

Cheryl Misak. *Cambridge Pragmatism: From Peirce and James to Ramsey and Wittgenstein.* Oxford University Press 2016. 368 pp. \$50.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780198712077).

To gain a proper appreciation of this book's ambition, the reader would be well-advised to heed its stated intention: to make a contribution to 'the history of analytic philosophy' (ix). On the one hand, this aspiration helps explain some aspects of the way in which the book is written. It is a history, so much of what we see is an historical narrative, compiled in large part from the writings of its main protagonists, with Misak's analytic commentary weaving itself through the text in a series of critical observations, comparisons, and guiding suggestions. It is, moreover, a history of *analytic* philosophy. One may be permitted to surmise, then, that the bulk of its intended audience consists of people who are not *primarily* interested in pragmatism and may, therefore, have limited familiarity with it. This may explain, in turn, the somewhat bland feel of the first two chapters dedicated to American pragmatists, James and Peirce. Those who are familiar with Misak's previous work will not find anything astonishingly new in these pages, although they may provide a good introduction for someone less familiar with the topic. At the same time, it would be a mistake to conclude that the book is a *mere* history with no substantive philosophical agenda: for to talk of pragmatism as part of the history of *analytic* philosophy is already a provocation—one that is meant to shift the conceptual heart of the tradition away from its native context, towards ... well, Cambridge (England).

Beyond the introductory chapters on Peirce and James, the book can be roughly divided into two parts, with somewhat different but complimentary agendas. There is a predominantly historical part, detailing the philosophical transactions across the Atlantic at the start of the twentieth century, with heavy emphasis on the work of Russell, Moore, and early Wittgenstein. The primary aim here, ostensibly, is to attempt a rehabilitation of pragmatism's reputation vis-à-vis the 'near fatal' damage inflicted on it by the British (93, 115). Naturally, this evaluation itself presupposes an analytic philosopher's point of view. The second part is where most of the substantial philosophical work is done, resulting in a general outline of the version of pragmatism that Misak finds herself especially drawn to. This kind of pragmatism, on her telling, is best exemplified in the work of Frank Ramsey, who was originally influenced by Peirce, and in turn, later influenced Wittgenstein. Misak makes no secret of her preference for Ramsey's views over the views of later Wittgenstein; however, one also gets a sense that she may ultimately favor Ramsey over Peirce, who is considerably less amenable to the kind of 'naturalizing' stance that she, qua analytic philosopher, is prepared to take up. But let us deal with the historical part first.

Stories about the relationship between analytic philosophy and pragmatism tend to focus on Russell's campaign to demolish James' pragmatist theory of truth between 1908 and 1912. The episode is usually regarded as the 'parting of the ways,' with the frequently added qualification that Russell, nonetheless, continued to appreciate James 'as a person.' Misak's account challenges this simplistic perception. In its stead, she unfolds a complex matrix of intellectual influences, relationships, and quarrels centered around the pivotal early figures of the analytic movement, creating a palpable sense of a lively intellectual scene ripe with various tensions, where pragmatism was always regarded at least as a serious challenge and, at times, as a viable possibility to contend with. With respect to Russell, at least, the book offers a strong and convincing case that his engagement with pragmatism was a serious, thorough, and life-long preoccupation. Yet the further claim that we are entitled to regard Russell's later work as a kind of belated surrender to pragmatism is more difficult to swallow. Misak argues that the primary issue of contention between Russell and pragmatism stemmed from the pragmatist emphasis on the fact that all inquiry is

human inquiry (ix), whereas Russell was championing a ‘direct and less mediated’ relationship between the mind and the world (100). Consequently, Misak feels entitled to treat any partial concession that cognition is mediated (e.g., with respect to perception) as a sign of Russell’s gradual shift toward pragmatism—a dubious strategy. She adduces, moreover, some passages from Russell’s later work explicitly commending pragmatism for recognizing that the only truth we can have is human truth, and that the relationship between facts and beliefs is more complicated than the ‘schematic simplicity’ assumed by logic (153). This *could*, of course, be read as a sign of surrender. However, in the same passage, Russell affirms that there is a realm of fact, which ‘lies outside the cycle of human occurrences,’ meaning that his position on the fundamental issues has not changed—there is still a transcendent standard of truth independent of human thought, although now he also concedes that human thought may never reach it.

