

## **The chair that is used to sit in**

TIM BUTTON

*The American Pragmatists.* By Cheryl Misak  
OUP. 304pp. £25.00 (US \$40)

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As a philosophical movement, American pragmatism is sometimes described in nationalistic terms: for example, as a philosophical reaction to a brutal American Civil War, which drew upon a distinctively American attitude of practical-minded individualism and which was ultimately made extinct by the arrival of the logical empiricists, immigrants from Europe.

Cheryl Misak tells it differently: the intellectual roots of American pragmatism reached back across the Atlantic to empiricism and positivism, so that pragmatism could both anticipate and be continuous with logical empiricism and today's analytic philosophy. Indeed, far from being made extinct, pragmatism walks among us today.

Every narrative has its heroes and villains, and in Professor Misak's hands the villains of American pragmatism are William James, John Dewey and Richard Rorty. At their worst – or perhaps, their most incautious – the villains are capriciously subjectivist, claiming that inquiry aims not at the truth, but at what works for me. And at their best – for they are not entirely villainous – they stumble towards the insights of Misak's pragmatist heroes: most notably, C.S. Peirce and C.I. Lewis. The heroes are adamant that inquirers aim to get things right, and they recognize that this amounts to more than “what seems right to me, right now”.

Cheryl Misak is particularly keen to defend Peirce's view of truth, which she characterizes thus: “a true belief is the belief we would come to, were we to inquire as far as we could on a matter”. This goes hand-in-hand with “a regulative assumption of inquiry that, for any matter into which we are inquiring, we would find an answer to the question that is pressing in on us”. The appeal to “regulative assumptions” of inquiry represents an intriguing Kantian streak in pragmatism, which Misak fruitfully explores.

That said, the regulative assumption just mentioned is implausible. What if all significant evidence, concerning the precise happenings at some past moment, were irrevocably obliterated? Alternatively: what if the world is configured so that you can either determine whether A, or determine whether B, but that obtaining any evidence about the one would prevent you from obtaining any evidence at all about the other; and yet it just happens to be the case that both A and B? In either case, there would be a truth that no amount of inquiry could reveal; but neither case can be ruled out just by considering our own practices of inquiry.

Truth and inquiry are not, then, quite as intimately linked as Peirce (and Misak) would have us believe. Nevertheless, there must be some link between them, if we are to retain pragmatism's distinctive opposition to the sceptical worry that what is true could come apart entirely from what we seem to have reason to believe. The challenge is to articulate this link, and this is a live concern for contemporary philosophers. (Indeed, these past two paragraphs trace work by Wolfgang Künne, Hilary Putnam and Crispin Wright.)

Misak also extracts from Peirce and Lewis a particular conception of the relationship between experience and reality. Roughly: we start with the ineffable "given" of thin experience. Once we are at the stage of saying, as it might be, "I (seem to) see a chair", we have gone beyond thin experience, since we have offered an interpretation, and any interpretation depends upon us (as, indeed, do things-as-known, such as chairs). And we can say nothing at all about the things that do not depend upon us – the things-as-they-are – except that they exist.

Once again, then, Misak highlights a Kantian impulse in Peirce and Lewis. But, in general, philosophical systems cannot get much juice out of postulating objects about which we can say nothing. And in this particular case, if we can say nothing at all about the nature of things-as-they-are, or about thin experience, what could it mean to say that the things-as-they-are determine our thin experiences? Misak's heroes are clearly in something of a predicament, and Misak does not provide them (or us) with much of a solution. So let me close by offering one.

According to Dewey, perception does not amount to having thin experiences, or even to interpreting them. Rather, when we look at a chair, we see, as Dewey puts it, "the chair which was bought, that is placed in the room, and that is used to sit in... the chair of direct experience, of use and enjoyment, a thing with its own independent origin, history and career". More generally, both James and Dewey insist that philosophers must not focus solely on an organism's experiences, to the neglect of the organism's actions. But once we register the importance of actions, including interactions and transactions between an organism and the objects in its environment, we should lose the motivation to think of a chair as a mere "thing-as-known", or a "thing-as-perceived". Rather, the chair is an artefact that someone crafted, that someone bought, that takes the weight off someone's feet, that someone might yet smash into firewood and burn, and about which we now speak and think.

In casting Peirce and Lewis as the heroes of American pragmatism, with James and Dewey as the villains, Misak establishes an impressive continuity between pragmatism and both logical empiricism and contemporary analytic philosophy. The general price she pays is that she underplays the pragmatists' interest in action. This is a shame. It is, however, no criticism of her stimulating treatment of her heroes. Indeed, the main arc that Misak traces – from Kant, through Peirce and Lewis, and then on to W.V. Quine and into wider philosophical orthodoxy – deserves to become widely known.