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Review of “Philosophy Americana: Making Philosophy at Home in American Culture”

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Book Review

Philosophy Americana: Making Philosophy at Home in American Culture, by Douglas R. Anderson. Fordham University Press, 2006, 294pp. Preface, bibliography, index. ISBN 0-8232-2550-X, \$75.00 (cloth); 0-8232-2551-8, \$24.00 (paper).

Perhaps because philosophers are perpetual beginners, I am drawn to beginnings; and the one Douglas Anderson has written for *Philosophy Americana* is a stroke of genius: “America does not think much of its philosophers” (1). This is an elegant, economical statement of a problem of thinking for “America” and for its philosophers. At the same time, it is a subtle way to introduce two critical questions of definition. Both “America” and “its philosophers” require specification, and Anderson is appropriately attentive to both. While he is conscious of the dangers of exclusion inherent in reducing “America” to a synonym for the United States, he follows popular usage in doing so. Making the dangers explicit from the outset introduces a thread of reflection on exclusion as part of the historical self-definition of the United States that he promises to address more directly in another volume (xi), “when the time comes.”

Acknowledging bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldua, and Margaret Fuller is a beginning toward a more inclusive definition of who “America” counts among “its philosophers.” But, for Anderson, that definition is a more complicated matter than simply identifying who is doing or has done philosophy in the United States. He seeks an understanding of “American philosophy” (or “philosophy Americana”) analogous to the evolving, open-ended, decidedly fluid *music Americana* that includes everything from country through rock to rap. The choice of a musical analogy is a considered one: it is in music that young Americans in particular most often encounter disciplined reflection on philosophical problems, and Anderson proposes to take this seriously.

That the problems posed in the beginning are problems of thinking is no small matter. If America does not think much, it is because American philosophers have failed to deliver on at least part of our social responsibility. But the beginning is, of course, also a problem of value. By a fortuitous and cleverly deployed idiomatic twist, that America does not think much of its philosophers means that it does not value us. A simple assertion, then, sets American readers (including philosophers) off on an epistemological, ethical, aesthetic, and (perhaps) economic journey of self-discovery and self-definition, an exercise Cornel West has characterized as America talking to itself--something, as I have suggested elsewhere, that America typically does in ways that make it hard for the rest of the world to avoid eavesdropping.

As is traditional in academic books, however, there is a beginning before the beginning. So the first line of the introduction follows a preface in which Anderson tells us what he will tell us in the book to follow. In this beginning before the beginning, he notes that American philosophy has been undertaken

mostly in collections of essays (ix), a mostly willed fragmentariness that others have noted and that is critical to understanding a philosophical tradition that extends from Jonathan Edwards to the present. The choice of essays, sermons, and other occasional pieces is one way to confront System while also cultivating engagement. Both certainly were of importance to pragmatism's founders, and both are important to Anderson, who takes up the essay form in this book. He does, however, point to a unifying theme, "the relationship between American philosophy and other features of American culture" (ix). This, too, unleashes two problems, American culture and American philosophy. The existence of both has been hotly debated, though Anderson is confident both are accessible as distinct but related objects of study. "My overall concern," he writes, "is what it means to think philosophically in the United States and under the influence of its particular history" (x). Note that this allows for a creative ambiguity that will continue throughout the book. Anderson is partly concerned to define philosophy as distinct from other disciplines, but he is also inclined to look for philosophical thinking outside that category. This makes him (not surprisingly) a practitioner of philosophy Americana, and we can expect a *working* definition that unfolds in practice if we watch what Anderson does rather than simply reading what he writes.

