

ROCKMORE ON ANALYTIC PRAGMATISM

SCOTT F. AIKIN AND ROBERT B. TALISSE

Abstract: This article responds critically to Tom Rockmore's essay "On Classical and Neo-Analytic Forms of Pragmatism," which appeared in *Metaphilosophy* in 2005. Rockmore charges analytic pragmatism with having a conflicted epistemology, relying on incoherent appropriations of Hegel, and maintaining an unpragmatic commitment to metaphysical realism. We rebut these charges by arguing that what Rockmore sees as conflicted in analytic pragmatist epistemology is simply fallibilism, that appropriations of Hegel needn't be as global as Rockmore claims, and that commitments to metaphysical realism need not disqualify philosophers from being pragmatists.

Keywords: analytic philosophy, fallibilism, foundationalism, idealism, pragmatism, realism, Rockmore, Hegel.

In a recent contribution to *Metaphilosophy* entitled "On Classical and Neo-Analytic Forms of Pragmatism," Tom Rockmore (2005) argues against "neo-analytic" forms of pragmatism and in favor of "classical" pragmatism.¹ Rockmore sees analytic pragmatists as sharing with their classical ancestors a commitment to the project of formulating a "viable nonfoundationalist, postfoundationalist, or antifoundationalist approach to knowledge"; however, he alleges that analytic pragmatists make the mistake of not following classical pragmatists in their wholesale revolt against "Cartesianism of any kind" (2005, 270). That is, Rockmore contends that analytic pragmatists still "hew to the Cartesian metaphysical realist standard" and, accordingly, inherit the very problems that classical pragmatists were bold and innovative enough to eschew (2005, 270).

In this brief response, we do not challenge directly Rockmore's admittedly "rapid" characterization of classical pragmatism (2005, 264). Nor do we engage his account of the historical trajectories connecting analytic pragmatism with analytic philosophy in general or

¹ Rockmore uses the term *neo-analytic pragmatism* to describe his target. We do not see the value of the "neo," and in fact think Rockmore might have been better served by the term *analytic neopragmatism* (a term he uses on the first page of his essay). In any case, we will speak simply of *analytic pragmatism*.

with what he calls “Classical English empiricism” (2005, 265). Instead, we focus on Rockmore’s own way of drawing the contrast between analytic and classical pragmatism. Ultimately we argue that Rockmore’s arguments do not establish his conclusion that with the rise of analytic pragmatism the term *pragmatism* has been “stretched beyond its limits in a way that does more harm than good in veiling if not actually obscuring central tenets that are well worth preserving” (2005, 259).

Rockmore fixes his target by means of three contrasts that he takes to be crucial between classical and analytic pragmatism: “One difference is a certain tendency for neo-analytic pragmatists, unlike classical pragmatists, to eschew epistemological justifications of claims to know. Another concerns the relation to Hegel (and idealism). A third relates to the commitment to realism” (2005, 270). Because Rockmore’s first and third contrasts are tightly related, we treat them together. Let us engage first Rockmore’s second point of contrast, concerning the relation of analytic pragmatism to Hegel.

Rockmore claims that analytic appropriations of Hegel’s arguments involve a “paradox” (2005, 267). Rockmore correctly notes that analytic pragmatists like Sellars and Brandom avail themselves of Hegelian arguments—for example, the sense-certainty argument from the *Phenomenology*—but do not accept Hegel’s idealism as a whole. Rockmore contends that this is an error; he claims that there is “an outright contradiction” in this analytic appropriation of Hegelian arguments and the rejection of idealism. Rockmore writes, “It makes no sense to accept Hegel but to reject idealism. To be consistent, analytic thinkers can reject no more than some forms of idealism, not idealism as such” (2005, 267). Rockmore’s argument is that Sellars’s failure to embrace some form of idealism after employing the sense-certainty argument commits Sellars to “an outright contradiction” (2005, 267).

But Rockmore is moving too quickly here. He correctly claims that “it makes no sense to accept Hegel but to reject idealism” (2005, 267), yet he charges Sellars with this obvious error after noting, again correctly, that Sellars borrows Hegel’s argument against sense-certainty in devising his own critique of the given. That is, Rockmore contends that to endorse the sense-certainty argument is to “accept Hegel,” apparently in toto. This raises two closely related questions. The first is whether Hegel’s holism is required for the soundness of the sense-certainty argument: Must the entirety of Hegel’s system be true for the sense-certainty argument to be sound? The second depends upon an affirmative answer to the first and concerns whether Sellars’s version of the sense-certainty argument in “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind” has the same dependence: Does Sellars’s appropriation of the sense-certainty argument retain the dependence on Hegel’s entire system? Rockmore holds both that Hegel’s argument cannot be sound without the presumption of idealism *and* that

Sellars's version of the argument retains the dependence. But it is not clear that either claim is true.

