Pragmatic Ethics

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Pragmatism is a philosophical movement developed near the turn of the century in the work of several prominent American philosophers, most notably, Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey. Although many contemporary analytic philosophers never studied American Philosophy in graduate school, analytic philosophy has been significantly shaped by philosophers strongly influenced by that tradition, most especially W.V. Quine, Donald Davidson, Hilary Putnam, and Richard Rorty. Like other philosophical movements, it developed in response to the then-dominant philosophical wisdom. What unified pragmatism was its rejection of certain epistemological assumptions about the nature of truth, objectivity, and rationality. The rejection of these assumptions springs from the pragmatist's belief that practice is primary in philosophy. Meaningful inquiry originates in practice. Theorizing is valuable, for sure, but its value arises from practice, is informed by practice, and, its proper aim is to clarify, coordinate, and inform practice. Theorizing divorced from practice is useless.

Pragmatism is at once both familiar and radical. Familiar in that it often begins with rather ordinary views; radical in that it often sees in those views insights that philosophers and lay people may miss or misunderstand. A pragmatic ethic employs criteria without being criterial. It is objective without being absolutist. It acknowledges that ethical judgements are relative, without being relativistic. And it tolerates – indeed, welcomes – some moral differences, without being irresolute. Precisely what each of these means, and why pragmatists hold them, emerges throughout this paper. I begin with the first since it sets the stage for introducing other pivotal pragmatic ideas.

Ethical theorizing begins when we think about how we ought to live. Many people assume that means we must look for moral criteria: some list of rules or principles whereby we can distinguish good from bad and right from wrong, or a list of virtues we try to inculcate. Utilitarians tell us we should promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Contractualists tell to look for the criteria emerging from a real or hypothetical agreement. Kantians tell us to treat others as "ends in themselves" and not as mere means. Divine Command theorists tell us to follow the commands of God. So, many will wonder: What are the pragmatists' criteria? How do they distinguish right from wrong? Although pragmatists may employ moral criteria, pragmatism is not criterial.

THE PRIMACY OF HABITS

When I say that most moral theories are *criterial*, I mean that the theories hold, at least in some attenuated form, that the relevant criteria are (a) logically prior, (b) fixed, (c) complete, and (d) directly applicable. Although many philosophers might deny that their views are criterial on this account, the character of most discussions in ethics suggests this view is still influential if not dominant. Thus, although the principle of utility might be revealed though experience, its truth is thought (a) to be logically prior to experience and (b) to provide a measure for determining what is moral for all people, at all times. Moreover, this principle (c) does not need to be supplemented, and (d) can be directly applied to specific cases. Likewise for deontological theories. Using the model of law, they envision a set of external rules or principles that tell us how we ought to act. To this extent, most deontologists share certain presuppositions with divine

command theorists, namely, that if morality is to be binding, its source must be independent of those whom it "binds."

Pragmatists disagree. If they speak of criteria at all, they think of them as tools for analysis, as heuristics isolating morally relevant features of action – features people should consider in making moral decisions. Criteria are not logically prior or fixed since they can be, and often are, supplanted. They are not complete, since central elements of moral judgement cannot be subsumed under them. And they are not directly applicable since principles cannot give us univocal direction on how we should behave in every circumstance.

The pragmatist's rejection of a criterial view of morality springs from its rejection of the notion of rationality undergirding that view. The belief that morality is primarily conscious adherence to prior and fixed criteria overrationalizes human beings. Many philosophers believe, or speak as if they believe, that everything significant about us involves conscious deliberation. Not so. We could not walk or speak or think the ways we do if we had to consciously determine to take each step, to speak or write the next word, or to add two numbers. Deliberation *is* vital. However, as I explain later, its central role is normally not to directly guide action, but to shape, change, and reinforce habits, and therefore to indirectly guide action. This is a significant role since most human activity is habitual. Therefore, before we can understand deliberation's proper role, we must first explore the pragmatist's notion of habit. This notion shows how a pragmatic ethic incorporates common and theoretical ideas of morality, yet uses them in ways that differ from standard uses. My account is strongly influenced by Dewey's ideas, especially the rich notion of habit he developed in *Human Nature and Conduct*

(1988/1922). Nonetheless, I will not engage in squabbles over textual interpretation. Rather, I loosely employ Dewey's work to explain habit and its role in ethical theory.

The nature of habits

Even those who recognize that conscious deliberation does not play the directing role assigned it by some philosophers might be leery of giving primacy to habits. After all, many of us assume habits are behavioral repetitions, largely beyond our control, and often negative. We tend to construe habits as external forces making us bite our nails, compelling us to drink, and leading us to be lazy, etc. However, habits are not mere repetitions, they are not necessarily bad, and they are not forces compelling us against our wills. At least properly understood they are not.

Habits carry the past into the present. What we learn and experience are not mere flashes on the cosmic stage; they continue in the present, unified and embodied in our habits. Habits, in this robust sense, have four principal elements: (1) They are influenced by our previous interactions with the social environment. (2) They are not simple acts but organized sets of smaller actions. (3) They are typically exhibited in overt behavior in a variety of circumstances, and (4) even when they are not exhibited in standard ways, they are nonetheless operative.

Consider a mundane action: walking. (1) Walking is learned by prior activity within our environment — it takes practice to walk, and still more practice to walk well. (2) Walking is not a single action, but a systemization of "smaller" actions: moving our feet and arms, looking ahead, and varying our paths to avoid obstacles, etc. (3) The habit is present in overt behavior: in the appropriate circumstances, we will walk in the

ways we learned how to walk. Finally, (4) the habit is operative, even when not immediately guiding behavior. What makes us walkers is not merely what we do when we walk, but what we do when we are not walking. Walkers think, remember, and imagine differently than non-walkers. This is obviously true of the wheelchair bound. It is equally (but differently) true of people who can walk, but rarely do. A walker might think of her office as "a twenty-minute walk" from home, while a non-walker describes it as a five-minute drive. Walkers will also imagine the future differently than someone who normally travels by auto: their dreams about and plans for a trip to the Alps will differ substantially from those who primarily travel by car.

