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What Is and What Should Pragmatic Ethics Be? Some Remarks on Recent Scholarship

Abstract. The aim of this paper is twofold. First, it offers a summary compilation of the main achievements in recent scholarship on the issue of pragmatic ethics —underlining the lack of consensus, but also showing basic agreement about the key features of the ethical philosophy of pragmatism. Second, it focus on two strands of pragmatism: the one spearheaded by Charles S. Peirce, which stresses the importance of habits, and the tendency of things (including human beings) to become habit-governed as the key to the development of ‘concrete reasonableness’, the ultimate end by which human action ought to be guided; and the one led by John Dewey, which stresses the importance of deliberative activity—a ‘dramatic rehearsal’ of the possible consequences of every course of action—and the central role of educational work in developing the ‘growth’ of human nature, in itself the highest ethical ideal—an ideal that manifests itself in the ‘reconstruction’ of a new and more democratic society.

At the beginning of the last decade, Richard Bernstein (1992) wrote about the resurgence of pragmatism in the Anglo-American academic world; since that time, it has become almost a *cliché* to note the significance that American philosophical thought has acquired in areas of culture as diverse as sociology, law, political science, literature and philosophy itself. Furthermore, this rediscovery has given pragmatism back its status as the ‘perennial American philosophy’, because of the central role it attributes to experimentation, reflecting the typically American preference for action over reflection, for facts over theories and, above all, for results (Dickstein 1998: 7, 16).

This new recognition is due in large part to the exhaustion of analytical philosophy, the materialist tendencies of logical positivism, the nihilistic sunset of hermeneutical philosophy and the dead-end of postmodernity. In response to this context in recent years, various philosophers —both in Europe and America— have revitalized philosophical reflection on the basis of a rigorous reconstruction of the pragmatist legacy. Yet, it would appear that work remains to be done in reconstructing the moral philosophy of pragmatism. Part of this deficiency resides in the diversity existing amongst pragmatist thinkers, which prompted F. C. S. Schiller to claim that there were as many pragmatisms as pragmatists. While it is possible to trace a certain common method in their approaches to examining moral experience, it is also the case that the first impression that one receives on studying this field is that of a debate between mutually opposed positions, rather than a unified and homogenous discourse.

With the intention of contributing to this task, in what follows I will offer a summary of what, *de facto*, the work of Charles S. Peirce and John Dewey contributes to ethical reflec-

tion. Finally, in concluding, I will describe the synthesis that several authors have proposed as to what a pragmatist ethics ought to mean¹.

PEIRCE: THE IMPORTANCE OF HABITS

I. The theory-practice divide

Peirce insists on the separation of theory and practice (*CP* 1.618, 1.642, 1898)², and emphasizes that ethics is a science worth studying only if it is *not* a matter of vital importance for he who studies it (*CP* 1.669, 1898). The practical man doesn't need to put his assertions to the test nor does he test his beliefs. Unlike him, the man of science accepts that reasoning and experimentation are analogous —both are inquiries into the sense of something, in both can the unexpected occur—and also admits that only experimental results can have a direct effect on human conduct.

This separation of theory and practice runs parallel to another split, namely, that of ethics and morals or, better put, of ethical *theory* and moral *practice*. Peirce denies that morality is subject to rationality and thinks that ethics is valuable as a science *in a broad sense*. But he also regards ethics as a science which bears on human conduct only indirectly, through the examination of past actions and the self-correction of the self in view of future action. In addition, ethics would be a normative knowledge only in so far as it analyzes the adjustment of actions to ends and in so far as it studies the *general* way in which a good life can be lived.

In morals Peirce appeals to instinct and sentiment, and in ethics he recommends the use of logical thinking —just as scientists do. However, even within the framework of his system, it's not obvious that scientists may so easily set aside their instincts —in fact, instinct (or ‘rational instinct’ as he called it in 1908) plays a significant role in the economy of research. Moreover, the statement that in moral issues there may be no possibility of carrying out an inquiry that is truth-oriented is not an uncontroversial one. After all, moral inquiry is performed in a *deliberative* way, weighing up argumentations, beliefs and principles, and comparing them either with their probable or conceivable consequences or with lived as well as possible experiences that can be forceful or impinge upon the deliberative subject in such a way as to acquire the compulsory resistance due to reality. As Misak puts it succinctly, “the practice of moral deliberation is responsive to experience, reason, argument, and thought experiments... Such responsiveness is part of what it is to make a moral decision and part of what it is to try to live a moral life” (2000: 52)³. Likewise, this same deliberative activity implies an effort to acquire habits, beliefs and principles that contribute to a truly free deliberation which, in turn, can result in creative conclusions. For Peirce, as you get more habit-governed, you become more creative and free, and your selfhood acquires plasticity and receptiveness to experience⁴.

