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Reply to Four Instructive Critics

CHERYL MISAK



Abstract

In this response to critical commentaries on *The American Pragmatists*, I clarify and sharpen some of the arguments made in the book—for instance, about how Quine and Lewis fit into my account of the history of pragmatism; how first-person experience is relevant to inquiry; and how metaphysical meta-philosophies are set against the naturalist tradition of pragmatism.

Keywords: Charles Peirce, William James, John Dewey, W. V. O. Quine, C. I. Lewis, Richard Rorty, pragmatism, naturalism.

Allow me to begin by thanking Alex Klein, Bjorn Ramberg, Alan Richardson, and Robert Talisse for providing such an excellent set of commentaries on *The American Pragmatists*, as well as Henry Jackman, for organizing the session at the Canadian Philosophical Association meetings that provided the first forum for the discussion. In this response, I will speak to the general meta-philosophical questions posed by the four commentators, as well as to the more local challenges set to me.

All the authors, in different ways, suggest that the very distinction between the history of ideas and philosophy is misplaced. The identification, demarcation and description of philosophical ideas is freighted with what one thinks is important and right, and with what one thinks needs to stand out in sharp relief rather than recede into the background. It is inevitable, unless one is going to simply transcribe the thoughts of dead philosophers, that we bring our own philosophical views to bear on our account of arguments made in the past. Just as inevitable is that, in telling the story of a tradition, one offers an account

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that gives coherence or shape to the tradition and to the evolution of theories within it.

These facts about the necessary melding of history and philosophy were intended to come out very strongly in *The American Pragmatists*, as it is both an account of pragmatism's past and an argument for what I think is a version of pragmatism that stands up to scrutiny. What philosophers who are interested in their past do is argue about the best interpretations of their predecessors. And in figuring out what those best interpretations are, we shape our own views and continue the conversation about how to think about pressing matters such as the nature of truth, knowledge, existence, the objectivity of value judgments, and so on.

Thus Ramberg uses precisely the right term for my endeavor: I offer an argumentative narrative of pragmatism, a narrative that identifies two competing sets of interests and motivations in those counted as part of the tradition of pragmatism. My aim is to raise to prominence a line of thought that is both empiricist and Kantian, running from Peirce, via Lewis and Sellars, to the heart of contemporary debates about the nature of objectivity and truth. My aim is to reclaim an important lineage in pragmatism—a lineage that has been almost lost in pragmatism's self-image and in the image that others have of it. As Richardson puts it, I provide an alternative to a common story of the development of pragmatism, told, for instance, by Richard Rorty. That common story has it that pragmatism was in the mid-twentieth century rejected, exiled from its place of prominence in leading American philosophy departments, and forced into more obscure departments where it still finds itself. As Talisse puts it, my project aims at disrupting what he has so aptly called the eclipse narrative: the narrative that has it that pragmatism was rejected by analytic philosophers (the logical empiricists) and later recovered by Rorty and others who set themselves against what they saw as the reigning analytic force. What I try to show is that, contrary to Rorty's narrative, pragmatism thrived in the hands of some of the best analytic philosophers in America, although those philosophers were often ambivalent or downright hostile to attaching that label to their positions. My next project will be to amplify the story I tell in *The American Pragmatists* by showing how in the 1920's, two of the most important philosophers in Cambridge, England—Ramsey and Wittgenstein—were heavily influenced by the Cambridge, Massachusetts philosophers Peirce and James. I shall make (the albeit tricky counterfactual) argument that had Ramsey lived past the age of 26 and had Wittgenstein been better about acknowledging his influences, pragmatism's fortunes would have been very different and pragmatism would have been even more prominent in what today gets thought of as mainstream philosophy.

Some of my four commentators think my narrative illuminating and some do not, but in each case, the opening up of the discussion has been fruitful. For instance, while Richardson is one of those who disagrees with the story I tell, I would argue that his own fascinating attempt to reorient pragmatism and philosophy of science/social science is in an important way compatible with my view. For one way of seeing my position is that we pragmatists need to reclaim our philosophy of science tradition. Richardson fills in the details of this reorientation in a different way, focusing on what is within philosophy an almost lost tradition—the aspiration of Dewey and the logical empiricists to make all of inquiry scientific. (I say “almost lost” because some contemporary philosophers of science, such as Isaac Levi, do extend this tradition.) But fundamentally, I take us to be on the same page. I identify a central feature of the pragmatist tradition to be the expansion of the scope of the theory of truth and inquiry to moral, mathematical, political, and other domains. Dewey, as I show in the book, was most certainly part of this movement, and I welcome Richardson’s bringing to light a group of similarly-minded philosophers that I neglected to speak about.

