

Ángel M. Faerna*

Ulf Zackariasson (ed.), *Action, Belief and Inquiry: Pragmatist Perspectives on Science, Society and Religion*, Nordic Studies in Pragmatism 3, Helsinki, Nordic Pragmatism Network, 2015, 320 pp.

This book bears witness to the wide range of topics of philosophical interest in which classical as well as contemporary pragmatist philosophers are involved, or to which they have made durable contributions, or simply on which they have an original word to say. Reading the headings of the six parts that make up this volume – Democracy, Normativity, Religion, Action and Habit, Inquiry, and Ontology and Meaning – one has the feeling that no other philosophical movement of the present can afford to provide distinctive, if plural perspectives on such a variety of discussions as this book encompasses; a feeling that gets even deeper when one considers that the list of topics could have been made longer easily by including sections such as on pragmatist ethics, education, philosophy of law, or aesthetics.

The three essays collected under the heading “Democracy,” by Mats Bergman, Torjus Midtgarden, and Jón Ólafsson hinge mainly on John Dewey, as everyone would expect. Now, Midtgarden and Ólafsson evade the usual approaches that insist on the unconventional, not ‘narrowly political’ sense of Dewey’s talk of democracy, and – assuming rightly that this is not a reason for dodging direct questions – they confront Dewey with hot topics of contemporary political theory such as liberalism versus communitarianism, pluralism versus multiculturalism, or activism versus institutionalism. As a prior question, the opening essay by Mats Bergman (“Minimal Meliorism: Finding a Balance between Conservative and Progressive Pragmatism”) accounts for the traditional association of pragmatist philosophy with the political ideals of human amelioration and social reform. While this association has good grounds, it raises at least two difficulties. First, those ideals seem at odds with Charles S. Peirce’s conception of philosophy as a non-utilitarian endeavour – i.e. as a purely theoretical activity disconnected of practical concerns –, a point that has led many scholars to the (all too) convenient expedient of splitting pragmatism into a ‘conservative’ and a ‘progressive’ wing. Second, it is not clear whether the reliance of pragmatist thinkers on experimental methods and scientific rationality would not incline their reformism toward a regrettable sort of social engineering that favors authoritarian rather than truly democratic policies. Bergman provides a nuanced discussion of (scientific, societal, metaphysical) meliorism and points to a balance between “the social-melioristic and scientific-conservative temperaments” (25) as a way to overcome the above difficulties and to preserve and improve the transformative impulse of the pragmatic tradition as a whole. Torjus Midtgarden (“John Dewey and Democratic Participation under Modern Conditions”) brings some traits of Dewey’s social ontology – especially, his category of ‘the public(s)’ – to the fore of the contemporary debate on the crisis of representative democracy. Dewey’s insistence on communication and cooperation as the very essence of a democratic society is, though inspired in the old Jeffersonian ideal of direct interactions among members of local communities, still relevant to apprehend the present gap between civil society and the institutional structure, where individuals fail to make their demands bear on politics

* Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha [angel.faerna@uclm.es]

and legislation. Moreover, the new era of communication technology may open unexpected possibilities to realize Dewey's idea of a "cooperative inquiry through cognitive division of labour" (39) between lay agents and social scientists, as some recent social movements may illustrate. Jón Ólafsson ("Democracy and the Problem of Pluralism: John Dewey Revisited") poses a central question in order to assess what democracy is, or should be, according to different traditions in current political theory: is democracy a "form of life" that commits individuals to a particular set of values, or is it only a "procedural device" in order to deal with the diversity of value-options that coexist in modern societies? Ólafsson argues cleverly that this dichotomy – 'moral' vs 'political' conceptions of democracy – reveals its limitations when applied to Dewey. When commentators criticize Deweyan democracy for being just a moral doctrine deprived of rational cogency (on liberal grounds) within pluralistic societies, they overlook the epistemic component involved in Dewey's approach – a component that defies simplistic oppositions such as morality versus reasonableness, valuations versus procedures, leading a meaningful life versus engaging in decision- and policy-making. When this fundamental epistemic side of the democratic rationale is taken into account the idea that Dewey's theory does not fulfill the demands of public reason – i.e. that it only commends itself on moral grounds – fails, for "the diversity of valuations broadens the cognitive base of democratic choice and thus feed[s] into a liberal conception of democracy, rather than a communitarian notion of the good" (52).

