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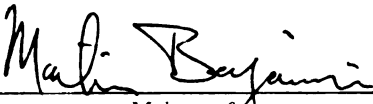
PRAGMATISM AND PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY

presented by

Scot D. Yoder

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PRAGMATISM AND PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY

By

Scot D. Yoder

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
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ABSTRACT

PRAGMATISM AND PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY

By

Scot D. Yoder

Philosophers are increasingly shifting their attention from the abstract and technical problems which have characterized professional philosophy to problems of a more practical and public nature. While this interest in practical philosophy has been welcomed by many people, it has also met with significant skepticism and criticism. Many professional philosophers still view practical philosophy as academically suspect, if not professionally inappropriate. My goals in this project are to develop a fuller understanding of practical philosophy and to offer a philosophically defensible framework for doing it.

First, I argue that though we have come to think of philosophy as a theory-centered discipline largely unconcerned with practical matters, there is ample evidence to suggest that throughout much of the history of philosophy practical concerns were considered legitimate subjects for philosophical investigation. The recent interest in practical philosophy is not the development of a new style of philosophy, but a reclamation of a style of philosophy which has been long overlooked.

Second, I clarify more precisely what practical philosophy is by contrasting it with both theory-centered philosophy and applied philosophy. In contrast to theory-centered philosophy, which emphasizes problems that are

abstract, universal, and eternal, practical philosophy addresses concrete, particular, and timely problems — i.e., problems which are highly dependent on the context in which they arise. While both practical and applied philosophy claim that philosophy can legitimately address practical concerns, practical philosophy rejects the assumption implicit in applied philosophy, that practical problems of philosophical interest are merely particular instances of more general philosophical problems. Such a view encourages a distinction between *doing* philosophy and *applying* it.

Third, to support the claim that practical philosophers are actually doing philosophy, I argue that American pragmatism provides a philosophically defensible framework for understanding practical philosophy. I note several features of pragmatism which make it especially well suited as an approach to practical philosophy. Connecting practical philosophy to this important, but often neglected, tradition within philosophy, lends support to the claim that practical philosophy has a place alongside its more theory-centered counterpart in the discipline of philosophy.

Finally, I explore wide reflective equilibrium as a model of philosophical inquiry which has the potential to bring practical and theory-centered philosophy closer together.

To Karen, Nathan, and Katelyn who have who have walked beside me the entire way.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

INTRODUCTION

In this century professional academic philosophy has come under serious attack both from within and from without the profession. Several notable philosophers have called the discipline into question, some urging a "recovery" of philosophy, others more dramatically pronouncing an end to philosophy or calling for a "post-philosophical culture."[1] Criticism from without the discipline has been sometimes harsh and in some ways more threatening. Those who teach philosophy today often find themselves on the defensive, trying to explain to students, parents, administrators, and even other faculty why philosophy is an important part of the curriculum.

A thread common to these criticisms is that academic philosophy has become technical, narrow, and inaccessible; it has become a subject of interest to philosophy professors and some of their students, but largely irrelevant to the general public. The concern centers not so much on any particular philosophical problem or solution, but on the enterprise itself — its selection of problems and its role in both academic and everyday life. The question is whether professional philosophy can incorporate the role of practical or public philosopher, a role which includes "accepting responsibility for addressing

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[1]See John Dewey, "The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy" 3-5, 23 and Richard Rorty, "Introduction: Pragmatism and Philosophy" xxxvii-xliv. A collection of essays on this topic can be found in *After Philosophy: End or Transformation*, ed. Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman, and Thomas McCarthy, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1987.

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public problems and for applying insights gained from one's technical work to public issues" (Cotkin 4). What are the prospects for such a change?

There are reasons to be both optimistic and pessimistic. On the one hand, there is considerable evidence that professional philosophy is expanding its horizons to address more practical and public issues. One needs only take note of the proliferation of new philosophy courses and journals devoted to more practical subjects such as social policy, feminism, racism, cognitive science, and practical ethics to see that change is taking place. Possibly the most notable change has taken place in moral philosophy over the past twenty-five years. The shift from a preoccupation with meta-ethics to an emphasis on practical ethics and social policy has shown that philosophers can productively address concrete and important problems of public concern. It has also demonstrated that they can work with, teach, and learn from professionals in other disciplines. On the other hand, these developments have frequently been criticized. They are often met with curiosity and skepticism from those outside of philosophy, and viewed by many professional philosophers as academically suspect, if not professionally inappropriate. These criticisms indicate that the move to practical philosophy requires not only an expansion or shift in the subject matter of philosophy, but also a reconceptualization of what it means to be a professional philosopher.

1   Overview

Ultimately, I believe practical philosophy belongs securely in the domain of professional philosophy. Fully demonstrating this, however, is a complex undertaking that lies beyond the limits of this dissertation. My aim instead is to make some preliminary but important contributions to this larger project by developing a fuller understanding of practical philosophy and to offer a philosophically defensible framework for doing it. With this in mind, I have divided the project into two parts.

Part One focuses on the idea of practical philosophy and its place in philosophical tradition. In Chapter 1 I argue that practical concerns have historically had a prominent place in the discipline of philosophy. However, beginning in the early seventeenth century, philosophers increasingly ignored and even dismissed them as the proper objects of philosophical reflection and, as a result, by the twentieth century philosophy was viewed as primarily a theoretical discipline largely indifferent to practical concerns. Making this historical point helps us to see that the recent interest in practical philosophy does not require creating a new space within the discipline, but reclaiming a space abandoned by a certain historical turn in philosophy. To better understand the status of practical philosophy I look at two historical accounts of the decline of practical philosophy in the United States. The first account, proposed by Stephen Toulmin, focuses on the rise of theory-centered philosophy. This style of philosophy, which frames problems and solutions in timeless, universal terms, is associated with Descartes and modern philosophy. The second account,

offered by Bruce Kuklick, highlights the professionalization of philosophy that coincided with the rise of the American university during the first part of this century. Though they focus on distinct historical factors, these accounts are compatible. Because theory-centered philosophy dominated at a time when the discipline became professionalized, it has become "institutionalized" as *the* professional mode of doing philosophy. Understanding the connection between these two factors draws attention to a challenge that confronts those pursuing practical philosophy — reclaiming practical philosophy will require reconceptualizing the profession of philosophy.

Despite its recent re-emergence, it is not clear that practical philosophy is consistently or well understood. In Chapter 2 I examine two contrasting conceptions of how philosophy should be brought to bear on practical concerns: applied philosophy and practical philosophy. While both claim that philosophy can be relevant to the resolution of practical problems, I argue that practical philosophy is preferable. Applied philosophy is unacceptable both because it creates barriers between philosophy that addresses practical concerns and philosophy that addresses theoretical concerns, and because it misrepresents the relationship between theory and practice. In addition to avoiding these problems, practical philosophy is preferable because its historical lineage places it more firmly within the philosophical tradition and because it is more sensitive to the importance of context — a feature that is important to any adequate philosophical approach to practical problems.

A strong commitment to context, I will argue, has three implications. First, practical philosophy will be oriented toward concrete problems that emerge in a particular social and historical setting. This orientation contrasts sharply with the preoccupation with timeless, universal problems associated with professional philosophy. Second, the solutions practical philosophers offer to such questions will tend to be provisional. The solutions will be both fallible and contingent; they will be proposed given the present, always somewhat incomplete, state of knowledge, and thus, subject to revision in light of new knowledge, technological advances, social changes, and new philosophical theories. Finally, practical philosophy will be interdisciplinary. Careful attention to the context in which problems arise makes it difficult to focus exclusively on what are typically taken to be the philosophical dimensions. For this reason, philosophers who turn their attention to practical issues will find it both useful and necessary to draw on resources from other disciplines.

The historical analysis and exploration of differing conceptions of how philosophy should be brought to bear on practical problems indicate that practical philosophy is neither completely accepted nor completely understood within professional philosophy. It also raises the following question: Is practical philosophy philosophically defensible? In Part Two of the dissertation I respond to that question by arguing that American Pragmatism provides a plausible framework and philosophical defense of practical philosophy. I begin in Chapter 3 by developing a "thin conception" of pragmatism, a conception highlighting elements common to most, if not all, versions of pragmatism.

Because pragmatism developed as a reaction to the Cartesian tradition in mainstream philosophy, I develop this thin conception of pragmatism by contrasting it with the basic presuppositions of the Cartesian tradition. Using Cartesianism as a backdrop four central features of pragmatism emerge — 1) anti-representationalism, 2) a commitment to the agent-centered point of view and the instrumental nature of thought, 3) a blurring of the distinction between fact and value, and 4) fallibilism. While these features do not constitute a tightly organized set of doctrines, they do, I believe, form a more or less coherent and fair, if not complete, characterization of American pragmatism. What I have in mind is something like Rawls's idea of an "overlapping consensus" (*Political Liberalism* 15, 39, 144-149). Various fully-developed conceptions of pragmatism differ in a number of ways, but there is an overlapping consensus among them on these four features. No fully-developed conception of pragmatism consists of only these four features, but most conceptions, if not all, include them.

In Chapter 4 I draw on the conceptions of practical philosophy and pragmatism developed in Chapters 2 and 3 to argue that pragmatism not only offers a promising framework for practical philosophy, but it also provides a philosophical defense of practical philosophy. I focus on three overlapping concerns or themes common to practical philosophy and pragmatism: the centrality of context, fallibilism, and the need for interdisciplinary approaches to problems. I also look at three relatively recent projects in which the authors self-consciously explore pragmatism as a framework for addressing issues in

their particular areas of practical philosophy (environmental philosophy, bioethics, and feminism). These examples provide insights into practical philosophy and its relationship to pragmatism inasmuch as they suggest answers to two questions. First, what is it that makes the non-pragmatic approaches to problems in these areas of practical philosophy insufficient or inadequate? Second, why do the authors believe that pragmatism offers a more promising approach?

Throughout the first four chapters I emphasize the contrast between practical and theory-centered philosophy, and explore pragmatism as a framework for understanding practical philosophy in part because of the priority it places on practice over theory. While this provides support for practical philosophy, it still leaves open the question of how we are to understand the relationship between theory and practice in philosophy. In Chapter 5 I argue that the relationship between theory and practice within philosophy should be understood as an activity similar to what is known in moral philosophy as wide reflective equilibrium. According to this view, philosophers, both theoretical and practical, are engaged in a constant attempt to maintain equilibrium between 1) their knowledge of the natural world and social arrangements, 2) their various considered moral judgments about the world, and 3) their philosophical (i.e., moral, epistemological, or metaphysical) theories. When new problematic situations upset the equilibrium, stability may be restored by modifying beliefs or practices in one or more of these areas. However, there is no predetermined procedure that dictates in which areas modifications must be made.

Furthermore, such resolution should only be considered provisional, as we may be forced to re-evaluate them in light of new empirical information, social changes, shifts in philosophical theories and commitments, or the emergence of new problematic cases.

Understanding philosophical inquiry as a process similar to wide reflective equilibrium helps to address a question implicitly raised by the contrast between practical and theory-centered philosophy — what is the relationship between practical and professional philosophy? Though I want to make room within academic philosophy for practical concerns, I do not want to eliminate theoretical concerns or portray philosophy as a discipline with two disparate and independent elements. Because wide reflective equilibrium requires that coherence be established between judgments at all levels of generality and between practical and theoretical concerns, it reveals the connections between practical and theory-centered philosophy. They are two interdependent parts of a unified, comprehensive conception of philosophical inquiry. On the one hand, solutions to practical problems must be informed by philosophical theories and commitments. On the other hand, attention to practical concerns corrects and extends theoretical philosophy, testing it, providing it with rich examples, and suggesting areas where further theoretical investigation might be fruitful. Practical philosophy without theory-centered philosophy is shallow and unsystematic. Theory-centered philosophy without practical philosophy is isolated and detached from broader academic and public constituencies.

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2   A Metaphilosophical Project

This is a project *about* practical philosophy rather than a project *in*

practical philosophy. Rather than addressing a specific problem, such as justice

in health care or animal rights, which a practical philosopher might be

concerned with, it is concerned with the nature of practical philosophy, its goals,

its methods, and its relationship to other disciplines. In other words, it is

metaphilosophy, the philosophy of philosophy.

Metaphilosophy is problematic for two reasons. First, one could quite

plausibly argue that the very concept of metaphilosophy is incoherent — there

can be no such thing. Normally, when one thinks of the other "meta"

disciplines, metaethics for instance, one has two disciplines in mind — a first-

order discipline (i.e., ethics) and a second-order discipline (i.e., metaethics) that

is a study of the first-order discipline. In most such cases, the disciplines are

more or less distinguishable. Metaethics, for instance, is concerned with the

concepts, methods of justification, and metaphysical assumptions of ethics, but

not with determining exactly what things are good or right, and certainly not

with making moral judgments regarding specific cases. Doing metaethics is not

doing ethics. The same cannot be said of metaphilosophy. When one does

metaphilosophy, one is still doing philosophy — one uses the tools and

methods of philosophy as part of the analysis. Granting this, I make no claim or

attempt to step completely outside of philosophy. Moreover, I acknowledge my

philosophical commitments up front — my philosophical approach is largely in

keeping with the tradition of American Pragmatism.   Still, it is helpful, I think,

to speak of metaphilosophy when the discipline of philosophy is itself the object of our philosophizing. It is in this sense that this project should be classified as metaphilosophy. Given my philosophical orientation, it might best be considered a work of pragmatic metaphilosophy.

Second, metaphilosophy is problematic because defining philosophy itself is problematic. If one surveys philosophy departments in North America and Europe, an enormous diversity of activity can be found. There is, to be sure, a certain connection to a historical tradition that generally ties these activities together, but one would be hard pressed to identify a noncontroversial set of necessary and sufficient conditions that would identify any and all "philosophical" activities. As Kai Nielsen has said, "'[p]hilosophy is not the name of a natural kind. In that way it differs from 'oak' and 'tide' and is more like 'gender' or 'pessimism'. There is nothing there in the social world that we could discover that philosophy must be" (*On Transforming Philosophy* 4). The same, I think, can be said for practical philosophy. There is a wide variety of work that could be broadly construed as practical philosophy. Thus, in writing about practical philosophy one must strike a careful balance — providing a thick enough description to clarify, but not so thick as to unduly restrict an evolving field.

3   Understanding the Terminology: Some Helpful Distinctions

English speaking philosophers in the twentieth century have been preoccupied, if not obsessed, with our use of language. They have stressed both

the ways in which language can confuse us and the importance of getting clear on the meanings of the words that we use. Some have even argued that once we clarify the meaning of our words, many philosophical problems will disappear. While I am not nearly that optimistic, I think it wise to provide, at least in a preliminary fashion, an account of some of the different types of philosophy discussed throughout this project. Thus, in what follows, I provide rough characterizations of practical philosophy, theory-centered philosophy, professional philosophy, and public philosophy, but make no attempt to provide strict definitions complete with necessary and sufficient conditions. These rough characterizations are meant only to be an initial guide for the reader. A much fuller account, particularly of practical and theory-centered philosophy, emerges in subsequent chapters.

Getting clear on terminology often involves drawing useful distinctions. For instance, although making a distinction between the concept of a person and the concept of a human being does not necessarily resolve all moral questions regarding abortion or treatment termination for patients in a persistent vegetative state, it does help to identify potential sources of conflict and opens up new perspectives from which to address these issues. Other times an analysis reveals that a distinction, once thought important, is no longer useful. In medical ethics, for example, the distinction between ordinary and extraordinary means, once thought to be the hinge on which treatment termination decisions turned, has proven to be both conceptually flawed and practically fruitless. Both

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drawing and dissolving distinctions can help us better understand our subject and its problems.

In this project I want to both draw and dissolve distinctions between different types of philosophy, in particular between what I call theory-centered and practical philosophy. It is this distinction that permeates the entire dissertation. One goal of this project is to better understand practical philosophy and its relationship, both historical and conceptual, to theory-centered philosophy. To do this it is important to distinguish between these two forms of philosophy. However, I also want to defend practical philosophy as a legitimate part of the discipline of philosophy — a discipline that for most of this century has been characterized as a largely theoretical discipline. To do this it will be necessary, in some sense, to weaken the distinction and emphasize the mutual dependence between theory-centered and practical philosophy. Rather than being two completely distinct and mutually exclusive forms of philosophy, I argue, they are distinguishable, but interdependent components of a unified, comprehensive conception of philosophical inquiry.

In discussing the distinction between theory-centered and practical philosophy I will largely follow the contrast as described by Stephen Toulmin in two works, "The Recovery of Practical Philosophy" (1988) and *Cosmopolis* (1990). Theory-centered philosophy, as Toulmin describes it, is a form of philosophy that construes philosophical problems as abstract, timeless and universal. These are those classic intractable problems that can be found in countless introductory philosophy textbooks — Does God exist? What is the

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good? What is knowledge, truth, or reality? Do humans have free will? The usual treatment of such problems is theory-centered, not because theory is invoked in the process of working toward a resolution, but because the problems themselves are constructed as predominantly theoretical problems, abstracted and detached from tangible connection to the tangled complexities of everyday experience. In addressing these problems, theory-centered philosophy attempts, as much as possible, to filter out or ignore the particular, contingent elements that inevitably shape experience. Such factors create "noise" that distracts or distorts our attention from the "real" philosophical — i.e., the theoretical — issues involved. Theory-centered philosophy is not so much concerned with what is good in this time and place, but with what the Good is (notice the capitalization) — what is good for all times and all places.

Consider, for example, the question of whether or not a poor 14-year-old boy from a broken home should be tried as an adult for killing an elderly woman during an attempted burglary. This is not the sort of question that a theory-centered philosopher would be inclined or well equipped to address. The contingencies of age, social-economic class, or family background that are essential features of the issue at hand — i.e., features on which decisions regarding the boy's future will likely be made — are the type of contextual details that are largely irrelevant to the theory-centered philosopher. They would be filtered out in order to focus on *the* philosophical issues involved. The theory-centered philosopher would more likely be concerned with a different set of more abstract questions such as whether or not anyone has free

will, the nature of moral autonomy and moral responsibility, and the relationship between these concepts and state sanctioned punishment.

In *Pragmatism* William James tells a story about a student's thesis that illustrates nicely this general picture of theory-centered philosophy. The student began, James writes,

> . . . by saying that he had always taken for granted that when you entered a philosophic classroom you had to open relations with a universe entirely distinct from the one you left behind you in the street. The two were supposed, he said, to have so little to do with each other, that you could not possibly occupy your mind with them at the same time. The world of concrete personal experiences to which the street belongs is multitudinous beyond imagination, tangled, muddy, painful and perplexed. The world to which your philosophy-professor introduces you is simple, clean, and noble. The contradictions of real life are absent from it. Its architecture is classic. Principles of reason trace its outlines, logical necessities cement its parts. Purity and dignity are what it most expresses. It is a kind of marble temple shining on a hill (*Pragmatism* 14).

In this passage James is not trying to draw a contrast between theory-centered and practical philosophy, but rather between the orientation and temperament of rationalist and empiricist philosophers. He cites the student as an example of the former. However, the student's understanding of philosophy provides a nice caricature of theory-centered philosophy as I have been trying to describe it. It is highly abstract, intentionally removed from everyday life and experience — purified, if you will, of messy contingencies.

What is further implied, is that the world of philosophy (i.e., theory-centered philosophy) and the world of the street (i.e., everyday life) are almost entirely separate, held together by only the thinnest of threads — one can move

back and forth between the two, but one must leave one in order to enter the other. The world of theory-centered philosophy is a realm of detached contemplation, the world of the street is a realm of engaged activity. The two worlds simply do not share the same problems. The problems of theory-centered philosophy are highly general and abstracted from particular problems of everyday life. Nor is there any suggestion that solutions achieved in the classroom would have any direct implications for the street.

In contrast, practical philosophy, one might say, is concerned with the street — it is explicitly concerned with problems that are concrete, particular, and dependent on various contingencies. Rather than asking "What is the good?" or "What is knowledge?" a practical philosopher might be more inclined to ask "Is it morally acceptable, as a matter of public policy, to allow alcoholics to compete equally with non-alcoholics for the limited supply of transplantable livers?" or "How do we know that allopathic medicine is superior to homeopathic medicine?" In such questions, the context is an integral part of the problem, not an irrelevant consideration that can be set aside or filtered out. It makes a difference, for instance, that there is a shortage of transplantable organs such that some people will die for lack of a transplanted liver. Evidence regarding the life expectancy of both alcoholic and non-alcoholic transplant recipients — evidence that might change with improving surgical procedures or more effective long term treatment for alcoholism — might also be relevant.

As Louis Katzner has said, practical or applied philosophy[2] "insists upon addressing these issues in the contexts in which they arise, rather than constantly abstracting from real situations to ideal cases. In other words, rather than treating the facts of a situation as variables that can be altered at will . . . applied philosophy insists upon beginning with the facts and sticking to them" (33). The problems of practical philosophy are the more everyday problems that are often used awkwardly in introductory philosophy texts as examples to illustrate "real" (i.e., the theoretical) philosophical problems. It is almost as if a sort of "bait and switch" strategy is employed.[3] A practical problem serves as the bait that engages the student. However, as soon as the student is hooked, the author switches to what he or she regards as the "real" problem, an abstract question of theory-centered philosophy.

Furthermore, the solutions sought to practical problems are not nice tidy theories, but reliable guides to action. The question of whether or not to supply alcoholics with liver transplants is asked, not because it is an interesting theoretical question (although it might be one), but because physicians and policymakers are confronted with a different decision between alternative courses of action. This is not to say that theories of justice or conceptions of freedom might not be relevant and useful; they may well be. However, it is the need to act, to make a decision, that generates the problem in the first place.

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[2]In Chapter Two I distinguish between practical and applied philosophy. I use Katzner's term here because his point applies equally well to practical philosophy.

[3]This characterization was offered by Martin Benjamin.

Any response, however elegant at the theoretical level, that does not at least

suggest a particular course of action relevant to the context in which the

problem was raised, would not be considered a solution at all. Likewise, an

answer to the question of whether allopathic medicine is superior to

homeopathic medicine might be used by a government agency to allocate

research dollars, by an insurance company to determine how to reimburse health

care providers, or by individuals to make decisions about what sort of health

care to seek. Finally, deciding how to deal with a 14-year-old accused of

murder could have significant implications not only for that individual, but for

broader policies governing how to treat juveniles in our criminal justice system.

In contrast to theory-centered philosophy, practical philosophy considers such

questions as legitimate philosophical questions — as no less philosophical due

to their dependence on context and connection to action.

In addition to theory-centered and practical philosophy, I will also refer

throughout the project to professional philosophy and public philosophy. For

this reason, I need to say a bit about each of these and how they relate to the

distinction between theory-centered and practical philosophy.

Ever since Plato established the Academy, philosophy has been associated

with institutions of learning.[4] While the relationship has at times been close and

at other times more distant, philosophers have been more or less consistently

represented in academia. However, not all philosophers have been

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[4]For an interesting discussion of the relationship between philosophers and
institutions of higher learning, see D. W. Hamlyn's *Being a Philosopher.*

academicians. While philosophy was taught in universities throughout the medieval and modern periods, many prominent and influential philosophers held no academic appointments. To cite a few examples from the modern period alone, Descartes held no academic appointment, Hume was a librarian, Spinoza a lense grinder, Locke was a personal physician and political advisor, John Stuart Mill an official of the East India Company and a legislator. These examples make it clear that much important philosophical work was done outside of the academic world. This is no longer the case. Philosophy is now almost exclusively an academic discipline governed by professional philosophers. Philosophers influential in the discipline today generally make their living teaching and writing about philosophy; they are associated with universities and other institutions of learning and gain their professional status from these associations. Commenting on the twentieth century in his history of philosophy as a practice, D. W. Hamlyn writes, "when considering the practice of philosophy, differences between philosophical doctrines and theoretical approaches pale in significance by comparison with the almost universal fact that in this century philosophy has become an academic and professionally managed subject" (127).

The professionalization of philosophy is a relatively recent phenomenon — a product of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. That is not to say that there were not philosophers who made their living as philosophers prior to that time. However, it is in the late nineteenth century that the characteristics of a profession began to emerge in philosophy — philosophical journals,

professional organizations and societies, and doctoral programs designed to train philosophers to be future teachers, researchers, and writers. Many of these developments were not unique to philosophy, but were connected to the much broader professionalization of academic disciplines associated with the developing and expanding university system. In any event it is fair to say that to be a professional philosopher in the United States today is to be associated with a university or other institution of higher learning. Thus, academic and professional philosophy, at least in America, are for all practical purposes synonymous.

How do these more sociological points relate to the distinction between theory-centered and practical philosophy? By the middle of the twentieth century the style of philosophy practiced by professional philosophers was almost exclusively theory-centered philosophy. The norm for professional philosophers — a norm enforced through the system of professional rewards and advancement (e.g., professional recognition, publication, academic appointment, tenure, etc.) — was theory-centered philosophy. The association was so strong that the distinction between practical and theoretical philosophy may not have even made much sense to a philosopher in the 1950s. Academic philosophy's self-image was that of a theoretical, and rather technical, discipline. Practical concerns lay outside of the discipline. This perception and self-image was so strong that when the famous English philosopher Bertrand Russell wrote on subjects of moral, social, or political concern (and he often did) he made clear that he did not do so as a philosopher. Thus, by the middle

of the twentieth century theory-centered philosophy, academic philosophy, and professional philosophy were closely related, if not equated. Theory-centered philosophy dominated academic philosophy which, in turn, formed the basis for professional philosophy. For this reason, practical philosophy, as it is described above, could just as easily have been contrasted with professional or academic philosophy as with theory-centered philosophy.

The philosophical scene, at least in the United States and Great Britain, has changed significantly in the past twenty-five years. Professional (i.e., academic) philosophers more frequently turn their attention to problems of a practical nature. Maybe the most dramatic example can be found in the burgeoning field of biomedical ethics, but philosophers have begun to look at a range of social and moral issues including war and nonviolence, sexism, racism, capital punishment, and animal rights. Numerous journals devoted to practical philosophy, or to particular issues within practical philosophy have emerged, and courses on such subjects are now frequently taught in colleges and universities. This suggests that theory-centered philosophy's dominance of professional philosophy is starting to wane.

The changes, however, have not taken place without resistance. There are still a significant number of philosophers who consider practical philosophy to be a second-rate, less rigorous form of philosophy, or to be outside the boundaries of professional philosophy altogether. For many, the adjective "theory-centered" adds nothing to the noun "philosophy" — theory-centered

philosophy just is philosophy. "Practical" philosophy is to be contrasted not with "theory-centered" philosophy, but with "pure" philosophy.

The association of theory-centered and professional philosophy gives rise to a number of metaphilosophical questions regarding practical philosophy. What is practical philosophy? Can we meaningfully talk about practical *philosophy*, or do practical problems — those that arise in particular contexts and that are motivated by the need to act — lie outside the discipline of philosophy? What is the relationship of practical philosophy to theory-centered philosophy? Can theoretical and practical concerns be integrated within philosophy or must they remain separate? What is the relationship of practical philosophy to professional philosophy? Can a practical philosopher be a professional philosopher? How do we need to re-envision the profession of philosophy if practical philosophy is considered a legitimate part of the discipline of philosophy? These are the sorts of questions that I want to address in this project.

For the sake of clarity, one further distinction should be made. Practical and public philosophy are, in my mind, closely related, but they are not synonymous. As I have tried to describe it, practical philosophy is distinguished by the types of problems it addresses — those that are particular, concrete, contingent, etc. In contrast, public philosophy, as I understand it, is characterized more by its audience than by its problems. Public philosophy — whether it is practical or theory-centered — is addressed to a general audience rather than to other philosophers, particularly other professional philosophers.

In general, it will contain less jargon specific to the profession so that it is intellectually accessible to a wider audience. For this reason public philosophy is perhaps best contrasted with professional philosophy, the audience for which is largely other professional philosophers.

There is certainly a connection between practical and public philosophy. One reason for this is that the problems that are likely to be of interest to a public audience are problems of a more practical nature. A fine example of a project that exemplifies both practical and public philosophy is James Rachels' 1975 article on active and passive euthanasia that appeared in the *New England Journal of Medicine*.[5] This widely cited and reprinted article deals with a very concrete problem, but it does so in a way that is very accessible to health care professionals and other non-philosophers. However, practical and public philosophy are not synonymous. On the one hand, public philosophy can be concerned with predominantly theoretical issues. The public lectures that William James presented to audiences in Berkeley and that later became the basis for the book, *Pragmatism*, are examples of public philosophy, but not of practical philosophy. The essays, while lucidly written to be accessible to a public audience, provide a new approach to the primarily abstract and theoretical problems that are part of traditional philosophy. On the other hand, a practical philosopher may deal with an issue of public concern in a manner that is quite technical and inaccessible to the general public. One could cite many examples,

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[5]Rachels, James. "Active and Passive Euthanasia." *New England Journal of Medicine* 292.2 (1975): 78-80.

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but the article "The Metaphysics of Brain Death" by Jeff McMahan illustrates the point quite nicely.[6] This article is technical, filled with philosophical jargon, and tightly argued. Though it clearly has relevance to many practical issues in medicine, it is probably not the type of article that a non-philosopher would find particularly accessible.

I began this project with the intent of exploring public philosophy. However, it gradually became clear to me that my real concern was with practical philosophy. I think practical philosophy is at its best when it is closer to public rather than professional philosophy, but I will not argue that point in this project.

One final comment or disclaimer. The differences between practical and theory-centered philosophy and between public and professional philosophy are not always clear cut. The characterizations offered here are rough, and perhaps overly simplified. In fact, many works in philosophy, such as John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*, defy easy classification. It is, on the one hand, technical and theoretical. Professional philosophers have written endlessly and in great detail in responding to and elaborating on the book. On the other hand, the book has practical significance and others have tried to trace the implications of Rawls' theory for a variety of concrete issues.[7] Furthermore, while the work is hardly a

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[6]Jeff McMahan, "The Metaphysics of Brain Death," *Bioethics* 9.2 (1995): 91-126.

[7]One of the best known examples is Norman Daniels's work on health care justice. See "Health-care Needs and Distributive Justice;" "Equality of What: Welfare, Resources, or Capabilities;" "Determining 'Medical Necessity' in Mental Health Practice," (with James E. Sabin); "The Prudential Life-span Account of

best-seller, it has drawn readers from many disciplines other than philosophy.

Many other examples of "fuzzy" or "boundary" cases could be provided. Such

boundary cases are not counterexamples to the distinctions provided, nor do they

suggest that there is no need to explore the relationship between theory-centered

and practical philosophy. Instead they point to the potential connections

between the two. The fact that so much interesting work takes place on the

boundaries is a good reason to focus on what happens there.

Justice Across Generations;" "Problems with Prudence;" "Merit and
Meritocracy;" "Rationing Fairly: Programmatic Considerations."

PART ONE

PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY

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CHAPTER ONE

PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

1   Ambivalence Towards Practical Philosophy

The path I have taken toward a career in philosophy has not been particularly direct. Instead I have moved back and forth, and pretty much equally divided my time between academic and non-academic work. After receiving a B.A. in 1983 I spent one year working construction, followed by two years at Bowling Green State University where I received an M. A. in philosophy. After another year of teaching philosophy, I left academia again to take a job as a systems analyst with a not-for-profit insurance and financial services company. However, it would not quite be accurate to say that I completely left philosophy. I continued to teach on an adjunct basis, and during my time with the insurance company found myself increasingly involved in what could only be characterized as some form of practical philosophy. I chaired a committee exploring ethical issues in organ transplantation, developed educational materials and presentations on advance directives and health care reform, and even became marginally involved in corporate issues regarding socially responsible investing. Still, after seven years in the "real" world I knew that I wanted to return to school for further training in philosophy.

A little more than a year after I returned to graduate school I spent a cold, bone-numbing day working alongside a dozen or so other parents who had volunteered to build a playground at our children's elementary school. Despite

the adverse weather conditions we had fun working together on a common and worthwhile project. As we thawed out over pizza at the end of the day people began to share stories about their jobs and work. There was a man who worked in a lumberyard, a computer programmer, a building contractor, a prison guard, a teacher, and people employed in a variety of other occupations that I can no longer remember. What I can clearly recall, however, is the dread I felt at the thought that someone might ask me what I do. People would look my direction and I would reply, "I'm a graduate student in philosophy." There would be an awkward moment as we all realized that the person who asked the question hadn't the slightest idea of what a philosopher did or even what further questions to ask me. After a day of comradery I would feel like a misfit. Fortunately, on that particular occasion I was able to avoid the embarrassment through a concerted effort to keep the conversation focused on other people and their occupations.

