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Source: *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (Summer 2013), pp. 424-433

Published by: Indiana University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/trancharpeirsoc.49.3.424>

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Recovering American Philosophy

ROBERT B. TALISSE



Abstract

Misak's *The American Pragmatists* goes a long way towards correcting the distorted account of pragmatism's founding and development that prevails among contemporary pragmatists invested in the "classical" idiom. Yet Misak does not give enough attention to the different conceptions of *metaphilosophy* at work in the early pragmatists. As it turns out, the "subjectivist" strands within pragmatism that Misak rejects are frequently accompanied by an overly robust metaphilosophy, whereas the "objectivist" pragmatism that Misak favors is metaphilosophically modest. This correlation is not coincidental. In this paper, the author draws out the metaphilosophical differences among pragmatists and argues that pragmatism's more ambitious metaphilosophical impulses should be abandoned.

Keywords: Cheryl Misak, pragmatism, naturalism, metaphilosophy.

In *The American Pragmatists* Cheryl Misak (2013) offers a highly compelling and nuanced account of pragmatism's founding and development. Her narrative is also unorthodox, as it undermines the story of pragmatism's past that prevails among contemporary classical pragmatists.¹ That Misak gladly acknowledges the deep sympathies between pragmatism and logical empiricism (2013: 156) is enough to place *The American Pragmatists* far outside the mainstream of classicalists' self-understanding. Refreshingly, Misak's book demonstrates just how distorted that self-understanding is. Yet Misak's achievement is not solely historiographical, for the dominant narrative among classicalists is also philosophically debilitating. Thus, in setting the history

TRANSACTIONS OF THE CHARLES S. PEIRCE SOCIETY
Vol. 49, No. 3 ©2013

straight, Misak sets the conditions for a fuller recovery of American philosophy.

Still, it seems to me that Misak's narrative is incomplete. Here I propose an expansion that will strike many readers as moving beyond the unorthodox to the heretical. I am curious to see how far along this road Misak is willing to travel.

At the core of the expansion is a topic that gets little attention in Misak's book. I refer to the increasingly robust role that *metaphilosophy* plays in the pragmatism of James and Dewey and their classicalist disciples. Of course pragmatism of any flavor promotes views about the methods and aims of philosophy; all pragmatism is partly a metaphilosophy. But it is worth noting that the "subjectivist" pragmatism that Misak finds unpromising are metaphilosophically more ambitious than the objectivist strands she favors (2013: 3). This is not coincidental. Though I cannot provide the requisite arguments here, my claim is that the way truly to advance American philosophy is to abandon the metaphilosophical stance typical of current work in the Deweyan idiom. The way forward for pragmatism is not through Dewey, but around him. There's the heresy.

I begin by sketching the dominant account of pragmatism's past among contemporary classical pragmatists. The contrasts between this account and Misak's are stark. Once they are laid bare, we will see how important the metaphilosophical issues are to the story of pragmatism.

The core of the standard view of pragmatism's past is well-articulated by H. S. Thayer:

In a word, pragmatism is a method of philosophizing often identified as a theory of meaning first stated by Charles Peirce in the 1870s; revived primarily as a theory of truth in 1898 by William James; and further developed, expanded, and disseminated by John Dewey. . . . (1981: 5)²

This statement embeds three closely-related commitments. First, there is the *culmination thesis*, the idea that Peirce and James are merely precursors to the full-bore pragmatism of Dewey. Second, there is *unificationism*, which holds that the story of pragmatism's development is the story of differences withering away, unifying under a Deweyan synthesis. Third, there is *doctrinism*, the view that pragmatism is a philosophical doctrine (a "theory of meaning" or a "theory of truth").

Given these commitments, the standard view identifies the fortunes of pragmatism with those of Dewey's philosophy. Hence the standard view nearly invariably adopts the *eclipse narrative* regarding pragmatism's post-Deweyan fate. This story is so pervasive that it is not necessary to rehearse it in great detail.³ In the broadest strokes, it goes like this: Pragmatism—specifically, Deweyan pragmatism—dominated professional

philosophy and beyond from the early 1900s until the early 1940s. Then something happened called the “linguistic turn”; it brought with it a foreign philosophy—“positivism,” “linguistic analysis,” “analytic philosophy”—which invaded America and declared pragmatism soft and imprecise. Pragmatism was eclipsed, and American philosophers began taking cues from England. Eventually that fad dissolved, and in the 1980s pragmatism was resurrected in a linguistified version by Richard Rorty. Others followed, calling themselves “neo-pragmatists.” By the close of the century, pragmatism had been revived.

