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What Good is a (Indeed, This) History of Pragmatism?

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Source: *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (Summer 2013), pp. 405-412

Published by: Indiana University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/trancharpeirsoc.49.3.405>

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### **Abstract**

The philosophical point of the history of pragmatism offered by Cheryl Misak appears to be, to a first approximation, to recover pragmatism from Rorty. She does this by uncovering an “objectivist” pragmatist lineage that begins with Peirce and runs right through the central figures of American analytic philosophy (Sellars, Quine, Goodman, Davidson). In this essay, I raise historical puzzles for Misak’s account, including reasons to doubt that Quine and Sellars are best thought of as pragmatists and reasons to reorient a history of pragmatism in the mid-twentieth-century away from these figures and toward now forgotten figures in American philosophy of science who helped transform the social sciences after the Second World War.

*Keywords:* Cheryl Misak, C. I. Lewis, W. V. Quine, Richard Rorty, philosophy of science

“Pragmatism” is a term to conjure with in recent history of philosophy—for a little over one hundred years various philosophers have used the term to advocate certain projects, to abjure others, to bind themselves with groups of like-minded philosophers, to distance themselves from other groups, to draw narrative arcs through recent history, to obscure other possible arcs, and so on. No one does quite so much with words as philosophers do. But what have they done with the word “pragmatism”?

I have begun with the word because the word’s existence cannot be doubted. Whether there is anything in particular meant by or even referred to by the word is a harder question. If pragmatism exists, it exists as a social-*cum*-intellectual thing. And we don’t really know what that thing

## *What Good is a (Indeed, This) History of Pragmatism?*

ALAN RICHARDSON



it is. This brings me back to the word—because it is often far easier to talk about what a specific scholar, a William James or a John Dewey or a Richard Rorty, is trying to do with the word than it is to figure out what the thing is that he is talking about (let alone whether there is a common thing they are all talking about). Here I wish to discuss a few things—things inspired by Dewey and by my own research into the now obscure history of early- to mid-twentieth-century American philosophy—about what Cheryl Misak, in her important new book, *The American Pragmatists*, is doing with the word “pragmatism” and its various forms. (The book also does interesting things with the word “the”—I would prefer, for reasons noted below, the title *Some American Pragmatists*.)

One family resemblance between pragmatism and logical empiricism in early twentieth-century philosophy is their shared frustration with many traditional problems of philosophy and their shared diagnostic impulse. Indeed, beyond the impulse, the diagnoses of what had gone wrong in much of traditional philosophy were importantly similar, hanging on a notion of meaning. But, whereas the logical empiricist diagnosis was directly in terms of a sort of cognitive or theoretical meaninglessness, the first diagnostic gesture of Dewey’s pragmatism was in terms of a sort of aimlessness or pointlessness or, if I may nod to Dewey’s Hegelian heritage, a point no longer conscious to itself embedded in traditional philosophical problems. So the pragmatist sought to direct our philosophical attention to why we were asking the sorts of philosophical questions we were. Here is a characteristic passage from John Dewey, from his 1897 essay “The Significance of the Problem of Knowledge,” in which he sought to diagnose the stalemate as he saw it in the epistemology of his era, motivated as it was by the question Kant formulated as “how is knowledge possible?”:

This situation creates a condition favorable to taking stock of the question as it stands; to inquiring what this interest, prolonged for over three centuries, in the possibility and nature of knowledge, stands for; what the conviction as to the necessity of the union of sensation and thought, together with the inability to reach conclusions regarding the nature of the union, signifies. (EW 5:5)

My project here is to undertake this sort of reflexive pragmatist historical stance. I approach Misak’s history of pragmatism with these questions in mind: what intervention into contemporary philosophy is she attempting to make in her history of pragmatism; what motivates (some of) us as philosophers to argue over our history in the way she does in her book; and why, for Misak, does the history of pragmatism matter?