I have since learned to avoid such awkward moments by emphasizing those aspects of my work that have a more practical aspect. I know, for example, that in certain situations it is much better for me to respond initially to questions about my vocation by saying, "I am studying medical ethics." While this response does not fully explain what I do, it at least suggests that what I do is relevant to something most people are familiar with — medicine — and provides a smoother bridge to my other work. Moreover, rather than producing silent awkward moments, this response usually triggers further questions or elicits stories, some humorous and some painful, of personal experiences with

the health care system. My guess is that it is easier for most people to understand and appreciate why someone would concern themselves with ethical problems in medicine than with the stereotypical questions sometimes associated with professional philosophy — "Does God exist?" "Can we ever really know anything?" "Do we have free will?" "If a tree falls in the forest and nobody hears it, does it make any sound?"

This anecdote probably reveals more about me than about professional philosophy, but nevertheless, I suspect something about it rings true for some other philosophers as well. It can be very difficult to explain what exactly professional philosophers do, much less how they do it or why it is important. This problem is reflected in the frequently heard criticism that American academic philosophy has become intolerably technical, inaccessible, and irrelevant to the concerns of the lay person. In short, philosophy has become isolated in the ivory tower of academia. Those who teach philosophy to undergraduates today often find themselves on the defensive, trying to explain to students, parents, administrators, and even to other faculty why philosophy is an important part of the curriculum.[1] If the sentiment that philosophy is irrelevant is pervasive in the context of higher education it may be even more acute among the general public. I doubt my experience on that cold November day is unique. Many of us involved in philosophy have found mentioning our

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[1]Such defenses were required frequently enough that in 1980 the American Philosophical Association deemed it necessary to draft a statement articulating and defending the role of philosophy in higher education. See "The Role of Philosophy Programs in Higher Education."

calling to be a sure-fire conversation stopper outside (and sometimes even inside) academic circles.

While my strategy is usually an effective way of engaging people in conversation it also has its limitations and drawbacks. On the one hand, it works with people who are less familiar with professional philosophy, in part, I think, because it avoids making an overt connection between medical ethics and philosophy. Medical ethics is a practical discipline, philosophy is the paradigm of an impractical field. On the other hand, I suspect many professional philosophers may perceive it as a pernicious evasion or sellout — a superficial and dangerous way of gaining popular support for philosophy in a culture that already places too much emphasis on practical matters and productivity. It is superficial because it caters to public sentiment; it is dangerous because it makes the value of philosophy contingent on its practical applications. Philosophy may have value for everyday life, but only indirectly to the extent that it enriches people's intellectual lives. In fact, for many people both inside and outside professional philosophy, the phrase "practical philosophy" is something of an oxymoron. Many people today, both inside and outside of professional philosophy, seem to share the same perception of philosophy that William James's student expressed a century ago (see Introduction).

This ambivalence regarding the practical significance or value of philosophy is not surprising considering some of the significant changes in professional philosophy and the public conceptions of philosophy that have occurred over the last three decades. In 1966 the author of the *Time* essay,

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"What (If Anything) to Expect from Today's Philosophers,"[2] criticized philosophers for being removed from the affairs of the world. "[C]ontemporary philosophy" the essayist wrote, "looks inward at its own problems rather than outward at men, and philosophizes about philosophy, not about life" (24). At the time, I doubt few in professional philosophy would have challenged the observation. In the decade that followed, however, evidence began to emerge that suggested the situation was changing. In 1971 the new journal *Philosophy and Public Affairs* published articles on abortion and war and morality, and in the same year John Rawls published his landmark work, *A Theory of Justice*. Furthermore, in the late 60s and early 70s many young philosophers active in the civil rights and anti-war movements brought their experiences into their teaching. These and other changes were noted by Peter Singer in a 1974 article, "Philosophers are Back on the Job," that appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*. Singer argued that philosophers, by virtue of their training, had something to contribute to the resolution of practical moral and political problems. While his purpose was to make a case for the practical relevance of philosophy, and thus a public role for the philosopher, the article included an implicit admission that professional philosophy had been absent from the public realm. Since Singer's article, the practical role of philosophy has been fervently debated both within and without professional philosophy. Still the ambivalence remains. On the one hand, as recently as 1997 Ruth Shalit wrote a scathing article for the *New Republic* castigating philosophers (and others) who claimed

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[2]*Time* 7 January 1966: 24-25.

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to be ethics experts.[3] On the other hand, only months later, philosopher and medical ethicist Arthur Caplan was featured favorably in the popular magazine *People Weekly.*[4]

In this chapter I want to provide some historical perspective on this ambivalence regarding the practical significance of philosophy. First, I want to argue that debate about whether or not philosophy should have practical implications has a long history. The degree to which the issue is now self-consciously and overtly discussed may be somewhat unique, but the debate itself goes back at least to fifth century B.C. Greece, and resurfaces at other times in western history. It is an ongoing and dynamic debate, sometimes favoring one side and sometimes favoring the other. Second, I want to explore two historical explanations of how, by the 1960s, philosophy in the United States came to be viewed as an impractical discipline divorced from everyday life. Stephen Toulmin suggests that the unstable social and political conditions in seventeenth-century Europe made a more theory-centered style of philosophy more attractive. Bruce Kuklick, on the other hand, implicates the development of philosophy as a profession, proposing that as it became a profession philosophy narrowed its focus to exclude areas of practical relevance. I am not a historian, and I do not offer either account, or even the combination of the two, as a full explanation of how or why professional philosophy came to

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[3]Ruth Shalit, "When We Were Philosopher Kings," *The New Republic* 28 April 1997: 24-28.

[4]Peter Carlin, "Arthur Caplan," *People Weekly* 3 November 1997: 133-134.

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disregard practical philosophy. However, I think the explanations are suggestive and shed light on the current ambivalence towards practical philosophy. Finally, I want to note the recent resurgence of practical philosophy and identify issues that the historical accounts suggest must be addressed if the ambivalence is to be overcome and practical philosophy fully accepted as part of professional philosophy.

2   The Practical Relevance of the Humanities: An Ongoing Debate

In recent years the increased interest in practical philosophy has sparked debate about the relevance or application of philosophy and the humanities to contemporary issues of public and social policy. To explore this issue, in the mid 1980s the National Endowment for the Humanities helped to fund a project run by the Hastings Center. Among other things the project resulted in an anthology of commissioned papers exploring the following two questions: "Does it make sense to speak of an 'applied' humanities?" and "What ought to be the role of the humanities in issues of public and social policy?" (Callahan, et al xiii). The first three papers provide valuable historical perspective. In "Historical Conceptions of the Humanities and Their Relationship to Society," Martha Nussbaum explores conceptions of the humanities in ancient Greece; in "Storm over the Humanities," David Little looks at contrasting perspectives on humanistic study found during the Renaissance; and in "The Professionalization of the Humanities," Bruce Kuklick looks at the history of the humanities in America. The theme that emerges from these essays covering distinctly different

time periods is that questions regarding the practical significance of the humanities are not new.[5] In fact, they date back almost as far as the humanities themselves.

Nussbaum begins her analysis of the role of the humanities in ancient Greece by relating two stories about the early Greek philosopher Thales ("Historical Conceptions" 3-4). In the first story Thales, engrossed in observing the stars, fails to pay attention to where he is walking and falls into a well. In the second story Thales is chided for the uselessness of philosophy, the evidence for which is his poverty. In response, he uses his astronomical observations to predict a large olive-crop, leases all the available olive presses in the region, and makes a huge profit by leasing them out on his own terms when the unexpectedly large crop comes in. These two stories, Nussbaum argues, present contrasting views about the relationship between intellectual pursuits and practical affairs. The first portrays intellectual pursuits as irrelevant, if not an obstacle, to the effective conduct of practical affairs. In contrast, the second is intended to demonstrate the practical relevance or usefulness of intellectual pursuits. However, Nussbaum notes that they also share a very important feature. "[B]oth assume that there is a problem in the intellectual's relationship to practical affairs; he is vulnerable to the charge of being too cut off from the practical" ("Historical Conceptions" 4).

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[5]Though Nussbaum, Little, and Kuklick write about the humanities generally, rather than philosophy specifically, they clearly view philosophy as one of the core disciplines in the humanities. Thus, what they have to say is relevant to understanding the practical significance of philosophy, though it is certainly not the entire story.

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Nussbaum goes on to explore the relationship of intellectual pursuits to practical affairs in fifth-century Greece prior to Plato, in Socrates and Plato, in Aristotle, and in Epicurus. In the fifth-century Greece prior to Plato, she argues, the form of education known as *paideia* (which included physical training, poetry, music, dance and some political or historical training) was valued only instrumentally for what it contributed to the community. The aim was the production of good citizens rather than personal or private enrichment ("Historical Conceptions" 7-12). In fact, an intellectual who could not relate his intellectual pursuits instrumentally to civic goals would not only have a hard time defending his teaching, but would have been considered dangerous. "[W]hat would be foreign to this culture," Nussbaum writes, "would not be the idea of a practical function for the humanities. It would be the idea that there was any legitimate function for these studies besides their practical function" ("Historical Conceptions" 11). In Socrates and Plato, Nussbaum finds a shift. While both philosophers insisted on the instrumental value of intellectual pursuits in the production of good citizens, they also added that engaging in intellectual inquiry is a good in itself ("Historical Conceptions" 12-17). It is an intrinsic value, an element of the good life independent of its social usefulness.[6] Aristotle also argued that the value of intellectual pursuits is not solely their

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[6]In the *Republic* these two attitudes toward intellectual pursuits both work together and conflict. On the one hand, through intellectual inquiry pursued ultimately for its own sake, the philosopher gains the knowledge necessary to rule the city effectively. On the other hand, if intellectual pursuit is supremely valuable in and of itself, then why should the philosopher choose to spend time ruling the city?

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instrumental value. He distinguished between theoretical inquiries that aim at theoretical understanding alone (e.g., astronomy and geometry) and practical inquiries, such as ethics and medicine, in which the aim is to improve some aspect of practice. He did not argue that theoretical inquiries could not have practical implications or that practical inquiries could not produce knowledge, but rather that the *telos* of these types of disciplines, the reasons to pursue them, were different ("Historical Conceptions" 18-21). Finally, Epicurus did not separate theory from practice, but he severed both from civic life. Intellectual pursuits were valuable only to the extent that they removed suffering or promoted the happy life for individuals ("Historical Conceptions" 21-24).

Nussbaum, thus, finds our current ambivalence regarding the practical significance of philosophy nothing particularly new. The idea that studying the humanities can have practical value was there from the origins of the humanities themselves. The tension we find today between the instrumental and intrinsic value of the humanities has a long history, but in Ancient Greece the direction of the debate was reversed. Rather than moving from a view in which the humanities have purely intrinsic value to the view in which they might also have instrumental value, the classical period saw a shift from a predominantly instrumental view of the humanities to one that recognized the humanities as having both instrumental and intrinsic value. In contrast to the current situation, Nussbaum writes, "[f]rom the point of view of the classical tradition, the idea that is strange is the idea that education might be severed from the aspiration to live well as a human being and citizen" ("Historical Conceptions" 25).

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In "Storm over the Humanities" David Little contrasts two ways of looking at the humanities in the early modern period — the Renaissance and Reformation perspectives. The Renaissance ideal, he argues, was of an inwardly liberated person educated in the humanities, but somewhat detached from the affairs of the world. In Aristotelian terms the emphasis was on contemplation rather than practical applications. From this perspective practical endeavors, such as attempts to "organize force, power, or wealth according to religious and moral prescriptions," would not have been appropriate uses of humanistic education (33-34). In contrast, the Reformation perspective was exemplified in both the Calvinist and Puritan traditions of the idea of a "worldly monk," a person who would use his education self-consciously in an attempt to affect worldly affairs (34-36). From this perspective, far from being irrelevant to worldly affairs, humanistic training was seen as part of vocational training. However, while the Puritans embraced humanistic training as a means of training people for positions of responsibility, they were suspicious of self-indulgent contemplation. Little writes,

> Learning is legitimate so long as it is put to active and self-conscious use in guiding and controlling power and coercive force in civil life, in producing and distributing wealth in economic life, and in harnessing erotic power in the family. Calvinists did not reject humane learning as they did not reject the ascetic calling. They transformed both in endeavoring to transform the world (36).

In this Renaissance/Reformation contrast Little finds the beginnings of the present conflict and tensions between those who argue for the intrinsic or individual value of the humanities — i.e., the study of the humanities as a way

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toward enlightenment and self-improvement — and those who see the

humanities as relevant and useful in managing the affairs of the world.

However, to the extent that the contrast parallels or overlaps Nussbaum's

intrinsic/instrumental value contrast, it seems clear that the tension Little notes

does not begin in the early modern period. It is the reformulation or

reincarnation of a problem with much older origins.

As Kuklick reviews the history of learned discourse in the America from

the seventeenth to twentieth centuries he finds a "continuous tension between

the eternal and the practical, the otherworldly and the worldly" ("The

Professionalization" 41). Limiting his focus to the humanities in America, he

begins where Little leaves off by noting the emphasis that the Puritans placed on

the practical implications of humanistic study. While the humanities in America

retained this practical character through much of the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries, Kuklick argues that this feature declined during the era of

professionalization in the humanities. Beginning around 1880 the various new

disciplines "hived off" from the older established discipline of moral philosophy

which, up through the nineteenth century, had been broadly construed to include

both intellectual and practical dimensions. When the social sciences separated

from the humanities they left only those disciplines that were not "practical,"

that could not be easily applied ("The Professionalization" 48-53). According to

Kuklick,

> The social scientists took over the relevant aspects of these ideals;
> what was called the humanities took over the otherworldly. That
> is, from my perspective the learned endeavor today embraces in

two separate areas what in the nineteenth century was one. The social sciences codify the practical, the humanities the eternal dimensions of the old moral philosophy ("The Professionalization" 53).

3   The Demise of Practical Philosophy: Two Historical Accounts

3.1   Toulmin: Modern Philosophy's Turn Towards Theory

In two works, "The Recovery of Practical Philosophy" (1988) and

Cosmopolis (1990), Stephen Toulmin tries to explain why, by the middle of this

century, professional philosophy was thought to have little practical import.[7]

Central to his explanation is the contrast between practical and theory-centered

philosophy and an account of the social, economic, and political conditions that

greatly influence the style of philosophy that will predominate in a culture.

3.1.1 The Two Origins of Modernity

Toulmin begins his story of modern science and philosophy by urging us

to rethink our assumptions regarding the starting point of modernity

(*Cosmopolis* 13-22). Two myths, he argues, lie at the center of our received or

traditional understanding of the origins of modernity. The first is that the

modern period began in the early seventeenth century. The second is that the

transition from medieval to modern thinking and practice rested on the adoption

of rational methods in all serious fields of intellectual inquiry. Underlying these

two myths is a set of what Toulmin claims are questionable assumptions

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[7]I will draw from both of these sources although a version of the former is included in the latter.

regarding the economic and social conditions present in the early 1600s, the period traditionally associated with the beginning of modernity. One such assumption is that the modern era grew out of prosperity — i.e., by 1600 most European countries had reached a significant level of prosperity relative to the medieval and Renaissance periods. A second assumption is that a group of generally educated lay scholars who were more or less free to think for themselves without fear of religious oppression emerged in the early seventeenth century and played a key role in the transition to modernity. These myths and underlying assumptions combine to form the standard picture of modernity as a period beginning roughly with Galileo Galilei and René Descartes, and characterized by the replacement of religious authority and superstition with reason in intellectual pursuits.

Toulmin questions these myths and underlying assumptions in an attempt to furnish an alternative account of the origins of modernity. First, he challenges the dating of modernity. Noting that it marks a transition from the medieval to modern periods, he argues that it is reasonable to view the Renaissance, or at least the later years of the Renaissance in the sixteenth century, rather than the seventeenth century as the beginning of the modern period. During the Renaissance key features of modernity emerge — the ancient classics were recovered, reason began to replace religious authority in intellectual pursuits, and scholars turned their attention to a broad range of humanistic concerns (*Cosmopolis* 23-30). Second, he challenges the assumptions regarding economic and social conditions associated with the

traditional view of modernity. Far from being a time of prosperity, he argues, the seventeenth century was a time of great social and economic turmoil in Europe resulting at least partially from the ongoing religious wars. Nor was this a time of great religious freedom. Quite to the contrary, during the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) the bitter conflict between the Protestants and Catholics made religious tolerance a rare quality. Toulmin concedes that a transition in thinking took place between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; indeed, it is important to his thesis that the time period normally associated with the beginning of modernity represents a profound transition. However, the transition was not from the medieval to modern periods, but from an *initial stage* of modernity characterized by humanism in literature and the arts to a *second stage* of modernity characterized by rationalism in science and philosophy.

Why is the dating of modernity important to Toulmin's account of philosophy? There are two reasons, I think. First, moving the beginning of modernity to the Renaissance allows him to include a wider range of philosophical styles in our conception of modern philosophy. In particular it allows him to argue that a type of practical philosophy he claims was more characteristic of Renaissance philosophers is part of the tradition of modern philosophy. Second, it allows him to characterize the transition that took place with Galileo and Descartes, not primarily as a transition from religious authority and superstition to reason, but as a transition between two types of reason — practical reason that recognizes and even embraces complexity, concreteness,

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diversity, and moderate skepticism and theory-centered reason that emphasizes simplicity, abstractness, uniformity, and absolute certainty.

3.1.2 From Practical to Theory-Centered Philosophy

Toulmin claims that in the shift from the first phase of modernity to the second, philosophers turned their backs on practical philosophy in favor of a theory-centered style of philosophy. Renaissance philosophers (the first-stage modern philosophers, if you will), according to Toulmin, were broadly humanistic and skeptical, emphasizing both the complexity and diversity of human experience and its limits. They were interested in history and ethnography. The second phase of modernity, beginning roughly with and exemplified by, Descartes represents a rejection of these humanistic concerns and a shift from practical to theory-centered philosophy. Toulmin identifies four main contrasts that mark the shift both from sixteenth-century practical philosophy to seventeenth-century theoretical philosophy ("Recovery" 338-341; *Cosmopolis* 30-36). These contrasts help provide a characterization of practical philosophy.

First, there was a transition from an emphasis on the oral to an emphasis on the written argument. Well into the Renaissance, rhetoric, the study of the external conditions on which arguments carry conviction with a particular audience, was seen as a legitimate field of philosophy. However, since Descartes, modern philosophy has largely ignored such considerations in favor of written arguments and formal logic. Arguments are seen as "referring not to

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public utterances before particular audiences, but to written chains of statements whose validity rested on their internal relations" (*Cosmopolis* 31). Modern philosophy, according to Toulmin, ignores "argumentation," which takes place among particular people in particular circumstances, in favor of written "proofs," which can be captured in writing and judged as written. Rhetoric's attention to the context of the argument (e.g., the nature of the audience or the particular circumstances in which the argument is presented) is seen as at best non-philosophical, and at worst, circumspect, being associated with dishonest tricks used in oral debate.

Second, there was a transition from the particular to the universal, exemplified in the rejection of casuistry in ethics (*Cosmopolis* 339-340). Both medieval and Renaissance moral philosophers and theologians dealt with moral issues using case-based methods similar to those used in Anglo-American common law. In the casuist tradition sound moral judgments always had to respect the particular nuances or circumstances of the case in question.[8] This tradition, however, was subject to abuse by those who practiced it and was in turn subjected to scathing ridicule by Pascal in the 1640s. Later it was pushed aside by Henry More and the Cambridge Platonists who transformed ethics into a field of abstract theory unconcerned with concrete problems of moral practice. From the middle of the seventeenth century on philosophers were to deal with universal, timeless moral principles, not with judgments regarding particular

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[8]For more on the history and defense of casuistry see *The Abuse of Casuistry* by Albert Jonsen and Stephen Toulmin (1988).

cases. Such case analyses and particular judgments were left to the theologians. The view that moral philosophy was to be concerned with comprehensive general theories as opposed to particular moral judgments or practices became the norm for modern philosophy. In fact, the consideration of particular cases or moral judgments was seen not only as lying outside the realm of proper moral philosophy, but as a potential obstacle to it. Henry Sidgwick expresses this concern in his 1894 classic, *Methods of Ethics*.

> For in this and other points the development of the theory of ethics has been much impeded by the preponderance of practical considerations. Although Aristotle said, "the end of our study is not knowledge, but rather right conduct" it is still true that the peculiar excellence of his own system is due to the pure air of scientific curiosity in which it has been developed. And it would seem that a more complete detachment of the scientific study of right conduct from its practical application is to be desired for the sake even of the latter itself (1st Edition 11).[9]

Given this sort of attitude, it is not surprising that until recently, attention to case studies in ethics was considered unphilosophical, and casuistry, like rhetoric, was held in disrepute.

Third, and closely related to the shift from the particular to the universal, was the transition from the local to the general. Implicit in the work of Renaissance philosophers such as Montaigne, was the conviction that history and ethnography were relevant to philosophy because they revealed the diversity

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[9]To be fair, it is worth noting that Sidgwick toned down this rhetoric a bit in later additions of the book. "For here as in other points the development of the theory of ethics *would seem to be somewhat* impeded other preponderance of practical considerations; and *perhaps* a more complete detachment of the theoretical study of right conduct from its practical application is to be desired for the sake even of the latter itself" (5th Edition 12, emphasis added).

of human experience. Philosophical interest in these subjects waned, however, and was overshadowed by a search for general, abstract axioms that were universally applicable. History and ethnography were not so much rejected in themselves — they were still interesting subjects — but were seen as irrelevant to philosophy. Philosophical understanding did not result from the accumulation of particular facts or experiences, but rather from the general ideas and abstract principles that connect particulars together (*Cosmopolis* 34). This penchant for axiomatic systems is most clearly evident in the work of rationalists such as Descartes, Leibniz, and Spinoza, but traces of it can also be found in the work of empiricists such as Locke and Berkeley. What both groups share is a quest for a unifying theory of knowledge, certain foundations on which all knowledge claims could be built.

Finally, according to Toulmin, there was a transition from the timely to the timeless (*Cosmopolis* 340-341). Renaissance scholars were interested in concrete issues of legal and medical practice in which considerations of time were relevant. Such issues, he argues, are timely, that is, they refer to specific moments of time because the rationality of decisions in these areas is dependent on the time in which the decisions are put into effect. As an example Toulmin cites the naval navigator's decision to shift course 10 degrees to the starboard. The rationality of such a decision, though it may depend on precise calculations, is contingent on the time at which the decision is put into effect. Shifting course 10 degrees starboard may be a rational decision at one time, but not at another. For Renaissance philosophers, the discipline of law, in which time-

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dependent decisions are made "as the occasion requires," was considered the model of a rational enterprise. In contrast, after Descartes, philosophers turned away from issues in which time was a relevant consideration, to search for timeless, permanent principles that could explain the transient and changeable world of appearance. Whereas the Renaissance philosophers considered the prospects of a universal natural philosophy problematic or unlikely, the aim of their successors, according to Toulmin, "was to bring to light permanent structures underlying all the changeable phenomena of Nature" (*Cosmopolis* 34). The model for a rational enterprise became science, not law.

These four points of contrast — between the oral and the written, particular and universal, local and general, timely and timeless — mark the transition to theory-centered philosophy.

> [W]hen seen in context, they [the 17th-century theory-centered philosophers] have several things in common: specifically, they choose to ignore the whole of *practical* philosophy — that is, the issues arising out of the clinical practice of medicine, the procedures and practices of law, the rhetorical force of personal argumentation, and the moral methods of the casuists. . . .
> Rational judgments of *practical* adequacy are timely and not timeless, concrete not abstract, particular not universal, local not general. They concern people who have roots in the practical and pastoral arts, and the seventeenth-century "new philosophers" were theory-centered, not practical-minded. They were not interested in procedures for handling limited classes of cases or specific types of problems; they concentrated instead on abstract, timeless methods of deriving general solutions to universal problems (*Cosmopolis* 341).

Toulmin attributes this shift in focus to the desire to find certainty amidst the religious, political, and economic turmoil of seventeenth-century Europe. However, because the Renaissance is overlooked as the origin of modernity, it is

this theory-centered approach to philosophy that we have come to identify with modern philosophy, and in fact, that many have come to associate with philosophy itself.

3.1.3 Philosophy After the Transition

While Toulmin focuses his analysis on the transition from practical to theoretical philosophy during the first part of the seventeenth century, he does not end the story there. The movement from one style of philosophy to the other was not a single linear affair, but rather one arc of a pendulum swinging back and forth between practical and theory-centered philosophy throughout the last 2500 years. The shift towards certainty and exactitude, universality and decontextualization continued in eighteenth-century philosophy and science, as well as in political and social theory. However, the new physics of Einstein and Planck as well as the psychology of Freud provide evidence suggesting this quest for certainty had begun to unravel by the end of the nineteenth century. A short-lived shift back towards humanism and the acceptance of ambiguity around the turn of the century was derailed by political events in Europe, particularly the First World War. Toulmin describes the period between the two world wars as a period of crisis analogous to the period surrounding the Thirty Years War, pointing out that there was a similar movement in the sciences and humanities towards certainty in both periods. In philosophy the desire for certainty at the time was most evident in the logical positivism of the Vienna Circle. Philosophers in the movement took the natural sciences, and particularly

physics, as the model or paradigm that philosophy, properly pursued, ought to emulate. Toulmin claims that in both cases — the crisis surrounding the Thirty Years War and the political and social instability between the First World War and the Second World War — social crisis pushed intellectuals away from a toleration of ambiguity and towards the goal of decontextualized, universal certainty. The result was an isolated, theory-centered profession, largely unconcerned with the practical affairs of public life.

3.2   Kuklick: The Demise of Practical Philosophy

While he would certainly agree with Toulmin's conclusion that by the middle of this century professional philosophy had become a highly abstract and theoretical enterprise, unconcerned with practical affairs and largely irrelevant to public life, historian Bruce Kuklick recites a somewhat different story to explain this state of affairs. The difference may be attributable to several interrelated factors. One is that Kuklick concentrates exclusively on philosophy in America, whereas Toulmin focuses primarily on philosophy as it developed in Europe. In fact, reading Toulmin one might assume that there was no philosophy in America worth mentioning until the 1880s. Another reason is that Kuklick is a historian looking at philosophy as an academic discipline, whereas Toulmin is a philosopher looking at the history of philosophical ideas and styles. For this reason Toulmin's account, although it pays close attention to the social, political, and economic conditions in sixteenth- and seventeenth- century Europe, stresses the history of ideas. In contrast, Kuklick's explanation

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emphasizes a sociological or institutional factor almost completely absent from Toulmin's account, the professionalization of philosophy in the twentieth century.[10]

Although this will be a rather brief summary pulling together material from several of Kuklick's works,[11] three points should clearly emerge. First, despite charges of irrelevancy brought against professional philosophy during this century, practical philosophy has been, at times, an important part of the American philosophical tradition. Second, the emergence of professional philosophy as we now know it occurred only in the twentieth century and was inextricably related to the widespread professionalization of academic scholarship associated with the rise of the American university. Third, there is a connection between the rise of professional philosophy and the demise of practical philosophy in America.

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[10]Kuklick is not alone in noting the importance of professionalization. In his survey of the history of philosophy viewed as a practice D. W. Hamlyn also identifies professionalization as one of the most significant features of twentieth-century philosophy (127-137). See also two works by Daniel Wilson "Professionalization and Organized Discussion in the American Philosophical Association, 1900-1922" and *Science, Community, and the Transformation of American Philosophy, 1860-1930.*

[11]Kuklick develops his account of the history of philosophy of America in several works, *The Rise of American Philosophy* (1977), "The Changing Character of Philosophizing in America" (1978), "Studying the History of American Philosophy" (1982), and "The Professionalization of the Humanities" (1985).

3.2.1 The First 250 Years

According to Kuklick, the period from the middle of the seventeenth century to the beginning of the First World War[12] — the first 250 years of philosophy in America — was characterized by two broad themes ("The Changing Character" 4-7). The first had to do with the relationship of philosophy, science, and religion. The role of the philosopher during this period was to show how knowledge of the world, of humans, and of God were related and mutually supportive — how they could be integrated into a unified whole. Philosophy during this period was largely defined by its relation to religion, particularly by its attempts to reconcile or integrate science and religion. During the last seventy-five years of this period a new challenge, the task of redefining both science and religion in light of Darwin's work, confronted philosophers. The second theme, had to do with the public role of the philosopher. According to Kuklick, during this early period "thinkers believed that their enterprise had consequences for mundane affairs; the philosopher was also a public man" ("The Changing Character" 4). In addition to questions of science and religion, philosophers also addressed economic, educational, and political issues.

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[12]Kuklick divides the history of philosophy in America into three unequal periods — the period from middle of the seventeenth century to the beginning of the First World War, the period between the First and Second World Wars, and the period following the Second World War ("The Changing Character" 4-13). Richard Rorty draws roughly the same divisions and draws quite similar conclusions ("Professionalized Philosophy" 60-71).

The first signs of professionalization appeared during the last decades of this period as philosophers struggled to retain a place within the growing and changing university system. Professionalization throughout academia included specialization in the form of growth of various disciplines within the university (and within philosophy), the definition of disciplinary boundaries, the training and placing of teachers through doctoral programs, and the codification of ranking and tenure systems, as well as the proliferation of academic journals. Philosophy was no exception. The first academic journal of philosophy, the *Philosophical Review*, was started in 1892 by philosophers at the Sage School of Philosophy at Cornell University (Wilson, "Professionalization" 53). Not too many years later the first professional organizations were formed — the Western Philosophical Association in 1900, followed by the American Philosophical Association in 1901 (Wilson, "Professionalization" 54). While these steps towards professionalization followed the trend towards professionalization in other academic disciplines, in philosophy they were arguably defensive. Rather than using professionalization to establish a new discipline and gain support for it within the university, philosophers used professionalization to protect an eroding position. As the university system expanded in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries several areas of study — e.g., economics, political science, sociology, and history — once considered part of moral philosophy, broke away to form distinct disciplines. Thus, philosophers organized, at least in part, to define and maintain the boundaries of their shrinking discipline. The boundaries that evolved tended to

define philosophy as a theory-centered discipline. The more "practical" disciplines associated with the social sciences splintered off, leaving to philosophy and the humanities those subjects that were not easily applied (Kuklick, "The Professionalization" 52-53).

3.2.2 Between the Two World Wars

The years between the two world wars constitute a transitional period in several senses. First, this period saw the completion of the professionalization process — the emergence of the first generation of purely professional philosophers, the solidification of their place within the growing university system, and the maturation of their professional organizations. Though the "amateur" or non-academic philosopher[13] played a significant role in American philosophy up through the last quarter of the nineteenth century, professional philosophers — i.e., those who held positions in the university — now completely dominated the field.

