

CAMBRIDGE PRAGMATISM

From Peirce and James to Ramsey and Wittgenstein

CHERYL MISAK

OXFORD



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Ramsey and Wittgenstein*

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Cambridge Pragmatism

For my parents, Alex and Ruby Misak, for their 80th birthdays

Preface

The aim of this book is to map and explore some unfamiliar but important territory in the history of analytic philosophy. It concerns the relationship between two intellectual giants of Cambridge Massachusetts, Charles Peirce and William James, and two intellectual giants of Cambridge England, Frank Ramsey and Ludwig Wittgenstein. The timeline begins in the mid 1860s, when Peirce and James started to develop the philosophical position they called pragmatism, and ends with Wittgenstein's last works in 1951. There will be special focus on the three decades between 1900 and 1930, when philosophers in Cambridge England became aware of and took account of the pragmatism being developed in Cambridge Massachusetts. These were the years in which Russell was repelled by some of the ideas of the pragmatists and attracted by others; Ramsey was heavily influenced by Peirce on belief and truth; and Wittgenstein was influenced by James on religious belief and influenced more generally and more significantly by Peirce, through Ramsey.

The insight at the heart of pragmatism is that any domain of inquiry—science, ethics, mathematics, logic, aesthetics—is *human* inquiry, and that our philosophical accounts of truth and knowledge must start with that fact. Our vast store of belief has developed in a way that is contingent on all sorts of historical accidents—the evolution of the human brain and sensory apparatus, the way language-users have posed fundamental questions and answered them, the technology made possible by the earth's raw materials and by our ingenuity, and so on. As James was fond of putting it, the trail of the human serpent is over everything (*P*: 37, *VRE*: 352). As some put it today, the best understanding of our concepts is agent-centred.

From this starting point about the human origins of and constraints upon knowledge, pragmatists have made different arguments and drawn different conclusions. Some argue that it makes little or no sense to speak of truth, falsity, or objectivity, but only what passes for true, false, or objective in one community or another. The most prominent proponent of this kind of pragmatism in recent years has been Richard Rorty. Others argue that the contingency of knowledge, and the allied fact that each of our beliefs is a fallible interpretation, does not entail that our beliefs are simply determined by—or answerable only to—what our community decides, or that truth and objectivity are spurious notions. The ideas of truth and objectivity are required if we are to have beliefs at all. I have argued for this kind of pragmatism, as has Huw Price.¹

The pragmatist who wants to retain a place for truth and objectivity must walk a fine line. The truth-denying pragmatist thinks that the truth-affirming pragmatist will not be able to keep her balance. Indeed, the truth-denying pragmatist thinks that the

¹ See e.g. Misak (2004 [1991], 2013) and Price (2003).

truth-affirming pragmatist is really walking a plank that will inevitably dump her under what the truth-affirming pragmatist thinks is the sea of post-modern arbitrariness. But that, in my view, would be an indictment of pragmatism. In the pages that follow, I will try to show that Peirce and Ramsey manage to keep their balance and have much to teach contemporary philosophy as we try to work through these difficult matters. Peirce and Ramsey, that is, offer us the best chance of understanding how it is that beliefs can both be the products of human inquiry and can nonetheless aim at truth.

This will come as a surprise to those who read Ramsey as a redundancy theorist about truth. It will also come as a surprise to those who read him as an expressivist who thinks there is a fact-stating discourse and a non-fact-stating discourse of open generalizations, causal laws, conditionals, value statements, etc., and that only the latter kinds of belief require a pragmatist treatment. My intention is to show that Ramsey's equivalence thought (the idea that ' p is true' and p are equivalent), which so many have interpreted as a redundancy theory, was merely a step along the way to a thoroughgoing pragmatist account of truth. That is, Ramsey is best read as a pragmatist, and a pragmatist not just about open generalizations, causal statements, conditionals, and value statements. He is a pragmatist about all our beliefs. On his account, however, as on Peirce's, that is not to deny that our beliefs aim at truth and objectivity.