Anderson describes the essays as being "somewhat" thematically aligned: "The first and last essays consider features of pragmatism in its origin and in its future import. Between these bookends, the chapters focus on several issues in serial order: the impact of our experiences of itinerancy and wilderness on philosophical practice; the question of practical wisdom in our political actions; the retrieval of religiosity from outside the bounds of religions; the question of the relationship between philosophy and teaching; and finally, in a reflexive way, the question of how philosophy, given the long-standing quarrel between the poets and the philosophers, might find itself entangled with American poetic and literary practices" (x). Cutting across this serial arrangement of themes is a concern with "risk, loss, possibility, failure, and hope," all of which are critical to Anderson's pragmatic reassessment of pragmatism, which lies at the heart of his natural history of philosophy Americana. That, too, is written in summary form in the preface by way of a listing of names that is a sort of family tree--Emerson, Fuller, and Thoreau; sometimes James, Davidson, and Dewey; Henry Bugbee and John Anderson; and a number of thinkers "not within the fold of American philosophy"--Gloria Anzaldua, Stanley Cavell, Annie Dillard, bell hooks, Norman Maclean, and Robert Pirsig (x,xi). Including that last group in the family tree while excluding them from the fold of American philosophy is another potentially creative ambiguity. Given the argument that unfolds in Anderson's essays, thinkers who are both "in" and "out" demand particular attention even if they do not command much space in what is written here. By being introduced as in and out at the beginning, they secure a place on the edge of vision; and edges, as attentive readers will quickly discover, are of central importance to Anderson's philosophical practice.

In the first of the two "bookend" chapters, Anderson notes that "Choosing to be a philosopher in America is also choosing, initially at least, to be a teacher" (14). And choosing to be a teacher in the United States is, increasingly, choosing a life of quiet desperation (1, 2). Teachers, like philosophers, are marginalized; so philosophers, as teachers, are doubly marginalized. Anderson's reflections on teaching--and specifically on philosophy as teaching--are among the most important in the book, so it is worth noting early on that the problem is posed mildly here. Anderson says that to be a philosopher in the United States is to be a teacher, but he only slowly moves toward the stronger assertion that it means to be institutionalized. The connection to a life of quiet desperation is not with teaching or education but with schooling--and, for professional philosophers, almost exclusively with schooling as it takes place in colleges and universities. Anderson returns to this several times before the second of his bookends, but one weakness of his argument is that he does not adequately tease the institutional/systemic problem of

schooling out of the discussion of philosophy as teaching. He certainly touches on it when he describes the managerial attitude (175ff) and in his discussion of Davidson, who spoke of the unfreedom of “teaching institutions” (164). The managerial, somewhat paradoxically, is connected with the drive to unionize, which transforms teachers from professionals into labor. That transformation cries out for a more considered and extensive treatment of *labor*--particularly if it is understood as intrinsically separate from profession. That Anderson seems often on the edge of describing a community of scholars (as Paul Goodman called it) engaged creatively in working together without ever quite getting there is perhaps intentional. Writing from a professional position within a teaching institution, Anderson, like Moses, may be able to speak only of what he can see of learning communities from a mountaintop. This is an edge worth exploring, and the prophetic glimpse he offers is another beginning. Anderson makes creative use of Emerson’s “insane angels,” often skating on the edge of a playful shift to “insane angles” from which flashes of the “madness” Emily Dickinson described as “divinest sense” may be caught.

The institutional/systemic questions posed by Anderson’s essays are complicated by issues of visibility and his connection of risk with gambling. The question of visibility leaps out of the first chapter, where the problem of thinking with which he begins transmutes into an experience of invisibility--out of mind, out of sight, so to speak. And it is connected to a problematic “we” that speaks throughout all of these essays. Anderson is pretty explicit about his “I,” weaving self-disclosure into his reflection at moments where it is appropriately illuminating. But his “we” is more often assumed, and it seems inadvertently to exclude some of the conversation partners he most needs. If the “we” is quietly desperate but privileged academic philosophers, readers who are not quietly desperate, privileged, or academic have little reason to become part of it. Since Anderson himself takes up Lutheran language of confession and vocation in his second bookend, it is worth noting that in some strands of philosophical reflection informed by Lutheran theology, the point of confession is to articulate something more inclusive that is, in fact, most authentic when it is invisible. I think Anderson is struggling toward this in his thinking of “fruitful ways into our own futures” (18). But the history of the United States is inextricably entangled with futures marked by ways that have systematically excluded some while being extraordinarily fruitful for others. Others who have been excluded in those histories have reason to be nervous about “frontier” language even if it appears in generally sympathetic narratives. Talking is a medium of transformation (16), but it requires constant attention to who talks when where, and who listens how.

