

INTRODUCTION:

EMANCIPATION AND LIBERATING HUMAN EXPERIENCE

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In February of 2015, philosophers from across the Atlantic met in snowbound New York City to discuss diverse views of *emancipation*. In contrast to the chilly weather, the three-day symposium provided a warm atmosphere with much room for discussions on the full spectrum of themes embedded in the pragmatist tradition, such as political justice, aesthetics, economic reform, religious freedom, racial equality, using problem solving over relying on moral/social conventions for social change, freedom of expression and lifestyles. At the close of the symposium all agreed that a fertile ground for the novel solutions to pressing global problems of emancipation was laid, while the snow continued to fall outside Fordham University's Mid-town building.

The idea that criticism of ideologies and of dogmatic beliefs has a liberating effect is as old as Plato's analogy of the cave. The story of each subsequent intellectual age can be told as providing its own rendering of human emancipation by means of waking us from various phases of dogmatic slumber. What changes noticeably are the "of" and "from" dimensions of emancipation: freedom from evil and the corruption of the soul; emancipation of the body as an object of beauty and a centre of human expression; overcoming the superstitions of a prescientific worldview and enabling a technological age; liberating humanity from prejudiced customs and political oppression. These name some landmarks in the history of philosophical endeavours aiming at emancipation. The in-between century from the mid 19th to the late 20th became the high tide of emancipatory projects, including the abolition of slavery and its racist correlates, emancipation of a working class from an ideological superstructure, emancipation of

childhood from internalisation in authoritarian educational institutions, enfranchising women and gender equality. Debates are, of course, continuing and proliferating into areas of respecting different sexual orientations, giving a voice to endangered species, future generations and entire eco-systems, or the position of Islamic cultural practices in western and mid-eastern societies.

Philosophies of emancipation in this time, such as the Frankfurt school, are theory-heavy. They centre on theory production and critique of systems (both systems of believe and political systems) and they are couched in a garb of sophisticated rhetoric that most members of the respective progressive groups could not be expected to follow. Rightly, the 20th century theorists of emancipation insisted on the political nature of scientific research and knowledge and they demasked scientific practices as part of societal power struggles. Unfortunately however, they often believed that social transformation could be wielded in discourses from within scientific institutions. Moreover, the dominant critical discourses in the 20th century between liberal and Marxist leading pundits were conducted as system debates and chiefly addressed questions of a political and economic order.

One recognisable feature of the pragmatist philosophy is the rejection of hard and fast conceptual or ideological juxtapositions. In this vein Crispin Sartwell criticises the classical political left-right spectrum, according to which state and market are imagined as opposing poles. "Squishy totalitarianism" is a label to reveal the interdependence and collaboration of state power and capitalist order.

Traditional debates focussing on system level critiques of political and economic power relations sometimes oversee the relevance of local contexts and practices in effective emancipatory endeavours, such as the role of customs, traditions and forms of aesthetic expression in guiding social change.

The pragmatist tradition offers a variety of remarkable and potentially helpful approaches in these debates, which this special issue brings together. Pragmatists seek to reconnect system level critiques with human experience, social habits and various forms of human communication. E.g. Ken Stickers asks how we can shore up the totalising tendency of capitalism, which defines all value, including the value of human life itself, in terms of capital and marketable commodities. His answer reflects on documented memories of oppressed and progressive groups, like former slaves and Haitian revolutionaries. In their accounts he finds inspirational episodes in which the experience of beauty, human courage and acts of defiance embodied resistance to a worldview that reduces human beings to a means for profit making.

Rebecca Farinas studies revolutionary transformations, namely those of the Ukrainian Maidan, in the context of religious and aesthetic experience. She links the revolutionary upheaval with lived cultural traditions, forms of expression that she finds in religious icons, which were embodied by protesters. She seeks out an intersection at James and Dewey's religious thinking, so as to synthesize James' insight of religious acceptance of our need to be emancipated from human struggles of subjective isolating states, with Dewey's theories of creative, community-oriented artistic processes. Emancipation for James and Dewey is always an ethical, social matter as well as a crucial personal and existential concern.

Pragmatists see their philosophy as a way of mediating between opposing ideologies. Sami Pihlström gives a key role to religious experience in this process. However, religion can fulfill this task only if it remains part of human experience and is not turned into an apologetic instrument of defending religious dogma. Pihlström questions in his paper whether mono-theism can help us fight evil, in that it does not pragmatically address the most urgent and compelling questions concerned with evil (and our existential condition for that matter), that

being how do we live with the evil in our lives so that we transform and change harm doing and suffering. William James' more existential moments give Pihlström opportunity to describe an emancipatory way out of excusing ourselves from dealing with evil on its own terms, as pragmatically we can emancipate our religious self awareness in terms of life as it presents itself and our meliorist attitudes.

