

LEVINE Steven, *Pragmatism, Objectivity, and Experience*

Cambridge University Press, 2019, 262 pages

Céline Henne



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejpap/1766>

DOI: 10.4000/ejpap.1766

ISSN: 2036-4091

Publisher

Associazione Pragma

Electronic reference

Céline Henne, « LEVINE Steven, *Pragmatism, Objectivity, and Experience* », *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* [Online], XI-2 | 2019, Online since 24 December 2019, connection on 24 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ejpap/1766> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejpap.1766>

This text was automatically generated on 24 September 2020.



Author retains copyright and grants the *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* right of first publication with the work simultaneously licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

LEVINE Steven, *Pragmatism, Objectivity, and Experience*

Cambridge University Press, 2019, 262 pages

Céline Henne

REFERENCES

LEVINE Steven, *Pragmatism, Objectivity, and Experience*, Cambridge University Press, 2019, 262 pages

- 1 Can pragmatists give a satisfactory account of the way our thoughts and claims are causally and normatively constrained by a mind-independent world? The question regarding the relations between pragmatism and objectivity, or pragmatism and realism, has animated pragmatists and its critics alike since the beginnings of the movement. Pragmatists have been accused of all the bad -isms of philosophy: subjectivism, idealism, relativism, irrationalism, to name but a few. Its most fervent critics saw the legitimacy of these accusations confirmed in Rorty's rejection of the philosophical importance of concepts such as objectivity and truth. This sparked a number of responses from new pragmatists who want to dissociate themselves from Rorty and defend a pragmatist account of truth and objectivity, among which we can count Hilary Putnam, Cheryl Misak, Jeffrey Stout, Henryk Reidenfelt, Robert Brandom and Huw Price.
- 2 Levine's book represents an important and original contribution to this century-old debate. It situates itself more specifically within the discussion on the centrality of experience or language for pragmatism. This discussion pits philosophers such as Rorty, Brandom, and Price who think that the classical pragmatists' notion of experience is outdated and should be replaced by an exclusive focus on linguistic practices, against those who think that the reconstruction of the concept of experience is one of the most valuable insights of the classical pragmatist tradition. Levine's own view is that it is precisely Rorty's eschewal of the concept of experience which is

responsible for his rejection of the idea of objectivity, understood as “the idea that we are answerable to the world in addition to other subjects” (p. 2). Those amongst the new pragmatists who follow Rorty’s lead in rejecting experience, but depart from him in attempting to construe objectivity on the basis of linguistic communication, are bound to fail at this task because of their shared premise. Accordingly, the main goal of Levine’s book is to defend a pragmatist account of objectivity that relies primarily on the classical pragmatists’ theory of experience: “Whereas most new pragmatists think that objectivity is best rehabilitated solely in *communicative-theoretic* terms – i.e., in terms that can be cashed out exclusively by capacities that agents gain through taking part in linguistic communication – I argue that rehabilitation can best be achieved through *experiential-theoretic* means” (3).

- 3 By pointing out the shortcomings in the new pragmatists’ accounts, Levine’s book motivates a new reading of the classical pragmatists as a source of inspiration and solution without thereby promoting an outright return to their views. Levine makes it clear that he is not advocating a *replacement* of the communicative-theoretic account by an experiential-theoretic one, as if one had to choose between Dewey or Brandom. He is rather claiming that experience is a necessary, and perhaps more primitive, condition of our answerability to the world.
- 4 Levine’s experiential-theoretic account of objectivity is twofold. Levine makes a helpful distinction between the question of “our *grasp* of the concept of objectivity, the concept of a world of objects and events that continue to exist when not perceived or experienced” (addressed in chapters 3 and 4), and the question of “whether the content of the empirical thoughts and judgments undertaken in light of this grasp are *in fact* constrained by, and answerable to, the mind-independent world” (157) (addressed in chapters 2, 5, and 6). In order to answer these questions, Levine also uses a twofold account of experience, each aspect being captured by the German concepts of *Erlebnis* (broadly construed as phenomenal or lived experience) and *Erfahrung* (broadly construed as an experimental, feedback-driven learning process). Although each concept of experience plays a role in both sides of Levine’s account of objectivity, and is present in both James and Dewey, Levine uses James’s account of *Erlebnis* in order to answer the first question, while Dewey’s account of *Erfahrung* supplies the answer to the second question.
- 5 One can already appreciate the originality of Levine’s contribution, which draws extensively from two figures of the classical pragmatist tradition seldom appealed to in the defense of a pragmatist realism or theory of objectivity. Peirce’s work seems to lend itself more easily to this kind of project, as indicated by the extensive development of a Peircian brand of realism in the past decades, amongst which we can cite the works of Misak, Christopher Hookway and Claudine Tiercelin. The reputation of James and Dewey, on the other hand, has somewhat suffered from Rorty’s creative appropriation of their works and from the criticisms received in their days and in ours, whether from Russell or Misak.
- 6 Another aspect of the originality of Levine’s work is his focus on the notion of objectivity. Most pragmatists have sought to answer similar questions in the terms of the debate between realism and anti-realism that raged on in the 1980s and 1990s, and whose most prominent pragmatist participants were Putnam and Rorty. The defense of a pragmatist realism, in turn, has most often been done through an elucidation of the concept of truth rather than objectivity, as in the case of Misak’s work. Perhaps this is