¹ The terms ‘pragmatic’ and ‘pragmatist’ are used interchangeably here. Small differences between them could be pointed out, but since their use in ordinary language is almost equivalent, I will not pay attention to their nuances.

² Reference to Peirce’s papers are given as *CP* followed by volume, paragraph number, and the year written. See Peirce (1931-1958).

³ Moral discussion is also comprised of experiences, examples, arguments and thought experiments which may be as compelling as compulsory and, therefore, may well account for the truth of the ethical hypothesis discussed (Misak 2000: 94).

⁴ In a certain sense, habits *release* time that can be employed in using imagination, which is the heart of creativity. Moreover, as Barrena (2001) says, “the creative power... rests in the capacity of exerting control over one-

Vincent Colapietro has referred to Peirce's description of human reason in terms of a *deliberative* rationality (1999: 24). Also, in another place he has explained that deliberation for Peirce is a process of preparation for future action which has to do with the checking of previous acts, the rehearsal in imagination of different roads to be followed by possible conduct and the nurturing of ideals (Colapietro 1997: 270, 281). It is precisely this experiment carried out within imagination that generates habits, because, as Peirce says in "A Survey of Pragmaticism", "it is not the muscular action but the accompanying inward efforts, the acts of imagination, that produce the habit" (*CP* 5.479, 1907).

Habits are regular ways of thinking, perceiving and interpreting that generate actions. As such, habits have a huge influence on human behavior, manifest themselves in the concrete things we do and, at the same time, are formed within those same activities. Even more, according to Peirce,

the activity takes the form of experimentation in the inner world; and the conclusion (if it comes to a definite conclusion), is that under given conditions, the interpreter will have formed the habit of acting in a given way whenever he may desire a given kind of result. The real and living logical conclusion *is* that habit (*CP* 5.491, 1907).

Much more evidence could be given to support the view that habits are virtually decided (*CP* 2.435, c.1893) and also that intelligence comprises inward or *potential* actions that influence the formation of habits (*CP* 6.286, 1893). Suffice it to say that, according to Peirce, deliberation is a function of the imagination, and that imagination is in itself an experiment which may have unexpected consequences that impose themselves upon the deliberative subject.

II. Ethics as a normative science

Although for a long time Peirce did not regard ethics as a subject worthy of serious study, he came to change his mind, especially at the turn of the century, when he tried out several classifications of the sciences and he assigned ethics to its place as one of the three normative sciences.

I'll spare you the details of Peirce's classification of the sciences. Let's just say for the moment that, because of its being part of philosophy, normative science is observational and based on ordinary experience. It studies phenomena in relation to ends, that is, phenomena as dyadic. Also, as a part of philosophy, the normative sciences derive their principles from mathematics, that is, they make claims about how certain things 'ought' to be or happen *hypothetically*. In this sense, they don't describe but prescribe "that if you want goodness in action, then...", "if you want beauty in feeling, then...", "if you want truth in thinking, then...".

In the case of ethics, if you want to obtain goodness in action then you should restrain your acts in certain ways (De Waal 2001: 19). For Peirce, this means that you should adjust your life to an ideal, namely, to the development of concrete reasonableness, to make a more intelligible world with our actions and thoughts. Ethics is not in charge of discovering this ultimate end, which is supplied by aesthetics, the science that defines the *summum bonum* which guides all actions. Ethics, then, would be *merely* the theory of the conformity of

self, of being rational, of integrating everything under reason through the development of habits. By means of habits, the human being makes all things rational, and submits the universe to his control in the case of science, his feelings in the case of art, or his own life in general [in the case of ethics]; that is, he adds reasonableness".

an action to that ideal. The ideal doesn't cause any action but prompts the revision of past actions and the judgment of future actions. The judgment that compares the action with the ideal gives rise to an influence on habits that, together with the consequences of past actions, modifies the future action.

