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Introduction to Pragmatist Ethics: Theory and Practice

Sarin Marchetti

- The present issue of the EJPAP hosts a symposium on the theme of *Pragmatist Ethics: Theory and Practice*, exploring the many ways in which the contribution of pragmatism to moral philosophy and the moral life has been thought of and argued for. In particular, the symposium explores the distinctive nature, reaches, and limits of a pragmatist mindset in moral matters: the plurality of voices represented showcases the extent of approaches possible, within pragmatism, to the very question of how moral reflection can touch, transform, better, halt, or even inhibit the moral life. Such variety is rather telling, although, of course, it hardly captures the whole spectrum, with many more possibilities featuring an almost overcrowded stage. The complexity and ramifications featuring pragmatist ethics pose in fact a problem for any attempt to guess its exact contours, challenging the very feasibility of the task. While there is in fact a convergence over the shape and goals of a pragmatist epistemology, philosophy of language, and even metaphysics (if any), none can be found in moral (as well as aesthetical and perhaps political¹) matters. That is, not only we do find, across the pragmatist spectrum, an array of *different answers* to the moral question (as is of course also the case with epistemological, linguistic, and metaphysical matters), but a whole set of *different questions* altogether. What strikes even the occasional reader is in fact a discordance of voices about what, according to pragmatism, would count as a reflective stance on the moral life in the first place, and what does the moral life look like at all. What is in fact debated is not only the details of moral theorizing over the moral life, but also the very form such an inquiry might take as well as its very opportunity. Losing sight of this fact welcomes unfortunate miscommunications and, worse off, ambiguities in one's very understanding of the task at issue.
- Now, this is no surprise since, as I will be suggesting if briefly, the very issue of how to square the two components of the equation, that is moral reflection and the moral life, lied at the very heart of two among the earliest texts on – and of – pragmatist ethics: namely, John Dewey's "Moral Theory and Practice," and William James's "The Moral

Philosopher and the Moral Life,” published respectively in the second and third issues of the *International Journal of Ethics*, dating back to 1891.² The journal, which from 1938 continued its publications simply as *Ethics*, was expressively conceived to host a conversation on the very nature and shape of moral philosophy, which to a certain degree it still does. Dewey and James, alongside such thinkers as Sidgwick and Bosanquet, Bradley and McTaggart, Royce and Caird, Simmel and Westermarck, focused their early inquiries on the most congenial way to rethink moral reflection as a productive tool for moral practice, that is in the first place a tool for critically interrogating moral practice and remaking it accordingly. For James and Dewey, who paved the way for the pragmatist tradition as a whole, this broadly instrumentalist understanding of the nature and place of moral inquiry within the moral life worked both ways: while on the one hand theory ameliorates practice by making it more enlightened (in the various senses I shall survey in a minute), on the other practice guides theory by keeping it on the rough ground of an experience to be problematized rather than reformed (a claim equally open to a great many interpretations). The common core of a pragmatist approach to ethics lies in fact in the belief that when moral experience fails, reflection should aid it to recover itself rather than reprogramming it altogether. When we are stuck and at a loss of answers, the site for help is to be found nowhere outside of the troubled situation we are into. Reflection refashions practice, rather than replacing it with something else entirely, in the measure in which it is still us (singularly as well as collectively) who are called for the ethical work necessary for the improvement of the condition we are in. Now, what makes pragmatist ethics particularly vexed is that even this minimal core has welcomed a number of (sometimes opposite) understandings, having to do with the ways in which such project should be implemented both theoretically and practically. The variety of diagnoses and hence of solutions differ over the meaning and weight they are willing to grant to the two components of moral reflection and the moral life. Hence in the strategies for, and results of, their coupling. We have in fact conflicting pictures of the moral life as something in need of healing and reconstruction, as well as conflicting views of the very activity of moral reflection as the proper device through which to bring peace and prosperity to practice.

- 3 Alongside detailed and sometimes exquisite studies focused on the ethical elaboration of the major figures of the tradition (e.g., de Waal & Skowronski 2012, Masecar 2016, and Liszka 2021a on Peirce; Throntveit 2014, and Marchetti 2015 on James; Hamington 2009 on Jane Addams; Welchman 1995, and Pappas 2008 on Dewey; Koons 2019 on Sellars; Marchetti 2021 on Rorty) a feast of volumes which recently attempted to seize the tradition as a whole competed to the challenge of guessing the contours of a pragmatist approach to ethics (Fesmire 2003; Lekan 2003; Pihlström 2005; LaFollette 2007; Frega 2012; Rosenbaum 2015; and Liszka 2021b). The study of this literature is at once exhilarating and frustrating, since the sense of a communal project – one, as said, hinged on the attempt to refashion moral practice from within and in the first person singular and plural – is gradually replaced with the realization that such conviction is much thinner and perhaps more blurred than one would have expected and is happy with. The many criteria employed to show how moral reflection actually impinges on the moral life by renewing it from within rather than schooling it from without share at best a family resemblance, rather than graduating into a compact program towards which the various parties might converge. There is in fact no single, if minimal, list of features equally agreed upon, but rather selected convergences and divergences

around which the pragmatist conversation revolves. While this is perhaps one of the strengths of the pragmatist approach, given its inbuilt distrust for settled solutions to perennial problems, still this plurality calls for an effort and exercise in classification.

