

Transactions, vol. 55, issue 1, pp. 84-88

Book review

David Rondel: *Pragmatist Egalitarianism*. Oxford University Press. 2018.

Minna-Kerttu Vienola

minna-kerttu.vienola@oulu.fi

Topics of equality and justice have been a part of pragmatist discussions since the early pragmatist thought from early on. Rondel's *Pragmatist Egalitarianism* is an important contribution to these discussions. In the book, Rondel reflects on former pragmatists' work, continues ongoing discussions, and provides a new conceptualization of a political-philosophical field called pragmatist egalitarianism. It is a reconciliatory project with a historicist approach to pragmatism, forming a picture of a clear political-philosophical pragmatist tradition. It rejects arguments based on "ideal-theoretical" first principles and questions the value of traditional conceptual analysis. In the course of forming pragmatist egalitarianism, Rondel brings forth claims and arguments concerning both egalitarianism and pragmatism, and brings them into a meaningful dialogue from which more emerges than merely a sum of its parts.

The book consists of two parts. In the first, Rondel presents the field of egalitarianism as split in two conflicting forms that he introduces as "vertical egalitarianism" and "horizontal egalitarianism." The first conceptualizes equality in terms of distribution and power as a 'juridico-philosophical' concept. This form of egalitarianism is represented in liberalist arguments of e.g. Robert Nozick and Ronald Dworkin. "Horizontal egalitarianism", in turn, consists of emancipatory themes concerning relations between persons and power as something that exists first and foremost within civil society. This field is represented by Marxist thought as well as in feminist philosophy and in critical race theory.

The main argument of the first part is that neither of these forms of egalitarianism is primary or sufficient for investigating the problems of inequality, even if Rondel seems to be more sympathetic towards relational or "horizontal" egalitarianism. Rather, questions of equality should be treated from a pluralist viewpoint. For Rondel, equality is a relation consisting of both distributive and social aspects. Equality as a concept does not have a clear and simple meaning, and therefore, there is no singular or primary route to the achievement of a genuinely egalitarian society. Rondel maintains that the debates that look for answers grounded in "abstract principles or timeless moral axioms" are "unnecessary", and claims that there will be no progress in the pursuit of values like equality as long as egalitarians remain engaged in these debates (p. 203). Rather, according to him, "egalitarianism does not have an essence, and various egalitarian movements and ideals are better understood as sharing in what Wittgenstein famously called 'family resemblance'" (p. 202).

Rondel's argument is provocative in that it implies the falsity of the grounding arguments of both "vertical" and "horizontal" egalitarianism. It pulls the rug from under the Rawlsian argument according to which legislative distribution of "primary goods" is the social base of "self-respect", it empties Ronald Dworkin's argument according to which "equality of resources" expresses the "equal moral worth of persons", and questions Elizabeth Anderson's arguments of the grounding role of equal relations. At the same time, Rondel's argument provides a way out of these discussions while keeping both relational and distributive equality in view. His argument cannot legitimately be ignored when thinking about equality and egalitarianism. If one is to argue for the superiority, or fundamentality, of either form of egalitarianism one must first prove Rondel's argumentation wrong.

In the second part, Rondel's pluralist view of equality is elaborated by means of pragmatism. This is where Rondel presents his alternative "threesome vision of egalitarianism" in an interesting, creative, and informative way. He constructs his vision by a systematic reading of three classical pragmatists: John Dewey, William James, and Richard Rorty—each representing one of the three "interrelated and mutually reinforcing

variables” of pragmatist egalitarianism. The “institutional” variable is presented by Dewey, the “personal” variable is presented by James, and the “cultural” variable is presented by Rorty. For Rondel, taken together these variables represent the constituents of equality and thereby include the problematics of both vertical and horizontal egalitarianism. By presenting his vision through the three pragmatists, Rondel provides the reader both with a historical and discursive commentary of the pragmatists and with a contemporary discussion of their work, including a deep insight into the role of each variable. Despite some problems in the works of the three pragmatists, Rondel succeeds in arguing for his usage of their work and distancing himself from their problematic conceptualizations or arguments.

Rondel discusses the three pragmatists separately in three chapters beginning with Dewey. As there are several contemporary pragmatists critical of Dewey’s views, Rondel has to justify his usage of Dewey by carefully answering his arguments. He does this in a decent manner while not refuting all the criticism but arguing for the irrelevance of those critiques that would hinder the utility of Dewey’s arguments. He succeeds to the extent that is required for reading Dewey as the provider of the “institutional” variable. By presenting Dewey as an advocate of democracy, Rondel introduces his pragmatist egalitarianism by explicating its underlying democratic value basis. For Dewey as well as for Rondel, democracy, equality, and the cultivation of individual personhood hang together in a “mutually reinforcing triangulation” (p. 93). Following Dewey, the existence of these requires functioning democratic institutions.

