

Pragmatism & The Moral Life

The subject of this chapter is the engagement with ethics that permeates pragmatism. My tasks are to identify contributions that pragmatists have made to philosophical ethics, to identify some challenges that may be associated with taking a pragmatist ethics on board, and to gesture toward possible next steps for pragmatist ethics.

The tasks just described, arranged in that way, have a kind of intuitive order – what’s on offer; what’s trouble; what’s next? Despite the plausibility of proceeding in the intuitive way, I think there is something to be gained by starting with the troubles, for in doing so we can perhaps begin to clear the way for making good use of pragmatism’s contributions in our own times and on our own terms.

As a final prefatory remark: because my task is to survey the relationship between a philosophical way of thinking and a particular domain, I give short shrift to biographical considerations. I defer the reader interested in knowing more about the thinkers behind the thoughts explored in this chapter to the entries of my colleagues in Part I.

Three Challenges

There are three main challenges to exploring pragmatist ethics that it is helpful to delineate before setting out.

The first is to determine which thinkers we would need to consider carefully to get a grip on what pragmatist ethics is and what it could be. Celestial navigation is the ancient art of using objects in the night sky to orient oneself in space. To do so, sailors can rely on the most visible such objects: the brightest stars. History of philosophy proceeds in a similar way – contemporary students and readers often orient themselves with respect to the most well-known philosophers of an era.

This presents a challenge with respect to pragmatism because there are numerous thinkers worthy of serious study, especially when we focus on contributions to moral philosophy. It is common for introductory courses or volumes on pragmatism to focus exclusively on three thinkers: Charles S. Peirce (1839-1914), William James (1842-1910), and John Dewey (1859-1952). But those who want to engage the possibilities of pragmatist ethics seriously will benefit from going beyond Peirce-James-Dewey treatments of the tradition, and including the thinkers with whom the ‘big three’ stand in constellation. This could include any of the following

philosophers – some quite bright stars in the history of pragmatism already, some whose place in the firmament has not been so well appreciated: Josiah Royce (1855-1918), Jane Addams (1860-1935), George Herbert Mead (1863-1931), George Santayana (1863-1952), Ella Lyman Cabot (1866-1934), W.E.B. Du Bois (1868–1963), Clarence Irving Lewis (1883-1964), and Alain Locke (1885-1954). To complicate matters further, we could go beyond pragmatism’s first hundred years and consider the work of self-identified pragmatists active in moral philosophy today, but I take it that the point is made even without the full pragmatist family tree.

The second challenge is closely related to the first, and it is the sheer volume of work to consider. With a constellation of thinkers, many of whom were prolific writers, some of whom lacked judicious editors, you get a lot of books. In the case of the pragmatists, we have much more than books – we have encyclopedia entries, magazine articles, autobiographies, correspondence, and great heaps of unpublished literary remains. As just one example, consider Clarence Irving Lewis, the subject of Peter Olen’s chapter in this volume. Lewis’s relevant contributions include the following essays and books: “Judgments of Value and Judgments of Fact” (1936); “The Objectivity of Value Judgments” (1941); *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation* (1946); “The Empirical Basis of Value Judgments” (1950); “The Rational Imperatives” (1951); ‘Subjective Right and Objective Right’ (1952); ‘The Individual and the Social Order’ (1952); ‘Turning Points of Ethical Theory’ (1954); *The Ground and Nature of the Right* (1955); and *Our Social Inheritance* (1957). Consider that this volume of work is fairly typical for any one of these writers, and the scope of the commitment required to fully engage the tradition begins to come into view.

Although the magnitude of materials can be daunting, this is actually a good thing. Unlike some schools of ethical thought, such as Epicureanism, which philosophers have had to reconstruct on the basis of textual fragments, we have a lot to work with in understanding how historical pragmatists engaged the ethical. Further, seeing the richness and variety in classical pragmatism’s moral philosophy supports our imaginative engagement with the projects those interested in experimenting with pragmatist methods might take up.