- 4 Even with this proviso in place, it is indeed rather curious that, despite pragmatism engaged in a radical reconfiguration of the ethical landscape – both within and without philosophy –, and often presented its own methodological cipher in ethical terms – that is as a call for a practicalization and re-evaluation of experience, language, and conduct itself –, still it is rather unclear exactly *how* this option is any different from the ones performed by kindred traditions (e.g. by Marxism, critical theory, and some selected strands of analytic philosophy; or, going further back, by Stoicism and ancient skepticism), or *if* it is at all.³ Furthermore, the two main directives along which one might chart the pragmatist approach to ethics are quite at odds with each other. Cutting across a number of other distinctions, and yet proving congenial for their articulation, we can sort pragmatic approaches to ethics into those advocating a reconfiguration of moral theory – in which the very subject-matters of moral reflection (such as duties, rights, goods, virtue, and so on) are seen as aspects of the moral life or tools for its amelioration (see at least John Dewey 1932; C.I. Lewis 1946; Elizabeth Anderson 1993; and Cheryl Misak 2000) –, and those aiming at obliterating moral theorizing altogether – in favour of a therapeutic conception of moral reflection aimed at self-transformation and care (as we find in William James 1897; Ruth Anna Putnam 1985, 1987; Hilary Putnam 2004; Richard Rorty 1989; James D. Wallace 2009). Still others attempted to work out a middle way by variously coupling pragmatism with evolutionism (Philip Kitcher 2011, 2021; Lucas McGranahan 2017), psychoanalysis (Joseph Margolis 1966, 1971), and the social sciences (Richard J. Bernstein 1992; Cornel West 1989; Michelle Moody-Adams 1997) or cognitive sciences (Mark Johnson 1993, 2014; Owen Flanagan 1991) to craft a moral methodology equally engaged in figuring out the best normative solution to ethical puzzles and in rethinking the problematic situation as one in which what is called for is a work of the self on the self.
- 5 These two lines – which, as said, admit a number of intermediate shades – are all the more puzzling to hold next to each other since we sometimes find them juxtaposed or even mixed up in the attempt to fashioning a reflective morality equally avoiding the pitfalls of “remote exercise in conceptual analysis or [...] a mere mode of preaching.” Says Dewey, following this train of thought, that “it is *not* the business of moral theory to provide a ready-made solution to large moral perplexities [...] [since] while the solution has to be reached by *action* based on personal choice, theory can enlighten and guide choice and action by revealing alternatives, and by bringing to light what is entailed when we choose one alternative rather than another” (1932: 316). Here we find, in the very same author and text (and *not* in a minor one) two ideas equally featuring a pragmatist approach to moral matters: namely, the *theoretical* suggestion to take a hard look at the consequences, both external and internal, of our philosophical and ordinary moral conceptions of the moral life they aim to be guiding, and a *therapeutic* exhortation at checking one’s very understanding of our moral practices in the light of disregarded or even hidden assumptions inbuilt in the very use (and hence consequences) of a theory allegedly guiding them. If according to the former model moral reflection *enlightens* the moral life by means of examples and possibilities with the potential of transforming the course of our actions and the reasons for our choices, according to the latter the effect of moral reflection is that of *bringing to light* what is genuinely at stake in our moral life when we so act and choose. What we have here is a

clash, or perhaps an interplay, between a picture of moral reflection as the tool(s) through which we address and resolve moral conflicts, and a picture of it as the deepening and redescription of the experienced conflict. If both approaches equally resist the moral disengagement often featuring meta-ethical analyses of moral discourse and practice, of which pragmatism challenged the alleged neutrality over the practical options taken into reflective consideration, as well as the moral propaganda inbuilt in normative and applied approaches to ethics, with their faith in the modelling and standardization of moral issues for their practical handling, pragmatic theory and therapy offer slightly different pictures of the individual and collective work at the heart of moral amelioration: the first by focusing on the methodologies through which we can learn to handle the moral uncertainty about what to think, say, and do without falling back on absolutes and fixed principles, while the second being interested in the removed, the unsaid, and the disowned informing our ways of approaching problematic situations or even (apparently) effortless ones.