Thinking is also habitual. (1) Thinking is learned by prior activity — it takes practice to think, and considerably more practice to think well. If we could think effortlessly, we wouldn't need to be educated. Yet, we do need to be educated, and there is ample evidence that some types of education encourage more and better thinking than others. (2) Thinking requires a systemization of discrete intellectual actions. To think well, we must discern the relevant point, remember crucial details, trace the implications of our views, and evaluate those implications. (3) Thinking exhibits itself in overt behavior. When appropriately trained, we will question what we have been told, will engage in heated conversations, etc. Finally (4) thinking is operative, even if not immediately guiding behavior. Thinkers will consider options, entertain ideas, and imagine possibilities, even if there is no one with whom to converse or no way in which the thought leads to immediate overt action. I could give a similar analysis of emotions, etc., but I trust that is unnecessary.

Habits empower and restrict

Habits are two-edged swords: the very features that give us power to act and to think also circumscribe us. Without habits we could not learn from experience; our actions would be haphazard and ineffective. Yet habits also limit us since, while they are operating, we are myopic. You cannot be a scientist if you investigate everything, not even everything within the province of your science. You must look at or for some particular phenomenon. Yet that may lead you to overlook other significant phenomena. Similarly language empowers us, since, without language, we could say nothing; yet it constrains us since we can say only what we can say in that language.

As habitual creatures we must walk a fine line between (a) blindly letting habits have their sway, and (b) constantly evaluating them. Neither option is optimal. We can plod through life, mindlessly absorbing the habits of our culture, and never intentionally changing them. Or, we may become so interested "in the delights of reflection; we become afraid of assuming the responsibilities of decisive choice and action . . . " (Dewey 1988/1922: 137) Or, as Gadamer puts it, we must both recognize and struggle against our histories (1975). Knowing how to do that is itself a second order habit, developed by practice, over time.

Social nature of habits

Speaking about an individual's habits of walking, talking, or thinking might suggest that habits are purely personal possessions. They are not. Since habits are shaped by prior experience, our cultures play a central role in forming our habits, in forming who we are. How we eat, how we talk, what we read, what we believe, and

how we think all began in the “instruction” (either formal or by example) we received growing up. Culture is best understood as the social transmission of habits. We inherit (and then refine) habits from our ancestors who inherited (and refined) habits from their ancestors, who . . . , etc. We live in cities rather than caves not because we are more clever than our cave-dwelling ancestors, but because we had “better” ancestors than they did. Ours gave us universities and the Internet; theirs gave them cave paintings. Recognizing this fundamental debt to others, Dewey claims, is the root of all virtue. "It is of grace and not ourselves that we lead civilized lives" (20). Once we recognize that we are who we are and live the lives we live because of our predecessors, then we must recognize that the habits we give our progeny and our peers will likewise shape their worlds, their lives, and their habits.

Habits and will

The fact that social forces shape habits might suggest that individuals cannot choose, and are thus not responsible for, what they do. Far from it. Habits – including our traits, abilities, and character – do carry the marks of our environment. That is the sense in which our habits are ineliminably social. They also embody our previous choices, including our choices to strengthen or alter our habits. That is the sense in which the habits are our own. Habits are the primary vehicles for transmitting our past choices into present action. Thus habits "constitute the self; they are will" (Dewey 1988/1922: 21).

Unless we appreciate that social influences and individual choice are wed in habits, then human action and will seem mysterious, the result of decisions by unseen

and unexplainable homunculi. Why do some people become writers while others become accountants and others, clerks? Why are some people honest while others are dishonest? Why do some people work hard, while other piddle away their lives? Without habits, which carry past experience and decisions into the present and the future, actions must be created and continuously recreated by brute will. However, that is nothing more than "belief in magic . . . [whereby we hope] to get results without intelligent control of means" (Dewey 1988/1922: 22).

Changing habits

We can change the habits we “inherit.” But we cannot change them directly and immediately. To believe we could is to believe in mental magic. Too often we think we can close our eyes, tell ourselves to become more honest, more caring, more hardworking, and that, if we just wish hard enough, our dreams will come true. However, believing this will work, as so many self-help books suggest, makes personal change difficult if not impossible. Real change requires hard work, attention to detail, and perseverence. Habits are changed not by private willing, but (a) by identifying and (b) then altering the conditions that make and sustain our habits, and finally, (c) by substituting a more productive habit for the old, detrimental one.

Unfortunately, many of us continue to think (or hope) that we shape our desires and frame our intentions in the recesses of a private mind. However, we do not even form intentions privately. Genuine intentions are themselves habits acquired, developed, and enhanced over time. As a child, I daydreamed of being Superman, of being an astronaut, and of being a soldier. I envisioned myself zipping though the sky

"faster than a speeding bullet," rocketing to the moon, and singlehandedly besting an enemy squad. Nonetheless, it would be silly to say that I intended to become an astronaut or solider, or that I desired to be Superman. Daydreams are neither intentions nor desires. They are mental magic. Humans cannot fly unaided. Moreover, although some people are astronauts and others are soldiers, the belief that I could be either merely by dreaming is no less magical than the belief that I could be Superman.