Our first and second challenges arise from what I have suggested is an appropriate expansiveness with respect to *writers* and *writings*. The third challenge relates to a different kind of expansiveness, which is with respect to what should be considered under the heading of *ethics*. One common approach is to see ethics as divided into three main branches: metaethics,

normative ethics, and applied ethics. Metaethics is the most abstract, and broadly concerns the preconditions and presuppositions of moral thought, talk, and practice. When we ask questions like “are any moral judgments true?” or “what, if anything, do moral claims refer to?”, we are in the realm of metaethics. Normative ethics concerns good conduct, and asks such questions as “what makes good acts good?” or “what is the mechanism for identifying morally good actions?” Applied ethics is the most concrete, as it asks questions that bring the theoretical elements of ethics into contact with real and pressing problems, asking such questions as “should people be allowed to receive medical assistance in dying?” or “does allowing carbon offset purchase by the wealthy do anything to help those most harmed by climate change?”ⁱ

This separation can promote clarity in our thinking about what a philosopher is most centrally doing in a given text or argument. But that clarity is in part achieved through a kind of distortion. In reality, the subfields of ethics make frequent contact and grow together. While our contemporary distinctions for carving up the space of academic moral philosophy are prominent, with many historical texts, the lines are blurry at best.

What all this means is that there are works by pragmatist thinkers that may not look so obviously like ethical treatises, but which are shot through with themes that bear on our attempts to model – and to live – moral lives. As an example, consider Jane Addams’s *The Long Road of Women’s Memory*, published in 1916. This book recounts the season when women of diverse backgrounds came to the Hull House settlement founded by Addams to investigate rumors that a “Devil Baby” had been born there. The book is part memoir, part reflection on the puzzles and promises of democracy, part anthropology, part feminist epistemology, part argument for the importance of narrative in understanding others, and part ode to meeting others in community even – perhaps, especially – when we have no idea what they are talking about.ⁱⁱ

In sum, a full study of pragmatist ethics has to chart a path through these three challenges: whose work to engage, from which of a myriad of sources, and on how wide an understanding of ‘moral philosophy’.

Our task is not the full study. Instead, my approach in what follows is to simplify matters by identifying entry points that are intelligible and interesting without taking on the tradition in its entirety. I will focus on three contributions to moral philosophy found in classical pragmatism: its distinctive moral epistemology; its treatment of habit; and its abundant advice on norms to live by.

From Methodology to Moral Epistemology

In his 1903 Harvard Lectures, Peirce described pragmatism as “a principle and method of right thinking”, that principle being that to understand our concepts requires us to interrogate them where we actually find them: in use, playing their parts in the cognitive life of human beings. He described pragmatists as “laboratory philosophers”, animated by “the impulse to penetrate into the reason of things” (CP 1.44) and by the conviction that “philosophy is a science based upon everyday experience” (CP 8.112). In her *Newer Ideals of Peace*, Addams articulates the pragmatist orientation in terms directly connected to moral philosophy. She declares that “It is necessary from the very beginning to substitute the scientific method of reason for the *a priori* method of the school men” - at least, it is necessary “if we would deal with real people and obtain a sense of participation with our fellows” (*NIP* 18). Hilary Putnam remarked that the distinctive balance of pragmatism as a method is between being fallibilist and being anti-sceptical: we must be prepared to change our beliefs when faced with appropriate evidence and experience, but beliefs as habits for actions are not undermined arbitrarily or by “paper doubts. Further, pragmatism as a method places human practice always at the center of the philosophical enterprise: ‘the emphasis on the primacy of practice’, he says, is ‘perhaps *the* central’ emphasis of pragmatism (1995, 52). While the application of the pragmatic maxim to the concept of truth may be its most (in)famous iteration, pragmatist methods in general are open to reiteration. In fact, they demand reiteration as human practices, institutions, and needs evolve. This is why pragmatism can be construed as a metaphilosophical program, rather than a set of substantive first-order views.ⁱⁱⁱ

At the center of pragmatism as practice we find its naturalized account of inquiry. This model is most famously articulated in a pair of papers by Peirce, “The Fixation of Belief” (1877) and “How to Make Our Ideas Clear” (1878). Peirce’s presentation is striking because it considers how an individual is moved to, and through, inquiry. It also locates human animals as knowers not in isolation, but in community – where what we often need to progress in the pursuit of our own settled beliefs is the experience and expertise of others. The earliest pragmatists took on the English psychologist Alexander Bain’s precept that beliefs are habits for action. Bain framed belief as active and predictive, the “expectation of some contingent future about to follow on our action” (1859: 568). Our beliefs are formed not apart from life, but in the living of it. Once

formed, they are not inert contents tucked away in the storehouse of the mind, but real commitments that guide our conduct. Just as we are not isolated and unchanging, our concepts – including our moral concepts – are not static placeholders in thought. Rather, they are instruments for classification, comparison, and inference, for solitary and shared deliberation.

