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A RECENT GUIDE TO THE STUDY OF PRAGMATISM[1]

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I

There are at least two different ways of introducing pragmatism to students and other readers not previously well familiar with it. The first is an historical narrative, going through the key classical figures of the tradition and ending up with recent neopragmatists. The second is a systematic, problem-oriented discussion of important philosophical topics to which pragmatism has contributed or may contribute. Robert Talisse's and Scott Aikin's textbook is a combination of these approaches, though its focus is on the second one. The historical discussion of the development of pragmatism from Peirce onwards is limited to the first chapter, "The Origins of Pragmatism", while the subsequent chapters analyze the relevance of pragmatism to central philosophical topics: epistemology, truth, metaphysics, ethics, politics, and environmental ethics. These might be divided into pragmatist issues in "theoretical philosophy" (chapters 2-4) and in "practical philosophy" (chapters 5-7), although pragmatists are usually suspicious of such traditional theory vs. practice dichotomies.

The historical part of the book consists of a brief introduction of the major ideas of the three best known classical pragmatists: Charles Peirce, William James, and John Dewey. No detailed scholarly discussion of the development of pragmatism, apart from these traditional heroes, is offered. Otherwise, the volume is strictly problem-oriented, also in the sense that the problems it takes up will be left to trouble the reader even after the reading has been done. No final solutions are found; no ultimate pragmatist (or other) theories of any particular topic are put forward. The chapters conclude with open issues, challenges, puzzlement.

This is how it should be. Pragmatism, indeed, lives from its genuine philosophical problems. Its depth lies precisely in its *not* providing any final, ultimate theory about anything. Pragmatists are not unified in the sense of accepting any common doctrine, let alone unquestioned dogma taken for granted. They are, rather, unified in the extremely open-ended and vague sense of having to face certain philosophical problems in their distinctive ways. I believe we should agree with the authors when they write:

1 Robert B. Talisse and Scott F. Aikin, *Pragmatism: A Guide for the Perplexed.* London and New York: Continuum, 2008. 192 pp.

> The resistance of pragmatism to precise definition is a mark of its vitality, an indication that it is a *living philosophy* rather than a historical relic. This means that questions concerning its principal contentions, major themes, and central arguments are still *open questions*, questions that pragmatists are still working through. Pragmatism, whatever it is, is still working itself out, still trying to figure out what it is (p. 3, original emphases).

The topics Talisse and Aikin have chosen for systematic pragmatic analysis are classical themes of philosophical research. Most of them have troubled philosophers since antiquity, and pragmatists have provided us with new insights on them. Only the brief chapter on environmental ethics, which concludes the volume, appears somewhat unmotivated in this context. Obviously, environmental ethics is a field in which pragmatists may produce significant contributions; yet, this special theme could have easily been incorporated into the chapters on ethics and politics. Instead, independent chapters could have been devoted to pragmatist aesthetics or philosophy of religion—both highly central fields of inquiry for many pragmatists, classical and modern.

One virtue of the book, in comparison to several other treatments of pragmatism, is that the authors avoid writing to an audience of other pragmatists. Rather, they seek to show the wider philosophical community how pragmatists have studied, or may study, certain philosophical problems, and especially that "there is still work for the pragmatist to do" in these different areas (p. 4). No fully satisfactory solutions to the issues considered have been presented by pragmatists (or non-pragmatists); yet, the pragmatist attempts to deal with knowledge, truth, existence, values, etc. deserve continuous critical scrutiny. Insofar as this is the authors' central message, they have undoubtedly succeeded.

II

The difference between Peircean and Jamesian versions of pragmatism has been debated since their lifetime, and will continue to be. The present book joins the traditional ways of formulating this difference: according to Peirce, "in order to grasp the meaning of a proposition, one must understand what experiences to expect *were that proposition true*", whereas according to James, "part of the meaning of a proposition (and the full meaning of certain propositions) is constituted by the psychological effects of *believing* it to be true" (p. 13).