Yet we continue to confuse daydreams with intentions. We assume that if we pleasantly contemplate some goal, then we desire to achieve that goal, and that if we contemplate it often, then we intend to achieve it. Thus, I might assume that I want to quit smoking if I think about quitting. I might assume that I desire to be calm, patient, and less judgmental if I imagine myself doing so. However, passing thoughts are neither desires nor intentions. They are adult daydreams. Daydreams are not necessarily bad; they can provide grist for the intention mill. However, unless we use daydreams to prompt specific plans, then we are reveling in fantasies, not forming desires or intentions.

Someone might contend that I am altering the meaning of common terms. I don't think so. If I am, it is a desirable alteration. Deciding which terms to use has significant practical implications. If we confuse daydreams with intentions and desires, then we are prone to comfort ourselves by saying that we are <u>really</u> kind, hardworking, intelligent, honest, and self-directed — no matter how we act. However, if we insist that we have intentions and desires only if we make specific plans (take specific steps) toward that end – then we can judge ourselves and others by what we do, not by inspecting private scenarios dancing before our minds. We can legitimately claim to be

kind only if we act kindly, we can legitimately claim to be honest, only if we are regularly honest.

How, then, do we turn daydreams into realities? How do we reshape our habits? None of us designed our initial environments, and none of completely designed our current ones. That is why we do not completely control our habits or our lives (Nussbaum 1986). But we do have some control, and that control depends on our understanding, and then deliberately altering, the conditions which made and sustain our habits. "Social reformers" and "social engineers" alter the environment to prompt changes in others. We can each engineer our own environments to alter our habits. Sometimes we merge these mechanisms: we change the social environment to help us change our personal habits, for instance, by placing high taxes on tobacco or supporting tough laws against drunk driving. Each mechanism relies on the intervening hand of deliberation: purposefully adjusting the environment to diminish, eliminate, or strengthen our (or others') habits. However, deliberation is no mysterious occult property. It is an intellectual habit developed and refined by previous experiences, stimuli, and deliberations. As Mill might say it, "the deliberative and the moral, like the muscular powers, are improved only by being used" (Mill 1985/1885: 55).

Multiple habits

However, if we have only one (or a few) narrow habit(s), our chance of changing faulty habits and finding satisfactory substitutes is less likely. We would be like a chess player who knows only one opening or a musician who plays only one tune. If our opponent makes a different first move, or if the only musical composition we know ("Joy

to the World") is inappropriate in the circumstances (a funeral), then we do not know how to continue. On the other hand, good chess players know different openings and employ different strategies. Their knowledge and strategies are habits which pave the intellectual roads along which chess-playing deliberation tends to travel. This is essential for being a good chess-player: these habits empower the player to respond appropriately to their opponents' first moves, even moves they have never seen. More generally, multiple habits empower us to be sensitive to wide varieties of situations, thereby making us more responsive to the relevant features of each situation. That is why multiple habit helps explain creativity, whether of chess-playing or of life. Creativity is not some inexplicable, mysterious inner power. It arises from a wide set of habits, unified within one person.

The reality of multiple habits not only empowers us to change habits, it also explains the appearance of seemingly uncharacteristic behavior. Suppose Ron is a kindly fellow: generally he responds sympathetically to others in pain. One day, though, he snaps at Belinda who asks him for help. "Why," he says, "are you always bugging me. Go pester someone else." Everyone, even Belinda, recognizes Ron is "out of character." But what does that mean? Does than mean someone other than Ron was snappish with her? No. It just means that being snappish is one of Ron's habits. Normally, it is dominated by more powerful habits. As Ron develops a more unified character, his tendency to snappishness becomes less and less potent; snappish behavior becomes even more uncharacteristic. But it does not disappear. It occasionally rears its ugly head.

MORALITY IS A HABIT

I am now able to explain more precisely how understanding the nature of habit illuminates morality. I will first show how moral habits are like other habits, and then show how the notion of habits help explicate central elements of a pragmatic ethic.

Their structure is like other habits

Many people claim that although other actions might be habitual, moral action cannot be. After all, they think that in standard cases moral agents must distinguish right from wrong by consciously applying the appropriate criteria. Of course those embracing this view often disagree about the source and nature of these criteria, and thus offer competing normative theories. However, pragmatists claim that morality, like all significant aspects of life, is not the product of immediate and direct conscious deliberation. If we always (or even often) had to rely on wholly conscious choice to be moral, we would be even less moral than we are. John trips on the sidewalk; Susan reaches down to help him up while Robin walks by. Later Susan has to decide how to handle a dispute between two co-workers; in an adjoining office Robin faces a similar decision. Susan is very sensitive to the way her decision will affect the interests of all involved; Robin is indifferent. What distinguishes Susan from Robin? In the first case Susan saw John and immediately reached out to him. Robin never seriously considered helping; perhaps he didn't even “see” him. In the second case Susan recognized and considered the interests of those involved; Robin likely did not recognize and certainly did not seriously consider his co-worker’s interests. The core difference between Susan and Robin is not between their conscious decisions –

although those may also differ. The central difference is in what they are habitually disposed (a) to see, (b) to consider relevant, (c) to think about, and (d) to use in guiding their actions.

Like Susan, people who are moral standardly do not *decide* to consider the interests of others, they are the kind of people – they have the appropriate habits – who just consider others' interests. Of course when we are being considerate, we may think about the best ways to help the other. But these deliberations are likewise shaped by our habits (just as the deliberations of philosophers are shaped by their professional habits). The aim of moral education (whether by others or ourselves) is to make us habitually sensitive to the needs and interests of others, and to shape the ways we think about, consider, and promote their interests.

