PRAGMATISM

Pragmatism is a (distinctively American) *philosophical* tradition originated in the writings of C. S. Peirce (1839-1914), William James (1942-1910) and John Dewey (1859-1952), continued by middle figures such as C. I. Lewis (1883-1964) and Wilfrid Sellars (1912-1989), and currently represented by Richard Rorty (1932-2007) and Hilary Putnam (1926). Despite numerous –and sometimes blunt– differences between these figures, they share a core of common themes and most importantly of methodological assumptions; the more so for what regards moral philosophy, ethics being –both historically and theoretically– one of the most important focus of pragmatism. In the first part I shall sketch at (perhaps too) broad strokes the main features of the pragmatist approach to meta-ethics, while in the second I shall instead survey in some detail a particular theme (composed of a meta-philosophical thesis and a related theoretical position) as it has been tackled by Putnam.

I. PRAGMATISM AND MORAL PHILOSOPHY: AN OVERVIEW

Being such a variegated tradition, in this general recounting of the pragmatist meta-ethical approach and views, I will necessarily blur some internal distinctions among its practitioners, and accept compromises between different accounts. For sake of convenience my pragmatism of reference will be a broadly Deweyan, since given its influence it is the most congenial to convey you the distinctiveness of the pragmatic tradition. Plus (historiographically) Dewey engaged for some six decades with the major positions in the English-speaking philosophical conversation, thus being the most suited to stand for the whole crowd.

Two orders of consideration:
(a) General
Fallibilism + Coherentism: self-corrective character of human practices (Peirce, Sellars)
Anti-skepticism: doubt requires justification as much as belief does
Anti-representationalism, functionalism, and holism of human activities
Primacy of practice/practical: (1) Actions first (metaphysics)
Primacy of practice/practical: (2) Meaning as use (semantics)
Pragmatism as clarificatory conceptual analysis (neither armchair nor fieldwork)
(b) Ethical
Irreducibility of the ethical point of view to a non-ethical one
Entanglement of the epistemic and moral (against dualism of directions of fit)
Entanglement of descriptive and prescriptive (against is-ought gap)
Meta-ethical issues (ontology, semantics, psychology) go with normative issues (vs. analytic)
Particularism (about the good life) and teleologism (of a perfectionist variant)
First-order practice of morality as intrinsically normative and practically authoritative

A bit of intellectual history
We can pragmatism as operating a re-enchantment of the world through an enrichment of the concept of experience. The outcome of the reinstatement of the mind (meanings, spontaneity) into the world (causes, sensibility) was a form of normative naturalism critical of and distancing itself from both idealism and classical empiricism. Inferentialism in place of correspondentism (either intuitions or projections): ideas and conceptions as tools for dealing with the problems to which they are addressed. Understanding is portrayed as a kind of adaptive attunement with the world (environment with our fellow human beings), in which we develop intelligent habits to face problematic situations.

Rorty (et al) depicts pragmatism as a second enlightenment, completing what was left undone by the first one (but also correcting it in some important respects): not only in matters of morals we should refute the authoritarianism of correspondentism, but also in epistemology (this being a first stab at the entanglement between the two). Commitments and intentionality in place of mirroring and certainty as the central ethical/epistemological notions. Pragmatism as criticism of criticisms: let our practices speak for themselves and augment their breadth as the path of our distinctive human flourishing, that is the growth of the genuine scope of what is human.

Enfranchisement from (mid-seventeenth to late nineteenth century) foundational projects in ethics and epistemology: cashing out in philosophical terms what a broadly Darwinian paradigm advocated for the scientific discourse and practice, however avoiding scientists interpretation of such intellectual synergy. Education of our sensibility and edification of our second-nature: against the dualism of nature and rationality. Reality is available to us as meaningful because of the human perspective through which we experience it: normative natural endowment of human beings (concepts built into percepts), and conduct as the source
of significance. Within this context values are both created and found: they come with, and are constituted by, our activity of world-making, and at the same time, because of this practical constitution, they are fully assessable as genuine aspects of the fabric of the world so envisioned.

