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Pragmatism Deflated

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Abstract

In *Cambridge Pragmatism*, Cheryl Misak rounds out the distinctive narrative regarding Anglo-American philosophy in the 20th Century that she initiated in her 1995 book on *Verificationism* and subsequently developed significantly in her 2013 *The American Pragmatists*. In this brief essay, I address *Cambridge Pragmatism* in the context of the broader historical account she has been developing.

Keywords: Cheryl Misak, Pragmatism, Analytic Philosophy.

In *Cambridge Pragmatism*, Cheryl Misak rounds out the distinctive narrative regarding Anglo-American philosophy in the 20th Century that she initiated in her 1995 book on *Verificationism* and subsequently developed significantly in her 2013 *The American Pragmatists*. In this brief essay, I address *Cambridge Pragmatism* in the context of the broader historical account she has been developing. In my view, Misak's account of pragmatism's past is largely correct; but I also think that the correctness of her account has far-reaching implications for pragmatism's future, implications that she has not adequately acknowledged. To preview: Once the history of pragmatism is told correctly, we see that there is little point in calling ourselves "pragmatists," except in a thoroughly pedestrian, deflated sense. To be slightly more specific, the truth about pragmatism's past suggests that the property of being pragmatist more properly attaches to *theses, claims, or arguments* of certain kinds, and not to *philosophers, philosophies*, or "traditions" of philosophy.

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It is important to note straightaway that, in a certain sense, Misak's account of the founding and history of pragmatism is *no big deal*. The story she tells about the trajectory of pragmatism is bound to strike anyone minimally acquainted with the broader history of 20th Century philosophy in the West as enlightening, but ultimately unsurprising. Readers of this kind will say: *Of course* the classical pragmatists were highly influential throughout the world of English-language academic philosophy; *of course* there are important interconnections and multiple lines of influence between classical pragmatism and various forms of 19th and 20th Century empiricism, including logical positivism; and *of course* pragmatism is indelibly baked-into the major trends within philosophy in America, including all of the mid-to-late-century naturalist philosophy championed by the towering figures of the period, including C. I. Lewis, Ernest Nagel, Sidney Hook, Nelson Goodman, Wilfrid Sellars, W. V. O. Quine, and Donald Davidson. They will continue: It stands to reason, then, that one should find pragmatism's influence in the work of leading British philosophers, including those who took themselves principally to be pragmatism's *critics*. After all, that's just how the give-and-take of philosophy works. Such readers will conclude that although Misak has done the admirable service of making explicit the central channels by which that influence travelled, her account is hardly newsworthy.

Another segment of Misak's readership will respond rather differently. As these readers regard themselves as the philosophical *inheritors* and *guardians* of the classical pragmatist tradition, rather than as historians of 20th Century philosophy, let us call them *neoclassicalists*. Neoclassicalists embrace a self-understanding that I've elsewhere called the "eclipse narrative" (Talisse 2007: Ch 1). My account of this narrative is by now well-known, and so I won't linger here on the details.¹ On this view, the classical pragmatism of Peirce, James, and Dewey proposed a wholly *distinctive* conception of philosophy, one that *renders obsolete* and thereby *undermines* non-pragmatist approaches. The narrative continues that although pragmatism reigned in America as the dominant philosophical idiom in Dewey's heyday, it began precipitously losing influence in the 1950s and ultimately was shut out of the philosophical mainstream. The neoclassicalist accounts for the waning of pragmatism by way of a kind of *conspiracy theory*: Deweyan pragmatism, it is claimed, was never honestly engaged with and found to be lacking but rather was *suppressed* ("eclipsed") by powerful academics at Harvard and Cornell who were incurable Anglophiles (and perhaps self-hating Americans) who simply succumbed to the fetishized "rigor" and "precision" proffered by post-war British philosophers. Accordingly, the neoclassicalists regard dominant post-Deweyan trends in English-language philosophy—cast monolithically

as “analytic philosophy”—as either alien and hostile or else redundant and derivative.

