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Author(s): Bjørn Torgrim Ramberg

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Symposium

Cheryl Misak

The American Pragmatists



Being Constructive: On Misak's Creation of Pragmatism

BJØRN TØRGRIM RAMBERG



Abstract

This commentary on Cheryl Misak's *The American Pragmatists* opens with a schematic distinction between Type I philosophers, who think of their problems in ahistorical terms, and Type II philosophers, who take the genesis of the vocabulary in which problems are stated to have philosophical import. I suggest that Misak is a moderate Type II philosopher, who constructs a successful narrative of pragmatism around the issue of objectivity. The narrative carefully traces the dialectic of convergence and conflict that shapes pragmatist thought on this central topic, smoothly connecting—both historically and systematically—with central concerns in contemporary Anglophone philosophy. Misak thus achieves a main aim, namely, to open avenues of dialogical engagement across sub-disciplinary boundaries. Success has a cost, of course, and I conclude by briefly suggesting what may be left in the shadows cast by this generally illuminating story.

Keywords: Cheryl Misak, Richard Rorty, pragmatism, narrative, historicism, objectivity, metaphilosophy.

Any academic philosopher, I suppose, has been trained to be bothered by some question or other that cannot be answered simply by doing science. Progress may be made by developing vocabularies that allow such questions to be refined, split up, and connected to other questions, including, perhaps, to relatively uncontroversially empirical questions. Some philosophers perform this job with no particular concern for the genesis of the vocabulary they are working in and contributing to. They (Type I philosophers) tend toward problem *solving*.

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Typically this work is carried out by way of production of *theories* of this or that puzzling (puzzle-generating) phenomenon. Such philosophical theories are resolutions of salient tensions and contradictions that can be detected between various things we want to be able to assert with respect to the phenomena under scrutiny. Thought experiments are a key tool. Other philosophers have been taught to worry about exactly the issue of genesis. Such philosophers believe an understanding of the historical nature and formation of vocabularies is useful, perhaps indispensable, in confronting, learning from, and dealing with the arguments and oppositions that form around the fissures and tension points that come to the fore as Type I theories are developed. These philosophers (Type II) tend toward problem *dissolving*. The work is done largely through narration, in which re-descriptions of the actual (rather than hypotheticals and counterfactuals) are a key tool.

A strong, unadulterated version of the latter approach is associated with Richard Rorty. Rorty and his admirers are holists about meaning, and because they are also naturalists and nominalists, this makes them what I call semantic historicists.¹ Tersely and unguardedly put: On the one hand, our thinking inevitably depends on and reproduces what is already thought. On the other hand, what is already thought is incomplete—both in the sense that it is incapable of fully determining our response to it (both actually and normatively), and in the sense that its content is always unfinished, incompletely unfurled, as it were. In both these respects the meanings and significance of past utterances literally depend on how we respond, on what we go on to do with them, just as our dialectical options and semantic reach rest on the efforts of our conversational forebears. Narratives of philosophy thus make both past and present philosophy out of what they find. Or as Rorty might have said (perhaps he did), when it comes to historical narrative there is little sense in applying the finding-making distinction. Such narratives are inevitably creative. Clearly they can be better or worse in that regard, and no doubt along many dimensions—dimensions of varying significance depending on the purposes for which such narratives are constructed and deployed.²

In *The American Pragmatists* Cheryl Misak is quite clear that her narrative is a creative act, a process of working out discursive relationships across time, concerned not just with giving shape to the past and the present of pragmatism, but, critically, setting up possible futures.³ Nevertheless, Misak is no Rortyan. For in the crude, dichotomous scheme that I have just sketched, important divides go unmarked. For instance, one may be sympathetic to the general drift of semantic historicism, and thus skeptical of any sharp or principled division between *doing philosophy* and *narrating its history*, without thinking that this dissolution is a panacea for philosophical problems. Rorty indeed does treat problems of metaphysics and of epistemology as subject to such

