading the entire volume, we could wonder if there is a common ground for these multi-faceted perspectives. A possible answer could be put forward starting by Randall E. Auxier’s article “Two types of pragmatism”. By sketching two different “pragmatic temperaments” — radical-empirical and idealistic — Auxier explicitly recommends the restoration of the latter, which is “now missing from contemporary pragmatism”. In fact, underestimating idealistic pragmatism, whose major exponents are C.S. Peirce and Josiah Royce, has restrained pragmatism from elaborating an original epistemology, either by getting rid of epistemology itself (Rorty’s anti-foundationalism), or by integrating “key parts of the pragmatist tradition into the canon of the analytical tradition in epistemology”, as Roberto Frega states in his introduction. Both solutions underrate the power and the originality of a pragmatist epistemology, which is of course pluralistic and motley, but at the same time endowed with a specific identity. *Pragmatist Epistemologies* gives us many good reasons for

considering this identity as deeply shaped by the productive tension between the two “pragmatic temperaments” outlined by Auxier. The majority of the essays composing this volume shows in a rather implicit manner the most peculiar feature of pragmatist epistemology: the capacity of dealing seriously with dichotomies. For instance, in his essay *Evolutionary Prolegomena to a Pragmatist Epistemology of Belief*, Roberto Frega points that pragmatist epistemology is structured by the “crossing of normative and evolutionary criteria”. This “crossing” compels us in keeping a key role for a concept of rationality, which must be necessarily reformulated in evolutionary terms. Another entanglement which must be taken seriously into account is the nature-history one. As Rossella Fabbrichesi Leo suggests, reading Darwin and Nietzsche together might be a good way of drifting away from the Scylla of reductionism and the Charybdis of weak anti-scientific approaches.

By sketching an original epistemology which defies dichotomies, Frega provides a living alternative to both hardcore naturalism and unbearable ultra-postmodern approaches. In fact, differently from reductionist approaches, pragmatism takes seriously into account the two dichotomic terms, and recognizes their value. By claiming the “entanglement” of these opposite items, we presuppose the acknowledgment of their meaningfulness. So therefore, a logic based on conjunction connectives (“and”) should be preferred here to an “either ...or” logic. Then, pragmatist epistemology is a matter of nature and history (Fabbrichesi), a matter of normative and evolutionary criteria (Frega), a matter of radical empiricism and idealism (Auxier), a matter of experience as a method and experience as a concept (Hildebrand). In my opinion, this is the most important philosophical upshot of the volume.

Finally, another interesting, even if more implicit, aspect of *Pragmatist Epistemologies* is the relation between pragmatism and the other contemporary philosophical currents. I guess that one of the assumptions implicitly stressed by the most part of the authors is that pragmatism is epistemologically self-sufficient. Of course, there is room for a dialogue with analytic philosophy, hermeneutics and phenomenology. By definition, pragmatist tools of inquiry can be improved by mean of reflexive attitude and practice; however, they can work on their own. But this perspective opens a further fundamental question: the relation between pragmatist epistemology and contemporary natural and social sciences. There is more than hint about this main subject in Frega’s paper, but it would be interesting to ask in more general terms whether pragmatist epistemology is independent of the development of the special sciences or not. The point at stake is again the troublesome coexistence of naturalism – even if considered in a “liberalized way”, which encompasses social and human sciences – and “idealism” (as Auxier would say) in pragmatism. This brings us to the question: is pragmatist epistemology able to solve this immanent dichotomy?