

Nancy Stanlick's *American Philosophy: The Basics*

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The first thing that strikes you about Nancy Stanlick's book, *American Philosophy: The Basics*, is the immense scope that is surveyed in its roughly 150 pages. In addition to covering the classical pragmatists, as well as such major figures as W.V.O. Quine, Thomas Kuhn, John Rawls, and Richard Rorty, Stanlick spends much of the book introducing readers to thinkers and intellectual movements that are frequently overlooked in philosophy curriculums. These include the great awakening's religious enthusiasts, the American transcendentalists, suffragists, and abolitionists, in addition to African-American activists and Native American thought. As a result, readers are not only immersed within the full, rich heritage of American intellectual history, from the polished prose of Thomas Jefferson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and William James to more recent ideas from bell hooks and Cornel West; readers are also challenged to expand their very conception of philosophy.

The choice to include such a wide range of thinkers in such a short, introductory work certainly has its drawbacks, for it severely limits the depth of discussion possible on each individual figure, but it also has a somewhat unexpected upside. When we step back for such a large panoramic view, the dominant themes running through the whole of American intellectual history become shockingly evident. We find an overwhelming emphasis on practical action, for example—that philosophy should make a concrete difference in people's lives—not just in the works of the pragmatists, but throughout much of American thought, whether we are looking at ideas from Ben Franklin, Henry David Thoreau, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, W. E. B. Du Bois, or Martin Luther King, and this emphasis is often tied to a concern for social justice and the struggle against oppression.

At the same time, by staggering each movement's main ideas against each other, Stanlick is also able to coax out their full revolutionary flavor. The truly radical character of the enlightenment's understanding of human dignity and rationality, for example, becomes starkly clear when displayed against the backdrop of Calvinist ideas about the wretchedness of human nature and reason. At the same time, the enlightenment's familiar conception of the individual and individual rights suddenly turns cold and abstract in contrast to the fuller, richer notion of an encumbered self that is developed by Michael Sandel and those working in the ethics of care.

Of course, some thinkers have to be excluded from such a short, introductory work. It would have been nice, for example, to find some way to include references to such thinkers as Josiah Royce, Jane Addams, George Herbert Mead, Alfred North Whitehead, Wilfrid Sellars, Noam

Chomsky, Hilary Putnam, Joseph Margolis, and Judith Butler, perhaps by way of suggestions for further reading. My first criticism of this work, however, does not concern an American thinker who was left out, but rather a non-American thinker who was included.

In her discussion of Emerson, Stanlick finds it important to explicate a few ideas from Kant. Given that Kant was an unmistakable influence on the entire transcendentalist movement, the inclusion of Kant's ideas is understandable. Stanlick also mentions that Emerson develops themes that will show up later in the works of the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, especially in regards to Emerson's conception of the over-soul and Nietzsche's understanding of the *Übermensch*. While this reference helps illuminate Nietzsche's emphasis on solitude, there is simply no need to delve further into Nietzsche's understanding of the overman or his conception of master and slave morality in the next few paragraphs, and the book would have been better off without this diversion.¹

Although Nietzsche frequently mentions the overman, he refrains from defining exactly what he means by this term, which is part of his strategy of leaving gaps in his texts that readers must fill in for themselves. As David Allison has explained, this is part of why readers become so personally engaged with Nietzsche's writings.² Any quick definition of what Nietzsche means by the overman is thus bound to be controversial, even if it is a good one. Stanlick's brief sketch, however, which centers on the idea of a person who expands his power by "defeating a worthy opponent or problem,"³ could apply to an ascetic, who stands as a strong example of the will to power. Yet, we know that, at best, the ascetic is to the overman as the camel is to the child in the beginning of *Zarathustra*.⁴ In addition, by Nietzsche's own admission in *The Genealogy*, the weak have defeated the strong, and slave morality has triumphed over master morality, but such a victory of the weak certainly does not make them overmen.⁵ What is missing here is Nietzsche's crucial distinction between being active and being reactive, as well as the whole creative drama of suffering and self-overcoming. Moreover, Stanlick's reference to Alexander the Great will lead readers to equate erroneously the overman with the ancient strong man. On this point, Nietzsche's ever-cryptic words almost reach clarity: "Never yet has there been an overman," Zarathustra tells us. "Naked I saw both the greatest and the smallest man: they are still all-to-similar to each other."⁶

My second criticism pertains to the chapter on the pragmatists. Overall, their views are well articulated, especially given the constraints incumbent upon a brief, introductory work that strives to give equal time to so many different movements and thinkers. Make no mistake; this work, though introductory, represents a huge and daunting task, perhaps too much for one person's expertise to master. There is one small but important detail regarding how John Dewey's position is presented, however, that seems overly influenced by the playful rhetorical maneuvers of Richard Rorty.

