

## **PRAGMATISM: A GUIDE FOR THE PERPLEXED**

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### ***Pragmatism: A Guide for the Perplexed***

By Robert B. Talisse and Scott F. Aikin.  
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(paperback).

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In the process of drawing pragmatism into the Western philosophical landscape, Talisse and Aikin permit pragmatism to speak, even though only briefly, in its own voice. They do this purposefully, 'often giving the critic the last word' (4), because

they think pragmatism can be improved. However, they do not carry out the consequences of pragmatism far enough to suggest how it might be improved, especially when the arguments deployed by the pragmatists may not be applicable when removed from their historical context. Although they acknowledge specific conditions for the emergence of pragmatism in the nineteenth-century United States they dismiss the significance of that historical milieu (1) and then bemoan the difficulties of defining what pragmatism is (2). For example, if Peirce is a fallibilist, then he became one within a specific intellectual and social milieu. Talisse and Aikin make little connection to that milieu, and instead look for the internal coherence of a fallibilist position. Though Peirce's fallibilism was, in fact, a better rational posture and methodological guide than the optimism generally characterizing his day, you won't find any acknowledgment of that success in this book.

Talisse and Aikin compare the problems of pragmatism with an analytic reading of philosophical problems. They see analytic philosophy as a sufficient rejoinder to the risks of relativism found in pragmatism. For example, though they acknowledge Frege's analysis of the regress problem for correspondence (58) or coherence (60) theories of truth, they nonetheless seem to favour theories that endorse the five logical criteria provided at the beginning of the chapter, i.e. those exemplified by correspondence and coherence theories, rather than those endorsing the criteria the pragmatists offer. And where they can agree that a pragmatic reading of a problem is more cogent than a strictly logical reading, they shy away from, or just do not address, the challenges to an analytic reading posed by a Gödel, Wittgenstein, Kuhn, or Foucault. I say all this to suggest that their sounding board for analyzing the structures of pragmatism is decidedly narrow, and

leaves the reader without an appreciation of the breadth of the questions the pragmatists made efforts to address. Talisse and Aikin's preference for an analytic reading can be seen in numerous places throughout the book, but it would be unfair to simply dismiss their reading without careful attention to the details of their arguments. As long as readers understand that Talisse and Aikin are writing from a certain point of view, they will be able to unpack that view alongside their capable exposé of pragmatism. As is the case with this book, analytic philosophy often offers a worldview which seems comparatively abstract and pictures the real world as a logical world with trusted foundations. Despite this reductionism, what analytic philosophy returns is a careful dissection of the logic of whatever point of view is being examined. Under Talisse and Aikin's lens, the trail of pragmatic commitments are taken to their logical ends, with the result that one does know where a theory of pragmatism will lead. They recount that 'Rorty's many critics have charged that his ironic liberalism is relativist, irrationalist, emotivist, ethnocentric, self-defeating, and nonprogressive.' (143) Talisse and Aikin characterize a probable Rortian response saying that 'such charges will offend only those who are still practicing the kind of philosophy he has abandoned.' (143)

Although the tone of the book is often combative, in the chapter titled "Pragmatism and Politics" the reader will find an even-handed treatment. When Talisse and Aikin examine Cheryl Misak's (2000) political view, they make it seem as if the proponents of pragmatism have something to offer, but they end their remarks on Misak with a wish for more "objective" evidence than she offers. (164) Talisse and Aikin think that a better epistemology provides a privileged objectivity. (37) Their commitment to foundationalism and the extensibility of logic as the arbiter of any knowledge claim is fairly clear. Their style of argument often requires that binary non-contradiction completely characterize truth claims, which makes it difficult to fairly evaluate the claims of the pragmatists they critique, because the claims they characterize as pragmatist are defined and argued against in terms of that binary logic while pragmatists themselves do not understand their claims in this way. I find this disappointing.

The style of this book is uneven. In one chapter the authors begin with a well laid out exposition of pragmatism. In another, they begin with a standard set of analytic philosophical problems. This is no difficulty for the nimble reader who can recognize the differences, but for the uninitiated, this might prove to be mystifying. For example the first chapter on the origins of pragmatism begins with pragmatism. However, the third chapter begins with a

fairly extended introduction to three views of truth and their attendant difficulties without any reference to pragmatic concerns. I was wondering at what point pragmatism would be addressed. Saying that is not to say that the treatment of problems with truth was not lucid and generally helpful, but that the extended discussion of pragmatic concerns following might have better been handled in the previous chapter on epistemology. I am suggesting a more persistent format that would provide the reader with a fair expectation of how the exposition would proceed, an expectation of structure that would be useful not only for the independent reader but also the college student wishing to examine this particular set of problems.

Even with the deficiencies outlined above, this book is a useful introduction not only to pragmatism, but to analytic philosophical problems that pragmatism raised and reacted to. The curious mix of assumptions under which Talisse and Aikin mount their attack is as telling about the difficulties and accomplishments of analytic philosophy as it is about those of pragmatism.

The only weakness of this exposition, apart from Talisse and Aikin's philosophical predisposition, is its variegated structure, which often misleads and misdirects the reader's attention. However, I recommend it both as a useful characterization of pragmatism and as an excellent introduction to the problematic certainties of analytic philosophy. But one will have to read the original texts of pragmatism to see how the ideas play out in the real world. For that, Talisse and Aikin have provided an adequate though not exhaustive reference section in the back.

### ***References***

Misak, C., 2000. *Truth, Politics, Morality*. New York: Routledge.