This professionalization was accompanied by a second sort of transition. Between the two world wars the conviction that professional philosophy should be scientific as opposed to speculative grew in importance. To be a professional

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[13]Exactly who should be classified as an amateur philosopher is probably subject to debate, but the list would include both religious leaders and members of the intellectual elite such as Cotton Mather, Benjamin Franklin, Jonathan Edwards, and Ralph Waldo Emerson who wrote broadly on the relationship between science and religion, and society. See Kuklick's "The Changing Character of Philosophizing in America" and *The Rise of American Philosophy*, particularly Chapter Three, "Amateur Philosophizing," for more on who addressed philosophical issues or was involved in informal philosophical clubs or discussion groups.

in the university was to employ "scientific" methods and rigor with the goal of attaining a body of knowledge. Daniel Wilson writes of the connection between the professionalization of philosophy and its self-conception as a science, "the methods and values of scientific inquiry increasingly set the standards in the expanding universities. Philosophers felt they would somehow have to meet that challenge and the new standards to retain their place in American academics. How could they become more professional, more specialized, and in some sense, more scientific?" ("Professionalization" 57). While the conception of science was ambiguous — i.e., there was no consensus on what it meant for philosophy to be scientific — it was, nevertheless, clear that the term "scientific" carried powerful normative connotations. Science had made great strides; scientific method had produced indisputable benefits in physics, medicine, and other fields. Science was associated with progress. It was good thing for philosophy to be considered a science.[14]

While the notion of "scientific" was somewhat vague, it was not completely devoid of meaning. Noting the contrast between "scientific" and other forms of philosophy provides some clarification. As already mentioned, "scientific" philosophy was contrasted with "speculative" philosophy. A contrast was also drawn between philosophy as science and philosophy as

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[14]See Kuklick, "The Changing Character of Philosophizing in America" and Wilson, "Professionalization and Organized Discussion in the American Philosophical Association, 1900-1922" and *Science, Community, and the Transformation of American Philosophy, 1860-1930*, for discussion of the developing institutional structures of professionalization and the conceptions of science and philosophy during this period.

edification.[15] Roughly put, philosophy as edification seeks to improve the lives

of persons in a personal, if not moral or spiritual sense — to inspire and guide

as much as to inform. This goal of philosophy was still quite evident in Anglo-

Saxon philosophy at the turn of the century. In reflecting on his career as a

philosopher Gilbert Ryle refers to it as a "missionary calling":

> There survived, if somewhat meekly, into my young days the idea
> that philosophy had the prime justification for its existence in its
> being a sort of missionary calling. Behind and above the
> pedagogic duties for which he was salaried by his college or
> university, the academic philosopher, no less than the lay
> philosopher, had the paramount duty to Do Good, by homily and
> example, to the Man in the Street (387).

In contrast, philosophy as science seeks to inform, to develop a body of

knowledge in an impersonal, precise, and morally neutral manner.

The contrast between these two genres is not always crystal clear, nor are

the goals necessarily mutually exclusive. A philosopher who seeks to edify may

also consider herself to be adding to a body of philosophical knowledge, and

one who pursues philosophical knowledge in a detached scientific manner might

also hope that the pursuit of such knowledge will have edifying results.

Nevertheless, it is clear that there was a perceived tension between the two goals

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[15]The contrast is not unique or exclusive to the period between the two world
wars. The same or similar contrasts can be found in works by other authors
during the 20th century. The contrast between philosophy as edification and
philosophy as science comes from Arthur Lovejoy ("On Some Conditions" 133-
135), Gilbert Ryle contrasts the missionary and scientific goals of the
philosopher (386-387), Douglas Walton compares philosophy as a kind of
knowledge with philosophy as a kind of "reasoned dialogue that is worthwhile
even though it typically does not result in (hard) knowledge (124), and Allison
Jaggar distinguishes between professional philosophy that is critical and popular
philosophy that is invariably normative (110).

and the styles of philosophy they encouraged. This tension was self-consciously discussed among professional American philosophers early in the twentieth century. Should philosophy strive to become a specialized empirical science or to provide personal and moral guidance? This was an important enough question to be addressed by Arthur Lovejoy in his 1916 presidential address to the American Philosophical Association. "Philosophy," he wrote,

> has long been endeavoring to perform two seemingly identical, but practically incongruous functions. It has seldom been quite clear whether men chiefly sought from their philosopher the record — often quaintly enough expressed — of interesting and impressive personal reactions upon life, or depersonalized science; and as a rule both have been expected at once and from the same sources. The philosopher has been looked to for edification, but also for the example of logical austerity and caution in believing. Yet there are in human nature hardly any two dispositions more deeply and subtly at variance than the desire to edify and the desire to verify. It is to be hoped that the truth, when found, will be edifying. But the soul habitually on fire with a passionate conviction which it is eager to impart is scarcely of a temperature favorable to the cool and deliberate processes of severe inquiry. An eagerness to serve the spiritual needs of one's generation is a generous and noble thing; but it is a very different thing from an eagerness to probe an intricate logical problem to its obscurest elements and its nicest distinctions. The type of mind that performs one of these functions well is likely — though there are perhaps rare exceptions — to perform the other badly ("On Some Conditions" 133-134).

Finally, this period between the two world wars was transitional in yet a third sense. During this period those American philosophers who continued to address public issues and audiences shifted their attention from religious to moral issues. They increasingly ceased to be concerned with the integration of science and religion, and by the Second World War had, for the most part, given up the defense of religion altogether ("The Changing Character" 7-8). However,

many remained public figures, turning their efforts toward applying scientific methods to social problems, and commenting on a broad range of issues including education, economics, and politics. Richard Rorty refers to this period in American philosophy as a time of "prophecy and moral leadership" ("Professionalized Philosophy" 61). Such efforts were epitomized in the diverse and far ranging involvements of John Dewey, who is probably as well and fondly known for his work in education and other areas "outside" of philosophy as for his philosophical writings. If philosophy was defined in terms of its relation to religion during the first period, it was defined by its relation to the social sciences in the second (Kuklick "The Changing Character" 8-9; Rorty "Professionalized Philosophy" 61).

3.2.3 After the Second World War

The years following the Second World War saw the culmination of the transition towards the professionalization of philosophy and its growing self-conception as a "scientific" discipline. The professionalization of philosophy was not an isolated event, but took place within the context of the more general professionalization of scholarship in America commencing around the turn of this century. The institutional structures of professionalization established earlier bore fruit after the Second World War as philosophers who were products of this system populated the expanding university system in the United States. By this time philosophy's self-conception as a science was also firmly entrenched. Perhaps the classic statement of the attitude is to be found in Hans

Reichenbach's, *The Rise of Scientific Philosophy*.[16] According to Reichenbach philosophy had finally reached an age of maturity in which an identifiable set of philosophical problems that previously were only imprecisely defined could now be addressed by rigorous logical and scientific methods. Philosophy was now a discipline modeled after the natural sciences, a discipline with an accepted set of problems, methods, and standards. Progress, that is solving philosophical problems and enlarging the body of philosophical knowledge, was both possible and to be expected. These transitions had the effect of narrowing philosophy and turning it inward. For philosophers trained after the Second World War, Kuklick writes, "the goal was specialized research published for technically competent audiences in technical journals with popularizations frequently relegated to hacks, incompetents, and has-beens" ("The Changing Character" 9-10).

This growing conception of philosophy as a science had the paradoxical effect of simultaneously solidifying philosophy's professional stature in academia and reducing its public significance. There were two reasons for this. First, while the importance of science and the scientific ideal grew in stature during the first half of the century, the scope of science was in some sense reduced. The belief that science could provide deep insights into the "meaning and significance of human existence was abandoned" (Kuklick "The Changing Character" 10). Thus, as philosophy became more scientific it was perceived to

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[16]For a discussion of how Reichenbach's vision of philosophy fits into the history of American philosophy see Richard Rorty, "Philosophy in America Today."

be less able to address deep existential and moral issues. Second, as the scope

of philosophical inquiry was narrowed to include only those problems that could

be treated "scientifically," practical philosophy was essentially eliminated from

professional philosophy. Philosophical interest in practical or public issues

waned while interest in more technical linguistic and epistemological problems

grew. The religious and moral problems that had been the subject matter of the

public philosopher were no longer considered part of philosophy at all. The

former had been abandoned, and the latter had been shifted to the social

scientists. With the rejection of these problems the public role of the

philosopher and the conviction that philosophical work was directly relevant to

everyday life were completely abdicated. The sharp criticism found in the 1966

Time essay mentioned earlier indicates that this change did not go unnoticed by

the public. By the mid-1960s American philosophers had turned inward to

problems raised by other philosophers, and philosophized about philosophy, not

about life.

Writing during this post-Second World War period (1979) Kuklick paints

a dismal portrait of philosophy, questioning not only whether it had any public

role to play in the affairs of the world, but also whether it served any significant

function within academia ("The Changing Character" 10-12). While other

disciplines could justify their existence by the production of knowledge,

philosophy could make no such claim. Having no knowledge of the meaning

and significance of human existence (i.e., no concern with religion or morality),

and no need to duplicate the knowledge produced by other fields, philosophy

was left with only the general problem of epistemology. However, while work

in this area was supposed to encompass all other disciplines, in fact, establish a

basis for their knowledge claims, it was widely seen as irrelevant and ignored by

practitioners in those other disciplines. Thus, it became detached from both

public and academic life. Nevertheless, Kuklick commented sarcastically,

philosophers need not worry about losing their jobs.

> Philosophers no longer show that science serves the sacred; nor do
> they comment on the affairs of men, nor — as they might still
> claim — on the affairs of other disciplines. But lack of utility
> does not mean that philosophy will disappear. On the contrary,
> established within the knowledge industry, philosophy can be
> expected to last indefinitely, somewhat like the way in which a
> dead person may be kept theoretically alive because he is hooked
> into modern medical technology ("The Changing Character" 11).

4 The Re-emergence of Practical Philosophy

There is no denying that there has been a resurgence of practical

philosophy in the last twenty-five years. Philosophers now address significant

issues of practical importance in medicine, law, business, and social policy;

write on contemporary social issues such as racism, feminism, health care and

environmental policy; and work outside of academia, serving on ethics

committees in local hospitals and nursing homes as well as on national

commissions and advisory panels. In addition to a host of publications devoted

to various areas of practical philosophy,[17] new journals intended to provide a

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[17]The following list is just a sample of the journals that address practical
issues: *Bioethics*; *Bioethics Quarterly*; *Biology and Philosophy*; *Business Ethics
Quarterly*; *Business & Professional Ethics Journal*; *Cambridge Quarterly of
Healthcare Ethics*; *Criminal Justice Ethics*; *Ethics: A Journal of Social,*

forum for discussing practical or applied philosophy itself have emerged.[18]

Many graduate programs allow students to specialize in "applied" areas such as medical or business ethics, and at least one school, Bowling Green State University, now offers a Ph.D. in applied philosophy. Writing as early as 1983, Frederick Elliston documented many of these changes, citing the introduction of new courses and texts, new professional societies, new research projects, new journals, and new institutional centers. "Taken as a whole" he writes, "these developments show a remarkable extension of the scope of philosophical activity, so far-reaching as to constitute a revolution" (197).

It would appear, thus, that Kuklick's gloomy prognosis for philosophy offered in 1979 was premature. In fact, given that Singer's article, "Philosophers are Back on the Job," appeared in the *New York Times Magazine* in 1974 one might even argue that Kuklick offered a faulty diagnosis. Staying with Kuklick's medical metaphor, it would be fair to say that renewed attention to practical and public concerns has breathed new life into professional philosophy. This was certainly the message in Toulmin's 1986 essay, "How Medicine Saved the Life of Ethics." It is, in fact, hard to miss the irony of

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[17](...continued)
Political, and Legal Philosophy; *Feminist Studies*; *Hastings Center Report*; *The Journal of Clinical Ethics*; *Journal of Computing Systems*; *Journal of Information Ethics*; *Journal of Medical Ethics*; *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal*; *Minds and Machines: Journal for Artificial Intelligence, Philosophy and Cognitive Science*; *Philosophy in Context*; *Philosophy and Public Affairs*; *Public Affairs Quarterly*; and *Theoretical Medicine: An International Journal for the Philosophy and Methodology of Medical Research and Practice.*

[18]The *Journal of Applied Philosophy* and *The International Journal of Applied Philosophy* are examples of two such journals.

Kuklick's metaphor when one considers the tremendous influence that ethical dilemmas in medicine, including those surrounding the use of respirators and other life-sustaining technologies, had on the resurgence of practical philosophy.

Elliston does a fine job of documenting the specific changes, but some broader trends are worth noting. In social and political philosophy landmark works by Rawls and Nozick[19] have certainly spurred a great deal of practically oriented research by a wide range of scholars and practitioners. In ethics, the shift from a preoccupation with meta-ethics to an emphasis on normative practical ethics and social policy in the last twenty-five years has shown that philosophers can not only address concrete and important problems, but can also work with and learn from professionals in other disciplines as well. Philosophers have also been influential in the newly emerging field of cognitive science, crossing and blurring disciplinary boundaries through their interaction with psychologists, neurophysiologists, computer scientists, and linguists. Whether this expansion is a sincere reclamation of the philosopher's public or practical role, or a more calculated defensive maneuver in response to a decreased demand for their services,[20] philosophers have to some extent shed their narrow preoccupation with epistemology and philosophy of language and sought to re-enter into broader public and academic discourse.

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[19]John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (1971) and Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (1974).

[20]This suggestion is made by Allison Jaggar in "Philosophy as a Profession."

The ambivalence toward the practical significance of philosophy noted at the outset of this chapter indicates that the resurgence of practical philosophy has not been uncontroversial. It has been met with criticism both from within and without professional philosophy. Toulmin's and Kuklick's explanations help both to clarify some of the reasons for this resistance and identify some of the issues that must be addressed if practical philosophy is going to be fully accepted as a part of professional philosophy. Toulmin describes a struggle between theoretical and practical philosophy — two competing, if not incommensurable, styles of philosophy. While ongoing swings between these two styles may be inevitable to some extent, a complete inability to reconcile them is ultimately unsatisfactory. We seem forced to choose between two valuable, but incomplete styles. The contrast Toulmin draws between practical and theory-centered philosophy reminds us that any attempt to reconcile the two will require close attention to the question of how to join theory and practice in philosophy.

From Kuklick we learn about the profound influence of professionalization, particularly how it can narrow and limit the vision of an academic discipline. This suggests one reason why theory-centered philosophy has become institutionalized as the model or paradigm of professional philosophy. What is interesting about the recent resurgence of practical philosophy, and what differentiates it from the other periods when practical philosophy was more prominent, is the blend of practical and academic philosophy. Philosophers may be expanding their range of problems to once

again address issues of practical concern either to the general public or to professionals in other disciplines, but they are doing so largely from an academic context. For the most part the philosophers involved in this expansion receive their training, professional affiliation and primary fiscal support from an academic institution. This suggests three things. First, despite the historical chasm there may be potential for meaningful practical philosophy to survive, maybe even thrive, within the academic setting. Second, because academic institutions still offer the most secure source of financial support, it is within the academic context that we need to assess the future prospects for practical philosophy. Finally, to the extent that professional philosophy has been characterized and understood as a theory-centered discipline, integrating practical philosophy into it will involve a change of professional identity. The change will require us to address the following question: In what sense can a practical philosopher remain a professional philosopher?

CHAPTER TWO

WHAT IS PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY?

1   Introduction

There is little denying that professional philosophy has undergone significant change in the last third of this century. Having spent the first part of the century emphasizing increasingly narrow and technical problems in epistemology, logic, and the philosophy of language, many professional philosophers are now turning outward to address a broader range of practical or public concerns. Some philosophers have gone as far as to refer to the change as a revolution in philosophy (Elliston 197). There are now professional journals and university courses devoted to what have been called "applied" issues in philosophy — sexism, racism, medical ethics, business ethics, environmental ethics, philosophy and computers, just to name a few. Philosophers have started centers and institutes to study these issues, they work as consultants in health care, government, and business, and they take part in public policy formation. In Peter Singer's words, philosophers are "back on the job" ("Philosophers" 6-7, 17-20).

Given the magnitude of these changes it may be surprising that one would even ask the question, "What is practical philosophy?" However, the uneven reception that this so-called revolution has received both from within and without the profession suggests that there may be good reasons to examine the question. Mixed reviews, ranging from enthusiasm to skepticism, have come

from outside professional philosophy. Consider, for instance, the experience of philosophers on national, state, and local ethics committees. On the one hand, their involvement is often actively sought and appreciated. Philosophers have participated on the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects, the President's Commission for the Study of Ethical Problems in Medicine and Biomedical and Behavioral Research, and more recently the President's Task Force on Health Care Reform. On the other hand, the effectiveness and legitimacy of their involvement has been challenged by those who deny that philosophers possess the expertise required for the resolution of practical ethical problems or the formulation of public policy.[1] Maybe the most common reaction is one of doubt about what philosophers can contribute *qua philosophers*. Reflecting on his experience working with philosophers on a national bioethics commission, for example, lawyer Alan Weisbard captures the skepticism, "Philosophers certainly may engage in useful policy analysis, but only insofar as they substantially abandon some of the distinctive analytic tools and attitudes of academic philosophy, as well as claims of detached and disinterested expertise that justify a special credibility for their academic work" (782).

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[1]For general critiques of ethics expertise see Cheryl Noble, "Ethics and Experts;" Giles Scofield, "Ethics Consultation: The Least Dangerous Profession?"; and Ruth Shalit, "When We Were Philosopher Kings." For discussion of the role of philosophers on the committees previously mentioned see Laurence J. O'Connell, "Ethicists and Health Care Reform: An Indecent Proposal?"; H. Tristam Englehardt, "Health Care Reform: A Study in Moral Malfeasance;" Laurence B. McCullough, "Should We Create a Health Care System in the United States?"; and Dan W. Brock, "Truth or Consequences: The Role of Philosophers in Policy-Making."

The response from inside philosophy has been mixed as well. Some

philosophers have welcomed the involvement in practical issues as a

rejuvenation of a discipline in decline (Toulmin, "How Medicine Saved" 265-

281). Others have viewed such endeavors as academically suspect if not

professionally inappropriate. Disengaged contemplation, not practical

involvement, is the *modus operandi* of the philosopher.[2] The true philosopher

works at an abstract level, maintaining a critical distance from issues of

immediate concern. Behind the scenes some philosophers have even questioned

the motivations of their colleagues who embrace roles that place them more in

the public spotlight. As from those outside philosophy, the reaction is often one

of confusion or ambivalence. The uncertainty is expressed well by philosopher

Louis Katzner

> The term "applied philosophy" is an enigma. Some view it as a
> redundancy; others as a contradiction. Some as indicating an
> important change in the focus of philosophical investigation;
> others as what philosophers have always been concerned with.
> And some view it as a welcome revitalization of a discipline that
> has stagnated; others as the eclipse of the queen of sciences (32).

The mixed response, particularly from the professional philosophical

community, suggests that the activity of practical philosophy has outstripped our

reflective understanding of it. Katzner's comments suggest two particular

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[2]One of the most extreme expressions of this view can be found in
Etienne Gilson's *History of Philosophy and Philosophical Education* (1948).
Gilson places so much emphasis on the essential contemplative nature of
philosophy that he argues that even when the philosopher is teaching philosophy
he is not doing philosophy. "Yet, when all is said and done, to teach is to act,
whereas to philosophize is to contemplate, and though, in this one instance, the
active life of a man is but the overflowing of his contemplative life, these two
lives are not the same" (5).

sources of confusion. First, it is not clear that the nature of practical philosophy is well understood. While one can point to numerous examples of practical philosophy it is difficult to find any concise or adequate description of what exactly makes a philosopher's work practical. There seems to be informal consensus on only one point. When engaged in practical philosophy the philosopher directs her attention to practical problems, roughly understood (although never to my knowledge precisely defined) as problems that arise or have some significant import outside of academia. While this is an important point of agreement, it leaves many questions unanswered. Is practical philosophy a distinct or unique form of philosophy and, if so, what distinguishes it from other forms of philosophy? Does it have a distinct subject matter or methodology? These questions suggest a second source of confusion — the relationship between practical philosophy and professional philosophy. Whatever else it is, practical philosophy is an activity very different from the type of philosophy that predominated in American colleges and universities during the first two-thirds of this century and that is still largely the norm today in most prestigious or highly-ranked graduate programs.[3] Moreover, to the extent that professional philosophy is equated with academic philosophy, the place of practical philosophy within professional philosophy is unclear.

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[3]For evidence see "The Philosophical Gourmet, 1998-2000." This report is a ranking of analytic philosophy graduate programs in America. The rankings are produced by Brian Leiter and published online by Blackwell Publishers at http://www.blackwellpublishers.co.uk/gourmet/.

In this chapter I explore the nature of practical philosophy, reserving questions of the relationship between practical and professional philosophy for subsequent chapters. More specifically I compare two conceptions of the relationship between philosophy and practical concerns. I will refer to the first as applied philosophy. Roughly, this conception assumes that the philosopher can bring the theoretical knowledge or methods of philosophy to bear on practical problems the way an engineer supposedly applies the theories of mathematics and physics to design the suspension system for a bridge. For instance, the philosopher may attempt to answer the question of whether to terminate life-sustaining treatment for a patient in a persistent vegetative state by deducing a solution from Kantian or utilitarian ethical theory. In this conception, "applied" philosophy is typically contrasted with "pure" philosophy which supposedly determines whether Kant's ethical theory, utilitarianism, or some other theory is ultimately correct. It does this from a detached and neutral perspective independent of any particular context. Furthermore, whether expressed or not, it is implied that applied philosophy is derived from and dependent on pure philosophy.

I will refer to the second conception as practical philosophy. Though it defies a precise definition (as does philosophy itself), practical philosophy differs from applied philosophy in a rather significant respect. Rather than being contrasted to pure philosophy, practical philosophy is contrasted with theory-centered philosophy. The different contrast reflects a different relationship. Whereas applied philosophy is derived from pure philosophy,

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practical philosophy is not derived from theory-centered philosophy. In fact,

Paul Thompson characterizes practical philosophy as philosophy that "involves

problems of a philosophical nature for which there is not theory" ("Two Types"

12). The relationship between theory-centered and practical philosophy then is

not one of subject-matter to application, but of two different forms or styles of

philosophy that co-exist on more or less equal footing. Central to the difference

between the two styles is the way in which each frames philosophical problems

and solutions. Stephen Toulmin, who has probably provided the fullest recent

account of the conception of practical philosophy argues that theory-centered

philosophy frames philosophical problems and solutions in timeless, abstract and

universal terms whereas practical philosophy frames them in timely, concrete,

and particular terms ("Recovery" 338-341).

The conception of practical philosophy, I contend, is preferable to the

conception of applied philosophy in two ways. First, it more accurately reflects

what philosophers actually do when they turn their attention to practical

problems. Second, the conception of practical philosophy avoids the pejorative

connotation inherent in the label of applied philosophy, that philosophers who

address practical issues are not truly doing philosophy, but are engaged in some

less rigorous, impure, second-order activity. This comes out most clearly in

Toulmin's work. In addition to offering a rich description of what we mean

when we say that practical philosophy addresses "practical" problems, Toulmin

also provides historical justification for considering practical philosophy on par

with theory-centered philosophy. As we saw in Chapter 1 he does this by

drawing attention to the historical diversity and contingency of philosophical practice or style. Practical philosophy, he argues, is not a form of philosophy that is being newly developed, but an established form of philosophy that has a long tradition and that is now being rediscovered. In fact, if one looks at the history of philosophy one might plausibly characterize the difference between theoretical and practical philosophy as a contrast between philosophy done in the Platonic and Aristotelian traditions ("Recovery" 348-349).

There are, however, deficiencies in how the model of practical philosophy has been described that need to be remedied. Toulmin's attempt to identify the distinction between theory-centered and practical philosophy with the distinction between Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy too narrowly restricts practical philosophy to one philosophical tradition and cannot withstand scrutiny. Moreover, despite his emphasis on the historical contingency of philosophical style, Toulmin overlooks an important historical development that affects the current prospects for practical philosophy — the professionalization of the discipline. Finally, and more generally, while depicting practical and theory-centered philosophy as separate types of philosophy helps to establish the legitimacy of practical philosophy within the philosophical tradition, it also raises an important question. What is the relationship between theory and practice in philosophy? While advocates of applied philosophy, I will argue, present an untenable relationship between theory and practice, proponents of practical philosophy have for the most part, skirted the issue by separating theory and practice. A fully satisfactory account of practical philosophy,

particularly one intended to find a place for practical philosophy with in the profession, must address this question.

2 Applied Philosophy

2.1 Description

Applied philosophy can be described in a number of ways. One common method is to describe it through analogy with applied branches of other disciplines. For instance, Wilson and Cowell characterize the modern sense of applied philosophy[4] as an attempt to use philosophy to solve problems similar to the way that we might use physics or mathematics to solve problems. It is an attempt, they write, to "assimilate 'applied philosophy' to 'applied science' or 'applied mathematics': that is, the application of some kind of 'pure' philosophy or philosophical theory to particular problems." Similarly, comparing philosophical theories to formulas of geometry, Thompson characterizes applied philosophy as a branch of philosophy derived from pure theory. "The theory is worked out, and then actual data points are used to instantiate the free variables. The theory then generates 'an answer' in the form of a prediction or a measurement" ("Two Types"12). Finally, describing what she calls the engineering model of applied philosophy Fiscella compares the relationship between philosophy and its applications to the relationship between physics and

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[4]Wilson and Cowell contrast this modern sense with another sense of applying philosophy that, they claim, is more commonly found in the history of philosophy. This other sense is to use philosophy not to solve problems, but to feel differently about them — e.g., Roman Stoicism (127).

engineering. "Just as theories developed in physics are used in the field of engineering to help solve concrete problems (so the model proposes), theories developed in philosophy are also applied to specific concrete problems" (61).

Other philosophers describe the model of applied philosophy by drawing certain contrasts between applied and "pure" or "conventional" philosophy. Perhaps the most important contrast pertains to the relevance or importance of context. Young uses the term "applied ethics" to refer to "any study which is concerned with practically determining right courses of action within the *context* of extant society"(37, emphasis added). He contrasts applied ethics with "conventional" philosophy (e.g., epistemology, metaphysics, and moral theory) that maintains a critical distance from the context-bound problems. In a similar vein Katzner emphasizes both the selection of concrete problems and the necessity of addressing them within the context in which they arise.

> [A]pplied philosophy involves focusing philosophical analysis and deliberation on issues of societal and individual import. Moreover, *it insists upon addressing these issues in the contexts in which they arise*, rather than constantly abstracting from real situations to ideal cases. In other words, rather than treating the facts of a situation as variables that can be altered at will (e.g. turning the discussion of a sane nuclear policy into one about an ideal nuclear policy), applied philosophy insists upon beginning with the facts and sticking to them (33, emphasis added).

Katzner contrasts applied philosophy to pure philosophy, not conventional philosophy as Young does, but the description is quite similar. Pure philosophy is more or less twentieth-century Anglo-American analytic philosophy, a feature of which is an apparent indifference to the practical contexts in which problems arise. According to this tradition, Katzner writes, "Philosophers, qua

philosophers, are simply concerned with clarifying the fundamental concepts of experience. The task of utilizing these concepts to forge a coherent mode of living is not their concern" (32). Applied philosophy then deals with problems embedded in a particular context, while conventional or pure philosophy deals with problems intentionally abstracted or removed from particular contexts.

Of course, the contrast between pure and applied philosophy cannot be the full story. It leaves unanswered the question of what provides the continuity that makes both *pure* philosophy and *applied* philosophy, *philosophy*? Proponents of applied philosophy have suggested a variety of connections. Fiscella's identifies two possible models of the relationship between pure and applied philosophy (61). The engineering model draws on the analogy to engineering mentioned above, highlighting theoretical knowledge as the bridge that links pure and applied philosophy. Pure philosophy is concerned with developing and articulating general philosophical theories. Applied philosophy does not develop theoretical knowledge in philosophy, but nevertheless draws on it, applying it to concrete problems. The skills/techniques model focuses on techniques and skills, rather than knowledge and theories. It emphasizes the transferability of skills, particularly analytic skills such as conceptual analysis, that are developed in the study of philosophy.[5] That is not to say that the models are mutually exclusive. For instance, elements of both approaches are evident in Katzner's advocacy of applied philosophy. He suggests both that

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[5]For instance, Robert Audi has argued that conceptual analysis can be effectively used by philosophers to clarify concepts outside of philosophy. See "The Applications of Conceptual Analysis," 87-88.

philosophical knowledge (e.g., normative, epistemological, and metaphysical knowledge) may be relevant to the practical issues, and that the skills honed through philosophical inquiry (e.g., reasoning, communication and problem solving skills) can be effectively used to solve more practical problems (34). Similarly, though it does not endorse applied philosophy per se, the American Philosophical Association's 1980 statement, "The Role of Philosophy Programs in Higher Education," quite consciously balances the importance of philosophical knowledge with an emphasis on transferable skills, such as critical thinking, writing, and effective communication, that are developed in the course of philosophical study (363-370).

2.2   Objections to Applied Philosophy

Applied philosophy is subject to several criticisms. At the risk of oversimplification, the objections can be grouped into two broad categories. The first category includes concerns about the implications the model has for the relationship between pure and applied philosophy. The central objection is that the model separates pure and applied philosophy both normatively and descriptively in such a way that applied philosophy is pushed outside of the professional discipline of philosophy. Even if the objection has merit, it does not show that there is something inherently wrong with or incoherent in the conception of applied philosophy itself, but only that it may have undesirable implications, at least from the perspective of the applied philosopher. The second category includes more substantive criticisms that have less to do with

the professional status of applied philosophy and more to do with the accuracy or feasibility of the model itself. More specifically, these criticisms suggest that the engineering model rests on certain assumptions regarding the relationship between theory and practice that do not seem to hold true in the practice of applied philosophy. To illustrate this point I will look at rule- or principle-based theories in biomedical ethics. Since these theories most closely approximate the deductive structure implied in the engineering model they provide a good test of its adequacy.

2.2.1 Objection #1: The Separation of Pure and Applied Philosophy

Central to the conception of applied philosophy is the contrast between pure and applied philosophy. This is true regardless of whether applied philosophy is described through analogy to other applied disciplines or through an emphasis on context. It is also true whether one finds the connection between the two in knowledge and theories or in skills and techniques. A significant implication of this contrast is that it separates pure and applied endeavors in such a way that applied philosophy is pushed to the periphery of the discipline if not shoved completely out into a separate discipline altogether.

Consider first the techniques/skills model. If taken exclusively, it seems to reduce philosophy to a set of formal skills so that anyone who possesses and uses these skills is a philosopher. For example, Katzner proposes that a person employed outside academia to do non-philosophical work, but whose work is informed by his philosophical background and knowledge should be considered

an applied philosopher. The trouble with this proposal is that it trades on the ambiguity of the term "philosophy." We can talk of philosophy in at least three senses. We can use the term "philosophy" to refer to the academic discipline or tradition of philosophy, what we normally think of as professional philosophy. This discipline, however, has both form and content — a set of techniques and skills, but also a set of certain paradigmatic problems. This form and content account for two other senses of "philosophy" — philosophy as a set of formal skills and techniques, and philosophy as a well-defined subject matter or discrete set of problems. Thus, when Katzner refers to the person whose non-philosophical work outside of academia is informed by her philosophical background and knowledge as an applied philosopher, he does so primarily based on the persons use of certain skills and techniques; he appeals to philosophy's formal aspect. However, the work appears to be non-philosophical in the other two senses. It does not fall within the arena of the academic discipline of philosophy, nor does it pertain to the content of philosophy. In fact, the way the skills/techniques model is described — as analytic skills applied to problems outside of philosophy — suggests that the person is engaged in some activity other than philosophy.

Without making claims as to the necessary and sufficient conditions for applying the title "philosopher," it is doubtful that an appeal to formal skills and techniques is adequate. It is one thing to say that skills employed in or honed through philosophical study can be applied in areas outside the discipline of philosophy, but quite another to say that the person who uses those skills is, for

that reason, a philosopher. To be sure, many people with advanced degrees in

philosophy work in other fields, and may even rely heavily on their

philosophical training to make significant contributions.[6] However, for the most

part, the individual in this situation does not make his contributions as a

philosopher. Rather, he makes contributions as a lawyer, a computer

professional, a social worker, a librarian, or a consultant. He would not be

perceived either by his non-academic professional colleagues or by professional

philosophers, as functioning in the role of professional philosopher. Even

Katzner admits that people employed outside academia to do non-philosophical

work often undergo a radical change, defining themselves in terms of their new

occupation and dropping the designation "philosopher" from their self-concept.

> [C]onsider the plight of those individuals with advanced degrees in
> philosophy who have been unable to find academic or "think tank"
> employment. For the most part, their self-concept, as well as the
> concept of them embraced by their former colleagues, has
> undergone a radical change. They are defined by their new
> occupation, and the designation "philosopher" drops out. They do
> not think of themselves as philosophers who are doing other things
> than teaching and studying philosophy (33).

To the extent that philosophy remains part of their identities, these people are

more accurately described as philosophical professionals rather than professional

philosophers.

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[6]*The International Journal of Applied Philosophy* often includes a section
entitled, "Reports on Applying Philosophy" in which the applications of
philosophy to different professions are explored, usually by people working in
those professions. To provide just a sampling, there have been reports on
applying philosophy to psychometrics and psychology, social work, library
science, freelance writing and journalism, and being a consultant.

