

New Directions in Pragmatic Ethics

Novas Direções na Ética Pragmática

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Abstract: It is well known that William James used Peirce's pragmatic maxim to not only develop a theory of meaning, but also a theory of truth—an expansion of the maxim of which Peirce disapproved. Nonetheless, James takes the concept of truth in an interesting direction by claiming it to be “one species of the good.” Consequently, the criteria he establishes for true beliefs are also his criteria for good actions and practices. In doing so, James lays the groundwork for an ethic that is elaborated well by Dewey and consistent with many of Peirce's ethical ideas. It is one that emphasizes the very practical characteristics of the good as that which improves the human condition by means of practices that best facilitate problem-solving. The purpose of this paper is to draw out this idea and show how it takes pragmatic ethics in new directions, one that is picked up by neo-pragmatists such as Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam.

Keywords: Ethics. Pragmatism.

Resumo: *É notório que James usou a máxima pragmática de Peirce não apenas para desenvolver uma teoria do significado, mas também para uma teoria da verdade – uma expansão da máxima que Peirce não aprovou. Mesmo assim, James encaminha a concepção de verdade numa direção interessante ao afirmar que ela é “uma espécie do bem.” Consequentemente, os critérios que ele estabelece para crenças verdadeiras são também seus critérios para práticas e ações boas. Ao fazer isso, James institui as bases para uma Ética que é bem elaborada por Dewey e consistente com muitas das ideias éticas de Peirce. Uma ética que enfatiza a mesma característica prática do bem como aquela que melhora a condição humana por meio de práticas que melhor facilitam a resolução de problemas. O propósito deste trabalho é extrair essa ideia e demonstrar como ela dá novas direções à ética pragmática, uma que é continuada por neo-pragmatistas como Richard Rorty e Hilary Putnam.*

Palavras-chave: *Ética. Pragmatismo.*

The pragmatists recognized that the problem of goodness is not as Aristotle imagined, a fairly well-defined target at which things aim and many times miss, but more analogous to crossing a river by feeling for the stones. The stones in this case are the problems that emerge in the work of being human. Problems drive change, and when the change improves things, it tends to move us in the direction of that improvement.

In this view, goodness is not a predetermined goal, but comes in bits and pieces as the result of solutions to problems that improve our lot. As Dewey emphasizes “[...] morality is a continuing process not a fixed achievement” (MW 14: 194):

A business man proceeds by comparing today’s liabilities and assets with yesterday’s, and projects plans for tomorrow by a study of the movement thus indicated in conjunction with study of the conditions of the environment now existing. It is not otherwise with the business of living [...] The physician is lost who would guide his activities of healing by building up a picture of perfect health [...] He employs what he has discovered about actual cases of good health and ill health and their causes to investigate the present ailing individual, so as to further his healing [...]” (MW 14: 196).

But, although not predetermined, the direction we take is fated in Peirce’s sense of the term since, to the extent that people cannot tolerate problems, they will prefer their solutions and, so, move in the direction those solutions take for us, much in the way in which chance events will tend toward a central limit. Goodness is measured not by how close we’ve come to something we’ve identified as the good, but how far we’ve moved from something considered worse. Goodness, like truth for Peirce, is approached not as a clear, direct target, but achieved indirectly by the reduction of error and a reliable process of self-correction. More positively stated, good is what results in the long run from effective processes of self-correction.

What comes along with this sense of the good is a broader sense of ethics as centered on all aspects of problem-solving in all the practices that characterize the work of being human. As Hilary Putnam argues, “any human problem at all [...] is ‘ethical’ [...]” (2004: 107). This position is certainly found in Dewey’s ethics, but also in Peirce’s notion of pragmatics, and some of the thinking found in other neo-pragmatists, such as Richard Rorty. In a sense of the term very distinct from Charles Morris’s notion, *pragmatics* is understood by Peirce as the comprehensive look at the ends, means, and their application to human practices, in a manner that integrates traditional ethics with practical and technical arts and sciences (MS 1345 c. 1894: 4). Pragmatics, in Peirce’s vision, is the study of practical moral ends (ethics), the study of how to attain those ends (arts), and the study of how to apply those means and ends in current historical circumstances (MS 1345: 6, 16). Because morals deals primarily with solving problems, Dewey argues that it “is ineradicably empirical, not theological nor metaphysical nor mathematical. Since it directly concerns human nature, everything that can be known of the human mind and body in physiology, medicine, anthropology, and psychology is pertinent to moral inquiry” (MW 14: 204).