In my attempt to open up a space for constructive dialogue across what are often warring divisions in contemporary Anglophone philosophy in general and pragmatist scholarship in particular, one passage, identified by Ramberg, is especially important. It is a metaphor of Ernest Nagel’s, expanded upon by me (116). The divide between pragmatists is a hairline divide along the following lines. All pragmatist (and, more generally, naturalist) positions struggle with what I call the problem of validity. If normative notions such as truth and justice arise from human practices and cognition, as the pragmatist insists, then can we make sense of something’s really being true or just? Or do truth and justice boil down to what this or that community or person believes? I argue in the book that the pragmatist ought to come down on the side of the hairline divide that has our normative notions having some real force. Notice that those who would argue that pragmatism ought to come down on the other side of the divide need to make sense of how they can even formulate that “ought.”

As Klein and Richardson argue, James and Dewey intended their pragmatism to fall on the side of the divide that does justice to the objective dimension of human inquiry and that has pragmatism be an engine of progress. But I argue that more often than not, James and Dewey failed to make sense of something’s being objectively right or wrong, leaving the door ajar for Rorty to pick up on certain of their statements and open wide that divide. Without a way of adjudicating claims—without aiming at something stable that we can call the truth—Dewey, James, and Rorty in the end cannot make sense of their aim to be consequential and to make our beliefs and our societies better.

I hasten to repeat what I said in the book (x)—not everything that is valuable in pragmatism is to be found in the story I tell. I have already mentioned Richardson’s resurrection of the pragmatist philosophy of science/social science movement. Ramberg is also right that I focus on Rorty’s *enfant terrible* side and downplay what is interesting in his Wittgensteinian interpretation of James and Dewey. I hope to fill that lacuna in *Cambridge Pragmatism*. But Ramberg’s interpretation of Rorty has always struck me as making the best of him, and I hesitate to suggest that any attempt of mine could come close to his in making the Rorty-Wittgenstein position compelling.

Klein draws attention to another important thing that I do not focus upon. He argues that James was much more a radical democrat than was Peirce. I agree, and I note in the book that while Peirce might be right about the bench-based sciences and mathematics needing a specialized vocabulary, we are much better off turning to pragmatists such as James, Dewey, and especially Lewis, when it comes to thinking about morals, politics, and public discourse, for some of the reasons that Klein draws out. Klein is completely right when he says that Peirce himself was more interested in the narrower scientific community than the community of citizens and that Dewey and James were pragmatist leaders in thinking through subject matters such as ethics, democratic inquiry and the vitally important duty that the philosopher has to engage the public. The best kind of pragmatism, I think, can have it both ways. Different kinds of inquiry—physics, mathematics, philosophy, ethics, politics, aesthetics—will have different characters. As Klein argues, what people feel will be relevant in some of these inquiries. But I would argue (and I suspect Klein would agree) that feelings are not as relevant in other sorts of investigations. For my sustained thoughts on how first person experiences or feelings are relevant to our inquiries, see my “Experience, Narrative and Ethical Deliberation” (2008).

Of course, a history of a tradition might be mistaken in whole or in part, and if I am to engage in genuine debates about the history of pragmatism, then my account must be responsive to further argument, to the contrary views of others, to challenges about whether I have my facts and interpretations right, and so on. It is part of the pragmatist commitment to bring to bear on a dispute the full range of our rational scrutiny. My account and the scholarship undergirding it had better be able to stand up to such scrutiny. So let me examine, in a necessarily brief way, a few issues that arise from Richardson’s contribution to this set of debates.

Richardson and I want to tell different stories about what happened to pragmatism in the 1950s. He asks me: so what did happen to pragmatism in the mid-twentieth century, such that its hold on the philosophical agenda was suddenly weaker, if the displacement story is not

right? I would argue that he in effect answers his question in his next paragraphs. There was a sense that pragmatism was Dewey's pragmatism, and the Peircean kind, which eventually found new life in the work of Lewis, Quine, Goodman, and Sellars, simply got whitewashed out as a kind of pragmatism. This is not surprising, given how difficult it was to even get one's hands on Peirce's corpus of writing. And even if one were to make the effort, those writings were often in multiple draft and scribbled-notes form. It is interesting that one person who did make the superhuman effort was Frank Ramsey in England. Another person who made the effort (less superhuman, as he shared an office with Peirce's copious "manuscript remains") was Lewis. Like Ramsey, his work was also heavily influenced by Peirce, and one of the most interesting and unjust episodes in the history of philosophy is Lewis's marginalization in contemporary philosophy.

