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# Pragmatism and the Ethic of Meliorism

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## Introduction

- 1 A consistency among the founding pragmatists was to favor a meliorist outlook about the human condition. Indeed, Colin Koopman thinks it “the central feature of pragmatist ethics” (2015: 148; see also Ruetnik 2008; Bergman 2015). He suggests that “the idea of meliorism can help inflect the strengths of a pragmatist moral philosophy in ways that recent work in pragmatist moral theory has not often brought into sharp focus” (Koopman 2015: 148). If so, meliorism raises a number of interesting questions germane to any ethic. First among these, the following: If improvement and betterment are guides for ethical life, how is progress to be understood? It will be argued here that the key to answering these questions is to understand pragmatist ethics as a problem-based morality. Progress is not to be measured by a march toward some pre-determined ideal notion of the good, but through the correction of error and problems in the practices and institutions of practical life.
- 2 Charles Peirce defined meliorism as “the doctrine that the world is neither the worst nor the best possible, but that it is capable of improvement: a mean between theoretical pessimism and optimism” (Peirce 1889-1991, vol. 5: 3697). “It is clear,” William James writes, “that pragmatism must incline towards meliorism” (James 1907: 286). In pessimism, “the salvation of the world is impossible.” “Optimism” is “the doctrine that thinks the world’s salvation necessary” (*ibid.*: 285). As opposed to determinism, the “melioristic doctrine [...] holds up improvement as at least possible” (*ibid.*: 119; Marcell 1974: 190; Koopman 2015: 21). John Dewey explains it as “the belief that the specific conditions which exist at one moment be they comparatively bad or comparatively good, in any event may be bettered.” What’s the alternative, Dewey asks? Pessimism encourages people just to give up on making things better. It’s a “paralyzing doctrine.” Optimism has to fly in the face of the presence evil and horror. If

“the world is already the best possible,” then “what would a world which was [...] had be like?” (Dewey 1920, MW.12.181-2).

- 3 The meliorism of the pragmatists was not a naïve belief in the inevitability of progress but tempered by a tragic vision of life. James thought that moral life was framed in such a way that no design of practices and institutions could accommodate everyone’s sense of the good. Conflict among goods was inevitable for that reason and, for every change, some one’s good must be “butchered” (1992 [1891]: 609). For every improvement, some people’s good was “unquestionably the worse off” (*ibid.*: 611). Moreover, “the good which we have wounded returns to plague us with interminable crops of consequential damages, compunctions, and regrets” (*ibid.*: 615). The goal had to be “to find the more inclusive order” (*ibid.*: 611), to minimize the “repressed goods” that were always “rumbling” in the background” (*ibid.*). Progress occurred when there was a greater inclusiveness of people’s goods, with a minimum of problems.
- 4 Sidney Hook, the student of Dewey, saw the tragic sense of life similarly. Every moral experience takes place in a situation “where good conflicts with good.” It is a case where “apparent good opposes apparent good.” “No matter how we resolve the opposition some good will be sacrificed, some interest [...] [which] may be every whit as intense and authentic as its fellows [...]” (Hook 1959: 13). Although some have claimed that Dewey’s meliorism was more optimistic than tragic (Boisvert 1999), there is enough textual support to show that Dewey appreciated not only the unending troubles and problems of the world, but also recognized forces beyond human control that could hamper progress (Dewey 1925, LW.1.45; Morse 2001: 564; Koopman 2015: 145). Progress was not inevitable and regress was likely.

## Meliorism Contrasted with Perfectionism

- 5 Contrary to Koopman’s interpretation, the pragmatists’ meliorism is not a perfectionist ethic (Koopman 2015: 149). There is an intuitive difference between improving and perfecting (*ibid.*: 147). An improvement may not be a moment in perfecting something. Finding a cure for cancer does not perfect bodily health but eliminates a fatal disease. By analogy, solving a problem such as homelessness improves the lives of many, but it hardly engenders a step toward the perfecting of some good.
- 6 It is true that not all perfectionists advocate for an ideal of the good toward which things are directed – Stanley Cavell comes to mind (Cavell 1990: 12). However, Aristotle’s claim in the opening of *The Nicomachean Ethics*, that all human action and practice moves toward some good and this good can be well-defined, is still the basic thesis of its ethic (Aristotle 1984, 1094a; Brink 2019: 4). Most thinkers sympathetic to the perfectionist tradition, whether of the consequentialist (Hurka 1993) or deontologist sort (Brink 2019), claim some sense of objective good known ahead of the process of perfection, either associated somehow with a supposed human nature or well-defined goods to pursue (Hurka 1993; Foot 2003; Arneson 2000).
- 7 The pragmatists, instead, were wary of concepts of the ideal good as guides to human practice (McDonald 2011: 216). Even Peirce, who thought “reasonableness” to be the *summum bonum*, thought of it as an evolutionary process rather than a state, whose outcome could not be known in advance (Peirce 1900, R 1429: 14; 1903, CP 1.614; Liszka 2021a: 201-2). It was something that is never “completely perfected,” but “always must

be in a state of incipency, of growth” (Peirce 1903, CP 1.615). It was more like the sort of progress found in science that comes out of the correction of errors and the solutions to problems and anomalies of hypotheses. It is through the correction of false beliefs that we get closer to the truth, including moral truths, wherever that may lead.

