
Cheryl Misak. *The American Pragmatists*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. xvi+286. \$45.00 (cloth).

Most analytic philosophers, when asked about American pragmatism, simply scoff. Like Bertrand Russell, they attribute to the pragmatists the view that “we may as well believe what is most convenient” (101). Cheryl Misak’s book is a history designed to silence the scoffers—to show that pragmatism should be taken more seriously. She certainly achieves this goal, but her framing may end up exacerbating the “with us or against us” tone of conversations about the pragmatists and their account of truth.

The main thesis of the book is that there are two strains of pragmatism, one that “preserves our aspiration to getting things right” and another that seems to abandon this aspiration (3). Pragmatism was (and still is) usually identified with the latter, first by Russell and various realist critics and later by Richard Rorty, a famous foe of objectivity. Misak, however, champions the former, which stems from the work of Charles Sanders Peirce. She argues that “some of the stars of modern analytic philosophy” are in fact members of this alternative pragmatist lineage (1). Thus, even if the “bad” strain of pragmatism has been marginalized, there is a “good” strain that is very much part of the mainstream—it is just that we do not usually think of it as pragmatism.

Although she does not put it in terms as stark as these, Misak’s book is a story with heroes and villains. The heroes are Peirce and his friend Chauncey Wright, along with descendants such as C. I. Lewis and Hilary Putnam. The villains are William James and to a certain extent John Dewey, along with descendants such as Rorty. James and company may have meant well, and their evils were for the most part inadvertent, but they are clearly responsible, says Misak, for pragmatism’s persistent PR problem.

The book is divided into three parts: “The Founders of Pragmatism,” “The Middle Period,” and “The Path to the Twenty-First Century.” Each part begins with a stage-setting chapter, followed by chapters devoted to individual pragmatist philosophers. Each part also contains one chapter on “fellow travelers,” a term that Misak does not define. George Herbert Mead, for example, is a fellow traveler, and there is only a short discussion of Jane Addams (142–43) within the section on “Mead and the Chicago School.”

The American Pragmatists begins with a chapter on the pragmatists’ American predecessors. Misak identifies two primary conceptual links between Ralph Waldo Emerson and the early pragmatists: first, a broad notion of experience, according to which “feeling or emotion is a kind of experience”; and second, the idea that experience can surprise or shock us (12). The next chapter discusses the oft-neglected Chauncey Wright. Although Wright was part of the original Metaphysical Club, he died in 1875, before pragmatism became a going concern. Wright wrote little, but Misak tracks down several passages that anticipate the views of Peirce. For example, Wright argued that mathematical axioms “have their truest proof in the broadest possible tests of experience, through the experimental and observational verifications of their mathematical consequences” (23).

Misak’s next chapter, on Peirce, is the key to the whole book. There are three ideas in Peirce that shape the rest of Misak’s narrative: truth as indefeasibility, the force of experience, and the regulative assumptions of inquiry.

She gives the first of these ideas a subjunctive twist: “A true belief is such that, no matter how much further we were to investigate and debate, it would not be overturned by recalcitrant experience and argument” (37). Misak notes that this is supposed to be “one fix on the idea of truth” rather than a definition of it (36). The second idea is also the second of Peirce’s three categories: firstness is a quality or feeling; secondness is action and reaction, a “bumping up against hard fact”; thirdness is inevitable interpretation and judgment (38–39). Misak singles out the second of these as a necessary part of her preferred version of pragmatism, which emphasizes “the actual clash between us and the world” (40). But why should we believe in an independent reality? This is where the third idea comes in: it is a “fundamental hypothesis,” says Peirce, that “there are real things whose characters are . . . independent of our beliefs about them” (51). Such regulative assumptions—others lie behind induction and abduction—are statements about “what [a] practice requires in order to be comprehensible and in order to be sensibly carried out” (51). These regulative principles are not assertions; they are expressions of a *hope*.

