

Pragmatism, Normativity and Naturalism¹

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Family resemblance terms are notoriously hard, if not impossible, to define, and by this point “pragmatism” has become such a term. Any one who can establish substantial continuities between their own views and some major strand of thought in one of the canonical pragmatists, can, with some justification, call themselves pragmatists.² “Pragmatism” thus justifiably means many things to many people, and I suspect more than one understandings of the term (and the tradition) will be manifest in this volume. Pragmatists of a Jamesian stripe are unlikely to be much troubled by this sort of pluralism, and since that is the stripe that I carry, I won’t be aiming to give a characterization of pragmatism that fits all of the work that justifiably considers itself ‘pragmatist’. In particular, I’ll be focusing on pragmatism through what I take to be one the most important themes in James’s writing, namely, the problem of finding a place for value in a world that seemed increasingly to demand a naturalistic understanding.³ Such an approach to the topic is not especially idiosyncratic, and the relationship between fact and value (along with a suspicion of any supposed dichotomy between them) is a theme that can be found in many pragmatists.⁴ Indeed, the view most commonly associated with pragmatism, James’s notorious claim that truth was “the expedient in our way of thinking”, and that “absolute truth” was that which “no further experience will ever alter,”⁵ is, in an important sense, just a *symptom* of his underlying pragmatism about value, and one could endorse such a view of truth for other reasons without thereby being a pragmatist in the sense that will be discussed here.

¹ To appear in Ghirdelli, P. (ed) *What is Pragmatism?* Londrina: South America Theology Institute. 2004.

² Who the ‘canonical’ pragmatists are is, of course, itself open to question (most agree that Peirce, James and Dewey should count, but there is less agreement about whether or not the canonical list should stop at three), and even if that question is settled, it is no simple matter to decide what should count as the *major* strands in their thought.

³ Much of what follows will be painted in fairly broad strokes, but an answer of this length to a question like “what is pragmatism?” invites, I think, such an impressionistic approach.

⁴ Among the classical pragmatists, this theme was probably the most prominent in the work of John Dewey, and among current ‘neo-pragmatists’, it has been most recently stressed by Hillary Putnam in his *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

⁵ James, *Pragmatism* (Cambridge: Harvard 1976 (1907)) pp. 106-107. Indeed, James himself occasionally suggested that Pragmatism was primarily concerned with the question of truth (see, for instance, his interview with the New York Times, found in Perry’s *The Thought and Character of William James* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1935) Vol.2, p.478.

1. The Ethical Values and the Problem of Normativity in a Natural World

The problem of finding a space for values in a world understood naturalistically has always been the most salient with the case of *ethical* values. *Sui generis* ethical facts strike many as being too ‘queer’ to be admitted into our ontology,⁶ and there has been a long tradition of arguing that any facts about values have to be understood in terms of facts about our practice of *valuing*.⁷ However, tying values to our evaluative practices in this way seems to make them ultimately subjective, and on such accounts, if different people may have different preferences, there may be no fact of the matter as to which one’s are ‘objectively’ right or wrong, just facts about which ones are more popular, more adaptive, etc.

For instance, take the example of an ethical claim such as the following:

(1) Slavery is wrong.

The most obvious facts in the neighborhood of such value claims are those about our practice of *valuing*, then it might seem that the content of (1) should be understood as something like

(1a) I disapprove of slavery.

Or

(1b) (Most) people (around here) disapprove of slavery.

However, these analyses manifestly don’t allow ethical judgments to be as objective as we typically take them to be. The first allows for no individual mistakes about values, and thus no substantial ethical disagreements between individual, while the second simply moves the infallibility and incommensurability to the community level. Both deny that there are facts about what is right and wrong that outstrip our opinions about them, and thus can seem to be verging on a type of eliminativism about moral value.

A more satisfying attempt to reconstruct some sort of objectivity for such ethical values relies on understanding objectivity in terms of something like stable intersubjectivity, suggesting instead (very roughly) an analysis of (1) like:

(1c) If everyone thought about it long enough, they would eventually all disapprove of slavery.

⁶ The best known development of this intuition being J.L. Mackie’s *Ethics, Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin 1977).

⁷ For a discussion of this tradition in empiricism from Hobbes on, see Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy*.

One can thus ‘reconstruct’ ethical objectivity in terms of this sort of stable intersubjective agreement.⁸ Ethical claims are objective on such a view in that any given community or individual can be mistaken about what is right or wrong, even if such moral facts are still constitutively tied to some extension of our evaluative practices.

