

Cheryl Misak, *The American Pragmatists*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. xvi, 286.

Reviewer: Tom Donaldson

Cheryl Misak's *The American Pragmatists* is an examination of the history of American pragmatism, starting with Chauncey Wright and Peirce, and finishing with Putnam. She focuses on the pragmatists' views about truth and epistemology, and to a lesser extent on their work in metaethics. Much of the book is introductory, but it is not for the philosophical neophyte. It would make an excellent textbook for an upper-level undergraduate course (one might use it alongside Susan Haack's anthology, *Pragmatism, Old and New*). I will examine in turn three major themes of the book.

First Theme: The continuity of pragmatism

According to a popular story, America's native pragmatism was largely displaced in the 1930s by a European invasive species, logical empiricism. Pragmatism was then close to extinct for a half-century, before it was reintroduced by Putnam and Rorty. Misak makes a powerful case against this story, arguing that the pragmatist tradition has developed in a more or less continuous manner from the founding of The Metaphysical Club in 1872 to the present day.

Misak argues that those who tell the popular story neglect C.I. Lewis. Lewis was deeply influenced by Peirce, and the influence is obvious in his work. Quine was in turn deeply influenced by Lewis, who taught him when he was a graduate student. For Misak, one can call Quine a pragmatist without too much distortion (208). Quine understated his debts to Lewis, she argues, partly because he himself was not fully aware of them (198) and partly because he had 'few warm feelings' for Lewis (195). The influence of Quine on Rorty and Putnam is clear in their work. There is thus a direct unbroken line stretching from Peirce to the so-called 'neo'-pragmatists.

Misak also maintains that those who tell the standard story misunderstand the relationship between pragmatism and logical empiricism. She argues that there were many deep similarities between the views of the pragmatists and those of the logical empiricists. These similarities were recognised at the time, and so pragmatists and logical empiricists cooperated. Moreover, Misak argues, as logical empiricism matured it 'moved even closer to pragmatism' (175).

Second Theme: The two pragmatisms

Misak contrasts two 'strains' (252) of pragmatism. She doesn't label them, but following Rescher (2000, 64-69) we could call them 'left' and 'right'. We are told that left pragmatists (Rorty, Schiller, James, perhaps also Dewey) hold that 'there is no truth at which we might aim—only agreement within a community or what works for an individual or what is found to solve a problem' (3). By contrast, right pragmatists (Peirce, C.I. Lewis, Sellars) understand that there is 'an objective dimension of human inquiry', and that 'those engaged in deliberation and investigation take themselves to be aiming at getting things right, avoiding mistakes, and improving their beliefs and theories' (3). Misak is embarrassed that, because James and Rorty were more effective popularisers than Peirce, C.I. Lewis and Sellars, it is now the leftist position which is most often associated with term 'pragmatism'.

Misak's discussions of the rightists are sympathetic and scholarly; when she discusses the leftists she goes on the offensive. James is praised for his essay 'The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life', but Misak devotes most of her chapter on James to an attack on his '*radically subjective* pragmatism' (71, emphasis added). She writes, 'it will be my duty to get James's cruder and more extravagant account of

truth on the page along with nods to his more careful view' (54). Some readers would no doubt prefer to learn about the 'more careful view'. It is true that James sometimes in passing endorsed the claim that a belief is true just in case it is useful; however, when James discussed truth in detail, in Chapter VI of *Pragmatism*, the theory he presented is not so dissimilar from the theory that Misak herself endorses.

Misak's chapter on Rorty is even more critical. It seems that her goal is not to present Rorty at his best, but rather to attack his more hyperbolic assertions. He is accused of holding that 'one belief is no better than another'; Misak objects that this is 'not only an unsatisfactory view, ... it is incompatible with Rorty's commitment to his own beliefs and with his practice of arguing or giving reasons for them' (230). This interpretation of Rorty is questionable, in the light of passages such as this:

Relativism is the view that every belief on a certain topic, or perhaps about *any* topic, is as good as every other. No one holds this view. ... If there *were* relativists, they would, of course, be easy to refute. One would merely use some variant of the self-referential arguments Socrates used against Protagoras. But such neat little dialectical strategies only work against lightly-sketched fictional characters. (Rorty 1982, 166-7)

Third Theme: Misak's theory of truth

In *The American Pragmatists*, Misak continues to defend her pragmatist theory of truth, which is based on, and very similar to, Peirce's theory. She introduces it in the chapter on Peirce, and goes on to argue that the theory is superior to James's 'relativist' theory (73) and Rorty's deflationary theory (232-235).

According to Misak, a belief is true just in case it is 'indefeasible', where an indefeasible belief is one 'we would come to, were we to inquire as far as we could on a matter' (36). One might reasonably object that in defending this theory Misak commits the 'conditional fallacy' (see (Shope 1978)). Since Wright has discussed this issue in detail (Wright 2000), I'll turn to a second worry.

