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Review of "The Pragmatism Reader: From Peirce through the Present"

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Book Review | *The Pragmatism Reader: From Peirce through the Present*

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***The Pragmatism Reader: From Peirce through the Present.* Robert B. Talisse and Scott F. Aikin, editors. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011. 496 pages. \$35 paperback; 978-0-691-13706-3**

Quine once remarked that the term “philosophy” (and, so, the discipline of philosophy) was, as he put it, something like “Middle Atlantic” or “Northwest Central” rather than like “Texas.” His point was that philosophy covered a broad range of concerns and, so, was more akin to a conceptual geographical region than to a precisely defined or articulated space.

The same can be said of pragmatism. There are certainly features that are shared by many of those who are called “pragmatists” (either self-identified as such or labeled by others as such). For example, Richard Bernstein identified five aspects of the “pragmatist ethos”: antifoundationalism, fallibilism, sociality of self and community, awareness and sensitivity to contingency, and embracing of pluralism. Nevertheless, these aspects are not taken to be a set of defining criteria and certainly not necessary or sufficient for whatever goes by the label “pragmatism.” Different folks who go by the label “pragmatist” (again, either by choice or by accusation) might or might not ascribe to, allow, embrace, accept, or be committed to some or other of these aspects. As with any “ism,” there is similarity and continuity with respect to very broad notions, but there is also wide variability and even disagreement among the practitioners of that *ism*.

In the case of pragmatism, this diversity in the context of commonality has been true from the get-go. It is by now a common folktale about Peirce's famous - or perhaps infamous - annoyance with William James, which eventually led him to abandon the

term ‘pragmatism’ in favor of ‘pragmaticism’, which he remarked was “ugly enough to be safe from kidnappers.” And, as Joseph Margolis pointed out decades ago, Peirce, James, and Dewey (classical pragmatism’s “Big Three”) were different enough, even at times antithetical enough, from each other that it is a stretch to call them all pragmatists. More recently, Rorty and Putnam, while both happily bore the badge of “pragmatism,” engaged in slings and arrows against much of each other’s work.

Be that as it may, there is a region of thought (if not a state of mind) that typically gets identified as pragmatist, as the present book gives testimony to. Over the years there have been a number of anthologies of pragmatist philosophical writing: Gail Kennedy’s *The American Pragmatists* (1960), Amelie Rorty’s *Pragmatic Philosophy* (1966), H.S. Thayer’s *Pragmatism: The Classic Writings* (1982), Louis Menand’s *Pragmatism: A Reader* (1997), John Stuhr’s *Pragmatism and Classical American Philosophy* (2000). More recently, there was Susan Haack’s *Pragmatism, Old and New* (2006). What was different about this collection was that Haack included a number of pieces from contemporary pragmatists, such as Quine, Goodman, Putnam, and Rorty. However, of the thirty-three readings collected in her anthology, twenty-one of them were by the Big Three (nine by Peirce, five by James, and seven by Dewey).

Talisse and Aikin’s compilation, on the other hand, contains thirty-one pieces, representing eighteen different philosophers. Of those thirty-one pieces, only nine are by the Big Three. This is (for this reviewer, at least) a welcomed shift in emphasis. Nor is this editorial decision merely an attempt not to duplicate anthologies such as those noted above. Rather, there is a driving conviction on their part that pragmatism has been alive and well – indeed, mainstream – throughout the past century of philosophy. This conviction is spelled out clearly in their spirited introduction to this volume, particularly in what they call the “eclipse narrative” of the history of pragmatism.

It has been claimed that recently there has been a renaissance of pragmatism in the philosophical community. Not only have a multitude of books and articles on pragmatism been published in the past several decades, but notable thinkers across philosophical traditions have embraced or at least endorsed aspects of it, thinkers ranging from Quine, Putnam and Rorty to Habermas, Eco and Apel. There is one sense in which this claim of renaissance is true, namely, more philosophers today opening identify themselves as pragmatist or explicitly draw on others who as identified as such or at least do not shun the label. However, as Talisse and Aikin note, talk of a renaissance is misleading in the sense that pragmatism has been with us continuously since Peirce. For just a few examples, Russell and Dewey engaged in rousing debates on epistemology, logic and truth throughout the first third of the 20th century; Quine championed pragmatism via his brand of naturalism throughout his career; Habermas has advocated tenets of pragmatism in some form or other since the 1960s.