Stanlick does well to emphasize Dewey's rejection of absolutism and his insistence that we are "doers" who "are active in the production of knowledge and not passive spectators," as well as Dewey's rejection of the quest for certainty, along with many other prejudices of the traditional philosopher.⁷ That Dewey does not ascribe to essentialism or to a coherence theory of truth, however, is not quite to say that he exhorts us to "abandon questions from traditional philosophy" altogether,⁸ if one understands these as normative questions about the nature of knowledge, reality, and morality. Stanlick's insistence, in her discussion of Dewey, that "evolution transforms the world of knowledge, showing that metaphysical speculations are impractical,"⁹ could perhaps be slightly adjusted to read "that *dogmatic* metaphysical speculations are impractical," seeing that Dewey saw fit to advance metaphysical ideas of his own in one of his most important works, *Experience and Nature*.

It is actually Rorty, and not Dewey, who sees no point to such speculations. Lauding Dewey as his "principle philosophical hero,"¹⁰ Rorty depicts Dewey as a forerunner of his own brand of postmodernism through what has often been described as a "strong misreading."¹¹ After all, we could hardly imagine Dewey himself endorsing the strict separation of the public from the private that Rorty champions in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*.¹² Moreover, when we read Rorty closely, we actually find him confessing that he deliberately ignores those portions of Dewey's thought that he finds vitalistic and metaphysical, which are precisely the ideas from Dewey that many Deweyans find the most intriguing.¹³

With reference to *Experience and Nature*, even Rorty grudgingly admits that, "[f]or better or worse, he [Dewey] *wanted* to write a metaphysical system."¹⁴ In this work, we find Dewey delineating the need for metaphysics to provide us with a "ground map of the province of criticism."¹⁵ Far from seeking an ultimate reality, the metaphysician is tasked with constructing a broad perspective on reality, revealing "the generic traits manifested by existences of all kinds without regard to their differentiation into physical and mental."¹⁶ The philosopher might then act as a sort of "liaison officer" between different realms of human inquiry, which are bound to contain their own assumptions about reality and eventually come into conflict with each other.¹⁷ When such conflicts arise, we might find ourselves confronted with a genuine crises in culture. It is only with reference to this larger, constructed, and hence revisable metaphysical perspective that Dewey thinks we have a chance to resolve the different questions of legitimation that will inevitably arise.

It is because Rorty has accepted a purely physical, causal theory of belief that he sees no need to delve into such normative questions, and he thus fails to see the need for any such project.¹⁸ From Rorty's point of view, Dewey's efforts in *Experience and Nature* only hold a "historical-sociological" significance.¹⁹ Other Dewey interpreters, such as Sydney Hook and Richard Bernstein, have lamented Dewey's metaphysical aspirations as well, arguing that Dewey really had no cause to go beyond the language of cultural anthropology or phenomenology.²⁰ These critics object to the

scope of Dewey's project, insisting that it was a mistake for Dewey to assume he could ever get beyond what the world is *to us*. Yet, we should note that this very sentiment ties his critics to a traditional philosophical prejudice that Dewey has left far behind: that experience is somehow severed from nature. In contrast, we find Dewey insisting "experience is *of* as well as *in* nature. It is not experience which is experienced, but nature—stones, plants, animals ... and so on."²¹ In short, we need not conflate some unworkable notion of a noumenal reality with a constructed vision of an independent reality.²²

In fact, it is precisely this very denial, that there is any separation between experience and nature, that allows Dewey to formulate the same position that Stanlick attributes to Native Americans: that everything is real.²³ "All materials of experience are equally real," we find Dewey insisting in *The Quest for Certainty*, characterizing his position as "the only complete and unadulterated realism."²⁴ Moreover, by connecting Dewey's understanding of reality to his instrumentalist theory of knowledge, we can arrive at another parallel with Native American thought: that knowledge is embodied or lived (through what Dewey calls our habits).²⁵ If we move from there to Dewey's philosophy of education, which lies at the heart of his ethical and social thought, we can even find Dewey stressing, alongside the Native Americans, the importance of community.