- 8 The fact of the matter is that perfectionist theories tend to be individualistic and agent-centered and are more concerned with character than collective social and political practices. Even if they consider the perfection of the other, it is still from the perspective of what one agent owes another as a means to that perfection. James emphasized that ethics was the result of a collective effort done through experiments of life (James 1992 [1891]: 595). Certainly, Peirce stressed that science was not a solitary affair but required a community of inquiry with certain dialogic norms and a strong intergenerational altruism (Peirce 1868, CP 5.354). Dewey, likewise, believed in the social idea of democracy as a search for the “great community” (Dewey 1927, LW.2.325).
- 9 As noted by Rawls, some theories of moral perfectionism tend toward elitist rather than democratic ideals of society and would certainly be contrary to Dewey’s sense of democracy as a social idea (Rawls 1971: 325n51). Given the way things are, only a few have the advantages, wherewithal and privileges to achieve the goods identified as the goals for perfectionism. Perfectionism seems insensitive to a world full of existential crises and fundamental problems, such as access to nutritious food, clean water and political security.

## Pragmatist Ethics as Problem-Based

- 10 If the pragmatists were skeptical about ideal goods known ahead of their pursuit, how was it possible to promote a meliorism without the benefit of some such concept of the good? Moreover, how did the pragmatists think things were to progress and people to manage the tragedy of the human condition?
- 11 Pragmatism’s solution, as Hook saw it, “focuses its analysis on problems [...] in order to reduce the costs of tragedy” (Hook 1959: 22). The answer to these questions was right there in what everyone faced in their daily lives. Dewey thinks that people “have constructed a strange dream-world when they have supposed that without a fixed ideal of a remote good to inspire them, they have no inducement to get relief from present troubles, no desires for liberation from what oppresses and for clearing-up what confuses present action.” People need not wait to “get enlightenment and instruction about the direction in which we are moving [...] from a vague conception of an unattainable perfection [...] Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof” (Dewey 1922, MW.14.195).
- 12 For Dewey, problems are “sufficient [...] to stimulate us to remedial action, to endeavor in order to convert strife into harmony [...] The converting is progress, the only progress conceivable or attainable by man” (*ibid.*). Dewey is puzzled that “considering the all but omnipresence of troubles and “evils” in human experience (evils in the sense of deficiencies, failures, and frustrations), theories of human activity have been strangely oblivious of the concrete function troubles are capable of exercising when they are taken as *problems* whose conditions and consequences are explored with a view to finding methods of solution” (Dewey 1939, LW.13.233). Dewey is against those who see betterment as an “approximation to an exhaustive, immutable end or good.” Instead, betterment is fixing “existing needs” (Dewey 1922, MW.14.198). He writes

“some methods of surgery...are better than others [...]. It does not follow...that the ‘better’ methods are ideally perfect [...]. They are the methods which experience up to the present time shows to be the best methods available for achieving certain results” (Dewey 1938, LW.12.108).

- 13 The intuition among the pragmatists is that since problems mark what was wrong with the way things are their solution should make things better. In this way, it was the amelioration of problems that could serve as the measure of progress.
- 14 Although Peirce focused on the matter of logic and scientific methodology, his account of scientific progress can serve as a model for the idea, generally, of progress through problem-solving. For Peirce, as for most people, progress in science was manifest (Peirce c. 1895, CP 8.43). Peirce was convinced that, through the scientific method, convergence toward true beliefs and claims was not only possible, but probable and, in many cases, already realized (Peirce 1871, CP 8.12; 1902, CP 2.775; 1880, CP 3.161; c. 1900, CP 7.78; Liszka 2019: 110ff.). What was it about the scientific method, generally understood, that explained the patent progress of science?
- 15 Scientific progress was the result of a double-teaming of induction and abduction, the former showing where error lie, the later finding a plausible way to replace or modify a problematic hypothesis. Peirce saw science in this regard as having a talent for self-correction (Peirce c. 1905, CP 2.769; 1898, CP 5.591; 1898, CP 5.575). The way to truth for Peirce was tacking through the wind of error.
- 16 For James, moral progress happened essentially through continuing solutions to the basic problem of sociality as he saw it. If the tragedy of life was that there is no design to practices and institutions that could accommodate all people’s goods, how was it possible then to maintain cooperation, solidarity, and stability in light of this tragic fact? The quest was not so much for a single good at which all people aimed, but a practical arrangement of what worked in maximizing desirable goods while minimizing problems (James 1992 [1891]: 610-1). James thought that people “must vote for the richer universe, for the good which seems most organizable, most fit to enter into complex combinations, most apt to be a member of a more inclusive whole” (*ibid.*: 614).
- 17 James thought that ethical guidance could not be provided by some Platonic strategy of imposing an ideal of the good on an imperfect society. That was a frightening mistake (*ibid.*: 595, 610, 613). Instead, it had to be wrought through the trial and error of experiments of living. “We all help to determine the content of ethical philosophy so far as we contribute to the race’s moral life” (*ibid.*: 595).
- 18 James sees history and cultural evolution as having a certain pattern. It did not involve smooth transitions, but followed a rough movement from stability to disruption, sometimes leading to growth into a more inclusive equilibrium, sometimes not. It was prompted by dissatisfactions with the older regime. As James explains it, progress comes through a clash of the old with the new (James 1907: 59) and, if the new is worthy, it tends to settle into an adjustment of the new with the old (*ibid.*: 59; see Marcell 1974: 190). 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” (James 1907: 60). “It marries old opinion to new fact so as ever to show a minimum of jolt, a maximum of continuity.” Something is good “just in proportion to its success in solving this ‘problem of maxima and minima’” (*ibid.*: 61).