One last note: pragmatism has been often variously understood as form of non-cognitivism or expressivism. This reading is rooted in a distinctive but untenable understanding of the so-called pragmatic theory of truth (the will to believe + perspectivism). It would be a long journey to rebut all the tenets of this flawed interpretation, but as I started to show a different reading of pragmatism (in epistemology and ethics) as a version of realism can be envisioned by discarding an instrumental understanding of the primacy of the practical and replace it with a broadly intentional naturalistic constructivism. I will focus on this revised pragmatist conception of practical rationality, leaving in the background the companion notion of theoretical rationality—they back up each other since they both are theoretical accounts of the (epistemological and moral) practice and practically inspired views of theoretical activity (although with different subject matters).

_Inquiry in the place of foundation_

One of the chief tenets of pragmatism that is relevant for ethics is that our starting point of our first order conducts and of our second-order reflection on them is never neutral and prior to actions themselves, but rather always embedded in our activities. This creates the problem of finding the space for a critical assessment of the ways in which we make sense of the world and of ourselves. Pragmatism explicitly denies that this conundrum can be solved by eyeing an external standpoint from which assessing our practices, since it sees it as both unavailable and dangerous to postulate. Rationality for the pragmatists is the capacity to transform situations into more satisfactory ones from the within without making appeal to any foundational rhetoric. Moral rationality aims at enlightening our conduct from within, and not at prescribing it from the outside; it tells how responsible a certain subject is in respect to the conduct she chooses to nurture. The central role of deliberation is not to directly guide actions, but rather to shape, change and reinforce habits. The question “why be moral?” if intelligible, cannot from a pragmatist point of view be the starting point of ethics. Difference with “how should I live?”: inside and outside (in) ethics.

A moral problem has the form of a grasp on, and deliberation about, what is good, but real hard cases present to us as conflicts of norms and criteria for assessment (as Dewey puts it, a
moral choice is not one between good and bad, but between goods). Moral theories try to sketch a unified view of the good and the right, but often fail because of their external viewpoint and crave for generality. According to pragmatism what we should be doing is rather committing to inquiry, through which we deepen our moral wisdom (of both the situation at hand and of the larger context in which it rises in the first place) so to accommodate our best intuitions and transform the reality that is recalcitrant to their satisfaction (but the very same hold reversely). Rules and principles are thus instruments and not themselves solutions to moral puzzles. Principle of selective emphasis: all theorizing involves making choices about what sort of data, hypothesis and principles are relevant for the specific purposes of particular inquiries.

At the meta-ethical level, this way of approaching moral conundrums presupposes (or expresses) that there is an objective dimension in human inquiry, in which our historically situated standards of sound (moral) reasoning are negotiated in practice without this trivializing their objectivity (e.g. Misak). This is what we might call the pragmatist challenge of internal normativity and authority of practices. For Dewey ethics can be defined as “growth of conduct in meaning”, where such growth and such meaning are forms of commitments open to acknowledgement, criticism and assessment on the background of experience (and with a goal in mind to reach more satisfying ones). The moral task does not end with a reference to a certain fact of value of the matter that would bring discussion to an end, but rather with the creation of conditions that would increase the level of sensibility to what the situation demands and with a reference to those habits allowing such situation to take place (transformation of the self and of reality). The growth in meaning is thus both a personal growth (of our reflective endowment and sensitivity) and an enrichment of the world itself (those aspects of reality which deserve attention). Another way of making this point is by stating that in moral inquiry we intervene on both ends and means for satisfactorily attuning with the world.

Realism and sensibility
As said the pragmatist challenge can be formulated as the search for a form of ethical naturalism that makes space for the notions of moral objectivity and truth. James’ claim that “ethics has a genuine and real foothold in a universe where the highest consciousness is human” set the tone for a practically secular, non-dogmatic, non-reductionist naturalistic ethics attuned with the human life. The moral reality to which our judgment and conducts
respond to is the one we construct out of experiencing. The bases of morality are to be sought in the wider domain of human life and activity, rather than in some special external force or in some isolated distinctive faculty.

At one point, Dewey had toyed with the idea of recognizing better rather than good as the fundamental ethical term, on the ground that preference was the basic ethical act. In his *Theory of Valuation* (1939) this critical function takes the form of construing value as basically appraisal, rather than as the apparently more simple and isolated act of prizing, for value does not lie in some simple fact of liking, or some set feeling or attitude possessed. In truth, prizings and attitudes are psychologically set in a framework of care or concern, so that the value judgment lies in an appraisal of means and consequences in the having of the liking or attitude. Valuation thus involves the continual emergence, organization, and testing of criteria in appraisal. According to this picture of moral evaluation our sensibility described as a practical capacity that is up to refine, which goes well beyond the sheer act of liking and comprise rather an activity of appraising. “Good” is always “good for x”, where x is an activity that is deemed valuable for those engaged in (and concerned with) it.