a panacea, because he regarded them as organically related symptoms of an entrenched *problematic* or *metaphoric*, one that on his view has come seriously to hamper cultural and intellectual maturation. However, that is a further, radical diagnostic view that a Type II philosopher may certainly refuse. One may be leery of taking questions of epistemology and metaphysics at face value, and as disconnected from their history, and still find value in addressing such questions in a constructive spirit. Even such conserving and constructive Type II philosophers, though, do have to face up to the kind of challenge that Rorty raises about the point of doing constructive philosophy in any particular case. For they, by definition, cannot take their inculcated sense of the philosophically problematic for granted as a detector of philosophical significance. Once historicism poses dissolution or destruction as an option—or “benign neglect,” as Rorty once suggested with respect to the realism - anti-realism opposition—producing refined theories is no longer a self-evident default option when we come upon intuitions in conflict. A case must be made for adopting a constructive strategy with regard to some problem or topic, and for the framing one takes it to have. Recognizing this obligation, Constructive Type II philosophers not only refuse a sharp distinction between philosophy and its history, they also think that meta-philosophical reflection is an intrinsic part of philosophical work. Moreover, and importantly, they recognize that to accept this much is to give up on the idea that philosophical problems *have* definitive solutions. For neither recontextualizing redescription of the genetic kind nor justificatory reflection of the meta-philosophical kind has a natural end-point. Yet they both are, for any Type II philosopher, intrinsic to philosophical thinking, which for that reason alone will be perpetually revising itself—not just its theories and conclusions, such as they are, but its point and purpose.

I think that Misak is just such a Constructive Type II philosopher, and that her argumentative narration of pragmatism does all these things: address problems argumentatively head on; give new shape to questions through narrative recontextualization; and defend their significance, their worthiness of intellectual engagement and effort, by relating them to wider human aspirations. Misak thus argues that a particular set of questions plays a constitutive role in the historical trajectory of pragmatism, while throughout the book maintaining a strong sense of the need to make a case for the significance of those central questions and the specifically pragmatist way of posing them.

She is (literally) up-front about the nexus that will be at issue:

[M]y focus in this book will be on what Bertrand Russell calls “the cardinal point in the pragmatist philosophy”—“its theory of truth” (1992 [1909]: 261). It is the view of truth and knowledge that is most associated with pragmatism and marks it off from other traditions. (TAP, x)⁴

Misak's task, then, is to capture a distinctive pragmatist path of exploration of questions about truth and knowledge. She seeks to do this in a way that will make evident both the point and the tractability of these questions, and that will guide us in our efforts, as pragmatists, to move ahead. The framing of the task is critical, and is made clear in the Preface:

The overarching issue for pragmatism is the problem with which both the empiricists and Kant wrestle. How can we make sense of our standards of rationality, truth, and value as genuinely normative or binding while recognizing that they are profoundly human phenomena? How do normativity and authority arise from within a world of human experience and practice? (TAP, xi)

This frame is carefully chosen. It allows Misak to provide a picture of pragmatism as an integral part of mainstream philosophy but also to emphasize what is distinctive about it: the elaboration of human *practice* as a source of normativity, combined with a persistent effort “to widen the concept of experience.” (TAP, 7) The latter point represents the pragmatists' effort to nip in the bud that impulse toward non-cognitivism about value which seems to lie inherent in empiricism. This theme is, for good reason, ubiquitous in the book—but perhaps it will suffice here to point to just two (important) instances: the idea is present in Peirce's pragmatic maxim, “that our theories and concepts must be linked to experience, expectations, or consequences” (TAP, 29), and the same central thought is reflected in C. I. Lewis's subtle account of ethics, which rests, Misak argues, on “the pragmatist idea that knowledge, action, and evaluation ‘are essentially connected.’” (TAP, 186)

At the same time, Misak's “overarching issue” provides a frame within which central divides within contemporary pragmatism may be traced. And it allows her to illuminate quite instructively the relation of pragmatist thought broadly considered to contemporary philosophical efforts of other kinds. Let us consider these themes a little further.

Misak identifies right at the start the divide in contemporary pragmatism that is her main preoccupation:

There will be plenty of opportunity to make the necessary nuances in the pages that follow. But roughly, it is a debate between those who assert (or whose view entails) that there is no truth and objectivity to be had anywhere and those who take pragmatism to promise an account of truth that preserves our aspiration to getting things right. (TAP, 3)

This conflict within pragmatism drives the narrative. Misak sets out to show the reader how people who are opposed on this issue, apparently so basic, are nevertheless oriented within a space of shared commitments

that are distinctive enough to justify calling them all pragmatists. And vice versa: to show that closely aligned commitments from the same family of ideas can lead to deep and important oppositions.

A case in point is Misak's reading of the opposition between the classical pragmatists as structured around the issue just broached, namely how, and how far, to broaden the concept of experience. I lack the scholarly competence to assess the specifics of her readings, but the dialectic is effective; Misak emphasizes a distinctively pragmatic form of naturalism as an orientation to science that brings the ethical—more broadly, the realm of value—under the scope of the cognitive. She credits Chauncey Wright with “the first careful articulation” (TAP, 23) of a defining commitment: “It is the idea that experience might go beyond what our five senses deliver; that we might experience value; that inquiry must be thought of as a seamless whole.” (Ibid.)