The position I trace and recommend here is in step with my 2013 book *The American Pragmatists*. There I presented a history of pragmatism and argued that we ought to follow Peirce and C. I. Lewis in order to rehabilitate the more objective version, after its successive downward shifts in fortune driven by James, F. C. S. Schiller, and Rorty. In the present book, I fill in a missing piece of that story. I give an account of the kind of pragmatism that was gaining strength across the Atlantic, in Cambridge England. That pragmatism is Ramsey's pragmatism, which then influenced Wittgenstein. Hence, my account of Ramsey's relationship with Wittgenstein is in competition with those who think of him as the junior partner in Wittgenstein's project and it is in competition with the very different narrative that that Wittgenstein's ideas were diametrically opposed to Ramsey's. I shall argue that while Wittgenstein was indeed a major influence on Ramsey, Ramsey was also a major influence on Wittgenstein.

I should say right away that there is much more to James than his sometimes careless expressions of pragmatism as the thesis that truth is what works for any particular person or community. But these expressions were what dimmed pragmatism's prospects in the minds of many, and hence, as in *The American Pragmatists*, I need to get this James on the page. Otherwise we will fail to understand the trajectory of pragmatism. It might be true that James's theories are often presented, for instance by Russell and Moore, in a wilfully weak way so as to provide an easy stalking horse. But however much one might admire the more careful James, we shall see that it was his less careful statements about pragmatism that made an impact across the Atlantic. It is good that we shall have in the present book more opportunity to look at James's better-received work, especially in psychology and the theories of action and perception.

The debates that absorbed the two sets of Cambridge pragmatists have of course evolved, and there is a temptation to spread our contemporary terminology and preoccupations onto thinkers in the past. I shall try to resist it.² To take just one example—the debate about primary and secondary languages that occupied a good deal of the attention of Russell, Wittgenstein, Ramsey, and the Vienna Circle—I will stick to the intellectual context they found themselves in, and will only gesture at the way these debates have continued to unfold. I shall also confine myself to the core issues of pragmatism, and so I will not, for instance, speak to the work of Russell, Wittgenstein, and Ramsey on the foundations of mathematics; or Frege's part in the intellectual background against which these three formed their positions; or the role of Mach, Brouwer, Hertz, and Boltzmann, who did not call themselves pragmatists, but who were sometimes thought to be such by Schlick, Wittgenstein, and others.³

One might well ask whether Oxford was not also influenced by the American pragmatists. The answer, I think, is 'yes.' Austin, Dummett, McDowell, Ryle, Strawson, and Wiggins are examples of those who have wanted to link our philosophical concepts to human practice and action. The pragmatist influence there came mostly through Wittgenstein, if my account of the impact of pragmatism on Wittgenstein is at all compelling. The reader who is interested in this lineage might want to turn to the volume of essays arising from the 2014 British Academy Symposium: *The Practical Turn: Pragmatism in the British Long 20th Century*.

² David Stern (2007) is superb on the dangers of reading the present into the past.

³ See Kevin Mulligan (forthcoming) for the beginnings of that last study.

Acknowledgements

Huw Price has been instrumental to this project in more ways than one. A research workshop he and Fraser McBride organized in 2012 on ‘Cambridge Pragmatism’ sparked my interest in the topic. In the autumn of 2014, he and I put together a British Academy Symposium titled ‘The Practical Turn: Pragmatism in the British Long 20th Century’, which provided further fuel, as did the reading group on pragmatism we organized in Cambridge during Lent Term 2015. Indeed, the book was finished while I was a very happy Visiting Fellow Commoner at his college, Trinity, home at various times to Russell, Wittgenstein, and Ramsey. All along the way, he has asked some of the most pressing questions.