Which habits does morality shape? Since, under special circumstances, virtually any behavior can affect others' interests, then no action and no habit is wholly outside the moral domain. However, just as Dewey warns of the dangers of overrationalization, he also warns about the dangers of overmoralization. So a pragmatist will, except in unusual circumstances, be concerned only with habits that regularly and significantly affect others. These "moral habits" have the same structure as other habits.

(1) They are influenced by prior activity, especially the interaction with our social environment. We may later alter or reject the habits so inculcated, but what we alter or reject is given in prior activity. (2) Moral habits are not simple acts, but an organized array of action. To be benevolent we must interpret our situation as one in which someone needs assistance, we must discern the assistance she needs, and we must provide that assistance. (3) Morals normally exhibit themselves in overt behavior.

Someone who is kind will act kindly in a variety of circumstances. Someone who claims to be kind simply because he has kind thoughts is either a liar or has mistaken daydreams for intentions. Finally, (4) even when moral habits are not apparent, they are operative, even if subconsciously. Benevolent people do not always give to others. Sometimes they demand that others help themselves. Even in these cases, however, the benevolent person may worry if she has acted appropriately, may feel regret if she thinks she has not, and may contemplate ways to help others help themselves.

Like other habits, moral habits empower and restrict. They empower because, in embodying previous learning, they permit us to respond quickly and appropriately in morally serious situations. Yet they also restrict, since, when operating, we overlook aspects of our action that may be morally relevant. Hence, we not only need first-order habits making us sensitive to others' interests, we also need second-order habits to evaluate those first-order habits to insure that they are appropriate, especially in changing circumstances. Being fallibilists, pragmatists know that no habit is flawless.

Morality is social

Pragmatists understand why we are inclined to think that morals are personal; after all, individuals are typically the immediate source from which actions proceed. However, this should not lead us to forget that society plays the central role in creating, transmitting, and reshaping our habits. Like Aristotle before him (1985/1932), Dewey recognizes the power of society to make us virtuous or vicious. If we have been well trained, and then taught how to evaluate our habits, then we will be generally be moral. On the other hand, if our moral training has been directed by ignorant, narrowminded

folk or selfish oafs, we will likely have seriously flawed moral character.

That is why believing that we are the sole authors of our moral habits is no different from believing that breathing and digestion are wholly private actions. We know that we can breathe only if there is oxygen in the atmosphere, and we can eat only if there is food to ingest. Yet somehow we are tend to think that "honesty, chastity, malice, peevishness, courage, triviality, industry, irresponsibility, are . . . private possessions" (1988/1922: 16). Not so. Our habits are essentially social, even if, once they are “ours,” we must take responsibility for them. Once we realize the character of social influences, we can avoid either of two intolerable extremes: (a) seeing individuals as mere products of social forces who lack any personal responsibility or (b) conceiving of them as wholly autonomous, free from all social influences.

> There are two schools of social reform. One bases itself upon the notion of a morality which springs from an inner freedom, something mysteriously cooped up within personality. It asserts that the only way to change institutions is for men to purify their own hearts, and that when this has been accomplished, change of institutions will follow of itself. The other school denies the existence of any such inner power, and in some doing, conceives that it has denied all moral freedom. It says that men are made what they are by the forces of their environment, that human nature is purely malleable, and that until institutions are changed, nothing can be done. Clearly this leaves the outcome as hopeless as does an appeal to inner rectitude and benevolence. For it provides no leverage to change the environment. . . . There is an alternative . . . We can recognize that all conduct is an *interaction* between elements of human nature and the environment, natural and social (Dewey 1988/1922: 9-10).

Changing habits for moral reasons

Habits are the products of ongoing “natural selection”: many habits are tried, but few are chosen. Those “chosen,” are “selected” because they are advantageous in the

environments in which we live. However, unlike most creatures, we can deliberate and we can alter our own environments. We thereby influence which habits we maintain and which we change. Among other things, we can develop a second order habit of taking responsibility for maintaining or changing or habits, and that (meta-) habit, once acquired, will make us more reflective about our habits of speech, thought, and action. It is not enough to understand the conditions that create, sustain, and alter our habits. We must also have the ability to change our first level habits in light of that understanding. Let me offer an example.

I grew up a bigot, living in a land of bigots. I walked, talked, acted, thought, and imagined like a bigot. I had no acquaintance with blacks, and no experience or habits to prompt me to change my bigoted habits. I enjoyed my (relatively) privileged status, although I did not see my status as privileged – I saw it as reflecting some natural order of things. My upbringing and social norms blinded me to my bigotry. At that point I was unlikely to change my racist ways, since the same conditions which shaped these habits also shaped my deliberative abilities. How could I see my flaws?

Then changes in my social environment spurred personal changes. I watched and listened as blacks challenged their inferior legal and moral status. Their elegant words and courageous deeds clashed with my bigoted habits. At first I “sought” ways to discount these clashes, to find ways of maintaining my current habits. However, the habits that were once so comfortable in my bigoted niche, became ineffective in the early 60s. I was forced to evolve, although initially not much. I first began to think blacks should be able to drink at the same water fountain with whites. Ethical tokenism, for sure. But a change nonetheless.

The conditions that prompted me to reevaluate my habits did not prompt everyone in my environment to make similar changes. That is not surprising. Since I was younger and my habits were less entrenched than those of my elders, my habits were more susceptible to different experiences. I had relatively few habits which would lead me to discount emerging evidence about the interests and abilities of black. Likely I also had beneficial habits of self-reflection. Still, it is vital to recognize that my first changes were prompted by alternations in my external environment. These opened the door for deliberation about and reflection on my racism. Without those external changes, I would likely not have abandoned my bigoted ways.

