Misak’s Peirce and Pragmatism’s Metaphysical Commitments

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Abstract

In this comment on Misak’s *Cambridge Pragmatism*, I examine a case study—debate about the existence of free will—in order to explore residual tensions between Misak’s ‘truth-affirming,’ Peircean pragmatism, and mainstream analytic philosophy. I suggest that Misak’s Peirce makes a metaphysical commitment to the existence of rational self-control, and thereby to the existence of free will. I also suggest, however, that her ‘analytic pragmatism’ thus far offers few clues about how we should defend such a commitment from skeptical arguments emerging from contemporary analytic metaphysics. I conclude that analytic pragmatists have more work to do in explaining pragmatism’s complex relationship with metaphysics, and defending its core commitments from skeptical threats.

Keywords: Cheryl Misak, Charles Peirce, Pragmatism, Free Will, Determinism, Voluntarism, Metaphysics

1. Misak’s Peirce and the New Eclipse Narrative

For much of the twentieth century, pragmatism was largely in eclipse. Few philosophers were familiar with the works of classical pragmatists such as Charles Sanders Peirce and William James, and pragmatist ideas were not at the centre of debate. (Hookway 2016)

This is commonly referred to as the “eclipse narrative” (or the “marginalization narrative”—Ward and Kaag 2015) of the history of pragmatism. It implies a competitive, perhaps even mutually exclusive relationship between analytic philosophy and pragmatism. In her last two books, *Cambridge Pragmatism* and *The American Pragmatists*, Cheryl Misak has argued for a new narrative that I’ll call the “Contestation & Influence” narrative.[[1]](#endnote-1) I take this narrative to have two central claims:

1. *Contestation:* There are two strands within classical pragmatism—a more objective, ‘truth-affirming’ strand (pioneered by Peirce and Chauncey Wright) and a more subjective, ‘truth-denying’ strand (epitomized in James’s more strident remarks, Schiller, Dewey, Rorty, et al). Throughout pragmatism’s history, these two strands have been in conflict about the nature and significance of pragmatism.
2. *Influence:* Truth-affirming pragmatism, far from having been eclipsed or marginalized by analytic philosophy, actually inspired and informed it (particularly through Ramsey and Wittgenstein), so that in reality, pragmatist ideas *were* at the center of the debate in much of the twentieth century. Truth-denying pragmatism, though it fell out of favor during the first half of the 20th century as Dewey’s influence waned, nevertheless enjoyed a significant revival and renewal through the work of neo-pragmatists like Rorty and Putnam, and neo-classical scholars such as Joseph Margolis, Erin McKenna, Colin Koopman, and Scott Pratt.

Misak’s narrative has the significant virtue of acknowledging, taking seriously, and explaining the tensions within pragmatism so obvious from (for example) Peirce’s frustration with James, and in particular his disavowal of a kind of pragmatism associated with the doxastic voluntarism of “The Will to Believe.”

In the spirit of continuing the conversation Misak’s important books began, and in the spirit of pragmatism itself, I propose to focus this paper on the *consequences* of her narrative for pragmatism and its relationship with the methods and problems of contemporary analytic philosophy.[[2]](#endnote-2) In this paper I examine a case study—debate about the existence of free will—in order to explore residual tensions between Misak’s truth-affirming, Peircean pragmatism and mainstream analytic philosophy. I suggest that the truth-affirming strand of pragmatism comes with a metaphysical commitment to the existence of rational self-control, and thereby to the existence of free will. I also suggest, however, that such pragmatism offers few clues about how such a commitment should be sustained in the face of skeptical arguments within contemporary, naturalistic analytic metaphysics.

My hope is that this case study will raise broader, fruitful questions about how pragmatists ought to handle tensions arising between our most basic metaphysical commitments and skeptical challenges to those commitments grounded in science and metaphysics. Like my fellow analytic pragmatists Aikin and Talisse, I suspect that one of the consequences of Misak’s new narrative is that it requires us to revisit and reconsider our understanding of the relationship between pragmatism and various forms of skepticism.[[3]](#endnote-3) Far from being straightforwardly antagonistic, Misak’s analytic pragmatism may require us to take some forms of skepticism more seriously. But this necessitates revisiting how pragmatists can make and sustain metaphysical commitments alongside their sympathy or alignment with analytic philosophy.