Assuming that a statement is false just in case its negation is true, Misak's account of truth implies the following principle:

Optimism: If a statement S has a truth value, then sufficient research would establish either that S is true or that S is false.

This is hard to believe. Yesterday at 11:55am I sat down alone in a windowless room. No recording devices were present. I took a pack of cards and shuffled them very thoroughly, keeping the pack face down at all times. At 11:59am I put the cards down on the table, still face down. At 12:01pm I picked up the cards and then thoroughly shuffled them again, all the time keeping the cards face down. Now consider the statement, 'At noon yesterday the card uppermost in the pack was a spade'. This statement surely has a truth value, but it doesn't seem that anyone could figure out whether it is true or false, no matter how thoroughly she researched the topic. So we seem to have a counterexample to Optimism.

Misak's Peircean response to this problem is ingenious. Consider:

Bivalence: If a statement S is a 'candidate for truth', then S is either true or false.

(The qualification ‘If a statement S is a candidate for truth’ is there to allow for truth-value gaps in the cases of semantic paradox, vagueness and so on.)¹ Misak claims that Bivalence is a ‘regulative assumption of inquiry’ (50). We must *assume* that Bivalence is true, even though we would not be justified in *believing* it. Here, ‘assumption’ is a propositional attitude rather like belief, but not governed by the same epistemic standards (64). So when faced with a putative counterexample to Optimism, Misak will say that we must *assume* that there is some way of ascertaining whether the statement is true or false (perhaps involving research-methods not yet discovered).

This is problematic. The difficulty in brief is that there are certain physical theories which (given plausible background assumptions) imply that there are counterexamples to Optimism. I don’t think that such theories should be ruled out on philosophical grounds.

Consider, for example, the physical theory known as ‘Bohmian mechanics’, according to which there is a ‘privileged reference frame’ which plays a special role in the dynamical laws.² If one accepts Bohmian mechanics, it seems that one will be forced to admit that there are counterexamples to Optimism. Suppose for example that we arrange for two lights to flash so that the two flashes are simultaneous relative to some observer’s reference frame. Call the two flashes ‘*a*’ and ‘*b*’, and consider the sentence:

S₀: *a* is simultaneous with *b*, relative to the privileged reference frame.

From a Bohmian point of view, it is hard to believe that S₀ lacks a truth value. S₀ is not relevantly vague; it doesn’t contain any empty names or defective predicates; it doesn’t contain any semantic vocabulary that could give rise to paradox, and so on. But Bohmian mechanics implies that nobody could ever figure out whether *a* is simultaneous with *b* relative to the privileged reference frame,³ and hence that nobody could ever figure out whether S₀ is true. So the Bohmian will end up saying that S₀ is a counterexample to Optimism. Thus, one cannot accept both Bohmian mechanics and Misak’s views about truth.

It is no good responding that we must ‘assume’ that we will be able to figure out whether *a* was simultaneous with *b*, perhaps using methods so far undiscovered. Bohmian mechanics implies that this is impossible, and it is surely irrational to make an ‘assumption’ that directly contradicts a scientific theory one believes. So again, one cannot rationally believe Bohmian mechanics while accepting Misak’s views about truth.

This looks problematic: surely one’s philosophical theorising about the nature of truth shouldn’t rule out physical theories, independently of the scientific evidence.⁴

I can see four possible responses available to Misak here:

(1) Misak could say that, because her theory of truth is correct and it conflicts with Bohmian mechanics, Bohmian mechanics must be rejected.

(2) Misak might say that one *can* rationally ‘assume’ that with sufficient research we would establish whether S₀ is true or false, even when one’s beliefs imply that this is impossible. On this view, a rational person can knowingly ‘assume’ something she believes to be false.

¹ Misak doesn’t actually mention truth-value gaps in *The American Pragmatists*; she discusses the issue in her earlier work. See (Misak 2000: 70-1).

² See (Albert, 1994: 160). For a defence of this aspect of Bohmian mechanics, see (Dürr et al., 2013).

³ See (Albert 1994, 169).

⁴ For another possible counterexample to Optimism, see (McAdam 2012). McAdam argues that ‘there is no way of identifying an unknown polarization state of a photon’.

(3) Misak could say that one can adopt both Bohmian mechanics and her theory of truth, by maintaining that statements of the form 'x is simultaneous with y relative to the privileged reference frame' are not 'candidates for truth'.

(4) Misak could continue to believe that truth is indefeasibility, and to assume that Bivalence holds, but concede that if physicists were to establish Bohmian mechanics (or some other relevantly similar theory) she would have to abandon her views about truth. On this view, Misak's pragmatist theory of truth is *empirically falsifiable*.

It seems to me that (4) is the best of these options. Fallibilism and an opposition to apriorism have always been central to pragmatist thought, so perhaps Misak would be happy with the conclusion that her theory of truth is empirically falsifiable in this way.

Thanks to Peter Olen, Ned Hall, Clay Cordova, Ben Levinstein, and as always Jenn Wang for assistance.

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