That is the story of moral evolution: our moral habits change when shifts in the environment force us to move into new moral niches. These initial changes are not brought about by brute force of will. To believe they are is to believe in moral magic, and Dewey repeatedly warned us of the costs of belief in magic: we lose the ability to make real changes. Of course these environmental changes were doubtless spurred by the deliberations and actions of others. But, then, that is exactly what Dewey claims. The route to real change in others and in ourselves is to deliberately change our environments. And that we can do: we are not rudderless ships on a moral sea.

In deliberating about matters moral, we do not – or should not – merely consult some small (moral) segment of our experience. Having a variety of habits is a crucial element of moral deliberation: it increases our ability to think about problems in different ways. We draw on all our experience, on all our habits: our understanding of ourselves, others, biology, economics, and politics. For instance, in deciding whether to be sympathetic to Joe, we not only need to understand what is morally relevant, we must

understand Joe's condition and see what is most important to him. Otherwise our efforts may do more harm than good.

So deliberation is crucial. But how do we learn to deliberate and to the deliberate well? Practice. We must first learn to deliberate badly, before we learn to deliberate well. Bad deliberative habits typically lead to bad results and are pruned by the process of natural selection. Productive deliberative habits tend to lead to success – especially in the right educational environment. We learn how better to think, imagine, and understand. We can develop our moral imagination, understanding, and thought by engaging in sustained and careful discussion of practical ethical quandaries, by talking to people (or reading about people) who have faced significant moral choices, by reading great literature, and by reading philosophical treatises on ethics. Although these deliberative means may lack the immediacy, texture, and depth of actual decisions, they can prepare us to handle real decisions by making us attuned to features and consequences of our actions which, in the press of time, we might overlook. Deliberation amplifies relatively small environmental changes, so that we can evaluate, and perhaps change, our habits *relatively* independently of dramatic external forces. Rather than suffer bad consequences from detrimental changes in environments, we can, as Popper would say, “let hypotheses die in our stead.”

ENDS AND MEANS

In working to change their habits, people assume they must formulate an end (to change the habit), and then seek the means to that end. However, this ordinary understanding of the relationship between ends and means easily misleads us. Most people think ends are fixed goals motivating activity, and means are the routes to achieving those ends. If Susan says she wants to become a lawyer, then her goal – her desired end point – is to be a lawyer. Given that she has this end, she must now decide how to achieve that end, she must find the means to employ. These means will have no value in themselves; they are merely the route to the desired end.

This is a skewed account of the relation between ends and means, an account that, once incorporated into folk psychology, distorts our understanding of deliberation, human action, and morality. Means and ends are not fundamentally different. Rather they are "two names for the same reality. The terms denote not a division in reality, but a distinction in judgement. . . . The `end' is merely a series of acts views at a removed state; and a means is merely the series viewed at an earlier time . . . " (Dewey 1988/1922: 27-8). Initially this claim seems preposterous. Surely there is all the difference in the world between the ends one seeks, and the methods one uses to achieve those ends. Susan's goal is to become a lawyer; so she studies for the LSAT, goes to law school, and works as a waitress in a local restaurant – all are the means for achieving those ends. What is mysterious about that?

Understood as a division in judgement, nothing. But since the division is thought to be fundamental, its standard characterization leads people to misunderstand both ends and means. People come to think of ends as fixed, determinate goals lying

somewhere outside activity. The goal provides value and meaning to human action; the only value lies in achieving the remote ends. However, ends are not the source of value nor does "reaching" an "end" complete action. Ends are not really an end to action, but at most a redirection of it. Susan does not stop acting when she becomes a lawyer. Being a lawyer is action.

> Ends arise and function within action. They are not, as current theories too often imply, things lying beyond activity at which that latter is directed. They are not strictly speaking ends or termini of action at all. They are terminals of deliberation, and so turning points *in* activity (Dewey 1988/1922: 154).

Put differently, the end's value does not lie beyond human activity, but it helps organize and focus activity. Susan enjoys doing lawyerly activities, and being a lawyer is the best way to allow her to continue doing those activities. Ends become ways of collectively understanding our efforts and actions. They are like the end of a story. It provides a perspective from which we can understand the story's elements. It is not some element outside the story.

Suppose Francine wants to become educated. The standard view suggests that "being educated" is some fixed, remote end she can achieve by attending university. However, studying, thinking, reading, writing, and reflecting are not mere means to being educated. Rather, they <u>constitute</u> becoming educated. The end ("being educated") is just a different way of describing the collective actions one takes at a university. This end is not fixed or final. We can always be more educated than we are. Moreover, can come to better understand what it means to be educated. Or, suppose Bob says he wants to become a good person. On the standard view, "being a good person" is a remote end Bob can achieve by acting in certain ways. However,

doing good deeds is no mere means to becoming good; doing good deeds regularly constitutes making oneself a good person. There is no end "being a good person" out there that is separable from the activities constituting being a good person. This end is not fixed or final since we can always be better than we are. Moreover, we can come to better understand what it means to be good.

The common view of means suggests that humans are basically passive creatures who would not act unless we are bribed, threatened, or cajoled. This threat or bribe must be some desirable end that motivates us to act. The end infuses the action with meaning: it transforms a distasteful activity (the means) and into a tolerable one. This view thereby misconstrues the nature of means: it treats them as *mere* means, actions whose sole value are as a route to the (distant) fixed end. This encourages us to exert only the minimum effort required to achieve the ends. Why should we do more if the end is all the matters? One consequence of thinking that the means do not matter is that we thereby diminish our ability to achieve our ends. We are more likely to achieve our ends if we understand that the means constitute, rather than being a mere route to, those ends.