**Moral knowledge and activity**

Practical realism in which moral practice is described as a self-correcting activity. Knowing according to pragmatism is a form of transaction in which experiences present to us as valuable, that is in a way to challenge us to respond in appropriate ways, where such fittingness of response makes in turn reference to our ways/forms of life.

**Objectivity and conceptual pluralism**

Which notion of objectivity such picture conveys? Being experience always conceptually informed, making reference to it means directly (if implicitly) calling in cause our conceptual endowment. According to the pragmatists it is not mysterious to claim that our evaluations are objective for those sharing the same conceptual background (or at least able to translate, that is enter imaginatively into, an alien one).

Pragmatist theory of concepts: having a concept means being successful in making sense of the practices ruled by such concept. Concept can be extended and projected only on the background of the wider order. (e.g. courage in wartime and peacetime)
Moral discourse

In a pragmatist framework, and grant all that I have sketched, moral discourse is both descriptive, that is refers to the facts of our moral life, and prescriptive, that is it is expressive of our point of view on our moral practices, portraying them as more or less intelligent. One other important feature of moral discourse is that it is at once explorative and revisionary: one can always keep improving and revising one’s moral understanding of a certain term and situation.

Pragmatism vs logical empiricism: round 1

Against the dichotomies dearest to a great deal of analytic meta-ethics, pragmatism launched a program of entanglements that went almost unheard till very recently. The question whether ethics is cognitive or practical found a radical answer in the emotive theory of meaning, inspired by logical empiricism and its philosophical program of sharply distinguishing factual, theoretical and metaphysical objects by making reference to their observability as a the criterion of meaning. Pragmatism, by refuting this criterion complicated the neat divide between prescribing and describing, performing and knowing: according to Dewey and the other pragmatists our moral practices (and terms we use to refer to them) are both genuinely informative about how things are in the world and about how we relate to such configurations (which are in fact our conceptually-informed configurations). To call something practical it does not disparage its cognitive character (e.g. medicine).

For Dewey the gulf created between cognitions and volitions is as artificial as menacing, since it debars us from seeing our in our practices of evaluations. Such divide is driven by a bad, Cartesian conception of the relationship between the so called inner and the outer, and an impoverished conception of both. This critique will be refined by Putnam, very likely the most attentive and interesting reader of Dewey (at least on this singular point).

II. PUTNAM ON REALISM AND THE FACT-VALUE DICHTOMY

Hilary Putnam is a major figure in contemporary English-speaking philosophy (perhaps the most important philosopher alive). His views set the agenda for analytic philosophy in the past forty years, and in recent years he progressively came to grip with his pragmatist heritage. He well embodies the best of both traditions, and his work initiated two
contemporary philosophical tendencies: the tendency in pragmatism for putting themselves into contact with other streams in analytic philosophy, and secondly the tendency in contemporary analytic philosophy toward more pragmatist and pragmatic-ish approaches.

Putnam characterizes his pragmatic affiliation in 4 points that he, after the classical pragmatists, endorses:

1) antiskepticism
2) fallibilism
3) no fundamental dichotomy between facts and values
4) primacy of the practical in philosophy

These points are not presented as forming a theory, but rather as describing a picture alternative to the forms of foundationalism and coherentism still ruling the stage of contemporary philosophy.

According to Putnam there is a still widespread particular meta-philosophical thesis and a related theoretical position that pragmatism fiercely rebutted. Despite its appeal and glory patently dropped, still according to Putnam portions of both philosophical and more broadly cultural discourse still retains some vestiges of them. I am referring to the fact-value dichotomy and a form of what Putnam calls metaphysical realism. To those two Putnam opposes an entanglement of fact and value and a conception of moral objectivity that makes reference to an realism; the two moves are related since one attacks the fact-value dichotomy in order to establish the objectivity of ethics, for what masquerades as the fact-value dichotomy is the thesis that ethical judgments are not factual. Putnam wants to retain the objectivity of ethics without committing to a thick ontology of moral properties. Along the way to this argument Putnam also argues that even scientific practices is imbued by (epistemic) values, which however is a theme I won’t discuss.