Hegel's argument certainly proceeds from a substantive view of demonstratives as mediated, but there is nothing *uniquely idealist* about this thesis.² That Hegel is an idealist, that the sense-certainty argument plays a crucial role in Hegel's system, and that it is likely that *Hegel* understood the sense-certainty argument as not being detachable from the whole of his system does *not* entail that the sense-certainty argument in fact is not detachable. What Rockmore needs here is a *demonstration* that the sense-certainty argument necessarily relies upon some uniquely *idealist* premise; only this would establish the claim that, in borrowing the sense-certainty argument, Sellars is bound on pain of contradiction to "accept Hegel," or some other form of idealism. Rockmore offers no such argument.

Furthermore, even if we grant Rockmore's view that Hegel's sense-certainty argument *does* depend on idealism, it is still an open question as to whether Sellars's version entails the same commitments. To explain: Certainly if Hegel is *right* it would be an "outright contradiction" (Rockmore 2005, 267) to borrow an argument from Hegel and yet reject idealism; for if Hegel is right, the soundness of any of his arguments derives from the correctness of his view as a whole. But it is not clear that Hegel's idealism—along with its corresponding holist commitments—is right. In other words, the claim that the sense-certainty argument is sound only if considered against the backdrop of Hegel's idealism is true if *Hegel's idealism* is correct. But if Hegel's idealism is correct, then we shouldn't be concerned about the opposition of analytic and classical pragmatism. In fact, we shouldn't worry about pragmatism at all—we should simply *abandon* pragmatism altogether because Hegel is right, and James and Dewey are not.³ So Rockmore's charge that analytic pragmatists who appropriate Hegelian arguments are committed to an outright contradiction presupposes that Hegelian idealism is true, and thus that pragmatism *of any stripe* is false or at least *aufgehoben*. Accordingly, if Rockmore is correct, pragmatists have more trouble than the fact that they have inappropriately borrowed an argument. If Rockmore is correct, pragmatism's entire philosophical program is bankrupt.

² The view, in fact, is very old, and its genesis is not idealist in any modern sense. Socrates' requirement of an account in definitions amounts to the commitment that ostensive definition cannot function independently of the concepts in question (*Euthyphro* 6e). In addition, Augustine's views on the function and understanding of words in *The Teacher* are that demonstratives are contentful only parasitically (1995).

³ Or at least they are *less right* than Hegel, since if Hegel is right, all views are correct to a degree (syncretism). Hegel is just the one that has the view that is *most right*, since it is about how all the other partially right views hang together. A further puzzle arises for Rockmore if Hegel's syncretism is correct, because syncretism entails the prohibition against criticism of views for their contradictions, since *all* views share this problem. The lesson, as we take it, is not to criticize other philosophical programs on the basis of the presumption of the truth of Hegelian idealism.

It seems clear to us that the Hegelian holist commitment driving Rockmore's charge is at the very least disputable. Ultimately, the claim to which Rockmore is committed is that one cannot properly assess any given argument except within the context of the philosophical system within which it is embedded. Arguably, this gets things backwards: our philosophical commitments and systems must be supported by argument if they are worthy of acceptance. In fact, Rockmore's very project of criticizing analytic pragmatism presupposes that philosophical approaches can be assessed from the outside. Moreover, there is a plausible interpretation along these lines of the function of the sense-certainty argument in Hegel's *Phenomenology*: Hegel confronts skepticism, considers a *prima facie* response to it, finds that response lacking, and so develops his absolute idealism. On such a reading, the sense-certainty argument is not simply an early or incomplete iteration of Hegel's idealism, it is partly the *motivation* for it; the sense-certainty argument clearly retains its force in the absence of the backdrop of the entire *Phenomenology*—it was the force of this argument that drove Hegel to write the *Phenomenology*. We suspect that Rockmore would reject this kind of reading of Hegel. But the issue at hand is not that of getting Hegel right, it is rather whether the sense-certainty argument retains its force when detached from Hegel's idealism; arguably it does, and Rockmore has not argued otherwise.

