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1

Introduction

This book is concerned with two projects: First, it seeks to develop a novel and viable version of pragmatism, one that is free from the relativist tendencies one tends to associate with pragmatism (especially contemporary pragmatism). Second, it seeks to provide a justification for two types of normative discourse (morality and epistemology), and shows that moral (and epistemic) constraints are *rational* constraints. I wish to show how this novel version of pragmatism can provide an answer to the question ‘Why be moral?’ (as well as the under-asked question ‘Why subject myself to epistemic constraints?’).

Recent years have demonstrated a resurgence of interest in pragmatism. Entire journal issues have been devoted to the topic of pragmatism,¹ and dozens of books on pragmatism have emerged, covering topics ranging from the classical pragmatism of Dewey, James and Peirce to ‘neo-pragmatists’ such as Rorty and Putnam.

However, despite pragmatism’s current popularity, it is still viewed by many as suspect. Pragmatism has not been able to shake its associations with relativism and subjectivism. Why does pragmatism have such associations? One reason is that some traditional pragmatists write as though they had a commitment to relativism or wanted to reduce truth to mere agreement. David Bakhurst writes:

Another potential obstacle to realism lies in pragmatists’ tendencies, when explaining the idea that true beliefs are those that survive the trials of inquiry, to collapse the concept of truth into that of agreement. Peirce himself writes that “the opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real.”² Here it seems that, “at the end of inquiry,” human agreement determines

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truth. But such a conclusion surely does violence to the idea that our beliefs are accountable to a reality that is as it is independent of how we take it to be.³

Other pragmatists like William James and F.C.S. Schiller argue for the mutability of truth. James writes, “The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events. Its verity is in fact an event, a process: the process namely of its verifying itself, its *verification*.”⁴ Many contemporary pragmatists, such as Richard Rorty, embrace rejection of objectivity, and treat this rejection as an essential part of pragmatism. Rorty famously writes, “A liberal society is one which is content to call ‘true’ whatever the upshot of such [free and open] encounters turns out to be.”⁵ He rejects philosophy’s concern with objectivity writing that an ideal liberal society would eliminate such Enlightenment ideals as objectivity and rationality: “In my view, an ideally liberal polity would be one whose culture hero is Bloom’s ‘strong poet’ rather than the warrior, the priest, the sage, or the truth-seeking, ‘logical,’ ‘objective’ scientist.”⁶ Although Rorty rejects objectivity, he also denies that he is a relativist, but in a way that many seekers of objectivity find discomfoting:

there is no such thing as the “relativist predicament” ... there [is] no higher standpoint to which we are responsible and against whose precepts we might offend ... There [is] no such activity as scrutinizing competing values in order to see which are morally privileged. For there [is] no way to rise above the language, culture, institutions, and practices one has adopted and view all these as on a par with all the others.⁷

Another reason behind pragmatism’s association with relativism may be pragmatism’s historical concern with what is useful, which has (rightly or wrongly) led people to interpret pragmatism as relativistic or not concerned with a properly objective sort of truth. For example, Peirce writes:

Truth is neither more nor less than that character of a proposition which consists in this, that belief in the proposition would, with sufficient experience and reflection, lead us to such conduct as would tend to satisfy the desires we should then have. To say that truth means more than this is to say that it has no meaning at all.⁸

Wiggins, commenting on this passage, notes, “This sounds awful,”⁹ and “This is the kind of statement that has given pragmatism such a bad name.”¹⁰ And indeed it does sound bad.¹¹ William James is pilloried for writing things like, “‘The true,’ to put it very briefly, is only the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as ‘the right’ is only the expedient in the way of our behaving.”¹² Even fellow pragmatist Peirce was critical of James and Schiller, writing,

It seems to me a pity they should allow a philosophy so instinct with life to become infected with seeds of death in such notions as that of the unreality of all ideas of infinity and that of the mutability of truth, and in such confusions of thought as that of active willing (willing to control thought, to doubt, and to weigh reasons) with willing not to exert the will (willing to believe).¹³

The final parenthetical clarification is obviously a reference to James’s famous essay ‘The Will to Believe.’