The organizers of a conference in 2012 on ‘Truth and Democracy: Themes from Cheryl Misak’s Work’ at the University of St Andrews, Yann Allard-Tremblay and Noah Friedman-Biglin, helped keep the flame alive during some heavy but rewarding lifting as Provost of the University of Toronto. My graduate classes at NYU in 2013 and the University of Toronto in 2015 on the topic of this book provided much stimulus. So did audiences at Columbia University; the University of Birmingham; the École Normale Supérieure; the University of Hertfordshire; The Idea of Pragmatism Workshop at Sheffield University; the Institute of Education at UCL; the New York Pragmatist Forum; NYU; the Peirce Centennial Conference; Royal Holloway; Queen’s University, Kingston; Roma Tre University; the Royal Institute of Philosophy; the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy; the Society for the Study of the History of Analytic Philosophy; University College Dublin; the University of Vienna; and three Cambridge groups: the Moral Sciences Club, the Philosophy of Science Society, and the Serious Metaphysics Society.

To re-fashion a remark made about Wittgenstein, one should not threaten visiting philosophers with early drafts of books. I’m glad I broke that rule with four of my own house guests—Hugh Mellor in Toronto, Anna Boncompagni in New York, and David Bakhurst and Nils-Eric Sahlin in Cambridge. They each read the entire manuscript at different stages and improved it immeasurably, as did Arif Ahmed, Steven Methven, Griffin Klemick, and two anonymous readers for OUP. Cora Diamond, Peter Godfrey-Smith, Andrew Howat, Tom Hurka, Henry Jackman, Jeff Kasser, Ed Mares, Michael Potter, Ian Proops, Ian Rumfitt, Joachim Schulte, David Stern, Sergio Tenenbaum, Thomas Uebel, David Wiggins, and Jessica Wright were very kind to comment on individual chapters, much to the benefit of the evolving manuscript. That is an astonishing amount of high-end help, and yet errors will remain, for which I take sole responsibility. Thanks also must go to three dedicated and knowledgeable archivists: Patricia McGuire at King’s College, Jonathan Smith at Trinity’s Wren Library, and especially my old friend Jacky Cox at the Cambridge University Library.

Griffin Klemick and Jessica Wright, Ph.D students at the University of Toronto, were superb research assistants, as well as substantial commentators throughout the writing of the book, and Cherie Braden and Leo Lepiano, students in my 2015 graduate seminar, did some excellent last-minute commenting and correcting. Jeremy Langworthy was a supererogatory copy-editor, as he was with my last book. Peter Momtchiloff, my editor at OUP, also went above and beyond the call of duty.

Peter Lofts found the wonderful photo for the cover. It is of Great Gate, Trinity College, home at various times to Russell, Moore, Wittgenstein, and Ramsey. It was taken by the Cambridge studio of Ramsey and Muspratt, the former being Lettice Ramsey, Frank Ramsey's widow. Finally, I'm happy to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for necessary material support for this project and my family, David, Alex, and Sophie, for even more important immaterial support.

I have written on certain of these topics before, and while some of the material in this book draws and expands on that earlier work, all changes should be taken as improvements—at least, that is how they are intended.

Reference and Spelling Policy

Given that this book crosses back and forth over the Atlantic, I will spell words as they were printed—‘behaviour’ and ‘behavior’, for instance, a word that even Russell uses in both spellings. In Canada, we also switch back and forth, but when using my own voice in this book, I consistently go the UK way. Normally, there would be a comma between ‘Cambridge, England’ and ‘Cambridge, Massachusetts’. These places are part of my subject matter and I will slow the tsunami of commas by not following normal usage in this regard.

References to the works of William James

References to James’s correspondence refer to *The Correspondence of William James* and take the form ‘CWJ n: m, year,’ where n is the volume number and m the page number. Abbreviations for others of James’s works are as follows. Full details of these works can be found in the bibliography.

ERE	<i>Essays in Radical Empiricism</i>
MT	<i>The Meaning of Truth</i>
P	<i>Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking</i>
PP	<i>The Principles of Psychology</i>
PU	<i>A Pluralistic Universe</i>
SPP	<i>Some Problems of Philosophy</i>
TTP	<i>Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life’s Ideals</i>
VRE	<i>The Varieties of Religious Experience</i>
WB	<i>The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy</i>

Reference to the works of C. S. Peirce

References to Peirce’s unpublished material are to the Charles S. Peirce Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University: MS: n, where n is the manuscript number.

