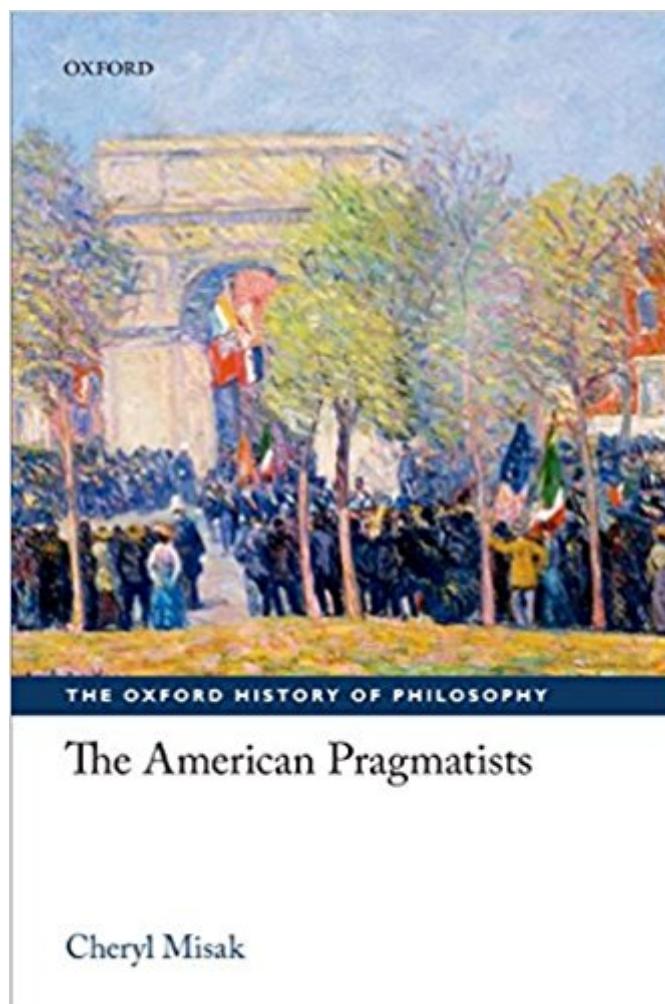


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The American Pragmatists (The Oxford History Of Philosophy)



Synopsis

Cheryl Misak presents a history of the great American philosophical tradition of pragmatism, from its inception in the Metaphysical Club of the 1870s to the present day. This ambitious new account identifies the connections between traditional American pragmatism and contemporary philosophy and argues that the most defensible version of pragmatism – roughly, that of Peirce, Lewis, and Sellars – must be seen and recovered as an important part of the analytic tradition.

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Customer Reviews

William James and John Dewey continue to be very popular, while Charles S. Peirce remains hardly known. Partly this is because Peirce did not have the long and brilliant academic career of James or Dewey, but also because his work does not read with the airy ease of the other two. Misak reminds the philosophically-inclined reader why Peirce was really the more profound and consistent of the three. He was the founder of pragmatism (though James and Dewey were the popularizers) and when pragmatism hits its most serious difficulties, it was Peirce who face them head on rather than attempting to elude them with a pretty phrase. And it is here that we learn why Peirce, exasperated

with all the popular distortions of his best philosophical idea, renamed it "pragmaticism" in 1905, a word he said was so ugly that it would be "safe from kidnappers."

Extremely well thought out by Professor Misak, on the basis of a thorough and well-balanced appraisal of the main currents within the contemporary philosophic scene. From various 'antithetical' excesses, we have now a consensus building which begins to integrate the various strengths within former (incomplete) viewpoints.

