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Reviewed by John Capps

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Review: *Cambridge Pragmatism: From Peirce and James to Ramsey and Wittgenstein*, by Cheryl Misak

John Capps

It's nice, every once in a while, to read a good book that makes you reassess what you do for a living. Cheryl Misak's *Cambridge Pragmatism* fits the bill, telling the story of how the Cambridge, Massachusetts, pragmatism of Peirce and James was ultimately absorbed into the Cambridge, England, pragmatism of Ogden, Ramsey, Russell and the later Wittgenstein. As Misak puts it, her aim "is to map and explore some unfamiliar but important territory in the history of analytic philosophy" (ix): namely, how Peirce's pragmatism, in particular, had a profound and positive effect on the development of an important strand of analytic philosophy. Or, alternatively: to show how philosophers in Cambridge, England, were in fact pragmatists whether they admitted it or not.

It's important to map this territory because, as Misak notes, there is a "standard story" that has pragmatism and early analytic philosophy deeply at odds with each other: a story where "Russell, Moore, and, to a lesser extent, Wittgenstein, savaged pragmatism, leaving it never to fully recover" (1). On this story, analytic philosophy out-competed pragmatism by, among other things, providing a level of clarity and consistency that had been conspicuously absent in the work of James, Dewey, and other pragmatists. In addition, and despite pragmatism and early analytic philosophy sharing many of the same philosophical opponents, this story also has it that pragmatism had at best a negative influence on the development of analytic philosophy: on this view, pragmatism most helped Russell, Moore, and Wittgenstein by making clear what they clearly were not.

By now we know that this standard story is greatly oversimplified. As Misak has argued elsewhere (e.g., [Misak 2013](#)) pragmatists and the first wave of logical empiricists to the United States knew and respected each other's work. Others, such as George Reisch and Thomas Uebel, have shown how pragmatists and logical empiricists made common cause, throughout the 1930s, against various forms of idealism and neo-Thomism. After WWII we continue to find significant—and explicit—overlap between pragmatism and analytic philosophy in the work of Carnap, Quine, Goodman, and many, many, others. Taken together, these facts suggest that the standard story hasn't done the historical record justice.

There's nothing terribly new in questioning the standard story of how pragmatism and early analytic philosophy got along. However, in *Cambridge Pragmatism* Misak does something much more interesting by arguing for a direct line of influence from Peirce (and, to a much lesser degree, from James) to the mature philosophical positions of Russell and Wittgenstein. If she's right, then not only are the differences between pragmatism and early analytic philosophy overblown, but there are important and largely unrecognized lines of influence leading from the former to the latter.

To see these connections requires a somewhat selective reading of Peirce, focusing on his conceptions of belief, action, and truth, and the application of these concepts to topics ranging across logic, mathematics, science, religion, and ethics. While some of this may be old news to readers of Peirce, or to those familiar with her writings on him, Misak presents Peirce as first having a dispositional account of belief, where beliefs are understood less in terms of their representational content (if any) and more in terms of whatever actions they typically produce. This leads, second, to a pragmatic account of truth, where a true belief is one that will never disappoint. Here, Misak wisely avoids Peirce's rhetoric of beliefs that are "fated" to be univer-

sally accepted and instead focuses on the concrete role that truth plays in assertoric discourse: by labeling a proposition “true” we take responsibility for asserting it and signal our willingness to give evidence in its support. Turning, finally, to the question of which topics are belief- and truth-apt in Peirce’s sense, Misak suggests that they might all be: while empirical science may be the most obvious illustration of Peirce’s conception of belief and truth, Peirce also argued that “logic is a ‘normative science,’ along with ethics and aesthetics” in the sense that “logic is about finding habits of reasoning and inference that do not lead us astray” (39) and, similarly, ethics and aesthetics are about our ultimate goals and how to go about achieving them. Misak thus reads Peirce as a global pragmatist (more on this later) who could apply a pragmatic account of belief and truth across the board.

With Peirce’s views now on the table—and, honestly, she gives a more coherent account of his positions than Peirce was ever able to provide—Misak then turns to the channels by which Peirce’s views became known in the UK. James certainly deserves some credit for bringing Peirce’s pragmatism to a wider audience, though, as he was well aware, his doctrinal differences and more accessible style often led to misunderstanding and misinterpretation. (Here, it’s nice to see that James could give as well as he got: Misak quotes a letter to Horace Kallen where James complains “Poor childish Moore! . . . He crawls over the outside of my lecture like a myopic ant over a building, seeing only the spot he touches, tumbling into every microscopic crack” (115).) F. C. S. Schiller and Victoria Welby were also important conduits, with special credit going to Welby, who was not only the go-between connecting Peirce and Russell, but also played a crucial role in introducing C. K. Ogden to Peirce’s work, at one point writing to Peirce, “I have found you, I think, a disciple at Cambridge” (84). Ogden would, in turn, prove instrumental in introducing Peirce to a wider British audience both by help-

ing publish the UK edition of a selection of Peirce’s writings (Peirce 1923), and by including a short appendix on Peirce in his and I. A. Richards’ widely-read *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923). Even more significantly, Misak notes, Ogden could take credit for introducing Frank Ramsey to the work of both Peirce and Wittgenstein, making Ramsey the crucial missing link between the two Cambridges.

