Comments on *American Philosophy: The Basics*

***Peter Olen**, Lake Sumter State College*

American Philosophy: The Basics is a pluralistic, inclusive attempt to re-cast the history of American philosophy in an introductory text. As one of Stanlick's former students, it is a satisfying read because it is structured around ideas present in her earlier lectures on America philosophy. In this new book, as in her previous work[1] with Bruce Silver, there is an emphasis to look at classic readings in American philosophy for signs of what makes them uniquely "American". As Stanlick remarks:

> Most American philosophers concentrate on the concrete difference that will be made by our conceptions, arguments, and ideas in the lives of individual human beings and groups. This is not to say that American philosophers disparage or fail to appreciate a concept or inquiring into a topic for intellectual satisfaction, but the tendency of American philosophers is still the practical, the useful, and the concrete. American philosophers tend to ask what we can *do* with theories, principles, and arguments.[2]

Although stopping short of claiming pragmatism as *the* American way of thinking, the pervasive narrative throughout the book is one of practical application. What marks American philosophy as a distinct "national or cultural tradition," one that is ostensibly reflected in various phases of American culture, is the "pursuit of the application of philosophy to lives played out on the American stage."[3]

I think there is something compelling about this idea. Louis Menand argues that practicality and progressive views are indicative of 19th century pragmatism (or most 19th century American philosophy). Inevitably, any historical narrative that attempts to bring everyone under one banner is going to have its outliers. This observation, in and of itself, is not particularly troubling. Where such outliers become an issue is when they match all of the criteria of the single banner, yet do not conform to the historical ideal. I want to discuss one significant change in 20th century American philosophy, the rise of professionalization, that I think causes problems for Stanlick's picture of what makes American philosophy uniquely "American."

In terms of covering the pragmatist tradition, Stanlick has omitted numerous essential figures from the canon. Again, my initial observation, in and of itself, is not really a problem for Stanlick's account of American philosophy. As Stanlick herself notes, one can only do so much when constrained by page limits. The problem is more that some of the omitted figures (most

notably C. I. Lewis, Wilfrid Sellars, and others) are indicative of both the professionalized turn in philosophy and a significant break in Stanlick's narrative. Lewis and Sellars are philosophers who were both wholly professionalized (i.e., philosophers more or less unconcerned with the practical application of their ideas) and, on most interpretations,[4] pragmatists. Both philosophers are "American" through and through (Lewis never even traveled outside of the United States) and made substantial, recognized contributions to the American philosophical tradition. Moreover, Lewis was a student of William James, Josiah Royce, and Ralph Barton Perry; whereas Sellars inherited the American tradition of critical realism from his father, Roy Wood Sellars. This is particularly telling because it places Sellars within the American tradition that started with pragmatism and progressed to debates between the new and critical realists. Yet, both philosophers were not concerned with the practical application of their ideas. Instead, Lewis and Sellars (found in slightly different, yet overlapping eras) were *exclusively* concerned with the theoretical articulation of fairly abstract philosophical problems.

For example, a hallmark of 20th century American epistemology centers on debates surrounding perceptual knowledge and "giveness" with Lewis and Sellars holding opposing positions. The debate concerns, on a rather thin reading,[5] whether perceptual experience is grounded on a foundation of unmediated, non-inferential knowledge or presupposes a holistic, conceptually-laden background. One finds Lewis arguing for a foundationalist epistemology in the 1920s as a direct result of wholly theoretical issues inherited from his time under James, Royce, and Perry. Although Sellars' position was inherited in part from his father's rejection[6] of unmediated awareness, his influences were significantly more pluralistic than Lewis (incorporating aspects of emotivism, new realism, and logical positivism into his attack on giveness). Yet what one does not find in neither philosophers' epistemology is a concern with, or even a mention of, what we ought to *do* with these ideas.

How could we re-cast this kind of argument – the kind of debate that became indicative of 20th century western philosophy – along practical, concrete lines? Surely a rejection of the myth of the given, as embodied in Sellars' philosophy, would require no one to revise their concrete practices. If perceptual knowledge is foundationally grounded on unmediated, first-person experience, then there is also no reason to think that such an idea would somehow find practical uptake. Debates over perceptual knowledge and giveness are a perfect example of theoretical concerns wholly set within the confines of *purely* intellectual pursuits. Yet surely this debate, one that has received exhaustive attention in the American philosophical community, counts as an event within the American philosophical tradition.