Genuine inquiry begins when belief is undermined by with doubt. As beliefs are the cognitive backstop for practical reasoning and our confident action, the perturbation of a belief we had relied on brings us up short. In order to find our way back to action, we must replace or update the previously held belief. The only reliable way to do this is inquiry, which is characterized by its cognitive aspirations: when we begin an inquiry, we take ourselves to be in the truth business. Peirce also calls this “the method of science” (CP 5.384), but this need not raise connotations of hadron colliders or hazmat suits. Rather, as Cheryl Misak puts it, a commitment to inquiry amounts to aiming at “empirical adequacy, predictive power, understanding the way things work, understanding ourselves” – that is, aiming at the truth (Misak 2000, 1).

This account of inquiry carries over to pragmatist moral philosophy. Dewey frames how extensive the scope of this method of belief fixation is in his *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, where he declares that “Inquiry is the life-blood of every science and is constantly employed in every craft, science, and profession” (1986 [1938], 12). Whether we articulate our cognitive aspirations to ourselves deliberately and declare our purpose explicitly, or whether we experience ourselves as flummoxed and simply trying to find a way forward that won’t give way beneath our feet, our desire for secure and stable belief shows us as committed to inquiry in practice. This is no less true of our beliefs about moral matters. While pragmatism portrays our approach to ethics as scientific – informed by evidence and experience – it is not scientific, for it is still human experience that moves inquiry forward.

It might be thought that pragmatism’s focus on experience is radically subjective in a way that leads straightforwardly to moral relativism. This need not be so. As James puts it, “when as empiricists we give up the doctrine of objective certitude, we do not thereby give up on the quest or hope of truth itself”, rather we see ourselves as engaged in the process of pursuing it – and “we gain an ever better position towards it by systematically continuing to roll up experience and think” (1979 [1896], 23-4). Systematically rolling up experience can be done at both the individual level and the communal level. It also requires us to consider experiences broadly.

When Peirce says that “Ethics as a positive science must rest on observed facts” (CP 8.158), this is a capacious understanding of ‘observation’ that includes consideration of our reactions to thought experiments or other modes of imaginative engagement. Also central to the idea of treating ethics as a normative science is the rejection of a dichotomy between facts and values. All inquiry is goal-directed, and such goals express values – whatever facts are turned up cannot be considered apart from the aims that led to their discovery.

Rather than taking this as a strike against science, we can take it as a point in favor of the overlap in method between science and ethics. The antidote to subjectivity of the solipsistic kind is not in an objective sense of morality available through reason alone, but shared objectives. This is how pragmatism positions inquiry as available to the laboratory scientist and the ethicist alike: we must conceive investigation into questions of good and bad conduct as moral inquiry, “aimed at finding the right answer and improving our beliefs through considering more evidence, argument, and perspective” (Misak 2000, 85).

Treating moral life as amenable to investigation is also a kind of democratization of access to the truths of morality, which follows from the wide range of whose experience is salient. Rather than a few sages or oracles who speak the truth to the many, pragmatism frames the pursuit of moral knowledge as group work. Participation in moral evaluation arises in much the same way that participation in inquiry does: from a natural inclination toward one’s own benefit, to an appreciation of the contributions others may make to one’s understanding and pursuit of one’s own benefit, and arrival at the necessity of the knowledge of others to best serve that pursuit. Lewis maintains that “to seek the good and to avoid the bad is the basic bent of conscious life” (1957, 83). Humans ascend from this “basic bent” to full-blown normative notions of right and wrong because we are capable of “the extension of this process to experiences distant in time through deliberation and self-criticism” (Murphey 382). The capacity for judgment, furnished with experience, makes it possible for a person to govern their actions in ways that produce good results for themselves and others – to adopt effective norms.

Habit Revisited

The improvement of our habits of mind is a central goal of pragmatist inquiry. Because of the active and predictive nature of beliefs on the pragmatist model, it will come as no surprise that habits of conduct should follow.