In contrast to the techniques/skills model, the engineering model would seem to require a closer relationship between pure and applied philosophy. However, upon further examination it is clear that it too leads to significant separation between the two. First, implicit in the engineering model is the assumption that the relationship between pure and applied philosophy is that of subject-matter to application. This implies that there is a shared or common body of knowledge that provides continuity between the disciplines. It also implies that the different ways in which they relate to that knowledge to a large extent defines the relationship between the two disciplines. The applied field is fundamentally derivative in the sense that what is applied to practical problems — i.e. theoretical knowledge — is not open to reevaluation by us in the process of solving practical problems (Kopelman 215). This suggests that when the philosopher is engaged in pure philosophy she is actively engaged in developing, critiquing, or refining philosophical concepts and theories. However, when she turns to applied philosophy and brings that knowledge to bear on some sort of practical problem, she does not create or alter it. In other words, the term "applied philosophy" connotes a second-order activity in which philosophy is used, but not *done*. The relationship is one of dependence, not of reciprocity. Applied philosophy is basically parasitic on pure philosophy, it does not really contribute to the discipline. Furthermore, because it is seen as a second-order activity, applied philosophy is seen as subservient to, and occupying a lower status than, conventional or pure philosophy. When the adjective "pure" is either implied or explicitly used to describe philosophy that

is not applied, it is unmistakably normative as well as descriptive. Applied philosophy is not only second-order, it is also second-rate.

Second, the engineering model separates pure and applied philosophy in as much as it suggests the goals of the two are different, if not inconsistent. This is perhaps most clearly evident when the applied philosopher works outside of academia. Even when the applied philosopher maintains her professional identity and utilizes her philosophical knowledge and skills, the tasks that she is asked to perform may in some way be inconsistent with those of the professional academic philosopher. For instance, in reflecting on his experience as staff philosopher for the President's Commission for the Study of Ethical Problems in Medicine, Dan Brock concludes that there is a "deep conflict between the goals and constraints of the public policy process and the aims of academic scholarly activity in general and philosophical activity in particular" (786). According to Brock, two features of scholarly academic work are problematic in the process of public policy formulation. First, scholars are committed to pursuing the truth — they are to follow the argument regardless of where it leads and regardless of the consequences. Second, scholars, particularly philosophers, are encouraged to question and critically examine all assumptions. Nothing is immune from examination and criticism. These features, Brock claims, conflict with the contrasting goals of and virtues required for public policy formation. In public policy formation the focus of policy-makers at all levels should be on the consequences for public policy and the people affected by it. "When philosophers move into the public policy domain, they must shift their primary

commitment from knowledge and truth to the policy consequences of what they do" (787). Moreover, the agenda of public policy-makers is limited by what is socially and politically feasible — not everything can be open to criticism and modification. Though policy makers can help philosophers be more realistic about their public policy analyses, there is a danger that if the philosopher's agenda is too narrowly focused he or she will be tempted to uncritically accept assumptions rather than questioning everything (790-791).[7]

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[7]Brock's experience on the President's Commission in many ways mirrors my experience working in a not-for-profit health insurance company. Given my advanced degree in philosophy, experience teaching moral philosophy, and an interest in biomedical ethics, I was asked to help develop educational materials and give public presentations on issues such as advance directives, HIV/AIDS, and health care reform. For the most part I could pursue these issues with a great deal of "academic" freedom and could develop the materials and make presentations accordingly. However, confronting the issue of health care reform during the intense political debates of the early 1990s I encountered a dilemma. My research and philosophical commitments led to the conclusion that universal access to health care was morally required, and that the best way to achieve this objective was through a single-payer health insurance system akin to the Canadian system. Moreover, since the company I worked for had publicly endorsed a general position advocating universal access, I felt management should take actions to bring its practice into line with its public position. I argued that the company should terminate its relationship with the Health Insurance Association of America that was actively (and some would say deceptively) lobbying against the single-payer system, and put its effort into advocating for a single-payer system. If successful, this strategy would have had dramatic implications for the company's nature and identity, leading it out of private health insurance, its main line of business. However, as an employee of a private (albeit, not-for-profit) insurer, I was not allowed, nor would I have felt comfortable publicly expressing these conclusions. This was not so much a case of censorship, but one of conflicting goals and obligations. As a philosopher, I felt an obligation to pursue "the truth" (whether my conclusions merit that title is another matter), as Brock would say, and to question all assumptions. However, as an employee I felt an obligation to support the goals and mission of the organization, and to help it fulfill its obligations. Among these were the duties to remain solvent (which getting out of the health insurance business would jeopardize) and to represent the interests and views of their clients (who, in general, were opposed to a single-payer

The fact that despite these reservations Brock has continued to write extensively on ethical issues in health care leads one to suspect that his comments may be limited to a conflict between academic philosophy and public policy formation rather than generalizable to all of applied philosophy. While there may be some truth to this assessment, it largely misses the point. Through his comments Brock seems to define the legitimate boundaries of applied philosophy. The philosopher should be able to address practical issues as a philosopher, but she must do so from a detached position one step removed from actual practice or implementation — a theoretical position if you will. The philosopher can use her philosophical knowledge and skills to illuminate certain elements of the practical problems, to seek the truth about them, but she cannot, as a philosopher, get involved in working out or implementing the actual solutions. The goals of philosophical inquiry are, at their core, incompatible with the goals of practical implementation.

Finally, as has already been mentioned, the contrast between pure and applied philosophy carries undeniable normative connotations — i.e., pure philosophy is seen as superior to applied philosophy. To be sure, this is in part due to the claim that the latter is a second-order activity dependent on the former. However, at the heart of this normative judgment is the concern that philosophy may be coopted or corrupted when it is applied directly to practical issues. This concern is central to Young's argument against applied ethics.

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system). The organization's mission statement did not include a mandate to follow the arguments and evidence wherever they might lead regardless of the impact on the organization or its members.

> The purity of conventional philosophy is one of its most valuable
> assets. By remaining pure, philosophy obviates the danger that it
> will be coopted. Philosophers are free to be critical of all aspects
> of a society. There is a serious danger that concentration on
> applied ethics may cause philosophers to abandon their traditional
> role of the Socratic gadfly. In applying philosophy we may only
> succeed in converting philosophers into "paid wage labourers" of
> the status quo (40).

A similar concern is raised by Bill Warren in his discussion of whether

philosophy should be a discipline removed from everyday life (15-16). Though

Warren ultimately wants to defend some form of applied philosophy he

acknowledges the concerns of those who believe that philosophy is a specialized

discipline that should remain removed from everyday life. A primary concern is

that philosophers who become involved in the issues of everyday life will end

up serving religion or some other established authority, or be reduced to mere

sermonizing.[8] Critics more concerned with social change than the integrity of

the philosophical profession warn that when philosophy is used to address

practical issues it can be manipulated, behind a veil of objectivity or neutrality,

to support the status quo (Noble 7-9; Fullinwider 222-234). Rather than being

the public gadflies, philosophers can become professional, albeit unintentional,

spin doctors.

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[8]Drawing on Hegel, Annette Baier talks about the possibility of a division
of labor among moral philosophers. Moral theorists would "keep their hands
clean of real-world applications" whereas philosophers who applied moral
theory would give advice to worldly decision-makers. The latter are "moral
valets," paid to be the conscience of a profession such as medicine, law, or
business. Baier ultimately rejects the vision of moral philosophy that the
division of labor implies ("Doing without Moral Theory" 235-236).

2.2.2 Objection #2: Theory and Practice

According to the engineering model of applied philosophy, philosophical theories and/or knowledge are to be applied to concrete problems. But just how is one to move from theory to application? Paul Thompson suggests that the movement is from general principles to specific cases. Moreover, his analogy between theories of geometry and theories of philosophy further implies that the relationship is a form of deduction. Philosophical theories, like formulae in geometry are general, can be instantiated by a number of different specific instances. Comparing ethical theories to geometrical formulae, he writes,

> [I]n similar fashion, if ethical theory holds that all human beings
> have a right to education, and the practice of segregated
> classrooms deprives some human beings of that right, then,
> according to the given theory, segregated classrooms are wrong.
> In both cases, philosophy or geometry, there are applications of
> general principles ("Two Types" 13).

Similarly, Norman Daniels describes his initial view of how a practical problem was solved in applied ethics as providing "a description of the particular situation that allows us to subsume it under a relevant moral principle ("Introduction: Reflective Equilibrium" 11).

Arthur Caplan also argues that the engineering model relies on the method of deduction to move from theory to application. He claims that it makes three assumptions ("Can Applied Ethics Be Effective" 314).[9] First, it assumes that there is a body of knowledge that it is possible to become an

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[9]Caplan discusses the engineering conception in other articles as well. See, for instance, "Ethical Engineers Need Not Apply: The State of Applied Ethics Today."

expert about and that gives a correct description of the subject under consideration. Second, it assumes that the theories (included in the body of knowledge) can be applied in a more or less mechanical way by making deductions from them. Finally, it assumes that the process can be carried out in a value-free manner.

A number of philosophers reject the engineering model precisely because they are skeptical of these assumptions. Some of the strongest criticism has come in biomedical ethics, arguably one of the most prominent practical fields of philosophy. For this reason, to illustrate the deficiency of the engineering model in general I will turn to the more specific critique of rule- or principle-based normative theories in bioethics. If it can be shown that the approach is inadequate in this important area of practical philosophy, then its use as a more general approach to practical philosophy is dubious.

In biomedical ethics applied philosophy, and more specifically the engineering model, is most nearly exemplified by what is known as rule- or principle-based moral theories. What makes a theory rule- or principle-based is not merely the presence of rules and/or principles, but their foundational and privileged status within the theory. In a rule- or principle-based moral theory principles provide the justificatory foundation for particular moral judgments. That is, rational justification of a particular moral judgment is seen as a process of showing that it can be derived from, or is consistent with more general moral principles. Thus, one might begin with a very general moral theory or principle such as the principle of utility or an obligation to respect persons as rational

agents, and conclude that there is a middle level principle that requires one to

respect autonomy. The principle of autonomy could then be used to argue that

it is wrong to force medical treatment on a competent adult. Though the

justification need not be strictly deductive, it is certainly top-down, using

general or abstract principles to justify particular or concrete conclusions.

Under this definition monistic theories, such as Englehardt's deontology[10] and

Singer's utilitarianism,[11] which ground general moral principles in even more

general unifying moral theories, would be classified as rule- or principle-based.

Pluralistic theories, such as Childress's principalism,[12] in which a number of

general principles are equally foundational, would also be included. In all three

of these theories particular moral judgments are justified by appeal to more

general moral principles.

2.2.2.1   No Objective Body of Knowledge

There are several reasons to think that rule- or principle-based moral

theories, despite their hierarchal structure, do not fulfill the expectations of the

engineering conception. One serious problem is that rule- or principle-based

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[10]See H. Tristam Englehardt, *The Foundations of Bioethics*, 2nd edition, (1996).

[11]See Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 2nd edition, (1993).

[12]See James F. Childress, "The Normative Principles of Medical Ethics," (1989). It is interesting to note that in his more recent work Childress moves away from any sort of strong foundationalism towards what appears to be more of a coherentist approach. See Tom L. Beauchamp and James F. Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 4th edition, (1994).

moral theories themselves, despite making claims to objectivity and neutrality, lack convincing justification. While particular judgments are justified by more general principles, there is nothing more general or foundational within the theories that can be used to justify the most basic principles. They cannot justify themselves without risking circularity, and no uncontroversial or uncontested external justifications have been offered. As a result several different theories are, in a sense "competitors," with none able to garner sufficient support to claim supremacy. Each of the major theories such as Kantian ethics, utilitarianism, or Aristotelian ethics captures something important, if not indispensable, to the moral life, but none seems to offer a complete picture. So while there may be a body of knowledge in which it is possible to become an expert — i.e., one could be an expert in moral theory — it is not a body of knowledge that gives a single correct answer to most genuinely contested moral questions. Thus, these theories fail to meet Caplan's first assumption regarding the engineering conception. The inability to objectively justify principles means that experts with different theoretical commitments may not agree about how to resolve difficult moral problems.

The inability to ultimately justify moral principles that are supposed to describe or at least guide the moral life also raises questions about the value-neutrality or objectivity, both of the process of making moral judgments and of those who claim to be moral experts. If, as Bernard Williams suggests, the foundational moral principles of normative theories are ultimately based on intuition (99-110), then a primary attraction of moral principles — that they

allow us to appeal to something more objective than intuitions about specific cases — turns out to be illusory. A similar point is made by Cheryl Noble who argues that in the absence of any conclusive justification the principles are only "highly abstracted descriptions of norms already embodied in those practices" (9). Unfortunately, the illusion is not innocent. Because moral principles are so highly abstract, they appear to be dissimilar to the more familiar norms embodied in social practices, and therefore, they are not subjected to the same type of rigorous analysis and criticism. If this is true, then the value-neutrality of rule- or principle-based moral theories is only apparent, and the theories also fail to meet Caplan's third assumption.

2.2.2.2   Lack of Inferential Reliability

Another reason that rule- or principle-based moral theories fall short of the engineering conception is that the rules or principles cannot be used mechanically to provide reliable inferences from general principles to particular judgments (Caplan's second assumption). The theories are subject to two types of criticism in this regard. The first is unique to pluralistic systems like Childress's, the second applies to both pluralistic and monistic systems.

In a truly pluralistic system there is no guarantee that the basic or foundational principles are consistent, and thus, no guarantee that they will not lead to conflicting judgments regarding particular cases. Indeed, there may be cases in which as Childress puts it, "there is clear evidence that an act is right and clear evidence that it is wrong" (36). For instance, suppose that our

pluralistic theory included autonomy, beneficence, and justice as basic or foundational principles. Unless we assume that autonomous adults always and reliably make decisions that are in their best interests, it is easy to envision cases in which the principles of autonomy and beneficence will come into conflict. For instance, a patient may decide not to take medication for hypertension because the side effects include a slight, but not insignificant, risk of reversible impotence. Or a patient may decide not to alter her high-fat diet or stop smoking despite the diagnosis of heart disease. In both cases though the decision is likely not in the long-term best interests of the patient, forcing him or her to comply with medical recommendations would require significant restraints on autonomy. Nor is it difficult to imagine situations in which conflicts between the principles of justice and autonomy would arise. Such situations might arise when we are faced with allocating scarce medical resources. For instance, in order to insure that this scarce resource is allocated fairly and efficiently policies governing the allocation of transplantable organs restrict the ability of potential recipients to use wealth and other personal resources to procure organs.

More importantly, neither monistic nor pluralistic theories are sufficiently specific to allow the direct inference of particular judgments from general principles. Moral principles are too general and abstract to be able to account for the richness and complexity of the moral life. Thus in many cases, specific judgments will be left underdetermined by the theory. To see why this is so consider the following (fictional, though not unrealistic) scenario:

A fifteen-year-old Jehovah's Witness is brought to the hospital emergency room for treatment of injuries incurred in an auto accident. The girl has suffered life threatening internal injuries which can only be surgically repaired. However, she has already lost a lot of blood and surgery will require a blood transfusion. Because her other injuries are minor there is every reason to believe that she will fully recover if surgery is performed. However, without the surgery she will die as a result of internal hemorrhaging. The patient's parents are adamant that she not be given the transfusion. The girl, while verbally agreeing with her parents, seems much more hesitant and unsure about the decision.

Now, consider some candidates for moral principles and whether they lead to a clear resolution of this case. Though a utilitarian would appeal to some balance of benefits over harms, the principle of utility alone does not tell us how to evaluate the benefit of continued earthly life as over against the threat of eternal damnation. Nor does it tell us how to understand or determine the true preferences of the patient. At the very least it needs to be supplemented with a more robust axiology and theory of human psychology. A deontologist such as Englehardt would appeal to the principles of autonomy and beneficence. But is the girl autonomous?[13] What would beneficence require in this case? These are questions that the principles themselves do not answer. Just given the facts of the case, the theories lack the resources required to resolve the issue. Abstract general principles "underdetermine" moral choice.[14]

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[13]This question raises both conceptual and empirical questions. See Bruce Miller's "Autonomy and the Refusal of Lifesaving Treatment."

[14]In *Splitting the Difference* Martin Benjamin argues that in a pluralistic society there will be a number of equally reasonable, but occasionally conflicting world views and ways of life. Since these world views and ways of life are important in determining moral choice, abstract moral principles alone will not resolve all moral conflicts (88-95).

To be fair, most rule- or principle-based theorists do not claim that appealing to principles alone will be sufficient to determine what to do. Resolving conflicts between principles or adding sufficient content to allow for the resolution of moral issues, they readily admit, will require appeals to additional empirical facts, concepts, and metaphysical beliefs. However, appeals to these additional considerations raise the question of objectivity or neutrality again. For instance, when the issue in question is controversial, the definition of contested concepts such as autonomy, personhood, or death becomes extremely important. However, how one defines the concepts may depend as much on one's intuitions regarding the desired outcome of the argument as on any other criteria. In this case, the reasoning is ultimately circular — an appeal to what are claimed to be morally neutral concepts is ultimately an appeal to prior moral judgments.

A good example of this process is found in Englehardt's argument for the protection of infants and the profoundly retarded. Such beings do not have the cognitive abilities required to fulfill Englehardt's criteria of personhood (*Foundations*, 1st edition 107), and thus lack the rights normally accorded to persons. However, because it goes against our ordinary moral convictions to treat such beings with disregard Englehardt introduces the concept of "persons for social consideration" (*Foundations*, 1st edition 116). The concept of persons for social consideration is not part of the "basic grammar of morality," Englehardt admits, but he argues that the practice of treating such beings as if they were persons may be justified on utilitarian or other consequentialist

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grounds. In this way the defense of such practices seems to follow easily from an application of Englehardt's principles of autonomy and beneficence. Or does it? How, one might ask, are these practices justified on consequentialist grounds? Upon examination it becomes clear that the negative psychological consequences of not treating such beings as persons are a significant part of the utilitarian calculation. However, these negative psychological consequences result, at least in part, from the offense to our ordinary moral convictions about how infants and the severely retarded should be treated. Thus, the justification of this moral practice is in some sense parasitic on our ordinary or conventional moral beliefs. We make a moral judgment based ostensibly on an appeal to objective consequences, but those consequences result, in part, from prior moral considerations.

It seems then that the rule- or principle-based ethical theories do not fit well with the assumptions or expectations of the engineering conception. They lack a body of knowledge that correctly or adequately describes the moral life, they cannot be used in a mechanistic way to deduce solutions to ethical problems, and they cannot be applied in a value-free manner.

2.2.2.3   Inaccuracy of the Engineering Model

One might argue that the inability of rule- or principle-based moral theories to conform to the engineering model says more about the current state of normative ethics than about the engineering model. That is, it merely shows that normative ethics is a soft discipline that lacks the rigor of the hard physical

sciences. There is good reason, however, to think that the problem may lie as much with the engineering model itself as with its application to normative ethics. Though it is supposedly drawn from the sciences, historian of science Edwin Layton Jr. argues that the conception does not accurately portray what happens in the sciences. Layton agrees that Caplan's characterization of the engineering conception more or less accurately describes what he refers to as the "applied science theory of technology," but argues that in practice, the relationship between basic science and technology construed as applied science does not meet this characterization (58-67). Take for instance, the relationship between physics and engineering. Because the theories provided by classical physics are idealizations that neither adequately nor accurately described the area of application under consideration, engineers (the parallel to our applied philosophers) have had to modify theories and develop their own body of knowledge useful for their purposes. Thus, physics itself fails to meet Caplan's first assumption of the engineering model — it does not provide a body of knowledge that correctly describes the subject under consideration. Moreover, Layton argues, because the theories are idealizations, they cannot be employed mechanically to produce solutions to engineering problems. In fact, the knowledge and theories produced by engineers tend to be inductive and empirical, rather than deductive and theoretical. Thus, the relationship between physics and engineering fails to conform to Caplan's second assumption as well. Finally, the assumption that the application of theory can be carried out in a value-free manner is also questionable. Design is an essential feature of

engineering, and design inevitably involves making choices that have both social (i.e., value-laden) and technical implications.

If the engineering conception of applied philosophy gets its plausibility and credibility by paralleling the relationship between the basic and applied sciences, then Layton's arguments undermine this support. If the engineering model does not accurately describe the relationship between physics and engineering, nor more generally the relationship between theory and practice in the sciences, it is hardly reasonable to expect it to accurately describe the relationship between theory and practice in philosophy.

3   Practical Philosophy

3.1   Toulmin's Account of Practical Philosophy

In the previous chapter I explored Stephen Toulmin's historical account of the decline of practical philosophy in the transition to modern philosophy. Toulmin's account, however, is not purely descriptive. He urges us to consider "'philosophy' in a practical sense, as a contribution to the reflective resolution of quandaries that face us in enterprises with high stakes" and calls on philosophers to "come out of their self-imposed isolation and reenter the collective world of practical life and shared human problems" ("Recovery" 352). While his primary objective is to defend and promote practical philosophy as an alternative to theory-centered philosophy, the conception of practical philosophy he develops is also clearly intended to support casuistry in ethics that he defends

elsewhere.[15] Inasmuch as casuistry is typically defended as an alternative to rule- or principle-based moral theories, and such theories are seen as exemplifying applied philosophy, there is reason to think that Toulmin's vision of how philosophy should be brought to bear on practical concerns may differ significantly from the understanding implicit in applied philosophy. For this reason I will consider Toulmin's account of practical philosophy as an alternative to applied philosophy.

Since I explored Toulmin's account in the previous chapter, I will not go into great detail here. Still it is worth reviewing a few of the more salient points. An important feature of Toulmin's account is his argument that the recent attention to practical or public issues in philosophy does not represent the emergence of a new form or style of philosophy. Rather, it represents the re-emergence of a style that was forgotten or rejected by philosophers in the transition to the modern period. Renaissance philosophers, according to Toulmin, were broadly humanistic and skeptical, emphasizing the complexity and diversity of human experience while at the same time (or as a result) recognizing the limits of human experience. Though theoretical inquiries were certainly an important part of philosophy, they were balanced with discussion of practical, concrete issues, such as those arising in medicine or law. Beginning roughly with Descartes, however, philosophers moved away from these humanistic concerns, shifting from practical to theory-centered philosophy. It is

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[15]See Albert Jonsen and Stephen Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry*, (1988).

this theory-centered approach to philosophy that we have come to think of as modern philosophy, and in fact that we have come to associate with philosophy itself.

Toulmin identifies four points of contrast that mark the shift both from sixteenth- to seventeenth-century philosophy and from practical to theory-centered philosophy ("Recovery" 338-341; *Cosmopolis* 30-36). These points of contrast suggest that a significant difference between practical and theory-centered philosophy lies in the type of problems that each considers legitimate objects of philosophical inquiry. "There is a shift," Toulmin writes, "from a style of philosophy that keeps equally in view issues of local, time bound practice, and universal, timeless theory, to one that accepts matters of universal, timeless theory as being entitled to an exclusive place in the agenda of "philosophy"" (*Cosmopolis* 31).

Though he focuses on the move away from practical philosophy following the Renaissance, Toulmin finds the origins and theoretical foundation of practical philosophy in the work of Aristotle. In fact, he sees the contrast and struggle between theory-centered and practical philosophy as a contrast and struggle between the philosophical orientations of Plato and Aristotle. Plato condemned the sophists who, he argued, used rhetoric to make the worse argument the better, whereas Aristotle defended rhetoric as a legitimate subject for philosophers to consider; the medieval and Renaissance casuists took seriously the Aristotelian dictum that the Good has no universal form and that sound moral judgment required attention to the circumstances of particular cases

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while the Cambridge Platonists made ethics a matter of universal abstract theory; Plato attempted to find the general principles of the just society while Aristotle held that human affairs were not open to such generalization ("Recovery" 339-341). Toulmin interprets the history of western philosophy, to a large extent, as an ongoing struggle between these two rival orientations.

> [P]hilosophy displays a series of historical pendulum swings between two broad agendas. On one agenda, the task of philosophy is to say whatever can be said in any field of inquiry that is entirely general; on the other agenda, the task is to say whatever can be said that is as general as the field permits. Being practical-minded, Aristotelians will not claim universality for their views in advance of practical experience; being more theoretically inclined, Platonists are willing to speculate more freely and to hazard broader generalizations ("Recovery" 348-349).

From Toulmin's perspective then the shift from practical philosophy to theory-centered philosophy in the seventeenth-century represents a swing from Aristotelian to Platonic philosophy and the current resurgence of practical philosophy represents a swing back again. Both styles of philosophy, though clearly contrasting, have a firm place within the history and tradition of philosophy.

The parallel Toulmin draws between practical and theory-centered philosophy on the one hand, and the Aristotelian and Platonic traditions of philosophy on the other accomplishes two things. First, for those familiar with the Aristotelian and Platonic traditions it helps to clarify the contrast that he is drawing. Second, by associating practical philosophy with Aristotelian philosophy, Toulmin gains credibility for practical philosophy. He shows that it is not something foreign to or outside of philosophy, but very much part of it.

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Practical philosophy is clearly philosophy, and it is only the widespread (and somewhat unconscious) acceptance of the "Platonic-Cartesian" theory-centered style that sets up the problematic dichotomy between pure and applied philosophy. If we think of practical or applied philosophy as outside of philosophy it is only because we have mistakenly assumed that philosophy is to be equated with a particular style of philosophy — the theory-centered style of philosophy.

While the parallel contrasts may have these benefits, it is at least an over-simplification that could do the disservice of confining practical philosophy too narrowly to the Aristotelian tradition. The oversimplification shows on both sides of the contrast. One the one hand, while Plato sought timeless universal solutions he certainly did not see philosophy as unconcerned with practical affairs. For instance, Martha Nussbaum argues that Plato, like Socrates, was intent on showing that the study of philosophy was not only of intrinsic value, but that it also contributed positively to political and social life ("Historical Conceptions" 12-17). Furthermore, Plato's disastrous attempt to implement his philosophy in Syracuse suggests that he believed philosophy could have direct practical import. On the other hand, Aristotle, while recognizing the limits of philosophical theory in certain areas such as ethics and politics, still regarded the life of contemplation as the preferred and most virtuous life (Aristotle 288-295).[16]

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[16]In a conversation on the subject Charles McCracken also noted that though the late medieval scholastics were largely Aristotelian in their approach, they were nevertheless very concerned with technical theoretical matters.

3.2   Expanding the Vision of Practical Philosophy

Toulmin's historical account of practical philosophy is illuminating in at least two ways. First, by situating it more firmly within the history of philosophy, he counters the pejorative image of applied philosophy as an inferior and dependent branch of philosophy. By tracing the lineage of practical philosophy back to well-known philosophers such as Aristotle, and by attributing the theory-centered nature of modern philosophy historically to social, economic, and political contingencies he adds credibility to practical philosophy. Second, in the conception of practical philosophy that emerges from Toulmin's analysis we find a fuller description of the type of problems that a practical philosopher might address — problems that are particular, local, and time-bound. In other words, they are imbedded in a particular context. However, while Toulmin's account is quite suggestive it provides an incomplete picture of practical philosophy. In this section I want to expand on his work, exploring some of the implications and limitations of his approach with an eye towards developing a fuller vision of practical philosophy and the challenges it faces.

Applied philosophy and practical philosophy are similar in one very important respect — both claim to address concrete problems embedded in a particular context. Because this insistence on the relevance of context is the strongest thread that ties the two models together it might legitimately be considered a hallmark trait of any philosophical inquiry into practical problems. The emphasis, however, is more pronounced in practical philosophy. Applied

philosophy, particularly the engineering model, tends to interpret practical problems merely as particular instances of more general and abstract problems — i.e., of "genuine" philosophical problems. It is precisely this attitude toward practical problems that encourages the view that when addressing such problems the philosopher is *using*, rather than *doing* philosophy. In contrast, Toulmin's discussion of the oral, the particular, the local, and the timely provides a rich description of what is meant by "practical" problems. Still, Toulmin's account does not provide a complete picture of what practical philosophy might look like. Three further implications flow from the insistence on preserving the contextual features of problems. These implications have to do with problem selection, the understanding of solutions, and the interdisciplinary nature of practical philosophy. When brought to the forefront, these implications add important detail to the incomplete picture Toulmin provides.

3.2.1 The Problems of Practical Philosophy

Because it is committed to the relevance of context, practical philosophy is oriented towards philosophical problems that emerge in particular social and historical settings. As a result, practical philosophers respond to a larger range of problems than those traditionally understood to be the subject matter of professional philosophy. For instance, practical philosophers concerned with biomedical ethics may not deal only with general questions about the concepts of autonomy, personhood, and death, or about the appropriate limitations on restraint of individual liberty. They will also address very specific questions

that arise in clinical practice or policy-making settings. How much information does *this* patient need in order to make an informed decision about his medical care? Should one try to respect the autonomy of a patient who is no longer competent, and if so, how? In light of the AIDS epidemic of the 1990s when does the need to protect others from harm (i.e., infection and probably death) outweigh the need to respect physician-patient confidentiality? How do we balance the competing claims of equality and liberty in the process of devising just policies regarding the allocation of health care resources given our current political and economic systems?

It is especially important to note that many of the issues that emerge in practical philosophy surface only or primarily as a result of scientific and technological innovations specific to a particular historical setting. Nowhere is this more clear than in bioethics. For instance, the ongoing debate about when to declare a person dead has been driven in large part by 1) the development of medical technologies, such as mechanical ventilators, that allow us to maintain cardiac and pulmonary functioning in patients who are both permanently unconscious and unable to maintain this functioning on their own, and 2) the development of organ transplant technology and the subsequent shortage of organs available for transplantation. Rapid advancements in the field of human genetics, particularly the information becoming available through the Human Genome Project, raise a host of ethical questions regarding the use of genetic testing, privacy and ownership of genetic information, and human cloning. What type of genetic testing should be done prior to conception, in vitro prior to

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implantation, or in utero, and how should it be used in making decisions about whether to conceive or continue a pregnancy? Who, besides the individual, should have access to personal genetic information? Should insurers, employers, or future spouses have access as well? It is acceptable to clone human beings, and if so, under what circumstances and for what purposes?

Such questions and issues are not part of the traditional "philosophical" curriculum,[17] and while they may be generated by philosophers with a special interest in science or medicine, they are often brought to philosophers by patients, clinicians, or policy-makers. That is not to say that the problems are always initially articulated clearly as philosophical problems, or that the practical philosopher would necessarily accept the problems presented at face value. Part of the task of the practical philosopher is to identify and articulate the philosophical issues underlying what initially appear to be non-philosophical problems, and to reformulate the problem in ways that make pivotal philosophical issues more clear. Still, the problem is important to the non-philosopher. In contrast, theory-centered philosophers will be more inclined to focus inward on the perennial issues of interest, if not exclusively then primarily, to professional philosophers. The following quotation from an autobiographical sketch by G. E. Moore illustrates this orientation taken to the extreme. Commenting on his stimulus to philosophizing, Moore writes, "I do not think that the world or the sciences would ever have suggested to me any

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[17]In Chapter 4 I discuss what it is that makes problems "philosophical."

philosophic problems. What has suggested philosophic problems to me is the things which other philosophers have said about the world or the sciences" (14).

Three points need to be emphasized here. First, if contextually-bound problems — i.e., those that are concrete, local, particular and time-sensitive — are appropriate subject matter for philosophizing, then the demarcation of philosophical from nonphilosophical problems does not coincide with the distinction between theoretical and practical problems. One does not make a practical problem philosophical merely by making it a theoretical problem, that is to say, by filtering out the contextual elements in order to form a more general or universal problem. The contextual elements are essential to our understanding of the problem, not an obstacle to it. Second, if practical problems are not simply particular instances of universal problems, then the method of deduction implied in the engineering approach to applied philosophy cannot be the sole method used to bring philosophical theory to bear on practical problems in practical philosophy. The particular, local, and timely problems that practical philosophers address are legitimate philosophical problems in their own right, not merely as imperfect instances of universal, general, and timeless problems.