2. Free Will Skepticism

Many pragmatists take a dim view of metaphysics, so it is popular to assume that to be a pragmatist is (at least in part) to refuse to engage in or to take metaphysics seriously. This view is of course simplistic, and Misak’s work has been particularly valuable in pointing this out. In *Cambridge Pragmatism*, she writes:

Peirce saw his purpose as providing a guide to the method of inquiry, not as giving us a metaphysics, a transcendental argument about truth, or some other such grand thing. This is not to deny that Peirce makes metaphysical commitments in developing his guide to inquiry. Still, he is suspicious of metaphysically laden answers to philosophical problems, opting for less-inflated solutions where feasible. This anti-metaphysical stance is partly constitutive of what it is to be a pragmatist. (2016: 11)

Even those sympathetic to what Misak might consider the ‘truth-denying’ strand of pragmatism argue that pragmatists were trying to ‘reconstruct’ rather than eliminate or ignore metaphysics altogether.[[4]](#endnote-4) I take it to be a somewhat open question, then, what pragmatists do or should say about a traditional metaphysical problem like that of free will vs. determinism. I believe that it’s also a question well worth asking and that we stand to learn important things (about both pragmatism and free will) from doing so. This is because the metaphysics of free will is relevant to a phenomenon that is central to the nature of pragmatism *qua* theory of inquiry, namely the nature and scope of *rational self-control.*

Peirce and James both took an interest in the traditional metaphysical problem of free will vs. determinism.[[5]](#endnote-5) Both men clearly believed in the existence of some degree of free will and responsibility, and they frequently said so, albeit more or less stridently and more or less explicitly over the course of their careers. However, both men also endorsed what Peirce called *tychism*, a form of indeterminism. What follows from this for their particular conception and defense of free will (e.g., some form of libertarianism?) is far from obvious, as is the answer to the question what exact positions the two men endorsed. For tychism can be considered compatible or incompatible with free will just as determinism can. That is, to say that some events or actions are the result of chance or are ‘spontaneous,’ as tychism does, is clearly not the same as to say that they are free (nor is it obvious whether or how it *entails* that actions can be free). Thus, while Peirce and James seem consistently to affirm the possibility of genuine freedom and responsibility, their remarks are usually qualified, and their views clearly shifted (particularly Peirce’s) over the course of their careers.

To focus our discussion, let us state a very basic version of the problem. Let free will be (very roughly) the notion of a psychological capacity to exert voluntary control over (at least some of) our actions. Let Free Will Skepticism(hereafterFWS)be the claim that we have good reasons to think that we lack any such capacity, where such reasons might be empirical evidence such as recent neuroscientific findings or theories, or *a priori* metaphysical arguments such as the consequence argument.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Why should pragmatists care about this problem? First, I think it’s of independent interest to see what pragmatists could or did say about it. In particular, I think it is a useful opportunity or case study for examining three ideas central to Misak’s reading of Peirce: the pragmatic maxim and its role in clarifying or (de)legitimizing metaphysical hypotheses, pragmatism’s anti-skeptical fallibilism and its role in defusing skeptical doubts, and modest transcendentalism or the appeal to regulative assumptions. Each of these themes speak to the broader question of how pragmatists who consider themselves a part of the analytic tradition should approach metaphysical debates that remain of interest to contemporary analytic metaphysicians.

Second, in recent decades analytic philosophers have grown increasingly interested—partly in response to political developments in the West, such as fake news and group polarization—in the issue of doxastic control (i.e., whether or to what extent we can exert control over our beliefs). Those, like Misak, Aikin, Talisse, and myself, often styled as ‘analytic pragmatists,’ ought, I think, to share this interest, given the fundamental importance of Peirce’s theory of inquiry and given that FWS might pose a threat to that theory. Such a threat might take the form of an anti-voluntarist argument (of the sort popularized by Alston 1988, for example). This anti-voluntarist argument might run roughly as follows.

Peirce argues (in “The Fixation of Belief”) that we ought to adopt the method of science. Peirce also seems to be committed to the principle that *ought implies can* and thus presumably believes that we *can* voluntarily adopt the method of science. His goal, after all, is to convince us that the method of science is, of the four he considers, the only legitimate method of inquiry. Hence, Peirce seems committed to saying that we have some measure of control over what we believe (this is entailed by these other assumptions and has considerable independent textual support).[[7]](#endnote-7) Chris Hookway labels this the capacity for *rational self-control—*ameasure of control over our beliefs and the methods of inquiry we use to obtain them.[[8]](#endnote-8) If we have a measure of control over the methods of inquiry upon which we rely, then *ipso facto* we have a measure of control over at least some of our actions. Hence, Misak’s Peirce (hereafter MP) seems committed to some form/degree of free will (at least in the doxastic realm, where, ironically, its existence is considered most controversial).[[9]](#endnote-9)

There are, in reality, many more steps in the above argument, and any one of them could be mistaken (I’m glossing over them for now, as I am currently developing the argument elsewhere). My claim in this brief section, however, is a modest one—merely that there are multiple reasons why it might be of interest to pragmatists to consider the right response to FWS. I also take it that any good pragmatist will be willing to play along for now, on the assumption that the proof of the pudding is in the eating.

