



THE **NEW** PRAGMATISM

Alan Malachowski



THE NEW PRAGMATISM

Also by Alan Malachowski and published by Acumen

Richard Rorty

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Philosophy is at once the most sublime and the most trivial of human pursuits. (William James, *Pragmatism*)

I do not think that pragmatism has a True Self.
(Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*)

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PREFACE

Strictly, 'New Pragmatism' is a descriptive phrase itching to become a name. I have given it capital letters to help it on its way. But, this does not mean that this book is oddly premature: professing to provide an introduction to a currently non-existent movement. There is plenty for a fledgling name to latch on to.

The great American pragmatist revivalist Richard Rorty used the phrase 'New Pragmatism' occasionally, and in descriptive senses that matched our own purposes (e.g. 2000a: 95). He wanted to stake out a philosophical position that derives from the original pragmatism of William James and John Dewey,¹ but differs in two main aspects. First, it avoids talking about experience, along with empiricist notions in general, by talking about language instead. And secondly, it abandons the idea that there is such an epistemically sweet thing as scientific method, something that should serve as a model for all enquiry, because whoever practises it maximizes their likelihood of attaining true beliefs.

Cheryl Misak (2007) recently relied on 'New Pragmatists' as the title of a very worthwhile anthology of writings by thinkers who, despite her own anti-Rortyan predilections, mostly fit in with our broader aims. They are linked to the pragmatism of Charles Sanders Peirce, William James and John Dewey in various ways, and with varying degrees of tightness. Moreover, their approach to philosophy manifests three fairly straightforward pragmatist commitments: (i) objectivity is

“historically situated”, and none the worse for that, (ii) “knowledge has no foundations”, and (iii) philosophy needs to keep “connected to first order inquiry, to real examples, to real life experience” (*ibid.*: 6–7).

In this book, we interpret the ‘New Pragmatism’ differently in a manner that goes beyond what either Rorty or Misak was disposed to say. We add a number of characteristics. Some of these make it somewhat clearer as to how practitioners of the New Pragmatism are related to the original pragmatists (we call them ‘classic pragmatists’) while at the same time showing how they differ from other philosophers, including other contemporary pragmatists and fellow travellers.

We introduce the New Pragmatism to help readers identify, and play off against one another, members of a useful cluster of philosophical views that promise both intellectual and social hope for the future. There is an additional hope, embedded within the whole fabric of the book, that those who find themselves attracted to the philosophical outlook it describes will find it easier to further their own correlative ambitions and communicate about them with kindred spirits if they can gather together, metaphorically or otherwise, under a single banner.

Certainly, the New Pragmatism will have done intellectual culture a terminological favour if it nudges aside the label ‘neo-pragmatism’, one that even Rorty was prone to using from time to time. The prefix ‘neo’, as in ‘neo-Freudianism’, ‘neo-Marxism’ and ‘neo-liberalism’, almost always carries connotations of substandardness, as if the version in question is not quite the real thing. This book is premised on the sincere assumption that the New Pragmatism is anything but that.

Finally, a brief word about the introductory nature of this book. Philosophers are fond of saying that philosophy has no shallow end. That is certainly true. But, it is nothing to either boast about or apologise for. And it does not mark out anything special about philosophy. Try diving into an introductory text on pure mathematics, corporate finance, literary theory or, indeed, any subject around which a substantial body of literature and critical thought has been built; unless you are already familiar with some of the background material, you will soon find the water flowing over your head. Having said that, this book aims to reach an audience of non-specialists without lapsing

into condescension and yet without making the waters of exposition run so shallow that philosophers themselves cannot swim in it. This difficult task has necessitated some trade-offs.

On the one hand, to save space and keep up the pace, thinkers and philosophical views have been introduced rather swiftly at times, without stopping to explain their meaning and significance to the uninitiated. This should not pose an insuperable obstacle to such readers, although they may feel momentarily uncomfortable with the resulting holes in their comprehension. Sometimes context will eventually fill these, sometimes a footnote or a bit of extra thinking will do the trick, and sometimes something that is said later might help. Furthermore, there is advice at the end of the book in the section entitled “Reading the New Pragmatists” on where to find out more about who or what appears to have been precipitously introduced in the main text (e.g. W. V. Quine or Donald Davidson and their respective views). There is, however, also a sense of purpose behind the swiftness.