Finally, problems that are context-dependent are inherently complex and dynamic. The problems are complex in that their definition will, to a large extent, depend on which of the multitude of elements constituting the actual context are chosen to describe them. In other words, to the extent that the context admits multiple descriptions, the problems that arise within it admit of

multiple interpretations. Furthermore, they are dynamic in that they are subject to continual change. In this sense, paying attention to context is more like playing an interactive video game than viewing a still photograph or painting.

A brief and somewhat humorous anecdote from an undergraduate medical ethics course may serve to make this point more clear. The class was discussing the morality of conscientious refusal on the part of health-care workers. Under what circumstances, if any, could a health care provider refuse, on the basis of conscience, to provide treatment or medication to a patient? As we developed various case scenarios one student shared that his father, who was both a physician and a Jehovah's Witness, would always ask a colleague to sign the order for blood transfusion when one of his patients needed it. His father saw this as a way of resolving the conflict between his duty to treat his patients and his religious objections to blood transfusions. Most of the class felt that this was an acceptable solution, because the physician's conscientious refusal did not ultimately affect his patients' treatment. To make the conflict between the duty to patients and his duty to conscience less avoidable, I asked the students to imagine that the same physician practiced in a remote rural area where no colleagues were accessible. What should he do then if a patient needed a blood transfusion? After a few minutes of discussion one student who had been rather quiet raised his hand and asked quite seriously, "I don't understand the problem. Couldn't he just call another physician and have the order faxed to him?" Though both I and several of the students initially laughed, the comment was not made in jest. This student honestly brought different assumptions to his

understanding of the context. He assumed (probably correctly) that in the 1990s physical distance need not be in obstacle in such cases. This story serves to illustrate two points. First, that the understanding or description of the context is important to the understanding of the problem. What one assumes about or sees as relevant in a given situation will greatly affect if and how one sees the problems it generates. Second, because the context is subject to change, problems are subject to change as well. What may be a problem in a certain context, may no longer be a problem when the context changes. What may have been an ethical problem two decades ago may no longer be an ethical problem.

3.2.2 The Provisional Nature of Solutions

One great advantage of abstraction is that it allows us to simplify a problem and to fix or stabilize its features in time. Thus, to the extent that solutions can be found, they are more or less permanent solutions. If solutions to immutable problems can be found at all, they should be eternal solutions. In contrast, contextually-bound problems are dynamic and unstable, and as result, the problems of practical philosophy admit of only provisional solutions. Solutions to them are not certain and immutable, but rather fallible and contingent. They are subject to revision in the light of both philosophical and extra-philosophical considerations such as better descriptions, new information,

or changing circumstances. They are not solutions guaranteed to work once and for all, but solutions that work under the present circumstances.[18]

Consider an example mentioned earlier — questions of privacy arising from the human genome project. As advances are made in mapping of the human genome it will be possible to detect genetic diseases (e.g., Huntington's disease) or genetic predispositions to certain diseases (e.g., breast cancer or Alzheimer's disease) prior to their clinical onset. Obviously, such information could be quite valuable to an individual. She might take precautionary measures aimed to avoid the disease, delay its progress, or compensate for the anticipated physical or mental changes. Life plans, including reproductive decisions, could be altered accordingly to avoid tragic consequences. However, the information could also be used in ways quite harmful to the individual. For instance, insurance companies or employers might use the information to deny coverage or employment in order to minimize financial risk.[19] Given the current social and economic conditions under which genetic testing might be conducted — i.e., the largely private health insurance market and the connection between employment and insurance in the United States — such concerns are quite

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[18]The idea that philosophy should not always strive for absolute certainty is not a new insight. In Book One of *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle warns his audience that "a well-schooled man is one who searches for that degree of precision in each kind of study which the nature of the subject at hand admits" (5).

[19]In claiming that the individual might be harmed, I do not mean to imply that the practice is necessarily unjust. Insurance companies, of course, claim if insurers are denied access to this information, then they would be subject to unjust adverse selection. The point is that the issue only arises within a health care system financed largely through optional private insurance.

reasonable. Under these circumstances the appropriate "solution" or response to questions of genetic privacy may include suitable restrictions on the use of genetic testing and access to genetic information. However, different conclusions might be drawn if the United States had national health insurance that guaranteed coverage regardless of one's health, employment, or financial status. New information made possible by technological advances may drive much of the debate, but assessments of what actions and policies are ethically justified in the situation — i.e., the solutions suggested by practical philosophers — will also be greatly influenced by economic, social, and political factors that are subject to change. In short, assessments, like the problems themselves, will be contingent.

3.2.3 The Interdisciplinary Nature of Practical Philosophy

A third implication is that practical philosophy will tend to be an interdisciplinary activity. In part, this results from its outward orientation. Philosophers who look outward for philosophical problems or who are receptive to problems brought from outside philosophy will necessarily operate on the boundaries of what we now conceive of as professional philosophy. They will work at the intersection between philosophy and other academic disciplines, or between philosophy and professions such as medicine or computer science that deal directly with the world outside of academia. For this reason philosophers who turn their attention to contemporary issues find it both useful and necessary to draw on resources from other disciplines. This is to be expected. There is,

after all, no reason to assume that problems that emerge from outside of philosophy, and particularly those that emerge from outside of academia, should fit into or conform to the disciplinary structures that have been established in academia. While philosophical training may play a vital role, and will, in fact, allow the philosopher to bring perspectives, methods, and resources to these problems that others cannot, it will not be entirely sufficient.[20]

Again, the field of medical ethics serves as a good illustration. Once seen as a subfield of ethics, medical ethics is now arguably an interdisciplinary field to which lawyers, sociologists, physicians, nurses, social workers, and other professionals, as well as philosophers, contribute. Nor should this be surprising. The ethical conflicts encountered in medicine often stand in the intersection between many different disciplines including, but not limited to medicine, philosophy, law, social work, psychology, and religion. The expertise required to function effectively in this field involves the ability to understand and integrate the knowledge, and, to whatever degree possible, reconcile the sometimes disparate perspectives from these various disciplines. Philosophers working in medical ethics may have special knowledge of ethical issues that results from their academic training in philosophy, but this special knowledge by itself will not constitute the whole of their expertise.

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[20]This is one reason why both the M.A. and Ph.D. programs in Applied Philosophy at Bowling Green State University require students to both take course work in a cognate area (e.g., psychology, computer science, health policy, etc.) and complete an internship.

Another field in which the interdisciplinary nature of practical philosophy is evident is the relatively new field of cognitive science. Cognitive science is an interdisciplinary field arising from the convergence of what were previously more or less disparate fields — psychology, linguistics, computer science, neuroscience, and philosophy.[21] The interdisciplinary nature of the field results in part from the recognition that the study of the "mind" or of cognitive processes more generally is not the exclusive province of any one of the fields noted. However, the field of cognitive science itself, as well as its interdisciplinary nature, also results from the development of new knowledge (e.g., how certain parts of the brain control specific cognitive functions) and new technologies (e.g., the development of computers), that, in turn, generate new problems (e.g., whether human intelligence can be replicated in a machine) specific to our particular social and historical setting. As in medical ethics, practical philosophers may draw heavily upon their philosophical training and knowledge in order to make unique contributions to this exciting new field. In particular, philosophers with strong backgrounds in epistemology, logic, and the philosophy of mind have made significant contributions.[22] However, these contributions can be most effective and focused when supplemented by at least a working or basic knowledge of the other disciplines.

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[21]For more on the interdisciplinary nature of cognitive science see Neil A. Stillings, et al, *Cognitive Science: An Introduction* (16-17).

[22]For a good initial list of philosophical contributions to cognitive science see the references and suggested readings provided at the end of the chapter on philosophical foundations of cognitive science in Stillings et al, *Cognitive Science: An Introduction* (373-377).

It is important to note that when philosophers pay careful attention to

context and participate in interdisciplinary work they will not only draw on

their philosophical background, they will also expand, alter, or enrich it. They

will be exposed to knowledge and methods from other disciplines that are

relevant to, and will affect the way that they perceive their own philosophical

work. For instance, at a fairly general level, medical ethics and other efforts to

use philosophical ethics in "applied" areas have stimulated a great deal of

theoretical work in normative ethics, generating renewed interest in virtue

ethics, narrative ethics, casuistry, and feminist ethics. This has undeniably

reinvigorated moral philosophy, bringing new people and ideas into the field and

taking it directions it otherwise would not have gone. [23] A similar, albeit it less

dramatic, case can be made in cognitive science. Philosophers are not only

contributing to cognitive science, but they are also trying to understand the

philosophical implications of newly emerging knowledge from the field. In the

preface to his book exploring the philosophical implications of cognitive

science, Alvin Goldman writes,

> In maintaining an alliance with cognitive science, philosophy
> continues its ancient quest to understand the mind. In the modern
> age, however, this pursuit requires careful attention to what is
> being learned by a new group of scientists. Plato and Aristotle
> created their own physics and cosmologies; contemporary
> metaphysicians must learn physics and cosmology from the
> physicists. Similarly, while Rene Descartes and David Hume
> created their own theories of the mind, contemporary philosophers
> must give respectful attention to the findings of scientific research
> (xii).

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[23]Toulmin has gone as far as to argue that medicine "saved the life" of
ethics. See "How Medicine Saved the Life of Ethics."

Goldman goes on to explore the implications of cognitive science for epistemology, the philosophy of science, the philosophy of mind, metaphysics, and ethics.

4   Unresolved Issues

I have tried to argue that the conception of practical philosophy is preferable to the conception of applied philosophy as a way of understanding what philosophers do when they reach outward to address issues of practical or public concern. While both models seem to express a commitment to the relevance and importance of context, practical philosophy gives a fuller and more adequate account of what such a commitment implies. It avoids the temptation, so prevalent in the applied approach, to downplay context in an attempt to reduce particular concrete problems to instances of abstract philosophical problems. Furthermore, if we accept Toulmin's historical account, the model of practical philosophy has a secure place in the history of philosophy.

While I have argued that practical philosophy is preferable to applied philosophy, a more general defense of practical philosophy is needed. This requires addressing some unresolved issues. First, what is the philosophical rationale for paying close attention to practical and contextual elements in a discipline that favors the theoretical and abstract? Second, what is the relationship between theory and practice in philosophical inquiry? I conclude

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this chapter with a sketch of these issues. They will be addressed in greater detail in subsequent chapters.

4.1   A Defense of the Practical

The account of practical philosophy given thus far has been primarily descriptive, rather than normative. I have tried to provide a picture of what practical philosophy looks like, rather than defend the claim that philosophers may address practical issues as a legitimate part of their philosophical work. In subsequent chapters, however, I will defend this claim. There are different ways to mount such a defense. Toulmin's analysis represents an historical approach. In essence, he defends practical philosophy by establishing its lineage in the history philosophy. I will take a slightly different approach by providing a more philosophical defense of practical philosophy. That is, I will argue that good reasons can be found within the tradition of philosophy itself to support the claim that practical philosophy is genuine philosophy. I take this approach because I want to convince those already familiar with or steeped in the theory-centered tradition of professional philosophy that addressing practical concerns not only has been, but still is a legitimate task for professional philosophers.

The philosophical resources to draw on are found in the tradition of American pragmatism. I will argue that American pragmatism provides a constructive framework for understanding and supporting the model of practical philosophy outlined above. First, by undermining the theoretical presuppositions of epistemology-centered analytic philosophy, pragmatism

shatters the pretense of theory-centered philosophy, making intellectual space with the discipline for practical philosophy. Second, pragmatism's understanding of the subject of philosophical inquiry as agent *in* the world rather than spectator *of* the world makes practical concerns, and thus context, indispensable elements of all philosophical inquiry. Finally, pragmatism's emphasis on fallibility of knowledge allows us to more easily view solutions to both practical and theoretical problems as provisional. As James writes in *Pragmatism*, "we have to live to-day by what truth we can get to-day, and be ready to-morrow to call it falsehood" (100). In Chapter 3 I will develop a "thin" conception of pragmatism, and in Chapter 4 I will explicitly draw connections between pragmatism and the model of practical philosophy.

4.2   Theory and Practice

A second issue that must be addressed in developing a philosophical defense of practical philosophy is the relationship between theory and practice. What is the relationship between theory-centered and practical philosophy? At one level the two seem incompatible. Theory-centered philosophy typically attempts to get beyond the contingent, diverse, and changeable elements of experience in order to focus on universal or general solutions to abstract problems. In contrast, by insisting on the relevance of context practical philosophy seems to give precedence to particular cases and concrete problems. This emphasis on context raises questions regarding the value using abstract general theories to address practical issues.

However, we must not portray practical and theory-centered philosophy as two distinct and disparate disciplines. They are interdependent. On the one hand, practical philosophy needs theory-centered philosophy. While the inadequacy of the engineering approach strongly suggests that the solutions to practical problems cannot be simply deduced from philosophical theories, practical philosophy must be informed by philosophical theories and commitments. On the other hand, theory-centered philosophy needs practical philosophy. Practical philosophy corrects and extends theoretical philosophy, testing it, providing it with rich examples, and suggesting areas where further theoretical investigation might be fruitful. Practical philosophy without theoretical philosophy is shallow and unstable. Theoretical philosophy without practical philosophy is isolated and detached from broader academic and public constituencies.

In Chapter 5 I will argue that the relationship between theory and practice in philosophy should be understood as a modified and more general version of what is known in moral philosophy as wide reflective equilibrium. The practical philosopher addresses specific problems that have disturbed the equilibrium between 1) our background knowledge about the natural world and social arrangements, 2) our considered judgments about how to act in or respond to the world, and 3) our philosophical (i.e. moral, epistemological, or ontological) theories. To restore equilibrium resolutions may require modification of one or more of these elements, though initially it may not be clear which. Such resolutions will only be provisional, as we may later be forced to re-evaluate

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them in light of new empirical information, social changes, shifts in philosophical theories and commitments, the results of our prior actions, or the emergence of new problematic cases. This process gives priority to neither theory nor practice. Our philosophical theories help shape our understanding of practical problems and provide tools for coping with them. However, our theories may be altered in the light of the very practical problems they help us to understand.[24]

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[24]This understanding of philosophy is certainly not original with me. For an articulate expression of a similar view see Kai Nielsen, "Philosophy as Critical Theory."

PART TWO

PRAGMATISM AND PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY

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CHAPTER THREE

A THIN CONCEPTION OF PRAGMATISM

In this chapter and the one that follows I will argue that philosophical pragmatism offers a helpful framework for understanding and approaching practical philosophy. To avoid certain criticisms from both pragmatists and non-pragmatists, I need to be careful not to overstate the project or its conclusions. I am not suggesting that all practical philosophers are explicit or implicit pragmatists, or that pragmatism provides a (much less *the*) systematic method or procedure for doing practical philosophy. Many philosophers involved in practical philosophy reject or ignore pragmatism and they would strongly object to any claim that pragmatism is the only underlying framework. Moreover, many pragmatists have resisted the temptation to refer to pragmatism as a "theory," "method," or "system" at all. Nevertheless, I hope to show that there is a comfortable "fit" between practical philosophy and American pragmatism, a fit that not only helps make sense of practical philosophy, but also provides a modest defense of it.

In this sense the project parallels one undertaken by Bruce Kimball in "Toward Pragmatic Liberal Education." In that essay Kimball argues that while no one may have consciously adopted pragmatism as a theory of liberal education, it nevertheless provides a coherent way of understanding developments in liberal education in the United States during the past few decades. I want to make a similar claim regarding pragmatism and practical

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philosophy — pragmatism provides a coherent way of understanding developments in practical philosophy in the United States during the past few decades. In fact, if one substitutes "practical philosophy" for "liberal education," the following passage from Kimball would express my thesis as well.

> Recent developments in liberal education, while appearing to be disparate responses to particular demographic, economic, or disciplinary changes, are actually related to one another through deep intellectual and cultural roots. Though perhaps individually prompted by such changes, these recent developments exhibit a collective pattern that is shaped by the historical and cultural context in which they occur. Hence, the proposed influence of pragmatism lies in providing a deeply-rooted rationalization, or intellectual justification, for recent changes and reforms in liberal education. To be sure, the rationalization may not conventionally be called "pragmatic" or even identified as a coherent philosophy or viewpoint. Nevertheless, I suggest that pragmatism provides an intellectual framework within which recent developments in liberal education make sense during the current era (xxii-xxiii).

My argument parallels Kimball's in one additional respect. Kimball defends his claim in a two-step process. He first identifies several themes or motifs of pragmatism, and then he connects them with important trends in liberal education. In these two chapters I adopt a similar approach. This chapter is devoted to an account of pragmatism. Rather than developing a full or "thick" conception of pragmatism as, for example, Peirce's or James' or Dewey's or Rorty's or Putnam's pragmatism, I provide a bare bones or "thin" conception. There is no agreement among self-described pragmatists as to the details of a fully worked-out or thick conception of pragmatism. Thus, I identify a thinner version that, while incomplete, captures the main features of

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pragmatism and is compatible with the more fully worked-out versions of Peirce, James, Dewey, Rorty, Putnam, West, and others. This thin conception lays the groundwork for a discussion of the affinities between pragmatism and practical philosophy in the following chapter. In that chapter I develop the "fit" between pragmatism and practical philosophy more fully.

1   Why a "Thin" Conception?

> It is not clear to me what it takes to be a pragmatist. It is not clear in what ways the philosophers who have been called pragmatists are nearer in outlook to one another than to philosophers who are not so called. I suspect that the term 'pragmatism' is one we could do without. It draws a pragmatic blank. However, we have the term, and we can make some sense of it by enumeration. Peirce, James, Schiller, Mead, and Dewey have been called pragmatists and have owned the soft impeachment ("The Pragmatists' Place in Empiricism" 23).

This pessimistic, if not somewhat disparaging, remark from W. V. O. Quine points to a challenge faced by anyone who sets out to provide a brief or succinct account of pragmatism — pragmatism is a diverse tradition with many faces. This has been true almost since pragmatism's inception[1] and is still true nearly 100 years later. One can still pick up several good books or articles on the topic and find notably different accounts. Seldom will two authors agree on a concise definition or even on a single most important trait of pragmatism. For example, Richard Rorty identifies anti-representationalism as the thread that ties the strands of pragmatist thought together ("Introduction: Pragmatism as Anti-Representationalism" 1-5), Cornel West offers, "a future-oriented

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[1]See Arthur O. Lovejoy's *The Thirteen Pragmatisms and Other Essays.*

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instrumentalism that tries to deploy thought as a weapon to enable more effective action" as the common denominator (5), and H. S. Thayer cites a belief in the connection between rational purpose and rational cognition ("Introduction" 20).[2] One could interpret this as a sign of either confusion or healthy diversity.

There are several good reasons to opt for the latter. In fact, paradoxical as it might sound, the propensity to describe pragmatism in different ways is quite consistent with pragmatism. One reason for this is that pragmatism has been adopted, and to some extent reshaped, by scholars in other disciplines such as education, literary criticism, and political science. A more important factor, however, is the tendency of pragmatists to define their views in opposition to mainstream philosophy, in particular formal doctrines and systems. This tendency has two important implications. First, pragmatists have more frequently criticized positive doctrines than put forth their own. This lack of positive doctrine make it difficult to define pragmatism in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. Second, in criticizing mainstream philosophy pragmatists have responded to prevailing trends in the discipline. To the extent that philosophical trends change, the face or expression of pragmatism changes as well. Thus, the classical pragmatists (e.g., Peirce, James, Dewey) emphasize

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[2]Interestingly, critics of pragmatism may very well point to the features that pragmatists themselves downplay or do not see as central. For instance, while Richard Rorty repeatedly denies that he is offering a theory of truth, and argues that when people try to talk of such a theory we should just change the subject, at least one of his critics identifies pragmatism's "position" on truth as one of its "most central tenets" (Prado 7).

different points than do the neo-pragmatists (e.g., Putnam, Rorty, Nielsen, West) whose work develops during or after the linguistic turn in analytic philosophy.[3]

For all these reasons pragmatism is a diverse and dynamic movement — one that defies precise definition because it is constantly evolving.

This diversity led the preeminent historian of pragmatism, H. S. Thayer, to argue that it is "primarily as a movement, rather than by any one doctrine that pragmatism is best understood" ("Introduction"11). A similar argument is made by Richard Bernstein who claims that the movement is characterized by conflicting narratives and metanarratives such that pragmatism has always been an "essentially contested concept" ("The Conflict of Narratives" 66). Rather than finding the diversity of narratives problematic, Bernstein interprets it as a sign of a vital and dynamic tradition. He further adds that it would be unpragmatic to try to define the essence of pragmatism or to establish rigidly fixed criteria that could be used to determine who is or is not a pragmatist.

Given the diversity and open texture of pragmatism, my strategy is to provide a "thin" conception of pragmatism. This thin conception is an account of what is common to most, if not all, versions of pragmatism. In this respect it

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[3]The terminology used to categorize pragmatists is somewhat problematic. The terms "classical pragmatism" and "neo-pragmatism" somehow suggest that the latter is not truly pragmatism. Though neo-pragmatism is more recent on the scene, the term "contemporary pragmatism" overlooks the fact that the movement I'm calling neo-pragmatism spanned several decades. Probably the most accurate terms would be "pre-linguistic pragmatism" and "post-linguistic pragmatism" since it is the influence of the linguistic turn in philosophy that most clearly differentiates the two styles. However, for the sake of economy, and because the term is commonly used, I will use the terms "neo-pragmatism" or "neo-pragmatist" throughout.

resembles a theory of child development that describes the developmental stages

of most children in general, but no child in particular. While many parents can

identify ways their children are "exceptional" or outside the norm, they

nevertheless find these general descriptions helpful. Moreover, just as no theory

of child development fully or adequately describes the rich and unique

development of any individual child, no pragmatist holds only a thin

conception.[4] Thinkers such as Peirce, James, Dewey, Putnam, Rorty, or West

fill out the thin conception in different ways by emphasizing different points,

utilizing different tools, and grinding different philosophical axes. The thin

conception is somewhat like the chord structure of a jazz number, around which,

and within the constraints of, different members of the band devise different

solos.

In what follow I highlight four central features or elements of

pragmatism[5] — 1) anti-representationalism, 2) a commitment to the agent-

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[4]Eva T. Brann captures the potential strength and weakness of offering a thin conception in her critique of Kimball's analysis of pragmatism. She refers to his listing of themes in pragmatism as a "flaccid collage, which no particular pragmatist might wish to acknowledge" (172). However, she admits that it also provides "a recognizable opinion scheme, a definable intellectual atmosphere" (172).

[5]The strategy of characterizing pragmatism by identifying central features or themes is used by several other authors. For instance, C. G. Prado identifies four central tenets of pragmatism: a pluralistic empiricism, a temporalistic view of reality, a contextualist conception of reality and values, and a secular democratic individualism (9). Cornel West cites "evading epistemology-centered philosophy, accenting human powers, and transforming antiquated modes of social hierarchies in light of religious and/or ethical ideals" as the major themes of pragmatism (4). Hilary Putnam identifies anti-scepticism, fallibilism, the claim that there is no fundamental dichotomy between facts and

centered point of view and the instrumental nature of thought, 3) a blurring of

the distinction between fact and value, and 4) fallibilism. While these features

do not constitute a tightly organized set of doctrines, they do, I believe, identify

the common core of most complete versions of American pragmatism. What I

have in mind is something like Rawls' idea of an "overlapping consensus."

Different, fully-developed conceptions of pragmatism differ in a number of

ways, but there is an overlapping consensus among them on these four features.

No fully-developed conception of pragmatism consists only of these four

features, but most, if not all, include them.

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[5](...continued)
values, and the primacy of practice in philosophy as theses that summarize
pragmatism ("Pragmatism and Moral Objectivity" 200). Richard Bernstein
cites anti-foundationalism, fallibilism (without scepticism), the social character
of the self and the need for a critical community of inquirers, the awareness of
radical contingency and chance in the universe, and plurality as major themes of
pragmatism ("Pragmatism, Pluralism, and the Healing of Wounds" 7-10). In
*The Condition of American Liberal Education: Pragmatism and a Changing
Tradition* Bruce Kimball lists the following six themes or points:
1. that belief and meaning, even truth itself, are fallible and
revisable;
2. that an experimental method of inquiry obtains in all
science and reflective thought;
3. that belief, meaning, and truth depend on the context and
the intersubjective judgment of the community in which
they are formed;
4. that experience is the dynamic interaction of organism and
environment, resulting in a close interrelationship between
thought and action;
5. that the purpose of resolving doubts or solving problems is
intrinsic to all thought and inquiry; and
6. that all inquiry and thought are evaluative, and judgments
about fact are no different from judgments about value (29).

Because pragmatism developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a reaction to perceived deficiencies in the prevailing or dominant conception of philosophy, I begin by describing the main elements or basic presuppositions of this conception. I then use this description as a backdrop in developing the thin conception of pragmatism. While it would not be fair to single out Descartes for all the glories or woes of contemporary philosophy, his tremendous influence as the "Father of Modern Philosophy" is undeniable. The questions that have dominated modern philosophy are arguably Cartesian. Descartes' legacy is not so much the answers he offered as the way the questions he formulated have set the agenda for nearly four centuries of philosophizing. Thus, inasmuch as pragmatism has largely developed in response to a certain conception of philosophy, and this conception of philosophy is, in its basic presuppositions, predominantly Cartesian, it makes sense to preface the thin conception of pragmatism with a thin conception of Cartesianism.[6] Still, as with my thin conception of pragmatism, I am not

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[6]Peirce was maybe the first to offer a thin conception of Cartesianism. In "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities" he identifies the following four points of contrast between Cartesianism and its predecessor, scholasticism.

1. It [Cartesianism] teaches that philosophy must begin with universal doubt; whereas scholasticism had never questioned fundamentals.
2. It teaches that the ultimate test of certainty is to be found in the individual consciousness; whereas scholasticism had rested on the testimony of sages and of the Catholic Church.
3. The multiform argumentation of the middle ages is replaced by a single thread of inference depending often upon inconspicuous premises.

(continued...)

referring to any particular philosopher, but to a more basic framework, a set of basic presuppositions, or a way philosophical problems have been posed and answers to them sought. The main elements of this thin conception of Cartesianism are 1) the spectator account of the philosophical subject, 2) representationalism, 3) radical or global skepticism, and 4) foundationalism.

2.1   The Spectator-Subject

Perhaps the most salient feature of Cartesianism is the conception of the knower or subject of philosophical inquiry as possibly a pure subject of consciousness. Descartes does not begin with this now-familiar understanding of the subject of philosophical inquiry, but arrives at it in the course of his quest for epistemological certainty. In the *Meditations on First Philosophy* Descartes embarks on this quest by systematically doubting all his beliefs that could possibly be false. Rather than examining beliefs one by one, he works with groups of beliefs categorized by their origin. Beliefs that we accept on the testimony of others are suspect because we could be, and often are, misled by others. Those originating from our own sense perceptions are also uncertain because we have often been deceived by our senses. I know, for instance, that the moon itself does not change size and shape from night to night even though

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4.   Scholasticism had its mysteries of faith, but undertook to explain all created things. But there are many facts which Cartesianism not only does not explain, but renders absolutely inexplicable, unless to say that "God makes them so"is to be regarded as an explanation ("Some Consequence of Four Incapacities" 228)

it appears to. Moreover, things appear real in our dreams, so real, in fact, that we are often not aware that we are dreaming. We cannot distinguish actual sense perceptions from those that appear to us in our dreams, and thus, we cannot be absolutely certain that at any given moment we are not dreaming. But if this is the case, then we have reason to doubt the truth of all our sense perceptions. Finally, it is even possible, he argues, that we could be wrong about beliefs, such as mathematical or geometrical propositions like "2+3=5" or "a square has four sides," that do not seem to derive from our senses at all. Though we are convinced that such propositions are true, we could be mistaken. It is conceivable that an evil demon could be systematically deceiving us into believing that such propositions are true even if they are not. After subjecting various types of beliefs to this process of systematic doubt, Descartes concludes that the only thing he cannot doubt is that he does in fact doubt, and that if he doubts, he must exist as a thinking thing. "So after considering everything very thoroughly, I finally conclude that this proposition: *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind" (17, emphasis in the original).

What Descartes takes to be his indubitable starting point then is a proposition regarding the subject of philosophical inquiry. From this foundation he hopes to establish other beliefs that are no less certain, including beliefs about the world outside his mind. However, it is important to pay attention to the assumptions underlying this conception of the knower or subject of philosophical inquiry. It is an odd sort of character, separate from both the

world that it seeks to understand, and from the experience it has of the world. It is an incorporeal consciousness, a thinking being aware of ideas that it is inclined to believe represent the world, but only of those ideas. It cannot, at the outset, be sure that it has direct awareness of the external world or even of its own physical body, much less the minds and bodies of others. It is, in Martin Benjamin's words, "a lone, disembodied spectator" (unpublished manuscript).[7]

Because the knower is disembodied, it is, to a large extent, passive in relation to the reality it seeks to know. For a subject who stands outside of the world knowing is a matter of getting the right picture, in Dewey's words "getting the view of a spectator" ("The Need for a Recovery" 23). What knowing does not involve for a Cartesian mind is interaction with, experimentation on, or manipulation of the reality to be known. The spectator subject is like a student of child development observing a classroom of children from behind a 2-way mirror. She can watch the children, and if a sound system is provided, listen to them as well. However, she cannot learn more about the children by talking to them or asking them to perform particular tasks. She can form hypotheses about their behavior, but she cannot control the environment or the situation in order to test them. In other words, she cannot formulate and

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[7]Dewey describes the subject of experience as construed by traditional philosophy in the following way:

> The characteristic feature of this prior notion is the assumption that experience centres in, or gathers about, or proceeds from a centre or subject which is outside the course of natural existence, and set over against it; — it being of no importance, for present purposes, whether this antithetical subject is termed soul, or spirit, or mind, or ego, or consciousness, or just knower or knowing subject ("The Need for a Recovery" 22).

test hypotheses about the children by influencing their environment or behavior. Thus, her knowledge of the children is limited to what she can passively observe. Cartesianism portrays the subject of knowledge as just such a spectator.[8]

2.2   Representationalism and the Appearance/Reality Distinction

Descartes was certainly not the first philosopher to be suspicious of raw experience as a reliable source of knowledge of the world. Much of traditional philosophy takes as a starting point a distinction between appearance or experience on the one hand, and reality on the other. While we assume that there must be some connection between the world as it actually is and how it appears to us in experience, we also understand that experience cannot be completely trusted. We are, after all, familiar with situations in which we know that our perceptions are unreliable. I know, for instance, that even though the oar in the water appears broken, in reality it is not; that while the desk I am writing on appears to be solid, from the standpoint of physics it contains more empty space than solid matter; and that while the sun appears to rise and set relative to a stationary earth, in reality it is the earth that rotates on its axis and revolves around the sun. These gaps between appearance and reality make us suspicious of "raw" or "unfiltered" experience. Thus, one of the most enduring

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[8]Douglas Sloan refers to this as "onlooker consciousness." "This view of knowing is that of a detached onlooker standing over and describing a world of mind-independent objects as though neither knower nor known were fundamentally interrelated and mutually affected in the process" (210).

goals of philosophical inquiry has been to help us penetrate ordinary experience to the reality behind, beneath, or beyond. It is this search for reality behind experience that concerned Thales and Heraclitus, motivated Plato's distinction between the universal and immutable world of Forms and particular changing world of appearances, and inspired Descartes' method of universal doubt. While it surfaces in various forms, the appearance/reality distinction has preoccupied western philosophy for more than 2500 years.

It is important to note that the appearance/reality distinction that has concerned philosophers is not the type of appearance/reality distinction that typically concerns us in everyday life. In our daily lives we are concerned with a number of different and specific appearance/reality distinctions. For instance, in everyday life we may be concerned with the distinction between a real dollar bill and a counterfeit dollar bill, the distinction between what our friends seem to think of us and what they really think of us, or the distinction between a drug that has only a placebo effect and one that directly affects the underlying disease or metabolic disorder. In all these specific cases we are concerned in some sense with *a* distinction between reality and appearance. Philosophers, however, have been concerned with *the* distinction between appearance and reality, that is, the distinction on a categorical or global level. They have tried to distinguish the world as experienced from the world unexperienced, that is, the world as it is in itself apart from all our interactions with it. They have asked whether everything we see or experience about the world might be systematically out of sync with the world as it is in itself.