I think such a view of ethics as integrated with technical arts and sciences, encourages a more comprehensive and, consequently, successful approach to problem-solving as a normative issue from top to bottom. As Gene Agre says, seeing a situation as a problem is a “function of a clash between what is and what should be. It’s a matter of setting things right” (AGRE, 1982: 129). Consequently, all problems are normative ones. With that in view, it’s possible to treat problems ethically in a broad or narrow sense. In a narrow sense—which is the traditional one—ethics is concerned with certain kinds of norms such as virtuous behavior, characterizations of the good, and ethical principles concerning best conduct. In the broad sense—which

is the pragmatic sense advocated here—ethics is coincidental with the normative in general: What is better or best, regardless of the practice or any of its aspects.

The advantage of the latter approach is that it promotes an integrative method to problem-solving that does not separate out the technical and practical from the ethical in the narrow sense. Ethical, technical, and practical problems are similar in that they all involve practical reasoning of how best to improve on the practice, relative to the end-in-view. As James Wallace claims, ethical norms, understood as standards by which actions are judged good or bad, right or wrong, are items of practical knowledge like any other form of practical knowledge (2009: 3). Moreover, such problems are fractal in that they typically reflect all the normative dimensions, regardless of where one starts. When one digs down into a political or a financial problem, an ethical one emerges in the narrow sense; similarly with any technical problem, since the technician is weighing duties and obligations, distribution of resources, and many other normative issues in attempting to solve a problem. In effect, the practical, technical, and ethical are intertwined from a broader normative perspective: If it is a practical problem, it is an ethical one in this wider sense, and, if ethical, it needs to be worked out practically and technically. If we consider conservation and preservation of the environment a worthy end, the meaning of those terms, pragmatically speaking, involves a set of practical hypotheses that, if they are to be realized, require working out in a practical way. They require a technical solution as much as they do an ethical one, in the narrow sense, but in the process of solving the problems they intend to solve, they guide each other in the context of an overarching normative framework. As Andrew Light and Eric Katz argue, although environmental ethics, for example, has been successful in analyzing the moral relationship between humanity and the natural world, it has had little practical effect on environmental problems:

Can philosophers contribute anything to an investigation of environmental problems? Do the traditions, history and skills of philosophical thought have any relevance to the development of environmental policy? We believe that the answer is yes [...] But the fruits of this philosophical enterprise must be directed towards the practical resolution of environmental problems [...] In short, environmental ethics must develop for itself a methodology of *environmental pragmatism* [...] (1996:1-2).

Let me try to spell this out in a little more detail by presenting an interpretation of the classic pragmatists that points to this position.

Peirce developed the pragmatic maxim as a means of clarifying concepts and, one could say, beliefs and hypotheses as well (CP 5.402). The gist of the maxim is that the highest clarity of a concept results when we articulate its practical consequences. It is by predicting what results when we act upon a thing that we come to understand what it means to be whatever it is; it is by doing that we come to understanding (CP 2.330). Peirce also recognized that for every concept so clarified, there was also a practical maxim that could be developed. If hardness of a diamond is clarified by the fact that it can scratch glass rather than being scratched by glass, we also have a practical maxim for how to cut glass (see LISZKA, 2009: 62-3; CP 5.402). The pragmatic maxim is inherently designed to bring out the practical aspects of any concept, belief or hypothesis. As Peirce emphasizes, the pragmatic maxim discovers the “practical bearings” of that which we seek to clarify (CP 5.402).