Pragmatists differ, however, over what sorts of ‘extensions’ of our ethical practices it is legitimate to appeal to. While some allow appeals to bare ‘idealizations’ of our evaluative practices, James is a little more demanding in how he takes (1) to be best understood. In particular, while (1c) helps itself to subjunctive conditionals about what we would agree on, James suggests something like the more austere. Namely:

(1d) Everyone will eventually disapprove of the practice of slavery.

James takes the existence of objective values to require our eventual *actual* agreement about what to value. This line of thought shows up the most explicitly in James’s “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life”,⁹ where ethical objectivity is understood as requiring an *actual* settlement about what competing preferences should be satisfied. A merely *potential* settlement does not seem to be enough for James, so if our valuing practices never reaches a consensus amount initially competing preferences, then they can never be more than just that, competing preferences with no ‘objective’ fact about which one should have been satisfied.¹⁰

Furthermore James suggests that ethical objectivity requires not only that there will eventually be a type of convergence among our needs and moral views, but also that such a convergence will endure. The objectivity of ethical values in the world requires the real endurance of a valuing community, and if all valuers disappear, the existence of objective value will have turned out to be illusory.

James was, of course, well aware that there was no compelling evidence for the belief that we will ever reach the sort of lasting convergence his account of ethical objectivity seemed to require, but he still felt that we were entitled to believe that such a stable convergence would

⁸ This account of ethical objectivity can be found in Peirce (for a discussion of this, see Christopher Hokway’s “Truth and the Convergence of Opinion” (in his *Truth, Rationality and Pragmatism, Themes from Peirce*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), and has recently been developed by Cheryl Misak in her *Truth, Politics, Morality*, New York: Routledge, 2000).

⁹ Reprinted in his *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979 (1897)).

¹⁰ This is a major difference between James and Peirce (and one reason why Peirce considered James’s position too ‘nominalistic’). James didn’t allow subjunctive conditionals to be used to support his account of objectivity in the way that Peirce did.

eventually be reached. His commitment to the possibility of such a convergence was an instance where he relied on the view of rational belief developed in his “The Will to Believe”.¹¹ That is to say, the question of whether we will reach such a consensus is an evidentially unsettled question about which we had the right to follow our inclinations about what to believe. Not only was the question, at least for James, ‘live’, ‘force’ and ‘momentous’, he also thought that such evidentially underdetermined beliefs could contribute to their own truth. By believing that convergence can, and will, eventually be reached through ethical inquiry, we may help bring it about that such a consensus is eventually reached (and such a consensus probably won’t ever be reached if parties with conflicting ethical beliefs are convinced that no such consensus is possible).¹²

On such an account, it is an *empirical* question whether ethical claims have objective content or not. That is to say, if there turns out to be no convergence, then ethical claims like (1) will turn out to merely express a (possibly group) preference, and there would be no robust sense in which someone who denied (1) could be understood as mistaken.¹³ However, the question is also, crucially, a *practical* one. Whether we *in fact* ever reach the sort of ethical consensus that the objectivity of our ethical claims requires is, in James’s eyes, *up to us*. We can’t simply decide that values are objective, but it may remain within our power to (collectively) make them so. This movement of the question of objectivity from the theoretical to the practical realm is one of the most characteristic features of James’s pragmatism.

2. Radical empiricism and the Will to Believe

While worries about ethical value are familiar to empiricists, James understood the empiricist tradition as being too forgiving when it came to another set of norms, and for the *radical* empiricist, *representational* norms will seem just as problematic.¹⁴ To the radical empiricist

¹¹ Reprinted in his *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*.

¹² This account of James’s will to believe doctrine is extremely sketchy, but is presented in fuller detail in my “Prudential Arguments, Naturalized Epistemology, and the Will to Believe”, *Transactions of the C.S Peirce Society* Winter 1999, Vol. XXXV, No. 1.

¹³ It would then be an open question about whether we should understand ethical claims as false. One would adopt such a theory if one thought that the reaching a stable consensus should be understood as part of the truth conditions of ethical claims, but given how the story is to be generalized in the next section, it seems better to treat our reaching a consensus as a presuppositions of their having truth conditions at all.

¹⁴ This was not the only, or even the primary, way that James considered his empiricism, ‘radical’.

there is something deeply inconsistent about traditional empiricism's habit of promoting skepticism about moral norms while taking representational norms for granted.¹⁵ After all, while facts corresponding to (1) may seem 'queer', one might say the same about facts corresponding to claims like:

(2) "Memorial Hall" refers to Memorial Hall.

James recognized that (2) calls for an explanation in just the way that (1) does. If one doesn't want to have 'magical' facts in one's conceptual scheme, then representation itself needs a naturalistic explanation, and the sorts of naturalistic explanation that make (1) seem less than fully objective will do so for (2) as well. For instance, the most obvious 'natural' facts in the neighborhood of (2) seems to be:

(2a) I apply the word "Memorial Hall" to Memorial Hall.¹⁶

(2b) (Most) people (around here) apply the word "Memorial Hall" to Memorial Hall.