The main answer to the question of what Misak is doing is fairly clear. She is providing an alternative to a common story of the development of pragmatism (found in Rorty explicitly and implicitly in the work of many who associate their work with pragmatism) according to which pragmatism was in the mid-twentieth century exiled from its place of prominence in leading American philosophy departments and forced into more obscure departments, where it still finds itself. Misak disrupts this narrative by tracing through a Peircean pragmatist inheritance—one that is robustly technical, concerned with epistemological and methodological issues, and is concerned with the objective aspects of truth and related notions and thus not beholden to the subjectivist leanings of James and Dewey. This Peircean inheritance finds its way through C. I. Lewis, W. V. Quine, and right the way through to contemporary philosophy. Pragmatism of this sort was never marginalized and creates a bulwark against the tender-minded pragmatism endorsed by Rorty in the name of James and Dewey. This form of pragmatism did not die out with the advance of analytic philosophy; it shaped the development of analytic philosophy, especially in the American context.

So, here is my first historical challenge for Misak. As she acknowledges, the displacement story is not simply confabulated. Something did happen around the middle of the twentieth century that lessened the hold that pragmatism had on the American philosophical agenda. Moreover, even today no one rises up the rankings by hiring a pragmatist; the correlation coefficient between being a top department and being in the Leiter American pragmatism rankings is quite low. Even if one can find pragmatist elements in the work of Quine, Sellars, Goodman, Davidson and a few of the other leading lights of mid-century American philosophy, there was a widespread sense circa 1960 that pragmatism was what Dewey said it was, that it was passé, and that the field had changed in the direction of detailed, technical issues in logic, philosophy of science, and philosophy of language, all done in an idiom that owed far more to Russell, Carnap, Wittgenstein, and Moore than to any American philosopher. For example, no logic book written in the middle third of the 20th century was as out of step with the growing interest in the technical issues in formal logic than was Dewey's 1938 *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*. No young philosopher interested in what Carnap and Tarski were up to in logic was going to spend much time on Dewey. Dewey exited the graduate curriculum in many U.S. graduate schools within a few years of his death; you learned how to do advanced philosophy by reading Russell and Carnap.

Moreover, even those like Quine and Sellars who had some recognizably pragmatist leanings did not talk much about pragmatism or expend much energy in establishing their own pragmatist bona fides. Sellars only came to be seen as a pragmatist through Rorty's work.

Therefore, Sellars was a realist, a naturalist, a Kantian, a historian of philosophy, and one of the most vocal advocates of analytic philosophy on American soil. Sellars' autobiographical remarks published in 1975 do not contain the word "pragmatism" or any of its derivatives. The only canonical pragmatist mentioned by Sellars in the whole piece is Lewis, whose *Mind and the World Order* Sellars read in 1937 at Oxford in a seminar led by J. L. Austin and Isaiah Berlin (!). Sellars, in the remarks, mentions his interest in Lewis's logical work and describes Lewis's epistemology (which he studied with Lewis himself at Harvard) as an "increasingly ingenious attempt to salvage phenomenalism." What did not interest Sellars in Lewis's work was Lewis's pragmatism.

I can illustrate some of what is at stake regarding pragmatism as a living (or not) tradition in mid-century American philosophy by discussing just a couple of aspects of Misak's account of Quine in relation to pragmatism. Misak (2013: 208) is not sure that Quine is a pragmatist. It is bad news for Misak's narrative arc if he is not; I think he is not. Quine's pragmatist inheritance is for Misak a Peircean one; Quine was deeply committed to many epistemological theses he learned from C. I. Lewis and that trace back to Peirce. I do not doubt that Quine's debts to Lewis are large and largely unacknowledged by both Quine and subsequent generations of commentators. But I disagree with Misak about whether Quine and Lewis are in substantial agreement over the analytic/synthetic distinction. She writes:

Quine says that Lewis "stopped short" of abandoning the analytic-synthetic distinction altogether. . . . He focuses on the fact that Lewis retains the distinction in name rather than on the fact that what he retains under that name is really an exploded distinction. Lewis might not have acknowledged that the distinction he was holding onto had disintegrated in his hands, but nonetheless, his was no longer the analytic-synthetic distinction that relied on a notion of synonymy or sameness of meaning. (2013: 202)

Indeed, far from acknowledging that the distinction had disintegrated in his hands, Lewis makes the establishment of the distinction and its philosophical importance the first orders of business of his 1946 *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation*. Lewis explains why he does this in the preface to the book:

For contemporary empiricism, the theory of meaning has that same intimate connection with epistemology which earlier rationalistic and idealistic conceptions assigned to metaphysics. This is the case because we now find that what is knowable *a priori* is certifiable by reference to meanings alone. That is one major result of present-century studies in exact logic. (1946: ix)

He then spends the first 168 pages of the book explaining this finding. In the process he distances his views on the analytic/synthetic distinction from conventionalism (à la Carnap) but certainly not from semantics. This is not a minor theme in Lewis's work. At the very end of his career, in his reply to critics in the Schilpp volume dedicated to his work, Lewis said this:

I wish to acknowledge that the whole body of my philosophic conceptions, in logic, epistemology, theory of value, and even ethics, depends on the validity of this distinction; and if that plank is pulled from under me, the whole structure will come tumbling down. (1968: 659; cited in Baldwin 2013: 219)

Surely, this is good evidence that something has gone awry interpretatively. Here is my diagnosis. Misak at one point (2013: 196 n.9) says, as if in passing, that one thing Quine and Lewis disagreed about was whether logic was extensional or intensional. But this is not an incidental disagreement on a minor topic far removed from areas of substantial agreement; it is indicative of what both would acknowledge as a fundamental division between them. Lewis's advocacy of intensionalism entailed for him the existence of multiple logics; this in turn is the starting place for Lewis's argument for the pragmatic *a priori*. It is in the choice of logic—where, in Lewis's phrase, “verification is not in point,” and where there is no other non-question-begging argument for one system over another—that pragmatic considerations must, for Lewis, operate without constraint. This whole setting for Lewis's views passes Quine by. What Carnap and Lewis share is both a problem situation (the choice among alternative systems of logic) and a view of logic as constitutive of evidential relations in the first place; Quine lacks both of these elements. It is for this reason that Quine's “more thorough pragmatism” is not even a form of pragmatism as that notion (in this context) is used by Carnap and Lewis—“pragmatic factors” are not for them simply what fills the gap between evidence and choice, but what operates when theoretical evidence is not in point.

Misak's misgivings about calling Quine a pragmatist have to do with his chary attitude toward questions of value. This is surely a proper misgiving to have, but it is for me only a symptom of a larger worry. Quine's extensionalism and his physicalism are so robust that standard ways to express what pragmatism is—such as Lewis's “knowledge is for the sake of action” or the robustly intentional idiom of ends-in-view in Dewey—are themselves officially unintelligible for Quine. The homey setting of pragmatism—its humanist vocabulary of doubt, inquiry, action—becomes philosophically problematic for Quine. So, whatever Quine's doctrinal relations to a pragmatist heritage, the impact of his work in reducing the centrality of pragmatism in American philosophy

is substantial. He rendered the base philosophical language of classical pragmatism dubious and in need of clarification or rejection, and he helped foster a differently focused philosophical agenda, trained on logic, formal semantics, the metaphysics of mathematics and modality, and so forth.