The focus on aesthetic experience in emancipatory projects is part of the DNA of the Frankfurt School since Marcuse, Adorno, and Benjamin. Pragmatists share much of this approach. Roberta Dreon begins with thinking about beauty and life affirming qualities. For Dreon, Dewey and Marcuse, two unlikely companions in some ways, join the discussion in relation to discernment and creative aesthetic choices in living by being politically aware of the diverse nature of our everyday cultures. Although Dreon claims she can offer no solution to our global problems of an ugly, nonproductive aesthetic landscape, because of capitalist economic processes that replace aesthetically embodied artistic processes, she actually offers not merely a critique but a pragmatic melioristic analysis. By enriching practical, human relations through democracy and cultural community building, social change can happen as the focus of our ongoing histories. This course of discernment and qualification has cleared a path in commonplace experience by Berleant, as he puts forth an unapologetic critic of the contemporary "cooptation" of aesthetic resources as one that restricts and restrains human creativity, growth and profoundly meaningful interaction. Berleant impeaches the commodification, and by extension the monopolisation, of our senses by a capitalist system that found ways to manipulate our tastes, normally by means of exaggerated intensity, and reduce sensibility to means of profitmaking.

John Ryder, like Dreon, links pragmatist discourses with critical theory. Looking at the foundations of human experience in judgment Ryder sees a fault-line on the

one side of which both John Dewey and Walter Benjamin find themselves juxtaposed to James Buchler on the other. Whereas Dewey and Benjamin, in quite distinctive ways, see the judgement as an inferential capacity, Buchler widens the scope of judgment beyond the assertive to include expressive and active dimensions. This opens the door to give a new and autonomous and emancipated status to aesthetic judgments and expressive actions, alongside assertive judgments.

Aleksandra Lukaszewicz Alcaraz has traced points of connection between post-modern thinkers and pragmatism. As she looks at the links between aesthetics, art, thinking and politics. She champions Continental philosophies because they recognise art as an important form of critique and activism, thereby fighting the status quo, and she incorporates pragmatism's contribution of thinking of art as an embodied experience into her picture.

The central concept of "imagination" stakes out an original contribution the pragmatist tradition offers to the understanding of emancipation. Brendan Hogan connects classical Deweyan ideas on imagination in social analysis with contemporary thought on social imaginaries and emancipation for which he engages the contemporary philosophers Charles Taylor and James Bohman. He demonstrates that emancipatory critique of neo-liberal social structures and ideology does not need to obtain the standpoint of neo-Marxist Frankfurt school inspired ideology-critique but that it can start from situated inquiry, which relies on creative imaginative exploration and transformation of situations.

Traditional system level critiques also tend to ignore the importance of specific lower level theoretical and methodological questions. Eric Thomas Weber studies whether the evidence-based medicine (EBM) is a reductive scientific approach, exhibiting an advancing tendency to monopolise our medical practices. Does it reduce the suffering individuals, diverse therapeutic contexts, doctor patient relationships to routines and

procedures warranted by a modern statistical alchemy? Weber asks whether we need emancipation from this paradigm of evidence base medicine or whether we can find an emancipatory potential in its very methodological approach. After carefully surveying criticism that portrays EBM as a dehumanising and reductionist approach to medicine, he uses a pragmatist perspective to argue that EBM should be best understood as a tool, which, like any other tool, can be used and abused. Treated as a tool, Weber argues, EBM can avoid the pitfalls of reductionism and domineering as several EBM based studies of alternative medicine treatments demonstrate.

Finally Margolis' far-reaching exposé takes us a long way into questions of how to solve global problems. He identifies these problems as moral in nature. For Margolis, our solutions to over-arching problems (and he does mention a few in-directly, such as nuclear holocaust, as well as religious inspired terrorism and runaway capitalism as a type of warfare) are actually embedded in our histories and cultures, not in philosophical thought or even our most cherished fundamental beliefs. Agentive norms, when looked at from a cultural/historical perspective, are best served when separated from our common involvement with the human condition. Margolis suggests "second best norms" as the problem solving set of values leading us all to a better more human world. These second-best norms will find consensus within our independent histories and cultures through understanding that treatises, solutions, and moral grounds are always a matter of our shifting evolutionary landscapes. Solutions of emancipation come not from philosophical ideologies, but for Margolis they come from a fuller understanding of ourselves and others, as human beings, as we encourage the positive possibilities we can hold in common, thereby propelling ourselves forward to our futures. The anti-perfectionist yet meliorist approach is a red thread that runs through the pragmatist tradition and sets it apart from many other philosophies of emancipation, and it holds a

potential that may stimulate further debates on emancipation. These debates, if we dare to make a prediction, will not fade from public attention but take centre stage in the coming decades.

Reflecting back on the passionate delivery of these contributions at the NYC conference (only one paper in this edition was not presented *in situ*), we remember how their originality inspired many lively debates. Now, having collected them for the journal edition, we can also see how certain themes coalesce. We marked out four overarching themes so as to organize this special issue: 1) Emancipation and religious experience; 2) Imagination, Art and the corruption of sensibility; 3) Politics, economics and social ethics; 4) Experience, action and inference.

The NYC conference that led to this issue could not have taken place without the vision and generosity of many people, foremost among them Judith Greene, Leszek Koczanowicz, Kenneth Stickers, and Aleksandra Lukaszewicz Alcaraz. This edition of *Pragmatism Today* represents some of the fruits of this conference, forwarded in the hope that it does more than to conclude and document an event. With this issue we intend to open opportunities for renewed inquiry into emancipation and the still underestimated contribution that pragmatist philosophies can make to this fleet of themes and problems.