- 19 New norms and practices are “social discoveries quite analogous to those of science.” The problematic norms “have slowly succumbed to actually aroused complaints.” Although in each change, “someone’s ideals are unquestionably the worse off,” the improvement is found in “a vastly greater total number” of goods. There is always room for progress since “there is nothing final in any actually given equilibrium of human ideals.” “Our present laws and customs have fought and conquered other past ones, so they will in their turn be overthrown by any newly discovered order which will hush up the complaints that they still give rise to, without producing others louder still” (James 1992 [1891]: 611).
- 20 Dewey, perhaps more so than any of the other pragmatists, latched on to the idea of problem-solving as key to moral guidance and a better political life. It was a mistake to take direction from some ideal of the good when real problems to solve were at hand. The more solutions to these pressing problems, the more progress, rather than being stalled in a quest for some ideal good that is always disputed and gets people nowhere. Problems are more motivating because they are immediate and call for action to solve. Hilary Putnam thinks Dewey is “heroic” in emphasizing “that the function of ethics [...]. the primary aim of the ethicist [...] [is] to contribute to the solution of practical problems [...]” (Putnam 2004: 4). Dewey argues that “philosophy recovers itself when it ceases to be a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers and becomes a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing the problems of men” (Dewey 1917, MW.10.46).

## Practices and Problems

- 21 The centrality of problem-solving as an ethical imperative is carried forward by certain pragmatists and thinkers sympathetic to the tradition. These include philosophers such as James Wallace (2009) and Frederick Will (1997). The contribution that Wallace and Will make in particular clarifies the connection between problems, problem-solving and the practices of daily life.
- 22 For Wallace, practical life is constituted by practices of various sorts (Wallace 2009: 11). Wallace emphasizes that practices “are the result of the experience over time of many people in dealing with the problems they encounter in living together and doing things” (*ibid.*: 3). Practices emerge and evolve to solve particular types of problems concerning how to attain certain ends by prescribed means. Certainly, people need the necessities of life, and practices proscribe, for example, what sort of food to eat, how to get it, grow it, hunt it, prepare it, and even how to eat it properly, with whom and when. As societies become more complex, practices expand to regulate nearly all aspects of lives and communities. Just about anything that is done by anybody in any society is within the context of some practice. Practices establish ways of doing things that relieves people, and generations of people, from the task of reinventing the wheel again, both literally and metaphorically. In this respect, Wallace notes that practices are functionally equivalent to the pragmatists’ notion of habit, but the concept of a practice allows for a broader understanding of the social and political aspects of such activities (*ibid.*: 16).
- 23 Wallace defines a practice as: “a shared body of practical knowledge in a community [...] a shared, structured set of skills, know-how, understandings, tendencies of thought

and action [...]” (*ibid.*). This aligns with standard definitions in the social sciences. Jonathan Turner defines it as,

[...] a complex of positions, roles, norms, and values lodged in particular types of social structures and organizing relatively stable patterns of human activity with respect to fundamental problems in producing life-sustaining resources, in reproducing individuals, and in sustaining viable societal structures within a given environment. (Turner 1997: 6)

- 24 It’s also not too far off the mark of Alasdair MacIntyre’s more philosophical definition in *After Virtue*:

By a “practice” I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. (MacIntyre 1981: 175)