Of course, the idea that habit is an important focal point in trying to model a morally good life and in trying to live one is not a Pragmatist™ idea. Indeed, it is an ancient idea. Much of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (4 BCE) is devoted to explaining how the interested student can cultivate moral virtues through processes of habituation – and much of the advice is practice-oriented. For example, in discussing how to cultivate particular virtues of character, Aristotle advises that self-knowledge is crucial: if we can identify which vice we are inclined toward, we can adjust our “aim” in action accordingly to hit the mean. Steering toward the vice contrary to the one we naturally lean toward is a mechanism for addressing the propensity leading us toward a bad habit.

Similarly, Epictetus's *Handbook* (~125) stresses self-knowledge when considering taking on a project or path forward in life, focusing at least in part on one's capacity to become habituated in the ways necessary to complete that project or walk that path. As he demands of his reader,

“Just you consider, as a human being, what sort of thing it is; then inspect your own nature and whether you can bear it. You want to do the pentathlon, or to wrestle? Look at your arms, your thighs, inspect your loins. Different people are naturally suited for different things. Do you think that if you do those things you can eat as you now do, drink as you now do, have the same likes and dislikes?” (§29, White, 1983: 20)

If we assess our conduct and find it wanting, we cannot simply continue to do as we now do and hope improvement somehow occurs. This is not because self-improvement is hopeless, but because in order for us to earn *rational* hope, we must replace our problematic beliefs – and their resultant habits – with something stable.

Pragmatism contributes to our understanding of habit as an evaluative focal point for moral philosophy by giving an account of how that stability can be secured. When habits of mind – beliefs – are disturbed by experiences that give rise to genuine doubt, it is back to inquiry that we turn. Becoming accustomed to *turning back* as part and parcel of doing ethics converts that initially unpleasant experience of doubt into a learning opportunity. The function of inquiry, recall, is to fix beliefs not merely as cognitive units of semantic content, but in connection with our intellectual and moral habits, and in connection with one another.

Mead articulates this interplay between the individual and the social as follows:

It is by means of reflexiveness—the turning back of the experience of the individual upon himself—that the whole social process is thus brought into the experience of the individuals involved in it; it is by such means, which enable the individual to take the

attitude of the other toward himself, that the individual is able consciously to adjust himself to that process, and to modify the resultant of that process in any given social act in terms of his adjustment to it. (2015 [1934], 134)

Updating our beliefs while participating in our collaborative social life is the mechanism for avoiding calcification of those habits. But to observe that humans run on habits is only part of the picture; pragmatists are deeply invested in habit as the site for individual and social improvement.

It is in this spirit that James describes habit as “the great fly-wheel of society” (1981 [1890], 121). He adds that, “Could the young but realize how soon they will become mere walking bundles of habits, they would give more heed to their conduct while in the plastic state” (1981 [1890], 127). Anyone who has undertaken a failed self-improvement program may find solace in a pair of remarks made by Peirce. On the one hand, “Where hope is unchecked by any experience, it is likely that our optimism is extravagant” (CP 5.366); on the other hand, “The trial of this method of experience [...] encourages us to hope that we are approaching nearer and nearer to an opinion which is not destined to be broken down -- though we cannot expect ever quite to reach that ideal goal” (CP 5.384). While certainty in ethics is not offered by pragmatist moral epistemology, it is nonetheless melioristic. Terence MacMullen points out that this measured hopefulness permeates pragmatist thought, and takes various forms in the problem-engaged theorizing of multiple figures (2013).

The question that arises next is a practical one: what ought we do to give appropriate heed to our conduct? Or in other words: through the lens of what ideal should we strive to improve our habits?

Abundant Advice

Pragmatists offer a refreshing diversity of ideals as candidates for the human good. Normative ethics, as we saw earlier, asks precisely what it is that makes good acts good. Once a criterion is established, it serves as a guiding normative notion: an ideal and focal point, a standard held up as a key piece of conceptual architecture in modeling moral life. The history of normative ethics in Western philosophy has furnished us with prominent examples, including virtue, duty, utility, and care.