due to the widespread assimilation of pragmatism to a (usually misunderstood) Peircian or Jamesian theory of truth.

- 7 Levine's shift of the discussion towards objectivity has clear benefits. First of all, the realism debate has traditionally been heavily focused on metaphysics, while most classical and new pragmatists want to avoid asking or at least approaching philosophical questions from this angle. Their participation in this debate, with the notable exception of Putnam, is usually forced upon them by critics, pragmatists having to answer the charge of holding incoherent anti-realist or relativist positions. Secondly, the concept of objectivity is congenial to both new and classical pragmatism. The concept of truth, on the other hand, is of less importance in the classical pragmatists' works than is usually thought (inquiry is, arguably, a more central and primitive concept than truth for both Peirce and Dewey). Finally, many of the questions that interest the philosophers engaged in debates on realism and truth can be satisfactorily addressed by an account of objectivity, with the added value of answering them from a refreshing angle. Realists insist that there is a mind-independent world and a "way that things are" which is independent of what humans think, say, or do about it; and most of them use the concept of truth as a norm of assertion and a goal of inquiry in order to account for our answerability to the way things are. Levine's twofold account of objectivity accounts for our grasp of the first idea (although its office is not to give a *proof* for it) and shows how our beliefs are answerable to the world in practice.
- 8 The focus on objectivity also comes with its restrictions, of course. Levine himself acknowledges that he is less concerned with the "epistemic" question of "how our *inquiries* must be structured so as to issue in judgments that can be counted as *knowledge*" (5). Very little is said about inquiry, whether ordinary or scientific, or about the relation between the structure of our assertions and the structure of the world. The book does not address the question of representationalism, which is central to the works of Rorty, Brandom and Price. Because they trace their anti-representationalism back to Dewey, this would have been another interesting angle for the kind of project pursued by Levine, i.e., for a comparative and critical study of the classical and new pragmatists – but it would have required another book.
- 9 The structure of the book follows Levine's argumentative strategy rather than a chronological order of exposition. The first part of the book (Chapters 1, 2 and 3) presents a critical exposition of the new pragmatists' accounts of objectivity, while the second part of the book (Chapters 4, 5 and 6) is dedicated to the positive exposition of James' and Dewey's experiential-theoretic accounts of objectivity. By structuring the book in this manner, Levine sets the terms of the discussion in contemporary terms, thus providing an easier point of entry into the classical pragmatists' works for readers who are less familiar with their views and terminology.
- 10 The first chapter sets the basis for the general argument defended in the book, by tracing back Rorty's rejection of objectivity to his eschewal of sense experience. Levine starts by rejecting Brandom's own genealogy, which situates the source of Rorty's hostility to objectivity in his views on the mental. Rorty promotes eliminationism with regard the category of the "mental," defined by the incorrigibility of first-person reports, after revealing its contingent and social grounds, and adopts the same strategy with the category of the "objective." Brandom's rehabilitation of Rorty consists in showing that this eliminativist strategy is neither necessary nor preferable with regard

to objectivity, and in developing a conception of objectivity consistent with Rorty's idea that it is we who grant authority to things.