- 6 In the light of this master partition, we can sort the many attempts at fashioning a pragmatist ethics as leaning towards one or the other (or both) understanding. At least this is a key I personally find quite promising to chart the pragmatist territory in ethics (as well as in kindred fields). The works of and on pragmatist ethics differ in fact in topics covered as well as in figures taken in consideration or prioritized. To encompass such variety, a focus on the way in which these different approaches attempted at reconstructing the relationship between moral reflection and the moral life is a promising criterion for assessing the very establishment and furthering of the tradition. The materials gathered for this special issue are equally suitable for such an investigation. With different emphases and from different angles, they all in fact call for a problematization of the way in which moral reflection touches upon the moral life, and how the very conceptualization of the moral life affects the desiderata of moral philosophy. If the task of finding out what a pragmatist approach to ethics amounts to does not leave us empty handed, it is from the understanding of the centrality of the notion of moral practice that we must start.
- 7 The three papers which open the symposium are methodologically-driven. James Liszka sketches a problem-based approach to moral matters hinged on the possibility for moral practice to better itself in the making without appeals to bannisters securing moral progress independently of experience and our situated reflection on it. The challenge of marking our practices as progressive or rather regressive with reference to the judgment and wisdom of those involved in them only is topped with the belief that the way in which we consider a certain situation as morally problematic is itself a mark of our moral upbringing and outlook. Matteo Santarelli takes an historical turn, highlighting the role that a genealogical approach to moral reflection plays in our understanding of moral experience and practice. In particular, the author critically engages some recent works on genealogical methodology in moral matters, showing how the kind of problematization offered by a genealogical outlook might endow us with a notion of moral normativity which escapes the pitfalls of being either too complimentary or too disparaging with the moral practices we live by. Belén Pueyo Ibanez puts moral experimentalism up front, and argues for the advantages of conceiving moral reflection as an open-ended activity of moral landscaping. By taking Dewey's conception of inquiry as a particularly fruitful way to understand the interactive nature of our being in the world, the author shows how a number of

tensions and contradictions featuring standard subjectivist and objectivists approaches alike can be released if experimentalism is applied in moral matters.

- 8 Moving to more particular issues and themes, the next four contributions detail further aspects of a pragmatist approach to ethics. Michael Klenk engages the central meta-ethical issue of moral objectivity, arguing for a variety of Peircean pragmatism capable of making sense of the objective aspirations of our moral discourse and practice without relying on burdensome metaphysical and epistemological assumptions about their essential nature and working. In this sense pragmatism builds up a notion of moral objectivity hinged on the fallibilism about what truth in a certain domain might consist in, with moral truth and objectivity becoming matters of inquiry rather than predetermined goals. Daniel de Vasconcelos Costa tackles another key issue about the nature of moral reflection: namely, its unfortunate dismissal of character formation for the resolution of the moral dilemmas we often face in experience. Taking the shaping of a self as a key moral activity, the author argues against the tendency and temptation inbuilt in moral theorizing to rule out genuine ethical impasse, showing on the contrary how moral reasoning is sounder when attuned to the lively experience of moral uncertainty and conflict. Frederik Kellogg equally engages the issue of moral dilemmas within the context of the clash between generalist and particularist approaches to moral justification. Pragmatism is once again presented as an alternative to the stand-off of views witnessed in moral (and legal) debates, with its emphasis on the transformational character of inquiry understood as imaginative rehearsal of questioned hypotheses. Finally, Jovy Chan looks at C.I. Lewis as a promising guide for the understanding of the place and significance of norms and normative considerations in moral experience. The rational principle *par excellence* is that of the *a priori*, which in the hands of pragmatism becomes a regulative idea capable of guiding our (moral, in the case at hand) practices because it embodies a certain way of looking, living, and in the end criticizing practice from within.
- 9 This symposium will hopefully bring the reader closer to an understanding of some of the signature features of a pragmatist approach to ethics. An approach which is as tentative and in the making as pragmatism thinks all inquiry should be, at pains of detaching us from an experience equally volatile and always on the verge of losing itself and turning enigmatic for those living and reflecting on it.

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NOTES

1. See the symposium, edited by Roberta Dreon, on "Pragmatist Legacies in Aesthetics" hosted in the previous issue of EJPAP (2021-1). In her introduction, Dreon stresses the deep connections between pragmatist ethics and aesthetics, arguing against a strict compartmentalization of the two fields. Not only, in fact, pragmatist ethics and aesthetics equally lack an univocity in methodology and approach, but they share more than a concern about what, at all, a reflective stance on ordinary practices can accomplish – with aesthetical and ethical considerations often contributing to the common quest of social and individual amelioration. For what regards political philosophy, a similar ambiguity can be appreciated, even if the contrasts internal to the "discipline" are more polarized around the two options of ideal vs. non-ideal theories. For a recent attempt at a mapping of the field, see Bacon & Chin 2016.
2. Peirce of course had distinctive views on the matter (see e.g. CP 1.1616-68; CP 5.120-50), as will be clear from the reading of those contributions to the symposium furthering his legacy in moral matters, although he did not frame the question in exactly the terms in which both James and Dewey did. Differently from Peirce's, James and Dewey's angle on the issue is more congenial to

chart the territory of pragmatist ethics as it unfolded in the twentieth and now twenty-first century.

3. For a classical study, see Bernstein 1971.

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