A number of the most prominent views handed down in the canon of Western philosophy are monistic about normative ideals: they either explicitly endorse just one guiding notion, or reduce an apparent plurality to a singularity. One question engagement with the classical pragmatists urges us to consider is whether we might get closer to understanding or accurately modeling the aspirations of human morality if we are more expansive. In response to the search for a criterion of good conduct pragmatists offer a plethora of guiding normative notions. Here, I introduce four candidates: growth; loyalty; harmony; and culture. I shall not strive to adjudicate between them, but only to suggest that these notions are worth considering alongside duty, virtue, utility, and care, that we might enrich contemporary conversations about what makes a life go well in the moral and prudential senses.

First, growth. Considering humans as a life form, some pragmatists forward a guiding normative notion of growth as the highest human good. All living things experience growth, but what is intended here is no merely biological process. Dewey focuses on growth in his philosophy of education, where he argues that education is characterized not a singular overarched end, but by the principle of growth (Dewey 2008 [1916]). Sidney Hook notes that “it is obvious that for Dewey growth is an inclusive and not a single exclusive end. It embraces *all* the positive intellectual, emotional, and moral ends which appear in everybody’s easy schedule of the good life and the good education – growth in skills and powers, knowledge and appreciation, value and thought.” (1959, 1013) As Hook adds, Dewey does not simply offer an objective-list theory of well-being, but stresses the activity requisite to “bring these ends into living and relevant relation to the developing powers and habits and imaginations of the individual person” (Hook 1959, 1014).

Peirce’s account of growth is similarly expansive, and also encompasses community-level growth. He suggests that the *summum bonum* of human life, “the highest of all possible aims”, is “to further concrete reasonableness” (CP 2.34). Growth in reasonableness that renders it “concrete” demands of us more than an individually cultivated disposition. As Aaron Massecar has argued, Peirce’s ideal requires us “to ensure that we use our reason to address the concerns of our community” (2016, 17). Reasonableness is made concrete not only in well-formed habits, but in practices and norms that govern our public life and shared institutions.

Second, we have loyalty. The ideal of loyalty as the highest good is introduced by Royce, and affirmed by Cabot. In his lectures published as *The Philosophy of Loyalty*, Royce develops

an account that is structurally similar to Aristotle’s virtue ethics, which presents a plurality of good moral qualities united under a single, overarching virtue. For Aristotle, all other intellectual virtues and moral virtues are arranged under the virtue of practical wisdom; for Royce, all other good moral qualities are arranged under the principle of loyalty to loyalty. In describing this structure, he asserts that “You can truthfully center your entire moral world about a rational conception of loyalty. Justice, charity, industry, wisdom, spirituality, are all definable in terms of enlightened loyalty” (160).

That loyalty should be enlightened requires a commitment to the ideal of loyalty itself. Royce describes how this leads to an imperative that informs self-cultivation:

Find your own cause, your interesting, fascinating, personally engrossing cause; serve it with all your might and soul and strength; but so choose your cause, and so serve it, that thereby you show forth your loyalty to loyalty, so that because of your choice and service of your cause, there is a maximum of increase of loyalty amongst your fellow-men. (909-10)

The final clause is meant to help guard against the objection that some people will choose bad causes to be loyal to; such a choice would not inspire in others an increase of loyalty in others, and thus is not enlightened loyalty.

Cabot shares Royce’s interest in loyalty, and connects the ways in which he frames it as providing normative structure to a life with her own philosophical work – especially her reflections on ethics education. In describing her pedagogy, John Kaag notes that she identifies “The loyalties of childhood to gangs, to friends, to family members and local communities”, which “are usually exclusive and remain antagonistic to diversity and difference” (Kaag, 67). Cabot believes that from an early age, moral questions “are as close to our life as the air we breathe”, and that “anyone who has any interests whatsoever is concerned with ethical problems” (1910, 1). Education can begin from that interest in a variety of ways. She sees clearly that not all have the same opportunities to engage first-hand with problematic situations in a way that would be edifying. It is on that account that she develops a necessary place for both sympathy and imagination. Sympathy, Cabot claims, “is intricately bound up with interest” and “like interest, grows with knowledge”. The more we know of someone else’s problems, the more equipped we will be to learn from and with them. But knowing facts is insufficient. We must “make real to ourselves” their struggles and solutions, and for that, imagination is required: “imagination is kindled and kept shining by sympathy” (1910, 202). To move from exclusive and

antagonist loyalties to mature and worthy ones is the work of becoming educated for the world in which we live.