However, just as (1a) and (1b) do not seem to underwrite a fully objective understanding of (1), (2a) and (2b) do not seem to underwrite a fully objective understanding of (2). People (even large groups of people) can, after all, misapply their words, and (2a) and (2b) do not seem to allow for this possibility.¹⁷ One might allow for simple errors, such as when one makes a perceptual error and applies a term to an object that one typically does not apply it to, but *systematic* mistakes seem much harder to accommodate within such a framework.

This lack of objectivity about representational claims like (2) would, of course, affect the truth conditions of our claims. For instance, if something like (2a) were an acceptable analysis of (2), then something like (3a) would ultimately be an acceptable analysis of (3).

(3) "Memorial Hall is in Cambridge" is true if and only if Memorial Hall is in Cambridge.

¹⁵ One might say the same about its claim that 'secondary' qualities are unreal, while refusing to push similar arguments about the so-called 'primary' qualities.

¹⁶ Where the second occurrence of "memorial hall" is understood in a 'demonstrative' rather than 'disquotational' sense.

¹⁷ While (2a) and (2b) are somewhat simplistic suggestions, they are being used for ease of exposition, and I won't be going into anything much more complicated here. The problem of grounding any workable notion of objectivity seems quite resistant to more complex versions of these suggestions, and for a discussion of this, see Paul Boghossian's "The Rule Following Considerations" (*Mind* Vol. 98, 507-549, 1989), and my "Foundationalism, Coherentism and Rule Following Skepticism" (*International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, forthcoming).

(3a) “Memorial Hall is in Cambridge” is true if and only if what I apply the term “Memorial Hall” to is in what I apply the term “Cambridge” to.

To the extent that one can't be wrong about the extension of the terms and predicates in one's language, one will have a corresponding degree of immunity from error when it comes to the truth claims that applying those predicates to their objects. To get fully objective truth, one needs fully objective representations, and so objective truth itself becomes problematic for the naturalist. The pragmatist understanding of truth will follow from their understanding of how to explicate the objective content of a claim like (2), and just as James would propose analyzing (1) in terms of (1d), he suggests that (2) be understood in terms of:

(2d) We will all ultimately agree to apply “Memorial Hall” to Memorial Hall.¹⁸

This account of how our terms get their objective content will ‘trickle down’ to the sentence level, so that the objective truth of any sentence will be tied to our ultimately reaching a stable consensus about its truth.

Just as James treated ethical objectivity as requiring actual agreement about values, James treated a claim's objective, or ‘absolute’ truth as requiring that we *actually* reach a stable consensus about the claim in question. It is not enough for there to be one which we would have reached had we been able to investigate better or longer. Consequently, if our investigative practice dies out, the possibility of objective truth and representation die out with it. If truth is tied to taking true and objectivity to agreement, then objective facts require that the consistent evaluative practice be understood as a permanent feature of reality.¹⁹

Just as it was in the ethical case, our faith in the eventual achievement of a stable consensus that representational objectivity requires is, for James, a will to believe case. We have no evidence to compel us to believe that such a consensus will be reached, but we have the right to

¹⁸ This is, once again, simplified considerably, and for a fuller account of James's views on representation, see my “James' Pragmatic Account of Intentionality and Truth” (*Transactions of the C.S Peirce Society* Winter 1998, Vol. XXXIV, No. 1: pp. 155-181), “James, prototypes and Analysis” (MS York University) and “James, Royce, Representation and the Will to Believe” (MS York University).

¹⁹ Since, for James, reality's ‘normative’ dimension requires there to be evaluators, the demise of the evaluative community brings with it the demise of our normative ideals (truth, goodness, beauty). It is not as if things really were true, good and beautiful, but stopped being so once we disappeared. Rather, it turns out that that things were never ‘really’ any of these things. Life turns out, after all, to have been ‘meaningless’. The ultimate passing away of our evaluative practice is thus a very bad thing for James, and he thought that his pessimism about the eternal endurance of humanity's evaluative practices was the main reason for finding the materialism of his day unacceptable.

believe it will, and with any luck our faith in its coming will help bring it about. James thus endorses a kind of ‘semantic meliorism’ to go along with his meliorism in ethics. Objective representation is possible, but only if we make it so.

3. The Problem of Objectivity and Contemporary Neo-Pragmatism

James’s worries about the place of values in a natural world thus went deeper than they did for most empiricists because he never lost sight of the fact that the problem of value was not restricted to ethics and aesthetics, but was a general problem about *normativity*. Consequently, if there were no space for values then there would be no space for such normative notions like truth or representation. One could not treat beliefs about the world as cognitive and those about right and wrong as non-cognitive, since for beliefs to be, properly speaking, cognitive at all, one needed some objective notion of normativity to underwrite their representational content. The fact/value distinction was thus problematic since even claims about facts require the objectivity of representations.

