

Book Review:

Pragmatist Ethics: A Problem-Based Approach to What Matters

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James Jakób Liszka, *Pragmatist Ethics: A Problem-Based Approach to What Matters*.
Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 202, 192 pages.
ISBN: 978-1438485881 (Paperback, \$25)



Our world is awash in problems. From the spreading of nationalist populism and extremism to institutional decay, climate crises, deaths of despair like drug overdoses, mass shootings, and rising suicides all speak to the current pathologies of culture. What kind of ethical obligations do we have in such troubling and toxic times? James Jakób Liszka's timely book *Pragmatist Ethics: A Problem-Based Approach to What Matters (PE)* attempts to offer sensible approaches that do not fall into the traps of the savior complex, the blind faith of progressivism nor writing a requiem for the world. How should we practice pragmatist ethics while distinguishing it from the vulgar reflexes of utilitarianism? There is nothing wrong with utilitarianism *per se*, since it is consistent with all the other dominant schools of moral philosophy—they subscribe to some theoretical or speculative account of triumphant principles that makes it impossible for groups to alter their views. Following the ethical philosophies of Peirce, James, and Dewey, Liszka argues that the moral life does not demand a theory of pleasure, goodness, or virtue, nor one of duty in Kant's deontological sense, but should promote our ability to solve practical problems that find solutions. Ethical pragmatism is problem-based ethics which does not confuse the abstract with the concrete. Following James, Bergson, and Whitehead's radical empiricism, *PE* prioritizes the concrete over the abstract. There is a fundamental difference between the demands of practical life and the ways in which we formulize them into logical propositions.¹ "Instead of archers with an ideal target, as Aristotle suggests, the situation is more like the Chinese proverb: 'We must cross the river by feeling for the stones'" (*PE*, 20).

Pragmatist ethics, as a philosophical orientation, registers difference between travelers and tourists. The latter are the exclusive practitioners of imperial apathy, who often guard against or antagonize encounters with others. Tourists are closed off from or seek to avoid the *interzones* of contact or deem foreign interactions as hindering the need for others (foreign, non-familiar) to be assimilated. They would rather encounter the otherness of cultures (C. S. Peirce's secondness) from a distance, in a museum, domesticated through the productivity of capture capitalism. How

¹ Liszka writes "In order for a practice to be counted as good, formally speaking, it must serve a good end and prescribe morally right means that will successfully attain that end. This overarching norm of good practices could be expressed in the following way: *practices ought to do what is likely to attain a good and in the right way*. But, of course, the norm is merely formal and does not supply any content as to what is right or good, so, it does not provide specific guidance" (*PE*, 66-67, emphasis original).

should we be culturally oriented in polyethnic, multi-localized ritualistic societies? Every epoch contributes to solving and creating problems for future generations. Liszka writes, Steven

Pinker also seems to slight the struggle of peoples in the march toward progress. Much of what has been achieved has come not through some smooth path of following Enlightenment ideals, like following a map to a destination. Rather, the norms that have proven themselves—many of which are what some Enlightenment figures presaged—are those that have been wrought through the struggles, blood, sweat, and tears of people to make changes to better their lives. Although certainly some were inspired by the Enlightenment, many ordinary folk were not necessarily conversant with Enlightenment ideals but knew the problems they faced and understood what would fix them. Change had to be cut through the thickets of problems and troubles, rather than travel on the paved road to progress, as exemplified by the struggle for women to have the simple basic right to vote and struggle of African Americans for ordinary civil rights (*PE*, 157).

We may respond to the demands for social justice through activist groups like BLM, ADL, or the NAACP, but does this amount to communities of inquirers having the efficacy to which Liszka appeals? He is more optimistic in our age of polarizing politics. One cannot sit on the sidelines and will commit just acts by working on behalf of others and having “skin in the game.” He writes “Problems have a way of troubling people even if they are not themselves suffering the problem. Problems not solved are like a malaise that seeps into the community, wipe away the veneer, expose the flaws. The moral character of people and the ethos of their communities are manifested in how they address their problems. Solving the problems of others is the beginning of a moral stance, the possibility of altruism. Justice is not realized until those not affected by a problem act to solve it for those who are.”