We now turn to Rockmore's first and third lines of critique. Recall that Rockmore contends that analytic pragmatists "eschew epistemological justifications of claims to know" and harbor a "commitment to realism" (2005, 270) that classical pragmatism rightly rejects. These criticisms share a common root, namely, that analytic pragmatism is a species of "weak Cartesianism" (2005, 260), in that it officially rejects Cartesian epistemic foundationalism but nonetheless retains a Cartesian metaphysical realism (2005, 270). Thus Rockmore claims that the analytic pragmatist movement is conflicted on two fronts. First, analytic pragmatism is committed to a metaphysical realism it does not have the epistemic power to countenance. Second, this realism is in direct conflict with what is most worth preserving in classical pragmatism (2005, 269). We will take these up in turn.

The first charge is that analytic pragmatists "reject Cartesian foundationalism while keeping analogous Cartesian claims to know, claims that require a foundationalist epistemological methodology or its equivalent" (2005, 265). Clarifying this a bit, Rockmore restates the point as follows: "Neo-analytic pragmatism typically affirms traditional Cartesian or Cartesian-like claims to know while failing to provide any argument or mechanism required to justify them. The result is a contrast, even an incompatibility, between claims to know and the justification of such claims" (2005, 265).

The claim here is that analytic pragmatists follow their classical ancestors in weakening the Cartesian standard for justification while

maintaining the Cartesian conception of the object of knowledge. This is objectionable, according to Rockmore, because the claim to “get it right about the way the world is” (2005, 261) stands in need of the kind of foundationalist justification that Descartes sought, a standard for justification that analytic pragmatists reject. Thus, alleges Rockmore, analytic pragmatists help themselves to claims to know about the “so-called mind-independent real as it is” (2005, 262), even though they have jettisoned the epistemological machinery required to underwrite them. The result is that analytic pragmatists make staggering claims to knowledge but never provide justifications for such claims (2005, 265–66).

We think that Rockmore is confused here. To abandon the Cartesian standard of epistemic justification is precisely to accept a weaker burden of proof for claims about the way the world is. Put otherwise, Rockmore applauds analytic pragmatists for following classical pragmatism in weakening the requirements for epistemic justification, but then he objects to an epistemology constituted by the weakened requirements on the grounds that such an epistemology cannot meet the old Cartesian standard. Rockmore apparently believes that to adopt the weaker epistemic standards is also to adopt a more modest metaphysics, one that rejects metaphysical realism, the view that there is a way the world is apart from the way we *believe* it is. But this is a muddle. Surely Rockmore is correct to characterize the pragmatist epistemological program as one which rejects the Cartesian view that the entirety of the epistemological project consists in the “concern to know the so-called mind-independent real as it is” (2005, 262). Pragmatists both classical and analytic insist that our epistemic objectives are broader than that; for example, we engage in epistemology for the sake of assuaging doubt, reconstituting action, solving a problem, or participating in community. But there is *nothing* in this pragmatist commitment that entails *anything* about our metaphysical commitments as such. In fact, many contemporary pragmatists see it is a cardinal virtue of the classical pragmatist’s epistemology that it is “metaphysically neutral” (Hookway 2000, 77), “low profile” (Westbrook 2005, 239), and not “metaphysically loaded” (Misak 2007, 70).

According to Rockmore, however, our epistemology *drives* our metaphysics. Hence he marvels at the tendency of analytic pragmatists to claim that there is an external world (2005, 265) without bothering to address the skeptic. But, again, the very point of weakening the epistemic justificatory standards was to resist the Cartesian imperative to take skepticism seriously; according to the pragmatists, both classical and analytic, we need not put our endeavors—epistemic, philosophical, or otherwise—on hold until we can find a way to devise a proof of the external world that could satisfy the skeptic. Rather, the point is to proceed *despite* skeptical challenges and to use the positive *consequences* of adopting realist metaphysical commitments as a way to indict the skeptic. Thus, Rockmore is correct to note that analytic pragmatists tend

to claim to “know external objects without providing any demonstrations for their assertions” (2005, 265). But their claim is not by itself objectionable. The whole point is to reject the epistemology that maintains the idea that such assertions stand in need of justification *in advance* of using them as working hypotheses.

This brings us to Rockmore’s claim that pragmatism is inconsistent with metaphysical realism. Rockmore holds that pragmatism is essentially an epistemological program that replaces the Cartesian mathematical model of knowledge with a scientific model (2005, 262). For Rockmore, Peirce is the exemplary figure (2005, 261). Rockmore describes the Peircean alternative to Cartesian epistemology as an “*a posteriori*, fallibilist, contextualized,” and “experimental” approach to knowledge (2005, 263), whose “cognitive claims are appropriately limited in espousing neither *a priori* apodictic affirmations nor skeptical rejections of knowledge” (2005, 264).