Therefore, for Peirce, every deliberate conduct implies the following: some ideal, an action, the subsequent comparison of the act with the ideal and, finally, a judgment concerning future conduct. Deliberate action is synonymous with free action, the kind of action that ethics can study, but in order to be a morally good action it has to be consistent with an ultimate end.

III. Adjustment of conduct to an ideal

Ethics for Peirce consists in rational deliberation about how to act in order to shape our lives to an ideal. This ideal is neither a socially inculcated one nor a historically or traditionally fixed one. Acting on such an ideal is not bad or wrong, it's simply not-moral, because you don't freely choose that end. Peirce has a lot of respect for tradition, instincts and inherited feelings because, even though they are not reflexive, they rule our conduct in a safe way and seek to preserve the community over the individual (Mayorga 2007). Parker has stressed that in this expansion of the range of driving forces for action Peirce succeeds in undoing the rationalistic dream of an ethical conduct completely ruled by reason. In fact, for Peirce, there's no need to reason about every single action —it is neither possible nor even desirable to do so— because ‘individual ratiocination is highly fallible in matters of ‘vital importance’’. Moreover, “compared to the errors of limited reason, instinct and sentiment are ‘practically infallible’ guides to ordinary affairs” (Parker 2003: 40-41).

So, again, what exactly is this ultimate end of conduct? Ethics can only point to some features of this end, but cannot say exactly *which* one it is. Indeed, in this regard “Peirce’s definition of an ultimate ideal is obtained by a logical analysis of what is required for an ideal to be ultimate” (Sullivan 1977: 189). As a result, he concludes that a good end must be assumable and possible to achieve on a constant basis. In this sense, the rationalization of the universe is the only ultimate end that clarifies and gives sense to *all* our activities —that includes thinking— because for the human being it is “the chance to understand himself and everything surrounding him” (Barrena and Nubiola 2007: 53) and, according to this, the chance to appropriate his own life.

The development of reasonableness also entails, in part, the development of habits, on the part of the world and of ourselves —that the world is evolving towards a more *habit-ruled* and ordered world is evident for Peirce; that we human beings can contribute to that evolution is also noticeable for him. The task of finding order in the world is in itself a part of making the world more intelligible. But this order isn’t easy to see. As Fontrodona wrote, since the ideal

is the growth in concrete reasonableness, and this, in turn, is the development of habits, it follows that the perception of the world will depend on the habits held by the individual... Thus, the conclusion is reached that good is what appears as attractive to the sufficiently matured agent (2002: 188).

So, as long as you become more refined, sensitive and responsive to experiencing habits you get to see more and more reasonableness everywhere.

DEWEY: EXPERIENCE AND DELIBERATION

I'll try to be even more succinct in outlining John Dewey's moral philosophy, a robust piece of philosophical thinking sufficiently detailed in several scholarly books. Dewey begins his ethical reflection by claiming that morally problematic situations arise when there are "ends so discrepant, so incompatible, as to require selection of one and rejection of the other" (*MW* 5: 194, 1908)⁵. Moral experience is bound to not knowing what to do among several demands. When one considers the incompatibility of ends that are presented in experience, then experience enters the moral realm. As Hildebrand puts it, for Dewey a moral experience is linked with reflective thought in a "*situation* saturated by conflicting elements which *demands* that engaged agents determine *reflectively* what to value and what ends to pursue" (2008: 67).

According to Gregory Pappas, Dewey understands that a typical moral inquiry is constituted by three main stages: an agent that finds himself in a morally problematic situation, the same agent that engages in a process of moral deliberation and, finally, the moment in which he arrives at a judgment that results in a choice (Pappas 1998: 108). As far as this brief presentation is concerned, on the second phase of the moral inquiry Dewey writes that

Deliberation is a process of active, suppressed, rehearsal; of imaginative dramatic performance of various deeds carrying to their appropriate issues the various tendencies which we feel stirring within us... We give way, in our mind, to some impulse; we try, in our mind, some plan. Following its career through various steps, we find ourselves in imagination in the presence of the consequences that would follow; and as we then like and approve, or dislike or disapprove, these consequences, we find the original impulse or plan good or bad. Deliberation is dramatic and active, not mathematical and impersonal (*MW* 5: 292-293, 1908).

