

BOOK REVIEWS

The American Pragmatists

By CHERYL MISAK

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Analysis Reviews says it covers history of philosophy that ‘has central relevance to analytic philosophy’, a proviso this book meets easily since, among its other virtues, its detailed genealogy of pragmatism shows us how the label ‘pragmatist’ acquired its present laudatory if rather vague meaning.

Misak’s book has 15 chapters, grouped into three parts. *Part I, The Founders of Pragmatism*, concentrates on three of them: Chauncey Wright, C. S. Peirce and William James. All three were, in Peirce’s words, ‘men of science, rather scrutinizing the doctrines of the metaphysicians on their scientific side’ (15). Hence their emphasis on experience as the only valid test of belief, and their consequent rejection of *a priori* arguments for metaphysical realism or Kantian idealism. Against the former they insisted on the mind’s contribution to our knowledge of the world, while rejecting the latter’s transcendentalism. So for Peirce, in Misak’s words, only against a fallible ‘background of ‘commonsense belief’ . . . can a belief be put into doubt and a new, better, belief be adopted’ (34); and for Wright, influenced by Darwin, ‘our knowledges and rational beliefs result . . . from the survival of the fittest among our original and spontaneous beliefs’ (24–25), where ‘fitness’ means fitness to survive more experience.

But whose experiences, and of what kinds, must beliefs of various sorts survive, and for how long, to qualify as rational? Misak shows how different answers to such questions divided, and still divide, pragmatists into two main sects. One, from James to Rorty, lets evidence for a belief include ‘the satisfaction of the believer’ (63); the other, from Peirce to Putnam, to which Misak belongs, does not. The former’s appeal varies of course with subject matter: it is easier to believe that ‘emotions or feelings or reactive attitudes count as evidence in moral deliberation’ (73) than that they do so in science or mathematics. So the question for a discriminating Peircean is how experiences that *do* count as evidence for non-evaluative beliefs differ from those that don’t. (*I* think experiences can only be perceptual, i.e. evidence for such beliefs, if most of them are reliably caused by what we thereby perceive; but then I’m not a pragmatist.)

Part II, The Middle Period, starts with hostile responses to the early pragmatists, especially to James, both by Russell and Moore in Britain and by American philosophers like James Pratt, for whom ‘it is one thing to say a belief is true because the logical consequences that flow from it fit . . . our otherwise grounded knowledge; and quite another to call it true because it is pleasant to believe’ (103). *Part II*’s core, however, is its account of John Dewey’s contributions to pragmatism: his showing, for example, how ethics can ‘fall under the scope of inquiry and knowledge’ while differing from science in the way it applies to ‘behaviour that manifests the agent’s

character' (130). Dewey also, like Peirce, links pragmatism to democracy, arguing that, as Misak puts it, 'if we are to have any hope of reaching beliefs that stand up to all experience, we must take the experience of others seriously... [ideally in] some form of democratic representation and collective decision making' (138).

Misak starts *Part III, The Path to the Twenty-First Century*, by rebutting the view that pragmatism was side-lined by the influence of the logical empiricist refugees from Europe in the 1930s. On the contrary, she argues, their views differed from pragmatism only in extreme forms of the 'verifiability principle' whose increasingly evident unworkability made many of them pragmatists in fact if not in name. Thus 'Carnap's empiricist, pragmatist, twist on Kant is to have our frameworks tested "by their success or failure in practical use" (174).' But the main news in *Part III* is C. I. Lewis's pragmatism, in which communities are what deliver objectivity in both science and ethics: 'If there were a complete absence of community in our value-findings on given occasions... then no one could... learn how to do anybody else any good – or for that matter, how to do him harm' (189). Misak blames Lewis's later neglect on his view of science being hijacked by Quine, whose failure to admit his debt, and refusal to apply his view to ethics, meant it stopped being called 'pragmatist', thus freeing the term for its later appropriation by Jamesians like Richard Rorty. And that for me, as for Misak, is where the rot really set in: with philosophers being told to abandon 'the very ideas of truth and objectivity' (227), and to replace the term 'experience' with 'discourse' in order to "construct narratives" that have a "therapeutic function".' (237)

Fortunately, a less extreme pragmatism resurfaces in Hilary Putnam, whose 'pragmatic realism offers 'a middle way between reactionary metaphysics and irresponsible relativism" (241). Whether the way works is a moot point, for reasons I can't go into here. But nor need I, since a realism 'that has experience giving us objective access to the inquirer-independent world', which Misak says 'all pragmatists reject' (248), can steer its own objective course between the Scylla of scepticism and the Charybdis of idealism. That is because its naturalism lets it: (i) define beliefs functionally by their perceptual causes, interactions with each other and with other intentional states, and the actions they and desires jointly cause; (ii) show how the truth of beliefs so defined is what makes those actions fulfil those desires (this is the grain of truth in pragmatist equations of truth with utility); and (iii) base our epistemology on the causal reliability of our senses and inferential processes, thereby (iv) distinguishing our and the world's contributions to our experience. That's what convinces me, if not Misak, that a naturalistic realism can explain pragmatism's insights better than it can. What Misak does is remind us all, pragmatists and realists alike, of how much pragmatism has rightly added to our explanatory agenda.

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