This received view is accurate to some extent, but things may not be as simple as they look. The (broadly) "psychological effects" of our believing what we genuinely need to believe in order to be able to live our lives forward may, for James, be constitutive of the truth of those beliefs; accordingly, the distinction between the conceivable practical effects of the object of one's conception (or of one's belief being true), on the one side, and of one's needing to believe it to be true, on the other, may vanish, from a Jamesian perspective—at least if James's pragmatist conception of truth and his defense of the "will to believe" strategy are integrated. I agree, of course, that James broadened Peirce's pragmatic maxim (p. 15), but if his broadened principle is accepted, then the Peircean attempt to distinguish sharply between the practical effects of one's belief and of its object(s) may become problematic.

The authors somewhat overhastily conclude that, although Peirce's pragmatism leaves room for disagreement over philosophical questions, James's and Dewey's pragmatisms do not: they are *Weltanschauungen*, not mere methods, and they "entail directly a particular set of philosophical answers to the standard questions" (p. 25). This can hardly be correct as a general statement about James's and Dewey's open-ended, fallible, and forward-looking

philosophical methodologies. Any philosophical "answer" is, for them, open to further scrutiny and to reinterpretation upon pragmatic grounds. It is too strong to claim that these developments of pragmatism are "radical departures" from Peirce's, as Peirce himself also connected pragmatism with a number of philosophical, including metaphysical, views—most importantly, the "scholastically realist" account of "real generals". Indeed, one thing that troubles me in Talisse's and Aikin's discussion of the founding fathers of pragmatism is their frequent reference to Peirce as a "positivist" and an "antimetaphysical" thinker (e.g., pp. 11, 61, 87).

In short, the historical chapter opening the book reinforces the standard picture of the relations between the three classics of the tradition. A more nuanced picture (also taking into account thinkers outside the classical triumvirate) is needed to balance the treatment of James's and Dewey's alleged misunderstandings or misrepresentations of Peirce. In addition, some historical background, particularly on the pragmatists' Kantian heritage, should have been included. Pragmatism, I believe, can only be adequately understood in its historical relations to British empiricism and German (especially Kantian) idealism.

III

Chapters 2-4, devoted to theoretical philosophy, deal with knowledge, truth, and metaphysics. The second chapter discusses pragmatist approaches in epistemology. After presenting the basic ideas of Peircean fallibilism, the authors distinguish between "pragmatist antiepistemology" and "pragmatist epistemology". The former is relativist, historicist, and anticognitivist—rejecting, with Richard Rorty, privileged, ahistorical standards of knowledge, as well as the assumption that truth is a goal of inquiry (p. 31)—whereas the latter is antifoundationalist, fallibilist, and instrumentalist—insisting, with thinkers like Wilfrid Sellars and Robert Brandom, that knowledge has no foundations, that any belief can be rationally revised, and that knowledge and our reasons for it depend on our interests (p. 39). The authors skillfully identify problems with both pragmatist antiepistemology and pragmatist epistemology. However, it is unusual, to say the least, to encourage pragmatists to defend (even a reconstructed version of) foundationalism (pp. 47-48). Even though it is hard to follow the authors into their foundationalist rearticulation of pragmatist epistemology, as a whole the chapter is a paradigm of clarity and argumentativity.

So is the one on truth, chapter 3. Our realistic and correspondence-theoretic intuitions about truth are first presented; here, it might have been a good idea to connect the discussion with the contemporary literature on "truthmaking" (cf. p. 57 on facts about reality "mak[ing] our beliefs true or false"). The chapter unfolds by explicating Peirce's "convergence theory" and James's conception of truth as "what works". Again, I am not convinced that justice is done to James when he is described as maintaining that "[o]ne's temperament, not one's arguments, determines one's theoretical commitments" (p. 71). Temperament and argument are distinguished too sharply here. They function together in James: arguments may be relativized to, or possible only within, temperamental ways of viewing the world, but they are important nonetheless, and James himself argues instead of simply putting forward a temperament-based view. We are, from the Jamesian perspective, continuously responsible for the philosophical temperaments we have adopted and maintain.

Dewey's replacement of truth by warranted assertability, Rorty's "changing the subject", and Stephen Stich's eliminativist rejection of truth are discussed under the rubric of "pragmatist evasions of truth". A problem of normative force is perceptively identified in

Rorty: how is Rorty able to criticize those who reject his views (p. 75)? However, I doubt that Rorty would have claimed that his opponents "have a *false* view of the nature of philosophy" (p. 75). He would simply have argued that their view can be set aside. The final section of the chapter, on pragmatism and deflationism, is a particularly valuable addition to the literature on pragmatism and truth, given the visibility of deflationist theories in contemporary discussions of truth.