When the eclipse narrative is relayed by contemporary classical pragmatists, it is accompanied by a palpable sense of persecution and resentment. By the classicalists’ lights, neo-pragmatism embraces the “linguistic turn,” and is therefore counterfeit pragmatism. Thus according to classicalists pragmatism was *twice* betrayed: first by mid-century Anglophiles dazzled by linguistic philosophy, and later by disillusioned poseurs claiming Deweyan orthodoxy. Furthermore, the eclipse narrative contends that pragmatism was never refuted, but only expelled; for many classicalists, then, the eclipse narrative underwrites more particular complaints about individual careers, hiring trends, tenure-decisions, publication records, and power and influence within the academy and the American Philosophical Association. In classicalists’ hands, the eclipse narrative identifies a purported historical *injustice* committed by “analytic philosophy” against pragmatism (more precisely, by “analytic philosophers” against self-appointed spokespersons for classical pragmatism). Consequently, classicalists see the fate of pragmatism as bound up with the task of settling a score.

This partly explains why classicalists evince such contempt for current analytic philosophy. Again, the classicalists hold that pragmatism was never properly criticized, but only marginalized. So, on their view, current philosophy must pick up where Dewey left off. Hence one of two stances toward current analytic philosophy prevails among classicalists: “Who cares?” and “Old news.” That is, classicalists resolutely decline to engage with current Anglophone philosophy, holding that it either is irrelevant and sterile (“Who cares?”), or involves positions that are at best half-baked versions of what Dewey already said (“Old news”). The classicalist literature often proceeds as if Dewey’s views need only to be articulated rather than argued for, and the value of non-Deweyan ideas is measured by how well they comport with what Dewey said. One looks in vain for an extended engagement with a well-developed critique of pragmatism, and if any errors on Dewey’s part are admitted, they are always strictly omissive, things Dewey merely neglected to say.

In any case, this stance encourages a principled insularity among classicalists.⁴ Moved by an account of their past that fixates on an alleged persecution, and convinced that there could be nothing philosophically new and important under the sun, they embark on a project of retrieval

that instructs them to talk mostly amongst themselves about their alleged trauma. The irony of such fundamentally backward-looking and nostalgic attitudes flourishing among pragmatists is apparently lost on classicalists, who seem content merely to preach to each other that salvation lies in an imaginary Golden Age that is nearly a century old. Meanwhile, new pragmatist developments and new problems calling for philosophical attention pass them by. Oddly, they call this relentless self-absorption “pluralism.”

Misak rejects the standard view and these accompanying attitudes (2013: 254). Hers is not a culminationist narrative, and she overtly rejects unificationism. Moreover, she shows decisively that pragmatism was never really a doctrine, but instead has always been the site of a series of substantive philosophical wrangles over truth, meaning, and value among empiricists in America committed to various versions of the thought that the empiricist’s philosophical story about experience had to be a story largely about human action. With her contestational view in place, there is no longer anything that could have been “eclipsed.” Furthermore, we can no longer take seriously the Dewey-centrism of the classicalist; hence we expose the folly of thinking that the waning of Dewey’s influence marks a marginalization of pragmatism.

Most importantly, Misak’s decentered narrative brings into view the formidable trends within mid-century pragmatism that are rendered invisible by the eclipse narrative. On Misak’s more inclusive account, we see that unless we radically falsify pragmatism’s founding, we must regard the trajectory of mainstream post-war American empiricist naturalism—with all of its disputes, ruptures, and diversity—as continuous with “classical” pragmatism. Thus a pragmatist lineage runs uninterruptedly from Wright, Peirce, James, and Dewey through Nagel, Hook, Lewis, White, Goodman, Quine, Sellars, Davidson, Rorty, West, Putnam, Rescher, Levi, and to Susan Haack, Robert Brandom, Huw Price, Elizabeth Anderson, Christopher Hookway, and Misak herself. It would be impossible to craft a *more* influential list of philosophers from the past 150 years. They all are pragmatists, and their work has shaped mainstream philosophy and significantly influenced life beyond the academy. The eclipse narrative collapses.

Why, then, is the eclipse narrative so popular among classicalists? Here is where I think Misak’s account requires supplementation.

Again, pragmatism always has had a metaphilosophical bent. Like many empiricists before him, Peirce sought to put philosophy aright by identifying its proper method. The Pragmatic Maxim is his central instrument; and it is, importantly, bound up with a conceptual argument that denies that metaphysics or epistemology could be “first philosophy.” Peirce saw pragmatism as challenging the very idea of a “first philosophy”; he saw pragmatism as the rejection of the very idea that there is a preestablished natural order in which philosophical questions

need to be addressed. He aspired instead to devise a way to keep the road of inquiry open so that any systematic philosophy that might subsequently emerge would be well-ordered.

