

What Are the Limits of Pragmatism in a Post-Humanist World?

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In his fine article, “Proposing a Pedagogy of Study: A Speculative-Pragmatic Approach to Study Practices,” Hans Schildermans aims to discern an educational way of addressing our “current global condition,” where humans dominate the planet as beings in and of themselves and through the construction of systems such as capitalism. Following Isabelle Stengers and Bruno Latour, Schildermans says that we ought to understand our current situation as predicated upon the intrusion of Gaia, and Gaia according to Schildermans is “the living assemblage of oceans, atmospheres, plants, climates, micro-organisms, and animals.”¹ Yet, Gaia is also “the doubly composite figure made of science and mythology used by certain specialists to designate the Earth that surrounds us and that we surround,” to use Latour’s phrasing.² Thus addressing Gaia as the assemblage of natural nonhuman matter and human constructs results in a kind of perspectival shift, which allows us to take up the “challenge of living together on a damaged planet,” argues Schildermans.³ Moreover, the confrontation of Gaia is related to the necessity of a particular kind of study practice that, in Schildermans’ phrasing, will result in welding together scientific inquiry and political deliberation. Together, Gaia and this particular practice of study help us “raise the question of how to live together,” argues Schildermans.⁴

I find Schildermans’ article compelling, but I have questions about how Schildermans’ proposal for a speculative-pragmatic practice relates to two bodies of work: post-humanism and traditional pragmatism. In this response, I raise three questions to tease apart and identify the theoretical traces that undergird his project. The first question is about the role of the human as studier, the second regards the role of institutions, and the third enquires into the value of traditional pragmatism for Schildermans’ proposal.

As I understand it, humans remain the central actors in this proposition. Although the recognition of Gaia prompts us to consider problems anew, Gaia herself is not a participant in the study. Rather, Schildermans positions Gaia as an uninterested but important catalyst that enables humans to think about their own extinction. In other words, the assemblages that make up our natural and built environment will outlast human life, while microbes and material things will “survive” an extinction event. Hence, the recognition of Gaia is of benefit to the humans who can do the recognizing insofar as they convene to stop destroying one another and their environment. As I understand Schildermans and Stengers, the point here is that viewing our earth-as-Gaia, and not just earth-as-planet, is akin to a Copernican revolution in that it “asserts a new truth” and leaves the door open for new theories about how we ought to live. This is a compelling and important argument. However, there seems to be a disjuncture between arguing that we must shift our focus and acknowledge Gaia and nonhuman actors in order to de-center the human, and proposing the human as studier to do so. If the problem is that our conceptions of earth and life on earth are too human-centered and that “humans have become a force with the same amplitude as volcanoes” then why propose a solution that is also centered on the human?⁵

On Schildermans’ view, although study practices can be institutionalized, ensconcing them in institutions like the University might lead to the generation of another big actor in the “History of Anthropos.” Hence, he says that study practices ought to be ensconced in our small-scale interactions with one another. A study practice emerges when a small group of people convene to address shared conditions that affect each person, such as poverty or a housing shortage. In becoming problematic the situation becomes a cause for collective thinking where each person’s opinion is taken up as an adventure with which to engage. In Schildermans’ words: “To initiate an adventure means, however, not to denounce these opinions in order to unveil the truth—as if there would be something more true than the hopes, fears, dreams, and doubts that are related to a situation that is perceived as problematic—but to activate this landscape of diverging opinions in a way that makes something present so that this landscape

of often contradictory claims can be transformed into a fabulous scenery of contrasting shades.”⁶ Thus, study practices illuminate diverse perspectives and ideas in a way that presupposes creative thinking about the future.

Beyond the brief comments about the institution of higher education, Schildermans does not expound on the role institutions can or ought to play in the instantiation of these study practices. Institutions can certainly become structures of ossified human practice or thought, but they can also be important forces of learning and reconstruction. Sticking within Schildermans’ theoretical lexicon, Bruno Latour is helpful here. Speaking to the need to think of science studies and not Science (with a capital S), Latour puts it this way: “In a situation of heated controversy, when it is a matter of obtaining valid knowledge about objects as complex as the whole systems of the Earth, knowledge that must lead to radical changes in the most intimate details of existence for billions of people, it is infinitely safer to rely on the institution of science than on indisputable certainty.”⁷ In this case the institution of science, with its material and mundane entanglements, is what ensures that the results of any inquiry are valid and robust and that the inquiry continues. Put another way, if the objective is to instantiate study practices that help us make sense of more entanglements and complex constraints imposed by diverse and diversifying beings, then shouldn’t we take seriously the ways in which institutions can aid in the perpetuation of these study practices? In addition, for traditional pragmatists such as John Dewey and Jane Addams, institutions promote evolutionary learning as they instantiate new habits. This ought to be a key consideration for Schildermans, who describes the art of study practices as a “composition without composer.”⁸ If there is no composer and no authority or teachers, then this new study practice seems to mandate an institution through which the practice can be transmitted.

I am sympathetic to Schildermans’ distillation of this speculative-pragmatic study practice. By including in his proposition the qualification that study practices must begin with a contemporary and pressing problem, involve adventurous thinking, entail a problematization, and draw individuals into a collective through the art of attention, Schildermans draws on sound Deweyan and squarely pragmatic thinking about how individuals form local publics and

make society. That said, I'm not sure what is new or better about Schildermans' speculative-pragmatic conceptualization of ideas that are integral to traditional pragmatism as characterized by Dewey. Dewey too speaks of pressing experiences, slowing down to think and consciously build habits, communication and composition, imagination, and the development of local publics. Importantly, Dewey also characterizes the emergence of undeveloped local publics that lack the tools to affect the world. In Dewey's phrasing:

An inchoate public is capable of organization only when indirect consequences are perceived, and when it is possible to project agencies which order their occurrence. At present, many consequences are felt rather than perceived; they are suffered, but they cannot be said to be known, for they are not, by those who experience them, referred to their origins ... Hence the publics are amorphous and unarticulated.⁹

On Dewey's view, although a collection of individuals may develop the ability to propose creative solutions to contemporary problems, share experiences of pressing problems, and have imaginatively shared their opinions, if they cannot discern the direct consequences of that pressing experience and then communicate that perception with others, then the public is impotent and cannot effect change. Can Gaia afford the generation of more inchoate publics?

I am curious to know what Schildermans makes of these ideas. Is the "human" practice of studying sufficient for the task of effecting a change in practice or being in the world that adequately confronts the presence of Gaia? And if so, why not take up Dewey or traditional pragmatic ideas that squarely deal with what it means to be in association, to act as a public, and to grow and learn within and through institutions?

1 Hans Schildermans, "The University in the Anthropocene: Proposing a Pedagogy of Study Practices That Make Thought Creative of the Future," *Philosophy of Education 2019*, ed. Kurt Stemhagen (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2020).

2 Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*,

trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

3 Schildermans, "The University in the Anthropocene."

4 Ibid.

5 Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, 9.

6 Schildermans, "The University in the Anthropocene."

7 Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, 4.

8 Schildermans, "The University in the Anthropocene."

9 John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Athens: Swallow Press, 1954), 131.