W.V.O. Quine, perhaps more explicitly than everyone discussed so far, gives us reasons to think 20th century American philosophy is not particularly concerned with the practical application of ideas. As Quine remarks

> Not all of what is philosophically important need be of lay interest even when clearly expounded upon and fitted into place. I think of organic chemistry: I recognize its importance, but I am not curious about it, nor do I see why the layman should care about much of what concerns me in philosophy. If instead of having been called upon to perform in the British television series "Men of Ideas" I had been consulted on its feasibility, I should have expressed doubt.[7]

Although not necessarily intended to be a historical observation about the discipline, Quine's reasoning here is, I think, quite indicative of the attitude held by most 20th century American philosophers. As the profession moved *away* from the idea that philosophy gives us a kind of synoptic picture of the world, one perhaps more attuned to the expression of individualistic and aesthetic tastes and more towards a particularly scientific picture of philosophy, there was less emphasis on the practical difference our ideas make (at least no more than is found in any other intellectual discipline) and more of an emphasis on myopic specialization. Indeed, one can find this emphasis in 19th pragmatists (and their American precursors, descendent from the Scottish common sense school of philosophy) in their opposition to what was a then-dominant form of Hegelian idealism, but it's difficult to see how an emphasis on practicality is indicative of most American philosophers.

But perhaps this is a recent change, one that came about specifically because of our discipline's professional need to emulate the sciences. Yet Quine argues the abstract problems most 20th century philosophers grapple with are *not* new problems. Instead, we should understand philosophy as a discipline that was *never* mainly concerned with the concrete difference ideas make:

> All of these luminaries and others whom we revere as great philosophers were scientists in search of an organized conception of reality. Their search did indeed go beyond the special sciences as we now define them; there were also broader and more basic concepts to untangle and clarify. But the struggle with these concepts and the quest for a system on a grand scale were integral still to the overalls scientific enterprise. The more general and speculative reaches of theory are what we look back on nowadays as distinctly philosophical. What is pursed under the name of

> philosophy today, moreover, has much these same concerns when it is at what I deem its technical best.[8]

Of course, we need not, and should not, agree with Quine's quasi-historical recasting of the history of philosophy. What is important in the above passage is that Quine's claim is reflective of the general attitude one finds in 20th century American philosophy.

In an effort to keep up with the development of the sciences, philosophy began to professionalize rather quickly at the end of 19th century. For philosophy, "professionalization" meant "the creation of a clearly defined academic discipline with recognized and accepted subject matter. In all disciplines, scientific values became the basis on which the new authority was established: The word 'scientific' then seemed to epitomize the very essence of the professional idea - expert authority, institutionally cultivated and certified."[9] This sense of professionalization, one that privileged standardization of style and publication over the application of ideas, is almost *the* definition of philosophy in our contemporary context.

This kind professionalization - one that, as Morris Cohen noted, emphasized specialization over a practical, broad reaching approach - allowed debates like the one between Lewis and Sellars to dominant the American philosophical community. Once philosophy became a *profession* more concerned with problem solving than offering practical solutions to pressing problems, there is nothing particularly mysterious about why debates over "giveness" in epistemology are paradigmatically debates in 20th century philosophy. From a historical perspective, what would be difficult to explain is 20th century American philosophers' concerns with theoretical puzzles in light of an emphasis on practicality. As a result of this transition "the professional, academic philosophy which emerged from this prolonged crisis of confidence bore but slight resemblance to mid-nineteenth century thought."[10] Even if an eye towards the practical *was* indicative of American philosophy in the 19th century, it is difficult to see how it is also indicative of American philosophy in the 20th century. In addition, it is this transition - from the kind of pragmatism concerned with the practical, concrete differences ideas make to a more "scientific" model of inquiry - that is problematic for Stanlick's narrative.

There is some room for expansion here. It is not the case that practical concerns are not indicative of developments in 19th century American philosophy. The problem, as Quine himself implicitly points out, is that what marks 20th century American philosophy is not such practicality, but a turn towards specialization and professionalization. Moreover, although Stanlick gives us a quick tour through epistemological developments in 20th century philosophy (including some of Quine's writings), I think this breaks the narrative apart a bit. It is not that 20th century American philosophers *cannot* focus on the practical, concrete difference ideas make in our lives, but that they

largely have not done so. This fact might raise perplexing questions about exactly why the American philosophical community went from emphasizing the practical difference ideas makes to the discipline we know today.[11] Yet this point is different from Stanlick's main claim that, *as a historical observation*, what marks American philosophy as distinctly "American" is an emphasis on the practical.

But perhaps Stanlick's narrative survives in contemporary attempts to brush off the effects of professionalization. Surely, Richard Rorty's philosophy is ostensibly a turn away from such professional norms - one purposely connected to the pragmatist tradition because of its emphasis on practical concerns. One might argue that Rorty is embracing a rich, specifically American, tradition of a turning towards the practical that is lacking in contemporary analytic philosophy. But is this to claim that most early to mid-20th century philosophers had somehow broken away from the American intellectual tradition? As noted above, there does not seem to be an obvious reason to disqualify Lewis and Sellars (or Quine) from counting as genuinely American philosophers. Even if *some* contemporary pragmatists focus on what practical difference ideas make, there is a large historical gap between themselves and their 19th century predecessors.