While the appearance/reality distinction was not new to Descartes he gave it a unique twist by adding, or at least drawing special attention to a third element or dimension, the spectator-subject — i.e., the mind or philosophical subject that is independent of both reality and appearance. This three-part division generates the problem of representationalism, the question of how accurately, or in what sense appearance "represents" reality to the subject of experience. Descartes argued that what we are aware of in consciousness or experience are not objects external to us, but ideas — i.e., mental images that stand for or represent external objects.[9] According to this view, for example, what I am aware of as I sit here at my desk typing these words are not the computer keyboard and monitor themselves, but mental images that ostensibly represent the keyboard and monitor. Descartes held that all thought involved the manipulation of these ideas that are like mental pictures on display in the mind. The presupposition that reality is thus known only mediately or indirectly through ideas that somehow copy or represent it generates a particular set of philosophical problems. If our experience is of representations, the challenge for philosophers is to figure out what we can know about the external world based solely on these internal objects of consciousness.[10]

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[9]Quine would later called this the "idea idea" (*Theories and Things* 68).

[10]Richard Rorty describes representationalism by likening the mind to a mirror that contains "various representations — some accurate, some not," and argues that the project of philosophers united by this picture is to get "more accurate representations by inspecting, repairing, and polishing the mirror" (*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* 12).

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The representationalist framework has been highly influential in modern philosophy.[11] While the rationalists and empiricists who followed Descartes disagreed with one another over which ideas, if any, were innate, which arose from experience, and how to distinguish those that represented reality from those that did not, they were predominantly Cartesian inasmuch as they accepted this basic representationalist framework and the problems it generates. For philosophers of both schools, the fundamental problem of philosophy was the epistemological problem of trying to acquire genuine knowledge of the objective or external world — i.e., reality — from the subjective, internal experience of ideas — i.e., appearances. In this broad sense Locke, Leibniz, Hume, Kant,[12] Berkeley, Mill, and most other modern philosophers were Cartesians. Twentieth-century analytic philosophers to a large degree retained the representationalist framework, although they replaced talk of ideas or mental images with talk of language. Language, not mental images, is what mediates between the world and the philosophical subject. Language is what the philosophical subject of inquiry uses to represent the world. As Hilary Putnam has written, "If any problem has emerged as the problem for analytic philosophy

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[11]It is also worth noting that representationalism has been quite influential outside of philosophy as well. For example, much, although certainly not all, work done in cognitive science (an interdisciplinary field in which philosophers have been quite involved) is based on a largely representationalist model. For a discussion of the philosophical basis for cognitive science see Neil Stillings, et al, *Cognitive Science: An Introduction* (331-377).

[12]It is worth noting that Putnam correctly argues that Kant breaks out of this mold in as much as he claims that knowing or describing the world is not simply a matter of copying it (*Pragmatism: An Open Question* 28-32).

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in the twentieth century, it is a problem of how words 'hook onto' the world"

("After Empiricism" 43).[13] Thus, although the focus shifts from ideas to words

during the twentieth century, the basic underlying problem of trying to

understand external reality given internal appearances remains.

2.3   Radical or Global Skepticism

The conception of the subject of philosophical inquiry and the

representationalism that it entails sets the agenda for modern philosophy by

framing epistemological problems as the general problem of knowledge.[14] The

general problem of knowledge does not focus on any specific knowledge (say

for instance, whether or not the earth is round or flat), but on whether any

knowledge of the world outside one's own mind is possible at all. The problem

of knowledge is formulated in this general way because for the spectator-subject

the epistemological problem is how to get beyond the limits of its own

subjectivity. The most important question for such a subject is: "Is knowledge

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[13]Richard Rorty argues that modern philosophy's preoccupation with the philosophy of language is not a rejection, but a reworking, of epistemology-centered philosophy. Where the epistemology in the Cartesian tradition asked questions about how our ideas represent reality, the philosophy of language asks how our language represents reality. For the parallels of between epistemology and the philosophy of language see *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Chapter 6.

[14]Dewey argues that the conception of the subject of experience as a spectator fuels the "industry of epistemology" by framing epistemological problems as the problem of knowledge in general — the question of the "possibility, extent, and validity of knowledge in general" ("The Need for a Recovery" 23).

of the external world possible, and if so, what is the extent and foundation of it?"

Cartesian representationalism generates, or at least makes possible, the prospect of radical or global skepticism. Our experience is limited to representations and manipulations of representations. But how can we know that these representations accurately represent reality? How do we know that our ideas of the world or the language we use to describe it are not totally off the mark, completely wrong? For that matter, how do we know that there is an external world at all? Philosophers have used a variety of thought experiments to make this point. In 1641 Descartes entertained the possibility that he might be deceived by an evil demon who merely manufactures ideas of the external world. More than 300 years later Putnam updated Descartes' evil demon by postulating an evil, but brilliant scientist who has somehow placed our brains in a vat of nutrients, and who uses a powerful computer connected to our brain to deceive us into believing that we have more extensive bodies through which we live in and experience the world *(Reason, Truth and History* 1-21). While these scenarios seem unlikely, they are notoriously difficult, if not impossible, to refute with certainty if one clings to the notion of a spectator-subject and a representationalist framework. What these thought experiments demonstrate is that if our experience is limited to representations, then it need not be dependent on the external world. In fact, we have no assurance that there is an external world, much less that our ideas accurately represent it. These apparently

insoluble problems raised by Descartes have been confronted time and again by philosophers in the modern period.

2.4   Foundationalism

Finally, the Cartesian conception of knowledge is largely foundational. Foundationalism in the broadest sense is the view that knowledge or epistemic justification has a two-tiered structure. Some beliefs are basic or foundational because they are known or justified non-inferentially. All other beliefs, if they are to be considered knowledge, are validly inferred from basic or foundational beliefs. In this way, all knowledge or justification derives from the basic or foundational beliefs.

In this chapter I am using "foundationalism" more narrowly to refer to more radical versions of foundationalism that hold that in order to qualify as knowledge our beliefs must rest on some certain foundations, *and* that humans have some special faculty by which we can know these foundations.[15] For the representationalist, such foundations promise a response to the radical skeptic. If found they would serve to guarantee that at least some of our representations correspond accurately to reality, tell us which or at least what type of representations those are, and provide reliable methods of using those representations to build and expand our knowledge of the world. It is, therefore, not surprising that philosophers captured by representationalism seek to identify

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[15]See Richard Bernstein's "Pragmatism, Pluralism and the Healing of Wounds" for a brief characterization of foundationalism (7-8).

both these foundations (e.g., sense experience, *a priori* principles, etc.) and the faculties by which they can be reached (e.g., intuition, sense perception, or reason). In theory, we should be able to trace any true non-basic belief back through a single line of inference to a basic or foundational belief. Dewey refers to this search for absolutes, which he sees has dominating philosophy, as the "quest for certainty." Cartesianism is overtly foundationalist in its emphasis on both foundations and formal methods of inference used to construct or justify knowledge.

3 A Thin Conception of Pragmatism

Pragmatists have argued persistently, and often vehemently, that the Cartesian framework is misleading, and that its acceptance has led philosophy on an unproductive search for epistemic certainty. While pragmatists have been hesitant to offer formal alternatives, they largely agree on a number of points. First, they reject representationalism. Second, they conceive of the subject of philosophical inquiry as an embodied agent rather than a possibly disembodied spectator, and thus, of thought and inquiry as largely instrumental rather than representational. These two points lead to a third; pragmatists reject a sharp distinction between fact and value. Finally, they endorse fallibilism, the view that knowledge of the world is invariably contingent and subject to revision. Taken together, these four points constitute what I have called the "thin" conception of pragmatism.

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3.1   Anti-representationalism

Pragmatists have a hard time making sense of representationalism. What does it mean for an idea to "represent" reality or for a belief to "correspond" to reality? While these concepts are understandable in everyday usage, they are meaningless when applied to things that are thought to lie entirely outside of experience. To see why this might be so consider the variety of ways an object can be represented. My dog, for instance, could be represented by a memory, a photograph, a statue, the word "Soda" written on a piece of paper, or a magnetic record of her identifying information (e.g., female, Boxer-Shephard mix, etc.) in a computer. None of these items is identical to my dog, in fact, they're all quite different from her. And yet they can all be said to represent, or correspond to her. I am not interested here in whether or not there is a single, unified account that makes all these items representations of my dog. Whether such an account can be given is a controversial and complicated philosophical problem that need not concern us at this point.[16] What is important to note is that in each case the ability to make sense of the notion of representation or correspondence involved, or to evaluate the adequacy of the representation depends on one having knowledge of both objects — the object represented and the representation. If you show me a picture of a dog and ask whether the picture

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[16]It is not clear to me how important this unifying account is likely to be. One could provide satisfactory, but different, explanations of how or why each item individually represents Soda without providing a unifying account of why they all represent her. These different senses of representations may be better understood as notions connected through a relationship of family resemblance rather than instances of a more general notion.

accurately represents Soda, I can provide an answer only because I both see the picture and already know Soda. My knowledge of both allows me to judge whether or not the item represents my dog and if it does, in what way and how accurately. If you show the same picture to someone who had never seen or heard of Soda, he would be unable to give an informed response. Whatever else judging the adequacy of a representation requires, it depends on familiarity with both the representation and the object represented. You have no basis for saying that X represents Y unless you are familiar with both X and Y.

This dependence creates a problem for representationalism and the Cartesian spectator-subject. In order to determine how or whether her ideas represent or correspond to reality, the subject of philosophical inquiry would have to reach an Archimedean point from which she could experience both reality and her representations of it, and compare the two. H.S. Thayer puts it well when he argues that adopting this perspective would require us to "perform a feat of self-transcendence by which we could become observers of two objects, our idea and some alleged object as its cause, and scrutinize the degree of correspondence between them" (Thayer, *Meaning and Action* 66). This feat of self-transcendence is an attempt on the part of the subject to adopt what Putnam calls a "God's-eye" view of the universe. Unfortunately, according to the representationalist view of knowledge, the subject of knowledge is only aware of representations, never the things represented. To adopt a perspective from which she could compare reality with the representations would require her to

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do exactly what the representationalist claims she cannot do, think without using representations.

While they do not always employ the language of representationalism or criticize it directly, versions of the preceding criticisms can be found throughout the writings of the early pragmatists. Peirce, for example, though committed to the realist position that an external world exists independent of us,[17] argues that we cannot make sense of a gulf between what is real and what is known or knowable. Underlying this second claim is his pragmatic understanding of linguistic meaning, according to which the meaning of a concept is tied to, and exhausted by the observable experimental phenomena associated with it.[18] On this analysis of meaning we can have no conception of what could not be experienced — i.e., that which could have no experimental phenomena associated with it. Thus, if we separate reality from experience, as representationalism does, we can have no conception of reality. It is this sort of

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[17]The fundamental hypothesis of science, he argues is that there "are Real things, whose characters are entirely independent of our opinions of them; those Reals affect our senses according to regular laws, and, though our sensations are different as are our relations to the objects, yet by taking advantage of the laws of perception, we can ascertain by reasoning how things really and truly are" ("The Fixation of Belief" 18).

[18]Peirce offers the following explanation of meaning as the essential tenet of pragmatism. Pragmatism holds that
> the rational purport of a word or other expression, lies exclusively
> in its conceivable bearing upon the conduct of life; so that, since
> obviously nothing that might not result from experiment can have
> any direct bearing upon conduct, if one can define accurately all
> the conceivable experimental phenomena which the affirmation or
> denial of the concept could imply, one will have therein a
> complete definition of the concept, and there is absolutely nothing
> more in it ("The Essentials of Pragmatism" 252).

reasoning that leads Peirce to the seemingly paradoxical claim that reality as the thing-in-itself "does not exist *as such*. That is, there is no thing which is in-itself in the sense of not being relative to the mind, though things which are relative to the mind doubtless are, apart from that relation" ("Some Consequences of Four Incapacities" 247, emphasis in the original).[19]

James directs his criticism at the notion of correspondence. In an early essay he criticizes Herbert Spencer's depiction of mental processes as the "adjustment of inner to outer relations" ("Remarks on Spencer's Definition" 44), where "adjustment" is understood to be some sort of correspondence between the two. He criticizes Spencer for employing a concept of correspondence that is hopelessly vague.

> But as the formula of correspondence was originally derived from biology, we shall possibly find in the author's treatise on that science an exact definition of what he means by it. On seeking there, we find nowhere a definition, but numbers of synonyms. The inner relations are "adjusted," "conformed," "fitted," "related," to the outer. They must "meet" or "balance" them. There must be "concord" or "harmony" between them. Or, again, the organism must "counteract" the changes in the environment. But these words, too, are wholly indeterminate ("Remarks on Spencer's Definition" 48-49).

More than twenty years later when his pragmatism was more fully developed he argued that any nonpragmatic notion of agreement between our ideas and reality

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[19]Peirce's claim that reality is in some sense relative to the mind is not meant to imply that reality is subjective. To Peirce it is objective in that it is intersubjective or communal. "The real, then, is that which, sooner or later, information and reasoning would finally result in, and which is therefore independent of the vagaries of me and you" ("Some Consequences of Four Incapacities" 247).

is a "meaningless abstraction" (*Pragmatism* 105). (Just what James meant by a pragmatic notion of "agreement" will be spelled out in the following section.)

Like the classical pragmatists, neo-pragmatists criticize representationalism and the correspondence notion of truth as untenable positions. However, since the linguistic turn in philosophy the problem of representationalism has been couched in terms of linguistic representation rather than in terms of mental ideas or images. What unites the anti-representationalism of the neo-pragmatists is a linguistic version of the claim that we cannot perform the feat of self-transcendence whereby we could view both reality and our ideas of it in order to see how the two match up.

Rorty bases his rejection of the correspondence theory of truth on his conviction that language is ubiquitous. The holism of Quine, the later Wittgenstein, Sellars, and Davidson, he argues, completely undermine our aspirations to get outside of language in order to see how language relates to a language-independent world on one hand, and to us on the other ("Introduction: Pragmatism and Philosophy" xvii-xxi). They do this by successfully blurring the distinctions — between the analytic and the synthetic, the linguistic and the empirical, theory and observation, and scheme and content — that philosophers have proposed as means of getting beyond language to see how language relates to the world. Rorty argues that language is not a medium of representation that stands between us and the world (i.e., between subject and object), but a tool or form of behavior that we use to cope with our environment. It is not, however, a tool we can choose to use or not use. We

cannot pick it up like a hammer or saw and use it only when we think it appropriate, for human thought itself is thoroughly and unavoidably linguistic. We do not have the option of thinking without language. This is what Rorty means when he claims that language is ubiquitous. We cannot get outside language — i.e., think non-linguistically about how our language relates to the world — because "there is no way to think about either the world or our purposes except by using our language" ("Introduction: Pragmatism and Philosophy" xix).[20] If Rorty's claim regarding the ubiquity of language is correct, then there is no Archimedean point from which we can compare our linguistic descriptions of the world with the world as it is, independent of language. We cannot make such a comparison without identifying the objects of comparison and we cannot make such identifications without using language.

Putnam draws on twentieth-century physics to make a similar point. In "Realism with a Human Face" he argues that the acceptance of quantum mechanics undermines the possibility of ever achieving a God's-eye view of the universe (3-11). Classical physics, according to Putnam, was an attempt to gain just such a view of the universe because it provided complete descriptions. There was nothing in classical physics to prohibit one from including both the observer and measurements as part of the complete system being described. In this sense, descriptions of the world were not dependent on the observer, they included the observer. However, according to quantum mechanics there is a

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[20]See *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, page 3-22 for a more thorough discussion of Rorty's understanding of language as a behavior or tool, and how this view undermines correspondence theories of truth.

"cut" between the observer and the system such that the observer or apparatus used to make the observation cannot be included in the description. Thus, according to quantum mechanics, there can be no complete description, no theory of the whole universe, no God's-eye view. Not only will the description always be dependent on the observer and the observational apparatus, it will always be incomplete because it cannot include the observer. This requires us to give up what Putnam calls a "great dream" — "the dream of a description of physical reality as it is apart from observers, a description which is objective in the sense of being 'from no particular point of view'" (11).

3.2   Instrumentalism and the Agent Point of View

While pragmatists have provided a sharp and powerful critique of representationalism, they have been reluctant to offer a set of formal doctrines to place in its stead. Nevertheless, their work has not been entirely negative. There is also a more "positive" side to pragmatism, a side most evident in pragmatic accounts of the knowing subject and the nature of thought. In contrast to representationalism, pragmatists view the subject of knowledge as an agent rather than a spectator, and thought more as a tool or behavior for contending with the environment than as a medium for representing or picturing reality. Because these two themes — the primacy of the agent point of view and the instrumental nature of thought — are so closely related I will deal with them together.

The primacy of, or commitment to, the agent point of view goes hand in hand with anti-representationalism. In repudiating representationalism pragmatists reject the conception of the subject of knowledge that it implicitly assumes — a spectator-subject, standing outside of reality hoping to describe it from a neutral, detached point of view. Pragmatists argue that we should abandon this understanding of the subject of philosophical inquiry, replacing it with a description of the knowing subject as an agent who stands in, rather than outside the world, and who interacts with the world, rather than passively observing it. The contrast between the spectator and agent conceptions of the knowing subject is captured nicely by James.

> I, for my part, cannot escape the consideration, forced upon me at every turn, that the knower is not simply a mirror floating with no foot-hold anywhere, and passively reflecting an order that he comes upon and finds simply existing. The knower is an actor, and co-efficient of the truth on one side whilst on the other he registers the truth which he helps to create ("Remarks on Spencer's Definition" 67).

To understand better what is meant by the agent point of view, it is helpful to note three elements of agency evident in this passage from James. I will call these elements "perspective," "action," and "purpose."

When James writes that the knower is not a "mirror floating with no foot-fold anywhere" he is claiming that the knowing subject is always grounded, located, or situated *in* its environment. Thus, the subject always seeks knowledge from a particular, limited or finite perspective. This is the conclusion Putnam draws from his study of quantum mechanics. The knower does not operate with a view from nowhere, from a God's-eye view of the

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universe, but rather with a view from somewhere. It is also a conclusion Rorty

draws from the ubiquity of language. We cannot get outside of language; we

must use language to describe the world and to develop new languages. But

languages are historical and contingent; there is no such thing as "Nature's Own

Language." As human creations languages will always reflect the various

purposes and historical circumstances that led to their development. A tenet of

pragmatic anti-representationalism is that the subject is unable to completely

transcend this social and historical perspective.

Much could be said about the role and implications of perspective in

pragmatism, but I will limit myself to a few very brief comments. First, it is

important to note that the perspective from which the agent-subject must operate

is complex, containing biological, social, cultural, historical, and linguistic

elements. What we know about the world and how we experience it are

influenced by our sensory and cognitive capabilities, our culture and history, our

prior knowledge, and the languages we use to cope with and describe the world.

Because the species have different sensory capabilities humans do not

experience the world in the same way that dogs experience the world. For

instance, humans see the world in many colors, whereas dogs see primarily in

black and white. However, a dog's olfactory sensitivity is many times greater

than that of a human. Nor do we now experience or know the same world that

the ancient Greeks or medieval Europeans experienced or knew. Not only has

the world changed, but our understanding of it and of ourselves is drastically

different. Talk of the "sun rising and setting" reflects an older understanding of

the universe. We no longer live on a flat earth at the center of the universe, but on one of a number of spherical planets that revolve around our sun, a medium-sized star in a vast universe. We no longer live in a stable world of unchanging hierarchically-ordered species, but in a constantly changing world of evolving species. However, our changing world view is not only a matter of advancing scientific knowledge of the natural world. Our social and political world has changed as well and so has our understanding of our place within it. Sometimes this goes unnoticed. For instance, many students thoroughly steeped in the milieu of individualism and our democratic political system are surprised to find out that the notion of universal human or natural rights is a relatively recent historical development with roots in the Renaissance and Enlightenment.

Second, while the exact characteristics of this perspective will vary according to the characteristics of the agent and his or her social and historical setting, we need not think of agent-based knowledge as completely subjective or arbitrary. It is not completely subjective because perspectives are, to a significant extent, shared. To the extent that humans share sensory and cognitive capabilities, cultures, histories, and languages their perspectives overlap. Moreover, agent-centered knowledge is not completely arbitrary because these overlapping perspectives are in some sense perspectives on the same world. A commitment to agent-centered knowledge does not mean that agents can create any kind of world they wish. To claim that we cannot achieve or adopt a God's-eye view of the world is not to claim that the world does not exist independent of human perspective. The world constrains our perspectives,

particularly when we must act in and cope with the world. As Kai Nielsen writes,

> [W]e should not forget that there are sticks and stones, hills and rivers; there is night and day, people get born and die and sometimes are in pain; and it is just the case that most people speak some language while earthworms do not. In that important way, there just is a world out there, independent of what we believe about it, and whose features are for certain sorts of belief an ultimate and objective test of what we believe ("Scientism, Pragmatism, and the Fate of Philosophy" 296).

The emphasis on perspective should in no way be taken to imply that the agent-subject is a passive observer of a fixed reality. For the spectator-subject knowing is construed as contemplation; the ideal subject "sees," "beholds," "views," or "contemplates" the object of knowledge, but does not interact with it. In contrast, for the agent-subject knowing involves interacting with the world. Knowing is not a matter of seeing reality, but of adapting to it. Furthermore, this adaptation is active; it is not something that *happens to* the agent-subject, but something that the agent *does* in and to the world. The agent-subject interacts with the objects of knowledge, and in so doing changes them. This is what James means when he claims that the knower is an actor who "registers the truth which he helps to create" ("Remarks on Spencer's Definition" 67). Knowledge is agent-centered not simply because agents view the world from a particular social, historical, or biological perspective, but because their activities change, and in that sense "create," the world. Reality is not something fixed prior to knowing, but is co-created through the activity of knowing.

While many pragmatists emphasize the relationship between action and knowledge, perhaps none does so as directly and frequently as Dewey. For Dewey a commitment to knowing as active rather than contemplative has two primary sources. The first is Darwinian biology. From biology, Dewey argues, we learn that humans are living organisms whose purposes are largely practical and who adapt to and modify their environment in order to survive.

> The effect of the development of biology has been to reverse the picture [of a mind that is only receptive or passive in knowing]. Wherever there is life, there is behavior, activity. In order that life may persist, this activity has to be both continuous and adapted to the environment. This adaptive adjustment, moreover, is not wholly passive; is not a mere matter of the moulding of the organism by the environment. Even a clam acts upon the environment and modifies it to some extent. . . . There is no such thing in a living creature as mere conformity to conditions, . . . In the interests of the maintenance of life there is transformation of some elements in the surrounding medium. The higher the form of life, the more important is the active reconstruction of the medium *(Reconstruction in Philosophy* 84-85).

In this light the conception of knowing as a passive contemplation of the environment misrepresents the relationship between the knower and what is known.[21]

The second source of Dewey's commitment to the active conception of knowing is the success of modern science, and more specifically to the experimental method of modern science. Since the experimental method has led

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[21]A similar argument is made by James in "The Sentiment of Rationality." He argues that the theory of evolution presents a view of cognition that is entirely dependent on practical interests. "The germinal question concerning things brought the first time before consciousness is not theoretic 'What is that?' but the practical 'Who goes there?' Or rather, as Horwicz has admirably put it 'What is to be done?'" (18).

to a tremendous growth in scientific knowledge, it should become a more

general model of inquiry.[22] While the conception of knowing as contemplation

separates knowledge from action and theory from practice, the experimental

method links knowing and doing.[23] The experimental method achieves its

results not through the passive observation of natural events, but by the directed

and controlled manipulation of events and/or observations. "*The* method of

physical inquiry is to introduce some change in order to see what other change

ensues; the correlation between these changes, when measured by a series of

operations, constitutes the definite and desired object of knowledge" (*Quest for

Certainty* 68, emphasis in the original).

The third element of agency, purpose, is connected to another important

aspect of pragmatism — the instrumental nature of thought. Agents not only

act from particular perspectives, they act purposefully. Thought is an activity

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[22]For more on Dewey's understanding of the relationship between experimental method and theories and knowledge see *The Quest for Certainty*, particularly pages 60-86.

[23]In *The Quest for Certainty* Dewey identifies three outstanding characteristics of experimental method.

> The first is the obvious form that all experimentation involves *overt* doing, the making of definite changes in environment or in our relation to it. The second is that experiment is not a random activity but is directed by ideas which have to meet the conditions set by the need of the problem inducing the active inquiry. The third and including feature, in which the other two receive their full measure of meaning, is that the outcome of the directed activity is the construction of a new empirical situation in which objects are differently related to one another, and such that the *consequences* of directed operations for the objects that have the property of being *known* (*Quest for Certainty* 69-70, emphasis in the original).

initiated and directed by the interests of the thinker or inquirer — i.e., the agent. Thus, there can be no clear or complete separation between intellectual and practical activity. Because it cannot be separated from the interests and desires of an active agent, all inquiry, all intellectual activity, is ultimately practical. We inquire not as disinterested observers or spectators, but as agents with particular interests, purposes, and desires. These interests, purposes, and desires can be varied and complex, ranging from interests in basic survival to aesthetic and moral concerns. Still, pragmatists claim not merely that thought can be useful in fulfilling particular interests, but that all inquiry is prompted by and directed towards their fulfilment. Peirce identified this as an important insight of pragmatism. "Now quite the most striking feature of the new theory" he wrote of the origins of pragmatism, "was its recognition of an inseparable connection between rational cognition and rational purpose" ("The Essentials of Pragmatism" 252-253).

Like the connection between knowing and doing, the commitment to the instrumental nature of thought in the writings of the classical pragmatists reveals a strong Darwinian influence. This influence is implicit in Peirce's organic theory of belief, doubt, and inquiry. Peirce describes belief not so much as a proposition, but as a disposition to *behave* in a certain way. A belief, he writes, "puts us into such a condition that we shall behave in a certain way, when the occasion arises" ("The Fixation of Belief" 10). Psychologically, belief is a relatively stable state, in contrast to doubt which is "an uneasy or dissatisfied state from which we struggle to free ourselves and pass into the

state of belief" (10). Inquiry, or thought, is simply the process of moving from doubt to belief — it is the process, or instrument, by which we establish dispositions to behave in certain ways.[24]

Agent-centered instrumentalism permeates James's writings as well. It is unmistakable in his teleological conception of the mind, a central thesis of his early writings in psychology and philosophy. The mind, he argues, must be understood teleologically, as proactive and goal-oriented. Human interests, he writes, "are the very flour out of which our mental dough is kneaded" ("Remarks on Spencer's Definition" 61).[25] By the time he delivered the lectures that would become *Pragmatism* he had developed this instrumentalism into a fuller theory of truth. "*'The true,' to put it very briefly, is only the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as 'the right' is only the expedient in the way of our behaving*" (*Pragmatism* 100, emphasis in the original). Rejecting standard copy (correspondence) theories of truth for failing to provide a coherent sense of the way ideas would "agree with" reality in order to be true, James argues that

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[24]Peirce makes the same sort of argument in "How to Make Our Ideas Clear." "[T]he action of thought is excited by the irritation of doubt, and ceases when belief is attained; so that the production of belief is the sole function of thought" (26). Belief "has just three properties: First, it is something that we are aware of; second, it appeases the irritation of doubt; and, third, it involves the establishment in our nature of a rule of action, or, say for short, a *habit*" (28, emphasis in the original).

[25]This is a response to Spencer's portrayal of the mind as a strictly reactive organ, one that receives and responds to stimuli from outward existence, but that does not in turn affect it. See "Remarks on Spencer's Definition of Mind as Correspondence."

"agree with" must be understood instrumentally, in terms of the impact it has on experience.

> To 'agree' in the widest sense with a reality *can only mean to be guided either straight up to it or into its surroundings, or to be put into such working touch with it as to handle either it or something connected with it better than if we disagreed.* Better either intellectually or practically! . . . Any idea that helps us to *deal*, whether practically or intellectually, with either the reality or its belongings, that doesn't entangle our progress in frustrations, that *fits*, in fact, and adapts our life to the reality's whole setting, will agree sufficiently to meet the requirement. It will hold true of that reality (*Pragmatism* 96-97, emphasis in the original).

As components of the agent-centered point of view, activity and purpose or instrumentalism are virtually inseparable in Dewey. In "The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy" Dewey provides an analysis and comparison of "orthodox" and "modern" notions of experience as a basis for a detailed critique of the spectator theory of knowledge (6-37).[26] According to the orthodox view experience is primarily psychological and subjective, limited to the past and present, and contrasted with thought or inference. The problem with this understanding of experience, Dewey argues, is that it is based on the misguided assumption that experience centers in a subject that stands outside of the natural world — i.e., a spectator-subject. This view of the knowing subject is outdated and unempirical. A more scientific view, one more consistent with the theory of evolution, is agent-centered. It regards experience as active rather than passive, and *in* the world rather than *of* the world. It involves interaction between a living thing and its environment, it is experimental and future

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[26]Note also *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, pages 77-102.

oriented, and it is filled ("pregnant" is the biological metaphor that Dewey uses)

with connections and inference.[27]

The theme of instrumentalism implicit in this notion of experience is

central to Dewey's understanding of all inquiry. He rejected, for instance, a

sharp distinction between intellectual pursuits that are practical or instrumental

and those that are theoretical (*Quest for Certainty* 21-39). Practical intellectual

pursuits, it is often assumed, are driven by our desires and interests, while

theoretical pursuits are thought to be driven by disinterested reason. The former

are contaminated, or at the very least suspect, because they are infected by the

biases of human interests. The latter are noble and pure attempts to find perfect

Truth or Reality. Dewey insists, however, that it is a mistake either to view

practical activity as an inferior and tainted type of intellectual enterprise, or to

divorce theoretical inquiry from human values and interests. No one, he argues,

cares about purely theoretical uncertainty for its own sake, but only theoretical

uncertainty that has practical implications. The "ultimate ground of the quest

for cognitive certainty" he writes, "is the need for security in the results of

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[27]Dewey focuses on the notion of experience because he believes it
provides insight into modern philosophy's preoccupation with abstract
epistemological problems. Modern philosophy has floundered because it has
construed experience as something centering in a subject that stands outside of
the natural world. If we replace this conception of experience and the spectator
subject that goes with it, with the notion of experience as the interaction of
living subject and its environment, then much of the problematic of modern
philosophy disappears. "But if the assumption that experience is something set
over against the world is contrary to fact, then the problem of how self or mind
or subjective experience or consciousness can reach knowledge of the external
world is assuredly a meaningless problem" ("The Need for a Recovery" 23).

action" (32). Thus, all thought, whether it is considered practical or theoretical, is ultimately instrumental.[28]

The themes of instrumentalism and the primacy of the agent point of view also pervade the writings of the neo-pragmatists, particularly in their discussions of the nature and function of language. Neo-pragmatists such as Rorty and Putnam urge us to give up a representationalist view of language — the notion that language somehow represents the way things are apart from language. Instead we should understand languages or vocabularies[29] as human creations. They are social practices or 'tools' that humans develop and use to cope with the world more effectively.[30] The metaphor of tool, as has already be noted,

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[28]A similar point is made by Putnam. Speaking of theoretical science, he writes, "the concern of exact science is not just to discover statements which are true, or even statements which are true and universal in form ("laws"), but to find statements that are true and relevant. And the notion of relevance bring with it a wide set of interests and values" ("Fact and Value" 349).

[29]The term 'languages' is being used here broadly to refer to what Wittgenstein called "language games" — "the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven" (*Philosophical Investigations* 5). The term 'vocabularies' is included here to note the fact that there can in some sense be different families of language games within a language that are used to contend with the world in vastly different ways. For instance, in English one could talk about the vocabularies of religion, philosophy, psychology, physics, law, etc.

[30]See Rorty's discussion of language in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (257-311), in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (3-22), "Introduction: Antirepresentationalism, Ethnocentrism, and Liberalism, and "Is Natural Science a Natural Kind?" These sources are perhaps the most concentrated or focused discussions, but Rorty's understanding of language is central to his entire conception of pragmatism. It should be noted that in his essay "Is Natural Science a Natural Kind" Rorty seems to want to distance himself from instrumentalism, but here he is using "instrumentalism" to denote a particular position within the philosophy of science that he distinguishes from pragmatism.

