
Review Essay

*Conservative Pragmatism,
Pragmatic Conservatism*

William F. Byrne

St. John's University

Conservatism and Pragmatism in Law, Politics, and Ethics, by Seth Vannatta. *New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 277 pp. \$95 hardcover, \$39.99 softcover.*

The proper moral and epistemological grounding for politics, once a topic of considerable interest, has seen relatively little serious study in recent years. Seth Vannatta's *Conservatism and Pragmatism* is a partial corrective to this neglect. As the title suggests, this broad study explores various aspects of the relationship between conservatism and philosophical pragmatism. Though both a comparative and a synthetic work, it is predominantly a re-thinking of pragmatism that "argues that the pragmatic method is guided by conservative norms" (4). It is when it holds to this focus that the book is at its best. More broadly, "one goal throughout this work . . . is to show that while the conservative tradition is not one that treats past custom as the only norm operative in social and political conflict, the pragmatist tradition is not one which treats future ends as the only operative norm. Both are transactive with the past and the imagined future" (120).

Conservatism and pragmatism are both "transactive with the past and the imagined future."

The relationship between pragmatism and conservatism has been a rocky one. Obvious affinities exist between elements of

WILLIAM F. BYRNE is Associate Professor of Government and Politics at St. John's University.

the work of, for example, Michael Oakeshott, and philosophical pragmatists like John Dewey. Claes Ryn's early mentor, the Swedish philosopher Folke Leander, did notable work on Dewey's thought, and Ryn has included favorable treatment of aspects of Dewey in some of his own work.¹ Nevertheless, to the extent that there has been anything resembling dialog between conservatives and pragmatists, it has generally not been warm. In fact, when conservatives pay any attention at all to philosophical pragmatism, it is usually with hostility. This may be attributed in part (though only in part) to the fact that some of the most prominent pragmatists have been progressives, while most self-identified conservatives are, well, conservative. Vannatta's new study serves as a valuable alternative to this mixture of antipathy and neglect. Though it comes much more from a pragmatist perspective than from a conservative one, it offers an opportunity for conservatives to re-engage, or perhaps to engage for the first time, with philosophical pragmatism.

Pragmatism rejects the use of a priori truths and adopts an experimental approach to morality and the good order.

Both pragmatism and conservatism represent alternatives to typical Enlightenment rationalism, as well as to some classical thought. Vannatta's treatment of pragmatism draws on a variety of thinkers including Dewey, Charles Sanders Peirce, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and Jane Addams. Pragmatism, like much conservative thought, recognizes that "philosophy always emerges in a cultural situation for some purpose whose origins are not entirely free from the historically inherited social and political values of time and place" (117). From this perspective, pragmatism rejects the use of *a priori* truths and instead adopts an experimental, essentially nominalist approach to morality and the good order. Vannatta quotes Dewey: "The hypothesis that works is the *true* one; and *truth* is an abstract noun applied to the collection of cases, actual, foreseen and desired, that receive confirmation in their works and consequences" (120). Dewey and Vannatta are correct that it is through observation of how ideas play out in the world

¹ Folke Leander's primary relevant work is: *The Philosophy of John Dewey: A Critical Study* (Gothenburg: Elanders Printing Company, 1939). Among the places where Ryn provides some treatment of Dewey is *A Common Human Ground: Universality and Particularity in a Multicultural World* (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 2003). Neither Leander's nor Ryn's treatment of Dewey is referenced in *Conservatism and Pragmatism*.

that we get a handle on truth. A common error of ideologues of all sorts is their tendency to warp their perceptions of reality in order to keep 'facts' in line with preferred *a priori* concepts and theories.

Vannatta notes appropriately that Burke "appeals to common sense, history, reason, habit, nature, and principle. By combining these, he does not pretend that reason and principle stand free of human history, custom, or common sense but are emergent tools which function within customary forms of practice" (33). There are clear similarities between conservatism and pragmatism, but where things get problematic is in the question of precisely how similar, or compatible, conservatism and pragmatism ultimately are.

The author is critical of Russell Kirk's treatments of both John Dewey and Edmund Burke. He sees the thought of Dewey and Burke as highly compatible, while Kirk sees the two thinkers as almost polar opposites. For Vannatta, Kirk offers a shallow and very incomplete reading of Dewey, and mistakenly equates Deweyan pragmatism with Benthamite utilitarianism. Vannatta seems to feel that Kirk was far too quick to dismiss and reject philosophical pragmatism based on its historical association with Progressive politics, before he had given it a fair read. As for Burke, Vannatta sees much that is positive in Kirk's treatment of him—treatment far more extensive, of course, than Kirk's treatment of Dewey—but faults Kirk for making Burke a Natural Law thinker. Vannatta's points are well taken, especially with regard to Dewey, but one can argue that he swings too far to the opposing side in his own interpretations of Dewey and Burke, and that his own considerations of each thinker's perspectives are too selective and limited in scope.