Note that choice or decision is something that can be arrived at either personally or socially. That is so, because for Dewey deliberation isn't just a 'cephalocentric' soliloquy but also a communicative and socially engaged act (Fesmire 2003: 70-71, 82). Also, in deliberating we not only imagine and reflect on the consequences for ourselves but also try to figure out the responses of others. To sum up, as Hildebrand explains,

By trying out various courses of action in imagination, we not only map out logical possibilities, we also evoke and make explicit *our* reaction; we test how we would feel if we did an action — what sort of person we would become. And while deliberation connotes a solitary act, much deliberation is actually social (2008: 78).

Taken as a whole, Dewey's reconstruction of moral experience also relies on the following features (Pappas 2008: 181-183):

- a) it is social and affective, that is, transactional and qualitative. For Dewey there are no isolated moral subjects, but societies wherein agents interact. Also, moral qualities are *experienced* and can affect any person in a given situation, since these qualities belong to the situation as it is presented in experience and, in fact, they are objective features of

⁵ References to Dewey's works follow the critical edition and use the following abbreviations: *EW* (*The Early Works*), *MW* (*The Middle Works*), and *LW* (*The Later Works*), followed by volume, page number, and the year written.

such situation. Undoubtedly, ‘moral qualities, traits, or values are sometimes experienced as objects of knowledge, but before this they are experienced as had, felt, or suffered’ (Pappas 1997: 541).

b) it is situational and contextual. The context of a unique situation is what is truly ‘given’ at any time in experience and each situation constitutes a unique context (Pappas 1997: 534, 537). Therefore, Dewey’s moral epistemology aims to solve the problem encountered in *this* situation (Anderson 2008), for ‘in’ a situation the agent is *participator*. It is in this sense that moral experience may turn into an effort to ameliorate situations and to bring new goods into existence.

c) habits are the stable part of moral experience and also ‘are largely responsible for the continuity of conduct’ (Hildebrand 2008: 67). Habits embody the traits of a person’s character and also tend to become fixed features of the self. That’s why it’s so important to instill —by means of education— habits of independent thought, critical inquiry, observation, experimentation, foresight, and imagination, including sympathy for others (Anderson 2008). The proper cultivation of one’s character is the best way to establish a moral order, provided that one’s moral intelligence is constituted by habits such as sensitivity, conscientiousness, sympathy and open-mindedness.

d) it acknowledges the importance of using ideals, principles and habits *intelligently*. To be precise, for Dewey an ethical theory should serve as ‘an instrument for rendering deliberation more effective and hence choice more intelligent’ because, as he conceives it, it should ‘enlighten and guide choice and action by revealing alternatives... [including] what is entailed when we choose one alternative rather than another’ (*LW* 7: 316, 1932).

e) it traces a distinction between immediate experience of value and reflective endorsement of it. ‘Valuing is immediate —value is felt as present in experience. Evaluating (also called ‘valuation’ by Dewey) is mediate or reflective —value is indeterminate and inquiry must endeavor to clarify the situation’ (Hildebrand 2008: 80). This latter operation of appraising is the one that makes the agent conscious of moral goodness, as ‘a truly moral (or right) act is one which is intelligent in an emphatic and peculiar sense; it is a reasonable act. It is not merely one which is thought of, and thought of as good, at the moment of action, but one which will continue to be thought of as ‘good’ in the most alert and persistent reflection’ (*MW* 5: 278-279, 1908).

Finally, let me say three more things about Dewey’s moral philosophy. First, the important task to be done by educators in trying to foster habits that entail an intelligent reinforcement of the best practices and not mere repetition of unreflective customs. Second, for Dewey there may be nothing wrong in taking tradition into account, *if* we make an intelligent use of it as a tool and provided that this same tradition does not lose its moral sensitivity towards unexpected situations and, therefore, render the improvement of its contents impossible. Third, Dewey does not reject the existence and effectiveness of ideals and ultimate ends altogether. He only denies that these are static or fixed ones. Indeed, in *A Common Faith* he stressed that ideals exist as ends in an *operative* way: they exist in character, in personality and action (*LW* 9: 33, 1934). True, Dewey’s ethics copes with an ever-changing environment, but still uses a broad moral criterion which is ‘growth’.

The end is... the active process of transforming the existent situation. Not perfection as a final goal, but the ever-enduring process of perfecting, maturing, refining is the aim in living. Honesty, industry, temperance, justice, like health, wealth and learning, are not goods to be possessed as they would be if they expressed fixed ends to be attained. They are directions of change in the quality of experience. Growth itself is the only moral ‘end’ (*MW* 12: 181, 1920).