Acts and consequences / actions and motives

When deliberating we may occasionally employ the distinction between ends and means. That's fine, as long as we understand the distinction does not mark a fundamental cleavage in the moral universe. The same goes for the distinctions between (a) acts and consequences and (b) acts and motives. They may be useful distinctions in deliberation, as long as we do not take them too seriously. The first

distinction is thought to sustain the theoretical divide between consequentialists and deontologists; the second, the divide between virtue and deontic theories. But neither distinction is robust enough to sustain the presumed wall separating these theories.

Deontologists claim that right and wrong are determined by the character of action, while consequences are merely the results of action, and hence, not central (and perhaps irrelevant) for determining what is moral. Consequentialists agree with above distinction bu reach a different conclusion. They think only consequences matter morally. Acts are merely causally connected with consequences, and hence, not central (and perhaps irrelevant) for determining what is moral. Both views imply acts and consequences are events in narrow slices of time. They just disagree about whether the act or the consequences are morally relevant. Both views err by construing this distinction as marking some deep moral or ontological divide.

Act descriptions embed implicit or explicit reference to consequences, while morally significant descriptions of consequences incorporate unstated act descriptions. Even the strictest deontologist must reject a rigid distinction between acts and their consequences. Suppose I point a loaded gun at Joe's head and pull the trigger. What have I done? Have I twitched my finger? Have I shot a gun? Have I murdered Joe? Have I orphaned his children? Deontologists will presumably claim that the third is the preferred moral description, that the first two insufficiently describe my action, while the fourth describes a "mere" consequence. But why are the first two insufficient? Presumably because they fail to include all the morally relevant features of "what I did." That is a plausible response, however, only because pointing a loaded gun at someone's head and pulling the trigger standardly leads to the other person's death.

This “consequence” is so likely that it determines the act description.

Conversely, the consequentialist, as well as the deontologist should be able to distinguish murder from killing. Any adequate consequentialist description of murder will include, either directly or indirectly, not only descriptions of what happened (someone's dying), but also the context: the condition of the “killer” (was she insane, hypnotized, etc.?) and the actions of the “victim” (was she an aggressor?). The consequentialist cannot circumvent this problem by claiming that the consequences were appropriate, excusable, or an instance of self-defense, since these incorporate unstated act descriptions. There may be practical reasons why, in some cases, we want to distinguish acts from consequences; but we should not think they mark any fundamental ontological distinction.

Any attempt to draw a sharp distinction between acts and motives faces the same problem. For although we might find occasions in which the distinction serves a deliberative aim, it does not carve the universe at its moral joints. What makes something a motive (rather than a passing thought) is that it is a disposition to act in certain ways, ways that standardly have certain consequences. Benevolent motives standardly lead to benevolent acts (which standardly lead to good consequences). Of course our best motives occasionally misfire, and the most careful, thoughtful actions occasionally lead to disastrous results. But that is just the point: they misfire – there is a story about why the motive did not lead to its normal action or the action did not have its normal results. Conversely, what (a) makes something a benevolent action, rather than a meanspirited one, and (b) leads to good consequences rather than rotten ones, is typically the agent’s motives.

This isn't in the least mysterious when we think of other traits. People who regularly say intelligent things in a variety of circumstances are intelligent, and we expect intelligent people to normally say intelligent things. But things occasionally misfire. Bright people can say stupid things and stupid people can say intelligent things. Why should it be mysterious when it comes to morality? Consequently, the decision whether we should call something an act or a consequence, an act or a motive, is best made not by seeking the natural joints of the body moral, but by deciding, for practical reasons, on the best ways to speak and understand our (and others') behavior.

There is a better way of conceptualizing the relationship between acts, motives, and consequences. Actions, motives, and consequences, properly understood, are interrelated concepts each having temporal depth and spatial breadth. Typically (a) actions are what they are because of the motivations of their actors and their expected consequences; (b) motives are what they are because they standardly lead to certain actions and consequences; and (c) consequences are what they because they normally spring from certain motives and actions. None occur in a thin slice of time in one locale. If I lie to you now, I am not just mouthing words, (a) my action springs from my habits (and thus, my motives), (b) I am deceiving you (or at least trying), (c) I am seeking to change your behavior in some way, (d) I am shaping the character of our relationship, and (e) I am strengthening my disposition to lie in the future. If I am myopic, I may think of my action one-dimensionally. But that does not alter its depth or breadth. A "lie" that did not spring from who I am would be a mistake (I did not realize the information I was telling you was false), not a lie. A "lie" that did not deceive (or at

least try to deceive) would not be a lie. A "lie" that did not change (or seek to change) your behavior would not be a lie. After all, the aim of the lie is to get you to act – or not act – differently that you would have had I told you the truth, even if the lie is about something trivial (your new sweater). A lie that did not alter our relationship in any degree (by making you distrustful of me if you discovered the lie) would arguably not be a lie. And a lie that does not make me more prone (however slightly) to lie in the future, would arguably have been an accident and not an act. Understanding that each element of this triumvirate is temporally and spatially thick helps focus deliberation. We will primarily think about what we do now since that is most within our control. But in thinking about what we do now, we should realize that our present action springs from who we are and has certain standard consequences.

THE NATURE OF PRAGMATIC ETHICS

Employs criteria, but is not criterial

The previous discussions enable us to say more precisely why pragmatists reject a criterial view of morality. Pragmatism's core contention that practice is primary in philosophy rules out the hope of logically prior criteria. Any meaningful criteria evolve from our attempt to live morally – in deciding what is the best action in the circumstances. Criteria are not discovered by pure reason, and they are not fixed. As ends of action, they are always revisable. As we obtain new evidence about ourselves and our world, and as our worlds changes, we find that what was appropriate for the old environment may not be conducive to survival in the new one. A style of teaching that might have been ideal for one kind institution (a progressive liberal arts college) at one

time (the 60s) may be wholly ineffective in another institution (a regional state university) at another time (the 80s). But that is exactly what we would expect of an evolutionary ethic.

