

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The American Pragmatists* by Cheryl Misak

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large outcomes some form of pluralism is likely right. No normative monism can possibly match the various, and often divergent, intuitions we have about outcomes. Lastly, the confidence which was once shown in utilitarian reasoning about big outcomes, and the subsequent confidence by others in Rawlsian reasoning about them, was, to more of an extent than previously thought, a function of a lack of alternatives considered, not an indication that they were somehow inevitable ways of thinking about large scale outcomes. *Rethinking the Good* is a book which, long after we have put our quest for a supreme principle aside, and after many years of rolling up our sleeves and doing the work to devise viable pluralisms, we can revisit to test how well we've done.

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The American Pragmatists

By Cheryl Misak

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, 304pp, £25

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Cheryl Misak's invaluable *The American Pragmatists* provides an account of the most important pragmatist philosophers from the 1860s until the early twenty first century. Her aim is to analyze and evaluate the theses held by these thinkers as well as tracing the history of pragmatist thought. Pragmatism, as a distinctive American contribution to philosophy, was born around Harvard about 1870. Charles Sanders Peirce and William James together with lawyers such as Oliver Wendall Holmes forged their philosophical stance in the meetings of a *Metaphysical Club*, largely under the influence of Chauncey Wright. There is little evidence that they used the word 'pragmatism' to describe these views although, after 1898 both Peirce and James suggested that the term had been used in this way. The views later called 'pragmatism' were defended by Peirce in 'The fixation of belief' (1877) and 'How to make our ideas clear' (1878). In 1898, William James declared that he was a pragmatist, tracing it to 'Peirce's principle' and identifying it as 'method of settling metaphysical disputes that might otherwise be interminable'. James identified pragmatism with the principle of pragmatism: and Peirce's with his 'pragmatic maxim'. Pragmatism quickly won both fame and notoriety, especially after John Dewey defended a related

but different form of pragmatism which was more concerned with problem solving in the social and political realm. This form of pragmatism was of major importance until the 1940s, Dewey being recognized as a major public intellectual. But, especially with the growth of logical positivism and the influx of philosophers from Europe pragmatism appeared to many to have died with little chance of resuscitation; few philosophers would have called themselves pragmatists.

Few would have anticipated that, by the mid-1970s, things would change; Cheryl Misak's history of American pragmatism devotes whole chapters to leading figures who were still active after the 1990s, Hilary Putnam and Richard Rorty: there are conferences about the 'Cambridge pragmatists'; and philosophers like Peirce and James are recognized as contributing to the contemporary debate. It is not just that there are contemporary philosophers who study Peirce and James and find value in engaging with them; contemporary philosophers begin to recognize that there have always been pragmatists, buried in the work of Carnap, Wittgenstein, and a lot of others. The history of pragmatism is now part of the history of most of us; it isn't just an account of a quirky philosophical sidetrack. She has excellent knowledge of this material, appreciating the less well-known figures as well as demonstrating an appreciation of the growing vitality of pragmatist thought. Pragmatism is now manifestly part of the history of contemporary philosophy. And Misak is an important part of this story, her impressive book *Truth and the End of Inquiry* (1991), establishing the case for the plausibility and interest of a pragmatist theory of truth.

The American Pragmatists begins with an appreciation of the origins of Pragmatist thought in puritanism, transcendentalism, and the Scottish philosophy of common sense before devoting a chapter to the work of Chauncey Wright, a follower of Darwin who debated with Peirce about the values for science of nominalism and Realism. She then turns to the three classical pragmatists, Charles Sanders Peirce, William James and John Dewey. In each case, she identifies issues of interpretation which are philosophically interesting and important. She has already written an important book on Peirce's views about truth so it is no surprise that her account of his views of inquiry is illuminating, offering insights into the role of regulative ideas in his account of inquiry. Turning to William James, she appreciates his pluralism and warns her readers to avoid the most extreme interpretations of his use of the 'principle of pragmatism' and his account of truth. Much of this chapter is devoted to ethical issues, providing a rewarding account of 'The Will to Believe' in which she describes the responses of Chauncey Wright to these

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ideas and considering some different interpretations of how the arguments were intended to work. The treatment of Dewey covers the topics that were to be expected: Dewey's undermining of the 'quest for certainty', and his metaphysical views, and his account of democracy, as a way of life. In each case, she raises interesting issues of interpretation and identifies important philosophical issues that they raise.