Liszka’s conception of problem-based ethics uses the triumvirate of Peirce, James, and Dewey as its foundation for providing the five pragmatist themes. Theory or normative thinking must change to practice and meaningful action. We can only solve problems concretely and not abstractly. The foundation of pragmatist ethics rests on five lessons which become the threshold topics for the chapters in this book.

The leading orientation is Peirce's pragmatic maxim, which holds that concepts such as the good, true, or beautiful, can only be understood functionally. What they *do* in practical life is more fundamental than what they are. Second, is the position that theory must be transposed into practice, that practical reasoning guides the way for practical reasoning. The third lesson is that "true belief" be established through the avoidance of error and "inquiry being done correctly." "Fourth, as both Peirce and Dewey argue, successful inquiries into matters of truth and goodness required a community of inquiry with certain norms, and practitioners with certain virtues. Fifth, progress in such inquiries was made through the detection of error in hypotheses, and through the solution to social problems" (*PE*, 4). The American pragmatists did not romanticize knowledge, nor did they fail to overlook the complexities that go into its creation. This might explain why Americans are generally more familiar with the so-called European big names of philosophy than their meager American forebears. Genius worship and idolizing the great thinker prevents us from taking seriously the interconnected network of experience, including all the agencies and processes involved. Cults of the expert have infected Americans' sense of knowledge that would depress a John Dewey or make an Ida R. Cummings sad. We need not believe there are superior individuals who will act as the final arbiters of what works or doesn't. An inquiry into knowledge is a social pursuit and works toward the convergence of agreement. The ability to establish this criterion of justification has become problematic in our age of hyper-communication. In this era, social media works to exacerbate the wounds of our increasing divides and polarization. But that may be the perplexing and eccentric nature of human beings. After all, it was the proto-pragmatist Immanuel Kant who declared us to be "socially unsociable." Using other people as the mediums of communication and information is the basis of democratic education. Our understanding of how knowledge is gathered, and spread has largely lost this sense of interrelatedness. What has resulted is not only fragmented groups talking past one another, but idiotic communes that only speaks its own language or plays its own tune. From these Leibnizian-like monadic self-enclosed echo chambers the authority of the expert is secured and, ultimately, never challenged. Psychosocial attitudes of closedness set in, undermining efforts to consolidate institutional norms for democracy and its pursuit of knowledge and innovation. Hence, American philosophy embrace an experimentalist democracy of inquirers paraphrasing Dewey's method of "organized intelligence," which brings "conflicts out into the open where their special claims can be discussed and judged in

the light of more inclusive interests than are represented by either of them separately” (Dewey 2008, 56).

By taking seriously the philosophical and cultural openness promoted by pragmatist ethics we can work to acknowledge how our moral obligations and rituals have value insofar as they are salient to real situations and circumstances. Problem-solving is the key to acting morally, not living according to some overarching principle or philosophy. Summarizing James’s “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” (1891) and Dewey’s “The Need for Recovery in Philosophy” (1917), Liszka writes “Dewey sees eye-to-eye with James.” James has two theses: “First, the role of moral philosophers is not to be the arbiter of what is good. This is a collective, ongoing project. [...] James’s second thesis is that there is no one good ‘to rule them all,’ that there is a plurality of goods that people seek. But this creates a tragic sense of life, in that no political, social, and normative organization of practical life can in principle accommodate them all” (*PE*, 3). Dewey “argues for a new role for the moral philosopher as facilitator, engaged in the moral problems of practical life, rather than an arbiter or law giver wrestling with abstract concepts of the good. Plato failed to prove that in knowing the good people would do the good. Instead, the pragmatists argued that in doing good, people come to know it” (*ibid.*). This is why Hilary Putnam calls Dewey a “hero” since he argues “that the function of ethics is not, in the first instance to arrive at ‘universal principles.’” (*PE*, 24; Putnam 2004, 4). The pragmatic maxim is about moving theory into practice. Gregory Pappas warns that without having an orientation on democratic problem-solving then societies devolve into a quagmire of ideologues. “A community of inquiry that is not centered and guided by the unique problem at hand usually deteriorates into a mere conflict of ideologies without the fullness of interaction required for learning” (Pappas 2008, 241). To put it bluntly, passers-by need to bypass the problems of philosophers for the problems of men, as Dewey argued in a series of essays (1946). Most notably, we struggle in our current times to settle on the common traction or location of where to begin to solve human problems because we suffer from being fractured and well-insulated in our bubbles.