Pragmatism vs logical empiricism: round 2

Putnam reprised and expanded Dewey’s arguments against the chief tenets of logical empiricism, and in particular the critique of the fact-value dichotomy. The chief move in this debate is the depiction of evaluation as a way in which we build procedure apt to account for the satisfactoriness of a certain situation from our situated point of view (that is always our perspectival take on wider conceptual ground on which our culture lies). Inquiry, in the Dewean mood, is the task of revising and adjusting both our ends and means: and this means both our improvement of our factual knowledge of situation and of our evaluative stance on it.
We should be mindful not to read this passage as an application of a purely instrumental rationality: for Dewey and Putnam, matters of fact has value not as *instruments* for the attainment of some values in view, but rather because *they are* what allow us to envision and realize values in the first place. There are not things as they are in themselves (bearers of all the normative force) and attitudes we have toward them (carrying the motivational weight).

Some objections: (A) how could there be something like an “evaluative fact”? And, how can we discern them? Conceptual endowment and the possibility to question and criticize it. (B) What criterion for assessing which evaluation are justified and which are not? Warrant assertibility is a matter of revising one’s assumptions from within the ongoing, self-correcting process of inquiry. According to Putnam we are never in the conditions portrayed by logical empiricism, that is that we have tons of facts and have to decide which values to activate; rather, we are in the midst of our evaluations and ethical criticism consists in revising them (either piecemeal or as a whole). This version of experimentalism implies that there are no moral truth transcending our acknowledgment of them: there being goods and values (normatively assessable) does not require that there should be something more than our capacity to treat them as such, as we do in our moral practices.

*McDowell and the critique of non-cognitivism*

Putnam at this point subscribes a distinctive critique of non-cognitivism first expounded by Iris Murdoch and refined by John McDowell. Despite such philosophical move is not presented by such authors as a pragmatist one, still Putnam reads in it an unmistakable pragmatist motif. Central ethical terms, and most specifically thick ones which seem to stand at the core of our moral evaluations, are described by the non-cognitivism as analyzable in a purely descriptive (factual) and a prescriptive part (attitudinal), but such a move is not an innocent one. In fact it implies that we could peel off the descriptive part from the evaluative one, which is a highly problematic philosophical move (and unfamiliarly ordinary one). McDowell is suspect of this disentangling manoeuvre:

Typically, non-cognitivists hold that when we feel impelled to ascribe value to something, what is happening can be disentangled into two components. Competence with an evaluative concept involves, first, a sensitivity to an aspect of the world as it really is (as it is independently of value experience), and, second, a propensity to a certain attitude – a non-cognitive state that constitutes the special perspective from which items in the world seem to be endowed with the value in question.

Now, it seems reasonable to be skeptical about whether the disentangling manoeuvre here envisaged can always be effected; specifically, about whether, corresponding to any value concept, one can always isolate a genuine feature of the world –by the appropriate standard of
genuineness: that is, a feature that is there anyway, independently of anyone’s value experience being as it is- to be that to which competent users of the concept are to be regarded as responding when they use it: that which is left in the world when one peels off the reflection of the appropriate attitude.

If the disentangling manoeuvre is always possible, that implies that the extension of the associated term, as it would be used by someone who belonged to the community, could be mastered independently of the special concerns that, in the community, would show themselves in admiration or emulation of actions seen as falling under the concept. That is: one could know which actions the term would be applied to, so that one would be able to predict applications and withholdings of it in new cases—not merely without oneself sharing the community’s admiration (there need be no difficulty about that) but without even embarking on an attempt to make sense of their admiration.

McDowell claims that we cannot master a certain ethical concepts without having a grasp of its appropriate application (and thus possibility of being extended), which is possible only by sharing a certain evaluative perspective. There would be no knowledge prior to evaluation, since no purely factual description would explain why we consider such concept apt in that situation. This move entails the fact/value entanglement. The formation of this evaluative-cum-factive outlook is for pragmatism the goal and point of ethical upbringing.