3. Three of MP’s Anti-Skeptical Strategies

In what follows I review three pragmatist ideas briefly mentioned above—those most likely to yield insight into a pragmatist response to FWS. One possibility is that by applying the pragmatic maxim to FWS, we might discover that the hypothesis that we lack free will is illegitimate, because pragmatically empty, and thus unworthy of further consideration. A second possibility is that MP’s unique anti-skeptical, fallibilist epistemology might provide some kind of solution to, or dissolution of, the problem, by exposing the relevant skeptical doubts as illegitimate or paper doubts. A third and final possibility is that a solution to (or dissolution of) the free will problem emerges from MP’s modest transcendentalism, his appeal to regulative assumptions.

3.1 The Pragmatic Maxim

Applying the pragmatic maxim to a philosophical hypothesis is usually thought to have two possible outcomes: either (1) vindication/tractability—we successfully identify the practical consequences of our hypothesis, thereby establishing its legitimacy and making it easier to determine its truth or falsity (by suggesting ways to test for those consequences); or (2) dissolution/deflation—we discover that the hypothesis totally lacks practical consequences and thereby grant ourselves permission to dismiss it as idle. In reality, of course, we might first stumble upon a third, presumably temporary outcome: (3) ambiguity theory—the metaphysical hypothesis (or some key concept within it) proves to be ambiguous. In this case, we will first need to disambiguate the hypothesis, or make it more precise, before we can determine which of outcomes (1) or (2) we will ultimately reach, for each of the possible disambiguations or precisifications. One of the great virtues of MP’s pragmatism, I believe, is that it acknowledges that testing an hypothesis, or disambiguating it, may take some considerable time and effort. The key question is what *would* happen, *were* we to pursue inquiry (as Misak puts it) “as far as it could fruitfully go.”

Which of these outcomes is most likely when we apply the maxim to the hypothesis FWS? If we go by the evidence of “How to Make Our Ideas Clear,” then the answer appears unambiguous: outcome (2). The following passage occurs shortly after Peirce introduces the pragmatic maxim for the first time, and it is supposed to be an illustration of its use in deciding the legitimacy of a metaphysical hypothesis.

For example, the question of free-will and fate in its simplest form, stripped of verbiage, is something like this: I have done something of which I am ashamed; could I, by an effort of the will, have resisted the temptation, and done otherwise? The philosophical reply is, that *this is not a question of fact, but only of the arrangement of facts.* Arranging them so as to exhibit what is particularly pertinent to my question—namely, that I ought to blame myself for having done wrong—it is perfectly true to say that, if I had willed to do otherwise than I did, I should have done otherwise. On the other hand, arranging the facts so as to exhibit another important consideration, it is equally true that, when a temptation has once been allowed to work, it will, if it has a certain force, produce its effect, let me struggle how I may. There is no objection to a contradiction in what would result from a false supposition. The *reductio ad absurdum* consists in showing that contradictory results would follow from a hypothesis which is consequently judged to be false. Many questions are involved in the free-will discussion, and I am far from desiring to say that both sides are equally right. On the contrary, I am of the opinion that one side denies important facts, and that the other does not. But what I do say is, that *the above single question was the origin of the whole doubt; that, had it not been for this question, the controversy would never have arisen; and that this question is perfectly solved in the manner which I have indicated.* (W3:267, CP 5.403, EP 1: 132­–133, 1878; first and third emphases added)

If Peirce were correct here, then this would be good news for pragmatists, as it would eliminate the anti-voluntarist threat to their theory of inquiry canvassed in section 2.[[10]](#endnote-10) However, since our focus is *Misak’s* Peirce, I believe we must reject the idea that this verdict on FWS can be correct. Specifically, MP changed his mind about the maxim, in a way that pretty clearly undermines his argument above. Hence, I think the answer is that we get outcome (3)—at least for the time being, unless/until we say a lot more about the nature of the problem, or free will itself. In the remainder of this section, I argue for this conclusion.