As Gouinlock puts it, “the end of human nature is growth —an integrated, socially responsible, ongoing development of the varying potentialities that emerge in the course of life... The good life is one of intelligent participation in processes of change” (1992: 260). As democracy is that way of life that encourages the arising of human potentialities, “a way of life controlled by a working faith in the possibilities of human nature”, and which task “is forever that of creation of a freer and more humane experience in which all share and contribute” (*LW* 14: 226, 230, 1939), it takes little to say that democracy as a way of life is a moral *ideal* worth achieving. Although, to be sure, Dewey does not outline how this ideal must be specified in particular institutions and customs beyond some general recommendations⁶.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF A PRAGMATIST ETHICS

In addressing the question of what exactly pragmatist ethics is, the first thing that we note is that there is still no accepted consensus concerning this potential ethical theory. In fact, discussion is still ongoing concerning the very possibility of a pragmatist ethical *theory*, since pragmatism is not based upon antecedent principles (it is not a doctrine that is deduced after establishing a set of foundations) and, further, there is no *single* independent and explicitly formulated pragmatist ethical theory as such. The most that seems deducible, on the basis of a superficial approach to pragmatism, is that there are as many ethical theories as there are particular experiences, since any “meaningful theory cannot exist apart from practice” and ‘theorizing is not prior to or independent of experience, but [rather] grows out and is part of experience’ (LaFollette 2000: 418). This explains why, instead of proposing a specific theory, pragmatism describes itself as a method for understanding better—or reconstructing—already existing theories, and more generally, as a method that enables greater awareness of our actual moral life.

Hence, it can be posited that the key concepts of pragmatism in ethics are the notions of *habit* and *deliberation*, elements which are also present in the real moral life of every person, and which other ethical theories have studied under other names (virtue, custom, tendency, disposition, dilemma, decision). This signifies, at the very least, that “any theorizing [...] begins from current wisdom, as embodied in our *habits*” (LaFollette 2000: 418, emphasis added). Since, however, there are no pre-established principles for pragmatism, but only experience, the norms of acting are established by each person thanks to the activity of *deliberation* —of making a ‘dramatic rehearsal’ (*MW* 5: 292-293, 1908) of the possible consequences of each course of action—and also thanks to the capacity to adopt as one’s own certain determined habits or dispositions for action. In this respect, Peirce is a most radical thinker, since for him concepts, beliefs, associations of ideas—and, it might be added, norms—are not created by us beforehand, but rather are caused by our experiences. Our life experiences *determine* our concepts and, as a result, we eventually arrive at our beliefs concerning reality, since the ‘course of life’ or totality of our experience is more or less homogenous. Life, in sum, forces the creation of our mental habits, since experience always influences our way of thinking and acting.

In addition, pragmatists include *projection* (Faerna 1996: 92) within the ambit of experience; that is to say, experience has value not only as a starting point for our concepts, but also, above all, as that which makes possible new courses of action. “True reality”, as Nu-

⁶ This invalidates much of Robert Talisse’s criticism of a supposed totalitarian or anti-pluralistic current in Dewey’s views. See Hildebrand 2008b.

biola has written, “is, then, the field of projection of experience which the members of society share via their communicative activities” (Nubiola 1996: 1141). We access projected experience in an indirect fashion, but it nevertheless has a real status, because it can be shared, communicated, brought about, and can be the impetus for concrete actions. Thus, it is integrated into general experience, being experience a contact with something that imposes itself upon me *despite myself*, and which I am forced to accept prior to theorizing (Pappas 2007: 329). Reality itself is a ‘field of projection’, which causes reflection, deliberation, communication and prediction to become fundamental activities for practical life, in interaction with the world, since they are activities derived from experience, and which project onto experience the various options available in acting or thinking.

Nevertheless, despite this shared emphasis on the value of habits and deliberation, the differences in approach between the various pragmatist authors are clear and well-known. As a result, the most typical strategy among scholars has been to base themselves upon one or another pragmatist author, and from that perspective develop a general ethical theory which is sufficiently broad and plausible that it can take into account the thought of the other thinkers in the pragmatist school. For this reason, the bibliography available up to the present has been based primarily on the thought of Dewey or the social psychology of Mead, although it at times mentions James and Peirce. The descriptions of the thought of these authors are generally more or less accurate, but their characterization of ‘pragmatist ethics’ tends to be vague and minimal. Nevertheless, there are indisputable points of agreement between these pragmatists, in particular the consideration of ethics as a science which is characterized by objectivity, cognitivism, teleology and naturalism.