- 25 People do not address their problems from some abstract, ahistorical perspective. Rather, they work within the framework of practices which have a history, and already provide ways and means, for better or worse, to solve the problems of the day. People address the problems of livelihood, family life, childrearing, educating the young, social and political life, through whatever practices their communities afford. These practices may be good, they may be problematic, but they frame life itself. As John Dewey emphasized, human action is already situated in a set of habits and practices from which it must chart solutions to problems: “we do not approach any problem with a wholly naïve or virgin mind; we approach it with certain acquired habitual modes of understanding, with a certain store of previously evolved meanings or at least of experiences from which meanings may be educed” (Dewey 1933, LW.8.214-5). Richard Rorty puts it simply: “We have to start from where we are” (Rorty 1989: 198). “We are morally situated, each community is subject to the vicissitudes and chance of history, and is one of ‘nature’s experiments’” (*ibid.*: 60).
- 26 Besides the fact that they are established to solve certain problems, there is another important feature of practices according to Wallace. Since they prescribe means to ends, they align very well with practical reasoning. Practical reasoning in its most general form is concerned about how to attain a desired, wanted or intended end. It is “very broadly” a form of “means-end reasoning” (Audi 1989). A problem is standardly defined as an impediment to a goal (Agre 1982: 122; Chadwick 1971: 124; Seel 2012: 2690-1). As such, problem-solving is a form of practical reasoning (Wallace 2009: 18). Practical reasoning is concerned with means to an end and problem-solving is concerned more precisely with overcoming or eliminating impediments in the way of means to an end. Since practices are problem-solving, Wallace is correct to stress that practical reasoning is at the core of any practice.
- 27 Practices tend to represent and visualize the ends of their domain, although somewhat vaguely and generally. Education practices, for example, tend to set the end of education. There may be disputes about that end. In higher education, there is often a conflict about educating for the purpose of careers and educating for citizenship, although some argue there’s no reason why these necessarily have to conflict. Second, practices tend to prescribe best means to those ends. Most colleges and universities believe that an educated person should not only be proficient in whatever field they

study, but also should have a general education, usually thought of as having an understanding of a range of disciplines, good writing and communication skills as well as some mastery of critical thinking. Of course, there are layers of means, in terms of best teaching practices, advising, counseling and array of practices within practices for the purposes of educating students.

- 28 Practitioners tend to have a certain level of performative competence, constituted by a combination of what Gilbert Ryle (1945) calls *knowing-that* and *knowing-how*. Psychologists characterize Ryle's distinction between know-how and know-that as a difference between procedural and declarative knowledge (Anderson 1980: 223; Devitt 2011: 209). Declarative knowledge, or knowing-that, is thought to be primarily propositional, meaning that people understand and believe with some degree of certainty the ways and means that are prescribed within a certain practice to attain its ends. Most people would say intuitively that even if people know all of the performative rules necessary to accomplish a particular task or practice, they still may not be able to execute it properly. Procedural knowledge, or know-how, is realized when people do the practice successfully and consistently. Know-how is not achieved by affirming a set of propositions but a skill that employs know-that in particular situations so that it realizes the general outcome consistently over time.
- 29 Consider again the practice of teaching. Teachers have a certain know-that about the practice, which they may acquire through their own education, training or research. But they also gain experience in the classroom as to what works best in getting the material across and maximizes student success in the classroom. Know-how is the proper execution of the know-that such that it is likely to attain the ends for which the practice is designed. Know-that and know-how may form a feedback loop. Know-that guides and informs know-how. But what is learned in experience may correct what is claimed to be known which, in turn, can improve know-how.
- 30 Besides the fact that practices are designed to solve certain problems and use practical reasoning to solve such problems, Wallace argues that they are also normative, precisely because they prescribe what counts as the better means to presumably good ends. "A practice *consists* in a structured body of norms. Norms are its constituents" (Wallace 2009: 11). They are normative because they prescribe "good ways or right ways to do certain things" (*ibid.*: 1). There are better and worse ways to do things, and whatever is the current version of a practice usually proclaims it to be the better way, true or not (*ibid.*: 11). Kjeld Schmidt agrees. A practice is a "normatively regulated continent activity" (Schmidt 2014: 10).
- 31 Together, the norms, practical reasoning, know-how and know-that of practices make up what Wallace calls *practical knowledge*. Practical knowledge is not only knowledge of "how to pursue the activity" (Wallace 2009: 14), but how to do it in "better rather than worse ways" (*ibid.*: 11), as well as considering what is valuable and good to pursue (*ibid.*: 13). For this reason, it is something akin to what Aristotle called *phronesis*. He defined it as "[...] the disposition with true reason and ability for actions concerning human goods" (Aristotle 1984, 1141b1-2). Julia Annas describes *phronesis* as "doing the right thing for the right reason, in the appropriate way [...]" (Annas 2006: 516). Wallace rightly notes in *phronesis*, "two conditions must be satisfied in any choice for it to be a right choice. First, the act chosen must be an effective means to the proposed goal, and, second, the proposed goal must itself be good" (Wallace 2009: 24). However, as formulated by Aristotle, *phronesis* does not provide any helpful, specific guidance, other



than to state, that one should pursue the good, whatever that is, by the best means – whatever that is.

