

BOOK MARKS

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Book Review

John Dewey's Ethics: Democracy as Experience.

Pappas, Gregory Fernando.

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\$65.00 (cloth); \$24.95 (paper).

To say that this volume accurately represents John Dewey's ethics would be something of an insult given the fact that, for scholars such as Pappas who are sympathetic to Deweyan pragmatism, the test of a philosophy, a theory of ethics or, in this case, a book of criticism is whether or not it enriches and expands our experience. It is certainly the case that Gregory Pappas never strays far from the pragmatic insight that is central to Dewey's method of *empirical naturalism*: "A genuine empiricism in philosophy entails that, no matter how abstract and remote our philosophical speculations might turn out, we need to start and end with directly experienced subject matter. As Dewey explains it, experience is a 'starting point and terminal point, as setting problems and testing proposed solutions'" (20). Those who would read Pappas's work must necessarily alter their critical expectations accordingly. The issue at hand is not whether he has gotten Dewey right once and for all. Rather, the question is this: in what ways might scholars find Pappas' volume useful?

Pappas wisely organizes his study into three sections. By his own admission, each of the sections can be used somewhat differently. The first three chapters fall under the section entitled "Moral Theory and Experience." Here Pappas attempts to acquaint his reader an overview of what we might now call Dewey's meta-ethical commitments. On the one hand, he avoids the temptation to simply enact the relatively opaque discourse of *empirical naturalism*, a tendency that marks many of the major studies of Dewey's ethics. On the other, Pappas refuses to turn Dewey over

to the taxonomy of –isms that populate the terrain of Anglo-American meta-ethics. Instead, the reader is left with the impression that Dewey's ethics must never be artificially lifted from the pragmatic, contextualist logic that characterizes his empirical naturalism. This negotiation is for the best, for if one is really interested in putting Dewey to use, one must begin by recognizing that his ethics are always, already meta-ethical. As Pappas puts it,

Dewey's empirical method has significant implications about the resources and limits of philosophical inquiry and criticism. Argumentation and logical rigor continue to be important, but there is also the requirement of adequacy to experience, a requirement that introduces a way of evaluating philosophical hypotheses that can be both a strength and liability of pragmatism. Dewey rejects commonplace assumptions in ethics because they are not based in his everyday primary experience, and he doubts that they are a part of the primary experience of other ethical theorists. This is a good reason for Dewey to reject entire views, even when they are impeccably well argued and meet all possible objections. (25)

In other words, the dialectical to-and-fro found in philosophy journals too often responds only to the relatively narrow experiences of academics working in even narrower academic contexts. The purpose of Dewey's pragmatic, empirically natural reconstruction of ethical theory is, on Pappas' account, to convert ethical reflection into an instrument or organ which, in turn, provides individuals and communities the means to fruitfully reconstruct their experiences. As he carefully translates the meta-ethical implications of this stance, Pappas imaginatively brings Dewey's thought into conversation with other contemporary figures which include Richard Rorty, Hillary Putnam, Alasdair McIntyre, R. M. Hare, Michael Stocker and Bernard Williams. These comparisons provide the reader who is unfamiliar with Dewey's empirical naturalism and pragmatism more generally with a much-needed map, one which quickly and effectively situates his thought within the wider scope of meta-ethical theory. Thus the first section alone should prove more than useful to those who desire a brief but thorough sense of how Dewey may relate to the variety of contemporary meta-ethical positions now extant.

The second section of Pappas's study, entitled "Dewey's View of Moral Experience" treats, over the course of six chapters, what might be best described as the descriptive component of Dewey's ethics, or, in the language of empirical naturalism, the *generic traits* of moral situations as they are experienced. Unlike Jennifer Welchman's chronologically-organized study, *Dewey's Ethical Thought* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), which traces the development of Dewey's ethics from his early idealism to the formulation of empirical naturalism, this section of Pappas's work marshals the full scope of Dewey's writings in order to support the relatively mature ethical thought that follows from his radical reconstruction of philosophy in *Experience and Nature* (1925). The central text for Pappas is Dewey's address to the French Philosophical Society in 1930, "Three Independent Factors in Morals," wherein Dewey maintains that the Aristotelian tradition's emphasis on virtue and character, the Kantian tradition's emphasis on duty and obligation and the utilitarian's emphasis on consequences all point to valued generic traits that are present in the foreground of so-called moral experiences, that is to say, experiences where a problematic situation presents the question, what ought one to do?