I. Experience as an objective and cognitive starting point

Thus, for example, Tiles has identified a series of components of the ethical philosophy of pragmatism, decanting it from the general characteristics of pragmatist thought (Tiles 1998: 640). These characteristics are, first of all, the rejection of certainty in the search for precepts and moral principles, and therefore the rejection of moral absolutes. Certainly, this characteristic is connatural to pragmatism and to Peirce, since, indeed, certainty or subjective assurance concerning a scientific hypothesis, or, in this case, a moral precept, does not add anything whatsoever to its truth or goodness. The fact that pragmatism rejects the possibility of moral absolutes means, first of all, that it rejects the possibility of moral principles which are not connected to experience. Nevertheless, this doesn’t mean that pragmatism succumbs to relativism, since, as Ruth Anna Putnam has stated, “all evaluations are firmly rooted in and are correctible by experience” (Putnam 1992: 1105). Experience corroborates assessments and valuations because it is objective and general, i.e., it is uniform, common to everyone, social and shared⁷. In the case of ethics —where we do not always know with certainty the consequences of our decisions, judgments and moral hypotheses— one must frequently recur to imagination, memory and thought as clues to experience⁸, but there is also something objective here, given that imagination is also experiential and shared; i.e. we all more or less imagine in the same way.

⁷ Indeed, although sometimes it is presented as a changing reality, “experience is the constant, persistent and trustworthy basis of evidence in any philosophical investigation which is empirical” (Pappas 2007: 327).

⁸ This is not to say that the issues discussed in ethics are abstract or indefinite, but only that ‘moral judgments require more collateral information’, which sometimes can consist in a certain experience or specific background knowledge (Misak 2000: 92, 82-83).

In conjunction with this, in second place, is the affirmation that we are dealing with a finalist ethics, which requires self-control in view of an end. This characteristic derives from the deference which pragmatism normally shows to the scientific method, and, more generally, from the conception of thought as an activity with an end, where the obtaining of any cognitive objective (such as that of truth) inevitably brings with it the requirement of refining the control which we exercise over our actions. Science itself, for Peirce, is a cognitive disposition, since it consists principally in the desire to learn (Cantens 2006: 94-95). According to Tiles, pragmatism employs scientific research as a model of how to respond to moral problems, and therefore it demands the same virtues of ‘reasonableness’ and ‘impartiality’ (which characterize the scientific researcher) in order to reach moral judgments (1998: 640)⁹. Both in science and in ethics, the search for truth demands a behavior characterized by openness to error and refutation. This ultimately means that ethics is a field of knowledge that seeks objectivity; that is, ethical propositions are objective because they can be mistaken (Lynch 2004: 11, 22, 34). Further, this implies that ethics carries with it a certain type of cognitivism, in the sense that moral statements express propositions and beliefs, and therefore may be judged true or false (Van Roojen 2005). If, in the context of Peirce’s philosophy, we were to go further, uniting this cognitive disposition to the disposition to learn – that is, of proposing hypotheses that can be corrected by experience – ethics would then be a fully rational science, since it would follow the first rule of reason, which is the desire to learn (*CP* 1.135, 1898).

Up to this point, therefore – as González-Castán has summarized the issue – a pragmatist ethics is recognizable by its insistence on the agent’s point of view, and that reality remains to be brought about; by its emphasis on the fact that moral conflict demands imaginative solutions; and by its avoidance of relativism through its appeal to the experience accumulated by the community. A further distinction of pragmatist ethics is its claim that desires and necessities are not something given and unchangeable, but that they are instead *created* (González-Castán 2001: 220-221, 226, 231, 235). The final characteristic of pragmatist ethics, as identified by Tiles, is along the same lines: it is a naturalistic ethics “in which claims about human nature function as norms” (Tiles 1998: 640) but in which it is not assumed that human desires are fixed, and in which, finally, the solutions proposed to moral conflicts must be evaluated by their consequences.