References to Peirce’s published material are as follows. If a passage occurs in the new *Writings of Charles S. Peirce: Chronological Edition*, I cite that source as ‘W n: m year’ where n is the volume, m the page number. If it is not in the *Writings*, but in the older *Collected Papers*, the citation is ‘CP n. m year’ where n is the volume number, m the paragraph number. If it appears in print only in *New Elements of Mathematics*, the citation is ‘NE n: m, year’, where n is the volume number and m the page number. If it occurs in

Peirce's contributions to *The Nation*, I cite it as 'N n: m, year,' where n is the volume number and m is the page number in the Ketner and Cook edition of those contributions. Full details of these works can be found in the bibliography.

References to the works of Frank Ramsey

References to Ramsey's unpublished papers are to the Frank Plumpton Ramsey Papers, 1920–1930, ASP.1983.01, Archives of Scientific Philosophy, Special Collections Department, University of Pittsburgh, RP n-m-o, where m is the box number, n is the folder number and o is the page number.

Abbreviations for Ramsey's published and collected papers are as follows. Full details of these works can be found in the bibliography.

CN	Critical Notice of Wittgenstein's <i>Tractatus</i>
DS	'On There Being No Discussable Subject'
FM	'The Foundations of Mathematics'
FP	'Facts and Propositions'
GC	'General Propositions and Causality'
K	'Knowledge'
ML	'Mathematical Logic'
MM	'Review of Ogden and Richards' <i>Meaning of Meaning</i> '
NP	'The Nature of Propositions'
NPPM	<i>Notes on Philosophy, Probability and Mathematics</i>
OT	<i>On Truth</i>
P	'Philosophy'
RB	'Reasonable Degree of Belief'
Th	'Theories'
TP	'Truth and Probability'
U	'Universals'

References to the works of Bertrand Russell

References to Russell's unpublished material are to the McMaster University Archives, BR n, where n is the record number.

References to *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell* take the form 'CP n: m, year,' where n is the volume number, m the page number. Abbreviations for others of Russell's works are as follows. Full details of these works can be found in the bibliography.

A	<i>Autobiography</i>
AM	<i>The Analysis of Mind</i>
F	'Foreword to <i>An Introduction to Peirce's Philosophy Interpreted as a System</i> '
FMW	'The Free Man's Worship'
IMP	<i>Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy</i>
IPM 2	'Introduction to the Second Edition of <i>Principia Mathematica</i> '
JCT	'William James's Conception of Truth'
KEW	<i>Our Knowledge of the External World</i>
MPD	<i>My Philosophical Development</i>
P	'Pragmatism'
PoM	<i>The Principles of Mathematics</i>
PLA	<i>The Philosophy of Logical Atomism</i>
RSP	'The Relation of Sense-Data to Physics'
WIB	'What I Believe'

Reference to the works of Victoria Welby

References to the works of Welby are in the form WA: n, where n is the manuscript number in the Welby Fonds, York University Libraries, Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collections.

References to the works of Ludwig Wittgenstein

References to Wittgenstein's unpublished papers are in the form MS: n, where n is the manuscript number. Abbreviations for Wittgenstein's published material are as follows. Full details of these works can be found in the bibliography.

References to *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* are in the form T: n.m where n is paragraph number and m is subparagraph number.

BB	<i>The Blue and Brown Books</i>
BT	<i>The Big Typescript</i>
CV	<i>Culture and Value</i>
LAPR	<i>Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religion</i>
LC1	<i>Cambridge Lectures 1930–2</i>
LC2	<i>Cambridge Lectures 1932–5</i>
N	<i>Notebooks 1914–16</i>

OC	<i>On Certainty</i>
PG	<i>Philosophical Grammar</i>
PI	<i>Philosophical Investigations</i>
PPF	<i>Philosophy of Psychology—A Fragment</i>
PR	<i>Philosophical Remarks</i>
RFM	<i>Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics</i>
RPP I/II	<i>Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology</i> , vols. 1 and 2
WVC	<i>Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle: Conversations recorded by Friedrich Waismann</i>
Z	<i>Zettel</i>

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