I want to argue that though pragmatism is right in being concerned with what is useful (read what serves our interests), it is wrong in identifying truth with usefulness. This latter move relativizes truth, and plays into the hands of critics of pragmatism. I will argue that not only can pragmatism justify our moral and epistemic discourse, it can do so in a way that does not lead to a relativist conception of morality and epistemology.

Suspicion regarding the existence and status of moral facts is a thread running through the history of philosophy. Hume, in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, writes:

Take any action allow’d to be vicious: Wilful murder, for instance. Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find that matter of fact, or real existence, which you call *vice*. In which-ever way you take it, you find only certain passions, motives, volitions and thoughts. There is no other matter of fact in the case. The vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object. You never can find it, till you turn your reflexion into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action.¹⁴

Writing two centuries later, John Mackie says, “If there were objective values, then they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe.”¹⁵ Gilbert Harman, in an influential piece,¹⁶ argues that moral facts are

not invoked in the best causal explanation of any uncontroversial phenomenon and hence do not exist.

Curiously, although these same arguments can be applied to epistemic (as well as moral) facts, few philosophers have done so. I have argued elsewhere¹⁷ that this double standard is untenable, that traditional arguments against moral realism apply equally well against epistemological realism, and that moral and epistemic facts stand and fall together. I will not pursue such an argument in this book (except to touch on it briefly in Chapter 2), but instead focus on giving a pragmatist justification and elaboration of moral and epistemic discourse.

Many pragmatists have conceded (as they ought to) that normative facts (including moral facts) do not exist in the world, and that normative terms do not denote natural kinds or real relations. However, these pragmatists argue that to concede this is not to equate such terms with ‘phlogiston’: that is, it is not to say that such terms should be expunged from the language as resting on a false theory of what the world contains. Rather, they argue that it is not the *function* of normative terms to denote natural kinds or causally explanatory facts.

The key notion here is that these pragmatists wish to focus on the role that normative terms such as ‘refers,’ ‘knows,’ ‘immoral,’ and ‘true’ play *within* the language. Again, their role in the language is not to denote natural kinds. Brandom, for example, denies that the phrase ‘x refers to y’ denotes a causal relation between a word and an object; rather, he reconstructs the function of ‘refers’ in terms of anaphoric chains within the language.¹⁸ Similarly, Mark Lance and John O’Leary-Hawthorne deny that meanings are natural facts or causal relations (or sets of dispositions, etc.). Rather, they focus on the role that meaning ascriptions play in the language, and argue that to say ‘x means y’ is to endorse a norm, not to refer to any naturalistic fact about meaning.¹⁹ And in this book, we will describe the role that moral and epistemic terms play in the language, while conceding that sentences containing these terms are not justified by appeal to causally efficacious or explanatorily potent natural facts about morality or justification.

Thus, by arguing that normative terms play important roles within the language, we open the possibility that what justifies our use of such terms is their *usefulness*. In particular, I will argue in this book that morality and epistemology are justified because these normative practices satisfy certain human interests. Thus, we connect with traditional pragmatism by connecting with what is useful (i.e., with what serves our interests).

But wasn't this connection with usefulness that got pragmatism into trouble in the first place? This is true; but traditional pragmatists often get into trouble by equating usefulness with truth, or making some similar connection. This is where this book aims to promote a novel version of pragmatism. The focus in this book is on practices, a practice being a set of rules. The practice of morality is therefore the set of rules constituting morality. Pragmatic reasons justify the practice of morality, consisting of the set of moral rules; but these pragmatic reasons cannot 'infiltrate' the practice to justify individual actions. Individual actions can only be justified by appeal to the rules constituting the practice; you may not appeal directly to pragmatic reasons to justify individual actions. Thus, pragmatic reasons can justify the rule 'It is *prima facie* wrong to kill innocent humans,' but you cannot justify killing a particular innocent human on the grounds that it is useful to do so. Individual actions can only be justified by appeal to the rules constituting the practice.