Hence Misak’s *Cambridge Pragmatism* will be received by the neo-classicalists as a *renegade* narrative, a *revisionist* history; for that reason it will be regarded as not at all enlightening, but instead a *distortion*. It is important to distinguish two sites from which this negative assessment emerges. First, Misak’s telling of the history of pragmatism highlights that pragmatism has *always been* internally conflicted over central philosophical issues regarding meaning, truth, objectivity, and value. The eclipse narrative, by contrast, requires there to be a more-or-less unified “classical pragmatist” philosophy. That is, in order for pragmatism to have been “eclipsed,” there has to be some easily discernable doctrine that one could identify as pragmatism and target for marginalization. If, as Misak contends, pragmatism has always been an unruly site of a broad spectrum of views, it is difficult to make sense of how it could be selected for banishment. Second, Misak shows that, far from ever being dispelled from the mainstream, the pragmatisms of Peirce and James were not only respected but also *highly influential* among the very philosophers that the neoclassicalists describe as the agents of eclipse, the ostracizers of pragmatism. Again, the eclipse narrative requires there to be a *neglect of* or a *refusal to engage with* pragmatism on the part of the “analytic” philosophers. But Misak shows that there was in fact no neglect and no disengagement; thus the eclipse narrative is undermined and the neoclassicalist self-conception goes by the board.

Misak’s claims to the effect that the founding giants of “analytic” philosophy were all influenced by pragmatism, and also embraced pragmatist views, will inevitably strike the neoclassicalist as heretical, or perhaps even *complicit* with an intellectual-historical injustice. To the neoclassicalists’ ears, such claims threaten simply to reinstate the eclipse that the “neo-pragmatism” of the 1980s partially—but *only* partially—undid.² According to the neoclassicalist, if classical pragmatism is to be given its due, it must be presented as a distinctive and radical *departure* from philosophy-as-usual. Therefore, in casting pragmatism as a kind of mainstream philosophy and a major influence on the development of English-language philosophy in the 20th Century and beyond, Misak’s presentation distorts classical pragmatism.

I have thus far tried to provide a sense of what is at stake for Misak’s neoclassicalist readers. In her work they find not only a distortion of pragmatism but also the very real threat of reinstating pragmatism’s eclipse. Importantly, they are likely to regard the new eclipse that Misak invites as coming not by way of *neglect* or *marginalization* but by the far more insidious route of *assimilation*.

The trouble is that there’s a sense in which the neoclassicalist is correct: The view that Misak’s history is revisionist seems to be the view

suggested by the self-conception embraced by the classical pragmatists themselves. Putting aside their occasional nods to Aristotle, Spinoza, Kant, Mill, and Bacon, as well as James's characterization of pragmatism as "a new name for some old ways of thinking," the classical pragmatists *compulsively* affirm their philosophical uniqueness, and they are particularly keen to frame a historical narrative according to which pragmatism is *the culmination* of humanity's philosophical enterprise. Accordingly, the classical pragmatists routinely cast themselves as promoting a *conception of philosophy* that is designed *not* to solve the traditional first-order problems of philosophy but to *escape, evade, or dissolve* them entirely. As Misak's version portrays classical pragmatism as a series of promising first-order views about meaning, truth, inquiry, and value, she encourages us to see pragmatism as proffering *answers* to philosophy's traditional problems. On the neoclassicalists' view, this is a grave error. They claim that pragmatism is properly understood as a *departure* from philosophy-as-usual and that the "analytic" program in philosophy (the program that includes Russell, Moore, Wittgenstein, Ramsey, et al.) is *dedicated* to philosophy-as-usual. So, they conclude both that analytic philosophy cannot be properly pragmatist and that analytic and pragmatist idioms must be antagonistic towards each other.