(continued...)

should not be carried so far as to imply that language is an independent, neutral medium that permits humans to express what they already know (non-linguistically) about themselves and the world. There is an intimate connection between language and thought; because distinctively human thought is linguistic, it is impossible to have all the thoughts we currently have without language. The tool metaphor accents the claim that vocabularies, and thus our descriptions of the world, are shaped by human interests and purposes — that is, they are agent-centered. A few examples may illustrate this.

Watching young children can provide insights into how the concepts we use to organize the world are shaped by our interests and purposes as agents. Consider for instance, the concepts of "toy" and "cooking utensil." When my wife's and my children were quite young they thoroughly delighted in banging kitchen pots and pans, sometimes with wooden spoons, other times against other pots and pans. I suppose the different sounds they made and the parental reactions they elicited fascinated the children. While this was not my idea of how cooking utensils should be used, they enjoyed it so much that we left one kitchen cupboard unsecured so they could pull older pots, pans, and utensils out and play with them like other toys. What this decision reflected was not so much an acceptance of an alternative use of cooking utensils, but an acceptance of a different description of the world and certain objects within it. Our

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[30](...continued)
As he describes the difference between realism and pragmatism in that essay it is clear that he accepts instrumentalism in the more general way than I have been using it.

children viewed the pots and pans as musical instruments or toys, whereas we viewed them as cooking utensils. Notice how these descriptions are dependent on different human interests and purposes — i.e., amusement and food preparation. Notice also that neither description more accurately represents the world apart from human interests and purposes. If the description of cooking utensils seems more correct it is only because the objects were made by adults for cooking and are more uniquely suited to that purpose than to the purpose of making music. Moreover, it would be a mistake, I think, to simply say that as they grew older our children learned that pots and pans are "really" cooking utensils. Rather, they came to see the objects as cooking utensils because they learned that food needs to be prepared and that certain objects are better than others for that process. In other words, the description of "cooking utensils" describes pots and pans only in light of the purpose and practice of preparing food. If we didn't need to prepare food there would be no cooking utensils even if there were things we called pots and pans.

If the previous example seems too trivial to be taken seriously the contentious abortion debate in this country provides an excellent illustration of how language shapes our understanding of the world, and how we use it to describe the world in ways congruent with our purposes. Though the legal and moral status of abortion is the issue at stake, the way the two opposing sides label themselves as "pro-choice" and "pro-life" reflects a desire to portray or formulate their positions positively in order to gain support. The resistance to accepting the label implied by the opponent's label — i.e., "anti-life" or "anti-

choice" — is not merely posturing; it reflects very different understandings of the values that drive the debate. Abortion rights supporters "see" women's rights and procreative autonomy as the fundamental values at stake, whereas abortion opponents "see" the protection of innocent human life as the fundamental issue. The debate is often thought to hinge on the moral status of the embryo or fetus, an entity that people on opposing sides are likely to describe in markedly different ways. For instance, abortion rights advocates are more likely to talk about an embryo as a "mass of cells," or as "human tissue," whereas abortion opponents are more likely to refer to the same entity as "a human life," "a baby," or "a person." Which description one accepts is important because the correlative moral status is not the same — persons have rights, masses of cells generally do not. The debate is so intractable at both a philosophical and political level in part because it is hard to see how one description could be proven to be more *accurate*. There is no clear or simple "fact of the matter" about the nature of the fetus, no neutral description that will easily and decisively resolve the debate. While it is tempting to write off these descriptions as attempts to manipulate public opinion (and this is certainly part of the story), it is also fair to say that the descriptions tell us something about how the respective parties are inclined to understand and interact with the world.

Unfortunately, the claim that human interests and purposes shape our descriptions of the world has been taken by critics of pragmatism to imply that truth is independent of the way the world is. But this, the critics maintain, is ludicrous. Surely the statement, "It is raining today" is true or false regardless

of what might be at stake for humans. There is a brute fact, something about the way the world is, such that the statement is true if it corresponds to that fact and false if it does not. We must not confuse the way the world is with our descriptions of it. We do not create the world merely by describing it. There is a fact of the matter about the embryo or fetus that is independent of our descriptions of it. It really is a "mass of cells" or a "person" (or some other entity) regardless of what people on either side of the abortion controversy say. We may have many different descriptions of the world, but there is only one way, according to the criticism, the world is.

The sting of the criticism can be soother by noting three points. First, the claim that human interests and purposes shape our descriptions of the world in no way implies that there is not a world that exists independently of humans. If everyone in the world were to die except one woman who is unknowingly two months pregnant, there would be something growing in her womb whether anyone believed it or not, or whether anyone could describe it or not.[31] This seems undeniable. However, the same cannot be said for how we describe what is in her womb. The terms "human tissue" and "person" are social constructions. Like Tuesday and the year 2000 A.D., what is growing in the woman's womb would not be "human tissue" or a "person," with everything these terms imply, apart from the interests of those who identify it in each of these ways. The entity in the womb is independent of human thought and

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[31]I thank Martin Benjamin for suggesting this example.

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language, though its identification as either "human tissue" or a "person" is not.[32]

Second, because our descriptions are socially constructed, attempts to find completely neutral descriptions is an exercise in futility. We always describe things for a reason. For instance, it is difficult to find neutral terms to describe the prenatal entity. Abortion opponents may even argue that the apparently neutral scientific terms "embryo" and "fetus" are morally loaded. The use of these terms begs the question inasmuch as they do not accord any moral status to the unborn. If the question is whether or not the unborn deserve moral consideration, these "neutral" terms unfairly shift the burden of proof to abortion opponents.

Finally, and most importantly, the criticism assumes a representationalist framework that separates the world as it is in itself, that is the world undescribed, from our descriptions of it. However, this notion of the thing in itself, independent of our descriptions, is empty.[33] It is not that we cannot

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[32]For an excellent discussion of what is and what is not a social construct, and the relationship between our descriptions of the world and the world as it exists independent of our descriptions of it see Eugene A. Troxell's "Teaching Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy: Noticing What Is Always Before One's Eyes."

[33]Putnam makes this point in the context of his comments on Wittgenstein, arguing that it is not that we cannot describe the thing in itself, but that it makes no sense to say either that we can or we cannot. To say that we cannot describe it means that it exists, but we can't describe it. "If we are persuaded that it is *unintelligible* to say "We sometimes succeed in describing reality as it is in itself", then we should realize that it is equally unintelligible to say "We never succeed in describing reality as it is in itself' and even more unintelligible (more, because it introduces the peculiar philosophical "can't") to say "We *can't* describe reality as it is in itself' (*Pragmatism: An Open Question*

describe the thing in itself, but that the idea of doing so makes no sense — talk of a thing in itself would require a description of what is by definition undescribed. This has led pragmatists to argue that even though languages and vocabularies are agent-centered, we can nevertheless say that they describe the world. Putnam regards this as a key feature of pragmatism. In *The Many Faces of Realism*, he writes,

> The heart of pragmatism, it seems to me — of James's and Dewey's pragmatism, if not of Peirce's — was the insistence on the supremacy of the agent point of view. If we find that we must take a certain point of view, use a certain 'conceptual system', when we are engaged in practical activity, in the widest sense of 'practical activity', then we must not simultaneously advance the claim that it is not really 'the way things are in themselves' (70).[34]

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[33](...continued)
39).

[34]In another work Putnam draws a connection between this claim and the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. While acknowledging an intellectual debt to the German philosopher for recognizing that gaining knowledge of the world is not simply a matter of copying it, he criticizes Kant for maintaining an inseparable gap between what we experience (the phenomenal) and the world as it is in itself (the noumenal).

> The confusion was to suppose that a description which is shaped by our conceptual choices is somehow, for that very reason, not a description of its object "as it really is". As soon as we make *that* mistake, we open the door to the question. "Well, if our descriptions are only *our* descriptions, descriptions shaped by our interests and nature, then what is the description of the things as they are *in themselves*?" But this "in themselves" is quite empty — to ask how things are "in themselves" is, in effect, to ask how the world is to be described in the world's own language, and there is no such thing as the world's own language, there are only the languages that we language users invent for our various purposes (*Pragmatism: An Open Question* 29).

3.3   Facts and Values

In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty argues that the notion of truth should be of very little philosophical significance. To say that a theory or vocabulary — Newton's as opposed to Aristotle's way of describing the world — is true is to say something about its usefulness rather than its ability to accurately express the nature of reality. "It is just an empty compliment — one paid to a writer whose novel jargon we have found useful" (8). While not all pragmatists would endorse the somewhat flippant way Rorty seems to trivialize scientific theories,[35] the passage draws attention to the connection between the preceding themes (anti-representationalism, instrumentalism, and the primacy of the agent point of view) and the claim, made by pragmatists, that we should dispense with the traditional dichotomy between facts and values. According to pragmatists, one implication of rejecting the representationalist framework in favor of an instrumentalist view of thought and language is that we must give up the hope of neatly distinguishing between facts and values. By using language that we typically associate with judgments of value — e.g.,

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[35]I think, for instance, that Putnam might want to distance himself from such a statement. The differences between Rorty and Putnam can be hard to pinpoint. Both would 1) reject any representationalist interpretation of scientific theories that claims that our scientific theories describe reality as it is in itself, and 2) argue that what makes a theory acceptable is inseparable from human values and interests. Putnam, however, as I understand him, is less inclined to "trivialize" (the term 'compliment' in the passage quoted conveys this connotation) notions of truth and reality as Rorty often seems to. Rorty often writes as if there is no rational way of choosing between alternative theories or world views, whereas Putnam argues that there are rational methods, albeit not formal or algorithmic methods, that can be used to adjudicate between theories or world views. For some insight into their differences see Putnam's "Realism with a Human Face" and Rorty's "Putnam and the Relativist Menace."

"compliment" — to describe people and activities that we normally associated with value-neutral facts — scientists discovering how the world really is — Rorty implicitly challenges the distinction.

The dichotomy between facts and values — the belief that statements regarding facts and statements regarding values are about two distinct and mutually exclusive realms — is both familiar and firmly entrenched.[36] Value statements tell us something about human interests and desires, whereas factual statements tell us something about the world as it is irrespective of human values.[37] The former pertain to things that are contingent on human interests, the latter to things that exist independent of them. The dichotomy is based on two claims asserting a contrast between facts and values. On the one hand, there are facts, statements about the way the world really is and how it works, that do not depend on value judgments of any sort. Statements of knowledge resulting from the natural sciences — e.g., "H_2O boils at 100 degrees Celsius" — are paradigm examples. On the other hand, with regard to values there is no "fact of the matter," nothing about the world independent of human interests and desires, that tells us what is good or bad, right or wrong, beautiful or ugly.

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[36]The dichotomy is so commonplace that Putnam refers to it as a "cultural institution" ("Fact and Value" 338).

[37]Maybe the clearest, and certainly most extreme, expression of the view that factual statements and values statements are quite different can be found in emotivist theories of value espoused by the logical positivists. According to such theories, value statements are not statements of objective fact, but merely subjective expressions of feelings, acts of will, or attitudes. For instance, the statement "Truth-telling is good" is not a statement about the world or even about the practice of truth-telling, but rather an expression of the speaker's attitude towards truth-telling, equivalent, say to, "Hooray for truth-telling!"

According to this view the statement "It is wrong to lie" is not true or false in the same way that "H_2O boils at 100 degrees Celsius" is true or false because the former does not correspond to some mind-independent piece of reality or fact about the world in the way that the latter does. If we consider the statement to be true, it is only as a matter of religious conviction or moral convention. We can, of course, make factual statements about values — e.g., "John believes that it is wrong to lie" — but these are statements about people's beliefs regarding values, not about the values themselves.

For the most part, pragmatists have concentrated on undermining the first claim, arguing that what we typically view as the value-free realm of fact is not ultimately independent of values.[38] While the arguments offered in support of this claim vary, the themes of anti-representationalism, instrumentalism, and agency are not far below the surface. If all thought, including the pursuit of truth, is guided by our goals and interests (instrumentalism and the agent point of view), then the facts we ascertain about the world, and the way we describe the world as a result of scientific or some other sort of inquiry, will be inseparably intertwined with our values. This is evident in Dewey's ongoing attempts to reconcile science and human values[39] and in both Rorty's conception of philosophy as edification and his claim that the demarcation between science

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[38]It should be noted that Putnam has also addresses the second claim, arguing that some values are objective. For his treatment of this issue see "Fact and Values" and "Pragmatism and Moral Objectivity."

[39]This is a central theme in *The Quest for Certainty*.

and non-science is not sharp.[40] Putnam also addresses the issue directly in

several of his writings.[41]

It is worth looking briefly at Putnam's arguments, in part because he

comes back to this theme so frequently, and in part because he does so in the

context of looking at scientific inquiry, the paradigm of value-free inquiry. If

any type of activity generates facts independent of human values, it is scientific

inquiry. Putnam, however, argues that the dichotomy between facts and values

is untenable because the very practices of scientific inquiry by which we

determine what is and is not a fact presuppose values ("Fact and Value" 338-

346). The criteria of rationality that we use to determine which theories to

accept and what we should count as knowledge are themselves based on

cognitive values such as the power of prediction, coherence, and simplicity. In

the course of scientific progress one theory wins out over a rival on the basis of

these values — because it enables us to predict future observations reliably,

because it coheres with our past observations and with other theories that are

important to us, and because it is simpler than the alternatives. Putnam claims

that these cognitive values are in turn tied to human interests and values; they

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[40]Rorty's comments on philosophy as edification are in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (363-365), his comments on the demarcation between science and non-science are in "Is Natural Science a Natural Kind?".

[41]See, for example, "Fact and Value," "Beyond the Fact/Value Dichotomy," "The Place of Facts in a World of Values," "Objectivity and the Science/Ethics Distinction," and *Pragmatism: An Open Question* pages 13-19, 57-75.

are not derived or justified by their tendency to select theories that more

accurately correspond to reality.

> . . . without the cognitive values of coherence, simplicity, and
> instrumental efficacy we have no world and no facts, not even
> facts about what is so *relative* to what. And these cognitive
> values, I claim, are simply a part of our holistic conception of
> human flourishing. Bereft of the old realist idea of truth as
> "correspondence" and of the positivist idea of justification as fixed
> by public "criteria," we are left with the necessity of seeing our
> search for better conceptions of rationality as an intentional
> activity which, like every activity that rises above the mere
> following of inclination or obsession, is guided by our idea of the
> good" ("Beyond the Fact/Value Dictomomy" 139, emphasis in the
> original).

One must be careful to make this point clear. The claim is not that

knowledge of the world is dependent on values. This way of describing the

relationship implies that statements of facts and of values are about entities that

are metaphysically different, though causally related. The claim is that facts

and values are woven of the same ontological fabric. This is implied in the

connection James draws between the "true" and the "good."

> "Let me now say only this, that truth is *but one species of good*,
> and not, as is usually supposed, a category distinct from good, and
> co-ordinate with it. *The true is the name of whatever proves itself
> to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definite,
> assignable reasons"* (*Pragmatism* 37, emphasis in the original).

Putnam tries to get at this point by arguing that facts and values

"interpenetrate" (*Pragmatism: An Open Question* 57). By this he means that

while we ordinarily distinguish statements of fact from statements of value with

little problem, many statements cannot be so easily classified as one or the

other. Many statements seem to contain elements of both facts and values.

Consider some rather ordinary statements. "Abraham Lincoln was the sixteenth President of the United States" seems clearly to be a statement of fact, whereas "Lincoln was a good person and the greatest President of the nineteenth century" seems to be a statement of value. However, many sentences, such as "Lincoln was a wise leader" are not so easily classified. The sentence is difficult to classify because the term "wise" includes elements of what we commonly think of as facts and values. "Wise" in this context, is meant to indicate both a factual statement of Lincoln's mental abilities — i.e., they are strong — and an evaluation or normative assessment of his use of those abilities — i.e., he used them in a praiseworthy manner.

A good example of how facts and values interpenetrate can be found in the problematic concept of medical futility. Consider the statement, "The use of a mechanical ventilator on Mrs. Jones is futile." The statement is certainly ambiguous, allowing of both factual and normative interpretations. For instance, it could be interpreted factually as a statement about ability of the ventilator to promote the goal of treatment — i.e., "The goal is to restore Mrs. Jones to consciousness, and while the ventilator will keep her alive, she will never regain consciousness." It could also be interpreted normatively — i.e., "The goal of preserving Mrs. Jones' life when there is no hope that she will ever regain consciousness is not worth pursuing."

However, ambiguity is not the only problem, and getting clear on the interpretation will not allow us to separate the factual and normative components of the futility issue. The distinction between fact and value that the

two previous interpretations presuppose may not hold up under scrutiny. Interwoven into what on the surface appears to be a straightforward factual judgment regarding the ability of the ventilator to achieve the goal of treatment are value judgments. For instance, if pushed, a physician claiming to be promoting a factual interpretation would be forced to restate her claim that the ventilator will not achieve the goal of treatment in terms of probabilities — i.e., "Given the experience we have had to date, we can say with 95% certainty that there is only a 2% chance that Mrs. Jones would ever regain consciousness if we maintained her on the ventilator." Thus, the apparently factual claim that the ventilator will not achieve the goal of treatment presupposes not only empirical knowledge regarding degree of certainty and probability of success, but also certain values regarding how that knowledge is to be assessed and applied. If the goal is never to withhold or withdraw treatment from a patient who might regain consciousness regardless of the expense in terms of human, financial, and emotional resources, then the treatment is not futile. If the goal is to make the decision that would turn out to be right in the vast majority of cases, and that seeks a balance between saving all lives and using resources wisely, then the treatment might be considered futile. The concept of futility cannot be easily reduced to either the factual or normative realm without loss of something important. It is not concept that makes sense apart from human interests and purposes.

3.4 Fallibilism

Finally, pragmatism is committed to fallibilism, the view, in Putnam's words, that "there are no metaphysical guarantees to be had that even our most firmly-held beliefs will never need revision" (*Pragmatism: An Open Question* 21). This claim that none of our beliefs is certain, that each is, in theory, open to revision has led some critics to mistakenly label pragmatists as skeptics. Indeed, the confusion is not difficult to understand. Both pragmatists and skeptics claim that we may be mistaken in any of our beliefs. Skeptics, however, generally equate knowledge with certainty, and then argue that without proof of epistemological certainty we cannot claim to have knowledge. Thus, when pragmatists also claim that we cannot claim to have certain knowledge, they seem to be advocating a form of skepticism. However, because pragmatists do not identify knowledge with certainty they are able, without inconsistency, to both accept fallibilism and reject skepticism. In fact, Putnam cites pragmatism's simultaneous acceptance of fallibilism and rejection of skepticism as one of its important insights ("Pragmatism and Moral Objectivity" 200).

The key to understanding how pragmatists can be committed both to fallibilism and anti-skepticism is to see that underlying philosophical skepticism is the representationalist model of knowledge that construes knowledge as beliefs that accurately represent reality. The skeptic's fear, articulated by Descartes in the *Meditations*, is that all our representations, whether they be mental images or linguistic descriptions, might be false. The attempt to overcome skepticism is the quest to find epistemological foundations — both

certain starting points such as *a priori* first principles or incorrigible experience, and foolproof forms of inference through which we can reliably acquire additional knowledge of the world.

While it is true that pragmatists reject the possibility of an Archimedean point or God's-eye view that would guarantee epistemologically certain starting points, they are not skeptics, for they do not accept the basic assumptions underlying skepticism. Most importantly, pragmatists reject a version of the appearance/reality distinction that holds that gaining knowledge is a matter of getting our representations right. They do not deny that we can talk meaningfully about the difference between appearance and reality. There are, as indicated above, specific situations in which the distinction is indispensable. For instance, it is important that children learn that what they see on television or in the movie theater is not always the way things are. What pragmatists deny is that a context-independent distinction between appearance in general, and reality in general does any real philosophical work for us. In other words, the distinction is useful in certain limited contexts, but it loses meaning when we "go global" with it. Gaining knowledge for the pragmatists is not fundamentally a matter of getting behind appearance to the reality beyond or of getting the correct snapshot of reality, but of distinguishing those beliefs that allow the subject to make sense of and interact effectively with the world from those that do not.

Furthermore, commitment to the agent-centered point of view makes global skepticism untenable. The spectator-subject who stands outside the

world and who views beliefs as attempts to represent the world may be able to question whether any of his beliefs represent the world accurately. However, an agent-subject who interacts with the world cannot doubt everything without ceasing to be an agent. For an agent-subject beliefs are not merely propositions about the world, they are dispositions to act in the world. A being with no dispositions to act is not an agent. Moreover, if, with Darwin, one regards the agent as a biological being, global skepticism is not even a viable option. All of the beliefs of a mortal biological organism could not be wrong, for if the organism's beliefs were systematically out of sync with the world, it would be dead.[42] From an agent-centered point of view it is possible to be a fallabilist, that is to believe that any of our beliefs could possibly be wrong, but not to be a global skeptic, that is, to genuinely believe that all of our beliefs might be wrong. While all our beliefs are, in principle, open to revision, we cannot open them all to revision at the same time. "[F]allibilism" Putnam writes, "does not require us to doubt everything, it only requires us to be prepared to doubt anything — if good reason to do so arises!" (*Pragmatism: An Open Question* 21).[43]

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[42]This point is emphasized by Rorty. "From a Darwinian point of view, there is simply no way to give sense to the idea of our minds or our language as systematically out of phase with what lies beyond our skins" ("Introduction: Antirepresentationalism, Ethnocentrism, and Liberalism" 12).

[43]Putnam's phrasing here is reminiscent of Peirce's distinction between genuine and philosophical doubt. Peirce argues that we cannot doubt everything at once for there will always be things that it does not even occur to us to doubt, in fact, there will be things that it does not occur to us that we can doubt. Certainly, one could put any proposition into the interrogative form, but the

(continued...)

world and who views beliefs as attempts to represent the world may be able to question whether any of his beliefs represent the world accurately. However, an agent-subject who interacts with the world cannot doubt everything without ceasing to be an agent. For an agent-subject beliefs are not merely propositions about the world, they are dispositions to act in the world. A being with no dispositions to act is not an agent. Moreover, if, with Darwin, one regards the agent as a biological being, global skepticism is not even a viable option. All of the beliefs of a mortal biological organism could not be wrong, for if the organism's beliefs were systematically out of sync with the world, it would be dead.[42] From an agent-centered point of view it is possible to be a fallabilist, that is to believe that any of our beliefs could possibly be wrong, but not to be a global skeptic, that is, to genuinely believe that all of our beliefs might be wrong. While all our beliefs are, in principle, open to revision, we cannot open them all to revision at the same time. "[F]allibilism" Putnam writes, "does not require us to doubt everything, it only requires us to be prepared to doubt anything — if good reason to do so arises!" (*Pragmatism: An Open Question* 21).[43]

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One can find two slightly different, but related, strands of fallibilism running through pragmatism, what I will call epistemological fallibilism and metaphysical fallibilism. The former stems from the pragmatic understanding of the instrumental nature of thought and knowledge. An instrumental view of knowledge breaks the link between knowledge and certainty — i.e., knowledge claims are not claims to certainty. In contrast, metaphysical fallibilism is less a claim about knowledge and more a claim about the world. It has its source in the pragmatic understanding of the world as dynamic and changing.

For the pragmatists, the heart of epistemological fallibilism is instrumentalism. Insofar as thought and language are instruments, they are revisable. If we find a belief, theory, or vocabulary that is more useful than the one we are using, we can adopt it in lieu of the present one. The classic example here is the transition from classical physics to quantum mechanics. Newtonian or classical physics was not so much proven wrong, as it was shown to be limited. It was not that the claims of classical physics were shown not to correspond to the way the world really is, but that they were found to be inapplicable to phenomena at the atomic level. Quantum theory was accepted by the scientific community because, among other reasons, it offered a better explanation of a wider range of physical phenomena — i.e., it was a more powerful explanatory instrument. James recognized that viewing our beliefs and

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[43](...continued)
resulting question will not generate real and living doubt unless it is accompanied by an uneasy feeling that becomes a stimulus to inquiry. For more on genuine doubt and Peirce's objections to global skepticism see "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities" and "The Fixation of Belief."

theories instrumentally precluded our ability to claim absolute certainty about any of them. Infallible truth might be an ideal vanishing point towards which our knowledge is converging, but we can only imagine it. "Meanwhile" he writes, "we have to live to-day by what truth we can get to-day, and be ready to-morrow to call it falsehood" (*Pragmatism* 100).[44]

The second strand of fallibilism, what I am calling metaphysical fallibilism is based on the notion of a malleable and changing reality. Much of the philosophical tradition, going back to the pre-socratics assumed that reality, whatever else it is, is something permanent and immutable. Based on their understanding of modern science — particularly Newtonian physics, Darwinian biology, and later quantum mechanics — pragmatists have rejected his view as unempirical.[45] It is true that experience is variable, but instead of taking this as an indication that we must get beyond appearances to an unchanging reality, pragmatists take this as a sign that reality itself is changing. We must be prepared to revise our beliefs in light of experience because, as James writes, experience "has ways of *boiling over*, and making us correct our present formulas" (*Pragmatism* 100 emphasis in the original). The same point is

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[44]Even Peirce, who maintained a realist conception of truth, argued repeatedly that all our beliefs were revisable. Although he promoted the scientific method as a way to fix belief, he claimed that absolute certainty was out of the question. In fact, the presumption of absolute certainty is to be avoided because it impedes the progress towards truth by prematurely cutting off inquiry ("The Scientific Attitude and Fallibilism" 55).

[45]For an example of how pragmatists see the development of modern science as changing metaphysical assumptions see Dewey's *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, pages 53-76.

implied in Dewey's rejection of a spectator account of knowledge, his depiction

of experience as a dynamic and continuous process of adjustment, and his

dismissal of the philosophy's ongoing attempts to find *the* fixed and immutable

reality beyond changing appearance.[46] Fallibilism, then, is not only a matter of

saying that without epistemological foundations we may be mistaken in our

beliefs, but also that our knowledge must change as reality changes. In this

sense we could be wrong, even though we have made no mistake because what

may be true at one time, may not be true at another point in time. To put it

colloquially, because reality is a moving target, knowledge and truth must be

dynamic and changing, not static and immutable. Thus, for the pragmatist the

commitment to fallibilism is based not only on anti-foundationalism, but also on

the conviction that reality is dynamic and changing.

Anti-representationalism, instrumentalism and the primacy of agent point

of view, challenging the fact/value dichotomy, and fallibilism lie at the heart of

or near the center of pragmatism. Taken together these features constitute a

"thin" conception of pragmatism, a description of elements common to most, if

not all, more fully worked-out or " thick" conceptions of pragmatism. Just as

important, they constitute a formidable critique of Cartesianism; they are fibers

forming a cable intended to lower the boom on epistemology-centered

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[46]Dewey discusses this in great detail in "The Need for a Recovery of
Philosophy" and in *Reconstruction in Philosophy*.

philosophy.[47] To the extent that Cartesianism, broadly construed, provides the framework for much of theory-centered philosophy, pragmatism presents a challenge to theory-centered philosophy. In this sense, it has something in common with practical philosophy. In the next chapter I will look more directly at the many connections between pragmatism and practical philosophy, developing a vision of "pragmatic practical philosophy." Unfortunately, that analysis will do little to bridge the gap between practical and theory-centered philosophy. This gap is an obstacle that must be overcome if practical philosophy is to be seen as a legitimate part of professional philosophy. For that reason, in Chapter 5 I will explore wide reflective equilibrium as a model of philosophical inquiry which brings practical and theory-centered philosophy closer together.

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[47]Peirce uses the metaphor of a cable to describe the way in which arguments are used in scientific reasoning. They do not "form a chain which is no stronger than its weakest link," he writes, "but a cable whose fibres may be ever so slender, provided they are sufficiently numerous and intimately connected" ("Some Consequences of Four Incapacities" 229).

CHAPTER FOUR

PRAGMATISM AND PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY

In 1994 Susan Wolf argued that the dominant paradigm in both bioethics and health law was being challenged.[1] She maintained that principlism, a methodology characterized by deductive reasoning from relatively general or abstract mid-level principles to particular cases, had come under attack from a variety of sources, particularly new emphases on empirical knowledge, gender, and race. These new emphases brought into question highly abstract approaches to moral and legal issues in health care that did not pay careful attention to the context in which reflection takes place, to the importance of difference, and to the consequences that decisions, policies, and laws have on specific, identifiable patients. Taken as a whole, she concluded, these trends signify a move away from principlism and toward pragmatism in bioethics and health law (395-399).

Though Wolf limits her discussion of the shift towards pragmatism to the fields of bioethics and health care law, the strength of her evidence leads one to ask whether the trend might not be more widespread. Is the shift in bioethics being replicated in other areas of practical philosophy, and if so, why? Are there certain affinities between pragmatism and practical philosophy that make the former particularly well suited to the latter? In this chapter I look more closely at this last question. Although one might well be able to make the

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[1]Wolf, Susan M. "Shifting Paradigms and Bioethics and Health Law: the Rise of a New Pragmatism," *American Journal of Law & Medicine* 20.4 (1994): 395-415.

argument, my primary goal is not to defend the claim that we are seeing a general shift towards pragmatism in practical philosophy analogous to the shift Wolf sees in bioethics and health law. Instead I want to focus on the claim that pragmatism provides a promising and philosophically defensible framework, not only for bioethics and health law, but for practical philosophy more generally.

The accounts of practical philosophy and pragmatism provided in Chapters 2 and 3 provide the background to this argument. In Chapter 2 I characterized practical philosophy by contrasting it to theory-centered philosophy, and argued that the differences between these two styles of philosophy flow from their tendency to emphasize different types of problems. Theory-centered philosophy focuses on general and abstract problems, whereas practical philosophy focuses on contextual problems — i.e., those that are local, particular, and time-sensitive rather than general, universal, and timeless. In Chapter 3 I followed this expanded account of practical philosophy with an account of pragmatism. Acknowledging that pragmatism is a diverse movement I used the notion of a "thin" conception to highlight certain points on which most, if not all, pragmatists agree. In this chapter I want to weave strands of these accounts together to show how practical philosophy has affinities to and is supported by pragmatism.

The chapter is divided into two parts. In Part One I look at three recent examples of pragmatic practical philosophy — projects in which the authors self-consciously explore pragmatism as a framework for addressing issues in particular areas of practical philosophy (i.e., environmental philosophy,

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bioethics, and feminism). An exploration of these examples can provide insights into both practical philosophy and its relationship to pragmatism. More specifically they provide insight as to what it is that makes the dominant approaches in these areas of practical philosophy inadequate, and why pragmatism may offer a more promising approach. Part Two builds on the groundwork laid in Chapters 2 and 3 to explore three overlapping concerns that bring practical philosophy and pragmatism together: the centrality of context, fallibilism, and the interdisciplinary nature of the problems of practical philosophy. Taken together, these three common themes, these points of connection, explain why pragmatism provides a promising and attractive framework for practical philosophy, and in so doing, support the claim that practical philosophy is a philosophically defensible endeavor. This is not to say that all practical philosophers are, knowingly or unknowingly, pragmatists. This is certainly not the case. However, practical philosophers who are searching for a deeper understanding and justification of what they are doing would be well-advised to explore pragmatism.

1   Three Examples of Pragmatic Practical Philosophy

While I think many philosophers engaged in practical philosophy unconsciously incorporate elements of pragmatism into their work, several have done so quite self-consciously. Three recent projects are especially worth noting for the ways in which the authors explicitly draw on pragmatism to guide their work in a given area of practical philosophy. The first "project" is a series

of articles in which Franklin Miller, Joseph Fins, and Matthew Bacchetta articulate and defend a method of moral problem solving, which they refer to as "clinical pragmatism," in the medical context[2] They see this method as an extension or adaptation of Dewey's general theory of inquiry to the clinical setting. The second project, *Environmental Pragmatism* edited by Andrew Light and Eric Katz, is an anthology of articles exploring the connection between pragmatism and environmental philosophy. Though the volume does not present one particular point of view, the editors are clearly sympathetic to the claim that pragmatism shows great promise as an approach to environmental philosophy. Finally, in *Pragmatism and Feminism* Charlene Haddock Seigfried explores the relationship between pragmatism and feminism in hopes of beginning a discussion that "has the potential for changing the theoretical analyses and concrete practices of both" (4). While each of these attempts highlights the relationship between pragmatism and a particular area of concern within practical philosophy, taken together they tell us something about the relationship between pragmatism and practical philosophy more generally.