This book is designed to encourage readers to move on to explore New Pragmatist thinking. And for that reason, it does not dwell on matters that should be signposted for narrative purposes but need not be explored. It does not, for instance, go into detail regarding the traditional philosophical problems concerning the relationship between mind and body, the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge and so forth. These are problems that New Pragmatists wish to ignore and would, moreover, like to see either bypassed or dropped. They do not believe philosophy is like inoculation. There is no need to inject readers with a dose of its problems in order for them to be able to avoid them in future.

On the other hand, philosophically literate readers are likely to feel frustrated by the failure to provide greater technical detail on certain philosophical claims or to push certain lines of argument further. They no doubt seek the provision of a more sophisticated line of pragmatist thought. There are currently some very accomplished and imaginative thinkers working with pragmatist ideas who do just that in spades. They include Robert Brandom, Bjørn Ramberg and Roberto Unger, as well as those contributing to Misak’s collection. This is not the place to deal with their complex and finely tuned work. However, for those who want to see what the New Pragmatism

is like when it steps up another gear or two – perhaps by developing “a Rortyan post-ontological case for the distinctiveness of agency” (Ramberg 2000), explicating “Wittgenstein’s pragmatism about norms” (Brandom 1994), or radicalizing some strands of pragmatist thought for current political purposes (Unger 2009) – there is also some special purpose bibliographical guidance for ‘experts’ in “Reading the New Pragmatists”.

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I owe Steven Gerrard, Kate Williams and the rest of the Acumen team a great debt of thanks for their exemplary patience and professionalism in steering this book through to publication. I would also like to thank my whole family, but especially Lesley, Jannie and Sophie, for their support and encouragement. Thanks are due also to Professor Anton van Niekerk along with my other colleagues at Stellenbosch University for their kindness in making me feel welcome and at home in a new intellectual environment. Emma Bell and Stephen Mullan provided characteristically perceptive comments on an earlier draft that led to some useful improvements. I am extremely grateful to them both. An anonymous reviewer also made a number of apt suggestions.

Finally, I should record my immense gratitude to all those scholars who have worked so hard and imaginatively over so many years, often against the tide and in other intellectually unfavourable circumstances, to foster a receptive intellectual environment for pragmatist approaches to philosophy. If the New Pragmatism continues to succeed on the terms outlined in this book, it will owe much to all of them.

Alan Malachowski
Arabella Country Estate
South Africa

ABBREVIATIONS

- CIS *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Rorty 1989).
DE *Democracy and Education* (Dewey 1916).
EN *Experience and Nature* (Dewey 1958).
ERP *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (James 1996).
EWO *Ethics without Ontology* (Putnam 2004).
LW *The Collected Works of John Dewey: The Later Works* (Dewey 1981–2008).
PMN *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Rorty 1979).
PMT *Pragmatism and The Meaning of Truth* (James 1998).
POQ *Pragmatism: An Open Question* (Putnam 1995a).
PWP *Philosophical Writings of Peirce* (Peirce 1955).
RP *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (Dewey 1920).

INTRODUCING THE NEW PRAGMATISM

There is absolutely nothing new in the pragmatic method.
(William James, *Pragmatism and The Meaning of Truth*)

Pragmatism, when looked at in wide perspective and against the background of earlier epochs of philosophic thought, is justified in thinking of itself as 'a new way of thinking'.
(Milton K. Munitz, *Contemporary Analytic Philosophy*)

The aim of this book is to provide a broad-based introduction to the New Pragmatism for those who are to a large extent, or perhaps even completely, unfamiliar with it. In tackling that task, it ranges over five large questions: what is the New Pragmatism? Why has it come into prominence in recent years? What, if anything, is *new* about it? What are its main strengths? And what are its prospects?