Misak needs to argue for the pragmatist bona fides of Quine, Sellars, Goodman, and Davidson in order to disrupt Rorty's story. This is because she grants that Rorty is substantially correct about the Jamesian and Deweyan wings of pragmatism. According to Misak, James and Dewey do lend themselves to subjectivism and ultimately to Rorty's pragmatist anti-philosophy. This is where I would want to disagree most thoroughly. I leave James aside for sake of space and competence, but Rorty's readings of Dewey seem to me decontextualized and tone deaf. Dewey, this most public intellectual and advocate of progressivism in American politics during its most activist age, repeatedly said that science and technology are the engines of not just material but moral progress. His theory of inquiry is robustly objectivist, and he advocates throughout his career not just the objective value of science but the fostering of the values of objectivity right through all human concerns. Here is Dewey in 1938, writing in the first volume of the *International Encyclopedia of Unified Science*, as the storm clouds of fascism formed over Europe:

[T]he scientific attitude and method are at bottom but the method of free and effective intelligence. . . . [I]t is intensely desirable and under certain conditions practicable that all human beings become scientific in their attitudes: genuinely intelligent in their ways of thinking and acting. It is practicable because all normal persons have the potential germs which make this result possible. It is desirable because this attitude forms the sole ultimate alternative to prejudice, dogma, authority, and coercive force exercised in behalf of some special interest. (LW 13:279–280)

Indeed, already in 1920, in the wake of the First World War, Dewey argued in *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (MW 12) that bringing the scientific attitude into ethical and social thought was the task of the twentieth century.

This was a widespread understanding of the task of pragmatism around 1930. There were groups who sought to discharge the tasks Dewey had set. If I were to argue that there was a robustly "objective" pragmatist tradition that was active in American philosophy right into the 1960s, I would not point to the analytic luminaries Misak points to but rather to Edgar A. Singer, Jr., and his students and colleagues and their students: C. West Churchman, Russell Ackoff, Richard Rudner, and Bob Butts. This group was a "hard pragmatist" (Singer's term) community of scholars who were central members of the American

philosophy of science community before and during the time of the alleged dominance of logical empiricism in the philosophy of science. It was a group with its own technical projects—largely in probability, statistics, and experimental inference—but whose technical interests remained robustly within the general purview of the “theory of inquiry” that formed Dewey’s conception of logic and trained on socially useful ends. In the end, Churchman, Ackoff, and Rudner all sought a science of ethics as well.

Singer was an undergraduate engineering student at the University of Pennsylvania in the 1890s who went on to work with James at Harvard and then went back to Penn where he was on faculty for about 50 years. He and his students and colleagues—especially the biochemist William Malisoff, who worked for Atlantic Oil in Philadelphia and lived in the University City neighborhood—were the founders in 1934 of the journal *Philosophy of Science*; Malisoff, Churchman, and Rudner were the journal’s first three editors, over a time period lasting roughly thirty years. They sought to promote the understanding of science, especially of the details of increasingly technical regimes of statistical techniques in experimental inference, and sought to understand how to mobilize science for social good. They thought of themselves as pragmatists who knew the details of what people like Dewey could only gesture at in phrases like “the scientific habit of mind.”

Unlike Misak’s narrative, the story of these scholars is not that of a continuing pragmatist tradition in American philosophy involving central philosophical figures. Just as pragmatist philosophers like George Herbert Mead ended up being much more influential in American anthropology than American philosophy, Churchman and Ackoff left academic philosophy entirely and took up the cause of establishing new social sciences at leading American business schools: Ackoff at Wharton, Churchman at Berkeley. They were founders of operations research, systems science, management science, the measurement of consumer preference, etc. This is how they sought to bring the methods of science into social and ethical philosophy.

If I were to write a book called *Some More American Pragmatists*, I would offer a different narrative, then. Not a narrative of a continuing, important strand of pragmatist thought in American academic philosophy, but a narrative of a far-reaching impact of American pragmatism in the new features of the American post-Second-World-War university and the growth of an American “scientific-technological elite”—in education schools, business schools, new social sciences, and new methods in old social sciences. This is neither a story of academic philosophy nor one of academic anti-philosophy but of philosophically-inflected social science, a fitting setting for pragmatism as a mature project.

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