Pragmatism is about concern for practical life through action, but not in some vulgar utilitarian sense. It is out of an ethics of care for oneself and others, which have the capacity to rise to the level of beautiful moral acts of love. Smith makes this a cornerstone of his pragmatic responsibility when he discusses how the philosopher must negotiate between theory and fact. “There are telltale divergences between what

caring would prompt her to do, prioritizing the needs of the living beings with whom she is presently dealing, and what Kantianism or utilitarianism would require. For example, she says she would tell a lie to protect her cat and will not accept global do-goodism as an ethical priority” (Smith 2022, 173; Noddings 2010, 236, 239). From Hadot to Sloterdijk to Rorty, the primacy of training over truth is of utmost concern for many twenty-first century philosophers. Thinking is re-oriented toward ethical and intercultural living and practices for daily life. Communities of inquiry are involved in forms of shared risk-taking. Our ability to predict the risks in advance is shortening and growing less reliable in an unpredictable world. Experts now work *ex post facto* and are not the cause, but result from a process of democratic knowledge, that is prepared to critique democracy itself. Knowledge emerges from a social process of enacted by a community of inquirers engaged in experiential interpretation. All results and findings from “experts” should be supplemented by communities of inquirers concerned about the importance, value, and freedom of knowledge. Not as something that is sole domain or prerogative of a special class of knowers. There is much to be gained from specialization and this kind of precision is required for further development of our initial assessments. But going too far in the direction of epistemic concentration is like setting up an Adam Smith division of labor structure, which can be potentially damaging to the developmental freedom of individuals.

Liszka relies upon Gilbert Ryle’s distinction between *knowing-that* and *knowing-how*. One of the limitations I found in Liszka’s treatment of solving problems is how little treatment he gives to “existential crisis” and disasters. Scarcely mentioned or treated in a contemporary context, one feels that a modest treatment is not sufficient to understand our global struggles. How are we to fight and resist the systemic impact of colonialism or stem the rising tides of gun violence and mass shootings in the U.S., for example? What if we are able to identify persistent problems while being unable or unwilling to work toward rectifying them? In his book *Infinite Mobilization*, German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk argues that humans have an addiction to emergency and unbearable burdening. We have, he surmises, normalized a disaster didactics preparing us for the catastrophic. We anticipate or expect what are called “disaster warnings” to be a common occurrence, so much so, that we are likely to be nervous about it not occurring. I speculate that Liszka’s analysis works with a reductionist account of how we confront and seek to revert the disasters and black swans that lurk in our age of hyper-speeds and distances. “Call this sort a problem an existential crisis, that is, a problem which , if not resolved, would result in the end or

