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Review of “Pragmatism, Postmodernism, and the Future of Philosophy”

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Book Review

Pragmatism, Postmodernism, and the Future of Philosophy, John J. Stuhr. Routledge Publications, New York, New York, 2003, xii + 205pp., Index, ISBN: 0-415-93967-4, 0-415-93968-2 (pbk).

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Overview

As the image of Hercules wielding his mighty club suggests on the cover, John Stuhr argues that nothing less than a cultural, intellectual, and educational revolution is needed to transform philosophy, society, and each of us individually, into people of action rather than people of empty words, theories, and doctrines. In Stuhr's view, academic philosophy is, for the vast majority of people living on this planet, a dead and irrelevant pursuit taken up by scholars who preach endlessly to other scholars on arcane and abstruse topics through the vehicle of technical journals and books that few will read, and fewer still can understand. As Stuhr writes in comical fashion, "The demand for philosophers...is only marginally higher than that for, say, cobblers, ice miners, alchemists, and certified phrenologists." Yet philosophers both past and present *peddle* their wares as products of unmitigated truth, as justified belief, as foundational, epistemological bedrock, as transcendent to the author who produces them. Stuhr argues that philosophy is storytelling, but marketed as having passed "the truth inspectors of the truth industry." Not unlike the cola-wars, philosophers erect their systems and compete for intellectual market-share, pronounce their product to be *better* than their competitor's, but also look with contempt upon those who disagree. This pervasive attitude in much of academic philosophy serves as a conversation-stopper rather

than as the impetus for dialogue that embraces diversity and change. Stuhr's work engages and challenging us to embrace change, but not simply in an academic way; he also challenges us to examine our own lives, that pragmatism means nothing if it is not applied in palpable ways to our lives and culture.

Argument

Spanning the work of contemporary figures such as Dewey, James, Foucault, and Santayana, Stuhr takes up issues of democracy, education, liberalism, power, criticism, spirituality, pluralism, and transcendence. The importance of seeing that there is a reciprocal relationship between education and democracy has been one of the strengths of pragmatist thinking since the work of John Dewey. Stuhr notes that education is not merely a successful adaptation to the current environment as it is the ability to transform the environment itself. This means that education must be adaptable rather than fixed, concerned with growth rather than foundations. To appreciate education in its entirety, we need to view the vehicles of education as those sources that span far beyond the formal classroom. Educators include governments, corporations, media, marketing, and the informational giants that dominate the landscape of popular culture. The problem is that these very institutions are often the ones that do not value education as growth, but as consumerism, as product, as amusement, as passive and as formulaic. In a powerful first chapter, Stuhr highlights the fact that positive change cannot be viewed simply as a change of classroom pedagogy or curriculum, but must sweep through culture in its entirety. We can say similar things about democracy. Based on Dewey's conception, in chapter three, Stuhr writes, "Democracy as an educational principle is this: The social aim of education is the production of democratic attitudes, dispositions, and abilities, the free interaction and participation of individuals and their mutual interpenetration of interests in and through shared communal life." He then concludes, "To this extent, remarkably, America is committed neither to democratic education nor to democracy."

Stuhr then introduces, or we might say reintroduces, a philosopher long forgotten by the professional academy: William Hocking. There are several interesting points made in this section, not the least of which includes the fact that professional academicians pick and choose their heroes and ignore others in a way that can hardly be called systematic. But Stuhr goes beyond this point to expose us to Hocking's concerns about liberalism, concerns that Stuhr shares. The tenets of liberalism are not tenets shared or cared about by many people, institutions, and organizations. That is, society is not an organism with common interests, and this means that what is important to one element of society is not necessarily important to another. Liberalism depends on a "we" mentality that is not found in society in general. Contemporary American values have long stressed an "I" mentality with importance being placed on individual success. Next, liberalism has the obstacle of having to overcome the popular perception that rights are inalienable. This perception leads to a general sense of apathy toward rights that leads to the further perception that people no longer need to fight for or defend these rights. Finally, according to Hocking, the root of the defects of liberalism is emotional withdrawal. Those liberals who merrily preach the positives of liberalism too often do not integrate these liberalist policies into their own lives, accepting mediocrity and surrendering to the self-indulgent ethos of our time. Can these defects be overcome? Is there a way for liberalism to jump out of the pages of academic literature and into the policies and lives of actual people? My skeptically phrased question finds no comforting hope from the remainder of Stuhr's book, as Stuhr forcefully recounts why absolutism, whether spiritual, political, or philosophical, continue to dominate the hearts and minds of people all over the world. The great desire for permanence, for truth, for unchanging foundations, for transcendent answers, is the engine that drives

the philosophical and spiritual train. Pragmatism, on the other hand, speaks of pluralism and tolerance through the recognition that great change takes great action and hard work. But who are the crusaders for this movement? Bill Gates and Bono? I don't ask these questions sarcastically, because, and I believe that Stuhr would agree, the kind of sweeping change that is needed in society and in the hearts and minds of individuals will not come through the philosophy departments of major universities. People respond to marketing, not argument, to entertaining appeals, not facts, to celebrity, not unknown academicians who write the abstruse and arcane treatise for the intellectual elite.

Stuhr challenges us all, not just those of us who have, for some reason, chosen to pursue careers in professional philosophy. But his is a gauntlet thrown at the feet of professional philosophy that could include the following confrontational imperative: make yourself relevant or become fossilized. Return to the Socratic legacy of asking how to live better lives, how to make better choices, how to confront our future. Do so by embracing an interdisciplinary approach to problem solving rather than insulating ourselves in ivory towers and digging through the same old philosophical boneyard of the past. In fact, Stuhr has several specific suggestions:

Ph.D. programs in philosophy should require that graduates minor in some other field, particularly fields with real-world application. Ph.D. programs should require field-work such as having ethicists work with corporations or organizations that actually deal with real-world problems. The APA should no longer sponsor philosopher-only events. We should work alongside people of various interests and projects. Finally, philosophers need simply to be more humble. We need to appreciate and incorporate the views of others as having much to contribute to our own interests (and perhaps ours to theirs), rather than dismiss interdisciplinary studies as "not being philosophical."

Amen!

My only worry is that Stuhr is preaching to choir. Opponents will be dismissive (probably without even reading the book), while non-academics will never have any exposure to it whatsoever. In fact, let's be honest, few academics will read it. This is the case with the vast majority of philosophical writing and academic publication in general. This is not the fault of Stuhr's book, but the widespread belief in popular culture that philosophy is out of touch with the concerns of "real people," which is what causes a book like Stuhr's to fly under the radar of a wider audience. Stuhr certainly knows and appreciates this point, which is why he emphasizes the need for more than a revolution in the ivory towers of *professional* philosophy departments. In fact, there are many in philosophy who will read the words "pragmatism" and "post-modernism" (especially in the same sentence) and who will shut down completely on whatever professor Stuhr has to say. A revolution is needed indeed!

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