II. How to describe and prescribe a certain behavior

Nevertheless, this does not make pragmatist ethics a consequentialist theory, but rather – as Liszka has demonstrated – a teleological one. Consequentialist ethics, in fact, does not imply movement towards an end, but rather the maximization of a certain or of certain consequences. Pragmatist ethics is teleological, but in a special sense, where the end which is valued is neither imposed from without nor comes from within, but rather is discovered and developed in process (Liszka 2005), in the human practices which constitute the moral life.

It is, further, a teleological ethics molded by habits and norms which are corrected by experience, and thus, “even if the capacity for a habit is immanent to an organism, habits are not. They are formed in the interstices between organism and its habitat” (Liszka 2005).

9 In a passage from Peirce’s later works, he approaches a similar position when he explains that the attitude of the scientist, and his particular task, does not consist in confirming his prior beliefs, but rather in seeking out the errors and insufficiencies in them. The logic which is employed by the person reasoning in scientific research is, therefore, irrevocably linked to a concrete interior attitude, and to an ethics of ‘justice’ and ‘impartiality’ with regard to evidence and new arguments which may go counter to previously held beliefs (*CP* 6.3, 1898).

Habits, therefore, are not simply the revealing of an inherent nature, but rather the result of a process of interaction and learning. Further, that which legitimates a normative claim (of the kind ‘I should...’) is not that its derivation from some human essence, but rather the fact that it leads to the desired end in a reliable manner (Liszka 2007).

The approaches of Liszka and Tiles coincide in adopting the model of successful scientific research as the way of developing a pragmatist ethics. Inspired by this option, – which appears to reconcile the perspectives of Dewey and Peirce – Liszka has proposed that pragmatist ethics is at once descriptive and normative. On the one hand, following Peirce (*CP* 1.409, c.1890), it would be a theory that recognizes the fact that all phenomena tend to self-regulate, that in all things there is a tendency to acquire habits, to behave in a regular manner. Translated to the sphere of ethics, this means that moral habits tend to acquire the form of laws or norms for the individual. In fact, moral habits can be seen as a repertory of inherited actions and behaviors which permit the person to confront the moral life, and which are only questioned when they are unable to help the person to handle new situations and internal or external conflicts (it is then that genuine moral deliberation begins, and new habits can arise) (Liszka 2005). In addition, self-regulation is complemented by a second descriptive aspect, i.e. that norms derive from the struggles of communities of moral agents to choose the best norms (or correct existing norms).

Nevertheless, certain criteria of evaluation are necessary, in order to judge the moral norms and new habits which may arise as a result of conflict and deliberation. Following the scheme of ‘fixation of habits’ suggested by Liszka, the fact that a norm may be dominant or resistant is no guarantee that it is correct to adopt it; rather, it is necessary that it be fixed in accordance with certain criteria. Drawing a parallel between the fixation of beliefs and the fixation of moral habits, it can be concluded that those habits which become fixed due to exclusion, authoritarian domination or dogmatic legislation allow us to discard certain dominant norms. In addition, as in science, a norm can be discarded if ‘the sample’ is small, i.e. if it does not include or draw together a significant quantity of experiences. Therefore, “the more inclusive the norming process [is], the more likely the results will be the right norm” (Liszka 2005). In this sense, a norm is not legitimated because it is conceptually consistent, but rather because it functions in practice, that is, because it can be translated into practice and have consequences (Liszka 2007).

It is true, however, that these affirmations are not strictly Peircean. On the one hand, as Misak has shown, a norm is not discarded because it is applicable only in a small number of cases, but rather because it encounters opposition nearly every time it is applied. Doing *A*, therefore, is correct if, in the long term, it is the option which brings about the least surprise (Misak 2004: 110). Further, on the other hand, from a Peircean perspective, the legitimacy of a norm does not derive from its practical equivalencies, but rather from its capacity to promote habits in the long term. The variety of practical consequences will be realized, in any case, in the different ways in which, in his behavior, the human person incarnates the ultimate ideal which should orient all his actions (Barrena and Nubiola 2007: 54).

