Krzysztof Piotr Skowroński, ed.
Practicing Philosophy as Experiencing Life: Essays on American Pragmatism.

Practicing Philosophy as Experiencing Life: Essays on American Pragmatism is a recent collection of essays edited by Krzysztof Piotr Skowroński. The essays, taken individually, are fascinating, but the pieces do not speak to each other enough to feel like a coherent volume. I say this not to criticize the volume, but rather to explain the form this review takes. Instead of discussing the volume in general terms, I have opted for a summary of each article.

In John Lachs's contribution, “The Obligations of Philosophers,” he asks about the obligations philosophers incur by taking material support from the public. In other words, what ought we to do to earn our checks? While many might think that philosophers’ professional obligations are exhausted by mentoring students and going to faculty meetings, Lachs has a longer list. These range from the banal and too opt-repeated adage to avoid jargon to more tendentious claims to resist communism to more interesting suggestions. For instance, Lachs urges philosophers to be fallibilists, to acknowledge the freedom we exercise in conceptualizing, and acting in, the world, and to display the courage “to speak up when central values are in danger” (p. 8). No doubt, these obligations tug on one another. (If the world does not dictate how it is to be conceptualized, we cannot be wrong about our preferred conceptualizations, so why should we be fallibilists about these? If we are fallibilists about our value judgments, why should we ever act as though we are certain that a value has been wrongly threatened and requires our defense?) Though such tensions may be ineliminable, Lachs is surely right that navigating them is essential for being a good philosopher. Whether one likes his specific answers or not, Lachs poses an important question. What should philosophers do to earn their keep? In an age when philosophy is endangered within the academy, this question has perhaps never had more relevance.

“Prolegomena to Pragmatist Conception of the Good Life” is Emil Višňovský’s contribution to the volume. Though the article gets off to a slow start, mentioning – not really probing – lots of well-known views about the good life and the good society, Višňovský ends the article on a high note, articulating a pragmatist vision of the good life, one that is “flexible, imaginative, pluralistic, anti-dogmatic and non-hedonistic” (p. 28). While I found this vision quite compelling, I also found myself wondering at the end: If this is the pragmatist vision, in what sense is Višňovský’s text a prolegomenon? Prolegomena are expository preludes to a longer discussion. On Višňovský’s view, however, pragmatists will not have any general, pre-packaged prescriptions on how to live,
so there should be no tome or treatise for which his remarks serve as introduction. A pragmatist treatise on the good life is a contradiction in terms. This wrinkle aside, Višňovský offers an attractive vision of how to pursue the good life, a vision that is strongly rooted in both classical and more contemporary pragmatist thought.

Why, in American thought, have people traditionally understood philosophy as a way of life, and not as a subject for detached, academic study? That question animates Kenneth W. Stikkers’s contribution, “Practicing Philosophy in the Experience of Living: Philosophy as a Way of Life in the American Philosophical Tradition.” Stikkers ventures two answers. First, he argues that, throughout American thought from Puritanism to pragmatism, one finds a different ontological framework than one finds in Europe, and he further suggests that this difference enabled American thinkers to resist Europe’s epistemology-centered view of philosophy, which goes hand-in-hand with the “philosophy as subject” view. Second, Stikkers points to a long history of American philosophy being practiced beyond the academy. The experience of non-academic philosophy militated against the “philosophy as subject” conception and commended the “philosophy as way of life” conception. The most fascinating part of the article comes in giving examples of philosophy outside the academy. There, Stikkers draws upon W.E.B. Du Bois and Jane Addams. These passages stand out because they offer suggestions about how to orient contemporary philosophical practice. From Du Bois, we get the suggestion that intellectuals must shine a light on the stories and musings of the marginalized in order to make progress in thinking about moral and political philosophy. I take this to imply that philosophers from within the contemporary academy must do more than aim not to exclude; they must positively aim to include marginalized voices. Moral and political philosophy will suffer otherwise. From Addams’s work, we get the suggestion that we should be more sympathetic in dealing with interlocutors. This is a lesson for everyone when we have difficult conversations, whether these conversations populate the pages of academic journals or populate our social media feeds.

In “Classical American Pragmatism: Practicing Philosophy as Experiencing and Improving Life,” Jacquelyn Ann K. Kegley continues the discussion of Du Bois and Addams. Kegley begins her contribution discussing Josiah Royce, William James, and John Dewey, focusing on these thinkers’ conceptions of individual-community interaction. For this trio of thinkers, the ideal interaction yields neither rugged individualists who are selfish and forgetful of their debts to society nor homogeneous communities that inhibit individuals’ “originality, self-will, [and] contrast” (p. 66). When Kegley turns to Du Bois and Addams, she does so to showcase thinker-activists who sought to create the conditions...