- 32 Aristotle’s attempted solution to the matter of good ends is to propose a final good that rules all other goods and orders them in an appropriate hierarchy. Those goods which serve the highest good are good to pursue, those that do not should be avoided. Of course, it is well known that Aristotle claims that happiness or flourishing (*eudaimonia*) is the final good, although the justification for it is based on hearsay: “Most people are almost agreed as to its name; for both ordinary and cultivated people call it ‘happiness,’ and both regard living well and acting well as being the same as being happy” (Aristotle 1984, 1095a17-20).
- 33 However, like most pragmatists, Wallace is wary of establishing some pre-determined final good. “One cannot explain why a final good is good – it just is.” Appeals to “self-evidence” are “unsatisfying.” “Further, the more specific one makes the description of the final goods, the more difficult it will be to establish that *every* right choice will advance just *these* goals” (Wallace 2009: 24).
- 34 Wallace’s account of practices and the problem-based ethics of the pragmatists is then left with a particular thorny problem: If some pre-determined notion of an ideal good is suspect, how then are the goodness of the ends of practices and the righteousness of their means to be considered? Wallace frames the issue in the following way: The “attitude” toward the practical knowledge in practices “must be at once reformist and conservative. It is crucial, of course, that the right things be changed and the right things be conserved” (*ibid.*: 25). Since practices emerge and evolve to solve certain problems, it follows that their failures would be the most likely source of problems. The key then, as Wallace emphasizes, is to figure out what to change in practices and how to change it.

## The Governance of Practices

- 35 The governance of practices is concerned precisely with this issue of when change in practices is for the better or worse. This is Frederick Will’s primary concern. Governance is the process by which practices self-correct toward better practices, and so is key to progressive changes. He defines governance as “all the processes by which, in both individuals and groups, social practices are developed and regulated; strengthened or weakened; changed or preserved against change; and sometime extinguished. These processes may be gradual and slow, or rapid and abrupt [...]” (Will 1997: 64). As Will writes,
- the collective body of practices is in widespread ways, in various degrees at various places, subject to change, revision, and reconstruction, results characteristically produced in it by discrepancies arising internally between component practices, or externally between various practices and the conditions of their application. (*Ibid.*: 140)
- 36 Practices evolve over time and tend to persist if they continue to solve problems satisfactorily. If they become problematic there is often a call for change among those most affected by its dysfunction. However, change is rarely easy and, in many cases, problematic practices resist change through the intercession of the powerful few who may benefit from them. Violence and force often mark change. How change in practices is managed is an important matter for this reason. If the governance of

practices works well, then what is right to change is changed and in a way that reduces conflict. If it is done poorly, then what is problematic remains, any changes are regressive and conflict likely. But, clearly, for that to happen, practices must have good governance processes.

- 37 Since practices face problems both internally, within its own operation and, externally, from changes to the structured environment in which it operates, there is both a governance *in* practice and *of* practice. The former uses the processes and norms of the practice to correct the operation of the practice; the latter is the case where the standard norms and processes are themselves corrected (Will 1997: 71). Internal problems arise typically when the practical reasoning and norms governing such reasoning fail to achieve their ends. Or, such problems arise when, even though the norms and practical reasoning are well-designed to achieve their ends, they are not well-executed. The latter is a problem with the performative competence of practitioners, or proper execution of procedures, violations of norms, and the like. These might be called *functional* problems since the problem lies in the design or execution of a discrete set of means for an end (Liszka 2021b: 39).
- 38 External problems arise when the structured environment of the practice changes. Rising costs and shrinking budgets are common problems for practices. Changes in laws or policies may affect certain practices. New technologies may cause disruptions. There are many sources of external problems. Most practices are connected and interdependent with other practices. If that interdependency is interrupted or changed in some way, then these usually involve what might be called *systemic* problems (*ibid.*). Whereas functional problems have to do with the design of some discrete part in a system, because it is not doing what it's supposed to do, a systemic problem has to do with a failure in the network of parts, how they work together to serve certain ends. For example, racism in America is not just a problem with a single practice but exists in how a number of social and political institutions work together to foster it. The Great Recession of 2008 was a failure in the systemic connection among banking practices, such subprime mortgaging, risky Wall Street behavior, deregulation of investment practices and weak watchdog agencies, among other failing practices. External problems may also arise because of some incompatibility or conflict with the larger, structured environment in which the practice works. This is a dynamic problem of growth (*ibid.*). Just as some plants and animals fail to thrive in certain ecologies, so certain practices or networks of practices will fail to flourish in certain structured cultural and political environments. The solution to such problems involves the monumental task of changing the norms or mores of the larger culture.
- 39 Governance of practice is typically inherent in the practice itself (Will 1997: 66). Although that is the case, there are also practices that govern other practices. The U.S. Constitution designed a system of checks and balances among the legislative, judicial and executive branch of governments. It is based on a paper-rock-scissors sort of logic, in which one branch can trump another, but no branch wins ultimate authority. In higher education, accrediting agencies serve as an external source of governance for institutions, but institutions themselves usually have well-defined shared governance between faculty and administration internally.
- 40 Will adds a further refinement to Wallace's notion of practical knowledge. Practices tend to prescribe by means of general rules, but the particular situations in which they have to be applied will have novelties and anomalies that puzzle practitioners. Such

reasoning, then, is not of a deductive sort, where there is the subsumption of a case under a general rule. Instead, it what he calls *pragmatic* rationality (*ibid.*: 142). James Tiles has noted that it appears to have a similarity to Peirce's notion of abduction where, faced with an anomaly in an existing hypothesis, a modified hypothesis is proposed to account for that anomaly (Tiles 1998: 277; Peirce 1903, CP 5.189).