Richardson also suggests that Sellars was only seen as a pragmatist through Rorty's later work, noting that Sellars' autobiographical remarks published in 1975 do not contain the word "pragmatism." But, as I argue (218ff.), that's because in the 1970s Sellars was distancing himself first from Dewey, then from John Smith, and later from Rorty. Sellars was, as Richardson notes, "a realist, a naturalist, a Kantian, a historian of philosophy, and one of the most vocal advocates of analytic philosophy on American soil." That is right. But I would add that this is an apt description also of Peirce and it is an apt description of Sellars' own teacher Lewis. Before the pluralism wars, Sellars was happy to call himself a pragmatist. His 1950 "Language, Rules and Behavior," which sets up and foreshadows his later, famous, position, is explicitly pragmatist in the spirit of Peirce and Lewis. As I put it:

In this paper, Sellars tells us that pragmatism has often been characterized as a crude descriptivism on which "all meaningful concepts and problems belong to the empirical or descriptive sciences." He is gesturing at Dewey when he says that the pragmatist sometimes offers those descriptivist interpretations of truth and moral obligation "with all the fervor of a Dutch boy defending the fertile lands of Naturalism against a threatening rationalistic flood" (1949: 291–2). But pragmatism can be more sophisticated than that (1949: 289–90). He wants to take the pragmatist's insights and offer something less fervent and more rationalist. He wants to come to a naturalist position that makes sense of the normative. (219)

Part of my story is that Sellars and Quine initially thought of themselves as pragmatists but were wary of the Jamesian/Deweyan lineage and were made even more wary by Rorty. They were pragmatists of the realist variety, just like Lewis, who was a graduate student in the years when, as I put it, realists such as Perry, Sellars senior, Santayana and the

pragmatists were tilling more or less the same ground, and distancing themselves from idealism.

As Richardson notes, I am not sure that Quine can be called a pragmatist—unlike Sellars and all the other pragmatists, he was not interested in bringing value under his holist tent. But Richardson is wrong that this is “bad news” for my narrative. Quine’s ill-fitting is very much a part of my narrative in just the ways Richardson notes—for instance, that Quine had a different view than Lewis or Carnap about what were then called in philosophy of science “pragmatic factors” and that his extensionalism and physicalism were too cemented-in. Nonetheless, I argue that Quine’s putting a foot in the pragmatist camp (and then, as Richardson notes, turning his back on its language) is an important moment in the history of pragmatism.

But Richardson and I do disagree about Lewis on the analytic-synthetic distinction. I argue that Lewis was terribly treated by his students and fellow travelers—Quine, Nelson Goodman, and Morton White. The reader will have to turn to my chapter on Lewis for the sustained argument. (They might want to turn also to Robert Paul Wolff’s memoirs for some confirmation of my account—an account that was partly based on a conversation with Morton White.) Let me just say here that Lewis tried to find a pragmatist balance between realism and idealism and he remained true to his 1923 position, as articulated in “A Pragmatic Conception of the A Priori.” There he is set against traditional conceptions of the a priori in which “the mind approaches the flux of immediacy with some godlike foreknowledge of principles which are legislative for experience . . .” (1970 [1923]: 231). With all other pragmatists, he argues that there are no “self-illuminating propositions,” no “innate ideas,” no first principles of logic from which other certainties can be deduced. He is very clear:

What is *a priori* is necessary truth, not because it compels the mind’s acceptance, but precisely because it does not. It is given experience, brute fact, the *a posteriori* element in knowledge which the mind must accept willy-nilly. The *a priori* represents an attitude in some sense freely taken, a stipulation of the mind itself, and a stipulation which might be made in some other way if it suited our bent or need. (Ibid.)

With Peirce, Lewis takes what is given to us in experience to be that which is not under our control—it impinges upon us. We make an *assumption* that what is given to us is provided by the world. In doing so, we can make sense of the ideas of reality, validity, knowledge, and truth. But what the mind meets is not reality—that only comes with further ado. The world of experience “reflects the structure of human

intelligence as much as it does the nature of the independently given . . .” (1956 [1929]: 29).

