If one is asked what ‘pragmatism’ is about, no short or precise answer comes readily to hand. The term ‘pragmatism’, arising from the Greek ‘pragma’, meaning action, signals an effort to bring intellectual things down to questions of practical interest—but this surely is too wide a circumscription. Fundamentalist political movements are typically doing just this: setting academic goals regarding what to produce intellectually, out of a given interest. This is not what pragmatists are in sympathy with. Rather, what they have in mind is both a critique of socially decontextualized thought (paradigmatically traditional philosophy) and a programme of social democratic culture. These are difficult and somehow overambitious—perhaps even conflicting—aims. Their attack on ‘pure’ thought demands from pragmatists a wide-ranging campaign not only against traditional philosophy, but also against its more recent ‘analytic’ manifestations: already an enormous task. But to go one step further: how do pragmatism’s therapeutic quest and its partisanship for a left-wing liberal policy work together? Are philosophical self-criticism and democratic policy not simply too far apart?

Both breadth and complexity may be the reasons why no book-length treatment of pragmatist claims (or those pronounced as such) in systematic form is available today. If it is too difficult to grasp the basic ideas of pragmatism in a principled way, the most obvious alternative will be an historic exposition of ‘pragmatist’ thinkers, both past and present. This is exactly how Richard Bernstein’s outline of ‘the pragmatic turn’ is arranged. The book collects three chapters on Peirce, James and Dewey to demonstrate ‘early’ pragmatism, and three chapters on Putnam, Habermas and Rorty for ‘late’ or ‘new’ pragmatism. Sandwiched between these are three further chapters on Hegel and pragmatism, objectivity and truth and the linguistic turn. These more systematically
announced chapters, though, are again largely dealt with by reference to the authors already mentioned.

The book builds on a number of already published articles, and frequently shifts the presentation from one thinker to the other, with, it seems, no reason other than a chronological one. But one of the strengths of the book is its provision of links between the early and the new pragmatists, and its challenging defence of the early pragmatists against some of the new. If one accepts the historic approach to pragmatism, are there serious gaps in Bernstein’s selection? In my opinion, the omission of Davidson is the most serious. A chapter on him would have been more important than chapters on Habermas or even Rorty, notwithstanding the popularity of the latter. To which extent readers may miss Wittgenstein or Heidegger, Nietzsche or Rawls, depends on a more fine-grained and systematic understanding of what pragmatists are about. By mentioning Rawls I cannot help but state that this is one general lacuna in the present understanding of pragmatism.

In Bernstein’s book, not untypically, there is hardly anything on moral philosophy. Bernstein presents Putnam’s attack on the ‘fourth dogma of empiricism’ (p. 156), the fact–value dichotomy (Ch. 7), and he gives a sympathetic treatment of Habermas’ discourse ethics (Ch. 8). But both topics are not an adequate substitute for reflecting on what a ‘pragmatist ethics’ would look like; nor whether pragmatists, especially Dewey, still have something to offer to present-day moral philosophy. Most of the pragmatists had, and have, quite different views on ethics: Peirce might have had a Kantian view, James was a Millian, Dewey had eclectic, pluralist views, while the new pragmatists Putnam, Habermas and Rorty side in different ways with ‘open’ and ‘free discourse’, without overly engaging in its systematic defence. In my opinion Rawls, even if not a self-pronounced pragmatist, today comes closest to what a pragmatist ethics should look like; and he, strangely enough, is not really acknowledged by the new pragmatists as a fellow thinker. In my view, the dubious state of a pragmatist ethics points to a lacuna in the positive, normative part of pragmatism’s project. This lacuna is a serious one, because it also affects the constructive meaning of pragmatism with regards to theoretical philosophy. It points to a missing synchrony between its radical philosophy-critical attitude and its liberal political claims. Why this is a problem can be more clearly seen if we have a look at the anti-
philosophical argument typically offered by pragmatists. And this part of the pragmatist agenda is well documented in Bernstein’s book.

Insofar as there is a thread running through the book, it is the attack on traditional epistemology which unifies all pragmatists. As Bernstein emphasises at the outset, with a citation from Menand (p. 10), the early pragmatists share a critique of the ‘realist’ vision incorporated in much of typical epistemology and metaphysics. The motive for this is not itself ‘philosophical’ in some lofty sense; rather, it builds on a naturalist view of what generally impels inquiry, taking into account biological, psychological and social forces. Ideas for the pragmatists are ‘social’ creations, but they are also evolutionary products (Dewey) and emotional constructs (James). The early pragmatists are naturalists, but naturalists of a specific sort. They want less to scientifically supplement than to transform epistemology into a philosophico-naturalist discipline, and this is what gives their programme its exclusive, even if up until now hotly contested, relevance.