- 41 This sort of reasoning is exemplified in case law. The first amendment to the American constitution provides for a general and vague provision for freedom of speech, but case law shows that there are a number of anomalies and novelties that arise over time that give more nuance to that rule. Cases where speech incites violence, or where it defames people, or is false in a way that harms people, or may harm children, trumps rights of free speech. These modifications do not invalidate the first amendment but, over time, give more direction about how to apply it in certain situations (Weaver & Lively 2009: 17). Detection is another good example. Detectives may have a general rule that spouses or intimate partners are likely suspects in the case of the untimely or violent death of the other spouse or partner. However, certain evidence may turn up that leads to another suspect. That does not invalidate the general rule since it has strong statistical support.
- 42 In general, the test of good governance processes is whether they work to minimize problems that emerge within the practice (Frega 2012: 493). For Dewey, Will thinks, "the authority of acts of governance lies in their capacity [...] to meet the needs of the problematic situation [...]" (Will 1997: 187). However, as insightful as Will's work is, it is a more descriptive account of governance than a proscriptive one. It still leaves Wallace's problem in place: what should serve as guidance for what to change and what to conserve in practices? In other words, what changes to practices would count as progressive? This is similar to the problem of progress that James articulated. Recall that for James, progress results from a clash of the old with the new (James 1907: 59). The adjustment has to preserve what is best in the older but novel in its replacement, with a minimum of conflict (*ibid.*: 60-1).

## Progress as Problem-Solving Effectiveness

- 43 Since practices constitute much of practical life and emerge and evolve as solutions to problems, their failures, functionally, systemically or dynamically, are likely the source of most problems. Problems as such may provide the guidance needed to determine which changes are progressive, and what should be conserved in practices. Generally speaking, the argument here is that progress is measured by *the problem-solving effectiveness* of practices. What that means needs explanation.
- 44 Larry Laudan – who is considered to be sympathetic to the pragmatist tradition – wrote a book some time ago, *Progress and Its Problems*, in which he attempts to explain why scientific practice is so progressive. He thinks the answer could also apply to other sorts of practices generally (Laudan 1977: 7). Science makes progress, Laudan thought, precisely because it is very good at solving its problems, specifically, problems with its hypotheses and theories. The core of scientific reasoning is essentially problem solving (*ibid.*: 4-5).
- 45 Relative to the practice of science, Laudan identifies two principal types of problems: empirical and conceptual. The latter typically involve inconsistencies in the formulations and claims of the hypotheses. Among the former, some empirical

problems are satisfactorily solved, some unsolved as of yet by any theory, and others are anomalous in the sense that, among competing theories, some solve them and some don't (*ibid.*: 32-6). How, then, to claim that one hypothesis, theory, or research tradition leads to progress where others do not?

- 46 Laudan proposes that the measure ought to be the problem-solving effectiveness of the research tradition. The latter is understood in Kuhnian sense as a disciplinary matrix, or what is being touted here as a practice. If he is correct that his account can be applied beyond scientific practice, then the progress in any practice or system of practices is measured by its problem-solving effectiveness. What is meant by that and how is it to be measured?
- 47 As a start, he considers R. G. Collingwood's cumulative theory of progress. The theory is very intuitive. A change whether in theory or practice is progressive if it solves all of the problems of what it replaces, as well as problems that its predecessor does not (Collingwood 1956: 329, 332). However, Laudan does not think this is adequate because the history of science shows that this rarely happens, if ever. New theories do indeed solve problems that older theories did not, but they do not solve all the problems that their predecessor solved. In fact, they may create new problems as well. People will certainly recognize this as true about changes of practices in history. The change in the political landscape in Europe and the Americas from the dominance of monarchies to the dominance of democracies that began in the 18th century solved certain political problems with the older form of government, but also created new ones, particularly the efficiency of decision-making. The abolition of slavery in the U.S. is now considered by all hands to have been a progressive change, but it created the problem of how to integrate a former slave population into a culture that practiced slavery, who violently resisted the change in a bloody war, and was hostile to the newly freed peoples. This did not go well. The policies of Reconstruction failed miserably in this regard, leading to the Jim Crow Laws that took some hundred years to abolish, leaving a lingering and more insidious racism in its place.
- 48 Instead, Laudan lays out what he considers to be a more realistic account of progress based on solutions to problems. Problem-solving effectiveness is measured by two important criteria. The first has to do with the *saliency* of the problems solved. Sheer numbers of problems solved surely do not necessarily count as progress. A change may solve many more problems than what is changed, but they may all be rather trivial. There has to be some consideration of the significance of the problems solved.
- 49 Philip Kitcher considers the same issue in the context of solving moral problems. He thinks "the criteria of significance [...] evolve with the changing conditions of human life. To make a judgment about the significance of a problem is to adopt a stance about what matters to a group of people, living at some particular place and time" (Kitcher 2015: 488). Although this is true to some extent, it is reasonable to argue that there are some relatively objective and culture-independent criteria for ranking the significance of problems. For example, existential crises, such as famine, war, disease, environmental crises, and the like are clearly significant problems, regardless of time and culture. Problems of sociality are critical since cooperation and solidarity are needed for any community or society to attain whatever ends it deems significant. For this reason, problems of polarization, conflict and lack of solidarity are clearly significant problems (Liszka 2021b: 158-60).