Vannatta is rather fuzzy regarding precisely what he thinks Burke believes. At times he appears to maintain that Burke rejects any transcendent truths or "first premises," though he admits that "Burke will resort to natural law arguments" on occasion. Now, it is very true that Burke should not be characterized as a hard-core Natural Law thinker of the most classic sort. But a great deal of secondary literature attempts to address this question in various ways, and a claim that Burke rejects or dismisses transcendent truths and is insincere

or reluctant when he makes Natural Law-type arguments really demands considerable engagement with that literature, as well as much more extensive engagement with the corpus of Burke's writings than the few fragments touched on here. Because this engagement doesn't occur, Vannatta's claim is inadequately unsupported and unconvincing. Moreover, it is not entirely clear that Vannatta believes that Burke rejects the existence of transcendent truths; at times it appears that it may be that he merely considers Burke a moderate fallibilist. But if Burke is a moderate fallibilist, how different is Vannatta's Burke from Kirk's, really? Unfortunately, the level of exploration and development necessary to answer this question well is not here. More broadly, Vannatta often takes a very 'black-and-white' view of whether an approach to political questions is "pragmatic" or "metaphysical," not seriously considering the possibility of subtle alternatives.

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In the case of Dewey, Vannatta is correct that Kirk engages in mischaracterizations of him and is too quick to dismiss him with a broad brush. But Vannatta also draws very selectively on Dewey, and, broadly speaking, Vannatta's portrait of Dewey is itself very much open to challenge. For example, one complaint Vannatta makes about Kirk is that he fails to acknowledge that Dewey sees a role for what Vannatta calls "spiritual values," but in fact Dewey's "spiritual values" are a very far cry from traditional religion, particularly orthodox Christianity, toward which Dewey might be fairly characterized as hostile. Moreover, Dewey repeatedly emphasizes the ability of "democracy" and "organized intelligence" to achieve great progressive change, a perspective that sounds a lot more like Burke's ideological opponents than like Burke himself. Notably, Vannatta feels compelled to declare that what Dewey represents is *not* a "politics of faith" in democracy (215), but again we are effectively asked to accept this claim on Vannatta's authority; the kind of argument necessary to defend it properly is not mounted.

It should be noted that direct characterizations of Burke, Kirk, and even Dewey make up only a modest portion of *Conservatism and Pragmatism*; the book is in fact rather wide-ranging in its scope, treating many thinkers. This is both a strength and a weakness. Touching on many diverse (though

related) points helps make this an interesting and thought-provoking book. As has been suggested, however, the trade-off is that there is relatively little development or defense of the many individual points that are raised, or claims that are made, and many related questions begged by such points or claims are not addressed or explored. The degree of precision in the ideas conveyed is often less than a fully engaged reader may desire. Moreover, the author's objectives are not always precisely clear. Much of the book is devoted to an exploration of the presence of conservative elements in pragmatism and to the benefits to be gained through greater embrace of those elements for a "conservative pragmatism." Vannatta is strongest with this material. At other times Vannatta seems to be more engaged in comparing, and broadly exploring relationships between, conservatism and pragmatism, which is a daunting task. It is difficult enough comparing two thinkers within a single modest-length monograph. Comparing two "isms" is much more challenging, and when one of those "isms" is as slippery and complex as conservatism this becomes almost impossible to do both briefly and well.

While there are indeed important relationships between conservatism and pragmatism, Vannatta finds parallels partly by effectively re-defining conservatism as something that very closely resembles Deweyan pragmatism. Early in the book Vannatta states that "we need not define conservatism essentially, but rather seek to highlight its methodological norms" (23). The precise distinction between what conservatism is "essentially" and what "its methodological norms" are is not made clear. But by the time one gets near the end of the book, one might argue that, despite his early disclaimers, Vannatta is very much in the business of defining conservatism:

Attention to experience, particularity, non-neutrality, as well as skepticism of abstraction are common features of the methodology of conservatism and pragmatism. Conservatism is not a defense of traditional hierarchies, of men's dominance of the home or of the public sphere. It is just a methodology attentive to context and its entire experiential nexus. Conservatism whose first principle is a divine social order, if they are to be defended, must either be radically fallible concerning our epistemic access to such a divine social order, or they must be abandoned in favor of that which leans toward pragmatism in all of its openness and freedom of communal inquiry (210-11).