According to Pappas, Dewey's key insight is that, if moral experience is confronted honestly, then it appears that, not only is it impossible to ultimately subordinate one generic trait to another, but it is often the case that these three factors will remain irreducibly divergent. As a result, moral philosophers ought to recognize that imaginative judgment is central to our attempts to balance and perhaps practically resolve the conflicts inherent in moral experience. Pappas explains that, if Dewey is right, then moral philosophers must abandon the artificially abstract dialectics that mark much of contemporary moral theory and instead engage in the project of rendering traditional moral theories into instrumentalities capable of improving one's ability to critically judge moral situations. This is all to say that progress in moral philosophy is not to be measured in relation to the relatively narrow problems of philosophers but in constructing tools that allow human beings to improve the functional balance between means and ends within common moral experience. It is certainly clear that Pappas's account lends itself immediately to the task of pre-empting the all-too-common reduction of pragmatist ethics to consequentialism, emotivism or subjectivism.

More exciting is Pappas' suggestion that, once Dewey's ethics are fully understood and appreciated, the self-image of ethics and moral philosophy may undergo radical transformation. For example, applied ethics may find in Pappas's account of Dewey's ethics a logic of moral inquiry that occasions an enduring transition from the remote dialectics of casuistry to a model of inquiry that fully appreciates the value of narrative ethics.

The final four chapters of Pappas's study are organized under the title "The Ideal Moral Life." Here he moves beyond the merely descriptive to the normative in an attempt to adumbrate Dewey's conception of the good life. Drawing from several texts, Pappas works up an original list of Deweyan virtues or instrumental habits and dispositions that must be in place to lead a life characterized by an ever-widening moral and aesthetic balance. The list includes openness and courage, sensitivity and conscientiousness and sympathy. As the self widens to include concern beyond the familiar and local, Pappas concludes, "The self lives through and by social relations. This has significant implications for how an ethics should formulate its normative prescriptions and hypotheses. An account of Dewey's ideal character would be incomplete if it left out the kind of relationship and community it assumes. Dewey's ideal character has to be envisioned in the context of an ideal net of interactions that Dewey qualified as democratic" (216). Thus Pappas attempts to work out the meaning of a belief held by Dewey throughout his career; namely, that democracy ought not be conceived as a form of political organization so much as ought to be seen as a way of life or an *ethos*.

In relation to the precariousness that characterizes our moral experiences, Dewey's ethical account of democracy, as presented by Pappas, exhibits a relatively stable way of experiencing, valuing and communicating with others that eschews aboriginal hierarchy. Far too many critics have mistaken Dewey's ethics and politics for theories in the traditional sense and have simply overlooked the fact that they should be understood as overlapping ideals or instruments that function within experience. Because of this mistake, his ethics and politics are often violently forced into a pattern of inquiry that is reminiscent of a contractarian logic of inquiry which derives political norms from a wider set of ethical norms in spite of the fact that, on several occasions, Dewey explicitly critiqued such a logic.

So Pappas rightfully characterizes the relationship between the Dewey's ethics and politics, not as one of implication, but as one of co-implication or, better yet, cooperation between ideals. Put simply, you cannot have a contextualist theory of ethics that purports to be responsible to common experience without first specifying, at least in general terms, what might count as a legitimate context. This insight alone should prove itself useful as way of challenging the prevalent division of academic labor which unreflectively enacts assumptions about the relationship between moral and political thought.

In the final analysis, Pappas's careful study of Dewey's ethical philosophy forcefully promotes the hypothesis that the habits and dispositions that enable professional academic specialists to prevail in the dialectical struggles currently animating journals of philosophy, professional conferences and graduate seminars may ironically be the very same habits and dispositions that are contributing to the increasing insularity and, perhaps, cultural obsolescence of ethical and moral philosophy more generally. That said, Pappas find alternative resources in Dewey's philosophy for reconstructing the profession provided that the profession is willing to reorganize itself around the problematic situations that characterize common experience as it is crudely undergone.

Biographical Sketch

Erik R. Anderson locates himself within the tradition of Classical American Philosophy. His dissertation research explores the democratic significance of the performative dimension of John Dewey's philosophy.