I cannot help being struck by the fact that Anderson connects risk with gambling while a feminist author like Sharon Welch connects it with jazz. Given Anderson’s attentiveness to music, this is an angle he might want to consider. I suppose that the distinction he makes between betting and gambling may be on its way to addressing this, but I am not convinced that musical improvisation is either. And I am inclined more toward the emergent composition of jazz than the winner take all conclusion of Texas Hold ‘Em. One of the most trenchant criticisms of the emergent Capitalism of the nineteenth century that has come to be synonymous with “America” in the twenty-first was that it fostered a “gambling” economy.

And I cannot help being deeply troubled by the connection of the “explorer’s attitude” with making ourselves at home (51). Under the influence of the particular history of the United States, that attitude is wedded to what Mark Taylor has called the unsettling character of settling. Favorably quoting John Anderson’s comment that “only the hunters and trappers on the long hunt could penetrate the wilderness and dare the unknown, for only they could discover and hold to a human meaning on the frontier” (52) calls to mind a whole series of questions about penetration (explored in some detail by Carolyn Merchant, among others) and the frontier. In the particular history of the United States, the frontier has

often been treated as an advancing line that divides “civilization” from “wilderness,” and “wilderness” has often been treated as empty. Holding to a human meaning on the frontier has too often meant advancing the line by filling the wilderness.

I think Anderson is on to something singularly important in his discussion of Thoreau’s walking and its connection, by way of Peirce, with Royce’s understanding of the philosophical life as “intellectual wandering” (34). But I think it is the nomad more than the “explorer” or the settler who is likely to offer insight into this life. The question of how to be at home in wandering is an important one, not likely, I think, given the dominance of “human resources” professionals in our society, to find its way into a “job description”--but promising as a beginning for reflection on a confession that might have something to offer an inclusive community. Once again, I believe Anderson is on his way to this in his discussion of Bugbee, where he speaks of being “in league with things” (54) and learning to wait. Americans have never been known as patient people, so waiting is something about which “we” have much to learn. As Anderson suggests, “Life in an awakened state in the wilderness is an ongoing experiment in meanings” (58). An ongoing experiment, being at home in wandering, which, as Thoreau would be the first to remind us, is where we are if we are alive, whether we know it or not.

Anderson wisely follows Thoreau in his attention to walking, and I think he is quite right to emphasize both the social and political dimensions of Thoreau’s work. Thoreau was not a rugged individualist in the typically “American” sense, and his wildness was (as Anderson notes) not aimless (87). This is important for Anderson’s project for a number of reasons, perhaps most important being that it helps him develop the idea of “working certainties” as an alternative to Dewey’s blanket rejection of the quest for certainty. Anderson describes his own experience of “walking the brook” where he grew up (66ff). He speaks there of “walking in the instabilities of the brook” as “a little bit of risk and a dose of bodily intuition. What began as fun, later developed into a practice, an act of self-control. Over the years,” he continues, “I built an assuredness, a kind of certainty in my walking. It came to be something I could rely on.” That kind of “certainty” is connected with Thoreau’s understanding of getting lost in the woods as a good fortune. There is nothing fixed about it--but there is a reliability, an at-homeness, that makes it possible to continue without being driven to transform the wild into the civilized. It is connected, too, with being “in league with things.” Where I grew up, in the Panhandle of Texas, we didn’t have “brooks,” but we had dry arroyos with sharp slopes of sand and gravel as slippery as the fast flowing streams I encountered a little further west in New Mexico. On those slopes, the kind of “certainty” Anderson speaks of is a sure-footedness that involves attentiveness to the ground beneath your feet, an experimental attitude in which what happens there contributes to what happens next--a sort of dialogue of constant adjustment, of mutual accommodation and transformation. And that is precisely the attitude Anderson cultivates by way of his reading of Peirce, James, and Dewey.