Part II is devoted to questions on "Normativity." Henrik Rydenfelt ("Pragmatism, Objectivity and Normative Realism") and Pentti Määttänen ("Naturalism and Normativity in Pragmatism") address this topic as it is discussed in two different theoretical contexts: the semantics of value judgments (usually called 'meta-ethics' by analytic philosophers) and philosophical naturalism in its connection to norms and valuations, respectively. As for the latter, the pragmatic solution to the 'fact-value problem' is presented as depending on a crucial shift that Peirce and Dewey made in the way philosophers used to deal with it: instead of presuming that human beings are mental entities confronted to an external physical reality – a picture that makes it almost impossible to conceive values as something more than subjective, mental responses to objective, physical facts –, they took the active organism interacting with the environment as the proper 'unit of analysis.' Määttänen explains how this shift helps introduce teleological features in nature and treat values as natural entities in a sense that should not be controversial *prima facie* for naturalist philosophers. Then Rydenfelt's contribution could be read as the transposition of this very same point to the more intricate scenario of semantic theory (to reverse the order of these two chapters would have been probably an editorial improvement). His defense of realism concerning normative or moral judgments dispenses with representationalism – the semantic counterpart of the mental/physical picture – and adopts Huw Price's "global expressivist perspective." "Global" means here that normative and non-normative claims are put on the same foothold, therefore such perspective does not amount to anti-cognitivism but rather to a re-description of cognitive relations that gets by without the representational picture. Rydenfeldt's contention is that although

expressivism usually risks collapse into a historicist form of relativism of the sort promoted by Richard Rorty, this can be avoided if we complement it with a Peircean account of truth as the aim of inquiry – an account that preserves realism (in its ‘hypothetical’ variation) without falling back into the representationalist view. This move brings Peirce, by Rydenfeldt’s lights, closer to Robert Brandom’s assessment of objectivity “as a normative standard of our assertoric practices rather than by (for the most part) invoking traditional realist notions” (80).

The two contributions to Part III, “Religion,” share the view that pragmatism’s best service to this subject is to blaze a trail between traditionally irreconcilable positions such as theism/atheism, fideism/evidentialism, spiritualism/rationalism, and so on. William James’s ascendancy on this opinion is of course unquestionable, and both Ulf Zackariasson (“A Skeptical Pragmatic Engagement with Skeptical Theism”) and Sami Pihlström (“Objectivity in Pragmatist Philosophy of Religion”) draw heavily on him. Zackariasson focuses on a well delimited topic, namely the problem of evil as a persistent challenge to theology – and why a recent response to it, labelled ‘skeptical theism,’ should be rejected by pragmatists – whilst Pihlström elaborates more fully on the possibilities opened by pragmatist conceptions of belief, objectivity, rationality, or inquiry (together with some recourse to modern theories of recognition) to unblock entrenched disagreements and favor more promising discussions between believers and non-believers. Both essays ably show the capacity of pragmatist ways of thinking to combat reductionisms, and in the specific case of religious belief to develop a sensitivity to its multiple human dimensions. Nonetheless, they also could be charged with a reproach that reaches back to James himself, namely a tendency to overemphasize the goods that religious beliefs bring to believers’ lives. Zackariasson, for instance, invokes Hume and Kant in support of the pragmatist persuasion that religion cannot be treated as a strictly cognitive affair (141, 143). From this persuasion, both Kant and James set out to look for justification of religious ideas (God, immortality) in the practical use of reason, i.e. in their role as necessary conditions for a conscientious moral life. In James’s case the argument did not adopt a transcendental form, of course, but was intended to rest on human experience only. Hence for pragmatists it is an empirical question whether religious belief fosters or, on the contrary, impedes human flourishing, the latter being the conclusion that Hume himself obtained, and such empirical question deserves an examination more detailed, and ‘polyphonic,’ so to say, than it receives here. In other words, the pragmatic justification of atheism seems at least as viable *prima facie* as the pragmatic justification of theism does, and this quandary cannot be solved by philosophical argument only. A second difficulty in these efforts to overcome the theism/atheism-debate and “to see religious believers and atheists as fellow inquirers” – as Zackariasson puts it following Pihlström – is that they tend to underemphasize the imperativeness that is peculiar to religious belief as such. This may not be so important when “the paradigmatic responses transmitted via religious rites, symbols, myths and stories are actually very similar to the paradigmatic responses transmitted in analogous ways in [many very] different non-religious ideologies and humanistic outlooks” (127), but it becomes a major problem when it is *not* so – and note that it is only when it is not so that the theism/atheism-debate