As much as Peirce and James agreed on the power of the pragmatic maxim for clarifying the meaning of concepts, they disagreed on its use as a theory of truth. There is an important difference in Peirce's mind between what a true belief does and whether a belief is true. Peirce could not agree more with James that true beliefs are reliable guides to living. But what is it that makes a belief reliable? It is not the fact that it is useful as a guide to experience, but that its ability to make consistent predictions about its content in the long run—and that requires sophisticated inductive tests. It is because a true belief can predict that it is useful; it is not true because it is useful. Moreover, there are many useful beliefs that are patently false.

But if James was wrong about the pragmatic maxim engendering a theory of truth, he may have been right about it as a theory of goodness. James's account of truth in fact turns out also to be an account of goodness: "Truth is *one species of good* [...]" (1907: 76), he says. Consequently, the criteria he establishes for true ideas, beliefs, and claims, are also his criteria for good actions and practices. In following this thought, if we were to substitute what he claims for truth in his more famous passages in the classic texts as what he also claims for goodness, then among these claims are the following: Something is considered good (=true) in so far as it helps us "to get into a satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience" (1907: 58). The good is that which "will carry us prosperously from any one part of our experience to any other part, linking things satisfactorily, working securely, simplifying, saving labor [...]" (1907: 58). Good things are measured by the "success with which they 'work' [...]" (1907: 67). The good is "what works best in the way of leading us, what fits every part of life best and combines with the collectivity of experience's demands, nothing being omitted" (1907: 80). The upshot of James's account of goodness (aka truth) is that it is anything which enables us to "lead a better life" (1907: 76).

For James, then, goodness is couched in the language of what "works"—the classically popular interpretation of pragmatism. Extrapolating a bit on this notion, James's criterion for goodness appears to have at least three dimensions, which might be called functionality, fit, and flow. First, *functionality*, the "success with which they [actions and practices in this case] 'work' [...]" could be viewed as a determination of how well a practice is working and, when it is working, whether it is achieving its end optimally relative to the constraints under which it must operate. As William James's notes, goodness (*cum* truth) is measured by its "work-value" (1907: 68). Functionality is bound up with the fact that a certain activity or practice produces a certain end or outcome, and does so well.

Second, *fit*, is that which helps us "to get into a satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience," and "[...] what fits every part of life best and combines with the collectivity of experience's demands, nothing being omitted." Fit could be said to be a measure of how well an optimally functioning practice works with other practices to which it is somehow connected. From this understanding, fit could be indicated by the number of practices that interfere with its functionality. Whatever ends or outcomes the function of the practice produces needs to be consonant with other functioning practices. As Dewey says in regard to living organisms, "in life that is truly life, everything overlaps and merges [...]. Only when the past ceases to trouble and anticipation of the future are not perturbing is a being wholly united with his environment and therefore fully alive" (LW 10:24).

Third, *flow* is that which “will carry us prosperously from any one part of our experience to any other part, linking things satisfactorily, working securely, simplifying, saving labor...” Interestingly, Zeno thought that the highest pleasure consisted in “a good flow (*epirrei*) of life” (ARIUS DIDYMUS, 63A). For James, this dimension of goodness is expressed as a developmental process of improvement. Improvements come through a clash of the old with the new (1907: 59) and, if the new is worthy, it tends to settle into an adjustment of the new with the old (1907: 59). Assuming a society or community is institutionally equipped to accommodate improvements, this adjustment preserves what is best in the older stock of beliefs and practices “with a minimum of modification; stretching them just enough to make them admit the novelty, but conceiving that in ways as familiar as the case leaves possible” (1907: 60). “It marries old opinion to new fact so as ever to show a minimum of jolt, a maximum of continuity” (1907: 61). Something is good “just in proportion to its success in solving this ‘problem of maxima and minima’ (1907: 61).

