

A Pragmatist Philosophy of History, written by Marnie Binder

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Book Review



Marnie Binder, *A Pragmatist Philosophy of History* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2023), 156 pp., ISBN 978-1-7936-5371-0, \$95.00 (hardback).

The American pragmatist tradition offers a wealth of ideas relevant to the philosophy of history, but this relevance has yet to be fully explored. Although its title might suggest otherwise, Marnie Binder's book does not aim to provide a systematic account of these ideas or a comprehensive interpretation of what pragmatist thinkers have had to say about history. Rather, it discusses some of the implications we can draw from pragmatist philosophy – particularly from its so-called classical period, spanning the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth century – for contemporary concerns about history. Binder divides her work into six chapters, each devoted to a brief discussion of one of the pragmatist authors she considers central: not only the classical triad of Peirce, James, and Dewey, but also George H. Mead, Jane Addams, and the British thinker Ferdinand C.S. Schiller.

Binder's main goal is to examine the work of these six authors in order to explore issues such as the social relevance of history, its status as an academic discipline, and its public use. She argues that classical pragmatism helps us understand history as a scientific enterprise with its own objective criteria of epistemic validity, despite the pervasive presence of ethical and political interests among those who write it. In other words, history is never written from a position of neutrality, which is precisely why it is so relevant to public debates. But recognising this lack of neutrality does not amount to falling into an “anything goes” kind of relativism.

To substantiate this thesis, Binder follows two main paths. The first path moves from a metaphysical question, namely the question of the continuity between past and present. According to Binder, the pragmatists' processual and evolutionary conception of reality leads to the conclusion that the past is always relevant to an understanding of the present, and that the present cannot be isolated from the past. In the words of F.C.S. Schiller, quoted on p. 50:

“If the real is not static but is in continuous process, only prolonged historical observation will do justice to its nature. Only a historical method will enable us to trace out its past, to understand its present, and to forecast its future.”

The chapter on James explores the theme of processualism through an analysis of his psychology. In James’ well-known account of the stream of thought, the present moment can never be isolated from the past or the future (a perspective, we might add, echoed in Peirce’s semiotic processualism and Dewey’s conception of experience). It would be important to note, however, that while James’ psychological framework acknowledges the presence of the past in our individual stream of thought, this notion does not translate seamlessly into the realm of history, where the presence of the past is mediated through historical traces and documents as reconstructed by the professional historian and shared publicly in the community of scholars.

The second path Binder takes is epistemological. It leads us to the traditional dilemma of truth and realism. How can we reconcile the idea that the historian’s task is to tell the truth about the past and faithfully represent reality with an understanding of the inherently constructed and partial nature of any historical narrative? In the chapter on Dewey, Binder answers this question by focusing on the pragmatic nature of historical knowledge and its ability to resolve problematic situations that originate not in the individual subjectivity of the historian but in objective features of our social environment. She also highlights an observation made by Dewey scholar Larry Hickman, who points out that, in Dewey’s pragmatism, the ambition to carry out a thorough reconstruction of past events coexists with the awareness that the meaning of any event is constantly changing and is at least partly dependent on the consequences that unfold from it (35). In the book’s conclusion, Binder revisits this issue from a slightly different angle. Following Rorty, she argues that a corrective to the danger of pragmatism becoming too liberal and “permitting anyone to accept any claim as ‘true’ because it ‘works for them’” is to emphasise inclusivity. We should aim for “inclusive intersubjective agreement” rather than subjective pragmatic utility (107).

The reference to Rorty illustrates what I feel is a tension throughout the book. Although Binder aims to focus on the philosophy of history of the classical pragmatists, she often combines her interpretation of these writers with insights from neo-pragmatist thinkers, such as Rorty, or José Medina in the chapter on William James (13–16). This may in part be explained by the author’s intention to make the philosophy of the classical pragmatists directly relevant to contemporary issues, rather than foregrounding the questions that the classical pragmatists themselves asked about history. In addition, Binder tends to assume that the six authors she analyses share a single project. Despite some

local differences, and “barring [the] more extreme views” of some of them (42), she claims that each author builds on, or “augments” (xiii), the work of the others. Indeed, she goes so far as to say that Jane Addams “brings the pragmatist philosophical tradition to a rational conclusion” (100). This interpretive tendency once again reveals an attempt to distil a message from these authors that can be readily applied to contemporary debates. In doing so, it risks downplaying significant differences between the authors under consideration.

A good case in point is the strong realist component of Peirce’s philosophy of history, which is not easily reconciled with the more pronounced constructivist tendencies evident in other pragmatist writers. In the first part of her chapter on Peirce, Binder brings this realistic component to the fore by discussing Peirce’s attempt to bring historical inquiry under the same historical laws as other scientific disciplines in his long text “On the Logic of Drawing History from Ancient Documents, Especially from Testimonies” (1901). In the second part of the chapter, Binder shifts her focus to a college lecture, “The Place of Our Age in the History of Civilization,” which Peirce wrote in 1863, when he was only twenty-four years old. Admittedly, this text can be quite revealing if we are interested in reconstructing the internal development of Peirce’s ideas on history. But it can hardly be taken as representative of Peirce’s mature philosophical outlook.

The book is very light on bibliography. In particular, the two concluding chapters on Mead and Addams lack any references to secondary literature. This absence is regrettable, given the wealth of excellent scholarship available on, for example, Mead’s philosophy of history, which could have significantly strengthened Binder’s interpretation. (Mead scholars such as Daniel Huebner and Hans Joas are mentioned in the book’s final reference list, but not in the text or endnotes.)

The chapter on Mead focuses on a central aspect of his thought, namely the social view of the self and the idea that the individual can grow to full maturity only if he or she learns to adopt the attitude of the other. The “other,” however, is a concept that stretches back in time to people who lived long ago. In accordance with this idea, Mead presents a view of history as the “accumulation of [...] social experiences” that gradually build up our reflexive understanding of others (76). Furthermore, Mead defends a conception of history as the shared memory of a community – that is, as a crucial resource in the process of identity formation. We construct interpretations of the past that help us orient ourselves in the present (or, to use Binder’s words on p. 81, “the self is defined through our interpretation of the past”). Mead’s interpretation of Romanticism is paradigmatic in this respect. According to him, Romanticism is a period in

our history that takes on a special significance “as the point of view from which to come back at the self” and shapes our present identity.

The final chapter of the book, on Addams, revolves around the nexus between narrative memory, ethics, and politics. Binder shows that in Addams’ writings, an awareness of history parallels an increased “social respect” for fellow human beings. Moreover, Addams claims that a shared history is a necessary condition for the formation of common social interests. Members of the working class, for example, can draw on their shared history to become more aware of their social position and social aspirations.

I said, “a shared history,” but I should have said, “a shared memory,” for Addams is not primarily interested in the scholarly reconstruction of the past, but rather in the normative power exerted by narratives about the past independently of their adherence to the epistemic standards of academic historiography. In some cases, such as her writings on a supernatural legend about a “devil baby” that circulated in Chicago around 1913, manifestly untrue stories can activate the biographical memory of individuals and help them generate a more comprehensive view of society. This reflection on the normative power of memory and narrative is a new tile in the pragmatist mosaic, one that helps us appreciate the richness and diversity of the philosophical conceptions of history developed by the authors discussed in this book.

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