has practical bearings. Again, the objection can be traced back to William James, who seems to have considered religion under an excessively benevolent light. As Ramón del Castillo observes in a recent study: “Some believers would thank James for defending their right to partake in public life without concealing their beliefs. An all too different thing is that they would be ready to obey anything but the will of their respective Gods. James’s [polytheistic] experimentalism presupposes to some extent what it is intended to foster: tolerance.”¹

The essays presented in Part IV (“Action and Habit”) are specially recommendable to those who wrongly think that pragmatism’s main point is basically easy to grasp, and accordingly easy to dismiss. ‘Action’ and ‘habit’ are recurrent expressions in pragmatist literature, but they have misled critics and even followers who take them in their customary sense, which is rooted in mind/body dualism. Erkki Kilpinen’s “Habit, Action, and Knowledge from the Pragmatist Perspective” is an insightful exposition of the change operated by classical pragmatists – the author calls it “a Copernican revolution” with good reason – in the traditional understanding of habit and its relation to action and intentionality. Here Määttä’s above remarks on the new ‘unit of analysis’ established by Peirce and Dewey are pertinent once more. The ‘revolutionary’ view is nicely condensed by Kilpinen in a Kant-like fashion – “intentionality without habituality is empty, habituality without intentionality is blind” (160) – and is shown to have received empirical confirmation from ongoing developments in cognitive- and brain-science. After the pragmatist reconceptualization, actions appear as secondary to habits – indeed, they exemplify habits –, where habits are not mindless routines but mind’s “vehicles of cognition” (160, a term borrowed from Määttä). In a similar vein, Matz Hammarström (“On the Concepts of Trans-action and Intra-action”) insists on the relational character of human action in order to transcend the idea that the agent and what is acted upon are separated, self-contained beings. Dewey used the term ‘trans-action’ to describe the process of knowing as something that involves the full situation of organism-environment, not a mere inter-action between two independent entities, say, the observer and the object observed. Hammarström makes this epistemological point into an onto-epistemological one by appealing to Karen Barad’s sophisticated concept of ‘intra-action’, originally developed in the philosophy of physics to deal with such problems as the Bohr-Heisenberg debate on the interpretation of quantum mechanics. Thus both Kilpinen’s and Hammarström’s papers point at interesting convergences between important pragmatist insights and empirical science. Frank Martela’s “Pragmatism as an Attitude” is written in a very different key. It builds on the idea that pragmatism is not primarily a theory but an attitude in philosophy, and aims consequently at identifying its actual content. Martela contends that this conception of what pragmatism is was endorsed equally by Peirce, James, Dewey, and Schiller, but this may be objectionable. For instance, it is not clear that when Peirce and Dewey speak of pragmatism as ‘a method’ they are conveying exactly the same idea as James does when he speaks of “a temper of mind” (188, 192). Anyway, Martela’s description of the ‘pragmatist attitude’ identifies central

1. Ramón del Castillo, (2015), *William James*, Barcelona, RBA, 141 (my translation).

features (experimentalism, anti-absolutism, fallibilism, orientation to outcomes and consequences, acknowledgement of contingency in experience and of our relation to the world as primarily practical and oriented by human interests) that no one would deny to be typically pragmatist. To say that “these beliefs are what we find at the beginning of the philosophical journey of a pragmatist [...] not the results of a rigorous philosophical inquiry” (197) is probably right in many cases. From this the author concludes that pragmatism will remain unattractive to those who do not embrace the same beliefs. Now, not all pragmatists will find this sort of psychologism convincing, for beliefs can be changed by experience and reasoning and also by philosophical argument. This is why Peirce added, after acknowledging the humanistic element that F. C. S. Schiller associated with pragmatism, that he did not think “that the doctrine can be *proved* in that way” (198, n. 6). Martela creates what in my view is an unnecessary and unfair divide when he writes: “This *more humane* approach to philosophy may not be as exact, analytic or confident as the more idealized way of doing philosophy. But I see it to be a more honest way of doing philosophy, and less an intellectual escape from the particularities of human life” (204).