Thus, we have a two-level system: pragmatic reasons justify our moral and epistemic practices; and these practices in turn justify particular actions and beliefs. Thus, the practice serves as a buffer between pragmatic reasons and individual actions and beliefs. This two-level version of pragmatism is still pragmatist (in that it justifies our practices in terms of *interests*) yet allows for objective truth (in that truth is not defined in terms of usefulness or what works). Again, pragmatism is often associated with relativism and subjectivism, and one of the novel aspects of this book is that it gives a version of pragmatism that is neither relativistic nor subjective, but which instead leaves plenty of room for objectivity. These notions are further elaborated in Chapters 2 and 4.

Chapter summaries

Chapter 2 seeks to motivate pragmatism about morality and epistemology. It begins with a discussion of the charge (stemming from Gilbert Harman's book *The Nature of Morality*) that normative claims cannot be verified by observation, and that normative facts do not figure in the best causal explanation of any non-controversial physical phenomena. I concede that Harman is right, but ask whether this is sufficient justification for jettisoning all moral and epistemological terminology from our language. The answer, I conclude, is 'No'; pragmatic reasons can serve to justify continued participation in types of discourse (such as moral and epistemic discourse) that do not serve the role of causal explanation.

The project of seeking to justify morality and epistemology pragmatically raises its own worries, such as the worry that this project conflates theoretical justification (Is a belief theoretically justified?) with practical justification (Is it *useful* to hold this belief?). I respond to these worries by developing a two-level version of pragmatism according to which pragmatism justifies certain practices (consisting of sets of rules), but pragmatic reasons are not allowed to infiltrate the practice and justify individual claims within the practice. Thus, for example, a belief is justified if it is formed and maintained in conformity with the rules of the practice (which will be normal epistemic rules), but a belief cannot be justified by appeal to pragmatic considerations (i.e., on grounds that it is useful to hold this belief, or that it makes the believer happy, etc.).

The strategy developed in Chapter 2 is that pragmatic considerations justify a set of rules, and individual actions are justified by appeal to these rules, and not by appeal to pragmatic considerations. This strategy allows us to give a genuinely pragmatist account of morality and epistemology, while denying that truth is mere usefulness and maintaining the connection between truth and objectivity. However, this version of pragmatism is itself vulnerable to a version of J.J.C. Smart's 'rule-worship' objection against rule utilitarianism. In Chapter 3, I argue that this objection rests on a dogma that rationality must be understood atomistically, in terms of isolated agents and individual, discrete actions. Against this dogma, I defend the claim that rationality must often be understood cooperatively and in terms of strategies. In developing this answer, this chapter makes clear how acting morally is rational, and refutes those who claim that when morality and self-interest conflict, it is always rational to choose according to self-interest. (However, this chapter also shows how other consequentialist systems, like that of Singer, err in thinking that morality almost always trumps self-interest and places unrealistic demands on agents.)

Pragmatism is often associated with relativism, an association the present account seeks to escape. In Chapter 4, I argue that reasons (in particular, prudential reasons of the sort that justify moral rules on our pragmatist account) display a 'timelessness.' When combined with David Wiggins's and John McDowell's account of truth as excellence of reasons, this feature of reasons allows us to conclude that moral and epistemic truth need not be conceived of relativistically. I will further argue that morality and epistemology have certain features that lend themselves to a social practice account of normative discourse. This account allows us to explain normativity in a way that does not offend against naturalism, and gives us a conception of morality, epistemology,

and interests that need not be relativistic. The decision as to whether to conduct our moral and epistemic practices relativistically turns out also to be a decision to be made on pragmatic grounds.

Chapter 5 turns to a discussion of the connection between morality and our interests. Pragmatism asserts that morality is justified by appeal to our interests, namely, the ends that constitute human flourishing. It is these interests that justify participation in moral (and epistemic) practices, and which contribute to the specification of moral (and epistemic) norms. But one might object to such an account, claiming it takes for granted a notion of interests that is immune from and prior to any sort of moral evaluation; justifying (say) morality by appeal to something which is already morally 'loaded' is circular and question-begging. I concede that interests are morally loaded, but argue that even if this is the case, interests may still be used to justify moral principles; this sort of circularity is, I argue, permissible.