Third, harmony. This ideal is hinted at by a number of pragmatists, and made explicit by both James and Santayana. In keeping with the radical empiricism that James develops to consider experiences of all kinds, he remarks in *Varieties of Religious Experience* that ‘Were one asked to characterize the life of religion in the broadest and most general terms possible, one might say that it consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto’ (1985[1902], 51). Santayana connects the notion of harmony directly with the aspiration to live a morally good life, remarking that “All that morality can require is the inward harmony of each life” (SB 134). Achieving harmony requires both knowledge of self and knowledge of the world; this is why Santayana connects the possibility of living harmoniously with wisdom. We sometimes find the following quote in isolation: “To be happy, we must be wise.” (EGP 152) But what immediately precedes this is an important piece of context. For wisdom here is earned through self-knowledge: “You must have taken the measure of your powers, tasted the fruits of your passions and learned your place in the world and what things in it can really serve you.” Martin Coleman and Herman Saatkamp have described this process of coming to know oneself in relation to the world as an individual one, but also as egalitarian in spirit: “No one can claim a central place above others. But each entity also has an embodied set of values, and the art of life is to structure one's environment in such a fashion as to best realize those embodied values, i.e., to place in harmony the natural forces of one's life and one's environment” (Saatkamp 2002).

Fourth, and finally, we have culture. Locke develops “an ethics of culture”, in which he argues that the “highest intellectual duty is to be cultured” (1991 [1923], 435). Speaking in an address to students at Howard University, Locke exhorts them to take a wider view of education than “the necessary hardship that is involved in preparing to earn a better living” (436). He states that the word “culture” represents a “higher function of education, the art of living well” (436). It is higher, on his analysis, because it is that part of education that is self-administered. Locke duly considers objections against the idea that we have a duty to become cultured – that it is artificial, useless, selfish, or snobbish – by calling his students back to their own investment in becoming educated. Crucially, that investment is not merely economic, but personal. But an investment in

one's continued education, in learning to live well, is not made selfish by being personal: "culture", Locke says, "even when it is rich and mature, gives only by sharing" (438).

Locke offers practical advice to his students about how to become cultured, which goes some distance further to illuminating how he understands this task as an ethical duty and not a mere instrumental good to the individual. He recommends that we refine our habits of consumption, cultivate an intelligent appreciation of one of the "great human arts"^{iv}, and constantly practice that in which we have an interest. Locke connects his ideal with the Socratic dictum "Know thyself" by marking culture out as a constitutive end of education: "the goal of education is self-culture, and one must hold it essential even for knowledge's own sake that it be transmuted into character and personality" (441). In connection culture with education and growth, both individual and societal, there is a clear resonance here between Locke's view and those of Peirce and Dewey. There is also some overlap with Santayana's account of harmony. While culture may seem specific, it may actually be the pragmatist normative notion that could most easily accommodate the insights of the others.

Whether to try to synthesize these ideas of morally worthy goals or allow them to stand separately is a question at the point of pragmatist ethics into action. If the list of options just rehearsed feels daunting, there may be some (cold) comfort in the doubt generated by having so much to choose from. For choose we can, and we must: to be human is to be the kind of thing that places oneself under norms, and such norms express themselves in our unconscious habits and our conscious choices. As Lewis puts it,

To act, to live, in human terms, is necessarily to be subject to imperatives; to recognize norms. Because to be subject to an imperative means simply the finding of a constraint of action in some concern for that which is not immediate; is not a present enjoyment or a present suffering. To repudiate normative significances and imperatives in general, would be to dissolve away all seriousness of action and intent, leaving only an undirected floating down the stream of time; and as a consequence to dissolve an significance of thought and discourse into universal blah. (1946, 481).

Far from encouraging such "blah", organizing ourselves under norms derived from ideals of growth, loyalty, harmony, or culture offers many possible routes away from doubt and indecision.