“Inquiry,” the topic dealt with in Part V, is arguably what pragmatism is all about in the end. It was to gain a better understanding of our inquisitive activities as natural beings in all kind of settings that classical pragmatists set out to revise traditional notions of truth, knowledge, thinking, and so on. Accordingly, pragmatism is not so much concerned with epistemology than with logic, if we take logic in the Aristotelian sense as the proper method of inquiring. In this connection, Peirce’s doubt-belief approach to inquiry and Dewey’s treatment of reasoning as a problem-solving task are admittedly the two milestones of pragmatist logic, and the essays in this section revolve around them. Sami Paavola (“Deweyan Approaches to Abduction?”) and Lauri Järvillehto (“The Role of Intuition in Inquiry”) tackle the most intriguing stage of thought, i.e. the process that leads from the statement of a problem to a hypothesis that would solve it. It is intriguing because hypothesis formation is not governed by inductive or deductive reasoning, and this seems to consign this crucial stage of inquiry to psychology rather than logic. Paavola compares Peirce’s concept of ‘abduction’ with Dewey’s characterization of ‘reflective thought’ on this point. Though the differences are clear – Peirce is more interested in identifying the logical element in the process, whilst Dewey takes it mostly as non-inferential and focuses on the dynamics of ‘working hypotheses’ –, similarities and continuities are significant: “The nature of abduction was a constant question for Peirce, and his formulations of abduction were often close to many ‘psychological processes’ like perception, instinct, guessing or insight. On the other hand, Dewey’s ideas about the role of hypotheses, suggestions, or ideas as a part of processes of inquiry are quite close to Peirce’s” (246). Guesswork is precisely the subject of Järvillehto’s contribution. Taking advantage of pragmatism’s commitment to naturalism, he bypasses the psychological/logical dichotomy and discusses the point in terms of empirical studies of the human mind. Although the dichotomy may persist as a conceptual problem, its philosophical implications are somewhat defused when one learns that some models of brain functioning – in this case, the dual-processing theory of thought –

afford viable explanations of how ‘intuitive’ and ‘discursive’ operations coexist and interplay in one and the same brain/mind. Besides, Järvillehto’s piece is in itself a nice illustration of the non-vicious circle of naturalism: it is only natural that we can use our minds to form hypotheses about how our minds manage to form hypotheses by and large. Margareta Bertilsson, for her part, introduces pragmatist themes in her rich, thoughtful reflection on the theory of explanation (“On Why’s, How’s, and What’s – Why What’s Matter”). Ever since Peirce remarked that even perceptual judgments can rest on abductive inference, that is, that hypotheses are involved even in stating *what is there* as a matter of bare perception (hypotheses that are extremely fallible, by the way), pragmatist philosophers have insisted that fact-descriptions, far from being the starting point of inquiry and explanation, are integral to it and, in a sense, they constitute its final result. Therefore, the traditional emphasis on why’s and how’s as the key questions in explanation, scientific or within daily affairs, should be corrected: “Inquiry starts out with a bothering *What* irritating us, as we do not quite know what is going on; but the end of inquiry might also be a more informed *What*, now in the form of a more ripe hypothesis as to what goes on. In relation to the Why’s and the How’s, What’s appear to us as infinitely open-ended, as a point of reference in which interlocutors in a dialogue help finding a common ground of reference so as to secure further (inter)action” (216). Bertilsson reveals the special benefits of this view to recurrent methodological debates in the philosophy of social sciences, where “the eruptive division [...] between structure and agency, constraints and choice, because-of vs. in-order-to motives” (218) creates deep divisions among inquirers as to what social science events are and what counts as explanations of them. (Again, I think that placing Bertilsson’s chapter at the end of this section, not at the beginning, would have formed a better sequence.)