Anderson turns to music, as suggested earlier, at least in part because this is where his students bring an encounter with reflection on philosophical problems. A central figure in his discussion is Hank Williams, Sr., emblematic of a “wildness” that accentuates the potential for “collateral damage” (which Anderson also attributes to John Brown in a passing reference to what he takes as Thoreau’s troubling endorsement of the Harper’s Ferry raid). In Anderson’s reading, Williams is the “type” to which a range of other performers (which he classifies as “country”) conform, a type that is simultaneously self-destructive and destructive to others (especially women, but, more generally, to family and friends). That a whole sequence of “wild” performers conforms to a type suggests that something other than Thoreau’s “wildness” is at work. This is most pronounced, I think, in George Jones’s assertion that he was giving

the fans what they wanted by cultivating the image of wildness--but also in Waylon Jennings's refrain "are you sure Hank done it that way?" Anderson comes closest, I think, to identifying the "wildness" of country music as a quietly desperate conformity in his discussion of Tammy Wynette and "feminist" country music. As he sees it, her live performances of "Stand By Your Man" suggest a critical reading of the persona of artists like Jones that recognizes the fragility in their "hard" posturing. Something similar, Anderson suggests, is present in a whole range of "road" songs performed by artists ranging from Bruce Springsteen through the Grateful Dead to Gram Parsons and Willie Nelson.

The "on the road" theme embodied in those diverse voices is most famously present in Jack Kerouac, who Anderson describes as past oriented (in contrast to the future orientation of Emerson). As Anderson reads *On the Road*, its journey into wildness circles back: the road to San Francisco leads back to New York. And the outward journey of Thoreau's walking becomes increasingly inner directed. But I think this partly reflects a failure to properly interpret Thoreau's "wildness" reflected in the distinction between "recivilizing" and "dehumanizing" (106, 107). The term "recivilizing" suggests that Thoreau ventures out only to return. But I think it more accurate to say that the venturing out is itself humanizing--not in the sense of extending "civilization," which is what turned the road to San Francisco into a circle back to New York, but in the sense of becoming at home in the venturing out. Anderson quotes Waylon Jennings describing the experience of being on the road in terms that suggest a perpetually displaced condition. But Thoreau inclines more toward the nomad's experience of being at home on the road--a kind of "tenting" existence. Certainly, there are unsettling dimensions to Thoreau's language--particularly his description of every walk as a kind of crusade. Historically, crusades have little to do with holiness--but stepping out of bounds into a wilderness where one encounters the holy by listening to and waiting on things, as Anderson suggested earlier in his discussion of Bugbee, is promising.

Again, I think Anderson is on to something in his turn to the unrespectable, to the outsider--and there is something in the "American" spirit that perhaps encourages this. But being able to place the "unrespectability" of William James alongside that of Hank Williams and Waylon Jennings raises a host of questions--not the least of which is why three incredibly successful men would be taken as exemplars of "unrespectability." I know that Anderson is critical of Cavell and others for drawing on European philosophies to legitimate Emerson and other practitioners of philosophy Americana; but I think Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer could offer a helping hand with their analyses of the culture industry. America's genius has been its ability to incorporate--and I think it is that genius that Thoreau in particular resisted. One could certainly make the case that artists like Lucinda Williams, Jo Carol Pierce, Iris Dement, and Cindy Walker have also resisted it in various ways. But their resistance is undercut by incorporation--and the long list of musicians who have died young after a slow suicide of drug abuse is a sobering reminder of the effectiveness with which that process burns artists up.

Nothing is more "American" than the struggle over who "owns" America, and I think Anderson joins a host of philosophical thinkers from John Winthrop through Margaret Fuller and Martin Luther King, Jr. to Bernice Johnson Reagon and Steve Earle when he enters it. The value of that struggle lies in the questions it raises and the arguments it invites. Anderson's book has the distinct virtue of inviting a host of serious questions and promising a good argument. In that, I think, he has tempered America's self-obsession with a healthy dose of humility--an approach that is characteristic of the best thinkers "we" have produced. Given his attention to Peirce's "tychism," I would bring another practitioner of philosophy Americana into the conversation. On the occasion of the bicentennial of the United States Declaration of Independence, John Cage composed his "Lecture on the Weather," inspired partly by

Thoreau. He ends his preface by writing “Our political structures no longer fit the circumstances of our lives. Outside the bankrupt cities we live in Megalopilis which has no geographical limits. Wilderness is global park. I dedicate this work to the U.S.A. that it may become just another part of the world, no more, no less” (Empty Words, 5).

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