How could we decide which to enact? For the pragmatist, the test of any principle is what Dewey called experiments in living. Presumably some version of this thought is what informs the popular event Stoic Week. Per the Modern Stoicism website, "Stoic Week is an annual event

that invites you to ‘live like a Stoic for a week’. It is run online and is completely free. Since 2012 over 20,000 people have signed up for Stoic Week.”^v The obvious challenge of “Pragmatism Week” as a competitor is that, as we’ve just seen, the pragmatists differ on what they emphasize in the pursuit of a good – socially engaged, morally upright – human life. But the mechanism of experimentation is the same for any candidate normative principle: we just have to try what the pragmatists offer to see what works. It is up to the student of ethics to determine which of the candidate norms sketched here can be lived out fully, and whether in the living we would find it vindicated in practice.^{vi}

Conclusion

We began by considering some challenges to getting serious about the study of pragmatist ethics, and then turned to a consideration of pragmatism’s contributions to moral philosophy. What could be next is roughly that our understanding of pragmatist ethics has the potential to go both backward and forward.

By ‘going backward’, I do not mean ‘diminishing’ – rather, I mean going back to those pragmatists whose work has not been widely read and engaged despite their contributions to moral philosophy. To go backward in this sense, we would need to meet – and not simply steer around – the challenge of meeting the pragmatist tradition in ethics in a more complete way than has usually been attempted.^{vii}

To go forward, we need to consider to what purposes and projects the elements of pragmatist ethics might be put: what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive pragmatist ethics to have.

Whatever steps we take toward improving our understanding of moral life, pragmatism tells us to take them together. The experience of others is an essential and everyday corrective; deliberation on the pragmatist model is not solitary *a priori* reasoning, but an activity where we have company. In a pluralistic society, that company will be mixed: people with different ends in view must find ways to get along and go along. In order to do so, we must adopt Peirce’s recommendation and “rate [our] own powers of reasoning at the very mediocre price they would fetch if put up at auction” (1.673). To know better, and do better, a person must make the most of being one among a community of knowers. The moral life is a shared life.

DRAFT

Recommended Reading

For alternate surveys of similar terrain, I recommend the following three works by way of introduction:

Andrew Sepielli (2017), “Pragmatism and Metaethics”, in Tristram McPherson and David Plunkett (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Metaethics*, Routledge: 582-594.

J.E. Tiles (1998). “Pragmatism in Ethics”, in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

Juan Pablo Serra (2010). “What Is and What Should Pragmatic Ethics Be?: Some Remarks on Recent Scholarship”, in *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*, II (2).

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ⁱ As Andrew Altman has argued, once pragmatism as a method is taken on board, we can see that applied philosophy has “a principal role” to play (1983: 227). There is an abundance of work being done by pragmatists in applied ethics, which has not been my topic here. This is not because pragmatist applied ethics is unimportant – quite the opposite – but because there are domain-specific observations to be made within areas of applied work that would lead us down too many branching paths to survey in a satisfactory way here.

ⁱⁱ Other examples will spring to mind for those familiar with pragmatism, so I add just one more here: James’s *Principles of Psychology*, principally intended as a textbook for the emerging science of the mind, is replete with metaethical observations.

ⁱⁱⁱ For the argument that metaphilosophical pragmatism is the only pragmatism worth having, see Aikin and Talisse (2018).

^{iv} Locke’s examples are “literature, painting, sculpture, music, or what not” (439). “What not” leaves considerable room for expansion and interpretation, which is important to Locke’s connection between authenticity and projects of self-cultivation.

^v Stoic Week is a yearly event. For details, see <https://modernstoicism.com/stoic-week/>.

^{vi} For more on the standard of pragmatic vindication, see Wiggins (1990-91).

^{vii} Shannon Dea (2017) recounts the experience of developing a more expansive syllabus for an undergraduate course in classical pragmatism. As she observes, “In classic pragmatism courses, the philosophers who are usually covered are Peirce, James, Dewey, etc. If any non-White male philosopher is included, it is typically Jane Addams.” Describing herself as “determined to teach a more pluralistic canon”, Dea’s syllabus began as follows: “In this seminar, we will survey classic pragmatism, a distinctively American philosophical movement that spanned about 1870 to the 1930s. We will read and discuss representative works by central figures in the movement and by other authors working in a similar idiom in the period.” Dea’s survey course included Peirce, James, Dewey, Addams, and Locke, along with Anna Julia Haywood Cooper (1858-1964), W. E. B. Du Bois (1868-1963), and Mary Parker

Follett (1868–1933). Students were tasked throughout the term with three questions: “what is pragmatism?”; “what have historically been the grounds for inclusion into (or exclusion from) the canon of classic pragmatism?”; and “what, if anything, is distinctively American about classic pragmatism?”

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