Commentary on "Pragmatism's Deliberation" by Stuart Rosenbaum

David L. Hildebrand
University of Colorado at Denver

Stuart Rosenbaum's discussion of deliberation[1] is timely. Much of our daily conversation focuses upon whether or not serious choices are being made with due deliberation, and what such deliberation should require. While I deliberate all the time in my personal life, the philosophical complexities of deliberation are somewhat new to me. I'm grateful to Rosenbaum for sharpening the phenomena. Today, I'll encapsulate what I take to be Rosenbaum's main thrust, and then focus on a few salient points.

Summary of Rosenbaum

Rosenbaum takes as a foil Todd Lekan's recent analysis to make a larger metaphilosophical point about "pragmatic empiricism:" "A genuinely pragmatic turn in thought about action refrains from philosophical theories that need philosophical defense"[171]. In his book *Making Morality* Lekan schematizes the deliberative process. Such a schema or system, Rosenbaum asserts, is useful for some situations, but by and large misleads us. We fall in love with the systematicity and too much ignore the radical particularity (the situatedness, the embeddedness) of actual deliberations. Good pragmatic empiricists, he continues, should respect the phenomenology of deliberation by recognizing the many varieties of urgency faced by moral choosers and the radical individuality of that chooser. They should also heed the pragmatists' transactional picture of reality by noting that the chooser doesn't stand apart from the situation but deliberates *into* it. And only if one takes seriously the pragmatist notion that beliefs are habits of action—and not propositions—can we direct philosophical energies away from a preoccupation with justification.

> The concern to have rational or justified beliefs yields to the concern to have useful and constructive beliefs [and desire]. Philosophical concern may focus more productively on the personal, family, and community phenomena that typically produce habits of desiring and believing" [168].

Typically, some will demand that pragmatists *prove* that beliefs are habits of action; pragmatists should resist such demands. Still, a pragmatist can explain why she takes her account to be more convincing. Rosenbaum names two reasons: the account embraces the historicity of all human phenomena and also coheres with Darwinism.

What should we teach students about ethical inquiry? He suggests that philosophers should shift focus away from training students to just "give reasons" and toward a broader appreciation of the situations that imbue such reasons with living force. In a recent work on Dewey's ethics, Steven Fesmire enunciates a similar caution, writing, "Conceiving deliberation as calculation inhibits imagina-

tion by forsaking the present. Ironically, it is calculation, not imagination, that distorts moral reflection by impeding our ability to see the near in terms of the remote. It locks in a course of action before we even discover what the situation is about, what it portends and promises." [2] Fesmire analyzes perspicuously why imagination has a centrally important role in moral inquiry. Stopped in our tracks by a problem, moral inquiry often proceeds by a process of deliberation that includes "dramatic rehearsal." That rehearsal can take different forms. No slouch at schematization, Dewey's 1900-01 lectures on ethics at the University of Chicago, noted four ways people deliberate: (1) "Some people deliberate by dialogue," (2) "Others visualize certain results," (3) "Others rather take the motor imagery and imagine themselves doing a thing," (4)"Others imagine a thing done and then imagine someone else commenting upon it." For Dewey, this diversity of methods is unified by the fact that deliberation "represents the process of rehearsing activity in idea when th[e] overt act is postponed."[3]

Schematic Worries

Having said all this, I have to wonder why Rosenbaum is as suspicious as he is of schematic representations of deliberation. After all, Lekan's schema nearly mirrors Dewey's, and neither man claims that these schemas are either comprehensive or ultimate. Sure, we shouldn't forget that a schema proposes a reductive picture derived from lived situations, but why must we proscribe them, as Rosenbaum seems to suggest? It's worth recalling that while Dewey warns against *reifying* abstractions—making them "into complete and self-subsistent things, or into a kind of superior Being" (LW 5:216, DC 65) he also applauds their value. "Abstraction," Dewey wrote, "is the heart of thought; there is no way—other than accident—to control and enrich concrete experience except through an intermediate flight of thought with conceptions, relations, abstracta" (LW 5:216, DC 65).