Very useful

Written for the Oxford History of Philosophy series, Cheryl Misak's "The American Pragmatists" (2013) offers a history of the distinctively American philosophical school of pragmatism from its earliest glimmerings in puritanism through current philosophical reflection and debate. Misak, Professor of Philosophy and Vice-President and Provost at the University of Toronto, has written extensively on pragmatism. In particular, Misak is a scholar and an admirer of the great American thinker Charles Sanders Peirce. Peirce's influence is everywhere in this book. In a relatively brief book of 250 pages of text, Misak is erudite, thorough, and provocative. She does a great deal more than summarize the various views of philosophers loosely identified under the banner of pragmatism. The book is far more critical and evaluative than might be expected in even a philosophical history. Misak identifies similarities among the pragmatists and key differences. She leaves little doubt about how she develops her own philosophical positions as among the pragmatists. Put broadly, Misak finds that pragmatists share, in general, a commitment to naturalistic explanations (as opposed to supernaturalism), holism, a broad understanding of the nature of experience (rejecting sense-data theories, for example, of early empiricists) and a commitment to the human condition and human problem-solving as the basis for formulating, understanding and resolving philosophical questions. Pragmatists differ in their understanding of truth, and different theories of truth become the driving theme of Misak's study. She claims that all the pragmatists offer a more deflationary understanding of truth than that of either idealism or realism, slippery though these terms are. But one school of pragmatists, exemplified by Chauncey Wright, Peirce and C.S. Lewis, reject an "ahistorical, transcendental, or metaphysical theory of truth" but nevertheless are "committed to doing justice to the objective dimension of human inquiry-- to the fact that those engaged in deliberation and investigation take themselves to be aiming at getting things right, avoiding mistakes, and improving their beliefs and theories." The other major thread in

pragmatism takes a far looser understanding of truth which, Misak states, holds that "there is no truth at which we might aim -- only agreement within a community or what works for an individual or what is found to solve a problem." Misak identifies the holders of this position as William James, F.S.C. Schiller, John Dewey, and, in contemporary philosophy, Richard Rorty. She develops and expands pragmatism's competing accounts of truth throughout her book. Her analysis is strongly with Peirce and his successors. Misak has other important broad themes which deserve mention. She admires the history and research of Louis Menand's popular book, "The Metaphysical Club" while disagreeing with Menand's philosophical understanding of pragmatism and its importance. She rejects Menand's emphasis on the Civil War as a precipitating factor in pragmatic thought. More importantly, Misak finds Menand's account tilted towards a view of pragmatism as a skepticism or relativism more in accordance with the teachings of James and Dewey than with Peirce. Misak is strongly committed to a Peircean understanding of pragmatism. A more important, and more technical, theme of the book is the relationship between pragmatism and what has loosely been described as analytic philosophy. Early analytic philosophers, such as Russell and Moore, criticized pragmatism severely for the formulations about truth in James and Dewey. According to Misak, prior historians believe that analytic philosophy displaced pragmatism as the dominant school of American philosophy at about the middle of the 20th Century. Misak rejects this philosophical understanding of philosophy's history. She argues instead that the early analytic philosophers were strongly influenced by pragmatism and that pragmatism's influence increased over the years so that the two schools almost melded together. She sees the height of pragmatism's influence in W.V.O Quine's famous paper "two dogmas of empiricism." She sees further pragmatic influence in the work of an analytic philosopher she greatly admires, Donald Davidson, in a paper called "The Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme." Misak sees a basic continuity between analytic philosophy and pragmatism. Misak's claims are well-argued and valuable. I think an almost equally strong case, however, could be drawn for the relationship between pragmatism and idealism, which coalesce at many points. Misak offers a short, insightful discussion of Josiah Royce, an idealist thinker strongly influenced both by Peirce and by William James. With the interest in religion and values of many pragmatist philosophers, which Misak recognizes at length, pragmatism could be linked as readily with idealism as with analytic thought. Misak's own views lean more towards science and towards more hard-headed analysis. The book proceeds as a history interlaced with the types of philosophical analyses and argumentations indicated above. Part I of the book "The Founders of Pragmatism" begins with a brief discussion of early precursors of pragmatism followed by densely written chapters on Chauncey Wright, Peirce, and James, with shorter treatments of Oliver Wendell