But it is not clear how these commitments of Peircean epistemology entail the rejection of metaphysical realism. Surely a Peircean could hold the fallibilist view that one does not need deductive arguments or conclusive proof of an external world, because one may believe in it (and things about it) on the basis of inductive and defeasible evidence or inference to the best explanation. In fact, something like this argument is at work in the defense of the “hypothesis of reality” that Peirce offers toward the end of “The Fixation of Belief.” There Peirce identifies the very realism that Rockmore rejects as an ineliminable presupposition of proper inquiry. According to Peirce, all proper inquiry is based on the idea that

there are Real things, whose characters are entirely independent of our opinions about them; those Reals affect our senses according to regular laws, and, though our sensations are as different as our relations to the objects, yet, by taking advantage of the laws of perception, we can ascertain by reasoning how things really and truly are; and any man, if he have sufficient experience and he reason enough about it, will be led to the one True conclusion. (1960, 384)⁴

Recall that Peirce’s defense of this realist view rests on the pragmatic consideration that action based on such a hypothesis does not cause one to doubt the hypothesis itself (1960, 385). This is of course not a *demonstration* (Rockmore 2005, 265) that the hypothesis is true, but it is the kind of nonconclusive, partial justification of the hypothesis that is epistemically acceptable once we weaken the Cartesian standards. And this aspect of fallibilism—namely, that subjects can know on the basis of

⁴ It is worth noting that Rockmore contends that this kind of realist commitment is “inimical to [Peirce’s] thought” (2005, 269). We think that Rockmore is obviously mistaken in this view, but here is not the place for Peirce scholarship. The point is that once again a claim crucial to Rockmore’s argument stands in need of argument.

nonconclusive reasons—certainly accommodates the metaphysical realist claims made by a variety of analytic pragmatists.

Furthermore, if pragmatism is, as Rockmore contends, a view that is principally committed to the outcomes of properly run inquiry (2005, 268), it is odd that he claims that some particular possible outcome of inquiry—such as metaphysical realism—is *inconsistent* with pragmatism. After all, if pragmatists are fallibilists, they must view all their commitments as open to revision in the course of further inquiry. Hence it seems starkly antifallibilist of Rockmore—in fact it is downright *a priorist*—to contend that pragmatists *must* reject metaphysical realism, for realism might be the position to which our inquiries lead.

By way of conclusion, let us say in stark contrast with Rockmore that one may view pragmatism not as a replacement for or an abandonment of the pursuit of the real and the true but rather as a way of implementing, personalizing, and socializing the philosophical project. On this view, pragmatism is not a turn away from the notion of the real, metaphysical or otherwise, but a program for deploying effective and accessible strategies in pursuing it. This is how analytic pragmatists see their inheritance from the classical pragmatists. Rockmore contends that this is an inherently “conservative” and insufficiently “innovative” way of proceeding (2005, 270). But calling the analytic pragmatist program “conservative” is not yet a criticism, and the claim that classical pragmatism is “bolder and more innovative” than analytic pragmatism does not constitute an argument in favor of classical pragmatism; in both cases, Rockmore is simply name-calling. And this name-calling is particularly Orwellian in nature, since it is Rockmore who is taking the developments in contemporary pragmatism to task for not respecting “central tenets” (2005, 259) of the classical stages of the tradition. In light of this, it is unclear who the conservatives are and who the innovators. But this should not matter, since the main question is not who gets to wear some preferred rhetorical mantle but who is right. If Rockmore sees the “big conceptual tent” (2005, 259) of pragmatism as too small to include the kind of interpretation of the achievements of Peirce, James, and Dewey offered by analytic pragmatists, so be it. So much the worse, then, for the pragmatism for which he claims to speak.

Department of Philosophy
Vanderbilt University
111 Furman Hall
Nashville, TN 37240
USA
scott.f.aikin@vanderbilt.edu
robert.b.talisse@vanderbilt.edu

References

- Augustine. 1995. “*Against the Academicians*” and “*The Teacher*.” Translated by Peter King. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Hookway, Christopher. 2000. *Truth, Rationality, and Pragmatism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Misak, Cheryl. 2007. “Pragmatism and Deflationism.” In *New Pragmatists*, edited by Cheryl Misak, 68–90. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Peirce, Charles S. 1960. “The Fixation of Belief.” In volume 5 of *The Collected Works of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss, 358–87. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Rockmore, Tom. 2005. “On Classical and Neo-Analytic Forms of Pragmatism.” *Metaphilosophy* 36, no. 3: 259–71.
- Westbrook, Robert. 2005. *Democratic Hope*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.