- 11 Levine, on the other hand, argues that Rorty's rejection of objectivity comes from his strict separation between the causal domain and the normative space of reasons. The same argument against the Myth of the Given leads Rorty to eliminate both sensation (defined as prelinguistic sensory awareness) and objectivity (the idea that the world can *normatively*, as well as causally, constrain our thought). Levine's criticism of Brandom at the end of the chapter brings to light two conditions that he thinks are necessary for a satisfactory account of objectivity: first, it must include an "explanation of rational constraint" (besides causal constraint) (40) and it has to "capture an essential feature of objectivity – namely that thought and perception that is objective is constrained by something that is *beyond our control*," which implies that the category of objectivity cannot be "something we engineer" (41).
- 12 The first chapter sets the tasks for the rest of the book: explaining why Brandom's account of objectivity is not satisfactory, and how the classical pragmatists' conception of experience does *not* fall prey to the Myth of the Given and other pitfalls that new pragmatists have sought to avoid.
- 13 Chapter 2 deals with what seems to be Brandom's most promising attempt at accounting for objectivity for those who, like Levine, want to defend an account primarily based on experience. As Levine points out, while Brandom rejects sensory experience understood as *Erlebnis*, he includes experience as *Erfahrung* as one crucial component of his account of objectivity. Experiential learning is understood as a feedback cycle through which one corrects one's prior commitments, which he also calls the "Test-Operate-Test-Exit (TOTE) cycle" in *Between Saying and Doing* (2008).
- 14 Levine's first criticism is that Brandom's account wavers between intellectualism and atomism. The former conflicts with the phenomenological fluidity of action, and the latter cannot account for the fact that human activity is "not only *launched* by acknowledgement of a practical commitment but is also *guided* and *controlled* by it through time" (54). As an alternative to Brandom's overly intellectualist pragmatism, Levine opposes a Deweyan conception of practice involving bodily habits and skills. Levine then criticizes Brandom's atomism by making an interesting application of Dewey's criticism of the "Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology" (1896) to Brandom's TOTE cycle (61-6).
- 15 The second part critically examines Brandom's attempt to account for "rational constraint" – what makes perceptual judgments rationally answerable to the world – without resorting to *Erlebnis*. Levine rejects Brandom's two solutions, namely, his social and reliabilist externalism, according to which rational constraint "can come from the rational assessment of one's perceptual judgments by *other* scorekeepers" (72), and his appeal to the process of "double-checking" (75). Both are deemed "incoherent" for Levine, the former leading to a vicious regress (74) and the latter to a self-contained coherentism (78). Levine concludes with a presentation of the interdependence between *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis* in Dewey's account.
- 16 This chapter gives a good overview of Brandom's experiential account of objectivity (with a helpful introductory section on Brandom's rationalist pragmatism) as well as Levine's alternative Deweyan account, developed at length in the second part of the book. If the reader wants to have a good sense of Levine's argumentative strategy and

of the overall position defended in this book but only has time to read one chapter, it should probably be this one.

