Review of “Philosophy & This Actual World: An Introduction to Practical Philosophical Inquiry”

Laura Duhan Kaplan  
*University of North Carolina at Charlotte*

Ellyn Ritterskamp  
*University of North Carolina at Charlotte*

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When a philosophical question appears to be insoluble, Martin Benjamin recommends that we place the issue in a pragmatic context. After all, he argues, we are not isolated subjects who can practice wholesale doubt as Descartes does in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Doubt is, in fact, a move in a language game, only possible against a background of conventional knowledge. Thus, conventional knowledge can be used to answer questions that arise from philosophical doubt. The thorny problems of free will and determinism can be resolved by “pragmatic physicalism,” the view that many things we do are “up to us,” even though sometimes we are influenced by our environments. Ethics can be grounded in evolutionary requirements to both help others for the benefit of the group and keep an eye out for ourselves. Political philosophy is ethics writ large; our life as social beings demands the occasional compromise that yet preserves our integrity. The question of whether a good God exists is best bypassed with a search for non-theistic sources of life's meaning.

In reaching these conclusions, Benjamin is guided by William James' concern for finding truths he can live with. Benjamin creatively combines this concern with Ludwig Wittgenstein's sensitivity to linguistic context, John Rawls' commitment to the ideal of social negotiation, John Dewey's experimentalism. The result is a clearly written introduction to a thoroughly materialist approach to contemporary philosophical problems. Generally educated readers interested in philosophy will find it engaging and informative. Scholars will welcome Benjamin's attempt to show the lines of thinking that are shared by nineteenth century American Pragmatism and twentieth century Anglo-American Philosophy. Synthetic thinkers will appreciate the creative interpretations and applications that enable Benjamin to show the connections. Graduate students in philosophy will see a good model of how to use the ideas of canonical thinkers to construct an original synthesis. Undergraduate readers, who might well enjoy selected chapters of the book, should be reminded that the book expresses only one possible approach to answering philosophical questions.

Benjamin's commitment to an anti-metaphysical approach does lead him into some difficulties. The "Cartesian subject" Benjamin rejects in his epistemology is a caricature taken out of the context Descartes sets up, as Descartes himself would be the first to acknowledge that his doubt is a thought experiment and a rhetorical device. The "reciprocal altruism" Benjamin attributes to human beings is a give-and-take arrangement conditional upon expectation of a future benefit for oneself. Thus it bypasses
the question of what motivates genuine altruism. And Benjamin's turn away from theism is hardly a move that James himself would endorse. James' *Varieties of Religious Experience* is premised on James's view that mystical experience is a life changing event that no philosophy can argue away. In James's *Principles of Psychology*, which is not even listed in Benjamin's bibliography, James shows himself to be sensitive to the sorts of metaphysical intuitions that Benjamin seems to think lead us astray. Given the fact that Benjamin credits James as his philosophical inspiration, such a partial reading of James' corpus is noteworthy.

Readers who see metaphysical intuitions as the spring of philosophy, or who favor a phenomenological examination of the complexities of consciousness, will be left thirsty by Benjamin's approach. But those who appreciate American Pragmatism, or who simply enjoy lively philosophical writing in the Anglo-American tradition, will find themselves enriched.

Laura Duhan Kaplan and Ellyn Ritterskamp  
University of North Carolina at Charlotte