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Making Morality: Pragmatist Reconstruction in Ethical Theory

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Book Reviews

Making Morality: Pragmatist Reconstruction in Ethical Theory by Todd Lekan. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2003. Pp. 216. \$22.95.

In this wonderfully provocative and lucid book, Todd Lekan has incisively demonstrated the richness of a pragmatic approach to moral theory. Lekan's Dewey inspired approach to morality begins by offering an account of how practical knowledge functions in all forms of value deliberation and rational conduct by systematically developing and defending a pragmatist account of practical knowledge in the domains of intentional action and practical justification. In contrast to the common view which sees practical justification as being grounded in fixed ends, Lekan conceives of practical knowledge through the lens of Dewey's notion of "habits" or those "shared ways of thinking, feeling, and doing that reside in evolving activities and practices" (5). It is here that the "revisionist" nature of Lekan's project becomes most clear. For given such an understanding of practical justification, "moral considerations are essentially only modifiable learned ways developed contingently over time to solve particular problems that are in many respects no different in kind than practical considerations in activities like hunting, baseball, medicine, and painting" (7).

The second chapter then extends the pragmatist reconstruction of morality to the notion of goods. Although a complete metaphysical account of the source(s) and loci of value is not attempted, Lekan does thoroughly illustrate the functional role of values in practical justification. In contrast to those who would defend notions of intrinsic value, Lekan argues that "the importance of value is a function of its connections to a variety of things in human life" (76). As Lekan notes in the subsequent chapter, one of the strengths of such a pragmatist moral theory is its ability to appreciate the uniqueness of each moral situation, while still recognizing the value and role of ideals. In this way, Lekan's pragmatic, revisionist, and reconstructive moral theory "provides a compelling, superior middle way between the view that moral judgment is based on universal principles and that of radical particularists who think of moral judgment in terms of case-by-case intuitive responses" (86). Further developing this line of thought, the fourth chapter focuses on the

"boundaries and authority of morality." It is argued that what ultimately distinguishes moral from non-moral considerations is the former's "special authority or force" (127). For Lekan, "the authority of moral norms is grounded in the fact that they express responsibilities for important social ties and relationships" (138).

Finally, in the best spirit of the pragmatist tradition, Lekan concludes his book by applying his view of moral arguments to social criticism, arguing that good social criticism must be both local and undertaken by the "engaged critic." Lekan sees the moral theorist and the social critic as engaged in a common enterprise to help a community "better understand its responsibilities and thereby improve its practices" (146). This beautifully captures the difference between the traditional and pragmatist approaches to moral theory. As Lekan beautifully argues, "For the pragmatist, morality does not reside in some mysterious transcendent realm independent of our created contingent practices, nor is it an expression of merely personal sentiment. Moral considerations are responsibilities developed in community" (147).

Though, as Lekan himself fully recognizes, *Making Morality* is not intended to be a complete pragmatist moral theory, I am nevertheless troubled by his approach to axiology. While the problem of understanding and appreciating value is critical, such an investigation cannot safely proceed without a prior analysis of its metaphysical status. Lekan's explicit avoidance of a metaphysical account of the status of value seems to be in conflict with what appear to be metaphysical conclusions regarding the nature of value in general and his rejection of the notion of intrinsic value in particular. That is, given the lack of a metaphysical account of the status of value, Lekan would seem to be unjustified in concluding that "goods 'exist' only in relation to human practice and activity" (73). It is anthropocentric axiologies such as this which perpetuate and make possible the wanton destruction of non-humans. Even assuming that rational agents are the only beings complex enough to be conscious and free enough to be responsible, Lekan is not justified in assuming further that humans are the only beings that realize a good for themselves; that is, that humans are the only intrinsically valuable beings. Lekan contends that the problem with such an account of intrinsic value is that "it does not explain why the pursuit of some goods is *more*

important than that of others" (75). However, this objection misses that the whole point of intrinsic value is that it is its own justification. More to the point, this objection seems premature barring a metaphysical analysis of the status of value. Moreover, if Lekan is truly to follow Dewey in rejecting invidious dualisms which seek to artificially separate humans from nature and instead see ourselves as continuous with nature, then his axiology must take seriously the value of non-human beings.

Acutely aware of the difficulty of defending a pragmatist moral theory, Lekan notes that those who would defend the ethical theories under reconstruction will suspect a "skeptical assault" and skeptics will suspect a "failure of intellectual nerve" (9). Yet, *Making Morality* offers such a lucid and thorough defense of the importance and richness of a pragmatist reconstructive moral theory that both of these camps will be unable simply to ignore its value. With Lekan, then, I am confident that a pragmatic reconstruction "remains the best hope for setting the house of moral philosophy in order" (9).

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The Pragmatic Whitman: Reimagining American Democracy by Stephen John Mack. Iowa City: U of Iowa Press, 2002, 182 pages. Cloth ISBN 0-87745-822-7

Stephen John Mack's *The Pragmatic Whitman* focuses largely on the changes in Walt Whitman's vision of American democracy, as presented in both his poetry and prose. Mack divides Whitman's development into three phases of progressive maturation. The first is best exemplified by *Leaves of Grass* (1855 and 1856). Here, according to Mack, Whitman offers a "metaphysics of democracy" in which sensory experience and the pluralistic equality of the experiencers take center stage. Whitman is working toward a naturalistic and dynamic cosmology akin to what would later be called "radical empiricism." This cosmology includes a pragmatic verification of language, an exploration of the relationship between the "I" and the "me," a questioning of hierarchies, and notions of temporal change and the ongoing development of mind. This chapter of Whitman's thought culminates in what Mack calls the "problem of agency" - crises in Whitman's life and in the