Stanlick's narrative can survive if it can handle the changes to philosophy I have described above. Here is my question for her: *Where do we see an emphasis on the practical difference ideas makes in 20th century American analytic and continental philosophy*? Although we might be able to see it in pockets within the profession, we surely do not see it throughout. Moreover, if we do not see such an emphasis in the American philosophical community throughout the 20th century, how is such an emphasis indicative of *American* philosophy? Is it that most philosophy since the 1930s is American in location only (having somehow broken free of what tied it to 19th century ideals) or does this narrative simply not apply to recent and contemporary American philosophers?

Of course, my challenges do not amount to overall dissatisfaction with Stanlick's book. It is amazingly more inclusive than past efforts to introduce readers to the history of American philosophy. Moving from the European background of American thought, through the early Calvinist leanings, and all the way to recent writings in everything from ethics to epistemology is a particular tall order. More so, the inclusion of Native American and African American thinkers as part of the American philosophical canon is particularly welcome. But I think it's important to recognize that the shift into a professionalized mode of doing philosophy has brought with it significant changes that*, at the very least*, signal a move away from the practical applicability of ideas. Even contemporary pragmatists, often in conjunction with deflationary attitudes towards truth and meaning, do not seem particularly concerned with the concrete difference their ideas make to life in general.

Looking at Robert Brandom's analytic "pragmatism" or Huw Price's "pragmatic expressivism"[12] does not lend much aid and comfort to thinking of the pragmatist tradition as mainly, if not wholly, concerned with creating solutions to practical problems. Even Price's recommendation that we ought to look at what expressions are *for*, as opposed to what they are *about*, only occurs within a context of specific theoretical problems about content and representation. And, again, such concerns do not arise because of practical pressures in our daily lives, but from theoretical, problem-based approaches to inquiry. Possible readings of Rorty aside, even contemporary pragmatists are mainly concerned with problems far-removed from daily life.

Perhaps this kind of contemporary pragmatism does have some connection to our daily lives. One finds Price claiming that

> Yes, certainly I'm a pragmatist. In my view, the most helpful way to characterize pragmatism is to say that it approaches a range philosophical issues in the way I just mentioned, by asking about the practical role that philosophically interesting concepts (e.g., that of causation) play in our lives – by looking for explanations, and genealogies, in broadly naturalistic terms (i.e., by starting with the assumption that we are natural creatures in a natural environment).[13]

Yet, I do not think this is the kind of "practical" that either Dewey or Stanlick have in mind. This sense of "practical" is not one that feeds back into our day-to-day practices, but one that informs our theoretical practices and concerns. Price's position represents a kind of practice-based approach that helps buttress deflationary attitudes towards metaphysical speculation. In this sense, one can find an emphasis on looking at human practices in order to inform our theoretical speculation, but this is not a sense of "practical" that helps reinvigorate Stanlick's narrative.

There may be an important *normative* issue at stake here: *Should* philosophy focus on the practical applicability of ideas? And the normative issue is, I think, one easily framed by looking back to 19th century American philosophy. The problem, or so I have suggested throughout this paper, is that such an emphasis on practicality is largely absent once we move beyond 19th century American philosophy.

Endnotes

[1] Stanlick and Silver 2004.

[2] Stanlick 2013, 5.

[3] Stanlick 2013, 5-6.

[4] I am skeptical about claiming Sellars as part of the pragmatist tradition. Although Richard Rorty and Robert Brandom are more than willing to co-op Sellars into the movement, there is significant evidence to the contrary. For example, see Sellars' introduction to *Naturalism and Ontology*.

[5] At the beginning of "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" Sellars points out that numerous ideas (not all tied to perceptual experience) have been asserted as "given."

[6] Wilfrid Sellars makes the connection between his own position on unmediated awareness and his father's position in Sellars 1954.

[7] Quine, 1981, 193.

[8] Quine 1981, 191.

[9] Wilson 1987, 239.

[10] Wilson 1987, 256.

[11] Within the last thirty years, there has been a decent amount of work on this topic. See especially Wilson 1990 and Jewett 2012.

[12] Although Price is not an American philosopher, he does explicitly connect his work with the pragmatist tradition. See Price 2011 (especially chapter 14).

[13] Marshall 2012, web.

Bibliography

Jewett, Andrew. *Science, Democracy, and the American University*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Marshall, Richard. Without Mirrors: Interview with Huw Price. *3 A.M. Magazine*. Posted: September 14th, 2012.

Murphey, Murray. *C. I. Lewis: The Last Great Pragmatist*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005.

Price, Huw. *Naturalism without Mirrors*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Quine, W.V.O. "Has Philosophy Lost Contact with the People?" *Theories and Things*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1981. Pp. 190-193.

Sellars, Wilfrid. *Naturalism and Ontology*. Reseda: Ridgeview Publishing Company, 1979.

_____. "Physical Realism." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 15.1 (1954): 13-32.

Stanlick, Nancy. *American Philosophy: The Basics*. London: Routledge, 2013.

Stanlick, Nancy. and Silver, Bruce. *Philosophy in America. Volume II*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2004.

Wilson, Daniel. *Science, Community, and the Transformation of American Philosophy: 1860 – 1930*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.