This paragraph alone would require a book-length explication and defense beyond what is offered in this volume. To say that conservatism is “*just* a methodology attentive to context and its entire experiential nexus” is at once so limiting and so vacuous a definition that its usefulness is highly questionable. Nor is it at all clear what the author means in this particular context by “radically fallible.” If Vannatta means that one must possess epistemic humility, one would imagine that any thinker widely recognized by scholars as anything like a ‘Burkean conservative’ would fit the bill, and that, at least as far as scholarly thought is concerned, this caution or qualification is largely moot. If Vannatta means a higher fallibilism than this, big questions arise regarding one’s ability to engage in meaningful, useful political-philosophical thought of any type (including pragmatist) in the context of extreme skepticism.

Notably, Vannatta argues repeatedly that his pragmatic approach to politics protects against “absolutism” and the “authoritarianism” associated with it. It is very true that the sort of ahistorical, rationalistic adherence to “Truth” that Vannatta opposes can lead to extremism and oppression, either by prohibiting any deviation from established ways or, more typically in the modern world, by fostering a revolutionary, ideological, totalitarian state. Yet, one may question whether Vannatta’s pragmatism offers much protection. What matters in politics is not the precise approach to public questions of a few philosophers. Philosophers do not make policy; less-schooled political elites, in conjunction with the general public, do. Deweyan pragmatism’s meliorism (celebrated by Vannatta) and emphasis on an almost revelatory role for “democracy” and “organized intelligence,” combined with its dismissal of traditional conceptions of truth, opens the door to a political culture embracing radical innovation accompanied by majority tyranny, oppressive social engineering by elites, or a combination of the two. The fact that this might not be Dewey’s intent, or that philosophers’ strictly adhering to Dewey’s stated approaches might not yield this result, is largely beside the point; if one is to be a true pragmatist, one must focus on the likely practical political impact of a particular moral-epistemological approach in the real world, with real political actors.

Vannatta speaks repeatedly against “authority” in politics, but all politics is based on authority. Burke recognized this, at least implicitly, and he recognized that appeals to dead authorities tend to be much less likely than appeals to live ones to lead to “absolutism” or “authoritarianism.” Burke’s whole project was one of preventing or minimizing “caprice” and tyranny in politics by fostering the idea that there was in fact Truth to which individuals and society should conform, and that knowledge of this Truth is embodied, mysteriously and fuzzily, in the practices, customs, institutions, and great figures of the past. The “conservative pragmatism” for which Vannatta argues, and which he ascribes to Dewey and other pragmatist thinkers and political actors, is in fact very far from Burkean conservatism. Despite lip service to tradition, the “openness” that Vannatta celebrates is strikingly un-Burkean and is far less likely to encourage meaningful constraints on a capricious will. While it is very true, as Vannatta notes, that “Natural Law” and the like can be misused in political argument, merely serving as cover for one’s own preferences, it is equally true that a “pragmatic” claim that a particular course of action is demanded by the circumstances at hand can also serve merely as cover for one’s own preferences.

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Vannatta favorably notes Dewey’s science-inspired approach: “The very norms of scientific inquiry that Dewey promoted—openness, experimentation, fallibility, and a rejection of dogma and prejudice,—are norms of praxis because thinking is an activity. Scientific inquiry, following these norms, has achieved results, and Dewey felt that inquiry into moral problems should follow such a pattern” (156-57). On one level, Dewey and Vannatta are certainly correct about the experimental nature of inquiry into moral problems. But the French *philosophes* with their new moral “science” of “ideology,” and Enlightenment thought generally, also emphasized “rejection of dogma and prejudice”; Burke understood that this purported “rejection” generally amounted to a willful replacement of particular old dogmas and prejudices with new dogmas and prejudices that were hastily arrived at and were usually inferior to the old ones. As Vannatta notes, the pragmatists recognized that philosophizing always occurs within a particular historical context and that it is shaped by

the existing culture and by the philosophers' understandings of the problems presented to them. It is because of this that the right sort of cultural and social grounding—one might say a very conservative cultural and social grounding—is necessary to ensure that legitimate efforts to broaden one's thinking don't morph into the confusion of one's own arbitrary opinions with transcendent truths and to ensure that one does not fall into the sort of scientism that is really but another expression of closed-mindedness.

While many readers are likely to have disagreements with elements of *Conservatism and Pragmatism*, it is a valuable addition to scholarly thought and is worthy of attention. There is a need for greater consideration of fundamental questions regarding the wellspring of sound political thought and action, and this book will serve as a useful tool in future scholarship and reflection. In addition to shedding new light on philosophical pragmatism and its role in American political thought, this book highlights, for conservative-leaning thinkers in particular, the need to take up a question that urgently needs re-visiting in the twenty-first century: "What is conservatism?" Finding a workable path to good order is a formidable challenge in today's world and one that demands that concerned scholars step outside of their comfort zones and muster all of the intellectual resources available for the task.