By the means of James, Rondel brings forth the individualism underlying his model of egalitarianism. His treatment of James is not symmetrical with his treatment of Dewey or Rorty, as Rondel’s discussion of the individualist egalitarianism of James merely deepens the insight gained by the Deweyan democracy without really bringing in anything new. According to Rondel, James provides a paradigmatic example of what is called ‘democratic individuality’, a notion which goes hand in hand with a kind of ‘personal’ egalitarianism as contrasted with ‘institutional’ egalitarianism. In his discussion of James, Rondel continues explicating the underlying motivation and the ultimate goal of egalitarianism as the equality and flourishing of each individual as well as elaborating the fallibilistic nature of pragmatist thought. In contrast to his treatment of Dewey and Rorty, his critiques of James are very mild. Bringing Rorty into the “threesome” is what makes Rondel’s reconstruction of pragmatist tradition interesting. By including Rorty’s comments of Dewey’s work, Rondel’s discussion of the pragmatists becomes reflective beyond particular chapters. By discussing Rorty’s “philosophy as cultural politics” after James’ individualism, Rondel comes back to the question of the importance of community, and thus makes his discussion of the variables of egalitarianism dialogical. Because Rorty, like Dewey, is criticized by multiple contemporary pragmatists, Rondel attempts to justify his usage of Rorty’s views by answering these critiques.

The way Rondel utilizes the works of Dewey, James, and Rorty presents pragmatist thought as anti-foundational while nevertheless being committed to individualist, liberal, and democratic values. This kind of philosophical approach does not aim at providing final or universal theory or values, but rather, as the pragmatist method is fallibilistic and melioristic, all the underlying ontological, epistemological, and evaluative questions remain open for revision. In Deweyan manner, this version of pragmatism includes “testing” or “inquiry” as the method of experimentation for revising the philosophical theories, arguments, and hypotheses in real-life contexts. Accordingly, Rondel makes no claims to determinacy, conclusiveness, or normative precision, but rather aims at provoking thought.

Rondel takes his pragmatist egalitarianism to be superior to the vertical / horizontal models because of its multifaceted and pluralist approach. According to him, “[u]nderstanding egalitarianism in terms of the institutional, personal, and cultural variables lets us make sense of different egalitarian movements (and ideals) with a sophistication and richness that is not available on a vertical/horizontal analysis” (p. 202). However, this is not the final answer to the meta-level questions of egalitarianism. Rather, pragmatist egalitarianism continues to “actively test and experiment, not to get things right once and for all, but to come up with something better” (p. 81). Faithful to its pragmatist spirit, the pragmatist model of egalitarianism remains “impermanent, open to revision and experimentally tentative” (p. 74).

Pragmatist egalitarianism, however, cannot be left to be the only discipline of egalitarianism if we are to investigate the underlying conceptual, ontological, and epistemological assumptions of our theories. Pluralism cannot be the answer when we are investigating the underlying ontology of power, sociality, etc. Nevertheless, instead of being committed to these grounding questions of the discipline, Rondel points to the role of pragmatist egalitarianism as “trying to figure out solutions to our problems, into more generally trying to improve the conditions we find ourselves having to live in” (p. 80). In the concluding part of the book, he demonstrates the applicability of pragmatist egalitarianism by bringing up the problem of injustice in “luck” and “relational” egalitarianisms in the context of the United States. In this way, pragmatist egalitarianism provides a tool for approaching and analyzing various real-life situations, even outside purely philosophical contexts, such as in sociology.

The relation between the first and the second part of the book remains loose. As the name of the book suggests, Rondel discusses both egalitarianism and pragmatism, partly separately and partly as one egalitarian idea. In the first part, he discusses the deep disagreement between the “horizontal” and “vertical” models, and in the latter the works of the three pragmatists. It is clear that the pragmatist model of egalitarianism is meant to be an alternative to the other two models, but as there is no explicit cross-referencing between the two parts, when coming to the end of the second part, the reader has probably forgotten the topic and the argumentation of the first part. Rondel’s remedy is the long concluding part where he returns to his main argument and demonstrates the pragmatist egalitarian analysis of real-world struggles by analyzing current social problems in the United States. The conclusion makes the book a meaningful whole, showing a way out of the deep disagreements within the current field of egalitarianism.