

REVIEW

Colin Koopman, *Pragmatism as Transition: Historicity and Hope in James, Dewey, and Rorty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), ISBN: 978-0231148740

Pragmatism as Transition calls for an *Aufhebung* of previous paradigms in classical American thought. Koopman's "transitionalist pragmatism moves beyond both linguistic pragmatism and experiential pragmatism in a way that preserves the best insights of each." (179-180) Therefore, it seeks both a critique and a renewal of pragmatist thought; in other words, Koopman calls for a reconstruction of pragmatism along genealogical lines. Linguistic pragmatism is represented by Neopragmatists such as Richard Rorty, Hilary Putnam, and Jürgen Habermas (those who have made the vaunted linguistic turn), while the experience paradigm governs the thought of the original pragmatists, especially James and Dewey, understood as defenders of experiential pragmatism, with Rorty understood as primary defender of the linguistic variety (though Koopman mentions Peirce, Emerson, and Thoreau, they are not the focus of his study).

While this may be a worthy project, it would seem to have little to do with the work of Michel Foucault save for the fact that Koopman's transitionalist pragmatism provides for a big tent pragmatism, one that includes the likes of Bernard Williams (whose reservations with regard to Rorty's work are perhaps too quickly dismissed), as well as Pierre Bourdieu and Hans-Georg Gadamer, and, yes, Michel Foucault. We discover at the conclusion of the book that Foucault and Dewey need each other, or at least genealogy and pragmatism need to supplement one another. I will return to the question of whether such co-dependence is a good thing in my conclusion. In the meantime, I will briefly sketch Koopman's argument before turning to his treatment of Foucault's genealogy understood under the rubric of Transitionalist Pragmatism. Transitionalist Pragmatism can best be understood as "meliorist cultural criticism," that is, the various concrete ways that "philosophy can help us improve those situations in which we find ourselves." (5) I am not altogether certain that Foucault was on board for such a Deweyan-Rortyeen program. Furthermore, this book is sure to disappoint those readers of Foucault's work who are not interested in Classical American Philosophy, as Foucault does not figure prominently in the text (indeed, his work is not discussed until the final fifteen pages of the book, although Koopman lists a forthcoming study on Foucault's genealogical method that promises to develop the work begun here). That said, for readers interested in American philosophy, Koopman presents a worthy reconstruction of pragmatist themes.

The experiential paradigm characterized the work of the classical pragmatists. Upon this view, experience becomes a primitive term, so the task of the pragmatist philosopher is to make sense of it. The problem as Koopman sees it (and he's certainly not alone here) is that this term comes to serve as something more than a beginning point for philosophical inquiry by becoming an inescapable metaphysical foundation, what Dewey decries as an inescapable quest for certainty. More specifically, the problems with experience lie in what Koopman terms "the high modern triumvirate of givenism, representationalism, and foundationalism." (186) Proponents of the linguistic paradigm begin by pointing out the problems with these three bugbears, and propose the mediation of language as an antidote (think for example of Rorty's anti-foundationalist work in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* or Sellars' arguments against the myth of the given). Koopman argues that the linguistic cure proposed by its proponents is at least as bad as the disease of givenism.

While Rorty and other neopragmatists do away with the myth of the given, in rendering experience language all they way down they neglect the realm of practices. It was no accident that Rorty was fond of Gadamer's line "Being that can be understood is language" (cited by Koopman, 122), nor was it happenstance that the linguistic turn shared much with the hermeneutic phenomenology of Gadamer:

Gadamer's argument against foundationalist epistemology, like Rorty's, took its cue in part from Heidegger's radicalization of the basic hermeneutic situation. This radicalization consisted in showing that all understanding is historically situated such that temporal finitude is taken as a basic context for human understanding. This perspective enables us to see that the foundationalist attempt to ground knowledge in something universal and unchanging is not only impossible but also unnecessary: Gadamer, also like Rorty, takes this Heideggerian radicalization as resulting in the idea that all understanding is linguistic. (122)