replacement of the practice, institution, or community” (*PE*, 144). He freely admits that “Practices are established to solve certain problems. If they persist that is because they continue to solve those problems fairly well. They are normative in the sense that they prescribe the best ways to attain their ends. Practices integrate technical and ethical norms. To be a good carpenter is to be an honest one. Science cannot be done if data is falsified. They involve practical reasoning, which is essentially reasoning concerned with how to attain desirable ends” (*PE*, 5). It sounds as if such problems under this kind of pragmatist sterilization treats of major problems—life or death calamities—like they can be tamed and brought under the domestication of “stress management” and other civilized techniques. Know-how is working to solve problems through projects of personal and collective responsibility with a keen sense of being aware of possible new ones arising through unintended consequences. When one is snatched out of the everyday occurrences and is thrown into unknown extremes there is an expectation that one will be concerned with being uncomfortable. There is an urgency beyond everydayness that we have to embrace as a regular course of events now; that is what the society of insurance is all about: being able to prognosticate emergencies and disasters before they happen. Emergencies, disasters, and even Black Swan events can render us helpless and passive-aggressive since we are ill-equipped culturally and socioeconomically to confront and deal with these problems from our standpoint of historical privilege, compared with other historical societies. Can we eliminate starvation, homelessness, or mental health taking over our cities? I believe there is a strong desire to do so, but the social structures have grown dependent on perpetuating the same policies, resulting in the same results. Just as a consumerist behavior can be characterized by addiction psychology, our politicians and business leaders have become meta-addicts, or growing dependent on the ways in which we are addicted. Addiction is a cornerstone of a consumer-driven economic market, and the impact of such psychic stresses has been little explored. It is imperative to proceed with caution since we have little data and evidence to make any definitive conclusions. In that Baconian spirit of “useful knowledge,” Jason Stanley’s 2011 book *Know How* presents the pragmatist approach as taking care of any epistemic and noetic conditions. Know-how “is realized when the person does the task successfully and consistently in a variety of circumstances and situations and, so, becomes expert in the practice. Know-how is not achieved solely by acquiring knowledge of rules, policies, and procedures, but in carrying through that know-that to particular situations that realizes the end or goal of the practice consistently over

time" (*PE*, 99). Theory becomes practice and habits while working on behalf of solving problems. Abduction plays a leading role in this process. Many legal and ethical rules don't apply well to situations involving nuances not addressed by the general rules. Liszka writes, "Abduction may be a good candidate to explain how novelty, nuance and surprise can affect adjustments to general rules. In explaining how scientific reasoning works, Peirce thought that besides induction—the kind of reasoning that tests hypotheses—there was also a process of reasoning that was concerned with the formulation of hypotheses" (*PE*, 95).

At the roots of pragmatic or problem-based ethics is its focus on flourishing and moral growth. "Peirce understood growth as not just increase, but diversification. Dewey too understood growth not simply as increase, but as something creates the conditions for further growth. Indeed, in a rather remarkable claim, Dewey says that 'growth itself is the only moral end'" (*PE*, 38). Consistent with meliorism, Liszka emphasizes how pragmatist ethics "is not a naïve optimism that thinks progress is inevitable, that the next generation will be better than the previous, marching toward some utopian ideal" (*PE*, 166). At bottom, human beings are problem solvers without having any pre-given rules or principles as a guide. "The model for the ethicist in the pragmatist mold is more Jane Addams, who worked to solve the problems of immigrants, John Dewey, who created an experimental school to transform education, or Alain Locke, who imagined and realized the Harlem Renaissance. It is an approach better than those who engage in a sort of cultural criticism that admires the problem, but let others do the hard work of finding the solution. The world needs critical thinking, but it needs problem-solving skills more" (*PE*, 168-169). This activist's dimension is often missing in the pragmatist's treatment of moral action and our loyalties or commitments to fighting for social justice. We are called upon to do more than establish the truth, a will to believe, or warranted assertion through a community of inquirers. Whether it is education, economics, politics, or art there is no shortage of groups or individuals ready with a solution with a readymade recipe to solve the problem. But this approach is a coveted appeal to specialists and experts, which represents the kind of epistemocracy that pragmatists seek to upend. Liszka agrees with Peirce's conviction about the power of science has for self-correction. "Abduction was the reasoning by which new hypotheses were developed on the basis of anomalies with existing ones; deduction, in this context, was determining the testable consequences of hypotheses so formulated; and induction was the means by which hypotheses were tested for problems and anomalies" (*PE*, 102). Others find

salience in the approach presented by Eddie Glaude, who argues, even more so than John Dewey's philosophy of American democracy, that "the work of pragmatism is "to express a profound faith in the capacity of everyday ordinary people to transform their world" (2007, 7). Yet, Glaude and other pragmatists struggle to deal with structures or systems of analysis failing to adequately contextualize our collective actions.

