Pragmatist Representationalism and the Aesthetics of Moral Intelligence

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Important work on the relation of pragmatic ethics and aesthetics, such as Steven Fesmire’s *John Dewey and Moral Imagination: Pragmatism in Ethics*, misses an important feature of the entire issue unless non-mimetic representation is invoked to explain the relation between what Dewey would call the “problem” and the “solution” presented in experience. This cannot be elaborated within a Rortyan neo-pragmatism, nor can it be addressed without attending to the “spiritual” aspect of moral agency.

Steven Fesmire, who teaches philosophy and environmental studies at Green Mountain College in Vermont, has recently authored *John Dewey and Moral Imagination: Pragmatism in Ethics*, which addresses the juncture of ethics and aesthetics.¹ This is an area not always appreciated even among Dewey’s admirers, and one of this book’s best features is its usefulness as a guide to some of the literature around this important issue. Part I lays out the standard scholarly terrain, through a well-documented treatment of character, belief, and intelligence in William James and Dewey. It recapitulates what Dewey’s original story involves and whose more recent work that story resembles. Its well-chosen quotes and anecdotes brighten the classical pragmatist story.

This is a familiar tale, however, which connoisseurs might well skim, moving on to the more provocative part of the discussion, in Part II. For it is clear, right from the book’s opening pages, that Steven Fesmire sees his own task as much more ambitious than just a standard account of some issues in Deweyan scholarship. He is hopeful that this own work here will contribute to “a Copernican revolution in ethics” (3). Part II of the book intends to sketch out this Copernican shift away from foundationalist ethics, and towards “an account of imaginative situational moral intelligence” (30). And here is Fesmire’s important contribution. The power of art to affect the moral imagination is well known, but artistic production and enjoyment is a less familiar but more helpful model for moral experience, superior to Dewey’s own rather bland notion of “growth” (107–8).
It is important to consider what this book intends to do and what it does not. Most apparently, it is not intended for those who are deeply skeptical of the pragmatist story. It seems to have been written on the assumption that its likely readers are its most likely allies. This might even be seen as one of the book’s strengths, because when it comes to characterizing “the moral artist” — the title of the book’s culminating chapter — Fesmire can use broader strokes, to paint a more intuitively vivid picture. On the other hand, this means that Fesmire has room for only so much. He gives only the sketchiest account of the objections to Decision Theory, for example, assuring us (but not really showing us) how the calculus of utilities “requires metaphorical interpretation, via the ‘Nash equilibrium’, to be relevant to human choice” (29).

So, as regards the agenda of classical pragmatism, this book is more celebratory than persuasive. This is no deep criticism of Fesmire’s achievement. It is no failure of execution not to have embarked on a different project. However, this can only be Volume One. There is vastly greater potential to a book subtitled “Pragmatism in Ethics” than just how ethics appears to many pragmatists. It would seem no less crucial to consider how pragmatic ethics can appear generally, to ethicists (and others). The very fact that the book’s intended audience seem to be allies, already committed to many if not most of Fesmire’s intuitions, indicates the amount of promising work still left undone, if Fesmire’s proposal is going to have a much deserved wider impact. The natural next step, in other words, would be to carry the proposal beyond what Daniel W. Conway once, perhaps teasingly, called “Deweydom.”2 This book does not do that.

But what the book does do is bring even more excitement to a discussion that many others have also been engaging. What some will find exciting, in Fesmire’s championing of the moral artist, is the idea that there is after all something substantial to say about the aesthetics of moral intelligence.3 Others have led the way on this, in indicating why this might be so and what might be preserved and expanded from classical pragmatism, and Fesmire’s work shows the influence of many of these colleagues.4 But Fesmire is sounding a rather new and important note here.

For one thing, though this itself is certainly not new, Fesmire is unabashedly willing to grant what Rorty (in some deep sense) certainly is not, which is that we are embedded within a complex of “structural factors independent of immediate human perception” (41).5 The difference between moral artistry and routine or impulsive behavior occurs within a context of fixed factors such as these, though on what level of specificity that fixture hangs is not clear. We do need to pay close care not to universalize features of purely local context — religious fundamentalism and colonialist apologetics come to mind — but Fesmire also seems unwilling to simply assume that no universal features are carried over.