To be clear, I think that there's a great deal that's mistaken in the view that I've just ascribed to the neoclassicalist. Yet it strikes me that the neoclassicalist is correct to think that, in making her case for the idea that pragmatism *pervades* 20th Century "analytic" philosophy, Misak has left something fundamental out of the pragmatist picture. Moreover, I think the neoclassicalist is correct to think that what's missing from Misak's depiction is the classical pragmatists' *metaphilosophical stance*. That is, I think the neoclassicalist is right to hold that at the *core* of classical pragmatism is a *conception of philosophy itself* that overtly rivals the assumptions, premises, and presuppositions that enable one even to *formulate* many of the traditional problems of philosophy. And, indeed, the classical pragmatists' explicit *self-conception* as metaphilosophical radicals is repeatedly downplayed in Misak's work.³

Scott Aikin and I argue in our new book that the trajectory of classical pragmatism—from Peirce to James to Dewey—can be helpfully read as one of *creeping metaphilosophy* (Aikin and Talisse 2018: Ch 8). That is, we agree with Misak that pragmatism emerges out of a series of first-order philosophical disputes, but we argue that the progression within the classical idiom involves an expansion of the role that *metaphilosophical* considerations play in navigating disputes of that kind. We contend that by the time Dewey comes to write *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, pragmatism has become a *metaphilosophy-as-First-Philosophy* program,

a philosophy according to which *all* traditional philosophical problems arise from defective philosophical methods. I refer the reader to the book for the required details. The crucial point at present is that, in insisting that the pragmatist metaphilosophy be placed at center-stage, the neoclassicalist is *more faithful* to the classical pragmatists than Misak. In that sense, the neoclassical charge that Misak has presented a *revisionist* history of pragmatism has some bite. To sum up, the neo-classicalists' critique of Misak comes to this: The most crucial difference between classical pragmatism and subsequent "analytic" philosophy is that the analytic philosophers think their methods of analysis are able to solve the traditional problems of philosophy; the classical pragmatists, by contrast, are committed to a metaphilosophy that recommends the abandoning wholesale of those problems and adopting a new vision of philosophy itself. Misak's narrative elides this central difference, and so her account is in that sense distorting.

Yet the success of the neoclassicalist argument I just presented is ultimately Pyrrhic. The "metaphilosophy first" tendency within classical pragmatism is the *least promising* element within classical articulations of pragmatism; metaphilosophical creep is something to be lamented, not embraced (Aikin and Talisse 2018: 137ff.). James and Dewey are at their *most egregious* when they attempt to engage interlocutors by "undermining" and "exposing" the "fallacies" and "false dichotomies" that allegedly underlie all criticism of pragmatism. James's *Pragmatism* lectures on "The Present Dilemma in Philosophy" and "Some Metaphysical Problems Pragmatically Considered" are embarrassing as attempts to address *actual* philosophical debates of James's day; and Dewey is simply wrong when he claims (again and again) that his version of empirical naturalism is the *only way* for philosophy to be properly attuned to modern science and the values of modern democracy (LW 1: 4). In fact, Dewey's overstated metaphilosophy is arguably the central cause of the waning of the influence of his particular brand of pragmatism in the decades surrounding his death. In the 1960s, one sees the development of new versions of nearly every view that Dewey claimed to have undermined, all with respectable scientific credentials. Dewey's contention that such views should be discarded once and for all as unscientific "chaff" (LW 4: 1) proved wrong; yet, as this stance provides the metaphilosophical lynchpin of Dewey's pragmatism, there was no way to recover Dewey's systematic vision in light of this error. It fell to post-Deweyan pragmatists to take up the new developments and build a new case for empirical naturalism from square one.

I suspect that Misak will agree that "metaphilosophy first" is the classical pragmatists' biggest error. Still, the neoclassicalist is correct to see both that it is a central feature of the classical pragmatist story

and that it is largely absent from Misak's narrative. So, Misak's account does, indeed, omit something that the classical pragmatists (James and Dewey, at least—Peirce is more complicated) would have taken to lie at the core of their project. And in that sense, Misak's version of pragmatism's past is a kind of distortion. Moreover, her downplaying of the extent to which the classical pragmatists saw themselves (increasingly) as metaphilosophers first is precisely what enables her to draw tight lines of influence between the two Cambridges. What gets lost, both in Misak's telling and in the work of the "pragmatism" of Cambridge UK, is the distinctive and radical metaphilosophy.