The real question of whether all truth is *necessarily* mediated by human thought always remained at the heart of the opposition between Russell’s ‘realism’ and Hegel’s ‘idealism.’ Russell believed that the pragmatists lean too much towards the idealist side (93); pragmatists thought that Russell’s brand of realism was ultimately untenable. Misak, accordingly, promises that the question of ‘whether the pragmatist is successful in putting forward a view that combines the best of realism and idealism’ will be ‘an ongoing theme in this book’ (58). Yet she does not deliver on this promise—a sustained philosophical discussion of idealism and its claim is nowhere to be found. Hegel is mentioned a couple of times in passing without so much as a summary of his views. Perhaps this is a discussion we can look forward to in Misak’s next book.

Later chapters of the book are rich in philosophical argument and *demand* a close reading. Here, Misak expertly isolates two important themes of classical pragmatism: an emphasis on always understanding our key epistemic notions in the context of inquiry, and a commitment to treating all statements of belief as hypotheses or expectations intended to survive the trial of future experience. According to Misak, both of these themes are also prominently featured in Ramsey’s work. Ramsey’s commitment to a dispositional analysis of belief (168), as well as his logic of partial belief which eventually became the basis for contemporary decision theory (174) seem well-aligned with the pragmatist analysis of belief in terms of expectations, hypotheses, or cognitive bets. However, the second part of the argument raises serious questions, and not only those of a purely epistemological or exegetical sort. Truth, in short, is not treated by Ramsey as a merely epistemic notion. In fact, he gives an account of the truth of a belief in terms of its *utility* (169): ‘if belief leads to a successful action the belief is true,’ with the added qualification that belief will be successful only if ‘objective factors’ figure appropriately in the constitution of the belief (169). Misak compliments this move as an instance of a quintessentially ‘naturalist’ strategy which explains the ‘normative’ by linking it with ‘successful behavior’ (6). There is also a fairly straightforward naturalist account of what constitutes success, pointing to the obvious desirability of increasing utility, winning our bets, and avoiding disappointed expectations. It is by ensuring the outcomes of this sort that knowledge, on this naturalist perspective, earns its keep, with ‘reliability’ serving as the ‘rock-bottom’ value defining success in knowledge (262). Hence Misak derives a very sensible account of truth (213) which, despite its Peircean inspiration, sounds surprisingly a lot like Dewey’s account of warranted assertibility. What she seemingly neglects is the fact that what we may be warranted in asserting may itself *essentially* depend on what we value, or what guiding norms we are reasonably prepared to embrace. The leanness of the naturalist account of success counts, potentially, as a feature that makes it inherently attractive. However, its deflationary tone also seems to run counter to the classical pragmatist’s aspiration to give ‘success’ a more comprehensive and more dignified meaning than narrow utility. It is possible, on the other hand, that the emphatic lack of interest in discussing ideals and ultimate values—all those hard-to-

define things that are frequently said to endow life with ‘real’ meaning—constitutes precisely the self-conscious and distinguishing feature of analytic neo-pragmatism with its naturalizing bent. Such a pragmatism could easily feature a joint commitment to a naturalized epistemology and contemporary decision theory as its defining streak. It would probably draw its inspiration more from figures like Davidson, Brandom, and Price and less from the classical triad of Peirce, Dewey, and James (who would nonetheless generally receive an honorary nod of approval). However, amongst classical pragmatists, it is likely to give rise to a worry which Misak attributes to later Wittgenstein (but does not share); namely, that before we can decide what can properly count as knowledge or success, we may have to decide on what counts as a meaningful form of life.

Serge Grigoriev, Ithaca College