The trouble with the passage from “How to Make Our Ideas Clear” is that Peirce’s argument relies upon a premise that we know he later came to reject. Immediately before the passage just quoted, Peirce wrote that “the question of what would occur under circumstances which do not actually arise is not a question of fact, but only of the most perspicuous arrangement of them” (CP 5.403, EP 1: 132). This premise notoriously led Peirce to make the deeply implausible claim that “all hard bodies remain perfectly soft until they are touched, when their hardness increases with the pressure until they are scratched” (ibid.). (More precisely, he says there “would be no *falsity* in such modes of speech.”) Peirce later renounced this implausible claim, writing of his former self:

He said that if a diamond were to be formed in bed of cotton wool, and were to be consumed there without ever having been pressed upon by any hard edge or point, it would be merely a question of nomenclature whether that diamond should be said to have been hard or not. No doubt this is true, except for the abominable falsehood in the word MERELY, implying that symbols are unreal. Nomenclature involves classification; and classification is true or false, and the generals to which it refers are either reals in the one case, or figments in the other. (CP 5.453, EP 2: 354, 1905)

Thus, as many influential interpreters agree (e.g., Atkin, Hookway, Misak, et al.), between 1878 and roughly 1905 Peirce shifted from what he called ‘nominalism’ to a form of subjunctive or modal realism (Peirce called it ‘Scholastic Realism’). This move led Peirce to make substantive changes to his conception of pragmatism and to the maxim itself (substantive enough that he renamed the resulting position ‘pragmaticism’). These changes at least re-open the question of the real relationship between the maxim and a metaphysical hypothesis like FWS.

Consider, then, a later version of the maxim, which reflects Peirce’s shift to Scholastic Realism:

Pragmatism is the principle that every theoretical judgment expressible in a sentence in the indicative mood is a confused form of thought whose only meaning, if it has any, lies in its tendency to enforce a corresponding practical maxim expressible as a conditional sentence having its [consequent] in the imperative mood. (CP 5.18, 1903)

There is obviously a great deal to say about what this means. Since my task here is very specific, however, I shall set aside everything except the bare essentials. That task is to determine whether or not the maxim provides us with a justification for ignoring or dismissing FWS, or the anti-voluntarist argument against pragmatism based upon it. Misak explains how the maxim might be thought to help us with this kind of problem:

[The maxim says] that philosophers should aim to formulate their hypotheses so that they have consequences. Wherever we can, we ought to formulate hypotheses the truth or falsity of which would have experiential effects. Along with this recommendation comes a standard for evaluation and criticism. The philosophical hypothesis is *flawed* if there is no way its truth might make any difference in the world. (2004: 34)

What would it look like, then, for a metaphysical hypothesis to fail the test of legitimacy? Misak suggests Russell’s hypothesis as a likely candidate, viz. the hypothesis that “the world and everything in it was created five minutes ago” (ibid.). If this hypothesis were true, then by definition it would have no practical consequences distinct from the hypothesis we already believe—that the world and everything in it has existed for billions of years. The only things we could possibly attend to, the only tests we could possibly perform, would all rely upon facts perfectly consistent with both hypotheses. Hence, this hypothesis, lacking consequences that could render it testable, appears—not false, since we have no means of confirming or disconfirming it, but—illegitimate. It does not pass the test of the maxim and is thus not worthy of serious consideration.

So this raises the question whether applying the pragmatic maxim demonstrates that FWS is flawed in this way. That is, if we subject this hypothesis to the test described in the maxim, does it appear that its truth or falsity makes no difference in the world? Do we find it impossible to identify ‘corresponding practical maxims’ in the ‘imperative mood’? I think there are three reasons to be skeptical that the answer to these questions could be ‘yes.’

First, as I’ve already noted, Peirce did not dismiss the problem of free will. He clearly took determinism seriously and recognized the tension between determinism and freedom.[[11]](#endnote-11) James too, though his position on the issue is perhaps less nuanced, saw a need to *argue for* the existence of freedom. If the pragmatists themselves did not obviously think the pragmatic maxim dissolved the problem (at least all-things-considered), that weighs strongly against thinking that it does.

Second, even if we set aside what the pragmatists themselves thought or wrote about FWS, the attempt to dissolve the problem of free will seems likely to beg the question against the anti-voluntarist argument canvassed earlier. That is, suppose the pragmatist can apply the maxim in a way that plausibly supports the conclusion that FWS is a flawed (because pragmatically empty) hypothesis. The maxim, and reliance upon it, are—on most interpretations—a core commitment of philosophical pragmatism. The anti-voluntarist argument is an objection to pragmatism. It appears question-begging to rely upon the maxim (that is, upon pragmatism) in order to dismiss an objection to pragmatism.