In the intellectual autobiography in the *Library of Living Philosophers* volume mentioned by Richardson, Lewis says that he saw the above matter as “the most difficult—the most nearly impossible—enterprise to which epistemology is committed” (1968a: 18). He could see that in talking about the given and the a priori, one ran the risk, despite one’s disclaimers, of being taken for a foundationalist—one who holds the old analytic-synthetic distinction. Epistemology, nonetheless, must be committed to saying what the difference is between the status of different kinds of beliefs—it cannot “fob it off.” He is full of regret for not being clear enough about his highly sophisticated and pragmatist view. He tries again: the “basic bent of the human mind”—the “net of logical and categorical order” takes “the disordered and kaleidoscopic procession of experience as it comes” and orders it. That net is composed of “necessary truths” but in a very unusual sense of “necessary”—these are merely beliefs that we “bring . . . with us in our meeting with experience”. Lewis “has no thought of retracting any of this” (ibid., 19). He does indeed hold dear the distinction between the analytic and the empirical. But the analytic is merely that which stands at the top of our conceptual scheme pyramid, which we would revise only with radical changes coming in its wake all the way down the pyramid. And the empirical is merely that which we revise much more easily, when contrary evidence comes in. This is not the distinction that Quine and the others railed against. Indeed, it is Quine’s very own innocuous pragmatic distinction, with two exceptions. The exceptions are, first, as Richardson notes, Lewis thinks there is more than one logic to choose from, and second, Lewis thinks that ethical beliefs are part of knowledge and inquiry.

Last, but not least, let me turn to Talisse’s thoughts that the meta-philosophical differences amongst pragmatists help to explain the differences concerning their views of objectivity and that the meta-philosophical tendencies of Dewey hinder pragmatism’s progress.

All pragmatists at least pay lip service to Peirce’s idea that there is no first philosophy—that philosophy’s job is to provide the methodological signage and work crews to keep the road of inquiry open. Talisse and I are on the same page when it comes to always keeping in mind the naturalist, anti-metaphysical, anti-meta-philosophical pulse that is the heartbeat of pragmatism. I agree with him that James, and especially Dewey, are inclined to stray from that naturalist commitment, although I would add that at times, they are as naturalist as can be. Talisse’s argument is that Dewey employs an over-ambitious meta-philosophy, drawn largely from socio-political sources. Here the aim of philosophy is to “escape from peril” and to manage the anxieties that come with living in an uncertain world. Democracy, for Dewey, comes

first and is foundational, rather than flowing from Peirce's thin methodological principle that deliberation and inquiry are all we have to go on when it comes to getting the truth. The Peircean route provides an epistemic argument for democracy—one that Talisse and I have been making for some years now. That argument begins with the conceptual point that all who assert or believe are committed to having their assertions and beliefs responsive to experience and to the arguments of others. It concludes that democracy is the structure that best allows inquirers to take seriously those inputs into inquiry.

Talisse is right that I have not brought Dewey's alternative (and we both think less compelling) argument about democracy to the foreground, except to say in the introduction to the book that Peirce was concerned with a philosophical conception of truth and Dewey was concerned with a cultural critique of the role that truth plays in our lives. One thing *The American Pragmatists* adds to Talisse's account (at least the short account he offers here—he has made the point elsewhere) is that the relationship between idealism (with its high metaphysics) and pragmatism (with its low metaphysics) needs to be drawn out. For Dewey was always tempted by the language and content of absolute idealism. I show how Royce, who started off an absolute idealist, moved towards a more naturalist pragmatism and that Peirce and Lewis tried to naturalize Kant. But the topic needs more attention, and I very much look forward to the sustained *Idealism and Pragmatism Forum* that Christopher Hookway and Robert Stern are organizing over the next years. I suspect much good will come of it.

But I think that Talisse and I do not diverge on the essentials. The metaphysics of the pragmatist must be a naturalist metaphysics. What exists in the world is what deliberation and inquiry (not science, note, but deliberation and inquiry) would tell us exist (note also the subjunctive conditional, which Peirce and Lewis insisted upon). The kind of pragmatism that we both think deserves close attention is a variety of naturalist empiricism that must hold its own in ongoing first-order philosophical debates. The kind of pragmatism that we think has had too much attention recently is an End-Of-Philosophy gesture, an attempt to bring philosophy to a close. I agree that the way forward for pragmatists is not through Dewey (and Rorty), but around them.

Here is one way of putting the argument in *The American Pragmatists*. The old fault-lines in pragmatism cannot be bridged by either the methods of "analytic philosophy," whatever that is, or by therapeutic Rortyan meta-philosophy. They can only be bridged by careful analysis (in the non-technical sense of that term) of how these positions arose, what they were responding to, and how they evolved over the generations. One of the things that bind all the pragmatists together is the idea that the history of philosophy is an integral part of the practice of philosophy. That is yet another reason why Quine sits so uneasily in the

pragmatism pantheon. He was not very interested in the history of the ideas he was putting forward. I have tried, in *The American Pragmatists*, to present that history in a way that not only makes sense of the debates and how they unfolded, but makes sense of where we pragmatists find ourselves today and, as Ramberg puts it, sets up possible futures for the tradition. I am a mix of his two types of philosophers. I think that problem-solving is important but can hardly ever be done in isolation of the history of those problems. And I think that, while a good history of those problems is likely to clear away a lot of debris, it is unlikely to sweep the problems away altogether.

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