James and Dewey are more ambitious metaphilosophically. They identify pragmatism with a view that contends, at least implicitly, that *metaphilosophy* is first philosophy. This is overt in James's *Pragmatism*, which begins with a diagnosis of philosophy's "present dilemma" (1977: 362ff.). As is well known, James contends that the existing philosophies are crafted (usually unwittingly) to suit the needs of specific psychological temperaments (1977: 363). He asserts that traditional philosophy has proceeded as if there were but two temperaments ("tender" and "tough" minded), while in fact most people are psychologically "mixed" (1977: 367). Philosophical debates understandably continue interminably because no extant philosophy can produce a view that suits the typical human psyche (1977: 368). Hence James's prescription: Get the metaphilosophy right, and the philosophy takes care of itself. That is, we must first see that philosophies really are just articulations of psychological needs, and only then can we make progress on inherited philosophical problems (1977: 374). Indeed, according to James, metaphilosophy determines what is to count as first-order success. Recall that for James pragmatism's chief virtue is psychological: pragmatism is a "happy harmonizer" (1977: 386), a "reconciler" (1977: 389) that brings us "peace" (1977: 349).

As he sees philosophical disputes as clashes between temperaments, James must accept that some people are indeed tough-minded. He must allow that pragmatism has nothing to offer them, and he cannot fault them for rejecting pragmatism; he must say that for tough-minded individuals, pragmatism is simply false. Dewey's metaphilosophy is more extreme, as it derives from socio-political commitments. According to Dewey, we philosophize in order to "escape from peril" (LW4: 3), to manage an "aleatory world" (LW1: 43); but, crucially, he also contends that the escape has an ineliminable social and political dimension.⁵ This is most explicit in *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (MW12).⁶ There Dewey maintains that traditional modes of philosophy covertly have been in the business of protecting the attitudes that bolster and sustain inherited social hierarchies (MW12: 90–94). This is metaphilosophy-as-politics, and Dewey explicitly affirms the result: One must adopt his vision of the nature of philosophy, or else be complicit in the projects of non-scientific, reactionary, anti-democratic elites.⁷

James's view is moderated by an overall resistance to systematic philosophy; he realizes that pragmatism is not for everyone. But Dewey's lingering Hegelianism allows his metaphilosophy to run amok.⁸ Ultimately his view appears from the inside as something that can be criticized only from the perspective of an alien metaphilosophy. This

obliges Dewey, as Misak notes, to “dismiss objections to his view rather than take them head on, to escape questions rather than answer them” (2013: 127). Once the Deweyan metaphilosophy is adopted, there could be no first-order objection that does not beg the question against his metaphilosophical stance. And since accepting that metaphilosophy is claimed to be necessary for being an open-minded inquirer, it is difficult to see how on the Deweyan view there could be philosophical disagreement at all. Everything gets kicked-up to the metaphilosophical level; what appear as first-order claims are actually proxies for metaphilosophical agendas, hence all disputes are actually clashes among distinct metaphilosophical visions. And clashes over metaphilosophy are, on the Deweyan view, intrinsically political.

This feature of the Deweyan metaphilosophy has the troubling effect of making a virtue of philosophical insularity. It encourages the thought that critics of one’s views are not *philosophical* critics, but rather are *political* opponents engaged in a struggle of quite another kind. Hence to try to engage with critics is to fail at solidarity with one’s metaphilosophical—thus political—allies.

Now we see that the eclipse narrative is of a piece with Deweyan metaphilosophy. On the Deweyan view, the waning of Dewey’s philosophy *must be* the waning of his metaphilosophy. And metaphilosophies, like political movements, meet their demise not by philosophical argument, but at the hands of power. The eclipse narrative hence provides Deweyans the only kind of explanation they can countenance for Dewey’s fate: There was a political battle within philosophy, and the Deweyans were ousted. And so, in the name of pragmatism, they rail futilely against a largely fictional foe, “analytic philosophy.”

By showing that mid-century American philosophy was driven by attempts to advance pragmatist views, Misak exposes all of this for the bizarre persecution fantasy that it is. But there remains the question of why *Deweyan* pragmatism so swiftly lost favor among mid-century pragmatists. I think the proper account again is rooted in metaphilosophical issues. To be blunt, Dewey’s metaphilosophical excesses attracted him to simplistic diagnoses of his opponents. The dialectical pattern is ubiquitous: Dewey identifies some alleged philosophical problem; he then pronounces the problem itself illegitimate because founded on a dichotomy that he declares obsolete or “chaff” (LW1: 4); finally, having taken himself to have cleared the decks, he simply reports his view as if it were the only option.