This challenge may of course have an answer, but it seems likely to be a substantive rather than a dismissive one—that is, it will involve developing some positive argument, which addresses pragmatism’s theory of inquiry, the nature of the problem of free will, pragmatism’s approach to metaphysics, and the relationships between all these things.[[12]](#endnote-12) The central argument of this paper is precisely that pragmatists need to develop just such a substantive response to the problem, instead of hoping or expecting that—being a case of ‘ontological metaphysics’—it can be safely ignored or dismissed as ‘gibberish.’

The third reason I am skeptical that the maxim dissolves the problem is that I think FWS pretty obviously has some practical consequences (even if identifying them is a contentious business). The pragmatist would surely be justified in asking what sorts of consequences are supposed to follow if FWS were true—this is an interesting and important question. However, it’s hardly a question that need leave metaphysicians scratching their heads. There are lots of things that such skeptics claim follow from the non-existence of free will. Chief among these is the notorious ‘pessimist’ claim that our concept of responsibility lacks all application.[[13]](#endnote-13) That is, many skeptics believe that if FWS is true, then there is simply no such thing as a responsible agent. Thus, were we to subject FWS to the test of the pragmatic maxim, we could presumably derive a conditional practical maxim with a consequent like ‘do not hold people responsible for their actions (or beliefs) on the basis of desert.’[[14]](#endnote-14) How we test for the appearance of such consequences is not at all obvious. But that is a different sort of worry about the hypothesis than its clearly having no such consequences at all.

I therefore suspect that FWS may survive scrutiny by means of (even the later, emended form of) the pragmatic maxim—it seems likely to pass its test of philosophical legitimacy, to have pragmatic meaning. That is, it seems likely to have consequences, which we can frame as appropriate practical maxims expressible as conditionals having their consequents in the imperative mood. If we were hoping to find a good reason to think MP offers us some way to dissolve or dismiss the problem of free will, I suggest we look elsewhere.

3.2 Anti-Skepticism

For many of its adherents, one of the defining features of pragmatism is its opposition to various forms of skepticism. For example, the late Hilary Putnam once described the reconciliation of fallibilism and anti-skepticism as “*the* unique insight of American pragmatism” (1994: 152). So in seeking out reasons to dismiss FWS, let us turn our attention next to MP’s response to Cartesian skepticism and consider whether it can be successfully extended to cover FWS. I shall argue it cannot.

FWS says that we have good reasons at least to doubt whether or not we have free will (e.g., the findings and theories of recent neuroscience, the consequence argument, etc.). The equivalent premise for a Cartesian skeptic would say roughly that we have good reasons to doubt whether or not we are capable of knowledge (e.g., the unreliability of the senses, the possibility of a deceptive God or demon, the more recent simulation argument / Matrix-like scenarios, etc.).

Peirce offers two main criticisms of Cartesian skepticism (at least as I think Misak and I read him):[[15]](#endnote-15)

1. **The task of answering skeptical doubt is *pointless* or *unmotivated*.** This is because doubt is not a state one can experience voluntarily. Rather, doubt arises involuntarily as the result of some surprising experience, one that upsets a settled habit or disposition, and thus makes us question our beliefs. Hence, if the basis for the Cartesian argument is doubt that we claimed to generate voluntarily through various thought-experiments, then the argument is unmotivated, and refuting it is pointless.
2. **The task of answering skeptical doubt is *impossible*.** This is because in addition to being involuntary, genuine doubt requires a reason, which makes completely general or systematic doubt impossible, since any reason one has to doubt something is going to be something else one believes. Hence, again, Cartesian doubt—like any systematic skeptical doubt—is illegitimate, because it lacks justification.

I do not propose to discuss here whether or not these two criticisms of Cartesian skepticism are valid.[[16]](#endnote-16) It does not matter for our purposes here. Remember that our question is simply whether this strategy (if it *were* successful) could be adapted to supply us with permission to dismiss or ignore FWS. I believe it cannot, for two reasons.

First, doubts about free will are not systematic in the same way as Cartesian doubts about knowledge. FWS does not threaten, nor even purport to threaten, everything we know about ourselves and the world. This is not to say that FWS is not a radical view, nor that it lacks far-reaching consequences. It is merely to note that, by its very nature, it does not preclude the possibility that we are able to marshal *reasons*, based on other beliefs, in favor of the skeptical hypothesis.[[17]](#endnote-17) Thus, the second of Peirce’s criticisms is—at best—not decisive against free will skepticism. It does not grant us permission to ignore or dismiss FWS.