- 50 T. M. Jones (1991) set up an interesting set of criteria for significant problems that could serve as general guidance in this respect. These include the magnitude of the consequences, how likely and how far into the future those consequences will occur; whether they are concentrated in many or a few, and the proximity of the problem to people's lives or community. To the extent that a problem lights up more of these factors, the more significant the problem.
- 51 The second aspect of problem-solving effectiveness, according to Laudan, is the *efficacy* of the solutions. Laudan characterizes this in terms of four features. The first is that the change or replacement persists in its problem-solving ability over time. A way to measure this is whether the latest solutions generated by the change have about as much success as the initial ones. Second, relevant to its domain, the rate at which salient problems are solved by the change at least remain constant. Third, the number of solutions to significant problems outweigh the number of problems and anomalies the change creates. Finally, the change allows for scaffolding in a way that demonstrates a chain of solutions such that later ones build on earlier ones (Laudan 1977: 107, 119).
- 52 Note that the two criteria of salience and efficacy match the two considerations that Wallace lists in practical knowledge and fulfill the basic function of *phronesis*, namely, to determine "effective means" and good ends (Wallace 2009: 24). The end in this case is not some pre-determined sense of the good, but the resolution of significant problems as they emerge and encountered in the practice of life. *It is in this way that problems can serve as a proxy for the good.*
- 53 In *The Ethical Project* (2011), Philip Kitcher also addresses the problem of what makes progress in a way similar to Laudan's approach, but he is concerned specifically with what makes for *moral* progress. Kitcher agrees with Dewey that "the notion of progress is understood in terms of problem-solving" (Kitcher 2012: 336). Indeed, Kitcher calls this sense of progress, "pragmatic" – which "consists in overcoming problems in the current state" (Kitcher 2015: 478). Like the founding pragmatists, he is wary of counting progress as movement towards some pre-determined sense of the good. Instead, he argues, "there can be moral progress *from* as well as progress *to*" (Kitcher 2011: 288).
- 54 For Kitcher, the ethical project, as he calls it, is concerned with how to address fundamental problems of sociality, much as James argued, namely, to maximize cooperation and minimize conflict. In fact, Kitcher's solution is James's intuition that the way to resolve the tragedy of life is to find improvements in the organization of practices and institutions that continues to be more inclusive of the legitimate or "endorsable" goods people seek. Kitcher labels these as "altruism problems." "The function of ethics," he says, "is to remedy those altruism failures provoking social conflict [...]." Solving these problems tends toward a "smoother, more peaceful, and more cooperative social life [...]" (*ibid.*: 223).
- 55 Altruism problems arise when, given a set of goods that are endorsed and pursued by a community or society, some members are either forbidden those same goods, or prevented opportunities to realize them. As a result conflicts arise and social cooperation breaks down. Endorsable goods are what are commonly held to be desirable and reasonable to pursue. These include certainly what John Rawls calls primary goods, goods that people would want no matter what else they would want, certainly the necessities of life, but also basic liberties and opportunities to acquire goods that make life go well. Altruism failures are cases where those who have such

goods do not sympathize with those who do not and fail to act accordingly. Overcoming these sorts of altruism failures is a mark of progress. In American history, the abolition of slavery, the enfranchisement of women, and the lessening of the moral disapprobation of same sex relations, would all count as cases of moral progress since it includes more people in the opportunities to pursue and realize endorsable goods, such as basic liberties, voting rights, workplace opportunities and equity, and freedom to associate and express love of others without fear. On the other hand, examples such as the Jim Crow Laws, which constrained the ability of African-Americans to pursue basic goods such as livelihood, property, education and full participation in the commercial and civic life of the community, would count as regressive.

- 56 Like Laudan's notion of efficacy, Kitcher argues that "ethical progress consists in functional refinement, first aimed at solving the original problems more thoroughly, more reliably, and with less costly effort [...]" (Kitcher 2011: 221; 2012: 316). Similar to Laudan's notion of scaffolding, functional refinement moves from "first success" to a "sequence of improvements," and does so "in ways that generate fewer problems [...]" (Kitcher 2011: 218-9).
- 57 Besides setting criteria for what ought to be changed, Kitcher also provides an interesting explanation of what ought to be *conserved* in practices. What ought to be conserved is what in fact *is* conserved in progressive transitions of practices. What is conserved in subsequent improvements of a practice becomes *de facto* a strong candidate for what would count as a moral truth. "Ethical truths are the stable elements in progressive practices, as people deliberate together to solve the problem of living" (Kitcher 2014: 101). It is highly unlikely, for example, that norms of truth-telling and oath-taking would be expurgated from improvements in judicial or criminal practices.
- 58 This has something of a family resemblance to Peirce's convergence theory of truth, as Kitcher himself notes (Kitcher 2011: 176n4; Liszka 2021a: 130-3). Norms that tend to persist through historical transitions or tend to be adopted cross-culturally (even in cloaked in cultural clothing) would be indications of norms that should be conserved or, if their change is proposed, those changes should tread lightly and undergo severe tests for problematic consequences. To use another criterion associated with Peirce's convergence theory of truth, norms that ought to be conserved are those that have reached the limits of their improvability. Further attempts to refine, change or modify them only causes more significant problems (Liszka 2021a: 130-3).