It is an attractive feature of the book that, after the discussion of each major figure, she discusses a range of 'Fellow Travelers', philosophers who were close to the pragmatists and offered distinctive characters to the development of Peirce's thought. For example, after discussing Peirce and James, she discusses the contributions of the legal philosopher, Oliver Wendell Holmes. She then turns to Josiah Royce, the Harvard philosopher, whose debates with William James were an important feature of the philosophy of the time. A third Fellow traveller here is F.C.S. Schiller, the British pragmatist whose version of pragmatism was less moderate, less carefully formulated, but much more entertaining than those of the better known pragmatists.

It is a virtue of the book that Misak devotes a full chapter to the writings of C.I. Lewis. He provides a link between pragmatism and analytical philosophy, partly because of his links with both Dewey and the Logical Positivists. But there are more reasons to take him seriously. C.I. Lewis's place in pragmatism is best known for his contributions to modal logic and for his pragmatist conception of the a priori, and he is often treated as a marginal figure and as the holder of an unpromising version of epistemological foundationalism: his conception of *the given* was attacked by critics like Wilfrid Sellars. His contributions are more important than this. Misak acknowledges that *the given* is a metaphysical conception rather than an epistemological one. Lewis's epistemology was a coherentist and holistic one, and Misak argues that Lewis had a very important role as linking Peirce and Quine. Lewis's first job was as guardian of Peirce's manuscripts and, although he did not often discuss Peirce in print, there can be no doubt of what he learned from reading the manuscripts. His book *Analysis of Knowledge and Evaluation*, showed a sophisticated attempt to develop pragmatist ideas to issues in moral philosophy. The only epistemology that Quine took was based on Lewis's first book *Mind and the World Order*. Misak argues for the indirect effects of Peirce upon Quine, citing their shared holism and fallibilism.

Following the chapter on Lewis, Misak offers a very interesting chapter on Pragmatism and Logical Positivism. A common reading

of the decline of pragmatism after the 1940s is that the flood of young logical empiricists from Germany, Poland and Czechoslovakia captivated young British anglo-saxon philosophers so that pragmatism was left behind. There is some truth in this: Dewey's lack of interest in formal logic may have opened the door for those who shared Peirce's passion for the discipline: Carnap, Reichenbach, Tarski and others. But Misak shows how the 'Unity of Science' movement brought Dewey together with Carnap and others; and Charles Morris made a concerted attempt to revise Peirce's ideas about the theory of signs. Lewis had links with the positivists, and Dewey was in correspondence with Lewis. As we have seen, pragmatist ideas were taken up by Quine through the teaching of Lewis, even if he did not acknowledge the fact. Carnapian themes were also embraced by Goodman, Morton White, and others. Pragmatist ideas were also fed into Cambridge philosophy through the work of Frank Ramsey, and there were connections between Wittgenstein and the William James of *Varieties of religious Experience*. The parade of fellow travellers continues, often bringing the reader's attention to authors who merit the attention, some quite well known such as Santayana, Meade, and the naturalists and realists from around the end of the nineteenth century.

The last three chapters turn to the revival of pragmatism after 1990, largely through chapters devoted to the contributions of Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam. We read of Putnam's rejection of metaphysical realism, and of his concern to reject the dichotomy between fact and value, and we learn of the views that led him to hope for 'a pragmatist enlightenment'. Misak also reminds us of Putnam's characterisation of pragmatism as involving the rejection of scepticism, adoption of fallibilism, the rejection of the fact/value dichotomy, and the primacy of practice. I am happy to endorse this. The discussion of Rorty identifies the most important issues too, beginning with his reasons for rejecting analytical philosophy and his anti-representationalism. The distinction here is helpful here too: Rorty's 'pragmatist' rejection of the idea that truth is the aim our inquiries raises some interesting issues. Pursuing settled belief will often take us to the truth but, according to Rorty, we cannot monitor whether truth has been obtained. Misak gives a sage assessment of what it is good and what is flawed in these claims.

The book closes with a chapter on 'The Current Debates'. It emerges that many current philosophical debates can be described as debates within pragmatism: examples are debates about disquotational theories of truth, about the forms to be taken by a satisfactory form of naturalism, and about the importance and understanding of

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objectivity. Misak is willing to describe as pragmatists many philosophers who would not have been so described twenty years ago: examples are John McDowell, and Crispin Wright.

This is a very impressive book, scholarly, subtly argued, and a fascinating guide to a tradition in philosophy that is not as well understood as it might be should be. Wide ranging and well argued, Misa book introduces the reader to philosophers who are not now widely known read, but who have made important contributions the development of Anglo-Saxon philosophy over the last two hundred years.

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