Bernstein’s treatment of the early pragmatist begins well, with Peirce’s earliest articles invoking the logic of scientific procedure against the overexcited, ‘absolute’ sceptical questioning of Descartes (p. 18). The early pragmatists attack distinctions such as mind/body, corrigible/incorrigible, universal/local, necessary/contingent—if handled in a dichotomous and not merely distinctive manner. In a sense the dismissal of dichotomies can be summarized as a dismissal of different versions of something absolute as against something humanly relative, and this shows why the opposition to the traditional, realist epistemology lay at the beginning of the pragmatist movement. Since Plato’s introduction of ‘ideal forms’ set the agenda for Western philosophy, the separation of man’s cognitive and emotional nature, thoughts and emotions, or human powers that do or do not reach ‘beyond’ humans, was very much on the mind of philosophers.

Bernstein is most explicit on this in his depiction of Peirce, for him (as opposed to Rorty), the most original and important of the pragmatists. The way he commemorates Peirce is oriented by a sort of via media-strategy offered at several turns of the argument, addressing the calamities that await those striving as boldly as the pragmatists do for a standpoint which is both naturalist and philosophical. Searching for a balanced solution
between extremes may be taken as the intellectual signature of this book, perhaps in harmony with Bernstein’s usual way of dealing with conceptual contradictions. But one objection to the pragmatist, given its thorough opposition to epistemology, is obvious: how to steer clear of a naively uncritical acceptance of everyday thinking, including everyday scientific thinking, if the reflective potential of epistemology is rejected as illusionary? What, according to Bernstein, is Peirce’s via media through this conflict?

A two-tiered answer is given in the first and sixth chapters of the book. The first, more direct answer refers to Peirce’s ‘critical commonsensism’ (p. 34), which develops a fallibilist and social notion of knowledge by distinguishing between indubitable and incorrigible truths. Peirce points out that, if backed up by the right amount of societal consensus, we can reach a point of certainty but we are not incorrigibly right. Genuine knowledge need not be ‘absolutely’ indubitable, only well-embedded in a social community. Such knowledge is intended to be ‘critical’ because of its fallibilist status: something that Popper later demonstrated to be important for science and society in a much more elaborate manner.

In the second stage of his argument, Bernstein presents Peirce as guarding himself against an idealistic, purely coherentist understanding of knowledge by drawing on a—once more critically reclaimed—concept of experience. As Bernstein rightly documents, this is also the stage where early and new pragmatists part company, as the ‘linguistic turn’ motivates the new pragmatists—of whom the most outspoken is Rorty—to shun all talk of experience in favour of talk of sentences and language use. The terminal point of this movement is incorporated in Davidson’s notorious dictum that ‘nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief’ (p. 46), which has been carried to even more appalling anti-realist consequences by Rorty. Bernstein recoils from Rorty’s claim that there are only conversational constraints to knowledge (pp. 134, 207). Not only does he see a form of linguistic idealism in such a pure coherence position, he also chides it as ‘giving up’ in terms of normative politics. For a pragmatist, then, two dangers stand out. On the one hand there is the concept of experience being in danger of falling back into the ‘myth of the given’, on the other there is a loss of critical norms, if authority is reduced to
the conversational powers that be. Bernstein's pragmatism attempts to steer clear both of Descartes and the empiricists on the one hand, and of Rorty and Davidson on the other.

Perhaps due to the book's textbook format, one does not find developed arguments as to whether there is, in fact, a way through these handicaps. The book devotes itself extensively to exposition and deals with such a large portion of philosophical history, that it runs out of space for detailed argument. But often it points to where an argument should be found, and hints at how it might be elaborated. Bernstein suggest that rehabilitating the phenomenon of experience is a way of avoiding linguistic idealism, and that Peirce's system of Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness—even more than James' and Dewey's conceptions of experience—is most helpful as part of this aim (Ch.6). The linguistic turn is charged for having discarded all theories of experience and having put language and meaning in its place. With dramatic flair Bernstein criticises Rorty's pragmatism as 'a pragmatism without experience' (p. 128).

It is true that the notion of experience has lost its foundational role in epistemic disputes since the linguistic turn, but to cast this as a problem is more rhetoric than argument. 'Experience' as a compound may have been lost, but 'perception', 'practice' and 'knowledge'—all elements of experience—are still well taken care of. At any rate, what is missing in Bernstein's complaint is a more thorough analysis, beyond the citation of typical statements from Peirce (and further from James and Dewey), as to why Peirce's triadic-view on signs and experience is something unfortunately lost by talking instead of language and concepts.