When Ramsey arrived in Cambridge, in 1921, Misak argues that pragmatism was very much in the air, with even Russell embracing something like Peirce’s dispositional account of belief (though not his account of truth). By this time Ramsey would have been well aware of pragmatism through James’ writings, C. I. Lewis’ 1918 *A Survey of Symbolic Logic*, Russell’s increasingly sympathetic treatment in *The Analysis of Mind* and, after 1923, through his close reading of the edited collection of Peirce’s writings that Ogden helped publish. Drawing on Ramsey’s unpublished diaries and notes, in addition to his published papers, letters, and drafts of what was later published as *On Truth* (1991), Misak makes a compelling case that Ramsey, too, was moving toward a Peircean conception of belief. “Peirce,” Misak writes, “was becoming a major presence in Ramsey’s intellectual life” (168). Even more significantly, however, Misak argues that Ramsey was also soon moving toward a pragmatic account of truth.

This might seem rather surprising, given that Ramsey is usually associated with a redundancy or proto-deflationary theory of truth. But Misak argues that, after about 1926, Ramsey saw that an adequate account of truth needs to do more than note the equivalence of “ p ” and “‘ p ’ is true”: if one has a disposition toward a dispositional account of belief, as Ramsey did, then it’s natural to ask what sorts of dispositions, in general, go along with believing that p is true. Ramsey came to much the same conclusion as Peirce: the belief that p commits one to giving reasons for p and considering the evidence for and

against it. Thus, on Misak's reading of Ramsey, "if we unpack the commitments we incur when we assert or believe, we find that we have imported the notions of fact (vaguely conceived), experimentation, and standards for good belief" (230). Pragmatic approaches to meaning and truth thus offer a tidy, mutually-reinforcing package that is an attractive alternative to the more typical combination of a representational theory of meaning with a correspondence theory of truth—while also offering a meaningful extension beyond the truism at the heart of deflationism.

Finally, this package leaves open the possibility of meaningful, truth-seeking, inquiry into normative questions of ethics and aesthetics. Misak sums up the implications for ethics:

Ramsey's picture is as follows. What it is to have a belief is to act on it, in a suitably complex set of ways, and if we have belief-habits with respect to ethical matters, and can evaluate those habits (given our desires), then ethical beliefs fall under our cognitive scope. . . . Even in this highly personal domain, we might be able to give reasons for our attitudes—reasons of a Jamesian sort—and remain sensitive to experience. (219)

Ramsey thus begins to sound very much like Peirce with a small, humanizing, helping of James. However, Ramsey also went beyond Peirce in some significant ways. Misak cites, in particular, Ramsey's account of partial belief, his awareness that different beliefs will stimulate different kinds of dispositions, and his understanding of how pragmatic accounts of truth can reframe the intuitions supporting correspondence theories (223).

If Misak is right, then Peirce had a significant and lasting influence on Ramsey. The question, then, is whether Ramsey had a similar influence on Wittgenstein. To begin with, Ramsey's familiarity with Wittgenstein's early thought is, of course, well known: in translating the *Tractatus*, Ramsey had the benefit of extensive conversations with Wittgenstein and his 1923 review in *Mind* still stands as both an excellent summary and critique

of that work. Wittgenstein seems to have taken Ramsey's criticisms seriously, so that when he returned to Cambridge in January 1929 he and Ramsey were in frequent and close contact until Ramsey's untimely death just under a year later, at age 26. Misak draws on a wide range of unpublished papers, lecture notes, and correspondence in order to piece together Ramsey's influence during this year. In an especially poignant passage, she quotes from unpublished notes Wittgenstein made the day after Ramsey's death (Wittgenstein had visited Ramsey in the hospital just two days before), where he dwells over a dispositional account of belief, "the pragmatic conception of true and false," and the equation of meaning and use—or that "the sense of a sentence is its purpose" (240). This and other writings provide significant textual evidence that Wittgenstein continued to engage with Ramsey's thought even after his death.

That Wittgenstein eventually embraced some broadly pragmatic positions is, of course, no secret. What Misak provides is strong circumstantial evidence that Ramsey played a crucial part in nudging Wittgenstein along this path, toward an emphasis on actual practice and away from representational idioms. As she notes, the story is complicated by the fact that Wittgenstein often spoke dismissively of both Ramsey ("a bourgeois thinker") and pragmatism ("So I am trying to say something that sounds like pragmatism. I am being thwarted by a kind of *Weltanschauung*"), but Misak argues that these remarks are the product of Wittgenstein's temperamental aversion to philosophical theories that aimed to answer questions—often of an ethical, religious or mystical nature—that, he thought, were unanswerable. In order to make room for this mystical streak (which Ramsey found exasperating) Wittgenstein was led to view truth as relative to different language games (277) and therefore resisted considering "a unified account or theory of truth, even if that unity arises out of, and is sensitive to, diverse practices" (257). As a result Wittgenstein resisted the pragmatism label, eschewing