Of course, the problem here is that Rorty comes perilously close to rendering language another sort of foundation, similar to the role that experience played in the work of the classico-pragmatists. At the very least, defenders of the linguistic paradigm exclude other types of experience with little good reason. Koopman's transitionalist pragmatism will effect a return to experience, but not experience understood as an origin. Experience should be understood as multivalent, rather than the singular origin of experience. Inquiry occurs within experience, but not as a result of it. I suspect that on this point Koopman may be accused of setting up the classical pragmatist as a Rorty-inspired straw man. Certainly Dewey scholars will protest that Dewey conceived experience along non-foundationalist lines, and not without some justification. Another possible line of objection will likely come from Peirceans who argue that non-foundationalist realism is a live possibility. Koopman has cleverly framed his discussion in terms of reconstruction, which allows him to simultaneously critique and extend the analyses of predecessors such as Dewey, Rorty, and Peirce.

Although I have focussed thus far on the epistemological issues at stake in *Pragmatism as Transition*, Koopman presents transitional pragmatism as a tonic to cure the ills that befall pragmatists working in ethics and political philosophy as well. Transitionalist pragmatism manifests

itself in ethics as Stanley Cavell-inspired perfectionism. This serves as a way through the impasse posed by modern moral philosophy, with utilitarians on one side and Kantians on the other. But the problem is that deontology and consequentialism need one another—they're incomplete:

Cavell says that he does not "coceive of [perfectionism] as an alternative to Kantianism or Utilitarianism." Rather, perfectionism makes room for, and stimulates us to, both teleology [Koopman unaccountably labels what most ethical theorists understand as consequentialism as teleology, but this conflates virtue-based ethical theories with consequentialist ones] and deontology, but without insisting that one of these approaches exclude the other. [...] The idea is simply that teleology and deontology do not by themselves capture everything of ethical importance. (146)

Cavell's perfectionist ethics focuses on transformation rather than present or past conditions. It is an open project of perfecting that is in principle without end. There are interesting parallels between Foucault's ethical project and Cavell's, but Koopman does not pursue them here.

In political philosophy, pragmatists generally seek a middle way between appeals to tradition found among conservatives and the revolutionary praxis characteristic of the Left. "The pragmatist and the conservative draw two quite different lessons in their respective affirmations of reformism as potentially radical and necessarily conservative. The conservative urges that we ought not to engage in too much purposive political change (in the name of ethical ideals, for instance) lest we interfere with the invisible hand set in motion by the transparent cunning of reason. The pragmatist urges by contrast that an evolutionist conception of political reason shows us precisely the terrain on which ethical interventions into political realities ought to be situated: within the domain of political reality itself." (164) Such a middle way goes by the name of meliorism. In other words, the pragmatist seeks out concrete solutions for concrete problems. Indeed, if one were so crass as to reduce Koopman's interesting book to a bumper sticker slogan, that would be it. And here is where Dewey needs Foucault. Koopman argues that the problem with Dewey's conception of meliorism is that it is short on concreteness when it comes to problems. Dewey is fine with solutions, but vague when it comes to description of the various problems that arise in the course of individual and social existence. This is where Foucault comes in, for Foucault saves Dewey from conceiving the problematic situation as a vague given. More specifically, Foucault's genealogies save Dewey's pragmatism.

From the standpoint of Foucault scholarship, this is unsatisfying for at least two reasons: first it reduces Foucault's thought to a supplement of Dewey's work. Regardless of whether this was Koopman's intent, it is the result. In Koopman's defense, he never claimed to be writing a book on Foucault, but this result limits the effectiveness of Koopman's work for Foucault scholars. Secondly, in taking up Foucault's work and focusing on his genealogy, *Pragmatism as Transition* reduces Foucault to his genealogies, which comprise a relatively small group of Foucault's *oeuvre*. Furthermore, I am not certain that Foucault's work can be described as

meliorist in any meaningful sense. While Koopman's book is well-written and valuable for students of American pragmatism, it is unfortunately of little value for Foucault scholars.

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