On a final note, I imagine that those who are already uncomfortable with the inclusion of religious enthusiasts like Jonathan Edwards and essayists and poets like Emerson and Thoreau also might object to the inclusion of Native American ideas. As Stanlick admits, not only is Native American thought outside the Western tradition, it is transmitted through dance, art, stories, and poetry, rather than a written tradition containing arguments.²⁶ Some might insist that Native American ideas would be better suited to a book on religion or anthropology.

It is precisely here, with this inclusion of Native American thought, as well as religious enthusiasts, African-American writers, suffragists, abolitionists, essayists, and poets, which I find Stanlick's book to stand as a great example of American philosophy at work. In light of the struggles so many Americans have faced against prejudice, and the continual call we hear in the American intellectual tradition to rethink categories that have grown rigid and confining, Stanlick's choice to include these particular voices in this book stands as a bold challenge that is offered in the best tradition of American philosophy. It is a challenge to those who object, that they educate themselves about what these voices are saying, so that they might offer coherent arguments in a worthy debate. It is also a challenge to all of us to rethink what philosophy is, what it is that we philosophers do, how we do it, and why.

I have to admit, I am unsure in what kind of book Native American ideas in particular belong. I find myself suddenly and curiously puzzled as to the relationship between philosophy and religion in non-Western contexts, as well as to the relation between philosophy and poetry. I also

wonder how we might come to negotiate similarities and differences between Eastern and Western intellectual traditions. I would love for Stanlick to address these questions more fully, clarifying exactly what she thinks Western philosophers have to learn from all the “other” voices she has chosen to include within her text on American philosophy.

Endnotes

¹ Stanlick 2013, 62-63.

² Allison 2001, 118.

³ Stanlick 2013, 62.

⁴ Nietzsche 1982, 137-140.

⁵ Nietzsche 1992, 489.

⁶ Nietzsche 1982, 205.

⁷ Stanlick 2013, 88-89.

⁸ Stanlick 2013 88.

⁹ Stanlick 2013, 95.

¹⁰ Rorty 1999, xii.

¹¹ Morris Dickstein, for example, has put it this way: "If pragmatism began with James's strong misreading of Peirce, it came to life again with Rorty's strong misreading of Dewey, whom [Rorty] described as 'a postmodernist before his time.'" See Dickstein 1998, 11.

¹² See Rorty 1989.

¹³ Specifically, it is the way Dewey sought to establish continuity between human inquiry and biological existence, in response to Darwin's theory of evolution that Rorty dismisses as vitalistic. See, for example, Rorty 1998, 299. In Rorty's view, Dewey would have done better homage to Darwin by developing a purely physical, causal theory of belief, like Donald Davidson. Rorty drops references to such a causal theory throughout his works, but for a sustained discussion, see Rorty 1991. Rorty's response to Dewey's metaphysical ideas is discussed further below.

¹⁴ Rorty 1982, 73.

¹⁵ Dewey 2008a, 309.

¹⁶ Dewey 2008a, 308

¹⁷ Dewey 2008a, 306-308.

¹⁸ See note 12 above.

¹⁹ Rorty 1982, 73.

²⁰ See Hook 2008 and Bernstein 1961.

²¹ Dewey 2008a, 12.

²² It is surely legitimate to talk about what the earth might have been like, for example, before life evolved. Acknowledging the epistemological union of subject and object in the construction of knowledge does not logically bar us from positing the world as existing independently from the mind. After all, on Dewey's view, the construction here is on the epistemological level, not the

metaphysical. For a further elaboration of this position, one can turn to any of the following works: Margolis 2002, Margolis 2007, or Margolis 2010.

²³ Stanlick 2013, 116.

²⁴ Dewey 2008b, 172 & 191.

²⁵ Stanlick 2013, 114.

²⁶ Stanlick 2013, 113.

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