Introductory Notes on the Obama and Pragmatism Symposium

Mark Sanders and Colin Koopman

This special Symposium on Obama and Pragmatism is the result of the efforts and diligence of many persons, all of whom deserve our gratitude, however the person most responsible and to whom this Symposium is dedicated, is Michael Eldridge. Mike’s sudden and tragic passing in September 2010 left a void which will be impossible to fill for those of us who knew him. His larger than life persona will live on in our memories of him and his work on pragmatism will live on in his published material. It is our honor to add to that material by not only dedicating this symposium to him, but by including herein, an essay by him.

Michael Eldridge was interested in the question of what kind of pragmatist President Barack Obama is and the connection between his pragmatism and philosophical pragmatism. He explored these questions from several angles. Eldridge’s inquiry into Obama’s pragmatism was the perfect project for him in that it involved inquiry into the pragmatism of an important political figure in terms of his words and deeds (his thoughts and actions). This inquiry was facilitated by Eldridge’s own pragmatic life as a community organizer, social activist, union representative, Fulbright scholar, and philosophy professor in which he always sought to connect his own thoughts and actions.

Eldridge’s interest in Obama’s pragmatism dated back at least to 2009 when he set up a website to serve as a resource and a place for discussion about Obama’s pragmatism.¹ This led to a workshop at the Summer Institute for American Philosophy at the University of Oregon in July of 2009 and then to a plenary session on Obama’s Pragmatism at the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy (SAAP) annual meeting at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte in March 2010.² The idea and impetus for both of these sessions came from Eldridge. In planning the latter SAAP session, Eldridge enlisted our help for this project since we shared his interest in the topic. (It is also a testament to his unflagging support of junior colleagues and graduate students that he was eager to enlist our help in a way that he insured would be of benefit to us, both professionally and personally.) Thanks to Eldridge, who chaired the session at SAAP in March 2010, and the participants, which included many of the contributors to this Symposium (Paul Taylor, Bart Schultz, Joseph Winters, Noelle McAfee, and Mark Sanders) the Plenary session...
provided a venue at which to begin a constructive dialogue about understanding the role of pragmatism in the political thought of Barack Obama. This special symposium on Obama in this special issue of *Contemporary Pragmatism* on Contemporary American Politics is a continuation of that dialogue.

The essays that appear in this Symposium offer a wide range of views on the question of Obama’s pragmatism. Some of the essays advance arguments on behalf of thinking about Obama as a pragmatist, some clearly oppose this conclusion, and others are perhaps somewhere in between. All of them, however are more interested in the question of what we mean when we call Obama a pragmatist (or choose to not call him a pragmatist). Obama’s background, education, community organizing, speeches, policies and political actions are thoroughly examined from a range of perspectives and methodologies across these essays. The essays were written independently and each stands on its own. However since some of them originated at the SAAP session, and some authors were aware of other author’s work, and sometimes just by happenstance, there is a considerable amount of dialogical discourse between them.

To orient the reader approaching this substantive selection of work on Obama and Pragmatism, we offer a summary of the perspectives that follow. Taken collectively, the work here offered provides a range of opinion and inquiry concerning both the pragmatist merits of the thought and action of Barack Obama as well as the philosophical stakes involved in the very idea of a discussion of Obama’s pragmatism. As is clear from our summary below, not all of our contributors are of the same mind about these matters: that there should be room for much debate on the question of Obama’s pragmatism is exactly what we as pragmatists should expect, and indeed even hope for.

Bart Schultz here draws upon his own earlier work on Obama in order to develop a new range of insights. He argues that Obama is not Dewey, but he is Deweyan, and perhaps as much as a President could ever be. He puts forth a sample of the wide array of interpretations of pragmatism in a way that makes it conceivable to call Obama a pragmatist while showing the need to clarify just what that means.

Paul Taylor raises several important concerns about extending the pragmatist label to Obama. He claims that Obama the writer, orator, and campaigner is more of a pragmatist than Obama the President. Taylor also proposes that the question of Obama’s pragmatism is one that some of us (pragmatists) are interested in is because it “makes the President one of us” such that it “might come mixed with deeper desires and anxieties, and gather some momentum from the progress of these desires and anxieties.” Taylor thus provides a useful cautionary note to those of us who are all too quick to think of Obama as a pragmatist. This may be a disservice to our understanding of Obama, and even to our understanding of pragmatism.

Mark Sanders explores the question of Barrack Obama’s pragmatism by inquiring into what it means when Obama is labeled pragmatic by observers from across various fields. Examining how the term ‘pragmatism’ is used in