**Redescription of facts and values**

In the FVD what makes all the work is a certain notion of the “factual” –from which the “evaluative” follows. Problematic conception of the factual of British empiricism (very often too close to what Sellars labeled as the myth of the given). Putnam’s critique is directed toward what bald naturalism and its fear of norms as inscribed in the nature of things. Values according to such picture are somewhat superimposed on the furniture of the world from top down, falling in this way outside the range of a naturalistic account. Once we re-enchant nature by noticing how it is impossible to debate facts without calling in cause our evaluative presumptions. Both facts and values are to be assessed against the wider background of our practices, in which our particular epistemic and moral claim make sense, and this does not commit us to postulate (factual and evaluative) entities independent of such practices. There are valuable things and valuable states of affair, not merely things and states of affair *plus* some kind of assessment, but things or states of affairs that are found *valuable upon reflection.*

**Beyond the fact/value dichotomy**

By discarding the dichotomic opposition of fact and value Putnam follows the lesson of Morton White and Quine about the troubled semantics informing the sharp analytic/synthetic
divide. For Putnam, after these authors, the fact that a certain concept C is not sharply defined
need not mean that there are no cases that fall clearly in C and others that equally clearly do
not. This amount to the denies that there are neither paradigmatic moral judgments nor that
there are paradigmatic judgments that fall outside the scopes of ethics—even if, because of the
critique of the two related dichotomies, one cannot exclude a priori that a certain concept C is
might become morally relevant if certain conditions take place. From the fact that there are
contexts in which it is useful to distinguish between ethical concepts and non ethical ones
nothing metaphysical about them follows (James and Wittgenstein on hinge propositions)
The FVD is particularly dangerous because it is a conversation stopper. In fact, if values
are non-cognitive, it is thought, they fall outside the field of rational argumentation. If we
resist the idea of disagreement as an irresolvable standoff we are not forced to the other
opposite of resolving it by pointing to bald (value-free) facts: rather, we should criticize our
ways of envisioning and evaluating situations. In order to have a coherent conception of a
fact, according to Putnam we should invoke values.

Objectivity without objects
For Putnam objectivity is consistent with the existence (and necessity!) of a plurality of
conceptual schemes. He claims that we should stop to associate the notion of objectivity with
that one of (purely descriptive) demonstration: there are many kind of assertions that are not
assessable in purely descriptive terms, and still regulated by strong procedures of rational
control individuating good from bad instances of it. Putnam labels himself as a moral realist,
but of a very peculiar kind. He recalls two persistent philosophical errors:

a) that if a judgment is objective there must be some object to which it corresponds

b) that if there are no “natural” objects to play this role, then it must be played by “non-
natural” ones.

Against these assumptions Putnam mounts a story about how we are initiated to recognize
objectivity without being acquainted with the supposed set of objects that would grant it, but
rather through learning how to participate in the very practices governed by such norms of
objectivity. By stressing the importance of the agential point of view Putnam claims how
there is no way the world is, and thus all references to such third-personal viewpoint (made
both by metaphysical realists and by moral relativists such as Williams and Rorty)
systematically miss the point of speaking of practical moral reality. All our perceptions and
judgment are shot through with evaluation, but only valuations that survive criticism turn into
objective value judgment and considerations. Contra the idea of convergence over an independent target Putnam argues for a broadly Peircean conception of inquiry as convergence toward an informed ideal point.

**Pragmatic Realisms**
Putnam changed the label of his speculative position (internal realism, realism with a human face, commonsense realism, direct or naive realism), but since the early ’80 he argued against metaphysical realism, for a realism of our practices. According to his later views, and consistently with his recent speculation, our concepts make possible the emergence and strengthen of genuine, authoritative moral truths. The way we grasp and master a certain ethical concept, as we say, is internally connected with its role in our meaningful practices and assessable in reference to them. Moral truths are the truths on which our individual and social life is based on, and a disagreement about them is no sheer disagreement about what facts are to be acknowledged or which sentiments should be voiced, but rather about the criteria for evaluations themselves.

According to such moderate realism we live in an ethically structure universe reflected in the way we use our concepts and language. The reality of moral discourse resides in its being action-guiding in ways that are assessable from the point of view of practice. Once experience is re-interpreted as norm-laden all the way through (or bottom up), then talking about normative facts means only restating the idea of ethics being about the kind of moral views that agents have of experience.