any theory that made substantive general claims. But, as Misak notes, this is such a neurotically narrow conception of pragmatism that Wittgenstein is in no way “entitled to reject the kind of modest theory Peirce and Ramsey were trying to articulate.” Ironically, Misak concludes, “it seems that Wittgenstein is being thwarted by *his own Weltanschauung*—the one that prevents him from accepting any kind of theory at all” (279). Thus in the end it’s possible that Ramsey had *too* much of an influence on Wittgenstein, providing the pragmatic impulse that Wittgenstein eventually took to an extreme.

Misak faces several challenges in linking Peirce, Ramsey, and Wittgenstein, the history of American pragmatism, and early analytic philosophy. Peirce, arguably, may have written too much, from which it’s sometimes difficult to extract a clear philosophical position; Ramsey arguably wrote too little, with many of his views still evolving before his untimely death; Wittgenstein interpretation is a notoriously risky endeavor (as Misak notes, interpreting Wittgenstein is “a delicate matter, likely to disintegrate in one’s hands” (275)); there are perennial debates about what counts as pragmatism and analytic philosophy in the first place. Making connections between these figures and traditions can be a treacherous undertaking across terrain studded with landmines and potential pitfalls. Having said that, I find Misak’s case overall persuasive: it’s deeply researched, thoroughly defended, and offers a sensitive reading of the figures and philosophies in our not-so-distant past.

In a recent review of *Frank Ramsey (1903–1930): A Sister’s Memoir*, by Margaret Paul, Ray Monk bemoans the fact that it largely ignores the last year of Ramsey’s life and his interactions with Wittgenstein:

One is left with the unshakable impression that at least one chapter is missing, which happens to be the very chapter that many of us most wanted to read. If that chapter had been written, it would surely have given us a detailed description of the year that Wittgenstein and Ramsey spent together at Cambridge, and traced

the influence the two had on each other, as Wittgenstein attempted to revise his thoughts on logic in the light of Ramsey’s criticisms and Ramsey attempted to develop a theory of truth. (Monk 2016)

While Monk describes the shift in Wittgenstein’s thought somewhat differently, as a shift toward intuitionism in mathematics, he is certainly correct that “the story of this shift, and the part (if any) played in it by Ramsey’s conversations in 1929 with Wittgenstein, would be of enormous interest to anyone concerned with the development of philosophy in the twentieth century.”

Cambridge Pragmatism goes a long way toward satisfying the need for a philosophically astute intellectual biography of Ramsey. Misak’s chapter on Ramsey clocks in at 75 pages and carefully tracks his evolving views on belief, truth, and the legitimate reach of philosophical inquiry. It draws specific connections between his and Wittgenstein’s later views and makes a compelling case for Ramsey’s importance to the history of analytic philosophy. *Cambridge Pragmatism* is simply the best and most comprehensive overview of Ramsey’s philosophical thought that I know of.

Of course, as with any book of this scope, there are still some lingering questions. For example, given Misak’s case against the “standard story” of the relationship between pragmatism and early analytic philosophy, one is left wondering how this story ever became so standard: how exactly was it that, despite their obvious similarities and areas of overlap, pragmatism and analytic philosophy came to be viewed as competitors, not allies? And, no doubt, there are interesting stories to be told involving other philosophers (such as Dewey, Carnap, and Stevenson), though perhaps these would take us too far—geographically and thematically—from the two Cambridges of her title.

Finally, this book is not just good history but also a good piece of original philosophy—with implications for present-day debates. Recently figures such as Simon Blackburn, Robert Bran-

dom, Huw Price and Michael Williams have discussed whether broadly pragmatic accounts of meaning can be applied locally or globally: in general, whether non-representationalism can be applied across the board, or only to certain areas of discourse. (This is sometimes referred to as the “bifurcation problem.”) Misak shows that this was already a live issue in the 1920s and 1930s, and that Ramsey (and possibly Peirce as well) sketched versions of global pragmatism that, at least at the outset, treat scientific, ethical, logical, and aesthetic discourse uniformly. (Whether all these areas can, in the end, be understood pragmatically is a matter for ongoing philosophical inquiry, not a priori philosophical stipulation.) Moreover, Misak argues that global pragmatism is compatible with cognitivism: one may reject representational idioms, yet still treat ethical discourse as genuinely truth-apt—so long as one also accepts something like the pragmatic account of truth found in Peirce and Ramsey. The result is a historically grounded and philosophically rich contribution to an ongoing debate.

Cambridge Pragmatism is a significant and much needed text, one that contributes to a new standard story of 20th century philosophy. For those of us raised on some version of the old standard story—and there are lots of us out there—it’s an important opportunity not just to reconsider the history of pragmatism and early analytic philosophy, but to reassess our own histories as well.

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