If Peirce was responsible for pragmatism’s creation, James was responsible for its fall. Just as there are good and bad versions of pragmatism, there are good and bad versions of James. Misak focuses on the latter—on the James who appears to argue “that widely variable and local human experience is all we have to go on when it comes to belief and truth.” She justifies this focus by pointing to pragmatism’s historical trajectory: it was ultimately rejected and scorned because of James’s “cruder and extravagant account of truth” (54). If only people had paid more attention to careful Peirce instead of careless James, things would have been different. But given James’s skill as a writer and popularizer, and Peirce’s disaster of a career, pragmatism’s fate was sealed. James wrote, for example, that “the truest scientific hypothesis is that which, as we say, ‘works best’” (66). Wright and Peirce were horrified by such claims, and so is Misak. Pragmatism’s critics did not “put James in his best light”; Misak uses this historical fact as a rationale for echoing these critics in her own analysis (54).

Misak’s treatment of Dewey parallels her treatment of James: Dewey is praised for his moral philosophy and attacked for his epistemological and metaphysical views. It is Dewey’s Hegelian heritage, says Misak, that gets him into trouble (121). His notion of a *situation* is at the heart of the confusion: “Dewey seems to offer us a metaphysics in which a mental state (doubt) is ascribed to a situation that is a merging of the natural world and human inquirers” (120). The Dewey chapter and the others in part 2 also contain several short discussions of pragmatism’s early critics: Russell, G. E. Moore, James

Pratt (101–5); the new realists, George Santayana, and the critical realists (122–23, 143–50). The upshot is that although all of these thinkers were critical of James and Dewey, and thus of pragmatism, many of them defended views consonant with those of Peirce.

Misak's most exciting contributions are in part 3, which brings the history of pragmatism up to the present. It begins with a chapter that follows HOPOS scholars in arguing that "there is no clean break between pragmatism and logical empiricism." Thus, if we are looking for the causes of pragmatism's decline, we cannot just point to Carnap and colleagues. By the 1960s, says Misak, when "the strong program of logical empiricism was unraveling," it became even harder to see how it differed from pragmatism (175).

The central figure of part 3 is Clarence Irving Lewis, who studied with James at Harvard as an undergraduate and went on to teach there from 1920 to 1953. Thus, most of the other characters in part 3—Willard van Orman Quine, Nelson Goodman, Wilfrid Sellars, Hilary Putnam—interacted with Lewis during their graduate training. Carnap and Moritz Schlick also praised the work of Lewis (179). According to Misak, Lewis's account of knowledge and value depended on Peircean regulative assumptions. In Lewis's view, she writes, "we need the given as a touchstone, even if it is so thin that we can say nothing about it" (184). And although he was inspired by Dewey's naturalistic account of value, Lewis often sounds positively Peircean: "If there is any hope that we can . . . effect any improvement in the quality of living," says Lewis, there must be something objective about our value judgments (189). Misak interprets both Sellars and Quine as inheritors of Lewis's pragmatism. For example, it is difficult to see how Quine's holism differs from that of Lewis (195). Misak resists counting Quine as a true pragmatist, however, since he restricted philosophy to "logic and science" and thus excluded questions of value (208). If Lewis is now neglected in the history of pragmatism, it is because he was misinterpreted—and often not even cited—by those who extended his views.

Misak's book is destined to become the standard history of pragmatism. It is clear and accessible; more importantly, it includes later pragmatists such as Lewis, Goodman, Rorty, and Putnam. In its systematic championing of Peirce, however, it is not entirely fair to James and Dewey. For example, Misak does not discuss James's tripartite notion of reality (in *Pragmatism*), which he defines as "in general what truths have to take account of." The book is also a bit short on context: important influences such as positivism, Darwinism, and the new psychology are mentioned, but the pragmatists' reactions to and interpretations of them are not described in any detail. Finally, Misak correctly predicts that the book will "irritate those pragmatists who are not part of . . . the

most defensible pragmatist lineage” (xii). Their response will likely be that she has not really demonstrated that advocates of solidarity have abandoned “our aspiration to getting things right.” Like good pragmatists, we need to ask whether different philosophical accounts of getting things right really make a difference in practice.

Trevor Pearce, University of North Carolina–Charlotte