What Talisse and Aikin call the eclipse narrative is that, while pragmatism (via the Big Three) was taken seriously during the early 20th century, it became eclipsed by other schools of thought (such as Logical Positivism or Existentialism) and philosophical stances or methods (such as linguistic analysis or deconstruction). This narrative, they argue, is false. As just mentioned above, pragmatism did not fade into the shadows after the 1920s only to be resurrected in the 1980s, following Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Instead, it has been mainstream philosophy during this entire time. Among the, not simply mainstream but highly influential, philosophers of the past century who are appropriately deemed pragmatist – and who are represented in this volume – are: Goodman, Quine, Carnap, Sellars, Davidson, Putnam, and others. To suggest that pragmatism has been sidelined, then, is misleading at best.

Another point made by the editors of this volume is that pragmatism should not be seen as primarily focused on metaphilosophy, dealing with stances or approaches or methods of how to do philosophy. No, they have been – and need to be even more so – engaged in first-order philosophical issues: philosophy of language, philosophy of science, philosophy of mind, etc. Quine didn't talk only about how to go about thinking about logic or ontology, but what the best view of logic and ontology are; Sellars didn't talk only about how to go about thinking about mind, but what the best view of mind is; Putnam hasn't been talking only about how to go about thinking of reference, but what the best view of reference is. This volume, then, makes the case, via its contents of serious and (in some cases) historically highly influential pieces, that pragmatism is and has been center-stage in philosophy for quite some time, thank you! In addition, it has important and fruitful things to say about solving, and not merely dismissing, philosophical problems.

As mentioned above, the volume contains thirty-one pieces, representing eighteen philosophers. It is basically chronological, beginning with the Big Three, and including the somewhat “obligatory” articles from them, e.g., Peirce's “Fixation of Belief” and “How to Make Our Ideas Clear,” James's “Pragmatism's Conception of Truth” and “The Will to Believe,” and Dewey's “The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy” and “Creative Democracy – The Task before Us.” These are followed by articles by: Sidney Hook, C.I. Lewis, Nelson Goodman, W.V.O. Quine, Rudolf Carnap, Wilfrid Sellars, Donald Davidson, Hilary Putman, Richard Rorty, Cornell West, Susan Haack, Richard A. Posner, Robert Brandom, Huw Price, and Cheryl Misak. (Goodman, Quine, Putnam, and Rorty all rate multiple articles, while the others are represented by one apiece.) These include some obvious classic works, such as Lewis's “A Pragmatic Conception of the *A Priori*,” Carnap's “Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology,” Davidson's “On The Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” and Putnam's “Meaning and Reference.” It also includes some not classic works (at least not classic to many readers), such as

Haack's "Double Aspect Foundherentism: A New Theory of Empirical Justification," Price's "Truth as a Convenient Friction," and Misak's "Making Disagreement Matter: Pragmatism and Deliberative Democracy." Happily (at least to this reviewer), the Big Three constitute only about one third of the book's content, as the editors demonstrate the historical and on-going substantive contributions to first-order philosophy via the emphasis on post-Big Three thinkers.

It seems that unless a reviewer (or, a conference commentator) complains about something, no matter how much they agree with the subject under review, that person is not seen as doing a proper job. So, although I agree with Talisse and Aikin, I will offer two carps. The first is that I wish they had included some "non-analytic" voices in this collection. Three were mentioned above (Habermas, Eco, Apel), but there are many others. Pragmatism has been engaged in first-order philosophy on the other side of the pond for a long time and it would be good to have that incorporated more in what American philosophers say and do.

My second carp is that, although I agree that the eclipse narrative is at least misleading, if not flat-out false, there is good reason for that narrative have been promoted. It is still the case that a great many philosophers, at least in this country, have read little or no works by classical pragmatist philosophers. While most philosophers of language could enunciate the subtle distinctions between the causal theory of reference and the theory of direct reference, very few of them are even aware that Peirce or Dewey had anything whatsoever to say about reference. It is still that case that for many self-labeled "analytic" philosophers pragmatism today = Richard Rorty (and they are quick to dismiss both). It is still few and far between that philosophy graduate programs in this country actively promote (or, for some, take seriously) pragmatism as first-order philosophy. So, while Talisse and Aikin are quite right, I think, that pragmatism was never really marginalized there are grounds for why some have said that it was.

That being said, this is an excellent collection, not simply of pragmatist thinkers, but serious and substantive philosophers. Talisse and Aikin have done a truly fine job of exhibiting the contributions to first-order philosophy by pragmatist-oriented thinkers over the years and helping to dispel the notion that pragmatism has been on the sidelines of important philosophical work. I recommend it, not only as an introduction to pragmatism (indeed, more than an introduction), but also as a work of fecund philosophical engagement.