Against this background, pragmatists appear as united in their dissatisfaction with the terms of epistemological arguments inherited from the Enlightenment, structured around an opposition between reason and experience. At the same time, Misak traces the fundamental differences that emerge as Peirce, James and Dewey reach different views about what a “widened concept of experience” should amount to, and what its consequences are with respect to justification and truth.

And in the same vein: It is a fundamental pragmatist thought, Misak suggests, “that inquiry must be thought of as a seamless whole,” and she shows us that this holism becomes “a defining feature of pragmatism.” (Ibid.) Yet this idea, too, as Misak shows in her treatment of more recent thinkers (particularly Quine, Rorty, and Putnam) can be, and is, taken in quite different directions that remain present as stark oppositions in contemporary philosophy.

In this way Misak's story traces a systematic development of a competing set of responses to shared challenges, first emblematically marked by the opposition between William James's subjectivist naturalism and Peirce's insistence that “there has to be some basis for dividing experiences into those that are relevant for truth claims and those that are not.” (TAP, 69) What surfaces here is the question of objectivity, which Misak announces at the outset as her leading concern. This is the issue that bifurcates pragmatism and on which the future of pragmatism as a viable project depends. Here is a pivotal and revealing passage:

It is certainly the case that those pragmatists who want to talk about the world and its constraints need to work hard to show how there is some space between their view and that of their realist opponents. We have seen that Peirce opens up that gap by arguing that we have no cognitive access to the world of independent objects—it is only by abstracting the forceful element from experience that we can get an inkling that the world is there. Dewey, on the other hand, needs

to work to say why his view remains sufficiently far away from his idealist opponents who have a hard time making sense of the ideas of improvements, mistakes, and standards. The divide . . . may be a hairline, but it is a divide that structures the history of pragmatism and the challenges that present themselves to the varieties of pragmatism. (TAP, 119)

This construction of pragmatism around the question of the source of epistemic normativity puts Misak in a position to reject what is now commonly referred to as the “eclipse narrative” of the relation between pragmatism and analytic philosophy as it evolved with the arrival of the European expatriates in the middle of the last century.⁵ For it makes the differences between prewar pragmatists and later analytic philosophers appear more a matter of style than of philosophical concerns. So philosophers like Quine, and perhaps more tellingly C. I. Lewis, are assigned an important role—they make apparent the proximity, and continuity, of concerns between pragmatists’ thought and analytic philosophy. Indeed, analytic philosophy appears as a continuation of work with the very questions that were central to Peirce and Wright and Lewis, albeit with new and perhaps refined techniques. And pragmatists, taking their cue from Darwinian biology rather than from developments in modern physics, may still have important contributions to make. It is far from obvious today, to put it gently, that the “over-arching issue” of pragmatism—the question of the relation of normativity to human practice—should simply be dismissed in favor of the defining concern of analytic philosophy of mind in the latter half of the 20th Century, namely the question of the place of mind in a physical universe.

Misak’s pragmatism is thus commensurate in its aims and its defining problems with much of current Anglophone philosophy, while still advocating distinctive and promising avenues of progress. Misak’s pragmatism claims a place at the table of current debates about naturalism, about the scope and significance of representationalism, and about objectivity. Huw Price and Robert Brandom are paradigmatic examples. Contributing to the rapprochement Misak finds and makes are developments on the other side, as one might put it; many philosophers—particularly, perhaps, philosophers of science (prominent examples are Philip Kitcher and Peter Godfrey-Smith)—are finding their way back to pragmatist sources.⁶

In her aim to bring pragmatism to the fore as part of the same fundamental enterprise as mainstream Anglophone philosophy, Misak is largely successful. Her narrative preserves the distinctiveness of pragmatism while making it possible to connect its claims dialectically with a broader epistemological enterprise. In this respect, her narrative does exactly what good narratives should do, and that perhaps only narratives can do: her story provides us with a richer, more well-defined and

nuanced dialectical space for central questions of epistemology, showing how pragmatism makes progress on these questions by relating them systematically to broader aspects of human practice—scientific, ethical, political.

Success, however, comes at a price, and we may note this without detracting from the achievement. There is a strong tradition of opposition to mainstream analytic philosophy, particularly to its resurging metaphysics, in parts of the pragmatist camp. This internal division is one that Misak does little to illuminate and explicitly chooses to leave alone—it pertains to the ends and means of philosophical reflection, and involves views and works that are much harder to make commensurate with the problems and theories of contemporary analytic philosophy. It seems to me that while the anti-eclipse revision of the “standard story” has a lot going for it, its champions risk underestimating the significance and philosophical interest of the “anti-analytic” streak of pragmatism by accounting for it in sociological rather than philosophical terms.