For Peirce and Dewey improvement is the hallmark of growth and, growth, at least for Dewey, “is the only moral ‘end’” (MW 12: 180-181). Growth for Peirce is not simply increase, but diversification (CP 1.174). This is Dewey’s understanding as well: Growth is something that creates the conditions for further growth. Indeed, for Dewey, growth is the essence of “moving to become better” (MW 12: 180-181), and is akin to Peirce’s notion of “evolutionary love,” the impulse to take what has been received from the past and improve upon it, to take even what is hateful and make it into something better (see CP 6.289)). Indeed, Peirce characterizes growth as “a primordial element of the universe” (CP 6.157). Dewey’s notion of growth rests on Peirce’s principle of continuity which, as Dewey interprets it, is that “every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after” (LW 13: 19). Growth is that dimension of continuity that retains what is best from the past and takes what is bad and makes it better. In Dewey’s more biological language, growth occurs “when a temporary falling out is a transition to a more extensive balance of the energies of the organism with those of the conditions under which it lives (MW 14; 146). Dewey argues that growing is “the continuous reconstruction of experience” (MW 12: 185). Growth “is the active process of transforming the existent situation” (MW 12: 181). The basis of morality for Peirce and Dewey is this desire to improve on the past, and is something that is also promoted by neo-pragmatists such as Richard Rorty, who puts it simply:

Pragmatists ask a “practical question: ‘Are our ways of describing things, of relating them to other things so as to make them fulfill our needs more adequately, as good as possible? Or can we do better? Can our future be made better than our present?’” (1999:72).

Rorty has a very specific index of improvement: Progress is in the ability to widen the group of ‘we’, and to work to reduce the amount of cruelty and suffering in the world. (1989: 192, 198). As Sidney Hook, noted “Dewey had the courageous but not unqualified optimism of a man embattled in perpetual struggle for a *better* world” (HOOK, 1959: 1014). As Dewey emphasizes “[...] morals has to do with all activity into which alternative possibilities enter. For wherever they enter a difference between better and worse arises [...] The better is the good” (MW 14: 193).

This notion of improvement harks back to Immanuel Kant's sense of the pragmatic as articulated in his *Anthropology*—and Peirce's self-proclaimed inspiration for his use of the term (CP 5.412). In the *Anthropology From a Pragmatic Point of View*, "pragmatic" knowledge is described by Kant as a knowledge of what human beings can or should make of themselves as freely acting beings, relative to our "physiological" knowledge, which aims primarily to figure out what "nature makes of man" (1798: 3). Pragmatic knowledge, as opposed to pure theoretical knowledge "aims at improvement" (1798: 4). As Ernst Cassirer notes in his commentary on the *Anthropology*, for Kant "what is truly permanent in human nature is not any condition *in which* it once existed and *from which* it has fallen; rather it is the goal *for which* and toward which it moves (1945; cited in VAN DE PITTE: xiv). The pragmatic viewpoint is future-looking, and bound up, as Kant notes, with what humans can and ought to become – and, so, necessarily bound up with the classic ethical question of how we ought to live. A human being has "a character which he himself creates, because he is capable of perfecting himself according to purposes which he himself adopts" (1798: 238): "[...] the human species can work itself up to its destiny only through continuous progress within an endless sequence of many generations" (1798: 240). Kant notes, however, that the pragmatic knowledge used to make these improvements is fallible, but is followed because something must be done. In the *Critique of Pure Reason* (A824; B852), Kant characterizes the pragmatic in the context of situations in which something must be done even though we must act on uncertain beliefs. Thus, the doctor "must do something for a patient in danger," even though he is uncertain of the nature of the illness. Based on the observation of symptoms, he selects the most likely hypothesis. "Thus," according to Kant, "pragmatic belief always exists in some specific degree, which, according to differences in the interests at stake, may be large or may be small." (*Critique of Pure Reason* A825; B 853). Dewey uses the same example to illustrate the nature of a pragmatic account of improvement. "The physician is lost who would guide his activities of healing by building up a picture of perfect health [...] He employs what he has discovered about actual cases of good health and ill health and their causes to investigate the present ailing individual, so as to further his recovering [...]" (MW 14: 196).