Second, doubts about the existence of free will are not obviously ‘paper doubts,’ resulting merely from voluntary pretense or idle speculation. In reality, these doubts typically emerge from highly specific scientific findings (e.g., Libet experiments) and from equally specific philosophical principles we have plenty of other reasons (whether good or bad) to consider and take seriously, if not endorse (e.g., nothing can be *causa sui*). So this is not a case where we are obviously entitled to the view that we are free or in control of our beliefs simply on the grounds that we lack any good reason to doubt it. We seem to have plenty of apparently good reasons to doubt it, and so we need some way to lay those doubts to rest.

The above argument leaves open the possibility that we shall discover, in the course of our discussion of FWS, other reasons to think the relevant doubts unfounded. Here, our concern is only with whether or not MP provides us with a means of *dissolving* the problem of free will. If the above argument is correct, then this second anti-skeptical strategy, borrowed from MP’s critique of Descartes, also fails to deliver this outcome.

3.3 Modest Transcendentalism, Hope, and Regulative Assumptions

Misak, in defending Peirce’s conception of truth, deploys the notion of a *regulative assumption* and the related notion of *hope*. That is, when Peirce makes a controversial metaphysical commitment (to the knowability of truth), Misak defends this commitment from common objections by interpreting this commitment as regulative rather than constitutive.This ‘modest transcendentalism,’ as Hookway (via Stroud) christened this strategy, turns a contentious metaphysical claim into a regulative assumption or hope, which is something less than a straightforward commitment to (or assertion of) a substantive claim. The argument is a form of transcendentalism because it begins with the observation that it is a condition on the possibility of engaging in a certain practice (such as inquiry) that we believe a particular hypothesis (e.g., that we have a capacity for rational self-control). The argument is *modest*, however, in that it does not purport to establish the *truth* of that hypothesis, but instead merely that *it is rational for us to hope* that it is true.

To preserve Misak’s contention and influence narrative, I take it that we must be careful not to conflate this approach with James’s view in “The Will to Believe”—that genuine, full-blooded belief in free will (or God’s existence, or whatever) can be justified on purely pragmatic or ‘passional’ grounds (e.g., James clearly associates FWS with a kind of pessimism, liable to lead one to despair, and pragmatism about free will with a kind of optimism, which drives inquiry forward and vindicates our faith in the meaningfulness of life).

What then is the truth-*affirming* pragmatist’s response to FWS, and how does it avoid the many objections leveled against “The Will to Believe”? It is, again, that we have adequate reason to *hope* that FWS is false, because this hope is a *regulative assumption of inquiry*. Hookway writes:

[Peirce’s] conception of logic and the normative sciences rests upon the supposition—or hope—that reasoning can increase our control over how we determine our conduct and the future course of events. Although he does not discuss the matter in much detail, it is plain that Peirce does not endorse the kind of compatibilism which claims that such rational self-control is compatible with the truth of physical determinism. … Certainly, Peirce thinks that *unless we had the freedom to decide upon which of a range of possible futures were realized, there would be no point in developing the sort of logic of which pragmatism forms a part. If our decisions do not shape the world, if we cannot control it, we do not need a methodological maxim designed to increase our rational self-control.* (1985: 43, my emphasis)

This is very similar (unsurprisingly perhaps) to Kant’s idea that “Freedom … is practically necessary—man must therefore act according to an Idea of freedom, and he cannot act otherwise” (Kant 1902, 29/898).[[18]](#endnote-18) It falls short of this, however, in that Peirce explicitly distanced himself from traditional transcendental argumentation (hence the qualifier ‘modest’). Hookway interprets this distancing as Peirce resisting the urge to assert practically necessary hypotheses, that is, to present them as true.

Thus, I take it that the truth-affirming pragmatist should say about free will something like the following. We instinctively, and perhaps unavoidably, believe in our own freedom, including our doxastic freedom (particularly when we ask *the logical question*, as Peirce called it). We take there to be some justification for this belief, though we may find ourselves unable to say what it is. Given that this belief appears both justified and unavoidable, skeptical arguments for FWS are unlikely to produce genuine doubt (indeed, it may be *impossible* for them to do so). Thus, rather than motivating us to inquire in the traditional sense (i.e., motivating us to seek out positive support for our belief in free will), skeptical arguments instead motivate us only to pursue a negative goal—the goal of debunking the skeptical challenge itself.