Claiming that facts are value laden can, however, be a dangerous game, and one might worry that this line of thought will simply push one to a sort of eliminativism about truth and representation as well. It is not enough to simply note that the fact/value distinction breaks down upon closer scrutiny. If facts are value laden, then things are just that much worse if there turns out to be no place for values in the natural world. One can take the existence of truth and representation to be the start of a transcendental argument for the reality of value,²⁰ but James seemed profoundly unsympathetic with such transcendental moves. The possibility of objective representation was clearly a *problem* for James, but while abstaining from the transcendental move forces one to admit that eliminativism about truth and representation may be possible, it does not require actually endorsing that possibility.

Pragmatists, with their identification of the truth with what is believed at the ‘end of inquiry’ frequently seem to be walking precarious tightrope between Subjectivism and Metaphysical Realism. If the “end of inquiry” just picks out those beliefs that we happen to have when we humans stop inquiring, then the pragmatist seems to fall, ultimately, on the subjectivist side, with there being no real sense in which we can think of our inquiries stopping at something short of

²⁰ Though something like it can be found in Royce, and Putnam makes a similar transcendental move in his *Reason, Truth and History*.

the true. On the other hand, if the “end of inquiry” simply picks out where inquiry would be if we were able to inquire in the way that we ideally should inquire (if inquiry were conducted *properly*), then it may seem as if the pragmatist has fallen off on the realist side, with the older realist notion of ‘object truth’ simply being smuggled in under the rubric of “idealized” inquiry.

‘Conservative’ pragmatists such as Putnam accuse more ‘liberal’ pragmatists such as Rorty of falling off on the subjective side. As he puts it,

Is there a *true* conception of rationality, a *true* morality, even if all *we* ever have are our *conceptions* of these? Here philosopher divide ... Richard Rorty ... opted strongly for the view that there is only the dialogue; no ideal end can be posited or should be needed. But how does the assertion that ‘there is only the dialogue’ differ from ... self-refuting relativism? The very fact that we speak of our different conceptions as different conceptions of *rationality* posits a *Grenzbegriff*, a limit concept of ideal truth.²¹

According to Putnam, to really understand truth and objectivity, we need to understand the process of inquiry as approaching something, and this *grenzbegriff* is what reason demands. Without such a *grenzbegriff*, one is left denying the existence of any real objective norms, and thus with a kind of self-refuting relativism.

Rorty, on the other hand, views Putnam’s positing of a *grenzbegriff* as a failure of nerve that leaves Putnam’s ‘pragmatism’ with precisely the sorts of commitments that the ‘metaphysical realist’ views that he rejected were saddled with.²² Putnam wants there to be something beyond the dialogue, but this sort of trans-practical standard was precisely what pragmatism was supposed to get away from.

However, doing away with any conception *grenzbegriff* seems premature. Putnam may be right to think that we need to posit some sort of ideal, but the real question is what *sort* of posit is required? Is it posited as something that is there ‘anyway’, and against which our sputtering or misdirected practices can be criticized? That would seem to provide a ground for an objectivity that we don’t make, and Rorty seems right to be suspicious of a pragmatist’s being able to appeal to such a notion in good faith. We have compelling evidence suggesting that there is any sort of ideal limit that our inquiries would converge upon if left to themselves long enough.

However, this point holds only at a ‘theoretical’ level. Putnam treats the *grenzbegriff* as a theoretical posit underwritten by a sort of transcendental argument, but such posits need not be understood in such a tendentious way. In particular, the reading of James sketched in the

²¹ Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981) p. 216.

²² See his “Hilary Putnam and the Relativistic Menace” (in his *Truth and Progress* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998)).

previous section suggests that the *grenzbegriff* can be understood as a *practical* commitment. It is something we are committed to *making* true rather than simply finding true.

We are committed to their being a kind of stable consensus, and we are committed to its being one that we can recognize ourselves in, but by underwriting such regulative ideals through a 'will to believe' rather than a transcendental argument, we make our commitment to their being an end of inquiry a *practical* rather than *theoretical* one. Objectivity is something we are committed to making, not something that we are committed to their already being out there to find. There is thus no limit we are approaching that is independent of our approach.

On this reading here, Pragmatism is a position between Realism and Subjectivism because it takes it as *unsettled* which story will ultimately hold for us. Subjectivism may reign even after we do our best, but we might be able to do better, and if we can, it is incumbent upon us to do so.