What's more, even if we do what Rosenbaum suggests and shift our energies toward the phenomenological description of moral deliberation's radical particularity, I don't see how that gets us away from schemas and systematic descriptions. Rosenbaum suggests that we focus "Philosophical concern...more productively on the personal, family, and community phenomena that typically produce habits of desiring and believing," but what does this mean, in practice? It seems that any description we make of a particular situation will demand that we utilize contrasts with other situations. Our very characterizations will necessarily reach beyond radical particularity toward schemas that have served us in the past. I see nothing threatening in developing hypothetical and fallible generalizations (or schemas) from this process, and Rosenbaum doesn't make clear why I mustn't do so.

Justification in Moral Choice

The severity with which Rosenbaum condemns justification in moral decision making is also a puzzle to me. Rosenbaum states that once the pragmatist account of beliefs as habits of action is accepted, "The concern to have rational or justified beliefs yields to the concern to have useful and constructive beliefs [or desires]"

[168]. I wholeheartedly endorse a shift away from the belief that logical analysis is sufficient for making a living, ethical choice. Still, the way Rosenbaum puts this makes me ask whether he dismisses too quickly the role that justification (or warrant) plays in pragmatists' account of inquiry. When we make a choice, we genuinely want to have warranted beliefs—warranted judgments, more precisely. In the midst of a difficult problem, one is frequently forced to engage in a cognitive evaluation of the best course of action. Which duty trumps which? Or, Which response best accords with my character? Yes, we want "constructive beliefs," in Rosenbaum's terms, but we don't always know which those are in a given situation. We can read pragmatism as suggesting that when we have hit upon a course of action that stabilizes the situation, our judgment is "warranted" and this notion of warrant does not thereby commit us to the notion that we've escaped from the situation by appealing to an ultimate standard. I take a "warranted judgment" to be like a "norm" insofar as I can rely on it because it picks out something more or less consistent in experience. The fact that warrant is available to me shows that it is less idiosyncratic than the experiential situation to which it applies.

Propositions and Judgment, Historicity

Towards the end of his paper, Rosenbaum states that pragmatists should not feel obliged to satisfy demands for a proof of their belief-habit account because (1) "pragmatists do not believe in propositions" and (2) they can still offer reasons for the account (based on historicity and coherence with Darwin).

My comment about propositions is akin to the previous one about "warrant." I'd have been happier if Rosenbaum had gone on to mention Dewey's reworking of the role propositions play in inquiry. Far from denying propositions, Dewey distinguished seven kinds (those interested should see Tom Burke's *Dewey's New Logic: A Reply to Russell).*[4] Propositions are not simply the asserted content of a true-or-false sentence. Rather, a proposition is, in Dewey's words, "provisional, intermediate and instrumental" (LW 12: 283). It is a *proposal* made by an agent to utilize the materials of an inquiry underway because that use is liable to lead to certain consequences. Those consequences which ameliorate the problem *confirm* the instrumental value of the proposition; those that do not *rebuke* its value. What's significant here, I think, is that a proposition functions at a mid-point of inquiry—that's why they're "proposals"—and it's in virtue of their ability to reshape the material in play that they allow one to render a judgment that transforms an ongoing and problematic situation.

Finally, Rosenbaum suggests that pragmatists defend their account based on the reason of "their embrace of the historicity of *all* human phenomena" including our institutions and our very principles of thought. "Nothing" he claims "escapes the web of contingency that is human history and culture" [169]. Perhaps it is just the way it is phrased, but this claim strikes me as lacking the kind of caution Rosenbaum recommended earlier. In my view, the cogency of the pragmatists' accounts of doubt, belief, desire, and deliberative moral choice need not appeal to

universal contingency and historicity. The pragmatist can make her case by articulating the starting point of inquiry using both eloquent and systematic portrayals of lived experience.

Notes

[1] Rosenbaum's paper and this comment were first presented at the meeting of the Southwest Philosophical Society, November 2003 in Memphis, TN. Rosenbaum's paper, "Pragmatism's Deliberation" appears in the *Southwest Philosophy Review* 20.1 (2004): 163-172.

[2] Steven Fesmire, *John Dewey and Moral Imagination: Pragmatism in Ethics* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003), p. 76.

[3] Dewey quoted in Fesmire, p. 74.

[4] Burke, *Dewey's New Logic: A Reply to Russell*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).