Chapter 4 is an important reminder to anyone who assumes that pragmatism is by nature antimetaphysical. There is a whole bunch of metaphysical problems involved in pragmatist thought. The chapter first explains what pragmatic naturalism is all about, and distinguishes three problems concerning naturalism: (i) integrating humanism with naturalism, (ii) explaining the truth-directedness of the norms of (scientific) inquiry, given that they have developed evolutionarily, and (iii) demarcating between legitimate science and pseudoscience. These might as well be discussed as problems in pragmatist philosophy of science, instead of metaphysics. Naturalism, however, also leads the authors to comment on the pragmatists' religious problems. Having briefly gone through Dewey's *A Common Faith*, James's "The Will to Believe", and Cornel West's "prophetic pragmatism", they ask, "why bother with religious language and practice at all", if these can be naturalistically articulated (p. 94). By overlooking the problem of realism in the context of religious and/or theological thought (and inquiry), Talisse and Aikin ignore the special ways in which religious postulations may be "real" for pragmatist thinkers.

The chapter on metaphysics continues with a section on the philosophy of mind, in which functionalism is taken to be *the* pragmatist philosophy of mind. This is narrow—ignoring, for instance, the way in which even something resembling Kant's and Husserl's transcendental subjectivity may be naturalistically reinterpreted in (Jamesian) pragmatism. The concluding section of the chapter focuses on individuals, examining pragmatist views on objects and their properties, including James's defense of pluralism against monism, as well as process metaphysics. Rudolf Carnap's and Nelson Goodman's "pragmatism" about the possibility of choosing different linguistic frameworks or "world versions" is finally considered. The former's position is hardly described accurately in the following: "[Carnap and Goodman] take questions of the adequacy of ontologies to be internal to the ontologies, and […] the means of deciding between competing ontologies is their practical value" (p. 105). The question concerning the adequacy—or practical value—of a given linguistic framework is, for Carnap, an "external" matter. Adequacy is no longer an issue when we are within a framework. Moreover, Carnap would not have described his linguistic frameworks as "metaphysical theories" (p. 104).

In sum, while the authors' decision to include a chapter on pragmatist metaphysics in their book is to be applauded, their choices have the odd consequence of making Peirce, who certainly was a metaphysician, an antimetaphysical "positivist", and making Carnap, who certainly was an antimetaphysical positivist, a kind of metaphysician.

IV

Chapters 5-7 discuss pragmatist approaches to "practical philosophy": ethics and politics —supplemented by a short chapter on environmental ethics.

In chapter 5, the metaphysical investigations of the previous chapter are extended to the metaphysics of value. Starting from the is/ought problem (how should the naturalist pragmatist deal with prescriptive statements about what ought to be the case?), Talisse and Aikin move on to critize James's meliorism as too egalitarian. For James, presumably, every demand or interest

"morally counts" (p. 111); however, some interests may be morally unworthy. While identifying important problems the Jamesian ethical thinker will have to take seriously, and while correctly pointing out that James is neither a utilitarian nor a hedonist (p. 114), the authors fail to observe the extent to which James firmly rejects the idea that innocents could ever be sacrificed in favor of overall satisfaction of interests (a difficulty for standard consequentialisms), as well as his way of taking evil seriously as a challenge to the very idea of morality. James's approach to problems in moral philosophy is more deeply existential (and religiously inclined, or even metaphysical) than this chapter is able to show. James's view is discussed as if his 1891 paper, "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life", were supposed to stand alone as a coherent ethical theory; however, an ethical perspective can be identified in virtually everything James wrote, throughout his central works (especially *Pragmatism*, 1907, which the authors do not sufficiently consider in this chapter). Without understanding that, for James, situations of metaphysical wonder and puzzlement (possibly connected with religious anxiety) may be Deweyan-like, experimentally resolvable ethically problematic situations (cf. p. 121), we understand relatively little about how James viewed moral values and problems.