Although it was a wisp of an idea, Peirce envisioned what he called *pragmatics* as a practical ethics concerned comprehensively with improvement in a wide set of practices that make-up the human condition. Pragmatics, like Kant's notion of pragmatic knowledge, is defined as "the study of how we ought to behave in the light of the truths of empirics" (MS 1345 c. 1894: 2), where empirics is understood as the study of physical constraints in nature and constraints of being human. Pragmatics is also more simply defined as the study of "how we ought to act in light of experience" (MS 1345 c. 1894: 5). Pragmatics "studies the processes by which the outer world is to be brought into accord with our wishes," that is, in accordance with our particular ends (MS 1345 c. 1894: 4).

If, as the pragmatists argue, the essence of growth is improvement, improvement means resolving or minimizing the number of problems a practice or institution encounters. The more problems, the less a practice or institution is able to positively grow and evolve. An index of the flow of a practice, then, would be the number and kind of problems it encounters in its functioning, as it works with other practices,

and how well it is able to resolve them. Problems curtail the growth of a practice, but their solution may bolster it.

When good practices are successfully working, they work well with other successful practices, and they enable us to negotiate the constraints of experience. The proper function, fit, and flow of good practices result in a minimum of problems. If an economy, for example, is generating high unemployment, low GDP, trade imbalances, strong inequalities in wealth distribution, inflation, and corruption, most would say it's not working. Similarly, if a health system generated high health care costs yet, nonetheless, resulted in lowered life expectancy, less access to care, higher infant mortality rates, and poorer health generally for the population, people would have a tendency to say it's also not working. The pragmatists' insight is that the measure of the goodness of practices centers around the sort of problems the exercise of that practice engenders, and ethics should be about solving existing problems. "Philosophy recovers itself," Dewey writes, "when it ceases to be a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers and becomes a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems of men" (1977: 94). In explaining how the pragmatic maxim achieves a higher level of clarity in our concepts than any other approach, Peirce emphasizes that this highest grade of clarity results in "[...] fruitful reasoning [...] that [...] can be applied to the resolution of difficult practical problems" (CP 3.457). As Hilary Putnam puts it "What I want to stress from Dewey is the idea of ethics as concerned with the solution of *practical* problems" (2004: 28). As Dewey emphasizes:

Moral goods and ends exist only when something has to be done. The fact that something has to be done proves there are deficiencies, evils in the existent situation. This ill is just the specific ill that it is. It never is an exact duplicate of anything else. Consequently, the good of the situation has to be discovered, projected and attained on the basis of the exact defect and trouble to be rectified (MW 12: 176).

Dewey makes it clear in this statement that ethics should not be in pursuit of some nebulous concept of the good, but address the ills that arise in specific problems and use the solutions as a guidepost to the next higher step in the landscape that makes up the human condition. As Dewey notes, "[...] we know that some things are better than others [...]" simply in the way in which we know that

some methods of surgery, farming, road-making, navigating or what-not are better than others. It does not follow in any of these cases that the "better" methods are ideally perfect, or that they are regulative or "normative" because of conformity to some form. They are the methods which experience up to the present time shows to be the best methods available for achieving certain results, while abstraction of these methods does supply a (relative) norm or standard for further undertakings (LW 12: 108).

When we do hit upon a good solution, it typically becomes a way of life, a habit of action that persists until it becomes a source of problems. Claiming to be inspired by Dewey, James Wallace argues that practices are habits of action that "are the result of the experience over time of many people in dealing with the problems they

encounter in living together and doing things” (2009: 3). Harking back to the language of “practical bearings” in the pragmatic maxim, we can think of practices as practical hypotheses that make claims that by doing certain things, other things will result. If we knew what would likely generate a prosperous economy, then we would also know the practical means to achieve that end. “A practical attitude of mind,” Peirce says, “concerns itself primarily with the living future [...] the pragmatist is obliged to hold that whatever means anything means that something will happen (provided certain conditions are fulfilled) [...]” (CP 8.194). If we have reason to believe that something will happen in the future, we have also the means to control for those events, and control our conduct toward those events. He claims that Dewey re-conceptualized ethics as a “project of inquiry” (PUTNAM, 2004: 108). As he elaborates:

[...] *if* there are ethical facts to be discovered, *then* we ought to apply to ethical inquiry just the rules we have learned to apply to inquiry in general. For what applies to inquiry in general apply to ethical inquiry in particular. (PUTNAM, 1995: 223).