This is a striking mode of engagement, and it is what still attracts many to Dewey’s writings. But the trouble with this dialectical strategy is that it encourages one to underestimate the resilience of one’s opposition. It is no accident that the demise of Dewey’s influence coincides with the emergence of improved articulations of the positions that

Dewey claimed to have decisively undermined. Subsequent pragmatists could not take seriously Dewey's contention that centuries of philosophical thought could be dismissed with one brash metaphilosophical assertion. Hence the mid-century is marked not by an eclipse of pragmatism but rather a *crisis* within Deweyan pragmatism occasioned by his overreaching metaphilosophy. It fell to post-Deweyan pragmatists to engage the new developments, to defend pragmatist commitments anew, argument by argument, against more formidable alternatives. Unsurprisingly, Dewey's writings provided meager assistance.

This part of pragmatism's story remains untold. Still, Misak's narrative helps us to gather two lessons from the demise of Deweyanism. First, pragmatists must keep their metaphilosophy in check and, second, they must avoid building systems of philosophy. To employ an allusion popularized by Berlin, pragmatists must be foxes rather than hedgehogs. They should certainly aspire to have their views hang together, but they must take up their problems piecemeal. This is because pragmatism, like any other living philosophical trajectory, advances only by means of dialectical confrontation. Accordingly, the tendency to see non-pragmatism as corrupt and unworthy of engagement must be rejected. It is worth noting that the most promising developments in current pragmatism manifest these foxy attributes.

Misak identifies "two kinds of pragmatism," one objectivist and another subjectivist (2013: 246). When her account is supplemented as I have suggested, a slightly different topology emerges. There are indeed two strands of pragmatism, but they divide metaphilosophically. One strand sees pragmatism as an activity-based naturalist empiricism that must hold its own in ongoing philosophical debates; the other sees pragmatism as an End-Of-Philosophy gesture. Misak views pragmatism as still embroiled in debates inaugurated in the Metaphysical Club, with Dewey playing a clumsy transitional role in the story. On the view I prefer, pragmatism has long been locked in a metaphilosophical conflict where the primary antagonists are Peirce and Dewey. The Peircean turns to metaphilosophy as a means for continuing inquiry among opposing views; the Deweyan appeals to metaphilosophy as a way to dismiss opposition and "get over" problems (MW4: 14). Adopting the former view brings definite risks, as one could find in the course of inquiry that one's pragmatist commitments must be abandoned. But the latter view invites the self-imposed isolation that accompanies the insistence that everyone must adopt one's own philosophical idiom or else be judged irrelevant, irresponsible, or worse. This kind of insularity also ensures that Dewey's worthwhile insights will be lost. That's a price too high to pay.

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NOTES

1. The term "contemporary classical pragmatist" designates those who see themselves as custodians of "classical" pragmatism. Classicalism typically is committed to the *eclipse narrative*, which is described below, and hence is marked by a reluctance to regard developments inaugurated by, e.g., Lewis, Goodman, Quine, and Sellars as authentically pragmatist.

2. Compare West 1989: 5; Campbell 1995: 14–22; Smith 1999: 3; Menand 2001; Cochran 2010: 3; Ansell 2011: Ch. 1; McGowan 2012: Ch. 1. For opposing views, see Scheffler 1974, Margolis 2002, Brandom 2011; Bacon 2012; and Burke 2013.

3. It is nearly impossible to find a current work on pragmatism that does not present roughly the story that follows. See, for example, West 1989: 3; Welchman 1995: 3f.; Festenstein 1997: 2; Boisvert 1998: 3–12; Dickstein 1998: 1; Hickman 1998: xii; Caspary 2000: 1; Margolis 2002: ch.1; Wilshire 2002; Capps 2003: 1; Fesmire 2003: 2; Hildebrand 2003: 1; Seigfried 2003; McDermott 2004; Westbrook 2005: xii; Hickman 2007: ch.3; Boersema 2009: ix; Bernstein 2012: 11ff.; Kitcher 2012: Ch 1; Lachs 2012: 61ff.; Margolis 2012: 2ff.; Alexander 2013: 1ff.

4. An extreme expression of this tendency is found in Rosenbaum, who argues that since "pragmatists do not believe propositions are required to understand phenomena of belief," they must "refuse to argue in defense of their account of belief." (2009: 114)

5. References to Dewey will be keyed to the *Collected Works*. Citations employ the standard formula: (Volume number: page number).

6. It is no surprise that *Reconstruction* is the best overview of Dewey's philosophy and his most overt metaphilosophical statement.

7. Dewey claims that his “empirical naturalism” is “the only way ... by which one can freely accept the standpoint and conclusions of modern science ... and yet maintain cherished values, provided they are critically clarified and reinforced.” (LW 1:4)

8. This is the crucial lesson of Gale 2010.