Dewey's proposal to extend the scientific method to moral inquiries is discussed as an example of "moral methodism". So is Putnam's "entanglement thesis", the claim that fact and value are inextricably entangled. We are told that this claim remains unclear as long as we have not settled what is meant by facts, or what makes something a fact (p. 124). Putnam is accused of begging the question against those who believe that (thick) ethical concepts (e.g., "cruel") can be divided into their descriptive and prescriptive elements (pp. 126-127), and his entanglement thesis is claimed to rest on W.V. Quine's famous repudiation of the analytic/synthetic distinction (pp. 127-128).

This criticism is insufficient to refute Putnam, because he defends the objectivity of moral values not only by appealing to thick moral concepts or the unclarity of the analytic/synthetic distinction but also by means of a "companions in the guilt argument": if ethical values are "queer", impossible to accommodate in the natural-scientific picture of the world, then so are the epistemic values (e.g., rationality, coherence) that are inevitably invoked in the very process of arriving at such a world-picture. Moreover, Putnam's argumentation can be seen as transcendental in a Kantian-like sense: a commitment to objective values is a necessary condition for our being able to engage in any inquiry into the nature of the facts. Furthermore, as the Quinean background is emphasized, the authors could also have considered Morton White's version of both the analytic/synthetic and the fact/value entanglements, especially because the chapter concludes with a section on reflective equilibrium, a method White—a somewhat neglected (neo)pragmatist—also employs.

Chapter 6 takes up four basic versions of pragmatist political philosophy: the Deweyan defense of democracy as "a way of life", Rorty's view that democracy is just "our" way of life beyond foundationalist justification, Richard Posner's allegedly "everyday" version of pragmatist democracy, and finally Cheryl Misak's Peircean-inspired "epistemic" conception of deliberative democracy. Because the authors believe that Dewey's view requires a substantial conception of human flourishing, they argue that it is "oppressive in Rawls's sense", having to reject "reasonable pluralism" (p. 137). Again, I am not convinced that classical pragmatism is accurately pictured here (though I cannot go into details of Deweyan democracy in this review). Certainly the Deweyan conception of human flourishing and "growth" is extremely inclusive and open-ended, not essentially tied to any particular view of what the good life for humans, ahistorically conceived, is. The critical remarks offered on Rorty, Posner, and Misak are, however, plausible and obviously worth taking seriously by pragmatist political thinkers.

Rorty's radically pragmatist program is, thus, attacked on many fronts in this book, both epistemological and political—and with good reasons.

It would have been a good idea to reorganize the discussion of environmental ethics, which is now a chapter of its own (chapter 7), as a concrete example of pragmatist political philosophy. The metaphysical issues regarding human beings' place in nature could, in turn, have been accommodated within the treatment of pragmatic naturalist metaphysics in chapter 4. However, given the global significance of issues in environmental ethics, it is important that an introductory book on pragmatism explicitly, even if briefly, comments on this topic.

V

To conclude, this well-written, thought-provoking book may be recommended to anyone interested in pragmatism, especially students and general readers who may not yet be thoroughly acquainted with this philosophical tradition and who are hoping to get an analytic, problem-oriented rather than a scholarly historical introduction. Most fields of philosophical inquiry in which pragmatists have been active are covered: epistemology, metaphysics, theories of truth, philosophy of mind (in passing), ethics, political philosophy, and even philosophy of religion (also in passing, in connection with metaphysics). Understandably, no detailed evaluation of the pragmatist legacy in all these areas is possible in a single introductory volume.

However, the reader is *not* encouraged to believe everything these authors say about the pragmatist tradition. In particular, while Talisse and Aikin are careful in analyzing the concepts and arguments employed by pragmatists, the complex relations between the views actually maintained by the classical pragmatists deserve richer discussion, more attention to the complexities of the historical texts. The present reading is somewhat conservative, hardly very original in, e.g., its depiction of the relation between Peirce and James. The reader would also have benefited from a separate concluding chapter, especially some final reflections on the intriguing fact that each of the substantial chapters of the book ends up with an inconclusive situation with a bunch of unsolved problems—something that Dewey could have called a problematic or "indeterminate" situation—requiring not that we give up the pragmatist approach that has led to such difficulties but, rather, that we engage in further pragmatist inquiry.

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