This subtle difference is an important one, because it represents a change in the burden of proof, and thus in the normative standards appropriate to evaluating the arguments we might give. When faced with a skeptical challenge that makes us genuinely doubt that *p*, it looks like the burden of proof is on *us* to fix the belief that *p* (preferably using the method of science), since it has now become unstable. When faced with a skeptical challenge that merely causes us to doubt *the challenge itself*, the burden of proof appears to remain with *the skeptic*, who must persuade us that *their skeptical challenge is legitimate grounds for doubt*. The most that is required of us is an explanation of why we are unmoved by the skeptical challenge, and here the appeal to regulative assumptions or practical necessity is quite sufficient.

In other work (Howat 2013) I have expressed strong sympathy with arguments along these lines, and I have even relied upon them to defend a version of Peirce’s conception of truth. However, when it is applied to the case of free will, I have a number of worries about it. I raise them here as friendly invitations to Misak to clarify some issues, large and small, regarding the role of modest transcendentalism in (putatively) insulating pragmatists from traditional metaphysical problems relating to their ontological commitments.

The Risk of Dogmatism

The way that modest transcendentalism relies upon resisting a shift in the burden of proof has a whiff of dogmatism about it. Suppose I am a cult member who has been subjected to years of brainwashing at the hands of my cult leader. In some good sense of the word ‘cannot,’ I *cannot* be induced to doubt the veracity of my cult leader’s teachings. Why, though, should this mean that the burden of proof lies with you, who sees my cult for what it is, to disprove the cult leader’s teachings? Isn’t the argumentative deficit here *ex hypothesi* mine, not yours? By analogy, supposing that it’s true that I *cannot* (because of human psychological limitations) doubt that I am capable of rational self-control, why should this entail that the burden of proof lies with the skeptic to prove otherwise?

Skeptical worries, as Hookway has noted, often raise the specter of a kind of reflective estrangement or alienation from those acritical certainties or regulative assumptions that we cannot help but take for granted. It’s not obvious how pointing to our psychological limitations could ever provide us with any *reassurance* in the face of such estrangement. Perhaps more importantly, however, there is a danger that such a strategy constitutes *blocking the road of inquiry*, in the sense that it requires us to abandon consideration of what seems to be a meaningful hypothesis—that we lack free will, and/or any control over what we believe.

Presumably, we want to say that there is a clear disanalogy between the two cases here, in that the cult member is the victim of a delusion, which is by nature *abnormal* psychology. Raising the same worry about *normal* psychology may seem to be unmotivated in much the same way as Cartesian skeptical doubt. Whilst (again) I am sympathetic to this line of thought, it’s not obvious to me that it’s in keeping with pragmatism’s commitments to (a) naturalism, and thus (b) taking seriously the findings of the natural sciences. Caruso, summarizing how other naturalistic, analytic philosophers have responded to such findings, notes an interesting shift in their conception of the *problem* of free will:

Even some compatibilists now admit that because of [various] behavioral, cognitive, and neuroscientific findings “free will is at best an occasional phenomenon” (Baumeister 2008b, 17). This is an important concession because it acknowledges that the threat of shrinking agency—as Thomas Nadelhoffer 2011 calls it—remains a serious one independent of any traditional concerns over determinism. That is, even if one believes free will and causal determinism can be reconciled, the deflationary view of consciousness which emerges from these empirical findings must still be confronted, including the fact that we often lack transparent awareness of our true motivational states. Such a deflationary view of consciousness is potentially agency undermining and must be dealt with *independent of, and in addition to*, the traditional compatibilist/incompatibilist debate. (2014, December 22)

Thus, the issue is that pragmatists, given their commitment to taking the findings of the natural sciences seriously, also seem (thereby) to be committed to taking the threat of shrinking agency seriously, which is to say they are committed to taking (at least a current form of) FWS seriously. This is *despite* it being true that our having rational self-control, and thus free will, also seems to be a regulative assumption of inquiry.

The Need for Confidence

Peirce holds that when it comes to regulative assumptions “we are obliged to suppose,” but “we need not assert” them (CP 2.66, 1902; quoted at Misak 2013: 51; 2011: 266). Misak explains this idea further:

Peirce seems to be suggesting that there is a propositional attitude, alternative to belief, which is appropriate in certain circumstances. It is of course an open question whether adopting this kind of attitude towards the proposition “this chasm is jumpable” or “we can capture this position” would be sufficient to instill the confidence required to successfully jump the chasm or capture the position. (2011: 273n15)

For the purposes of defending pragmatism, or the idea that we have the capacity for rational self-control, from FWS, this presumably cannot remain an open-question but must be settled. That is, adopting the doxastic attitude of ‘hope’ towards the existence of our own capacity for rational self-control seems like it *must* be sufficient to instill the confidence required to exert such control, otherwise selecting and implementing the method of science is a goal beyond our reach. How, then, are we to go about settling this question?