As a form of inquiry, the pragmatists, particularly Peirce and Dewey, are keen on accounting for the right sort of community that is needed in order to conduct such inquiries satisfactorily.

For Dewey, inquiry is a process of identifying problems, considering possible solutions and their consequences, and testing the chosen solutions in experience. This is consonant with Peirce’s triadic set of inferences of abduction, deduction, and induction. But both thinkers recognize that such logical methodology requires a proper community to execute. Peirce’s notion of a “community of inquiry,” with its social logic, and Dewey’s vision of the “great community” as a proper democratic practice, emphasize the importance of having institutions and practices that reflect, nurture, and promote the more successful forms of inquiry. Dewey thought of democracy as a form of inquiry. Peirce, always the scientist, thought that the scientific method, broadly conceived, was the best model for any sort of inquiry and required that the norms of a community be designed so that it facilitated such inquiries. Dewey, with an eye toward political life, agreed that the scientific or experimental method ought to be the model of inquiry, and thought that democracy in its best form fulfilled the normative conditions that Peirce required. Like Peirce, Dewey argues that experimental intelligence cannot flourish in a community dominated by authority, moribund custom, imitation, or recalcitrance to new ideas (MW 11: 346). A good community is one that is able to take what is best within it and correct what is not: “the problem is to extract the desirable traits of forms of community life which actually exist, and employ them to criticize undesirable features and suggest improvement” (MW 9: 88-89). In order to achieve this “what is needed,” Dewey says,

is intelligent examination of the consequences that are actually effected by inherited institutions and customs, in order that there may be intelligent consideration of the ways in which they are to be intentionally modified in behalf of generation of different consequences. This is the significant meaning of transfer of experimental method from the technical field of physical experience to the wider field of human life (LW 4: 137).

As Gregory Pappas notes, “Dewey expects his ideal community to conduct its deliberations about public policy on the same sort of scientific basis he recommended to individuals. In effect, a democratic community is or ought to be a scientific community of inquiry, investigating the obstacles to human flourishing with a view to their amelioration.” (PAPPAS, 2008: 252). The goal of a good society is not freedom from conflict, but a society whose institutions and practices are so designed that they can tolerate tensions and likely resolve conflicts (MW 14: 199ff). Echoing Dewey, Hilary Putnam argues that “democracy is not just one form of social life among other workable forms of social life; it is the precondition for the full application of intelligence to the solution of social problems” (PUTNAM, 1992: 180).

In the end, Dewey says,

the best we can accomplish for posterity is to transmit unimpaired and with increment of meaning the environment that makes it possible to maintain the habits of decent and refined life. Our individual habits are links in forming the endless chain of humanity. Their significance depends upon the environment inherited from our forerunners, and it is enhanced as we foresee the fruits of our labors in the world in which our successors live (MW 14: 19).

If the focus of pragmatic ethics is optimal solutions to problems, both classical and neo-pragmatists argue that such solutions work in a moral landscape with a certain topology so to speak. To exploit this common metaphor a bit, the pragmatists would argue that, first, the landscape is lived-in, *habituated* by a set of sedimented beliefs, values, and practices—*habits*, as pragmatists would call them—which have evolved over time, and serve as the primary way of thinking and the means of moral decision-making for most people. Second, navigating the landscape is an uncertain affair, with false turns, errors, missteps, and a tenuous moral direction, all of which makes moral choices and solutions *fallible*. The habits used to negotiate this landscape are tenuous in principle, but people must use something until something better comes along. Third, the landscape itself is *evolving* and changing. The conditions and constraints under which people live change over time; these changes can generate problems and often require re-evaluation of working habits. Fourth, how people work and live together within this landscape is partly shaped by these constraints, but also shapes the landscape to a certain extent. The two processes form a causal loop which shapes one another eventually into a comfortable fit, an interaction between environment and our existing set of habits, as Dewey emphasizes. It is most important, then, to have the *right sort of community*, one that shapes the best habits for negotiating the landscape and is best capable of resolving the problems that arise in that negotiation.

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