Answers to What’s questions are the domain of ontology, thus if pragmatism sees What’s as infinitely open-ended, as Bertilsson puts it, then one can ask exactly in what relation pragmatist philosophy stands to ontological theory. This problem is discussed in Part VI (“Ontology and Meaning”) in the language-centered manner that is characteristic of analytic philosophers, and of analytically-oriented pragmatist philosophers – often called ‘neopragmatists’ – at that. The problem at hand could be phrased as follows: if ontology – or, to use its other name, metaphysics – is an inquiry into what *really* is, most generally speaking and without reference to particular observations that are always conditioned and, at best, partial, and if pragmatism dismisses absolute views and unconditioned truths altogether, then should not pragmatists reject metaphysics as a whole? Bjørn Ramberg (“Method and Metaphysics: Pragmatist Doubts”) reminds us, however, that “metaphysics belongs to metaphysics” (275), i.e. that the impugnation of metaphysics is in itself a metaphysical statement, for in saying what metaphysics is, even to reject it, one must engage the blatantly metaphysical distinction between appearance and reality. Now, there is a sort of ontological theorizing, Heikki J. Koskinen suggests in “On Quine’s Pragmatic Conception of Ontology,” that can do without essentialism and “global realism” (the idea that ontology depicts the mind-independent structure of reality), this theorizing being perfectly within the limits of naturalism, empiricism, fallibilism,

and rational responsibility that pragmatism imposes on us. One can see Ramberg's non-metaphysical reading of Donald Davidson along these lines: Davidson's attempt to find out the large features of reality by studying the general structure of our language can be co-opted by pragmatists "once [the ascent to explanatory generality] is decoupled from the representationalist framework, from the idea that we are specifying features of global out-looks, features that must be true of any such [global out-look]. There may be, as Davidson acknowledges, many lines of ascent to generality, different ways of specifying structure – what we must turn our backs on is the idea that they will take us from what merely appears to us to be so to what is really real" (277). Once traditional metaphysics is deprived of its representationalist (essentialist, absolutist) pretensions, it loses all that makes the pragmatist stand against it and can be *transformed*, Ramberg holds following Rorty, in a useful tool for 'cultural politics,' i.e. for freeing ourselves of philosophical views that diminish "our active participation in, and thus our willingness and ability to take responsibility for, any particular rendering of our relations to the world, to each other, and to ourselves" (277) and replace them with more promising views. Davidson's final picture of language as communicative encounters between 'idiolects,' where no shared, global view of things is required and meanings are somehow negotiated among participants, would be one of those views (note the parallelism with what Bertilsson says about "finding a common ground of reference so as to secure further (inter)action." This picture, however, is questioned by Jonathan Knowles in "Davidson versus Chomsky: The Case of Shared Languages." Knowles argues that Davidson fails to prove that his semantics escape the commitment to irreducibly shared meaning. This would show that "there must be something wrong with Davidson's overall or 'ideological' approach to language and communication, and – assuming that the more general objections to shared languages proffered by Chomsky, and which I take Davidson would endorse, are essentially correct – that there is reason to think that Chomsky's overall view instead is on the right track" (304). This debate, I would say, involves a wider confrontation between two different understandings of what is at issue in the idea of naturalizing not only language but philosophy in general, an idea that is central to pragmatism. Chomsky's overall or ideological view sees language as "a specific neural capacity of human beings that manifests itself in our behavior and our conscious intuitions" (317), thus giving pride of place to natural science. Davidson's approach, in Ramberg's interpretation at least, points at something different, an ideological view closer to what Dewey called 'cultural naturalism.' Looking back at the discussions of the preceding sections – specially those in Parts II, IV and V –, one gets the impression that pragmatist philosophers are more akin to the second 'ideological' view, for the ontology they commit to admits such entities as publics, values, habits, ends, that can hardly be tackled by natural sciences – though, of course, they are not intended to challenge them either. This cultural naturalism may be reassured or not by a particular rendering of language, but its entrenchment in pragmatism seems solid.