One of the setbacks of this book is the nonchalant way it confronts the future of problem-making and how it relies upon a cryptic understanding of progress; one that critiques the progress of modern enlightenment, but believes in progress, nevertheless. Relying upon Collingwood's distinction between improvement and progress, Liszka is quick to overlook how much this distinction is becoming blurred and vanishing. Although it is true that improvement does not necessarily imply progress, are we confident we will get better or worse at being able to tell the difference? Our ability to "compare successes" becomes more problematic once we consider inconsistent results and competing instruments to perform the same tasks. This was experienced, for example, during the covid pandemic when a flood of false positive and negative results was deemed inconclusive. Not only are we arguably becoming addicted to problems but the more of an ecological, digital, and generational footprint we leave on the planet and beyond, the greater the risks and unintended consequences. To advance civilization is in a certain sense to create new, bigger problems. We are beyond the Malthusian scare of the eighteenth century involving the population bomb and food shortages. The turn of the millennium brought Y2K panic and an apocalyptic frenzy that Liszka calls "existential problems." Our epoch warns of the existential threat associated with artificial intelligence and its ability to write meta-codes that can *function* according to our social expectation structures. In a nutshell, we are willing to be fooled and tricked by modes of randomness. An openAI capable of writing its own software that will script its own secondary "scholarly" sources, while creating its own followers willing to share its novel research makes it difficult to hold onto any sense of stable or reliable human forms of knowledge.

Liszka gives a brief catalogue of problems to be solved by pragmatist ethics near the end of the book. They are seven primary categories: *existential* problems, *problems of sociality*, *common*, *base*, and *problems of scale*, *imminent* problems, and *difficult* problems (PE, 159-160). One of the essential dilemmas that pragmatist philosophers must confront entails the problems of scale. If we live in "networks" (human and nonhuman) or what Crispin Sartwell calls "entanglements" (2017, 197-198) then

social and planetary problems present new degrees of structures. For example, economist Thomas Schelling has shown through his segregation models that even if a person has non-rigid preferences for their in-group, can still lead to highly segregated societal relations. In another case, Nassim Taleb argues in his book *Skin in the Game*, that zero-intelligence market strategies involve factors that go beyond our rational (and irrational) choices. In a remarkable rebuke of Richard Dawkins's selfish-gene thesis, Taleb reformulates Kant's "pact of devils" claim in his *Perpetual Peace* essay: "Under the right market structure, a collection of idiots produces a well-functioning market" (2018, 91, emphasis original). In fact, it may be the case that these models reach optimal results aside from our individual decision-making calculations. What are we to do about the bad actor within the network who was pushed out for passing along bad information when caught, but when his or her detection was evaded, no means for stopping the damage could be surmised or done? I am thinking of a computer hacker. How do we address a friend or family member overtaken by a political or religious cult, committing themselves to a blind loyalty while willing to do excessive self-damage in the name of this movement? The agony of *belonging* is a major problem facing us in the cyberage of "connected isolation" and that seems to be glossed over in *PE's* analysis—it reads as if one will hardly struggle with the existential threat of not being able to find a community of inquirers. While dealing with the American obsessive coverage of southern border immigration, Liszka has nothing to add about the growing migration and refugee crises. How should we approach the paranoid conspiracy theorist who thinks they know the "real story" without any evidence and an aggressive willingness to not listen. Speaking of conspiracy theories, it is only insofar as people act on them that they become dangerous and problematic, otherwise they should be treated as pseudo-problems. This is not to say that these speculative and "science fiction" problems cannot become real problems like the controversies and ethical dilemmas that openAI chatbots create. Problems that our species has never considered nor needed to contemplate before. We are truly travelers into the future rather than prepared tourists with everything mapped out. We can appreciate pragmatist ethics through a more piecemeal approach, which is to say any notion of good, justice, or truth will have to be treated functionally, provisionally, and hypothetically.²

² "Problems can be thought of in a positive or negative sense. In its positive sense, so long as practices are working, that is, if there is an absence of significant problems, then the ends and

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means of those practices can be counted provisionally as good ends and righteous means--at least until if or when they do cause problems" (PE, 88).