The discussion of moral norms in Chapter 5 leads to a discussion of moral responsibility and freedom. I argue in Chapter 6 that a pragmatist approach sheds light on the traditional problems of free will and moral responsibility. Free-will discourse serves as an adjunct to our moral discourse: that is, it divides actions into those for which the agent should be held morally responsible, and those for which the agent should be absolved of responsibility. The distinction between free and unfree actions turns on the question of whether a particular type of action can be altered through education and application of sanctions. Actions belonging to the type that is amenable to such alteration are free, and those that do not belong to this type are unfree. Thus, free-will judgments help enforce our cooperative moral strategy by identifying those actions that ought to be sanctioned or rewarded, thereby reinforcing moral behavior. Interestingly, the criterion that a pragmatist uses to decide which actions are free and which ones are not turns out to be the same criterion a hard determinist would use to decide which actions should be subject to sanctions or rewards and which actions should not. We will thus be able to argue that even hard determinists are committed to the pragmatist version of compatibilism. Hence, pragmatism allows us to see that from every perspective in the free-will debate—libertarian, compatibilist, and hard determinist—humans are free; free will and responsibility ascriptions are *inescapable*.

After responding to several objections to this thesis, Chapter 6 extends the discussion to the issue of epistemic responsibility. I conclude that while familiar arguments against doxastic voluntarism (the thesis that our beliefs are under our voluntary control) undermine the idea that we

are responsible for our beliefs, we can still evaluate the epistemic performance of agents and exclude bad performers from certain discussions and inquiries.

Chapter 7 turns to a discussion of a pragmatist epistemology. Epistemology is justified by our interest in explaining and understanding the world. It emerges that this interest in fact justifies two distinct but related epistemic practices—our practice of evaluating individual agents, and our practice of justifying theories or beliefs. That our epistemic practice has these two dimensions is illustrated by the fact that we make judgments of the following form: ‘Astrology as a system has been soundly refuted, but given her upbringing and community, *her* belief in astrology is perfectly rational.’ The latter half of this judgment reflects our concern with an individual agent’s epistemic performance, which is important, for example, when issues of culpable ignorance arise. The first half of the judgment reflects the fact that often we do not care whether an individual agent has performed well or badly; rather we want to know what it is that is rational to believe. In this chapter, I develop these two different dimensions of epistemic evaluation, and show how pragmatism helps us flesh out these two evaluative perspectives. I further argue that many (perhaps most) traditional epistemological theories do not have the resources to capture the distinction between these two evaluative dimensions, and that this represents a significant advantage that pragmatist epistemology has over these other theories.

In Chapter 8, I argue and conclude that this two-dimensional pragmatist approach to epistemic evaluation—the two epistemic practices justified by pragmatist considerations, sketched in Chapter 7—sheds light on such important issues as the internalism–externalism debate in epistemology. In particular, the two evaluative perspectives explored in Chapter 7 correspond to internalism and externalism in epistemology: the pragmatist evaluation of individuals’ epistemic performance corresponds to internalism, and satisfies the intuitions that have traditionally motivated internalist epistemologies, whereas judgments about what it is that is rational to believe correspond to externalism, and this perspective satisfies the intuitions that motivate externalist epistemologies. Thus, Chapter 8 argues that adopting a pragmatist view of epistemology allows for a reconciliation of internalism and externalism in epistemology. I will also argue that the traditional connection between justification and truth has been misunderstood, and I present a new way of understanding the connection that sheds light on the internalism–externalism debate.

A final note: this book is not intended as a historical exposition of pragmatism; nor do I make every attempt to trace the historical connections between (say) my account and the philosophies of the early American pragmatists. In places where there is a direct connection between my view and that of a historical pragmatist, I will discuss this connection; but I am more interested in developing a viable version of contemporary pragmatism than I am in proving that the theory in this book belongs to the pragmatist genealogy. Those who are familiar with pragmatism will recognize in this book many elements central to that theory: fallibilism, the connection of our philosophical practice with our interests, the emphasis on social practice, and so forth. I rest content with that.

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