Neither could criteria be complete. The moral world is complex and changeable. No set of criteria could give us univocal answers about how we should behave in all circumstances. If we cannot develop an algorithm for winning at chess, where there are only eighteen first moves, there is no way to develop an algorithm for living, which has a finitely large number of "first moves." Moreover, while the chess environment (the rules) stays constant, our natural and moral environments do not. We must adapt or fail. While there is always one end of chess -- the game ends when one player wins – the ends of life change as we grow, and as our environments change. Finally, we cannot resolve practical moral questions simply by applying criteria. We do not make personal or profession decisions by applying fixed, complete criteria. Why should we assume we should make moral decisions that way?

Appropriates insights from other ethical theories

Nonetheless, there is a perfectly good sense in which a pragmatic ethic employs what we might call criteria, but their nature and role dramatically differ from that in a criterial morality (Dewey 1985/1932). Pragmatic criteria are not external rules we apply, but are tools we use in making informed judgements. They embody learning from previous action, they express our tentative efforts to isolate morally relevant features of those actions. These emergent criteria can become integrated into our habits, thereby informing the ways that we react to, think about, and imagine our worlds and our

relations to others.

This explains why pragmatists think other theories can provide guidance on how to live morally. Standard moral theories err not because they offer silly moral advice, but because they misunderstand that advice. Other moral theories can help us isolate (and habitually focus on) morally relevant features of action. And pragmatists take help wherever they can get it. Utilitarianism does not provide an algorithm for deciding how to act, but it shapes habits to help us "naturally" attend to the ways that our actions impact others. Deontology does not provide a list of general rules to follow, but it sensitizes us to ways our actions might promote or undermine respect for others. Contractarianism does not resolve all moral issues, but it sensitizes us to the need for broad consensus. That is why it is mistaken to suppose that the pragmatist makes specific moral judgements oblivious to rules, principles, virtues, and the collective wisdom of human experience. The pragmatist absorbs these insights into her habits, and thereby shapes how she habitually responds, and how she habitually deliberates when deliberation is required.

This also explains why criterial moralities tend to be minimalistic. They specify minimal sets of rules to follow in order to be moral. Pragmatism, on the other hand, like virtue theories, is more concerned to emphasize exemplary behavior – to use morally relevant features of action to determine the best way to behave, not the minimally tolerable way.

Is relative without being relativistic

"Okay," someone might say, "habits are important for morals. But unless we

decide what is a good habit and what is not, then how can morals be objective?" The pragmatist claims there is no algorithm nor recipe for deciding which habits are best. But why should we assume there needs to be? There is no recipe for being a good teacher, a good philosopher, a good friend, or deciding whether to take a job. But, we think there are better and worse teachers, philosopher, friends, and decisions. We can give reasons for our evaluations and decisions, and these reasons can be informed by the deliberations of others and by "theories" of friendship, philosophy, pedagogy, and decision-making. It seems sufficient to say:

- Some moral habits are better than others; some are worse than others. We can give reasons for these respective evaluative judgements.
- Because we are fallible, we do not always know which moral habit is best. That is why we allow people considerable latitude in setting their own habits. It permits individuals to choose, and the society an opportunity to witness experiments in moral living. But this does not mean that all habits are equal.
- Because our environments change, a moral habit that is serviceable now may be inappropriate later. But that does not alter that fact that it was once serviceable, and is no longer.

All these claims would be taken as a commonplace were it not for the assumption that moral absolutism and moral relativism are our only options. Absolutists assume relativism is a wolf at the door of ethics: unless we have one unique set of determinable moral principles, then the wolf will enter and devour the hapless progenitor of morality. Relativists agree with absolutists about the status of morality without absolute principles; they just think there are no such principles.

Pragmatism helps us understand why these are not our only options – why the three considerations above reflect our best understanding of the moral life and explain why this provides all the objectivity we need, even if it does not provide the certainty we occasionally want (Bernstein 1983; Dewey 1988/1922, 1970/1920; Elgin 1997; Margolis 1996, 1986; Putnam 1994; Rorty 1989, 1982, 1979). The hope that ethics (or science) could provide certainty is itself a symptom of the disease that pragmatism seeks to cure. As Dewey put it:

> . . . in morals a hankering for certainty, born of timidity and nourished by love of authoritative prestige, has led to the idea that absence of immutably fixed and universally applicable ready-made principles is equivalent to moral chaos (Dewey 1988/1922: 164).

Tolerates without being irresolute

Although we acknowledge that some habits are better (or worse) that others, in some circumstances several habits appear to be equally good. In this case, appearances may not be deceiving. Why should we assume that only one set of habits, principles, or ideas can be best? Why not say several of them are objectively better than others, even if we cannot say that one is uniquely best? Pragmatism permits and explains why we should expect and desire some moral disagreements. An evolutionary ethic seeks the optimal behavior within a niche. Since the niches in which people live vary, we should not expect that precisely the same behavior would be optimal in each. Since social norms help compose our environments, then those norms will themselves determine, to some degree, what is genuinely moral. For instance, most societies have norms about appropriate dress at a funeral. But those norms vary.

Someone violating those norms (wearing a kilt to a funeral in Houston) will likely not only clash with those norms, they may thereby deeply offend the family of the deceased.