Bernstein, fixated as he is on Rorty's lamented idealism, never touches upon what advancement was really brought about by the linguistic turn versus the psychological talk about experience. Peirce still set himself the task somehow to construct meaningful signs and their function for experience with the help of more elementary pieces, those pooled together with the terms 'Firstness' (the immediate in experience) and 'Secondness' (responses to the immediate), thereby clumsily wrestling with a newly invented pseudo-psychological terminology. The triadic relation and its terms are surely an improved version of the older subject-object distinction, but they are still a version of it, whereas it
would be better to avoid such oppositions altogether. Bernstein’s ‘via-media’ solution, in
regard to Peirce, is to call his triadic scheme one of ‘distinguishable, but not separable’ (p. 130) elements. In the end, however, it remains unclear what it is that makes the non-
separable unity: is it something in the world, something subjective, a habit, or something
else? Perhaps the comprising entity is meant to be experience, but then it remains unclear
what experience is, besides being a something which comprises. Mead’s idea of ‘social
communication’, which Bernstein suggests is the solution for all problems remaining in
the classical pragmatists’ concept of experience (p. 151), is surely not an easy way out.
What Mead supplies is a still more primitive psychological method, behaviourism, which
leads to a dubious epistemological understanding of meaning.

One who has followed through the linguistic turn would instead suggest giving up on
attempts to find out how Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness might be sensibly put
together, and instead begin reflecting from a position within language-use, from sentences
and communicative understanding instead of ‘signs’. If she wished, she could try to make
sense of what Peirce, James or Dewey had been up to from within this use, which is taken
for granted. But she would depart from the idea of constructing language and experience
from somewhere deep below, as the early pragmatists (still partially) did. Would she
therefore fall into the trap of linguistic idealism or, something deplored by Bernstein, fail
in managing ‘to lose contact with the everyday life world of human beings’ (p. 152)? It is
the everyday world of linguistic understanding, including acting on the basis of such
understanding, with which she begins. The linguistic philosopher may come to the rescue
of sorting out what is good and bad in early pragmatism, instead of being helped by an
outdated psychological epistemology. The one central positive message in this book,
therefore, seems to misfire. Whatever is problematic in new pragmatism, and especially in
Rorty, cannot be repaired by reading the classical pragmatists more thoroughly. The
linguistic turn put their psychology-based agenda to rest for good.

Does the book highlight the political part of pragmatism, its defence of a social or liberal
democratic position? (This is something that excludes, of course, Peirce, and to a lesser
extent James – but Dewey, Putnam, Habermas and Rorty each voice a liberal democratic
position.) Liberal (i.e. social) democracy as present in these thinkers is represented by
principles of universality, equality and freedom. Bernstein includes a chapter on Dewey and democracy (Ch. 3) and reports comparable thoughts by Putnam and Habermas. The chapter on Dewey leaves one in a similar state to when one reads many texts by Dewey himself. The impression that Dewey is up to something genuine conflicts with the observation that he is not able to verbalize it. The same occurs with Bernstein’s depiction, which in part adopts the Polonius-like quality familiar from Dewey-texts. Bernstein’s method is, again, the via-media-approach. Dewey is a liberal but not an individualist, he favours community but is not a communitarian, he accepts conflicts but also considers consensus, he is in favour of rational persuasion but also of ‘embodied intelligence’. Dewey wants politics to accomplish nothing less than encompass ‘the full range of human experience’ (p. 86).

One (problematic) reading of Dewey’s argument for democracy arises from his belief that humans can grasp their values and interests only within, and with the help of, social contexts, optimally under a democratic regime. (Another staunch defender of this thesis again was Dewey’s friend Mead.) This belief can be taken causally or normatively, and obviously, with regards to the latter, it is potentially illiberal. There is room for argument, however, if democracy, as suggested by Putnam (p. 163f.), is meant to be a precondition for inquiry, both of individuals’ inquiry into their idea of a life, and of scientific inquiry. Now, though, the original belief vacillates between a strong but risky and a weak but trivial thesis. Dewey (and Putnam) in part suggest that humans build up their identity only politically, and moreover in a democratic way. This would be an extremely normative statement, falsified by the dubious personal character of many professional politicians (but perhaps they follow the ‘wrong’ politics?). If, on the other hand, liberal freedom is meant to be a precondition for unimpeded socialisation and private decisions, this is common lore of large parts of liberalism. Dewey, Putnam and Bernstein stand of course, some distance away from the private/public distinction at the basis of this kind of liberalism, and are therefore not on this side of the alternative. Unfortunately, Bernstein remains silent on the issue of finding a way out of this impasse, and also on whether Dewey would be helpful.
Favouring the private/public distinction concerning liberal politics is a consequent move by Rorty, in the light of his radical critique of epistemology. Along with this goes a rather minimal 'liberalism of fear', which has always seemed at odds with his fondness for Dewey. The importance of the anti-epistemical side to pragmatism for its liberal side is clearly visible in Rorty, even if largely only negative. In not following Rorty with regards to this solution, Bernstein manifests himself as a good Deweyan, but less so as a rationally transparent pragmatist.

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NOTES

i Via media-solutions are offered on pp. 49, 51, 58, 84, 129, 226 fn.12.

ii For further advantages of this move see Davidson 2002.

REFERENCES