One wonders whether it makes sense to insist that the story we tell today about classical pragmatism should place at pragmatism's core certain indefensible commitments that some of the classical pragmatists *mistakenly* thought were indispensable to their view. The question is all the more poignant in light of the fact that other commitments that arise from the classical pragmatists are arguably *equally central* and also *viable*. Why not follow Misak in simply jettisoning the negative as a way of accentuating the positive?

I think this question really cuts to the heart of the matter. On Misak's view, our aim should be to focus on the best ideas of the classical pragmatists, duly credit them, and then deploy them in our current philosophical thinking. On the neoclassicalists' view, our aim should be to *preserve* a historically significant philosophical tradition, and as that tradition was developed in critical reaction to an entire way of conceptualizing the enterprise of philosophy, we should retain that stance as well. The neoclassicalist rightly sees that Misak's way of proceeding results in the abandoning of what one might regard as *distinctive* about classical pragmatism as a philosophical movement. Put otherwise, as Misak herself has demonstrated, her approach to pragmatism's past shows us that pragmatist ideas, theses, and arguments have played a commanding and formative role in shaping "analytic" philosophy in the 20th Century and beyond. And she thinks that's good news. But the neoclassicalist sees this as an unwelcome vindication: pragmatism is cast as a Prime Mover in contemporary mainstream philosophy, but only because it has been diluted beyond recognition.

And so we reach an impasse. Misak seeks to tell the story of the deep and indisputable influence of pragmatist ideas on the development of 20th and 21st Century philosophy, whereas the neoclassicalist wants to preserve a tradition of metaphilosophical radicalism. I can see no reason why one would want to retain *pragmatism* as a "tradition" if doing that requires one to embrace a metaphilosophy that is defunct. Accordingly, I'm on Misak's side of this divide. But we must ask, once the classical pragmatists' overbearing metaphilosophical gestures are

jettisoned, what's left of pragmatism? Well, not much. And what point is there in calling oneself a pragmatist, or in characterizing others as pragmatists? Again, there's not much point. It strikes me that Misak has shown us—indirectly and unintentionally, perhaps—that calling oneself a pragmatist is useless, except as an utterly deflated way of signaling that one has expertise in and sympathies with a certain episode in the history of philosophy involving a certain group of American philosophers. What's more useful, I think, is to follow Misak in thinking that pragmatism describes no philosophical “tradition” at all, but only a loosely-related series of promising insights, suggestions, and gambits about how considerations concerning human action should inform our theorizing about meaning, truth, inquiry, and value. Here, one should expect to find instances of pragmatism across the history of philosophy, especially among empiricists. On this score, Aristotle and Hume seem as deeply invested in pragmatist commitments as any of Misak's UK pragmatists; what's more, UK philosophers not typically associated with pragmatism, like W. K. Clifford and P. F. Strawson, emerge as staunchly advocating pragmatist positions.⁴ But it is only when we make the error of thinking that the term “pragmatism” properly characterizes a *philosopher* or his *philosophy* that it would strike us as absurd to think that, say, Aristotle, Clifford, or even David Lewis advances pragmatist claims. On the view I have come to favor as a result of reading Misak's *Cambridge Pragmatists*, no one is any longer a pragmatist in any philosophically interesting sense; pragmatism is thus deflated, but it is all the better for it.

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NOTES

1. For an updated account of the “eclipse narrative,” see Aikin and Talisse 2018: Ch 1.
2. The neoclassicalist stance towards the neo-pragmatists of Rorty, West and Putnam is complicated. The prevailing view is that neo-pragmatism revival was at best a mixed blessing. They say that on the one hand, the neo-pragmatists brought Dewey and James back into the conversation of mainstream philosophy, but on the other, the neo-pragmatist versions of the classical figures are themselves inferior distortions of classical pragmatism. See Talisse 2007: Ch 1 for details.
3. I raise this concern in my contribution to a symposium on Misak’s *The American Pragmatists* (Talisse 2013).
4. On Clifford, see Scott Aikin’s contribution to this symposium.