Circularity

Is there an unavoidable circularity in this argument form? That is, when one argues against FWS, one is inquiring, and *ex hypothesi*, when we inquire we assume we have rational self-control and thus free will, which entails that one is assuming the very things one is now trying to prove. Peirce himself seems sensitive to these kinds of circularity concerns in “Fixation”(when he worries about relying upon his method of inquiry to justify that same method of inquiry), so it may be that Misak wishes to adapt Peirce’s various replies in that paper to this situation.

FWS is intelligible

Modest transcendentalism (at least the way Hookway develops it) only works if there is something unintelligible about the skeptical doubt itself. Perhaps this merely reflects my own failings, but I have been unable to identify any good grounds in this paper for calling FWS ‘unintelligible,’ despite considering the most popular pragmatist strategies for doing so.

Thus, given all of the arguments in this paper, I have yet to be convinced that MP can offer us a compelling diagnosis of or response to the metaphysical problem of free will and the threat it seems to pose to pragmatism’s foundational metaphysical commitment to our possessing a capacity for rational self-control. This is why I suspect that realizing Misak’s vision of a form of pragmatism deeply embedded in contemporary analytic philosophy may require us to develop a fuller picture of whether and how pragmatists can sustain metaphysical commitments in the face of such skeptical challenges.

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1. NOTES

   Misak is not alone (see, e.g., Richardson 2002, 2003, and Talisse 2007). The inspiration for these labels comes from Aikin and Talisse 2018, chapter 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. I do not address the question whether Misak’s narrative is correct—I leave that to historians more qualified than I am. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See especially Aikin and Talisse 2018, chapter 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See, e.g., Stuhr 1992. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See especially Peirce’s “The Doctrine of Necessity Examined” and James’s “The Dilemma of Determinism,” the third of James’s *Lectures*, etc. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Under the heading of empirical research, I have personally found Wright 2017 and Gazzaniga 2011 particularly interesting and compelling. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. As Misak points out, “Peirce says that ‘it is idle to discuss the ‘legitimacy’ of that which cannot be controlled” (2004: 78). Misak is citing CP 6.522 (1901). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See especially Hookway 1990. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. To be clear, this paper explores the views of *Misak’s Peirce.* I take no position here concerning (a) whether or not Misak’s Peirce is (as it were) the ‘real’ Peirce, or (b) what other versions of Peirce might have written or believed about free will. Those are historical and interpretive questions beyond my remit here. For my part I find Misak’s interpretation of Peirce to be the most compelling available; however, I do not argue for this view here. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. However, the argument would obviously need careful elaboration and defense, since its exact structure and its plausibility are far from clear from this brief statement. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. For example, in “Fiske’s *The Idea of God*,” he wrote, “All the minds which have been formed under the influence of physical science do believe that the events of this world are brought about by force and chance, and *freedom is either not allowed to deflect a molecule from its necessitated path, or at least freedom is restricted within extremely narrow limits* (W 5: 261, 1885; emphasis added). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. I am in the process of developing just such an argument, one which exploits an ambiguity in pragmatism proposed by Aikin and Talisse (2005), between its *inquiry* dimension and its *meaning* dimension. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. See Strawson 2008. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. For recent work on what a world without responsibility norms might look like, see, e.g., Waller forthcoming and Caruso 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. This summary also draws upon Peirce’s “Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man” and “Some Consequences of Four Incapacities,” Haack 1982, and my own 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. See my 2013 for such an argument. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. One might think an argument along these lines is suggested by Kant’s position on free will, but my current view is that such an argument cannot succeed on its own (though it may nevertheless have things to teach us). Again, I’m developing this line of thought elsewhere. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Later in the same work (1985: 55) Hookway writes: “It is a point familiar from the work of Aristotle, Kant and others that, insofar as we view ourselves as engaged in controlled and rational deliberation, as reasoning in an autonomous and responsible fashion, we cannot look upon our ends as psychologically determined, but must see ourselves as free to adopt any standards or purposes that we think we ought to adopt.” [↑](#endnote-ref-18)