The claim, of course, is not that social norms determine what is right and wrong. The pragmatist only claims that social norms are often relevant to how we should behave. There is no algorithm for specifying when and how they are relevant, but as I stated earlier, the pragmatist does not think there are moral algorithms. These are issues about which we can debate, and about which morally minded people might disagree. The pragmatist merely claims that, in cases of such disagreement, the opposing views are best tested in an environment in which open discussion is encouraged (itself a social habit). This increases the likelihood that misguided solutions will be bested in the arena of ideas. And, when some competitors survive, the society will permit and even encourage them to be tested by life (experiments in living). The laboratory of life might reveal that some of them are inadequate. In other cases, the results may be inconclusive. Several may thrive in the same or related environments. That will not disturb the pragmatist. For the pragmatist holds only that some views are better than others. They do not hold that there is always one and only one uniquely good view. Why should we think that?

Consider. Some writing is dense, imprecise, rambling, and boring, while other writing is crisp, lucid, unambiguous, and vigorous. These differences are so pronounced that virtually anyone would spot them in an instant (LaFollette 1991). In that sense, we are objectivists about language. Of course there are borderline cases about which we might genuinely disagree. Moreover, there are some differences which

are just differences in style and taste. Should an objectivist about language and prose try to squelch these differences? I see no reason why they should, and plenty of reason why they shouldn't. It is hard to see what harm can come from these differences, and it is easy to see how they can be beneficial. Having various linguistic options is more enjoyable: a society in which everyone wrote or spoke in precisely the same way would be a society where fewer people read, and where prose and spoken language would be boring. Moreover, pluralistic writing and speaking styles permit us to say different things in different ways, and hearing a different description of an event may enhance our understanding of the phenomenon.

Likewise, we all recognize that there is no uniquely nutritious or tasty meal, insightful movie, enjoyable music, relaxing vacation, good lecture, etc. What possible reason would the pragmatist have for thinking morality must reveal one and only one appropriate behavior? On the other hand, we all recognize that there are fatty and disgusting meals, pedestrian movies, boring music, tense vacations, and sleep-inducing lectures. What possible reason would the pragmatist have for thinking all moral judgements and behaviors are equally good? Some are good; some are terrible; others are mediocre. Any reflective pragmatist realizes that sloppy or unscrupulous pragmatists (like sloppy and unscrupulous deontologists or consequentialists) may act immorally. Moreover, careful and conscientious pragmatists (like careful and conscientious deontologists or consequentialists) will also occasionally morally botch it because of ignorance or inattention. That is why the careful pragmatist emphasizes our fallibility. We may be mistaken even about those moral judgements about which we seem most confident. Our fallibility does not diminish our need to act. It does,

however, give us compelling reason to subject our views to the scrutiny of others. As Mill expresses it:

> The beliefs which we have most warrant for, have no safeguard to rest on, but a standing invitation to the whole world to prove them unfounded. If the challenge is not accepted, or is accepted and the attempt fails, we are far enough from certainty still; but we have done the best that the existing state of human reason admits of; we have neglected nothing that could give the truth a chance of reaching us. . . . This is the amount of certainty attainable by a fallible being, and this the sole way of attaining it (Mill 1985/1885: 20).

And the pragmatists say: "Amen."

Redescribes the relationship between theory and Practice

So what is a pragmatic ethical theory? Pragmatism has no separable ethical theory: meaningful theory cannot exist distinct from practice. Theory without practice (ends without means) becomes an intellectual game only vaguely connected to the phenomena it is supposed to understand and explain. Practice without theory (like means without ends) lacks direction; it becomes little more than a loose amalgam of reactions to specific circumstances. The pragmatist sees theory and practice as two intricately related elements of ethics, properly understood.

Theorizing is an essential element of inquiry, a tool for understanding, evaluating, modifying, and hopefully improving our moral thought. But theorizing is not prior to or independent of experience, but grows out of and is part of experience. Any theorizing — whether we are theorizing about language, love, life, biology, physics, or ethics — begins from current wisdom, as embodied in our habits. Most of us began theorizing because of clashes between or uncertainty about our habitual reactions to (or

intuitions about) a problem we face. Suppose our parents told us not to lie and told us not to hurt others — good advice, to be sure. Then one day we find that telling Jo the truth will hurt her. How can we follow our parents' advice? The inability of our habits to cope smoothly with this problem requires us to theorize, to step back from the problem and reflect on it. We might theorize haphazardly and ineffectively or we might do it well. What determines how well we theorize? There is no algorithm. However, we have a better chance of finding a satisfactory solution if we have multiple moral habits. For instance, if we are familiar with a range of practical moral problems, if we read good literature, and if we have a good sense of the ways people reason about practical problems (as captured in various ethical theories), then we will have the resources to find a reasonable solution. But success is never guaranteed.

EMBRACING A PRAGMATIST ETHIC

A pragmatic ethic is not based on principles, but it is not unprincipled. Deliberation plays a significant role, albeit a different role than that given it on most accounts. Morality does not seek final absolute answers, yet it is not perniciously relativistic. It does recognize that circumstances can be different, and that in different circumstances, different actions may be appropriate. So it does not demand moral uniformity between people and across cultures. Moreover, it understands moral advance as emerging from the crucible of experience, not through the proclamations of something or someone outside us. Just as ideas only prove their superiority in dialogue and in conflict with other ideas, moral insight can likewise prove its superiority in dialogue and conflict with other ideas and experiences. Hence, some range of moral

disagreement and some amount of different action will be not be, for the pragmatist, something to bemoan. It will be integral to moral advancement, and thus should be permitted and even praised, not lamented. Only someone who thought theory could provide final answers, and answers without the messy task of doing battle on the marketplace of ideas and of life, would find this regrettable.[1]

Notes

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