In dealing with such big questions, the book cannot help but evoke further issues. Some of these are subsidiary, and hence disposable. Others are quite important. However, most of the latter, especially those involving complex matters of history and textual interpretation, cannot be dealt with in the space available. And the others simply have little relevance to an introductory project of this kind. Furthermore, the overarching goal here is to cut through such complexities in order to provide a clear, accessible, general guide to the New Pragmatism, one that explains what it involves in the most general sense, why it has

created such an intellectual stir in many quarters¹ and what makes it so interesting and challenging at the present time.

Notwithstanding its avowed introductory status, the book may also be of some interest to those who regard themselves as familiar, perhaps all too familiar, with the kind of pragmatism it describes. For the relationship between the New Pragmatism and its historical ancestor is often misunderstood, and this generates confusion and faulty lines of criticism. In setting the record straight, the book may encourage some victims of such misunderstanding to view the New Pragmatism in a different light, and to reconsider its potential.

The general structure

This short opening chapter outlines the structure of the book as a whole. It then goes on to discuss, in preparatory terms, what is meant by the label the 'New Pragmatism'. In doing so, it goes beyond the brief terminological justification given in the Preface and sets the scene for the more explicit treatment of the topic provided towards the end of Chapter 2.

That chapter fills in some background concerning classic pragmatism. This was the original form of pragmatism. It was given birth to by the writings of the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce. But it only began to make significant impact in the hands of two other famous American thinkers: William James and John Dewey. We do not discuss classic pragmatism in any depth. Just enough historical detail is furnished to flesh out an informative contrast with the New Pragmatism. For we need to show what it is that the New Pragmatism is trying to leave behind, why it finds it necessary to part company in this way, and why it makes consistent sense to say that the New Pragmatism is both historically rooted and something of a fresh departure. This material will perhaps provide additional insight into why the work of some New Pragmatists has provoked such harsh criticism from many of those who nevertheless remain attracted to pragmatism itself.

Building on the account offered in these preliminary remarks, Chapter 2 argues that a number of main features distinguish the New Pragmatism from its venerable ancestor. It contends that these

features in particular also help mark it out as something new. Some of these are worth flagging now. In the first place, the New Pragmatism is resolutely ‘cosmopolitan’. It has lost, in Giles Gunn’s suitably evocative phrase, its “American colouration” (1995: 298) and thereby shaken off the provincial image that dogged classic pragmatism for so long.² It is now thereby able to exert a stronger influence across borders, both academic and geographical.³ The second feature is ‘autonomy’. The New Pragmatism has largely broken free of the analytic tradition that trapped its predecessor in unending, and largely fruitless, disputes. For this reason, the New Pragmatism has been able to start fashioning its own agenda and is liable to continue doing so in ways that are currently unpredictable. Its proponents do not generally waste much time engaging with the kind of tradition-bound criticisms of classic pragmatism that were once believed to be compelling. This is a controversial matter because some such criticisms remain in currency and are still considered unanswerable. The final feature can be tagged ‘neoteric’. It concerns the way in which the New Pragmatism has updated the philosophical approach of its predecessor and become more attuned to the present-day ethos. It is not, for example, enamoured with science or wedded to certain empiricist notions that prevented adherents of classic pragmatism from adapting it to take advantage of useful developments in both philosophy itself and the wider intellectual tradition. Among these developments, the so-called ‘linguistic turn,’ when philosophy began to focus on language as a means of clarifying, if not dissolving its problems, is the most important.

Chapters 3 and 4 deal, consecutively, with the two philosophers who have done by far the most to develop, inspire and promote the New Pragmatism. The first is Richard Rorty, who taught for extended periods at Princeton University and the University of Virginia before moving to Stanford University where he was highly productive until his death in 2007. And, the second is Hilary Putnam, who has stayed at Harvard University throughout his lengthy philosophical career and is now Emeritus Professor there. Many other thinkers have paved the way for the recent revival of interest in pragmatism. These include Richard Bernstein, Susan Haack, Robert Westbrook, Richard Shusterman, Nicholas Rescher, Christopher Hookway and Cheryl Misak, whom we mentioned in the Preface.⁴ However, it is Rorty and Putnam who have been most responsible for the ascendancy of the