Holmes, Royce, and Schiller. Part II of the book "The Middle Period" discusses early critiques of pragmatism, but it focuses on the difficult, confusing, but highly influential philosophy of Dewey. There are short treatments as well of George Herbert Mead, Dewey's colleague, and of George Santayana. In Part III, "The Path to the Twenty-First Century", Misak explores at length the interplay between analytic philosophy, beginning with the early logical positivists, and pragmatism. Again, her goal is to bring what are commonly thought of as two competing ways of philosophizing together. Misak offers a long, admiring discussion of C.I. Lewis, a philosopher who is not studied as frequently as he might be, followed by a lengthy treatment of pragmatic aspects of the thought of Quine. There are discussions of Nelson Goodman Morton White, and a too brief treatment of the influential Wilfred Sellars. This brings the story to the final decades of the 20th Century. Richard Rorty receives an unsympathetic reading from Misak while Hilary Putnam, Rorty's opponent, receives as might be expected a more sympathetic discussion. The book concludes with a valuable recapitulation of its main themes and a prognosis as philosophizing and pragmatism continues into the 21st Century. Misak has written a wonderfully well-informed and philosophically challenging book about American pragmatism. It is probably not for beginners, but the audience for the book should be broader than specialists. There are frequent technical discussions of for example the claimed differences between analytic and synthetic statements and the Tarski (disquotational) theory of truth that reduces the concept of truth to the form "snow is white" is true if and only if snow is white that require some background in philosophical debate. Overall, the book can be read with advantage by a persistent non-specialist. Readers seriously interested in American philosophy and, of course, in pragmatism will benefit greatly from Misak's book. Robin Friedman

This concise and well written book is an sympathetic narrative and analysis of the Pragmatist movement in American philosophy. Pragmatism was, at its origin, a distinctly American phenomenon that emerged in the second half of the 19th century and constitutes the major American contribution to western philosophy. The author, Cheryl Misak, is herself a well known philosopher in the Pragmatist tradition. Misak's major goals, all achieved nicely in this book, are to provide a historical overview of the Pragmatist movement, to differentiate major strains within the movement, and to rebut prior historical accounts of the development and evolution of Pragmatism in America. She is particularly concerned with rebutting the narratives of Louis Menand and Richard Rorty that see Pragmatism as a reaction to the Civil War, that it dominated American philosophy for decades, that it was eclipsed in the 1940s and 1950s under the onslaught of Logical Empiricism, and that it was resurrected, primarily by Rorty, in the last few decades. Misak's account is

chronologically arranged with chapters devoted to the major Pragmatist thinkers, interspersed with other short chapters on other relevant American philosophers and trends. She opens with a brief and informative chapter providing some useful general background on 19th century philosophy and then founders of Pragmatism - Wright, Peirce, and James. These chapters are clear and thoughtful expositions of the thought of these individuals. Misak identifies 2 strains of Pragmatism, a Jamesian strain emphasizing that "what is true is what works" for individuals and more rigorous strain associated with Wright and Peirce in which truth is the product of extensive falsifiable inquiry. Naturalism, holism, and the natural sciences as a model of inquiry are common features. Partly because Wright and Peirce published little in their lifetimes, and partly because of James' considerable success in publishing his ideas, it was his version of Pragmatism that received the most attention. Misak devotes considerable attention to John Dewey, whose prodigious output and long career facilitated his preeminence among American philosophers. Dewey is presented as an important figure, particularly in terms of his extensions of Pragmatism into ethical and political thought, but mainly in the less rigorous and somewhat problematic James tradition. Misak also has a relatively long exposition of the work of C.I. Lewis, clearly an effort to boost the reputation of this somewhat forgotten figure. Like Peirce, Lewis was an accomplished logician, and Misak presents him as carrying and expanding the Wright-Peirce strain of Pragmatism through the 1st half of the 20th century. The treatment of the relationship of Pragmatism and Logical Empiricism is particularly interesting. Misak points to considerable overlap between the concerns and ideas of the Logical Empiricists and Pragmatism. Far from eclipsing Pragmatism, it appears that Pragmatism created a hospitable atmosphere for the European emigre Logical Empiricists and Misak argues well that much of the work of Logical Empiricists in the US is at least parallel to, and likely reflects, Pragmatist positions. There is a very good series of chapters on subsequent important American philosophers such as Quine, Putnam, Sellars, and others. Misak argues that much of the major work of these thinkers reflects Pragmatist themes, and the very best work is in the Peirce/Wright tradition. Far from being the death of Pragmatism, the impact of Logical Empiricism appears to be somewhat disguised expansion of its impact. Misak has a polite but critical chapter on Rorty, whom she (and others like the Pragmatist epistemologist Susan Haack) see as exemplifying the worst tendencies of Jamesian Pragmatism. The length of this book contrasts with the extensive bibliography. It is clearly the product of extensive research. Misak's ability to distill and present complex ideas is first-rate. While this book will be of most interest to philosophers and historians of philosophy, it is accessible to readers with some general knowledge of philosophy and a real contribution to American intellectual history.

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