## Conclusion

- 59 The founding pragmatists looked for guidance in the matters of truth and goodness through the process of correcting human error and resolving problems that trouble daily living. For this reason, they adopted an ethic of meliorism, the idea that improvement in the human condition as it is, is an ethical goal more worthy than pursuing an ideal sense of the good that is pre-determined and whose justification is always suspect. They thought that just as the laboratory experiment was a means to sorting out claims that were in error from those that were good enough not to reject, the laboratory of life (problems with experiments of living) is the sorting bin for which among the norms, ends and means of practice were worth keeping on and those that

should be changed for the better. Sufficient unto the day were the problems that plagued practical life as guideposts for betterment of the human condition.

- 60 James Wallace and Frederick Will did significant service to this tradition by showing how these matters were framed within the practices and institutions of practical life. Wallace argued convincingly that practices emerge as solutions to problems. He also stressed that practices are inherently normative since they prescribe means to ends which they promote as good to pursue and for which they provide some visualization. Since they are about means and ends, they are also essentially institutionalized forms of practical reasoning, and form the basis of problem-solving methods. Practices are essentially forms of practical knowledge and are institutional forms of *phronesis* in that they propose the ends to pursue and the best means to attain them. Will's work brought to light the importance of the governance of practices and how governance works generally when it is working well. The function of governance is precisely to self-correct, to change in Wallace's words what is right to change and to preserve what is right to preserve. However, both of these thinkers do not ultimately provide a clear solution to this particular issue.
- 61 The work of Larry Laudan on the matter of scientific progress does offer such a solution. Assuming that his analysis of progress in science can be extended to a wide range of practices, he shows that progress can be measured in terms of a practice's problem-solving effectiveness. That has two key features: saliency and efficacy. Saliency is a matter of ranking problems in terms of their significance. Progress occurs when a change solves salient problems as opposed to just trivial ones. Efficacy is measured by how effective the change is in solving a positive ratio of significant problems compared to what is changed; solving any new significant problems that arise because of the change, and what sort of scaffolding it affords for future progressive changes. In this way, Laudan's criterion for progress addresses the two aspects of *phronesis* without an appeal to a predetermined sense of the good. The ends to pursue are effective solutions to significant problems. Problems become a proxy for the good.
- 62 Philip Kitcher adds an important dimension to this framework with his focus on moral progress. Similar to the work of Laudan, and like his patron pragmatist, Dewey, he argues that moral progress occurs through the solution of problems. The most significant problems in the moral sphere are altruism problems, since altruism is the glue that holds together cooperation and solidarity in a community, which are the necessary means to all ends. If people are pursuing similar ends by relatively similar means, cooperation is maximized, solidarity reinforced. Altruism problems arise when endorsable goods, or the opportunities for those goods, are realized by some but denied others, so that conflicts arise. Changes which lead to more inclusion in opportunities for these goods are progressive for that reason.
- 63 Kitcher's work indicates where normative changes should occur in practices, but he also develops criteria for what should be preserved in practices. Norms that persist through successive changes function more or less as moral truths. They serve as the scaffolding for changes that make life go better.
- 64 Pragmatism offers a melioristic ethic that provides an alternative to consequentialist and deontologist approaches to the problem of the good and right. It finds the guidance for the good life in the correction to problems that plague people in the practicality of their daily lives. As Colin Koopman stresses, the lesson of pragmatism is that "Instead of focusing on [...] moral rightness, we should instead focus on [...] moral melioration,

improvement, development, and growth.” “For better or for worse? Isn’t that the crucial thing?” (Koopman 2015: 11-3). Since practices constitute practical life, practices that are problem-solving effective inherently make life better. Every significant problem solved situates people and communities in a better place. The more effective a community is at solving its problems, the more likely the community will become a better one.

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## ABSTRACTS

The founding pragmatists were meliorists, arguing for the possibility of improvement in the human condition. At the same time, they did not think that progress was something inevitable. It was constrained by a tragic order that would prevent any movement toward a utopian ideal and could always lead to regress. Because they could not abide the notion of an absolute, pre-determined sense of the good, they did not subscribe to a moral perfectionism as well. Instead, Peirce, James and Dewey argued in different ways that progress was made through the correction of error and the solution of problems as they presented in the experiments of life. Thinkers sympathetic to this understanding of the pragmatist tradition, such as James Wallace, Frederick Will, Larry Laudan and Philip Kitcher, build on these insights. The aim of this article is to show how the work of these thinkers provides the basis for a problem-based ethic that can assist in determining what changes to the practices and institutions of practical life can count as progressive or regressive.

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