Instead, Misak’s target is Rorty’s formulation of pragmatism. Despite Rorty’s role of *enfant terrible*, his opposition to the epistemological enterprise (to what he terms “representationalism”) is framed, at least in part, in a vocabulary employed within that enterprise. Thus his writings can be put to good use within the dialectical space and the historical trajectory that Misak develops. Rorty’s Wittgenstein-inspired version of Dewey and James serves in the context that Misak develops precisely to emphasize and make vivid the proximity of analytic epistemology and the Wright-Peirce line of pragmatist thought.

Misak’s dialectical use of Rorty means that she can find nothing in his work that is both distinctive and of lasting value to pragmatism. He represents, in her story, what you get if you put James’s psychologism and subjectivism through the linguistic turn and call the result pragmatism. Here, too, I think that a cost is extracted.

Misak recognizes that Rorty’s remarks on truth and knowledge do not fit the opposition that structures her story without remainder. She resolves this—in good Rortyan fashion, it might be noted—by distinguishing between “Good Rorty” and “Bad Rorty.” GR is sensible but not very original. BR is at loggerheads with Misak’s purposes—he thinks that there is nothing of interest to be said about knowledge and truth, that the point of the early pragmatists’ “widening of the concept of experience” is best achieved by sticking a pin in that bloated concept, that the idea of a “philosophical theory of meaning” is retrograde, that science should be of no particular interest to philosophers, and finally that pragmatism, understood as “cultural politics,” is the natural outcome of the dialectical self-immolation of the analytic program. There can be little wonder as to why he is the villain of the piece.

But an alternative narrative might emerge if one were to take Rorty to be speaking with a coherent, integrated intention. I conclude by briefly indicating how one might begin to construct such an alternative narrative in dialogue with Misak. Toward the very end of her book, Misak considers Davidson, aligning him with Peirce (or vice versa). Considering Davidson's rejection of "the third dogma of empiricism" (the scheme-content opposition), she writes, "as far as Davidson is concerned, Rorty holds fast to the last dogma of empiricism—that there are different conceptual schemes we might choose from to organize experience." (TAP 254)

Misak's Peircean line, by contrast, takes the Davidsonian lesson to heart: "While what counts as real is relative to our ways of organizing and conceptualizing experience, there is only one framework. We might as well call it, I suggest, the human framework." (TAP 253)

Here is where I would begin to resist. Rorty, and I follow him faithfully in this, takes Davidson to be rejecting the very idea of a framework and of framework relativity. The problem with representationalism, for Rorty and Davidson alike, is the very idea that we should explicate "reality" with reference to an epistemic framework of interpretation at all, to "our" contribution, whether we take that contribution monolithically ("the human framework") or pluralistically.⁷ My suggestion is that by making this insight, if it is one, an absolute constraint on interpretation of Rorty, then he appears not less radical, but less easily split into two versions—the sensible and boring part and the crazy part.

That might give another picture of how the pragmatist impulse may be brought to bear on contemporary mainstream Anglophone philosophy, placing its working conception of the ends of philosophical reflection in question. That challenge, that oppositional force, is a part of the pragmatist heritage that to my mind is worth preserving and emphasizing. Rorty has been posing this challenge in various creative ways at least since the 1970s. But this is another story.

Center for the Study of Mind in Nature,
University of Oslo
b.t.ramberg@csmn.uio.no

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NOTES

1. On the connection between these, see Brandom 2000.
2. Rorty's schema of possible purposes may be found in Rorty 1984.
3. Misak 2013. (Cited in the text as *TAP*.) In the *Preface* Misak writes,

my project straddles the history of ideas and philosophy. One of my aims is to tell what I think is a gripping story in the history of philosophy . . . But an equally important aim is to show what is good in pragmatism; where philosophical missteps were taken; and how pragmatists can best go forward. (*TAP*, xi)

4. Misak is quoting from Russell's essay "Pragmatism" (1909).
5. The term is due to Robert Talisse, who has debunked the view in a number of works. See for instance the introduction to Talisse and Aiken 2011.
6. For Kitcher's locating of his own thought with respect to the pragmatist tradition, see Kitcher 2012. Godfrey-Smith draws on and interprets Dewey in a number of recent papers, e.g., Godfrey-Smith 2010.
7. We should keep in mind that Davidson, too, is clear that there is no interesting sense in which truth is a goal of inquiry.