III. On the role of ends in pragmatist ethics

Therefore, by asserting that norms are valid if they are translatable into practice, Liszka borders on a functionalism very similar to the thesis of Dewey, which – far from discrediting his proposal – shows how difficult it is to shed the Deweyan legacy when discussing pragmatist ethics. Peirce never went into such detail in the few texts he wrote on ethics; indeed, in order to acquire the status of a science, for Peirce ethics would have to be ‘anteth-

ics' (*CP* 1.573, 1906), i.e. that which is prior to ethics as it is normally understood, and which studies merely the conformity of the action to an ideal (the determination of this ideal is not the ethicist's task). Nevertheless, if this ideal of action is regarded as something fixed and 'final', it would appear that, once it is achieved, action would come to an end. But the moral life teaches us that ends, rather than constituting goals which put an end to action, perform the function of orienting it and giving it meaning; they make action intelligible, and at the same time, are the principle of new actions¹⁰. Therefore, if (as was stated earlier) pragmatist ethics attempts to treat of our actual moral life, it is not in the discovery and clarification of ends that the essence of pragmatist ethics is to be discovered; rather, such ethics pays attention to any voluntary action and, more generally, to all courses of action which pursue an end in a consistent way over a prolonged period of time – as Peirce wrote (*CP* 5.135, 1903).

This occurs in this way because, in our actual moral life, our objectives can always be achieved in a more full way; we can always improve the way in which we carry out our actions. LaFollette similarly blurs the line between ends and means, and emphasizes how, on many occasions, actions which are normally regarded as *merely* means to an end *already* constitute that end, since they are realizing that end (LaFollette 2000: 410-412). For him, pragmatist ethics has four essential characteristics. In the first place, it is an ethics which employs criteria without being criteriological; that is, it does not maintain that moral criteria are logically anterior, nor that they are fixed, complete and directly applicable (LaFollette 2000: 400-401). It may use other ethical theories as criteria, but the vital issue for pragmatist ethics is deliberation. In second place, pragmatist ethics is objective without being absolute; that is, it recognizes that some moral habits are better than others, but at the same time it admits that we are fallible, because we do not always know which moral habit is better (LaFollette 2000: 415) and, therefore, we seek objectivity by comparing our actions with our acquired habits and our experience (LaFollette 2000: 409-410)¹¹. In third place, for LaFollette, pragmatist ethics recognizes that ethical judgments are relative, because they derive from the interests of the agent and from the educational and instructional process which produces the morality of each person. But, at the same time, it is not relativist, because it admits that virtually any behavior can affect the interests of others, and that therefore there are better and worse habits (LaFollette 2000: 407). Finally, pragmatist ethics is pluralist without being indecisive. It tolerates and welcomes certain moral differences because it admits that, on certain occasions, various habits may appear to be equally good and, if there is disagreement, the best way to resolve it is to put these habits to the test in an environment which encourages open discussion (LaFollette 2000: 416-417).

BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

As LaFollette presents it, the key to understanding pragmatist ethics is that it is *not* an ethical theory per se, but rather it is an anthropology, a way of understanding the human

¹⁰ In fact, it is hard to determine what kind of action a 'final' action would be. Even in a specific course of action, it is difficult to point out which single deed would be the one that brings the whole action to an end. This is so because, as British writer G. K. Chesterton rightly saw, 'all we do is preparations'. That is, every action is always preliminary to something else, each act always gives way to several other deeds, and no single act in itself coincides with the end of a given action. Perhaps, as Chesterton wrote on several occasions, the only acts that bring action to an end (metaphorically speaking, as we in fact are *always* acting) are the ones based on unreflective custom, such as those belonging to madmen and lunatics (Chesterton 2004: 295-296).

¹¹ In the same way, when discussing values and evaluating them, Misak has emphasized that we do not begin from an abstract definition, but rather from our experience of them (Misak 2000: 81).

being and his moral action. Therefore, pragmatist ethics in reality does not propose a new ethical theory, but rather “reconstructs” through a new prism the basic intuitions of the best ethical theories. The fundamental element on which the attention of pragmatist ethics centers is deliberation. Deliberation is not directly responsible for directing action, but only does so *indirectly*, by means of a critique of past actions, the effort to correct or reinforce certain habits and mental experiments that each actor performs in order to determine his own future conduct, and even to determine in a general manner the way in which one wishes to live one's life (or, what amounts to the same thing, the type of person one wishes to be). The task of a pragmatist ethics, therefore, is not to provide final solutions, but rather to indicate that it is only via the testing and communication of experiences that the superiority of one moral idea over another can be demonstrated. In this sense, one of the principal missions of any given version of pragmatist ethics is to indicate some general manner in which habits can be acquired which, later, will facilitate personal deliberation – both internal and external – in the broad variety of circumstances which make up the moral life.

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