- 17 The third chapter is concerned with our grasp of the concept of objectivity. Levine contrasts Brandom's and Davidson's communicative-theoretic accounts with the perceptual-theoretic accounts of Strawson and Evans, according to which "the concept of objectivity is the result of an agent's grasp of the system of *spatial* concepts that informs their rudimentary 'theory of perception'" (83). Levine's main thesis is that "the communicative-theoretic conception of objectivity depends in a nonsymmetrical way on the form of objectivity that is identified by the perceptual-theoretic approach" (83).
- 18 Levine thinks that Brandom successfully defends an account of objectivity as "attitude transcendence" based on "discursive structure" only (85). He fails, however, at defending a similar account of "the authority of objects and our consequent responsibility to them" (*ibid.*). The gist of Levine's argument is that Brandom's appeal to *de re* ascriptions is not sufficient, since their representational content is interpreted in social-perspectival terms (94). Levine also shows how Davidson's "triangulation" depends on communicators already having a "grasp that there is a common space in which oneself, other, and object are housed" (109). This leads him to the examination of Strawson's and Evans's accounts, which locate our grasp of the concept of objectivity at a more basic and primitive level, namely, in our notion of a spatial world and of existence unperceived.
- 19 Drawing on the results of the previous chapter, Chapter 4 offers a revision of Strawson's and Evans's accounts based on James's own account. Levine points out that for Strawson and Evans, our concept of objectivity is something we "*bring to our experience of objects through the use of a rudimentary theory of perception*" and therefore has "its origin off stage" (123). For James, on the other hand, our grasp of objectivity is "*based in our experience of existence unperceived*" (*ibid.*). This experience is not that of the classical empiricists, but the "much richer notion" of *Erlebnis*. It involves, amongst other things, the selectivity of the mind, thought intending the same object, the fringe of consciousness, and the temporal dynamics of consciousness. Levine's main point is that, for James, our conception of existence unperceived does not come from *spatial reasoning*, but it comes from (i) our *experience of objects as persisting through our changing experiences of them*, and (ii) our *simultaneous experience of presence and absence, namely, of objects which are, in one field, "vividly present," and in another, "part of the vague marginal more"* (155).
- 20 Chapter 5 examines Dewey's account of experience as a "tribunal for thought" that is both "independent of, and yet homogeneous with, thought" (158). Dewey's account is presented as an answer to the problems raised by Rorty's and Brandom's separation between the causal realm of sensation and the normative realm of rationality, and only partially resolved by John McDowell's minimal empiricism in *Mind and World* (1994). McDowell's solution consists in seeing sensation as an actualization of conceptual capacities (167). Dewey, on the other hand, sees the "operations that organize experience [as] not primarily cognitive but practical or teleological" (170), through habits rather than inferences. The main particularity of Dewey's account is his consideration of the temporal and reconstructive aspect of thought: "thought does not come about primarily to endorse an already given experiential content, as it does for McDowell; rather, it comes about *when there is no clear content to be had*" (176). Hence, it is the reconstructed experience that eventuates as the consequence of an action

directed by thought which stands as the tribunal for thought. The chapter is very efficiently laid out: it sets the problem in the terms of Dewey's own dilemma between the "seesaw" of the dualists' Given of sensation and the idealists' coherentism, echoing the previous discussions of Rorty and Brandom, and goes on to contrast Dewey's position with McDowell's solution to that problem.

- 21 While the previous chapter focused on Dewey's instrumentalist phase, Chapter 6 focuses on Dewey's later naturalistic empiricism. Levine presents Dewey's account on its own terms, before comparing it to McDowell's account of "second nature," arguing that "Dewey's account of experience as 'second natural' can support a realist theory of answerability while McDowell's can't" (218). Levine then responds to Rorty's claim that Dewey's account of experience falls prey to the Myth of the Given. He convincingly argues that, while Dewey does blur the line between cognitive and noncognitive states, perceptual experience is not "Given in a mythical way," in the sense of having epistemic authority on thought or action without being mediated or capable of mediation by reasons (228). For Dewey, all experiences are "mediated by prior operations of reflective problem solving and reason giving" and "admit of potential reason giving in becoming tensional or indeterminate" (229). However, it is surprising that Levine did not also appeal to Dewey's extensive criticism of perception as a "case of knowledge," Dewey's point being precisely that perceptual experience, in its immediacy, has no intrinsic cognitive value. In *Experience and Nature* (1925), Dewey introduces a further mediation besides the ones Levine already pointed out: the use of a perceptual experience as a sign of (unperceived) objects or conditions is what can properly be said to have cognitive or epistemic value.
- 22 Levine took up and succeeded in the task of creating a lively, extensive and productive conversation between the classical pragmatists and more recent figures in post-analytic philosophy. Their differing philosophical starting points, backgrounds and terminologies make this kind of work a challenging enterprise. It is in fact rare to find such in-depths discussions of both sides of the dialogue. The studies of James and Dewey in particular are often primarily exegetical, with the regrettable consequence that their works are sometimes relegated to the domain of the "history of philosophy." On the other hand, when their ideas are used in contemporary discussions, it is often at the expense of a careful reading of their works – Rorty's selective and creative reading of Dewey being an extreme example of this tendency. Avoiding both pitfalls, Levine's combination of careful scholarship and critical engagement is surprisingly evenly distributed between Brandom and Dewey, Davidson and James, Strawson and McDowell. For this reason and the ones already mentioned, Levine's book represents an important contribution to pragmatist philosophy.

AUTHORS

CÉLINE HENNE

Corpus Christi College, University of Cambridge
c1lh2[at]cam.ac.uk