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[2]Franklin G.Miller; Joseph J. Fins; and Matthew D. Bacchetta, "Clinical Pragmatism: John Dewey and Clinical Ethics;" "Clinical Pragmatism: A Method of Moral Problem Solving;" and "Clinical Pragmatism: Bridging Theory and Practice." See also Rosemarie Tong, "The Promises and Perils of Pragmatism: Commentary on Fins, Bacchetta, and Miller;" and Lynn A. Jansen, "Assessing Clinical Pragmatism" for commentary on the articles by Miller, Fins, and Bacchetta.

1.1 Clinical Pragmatism

In a series of articles Miller, Fins, and Bacchetta develop a method of moral problem solving they refer to as "clinical pragmatism." In some respects, their method might more appropriately be titled "clinical Deweyanism" since they claim that the method is an extension of Dewey's broader theory of inquiry, and draw almost exclusively on Dewey's pragmatism without explicitly exploring or incorporating the work of other pragmatists. Still, several elements of their method are clearly pragmatic in the broader sense of the term.

First, their approach begins with the assumption that moral inquiry, like all inquiry,[3] is to be understood naturalistically as a process that emerges from the functioning of organisms and environment. It is a response to what Dewey called a "problematic situation." Second, because inquiry begins with a specific problematic situation, and not with an abstract problem, a great deal of emphasis is placed on the context in which the problematic situation arises. In the case of clinical pragmatism the context includes not only the general backdrop of the medical setting, but also particular elements of an actual clinical case.[4]

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[3]While the authors offer clinical pragmatism as a method of moral problem solving, they emphasize that the same logic of inquiry applies to the sciences and professions. "Dewey argued that the type of thinking characteristic of science is applicable in ethics as a method of determining and validating moral judgments and resolving moral problems. Our claim that an object is good is tested by intelligently directed conduct. Values are determined, or constructed, by a process of inquiry yielding reliable, but not certain, results" ("Clinical Pragmatism: John Dewey and Clinical Ethics" 38).

[4] Miller, Fins, and Bacchetta make this clear when they claim that the "bedrock of all moral problem solving in clinical practice is the proper assessment of, and concurrence about, the medical facts of the case" ("Clinical
(continued...)

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Third, Miller, Fins, and Bacchetta dismiss principlism as an ineffective method of moral problem solving. Like many pragmatists they are skeptical of the value of abstract moral theories, in particular of appeals to *a priori* reasoning, in the resolution of concrete cases. This skepticism, which underlies their rejection of principlism, has two sources. At a theoretical level, they reject any appeal to *a priori* moral principles as a product of the spectator theory of knowledge ("Clinical Pragmatism: Bridging Theory and Practice" 38). At a practical level, they criticize principlism because it construes moral judgment as an abstract, theoretical process that can take place apart from the actual clinical setting in which the ethical problems arise. They argue that principlism allows, and even encourages, one to separate clinical and ethical thinking completely ("Clinical Pragmatism: John Dewey In Clinical Ethics" 44-46). This is not to say that Miller, Fins, and Bacchetta consider the moral rules and principles central to moral theories to be irrelevant to moral problem solving. However, they give moral rules and principles a less prominent, less controlling or definitive role. Moral rules and principles are viewed as hypotheses, as

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⁴(...continued)
Pragmatism: A Method of Moral Problem Solving" 133). Other ethically relevant considerations include a variety of contextual elements including, "the life situation of the patient; the patient's capacity to make health care decisions; the beliefs, values, preferences, and needs of the patient; the impact of the care of the patient on family members and others intimately concerned with the patient; institutional arrangements that may be obstructing shared decision making; the perspectives of involved clinicians; and relevant moral, legal, and institutional norms" ("Clinical Pragmatism: John Dewey and Clinical Ethics" 48).

presumptive guides, as tools for guiding conduct rather than as "absolute, fixed moral laws" ("Clinical Pragmatism: A Method of Moral Problem Solving" 130).

Fourth, clinical pragmatism is experimental and fallible. Drawing on Dewey's description of inquiry in *How We Think*, Miller, Fins, and Bacchetta argue that moral inquiry should be understood as a reiterative process in which we put forth hypotheses regarding moral problems and investigate them.[5] It is not a mechanical or algorithmic process for discovering moral "truths,"[6] but an experimental pattern of inquiry designed to promote successful problem solving ("Clinical Pragmatism: John Dewey and Clinical Ethics" 32-41). It is fallible in the sense that recommendations made to resolve problematic situations as well as our moral rules and principles must be tested and may be found wanting.

1.2   Environmental Pragmatism

In the introduction to *Environmental Pragmatism* editors Andrew Light and Eric Katz note several factors that have led philosophers to seriously consider pragmatism as an environmental philosophy (1-5). The first factor is a

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[5]Drawing on Dewey's description of inquiry in *How We Think* (72), Miller, Fins, and Bacchetta argue that inquiry should proceed through a series of steps. These steps include perceiving the problem; defining the problem; adjusting possible solutions; using reasoning to anticipate implications of solutions; and further observation and experimentation that leads to either acceptance rejection of the proposed solution.

[6]Miller, Fins, and Bacchetta, I think, are somewhat loose in their use of terms such as "truth" and "right answer." Though they are advocating a pragmatic framework, they continue to use "truth" and "right answer" in non-pragmatic senses — i.e., as they might be used by someone advocating a correspondence theory of truth or a foundationalist ethics.

sense that environmental ethics was having no practical effect on environmental policy. The second is the belief that one of the things holding environmental ethics back from making practical contributions to policy is an emphasis on theoretical debates aimed at producing philosophical certainty. Finally, the third factor is a sense that environmental ethics has also been held back by methodological and theoretical dogmatism — that is, by the belief that only a certain limited number of theories or approaches to environmental philosophy could yield morally justified environmental policy. The appeal of pragmatism, they argue, is its emphasis on the significance of practice in the resolution of practical problems, its acceptance of fallibilism and uncertainty, and its openness to methodological and theoretical pluralism. "For us, environmental pragmatism is the open-ended inquiry into the specific real-life problems of humanity's relationship with the environment" (2).

While many authors in the anthology note different specific elements of pragmatism that make it especially congenial to environmental philosophy, several common themes emerge. One is a repudiation of both the spectator theory of knowledge and the closely related dichotomy between subject and object (Parker 21-24; Rosenthal and Buchholz 38-43). Pragmatism's rejection of these views makes it uniquely suited for environmental philosophy by clearing a path for a richer understanding of the connection between humans and the environment. The conception of the subject of inquiry as a spectator of the world allows one to envision barriers between the natural and human worlds in a

way that a conception of the subject as an agent in the world does not. Agents

and environments cannot be understood in isolation from one another.[7]

A second theme that emerges is a suspicion of *a priori* principles and of

"applied philosophy" understood as a deductive methodology in which general

(and usually *a priori*) philosophical principles are applied to resolve particular

conflicts (Parker 23-27; Norton 107-109, Thompson "Pragmatism and Policy"

198-202).[8] As with the clinical pragmatism of Miller, Fins, and Bacchetta, the

reluctance to appeal to *a priori* principles has both theoretical and practical

origins. Theoretically, what leads to a suspicion of *a priori* principles is a

skepticism regarding the epistemic or metaphysical status of the principles

themselves (Parker 23-27). However, there are more practical concerns as well.

Thompson argues that when used to resolve practical problems, the practical

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[7]Rosenthal and Buchholz emphasize this point, but use the more biological notion of organism rather than agent.

> From the backdrop of the non-spectator understanding of human experience, humans and their environment—organic and inorganic—take on an inherently relational aspect. To speak of organism and environment in isolation from each other is never true to the situation, for no organism can exist in isolation from an environment, and an environment is what it is in relation to an organism. The properties attributed to the environment belong to it in the context of that interaction (40).

[8]Both Bryan Norton and Paul Thompson criticize "applied philosophy," which they construe as a attempt to apply general philosophical principles in an attempt to adjudicate particular concrete conflicts. This philosophical approach to practical issues encourages the view that the philosopher's task is strictly a theoretical one. The alternative that Norton recommends, "practical philosophy," has a distinctly pragmatic flavor. It is a problem-oriented approach in which theories are viewed as intellectual tools developed to resolve specific practical controversies. This, in some sense, reverses the relationship between theory and practice. "Practice is prior to theory in the sense that principles are ultimately generated from practice, not vice versa" (Norton 108).

effect of applied philosophy is likely to be negligible or even negative

("Pragmatism and Policy" 198-200). When philosophy is construed exclusively

as a theoretical endeavor, the inability of philosophers to resolve theoretical

conflicts (e.g., conflicts between libertarianism, utilitarianism, and

egalitarianism) renders philosophers incapable of providing clear applications at

the practical level. Falling back on the claim that philosophical reflection

serves to clarify conflicts even when it cannot resolve them does not fair much

better in Thompson's view. The practical effect of clarifying theoretical

conflicts is often to freeze and/or rationalize positions held for other reasons.

Rather than leading to the resolution of practical problems, clarification merely

gives opponents additional justification, justification of a theoretical sort, for

holding positions they would hold anyway for other reasons.[9]

A third feature of pragmatism that makes it attractive as an

environmental philosophy is its commitment to fallibilism. This fallibilism has

both epistemic and metaphysical sources. As has already been noted,

pragmatism's rejection of foundationalist epistemology leads to epistemological

fallibility. But there is a sense in which the commitment to fallibilism has a

metaphysical basis as well. Parker argues that pragmatic metaphysics, to the

extent that there is one, includes beliefs in irreducible pluralism; in

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[9]This leads Thompson to question the value of applied philosophy. "It is questionable whether we are really better off than we were when disputants had vague, intuitive understanding of their own rationale. Arguably, clarity only hardens a dispute that might be resolved had disputants not been so clear about the burdens of proof they expected their opponents to provide. If this is what applied philosophy yields, we might be better off with lawyers!" ("Pragmatism and Policy" 199).

indeterminacy and chance as real features of the world; and in change, development, and novelty rather than stability and immutability as the overarching rule (Parker 25). Thus, our knowledge of the world is fallible, not only due to our epistemic limitations, but also because the world that we seek to know is constantly changing. Thus, fallibilism is an attractive component of an environmental philosophy for two reasons. First, it counters the perceived need to reach philosophical certainty as a prerequisite to practical involvement. Second, the commitment to pluralism and indeterminacy, which are part of the basis for fallibility, undermines theoretical monism, creating space for exploration of different theoretical approaches.

1.3   Pragmatism and Feminism

Pragmatism and Feminism differs from the previous two projects in that Seigfried tries to establish a two-way or mutually beneficial relationship between pragmatism and feminism.[10] She believes that the relationship between pragmatism and feminism can be mutually beneficial because the two

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[10]Seigfried, in essence, provides her own thin conception of pragmatism. She asks whether there might not be "premises they all share, even though they might differ considerably in how they express those premises and what they mean by them?" (6). Though she does not present her premises in a precise list, she mentions the following elements: 1) a stress on the relation of theory to practice that takes experience as the starting point for reflection, 2) an understanding of experience as the ongoing transaction between organism and environment; 3) an instrumental view of knowledge in which knowledge is seen as a tool, guided by interests and values, used to organize experience; 4) the interconnection between facts and values; 5) the fallibility of truths and beliefs; and 6) a naturalistic, pluralistic, developmental, and experimental ethics (6-8).

movements share many theoretical and practical concerns.[11] One she repeatedly

mentions is the emphasis both pragmatism and feminism place on concrete

experience as a starting point for reflection. This focus on experience makes

context an integral element of philosophical problems. There are, however,

other aspects of pragmatism that Seigfried thinks makes it particularly attractive

to feminist reconstruction. For instance, she argues that pragmatism's insistence

on the entanglement of facts and values (see Chapter Three, Section 3.2)

supports feminist claims that statements about reality are political (31). She

also claims that certain features common in the writings of the pragmatists can

be identified as "feminine." These features include a proclivity for metaphorical

discourse rather than "a deductive and reductively symbolic one;" a stress on a

concrete experiential basis for theory in contrast to theoretical puzzles and

abstract conceptual distinctions; and developmental rather than rule-governed

ethics (32).[12]

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[11]Other authors have also noted the affinities between pragmatism and feminism. See Margaret Jane Radin's "The Pragmatist and the Feminist;" Richard Rorty's "Feminism and Pragmatism;" Rosemarie Tong's "The Promises and Perils of Pragmatism: Commentary on Fins, Bacchetta, and Miller;" and Mary Mahowald's "Moral Compromise, Feminism, and Pragmatism," an unpublished manuscript presented at the Central Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association, May 1998.

[12]The following paragraph in which Seigfried draws on Sandra Harding's analysis of feminist research provides maybe her most concise statements of the connection between pragmatism and feminism.
> Harding lists three distinctive features of feminist research:
> (1) it begins with women's experiences as a basis for social
> analysis; (2) its aim is to benefit women; and (3) the researcher is
> not a neutral observer, but is on the same critical plane as the
> subject matter. Support for and development of these three themes

(continued...)

In addition to the support that pragmatism extends to feminism, Seigfried also suggests that feminism has something to offer pragmatism, in particular, encouragement to pursue interdisciplinary work. Pragmatism, she argues, more than any other philosophical movement "defends the legitimacy and irreducibility of multiple perspectives" (10). However, it does so generically so as not to privilege any one perspective. Feminism, because it incorporates a more particular perspective, "can help to identify the hidden assumptions of pragmatist analyses and to demonstrate the crucial difference between merely acknowledging other perspectives and coming to terms with the consequences of such recognition" (10). According to Seigfried, pragmatism should be receptive to interdisciplinary work for a variety of additional reasons as well. First, many of its founders such as James, Dewey, and Mead began their careers prior to the formation of hard disciplinary boundaries and contributed to other fields including physiology, psychology, education, sociology. Second, James, Dewey, and Mead all attacked the growing professionalization of philosophy because of its narrowing of interests and preference for over-intellectualization and abstract theory instead of concrete experience.

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[12](...continued)
can be found throughout pragmatist philosophy, which emphasizes that reflection ought to begin with experience, which is irreducibly plural; that the goal of reflection is to satisfactorily resolve the problematic situations that arise within particular experiences, as these are defined by those involved; and that knowledge is always shaped by — in Harding's words — the "concrete, specific desires and interests" of the investigator (37).

2   Three Overlapping Concerns

These three examples, along with the accounts of practical philosophy and pragmatism in Chapters 2 and 3 suggest several important points at which practical philosophy and pragmatism coincide. In the remainder of this chapter, I explore three such points of convergence: the centrality of context, fallibilism, and the interdisciplinary nature of the problems. My main argument is that these three overlapping concerns warrant serious consideration of pragmatism as a framework for understanding practical philosophy. They create a "fit" between pragmatism and practical philosophy that explains why many philosophers who turn their attention to problems outside the traditional set of philosophical problems often find themselves adopting, explicitly or implicitly, pragmatic approaches, and why they might benefit by more overtly adopting a pragmatic framework for their work. By arguing that pragmatism offers a constructive approach to practical philosophy, I hope to indirectly defend practical philosophy's place within professional philosophy. The substantial connections between pragmatism and practical philosophy suggest that practical philosophy need not be considered an activity alien to professional philosophy. Pragmatic practical philosophers are not leaving the boundaries of the discipline in their work, but are resuscitating a neglected tradition.

2.1   The Centrality of Context

As noted in Chapter 2 practical philosophy's insistence on relevance of context has three implications. First, practical philosophy is oriented toward

context-dependent problems that emerge in particular social and historical settings, and thus, towards problems that are likely to be felt or perceived by men and women outside the discipline of philosophy as well as by those who identify themselves as philosophers. Second, because these context-dependent problems are complex and dynamic, our responses to them must be provisional — fallible, contingent, and subject to revision in light of new information and/or changing circumstances. Third, because the problems of practical philosophy are important to men and women outside of the discipline of philosophy, and because our responses to them must be sensitive to context they are, in a sense, interdisciplinary. Such problems do not fit easily and exclusively into any one discipline. Philosophers who consider them will need to draw on knowledge from, and pay special attention to the connections between, other disciplines and professions.

Before going further in discussing the implications of context, it may be wise to anticipate and respond to a concern that might be raised by some readers. One might ask, "These context-dependent problems that you claim are part of practical philosophy may be interesting and important, but are they really philosophical? Aren't these the sorts of problems that should be dealt with by men and women in other disciplines or professions?" This concern is both understandable and important. It is understandable given the way in which philosophy has been largely construed as a discipline that deals with theoretical and abstract problems. It is important because if these practical and contextual problems, which I have been arguing are the focus of practical philosophy, are

not philosophical problems, then it remains to be seen whether practical philosophy should be considered part of philosophy. In response I want to offer two responses to the question, "What is a philosophical problem?"

One way of identifying philosophical problems is to avoid offering a definition in terms of any necessary and sufficient conditions, and instead point to the discipline itself for guidance. Philosophical problems are those problems addressed by philosophers when they take themselves to be doing philosophy. In this case, calling the contextual problems philosophical is unproblematic as long as it is philosophers who are addressing them. Or more conservatively, one might try to limit the field to those problems or questions that have traditionally been associated with the discipline of philosophy. What do we mean when we say that we know something? How do we reconcile the apparent freedom of human action with our understanding of a world governed by the laws of cause and effect? What do we mean when we say that something is good, or that some action is right? On this view, the contextual problems could still be considered philosophical because they point to, or address directly, many of the traditional philosophical questions.

An illustration may serve to explain more clearly. One current practical issue in bioethics is how much weight, if any, we should place on personal responsibility for health when allocating scarce health care resources. Should we, for example, provide liver transplants to individuals whose liver failure is due to alcoholism? Should we adjust insurance premiums based on lifestyle choices — up for smokers, reckless drivers, or couch potatoes; down for

vegetarians, pedestrians, or joggers? Underlying many of these questions are aspect of the traditional free will problem. We want to know, for instance, to what extent are such choices freely made? In what sense is the alcoholic's decision to continue drinking a free choice in the sense that we may hold him or her personally responsible for the consequences? Neither the practical philosopher nor the pragmatist need deny that these are free will problems. However, they would be skeptical of any claim that they can be answered in one fell swoop by a philosophical solution to *the* free will problem. I think this is the type of point Dewey had in mind when he wrote in regard to epistemology, "In ordinary life there are problems a-plenty of knowledge in particular; every conclusion we try to reach theoretical or practical, affords such a problem. But there is no problem of knowledge in general" ("The Need for a Recovery" 23).

A second, but not incompatible response would be to suggest that philosophical problems are just those difficult and important problems that are not clearly any other sort of problem. They are those significant questions and problems that are amenable to no more or less definite method; questions and problems that are not resolvable by methods or procedures developed in any other established discipline. In fact, once more or less definite methods are found for resolving a set of problems, the problems are no longer philosophical. If one looks at philosophy historically, relative to other disciplines, there would seem to be a great deal of truth in this response. Philosophy was once a much broader field that included many of the natural and social sciences we now view as separate disciplines. It is something like this vision that lies behind John

Austin's analogy between the history of the universe and the history of human inquiry. "In the history of human inquiry," he writes, "philosophy has the place of the initial sun, seminal and tumultuous: from time to time it throws off some portion of itself to take station as a science, a planet, cool and well regulated" ("Ifs and Cans" 180).[13] One advantage of characterizing philosophical problems in this way is that the dividing line between the philosophical and nonphilosophical cannot be equated with the division between the theoretical and the practical, or between the abstract and the concrete. There is nothing that would exclude from philosophy those contextual problems that do not fit anywhere else and for which we have no established methods or procedures.

The question of whether the contextual problems of practical philosophy are really philosophical problems highlights the importance of connecting pragmatism and practical philosophy. It is the insistence on the relevance of context that makes practical philosophy seem "un-philosophical" in contrast to theory-centered philosophy, the norm for professional philosophy. The focus on local, particular, and time sensitive problems seems strangely out of place in a

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[13]One might also argue that something like this is implied by Bertrand Russell's description of philosophy offered in his *A History of Western Philosophy*. Russell argues that philosophy lies somewhere between theology and science.

> Like theology, it consists of speculations on matters as to which definite knowledge has, so far, been unascertainable; but like science, it appeals to human reason rather than to authority . . . All definite knowledge — so I would contend — belongs to science; all dogma as to what surpasses definite knowledge belongs to theology. But between theology and science there is a No Man's Land, exposed to attack from both sides; this No Man's Land is philosophy (xiii).

profession largely defined by the pursuit of universal and timeless truths or principles.[14] In this regard pragmatism can support practical philosophy's claim to be part of professional philosophy. Though pragmatists have often been severe critics of professional philosophy, pragmatism is, nevertheless, a movement within philosophy. Most importantly, it is a movement, within philosophy, that insists on the relevance of context to all inquiry, including philosophical inquiry.

The assertion by pragmatists that context is relevant to philosophical inquiry is both descriptive and prescriptive. Descriptively they argue that philosophical inquiry cannot be purged of all reference to context; at some level, context is relevant to all forms of inquiry whether we choose to acknowledge it or not. Thus the normative or prescriptive claim is not that philosophers *should make* context relevant to philosophy, but that they *should explicitly acknowledge* the relevance of context in their reflections and not attempt to deny it. Such a

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[14] In the Introduction I quoted a story that James tells of a young graduate student's expectations of philosophy courses. That story nicely expresses, I think, the attitude many philosophers, particularly those wedded to the theory-centered tradition, take towards context. The simple and clean world of the philosophy classroom is something quite distinct from the messy world of the street, or everyday life. Still, the former is supposed to account for or shed light on the latter. That James viewed this attitude negatively is made clear in the paragraph that follows the story.

> In point of fact it [philosophy] is far less an account of this actual world than a clear addition built upon it, a classic sanctuary in which the rationalistic fancy may take refuge from the intolerably confused and gothic character which mere facts present. It is no *explanation* of our concrete universe, it is another thing altogether, a substitute for it, a remedy, a way to escape (*Pragmatism* 14, emphasis in the original).

claim has implications for what sort of projects philosophers should be involved in and what approach to projects they should take.

The argument that context is an unavoidable element of all inquiry stems from pragmatism's understanding of both the subject of philosophical inquiry and the nature of thought. As was discussed in Chapter 3, in contrast to Cartesianism,[15] pragmatism views the subject of knowledge as an agent rather than a spectator, and thought as a tool or behavior for contending with the environment rather than a medium used to represent or picture reality (see Chapter 3, section 3.2). These claims regarding the nature of the subject of knowledge and the nature of thought support the claim that context is unavoidably relevant to all inquiry. If thought is understood naturalistically and instrumentally as the result of the interaction of the agent and its environment, then all thought or inquiry emerges from a particular context. Moreover, if the subject of inquiry is an agent who stands in the world, rather than a spectator who stands outside the world, the knower can never completely leave, or fully transcend the context in which inquiry takes place.

A somewhat more subtle, but still significant way in which pragmatism recognizes the importance of context is in its orientation towards the future. This orientation towards the future is evident in a number of ways — in both Peirce's and James' claim that the meaning of beliefs is to be understood in

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[15]Because pragmatism developed as a reaction to perceived deficiencies in traditional or mainstream philosophy, and mainstream philosophy is, in its basic presuppositions, predominantly Cartesian, I developed this thin conception of pragmatism against the backdrop of Cartesianism. See Chapter 3, Section 2 for a description of Cartesianism.

terms of their consequences and dispositions to behave (in the future) in certain ways; in Peirce's and Dewey's experimentalism; and in the emphasis Dewey and James place on the dynamic and changing character of the world. Even the pragmatic notion of truth reflects an orientation towards the future. For the pragmatist, "truths" are not static facts about the world, linguistic snapshots that accurately represent the world, but beliefs rooted in the past that point to the future. True beliefs direct behavior in the present because they have served us well in the past. However, as they guide us now, they are continually tested with a view towards their future consequences.

This orientation towards the future implies that context must be taken seriously, for time is an element of context. Change takes place in time and space; the knowing activity of agents takes place in a specific time and location; the consequences that affect our understanding of the truth are not consequences in the abstract, but actual specific events that occur at a particular time and in a particular location. Thus, to the extent that philosophers take time seriously they will be drawn away from general and abstract problems — those that ignore the relevance of time and location — toward those that are bound to a specific context.[16]

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[16]Richard Rorty notes the implications of taking time seriously for philosophers.

> Philosophers became preoccupied with images of the future only after they gave up hope of gaining knowledge of the eternal. Philosophy began as an attempt to escape into a world in which nothing would ever change. The first philosophers assumed that the difference between the flux of the past and the flux of the future would be negligible. Only as they began to take time

Dewey, perhaps more than any other pragmatist, wrote explicitly about the connection between philosophy and context. While this theme permeates much of his writing he addresses it directly in "Context and Thought," a 1910 article in which he emphatically criticizes philosophy for its systematic disregard of context. "I should venture to assert" he writes, "that the most pervasive fallacy of philosophic thinking goes back to neglect of context" (92).[17] To overcome this fallacy Dewey argues that philosophers must self-consciously bring the context in which philosophical problems arise and are reflected upon under philosophical examination. This requires that attention be paid to two elements of context — background and selective interests.

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[16](...continued)
> seriously did their hopes for the future of this world gradually
> replace their desire for knowledge of another world ("Philosophy
> & the Future" 197).

[17]The neglect of context leads to two extremes in philosophy, or what Dewey refers to as two fallacies — the fallacy of analysis and the fallacy of unlimited generalization. Analysis taken to the extreme, Dewey argues, leads to a form of atomistic particularism in which reality and knowledge must be constructed from discrete and independent elements. The denial of all connection and continuity in experience leads to attempts to identify some transcendent act or faculty of synthesis that can bring the disparate elements together ("Context and Thought" 92-94). This is the unfortunate route down which much of empiricism has headed. In contrast, the fallacy of unlimited universalization, the Achilles heel of idealism, pushes philosophers towards sweeping metaphysical doctrines. It assumes that "the goal of thinking, particularly of philosophic thought, is to bring all things whatsoever into a single coherent and all inclusive whole" ("Context and Thought" 95). Dewey does not deny that the goal of thinking is to bring unity to situations in which the data are fragmented, discrepant, or confused, but he argues that the idea of unlimited extension or generalization beyond the limiting conditions of the situation is meaningless. "When context is taken into account," he argues, "it is seen that every generalization occurs under limiting conditions set by the contextual situation" ("Context and Thought" 95).

Context, Dewey argues, includes a temporal and spatial background that affects all thinking ("Context and Thought" 98-103). This background is composed of the material that is implicitly or tacitly understood and taken for granted in any situation. It surrounds whatever we are reflecting on, but does not itself often become a direct object of reflection. It does so only when we suspect that it is having a significant effect on what we are consciously thinking about. This background includes all those assumptions that we make about how the world works, human nature, etc. For instance, Dewey notes that for centuries Aristotelean metaphysics and Ptolemaic astronomy were taken for granted by those working in the sciences, as was the fixity of the species prior to Darwin's work. Although it is speculative, the same might be said of the theory of evolution today. At one level we are aware of it as a scientific theory that, like other theories, is to be continually tested and reassessed in light of new information. At another level it is taken for granted or assumed to be true, not only as a theory in biology, but as a more general principle of cultural, social, and economic progress.

Context also includes selective interest, an attitude or bias that determines the selection of subject matter for reflection. This is a corollary of the rejection of the spectator theory of knowledge in favor of an agent-centered instrumentalism. Because we inquire as agents in the world, not spectators outside the world, selective interest is an unavoidable element of all thought and knowledge. "There is care, concern, implicated in every act of thought" and

everyone who thinks is "differentially sensitive to some qualities, problems, and

themes" ("Context and Thought" 100).

This is not to say that selective interest leads to a version of subjectivism

that is often associated with a rather naive relativism. Dewey admits that

selective interest is subjective in the sense that the subject who is inquiring is

"implicated in all thinking," but he denies that this necessarily constitutes

subjectivism in the pejorative sense.

> Subjectivism has a bad name, and as an 'ism it deserves its ill
> repute. But the subjective as determining attitude is not to be
> equated to this 'ism. It is not concern which is objectionable even
> when it takes the form of bias. It is certain kinds of bias that are
> obnoxious. Bias for impartiality is as much a bias as is partisan
> prejudice, though it is a radically different quality of bias. To be
> "objective" in thinking is to have a certain sort of selective interest
> operative. One can only see from a certain standpoint, but this
> fact does not make all standpoints of equal value. A standpoint
> which is nowhere in particular and from which things are not seen
> at a special angle is an absurdity ("Context and Thought" 102).

Dewey contends that philosophers tend to neglect context because they

typically undertake reflection in situations far removed from the immediate need

to act. This distance from the need to act leads from a naive neglect of context

to a virtual denial of the importance of context to philosophical thought.

> In the face to face communications of everyday life, context may
> be safely ignored. For, as we have already noted, it is irrevocably
> there. It is taken for granted, not denied, when it is passed over
> without notice. . . . But in philosophizing there is rarely an
> immediately urgent context which controls the course of thought.
> Neglect of specific acknowledgment of it is, then, too readily
> converted into a virtual denial ("Context and Thought" 92).

Because he sees the neglect of context as a vice that impedes philosophy

from serving a constructive social and intellectual function, more self-conscious

attention to the context in which problems arise and are addressed is an essential component of Dewey's vision of a reconstructed philosophy. At any point in time there are beliefs, and a set of institutions and practices connected with these beliefs, that form the background and reflect the selective interests that make up the context in which philosophical reflection takes place. According to Dewey, these beliefs constitute the primary subject matter of philosophical reflection. They are not, as the Cartesian tradition would regard them, extraneous, non-philosophical matter that needs to be filtered out in order to focus clearly on philosophical issues. The aim of philosophy "is to criticize this material, to clarify it, to organize it, to test its internal coherence, and to make explicit its consequences" ("Context and Thought" 106). The problems of philosophy then, are not those immutable and timeless problems that transcend cultures and time periods, but the contextually-bound problems specific to and constituent of cultures and time periods. Thus context must be an indispensable aspect of philosophical reflection.

Dewey recognizes that calling on philosophers to take context into account self-consciously as they reflect goes against the grain of professional philosophy that emphasizes theoretical abstraction and detachment. Such philosophers, he acknowledges, might even run the risk of not being regarded as philosophers. However, he argues, they may "console themselves with the reflection that they are concerning themselves with that inclusive and pervasive context of experience in which philosophical thinking must, for good or ill, take

place, and without reference to which such thinking is in the end but a beating of wings in the void" ("Context and Thought" 110).

The three examples of practical philosophy discussed earlier suggest two particular ways in which the pragmatic emphasis on context may play a role in practical philosophy. First, an emphasis on context helps to maintain a focus on the problems that initiated philosophical reflection and increases the likelihood that the proposed resolutions will be effective in practice. This is clear in Miller, Fins, and Bacchetta's concern that appealing to abstract moral principles makes ethical reasoning a theoretical task divorced from the clinical situation in which the moral problem arises. The insistence that the medical, social, financial, and institutional factors of the case are morally relevant considerations makes it more likely that any proposed resolution will be sensitive to the complexities of the clinical setting. Similarly Light and Katz call on environmental philosophers to regain their focus and address the specific contextually-bound environmental problems.[18] They find pragmatism appealing because it emphasizes the resolution of practical problems, that is problems within the context in which they arise.

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[18]   The problematic situation of environmental ethics greatly troubles us, both as philosophers and as citizens. We are deeply concerned about the precarious state of the natural world, the environmental hazards that threaten humans, and the maintenance of long-term sustainable life on this planet. *The environmental crisis that surrounds us is a fact of experience.* It is thus imperative that environmental philosophy, as a discipline, address *this* crisis—*its* meaning, *its* causes and *its* possible resolution (Light and Katz 1, emphasis added).

Second, attention to context is important because it draws our attention to aspects of problems that are appropriate for philosophical reflection, but that might otherwise be overlooked. This is perhaps most evident in Seigfried's claim that the commitment to the epistemic value or validity of concrete, lived experience also connects pragmatism and feminism. The neglect of experience in philosophy, and thus to the context in which experience takes place, is of great concern to feminists because it too often covers up or removes from sight the ways in which women are oppressed. Seigfried argues that Dewey's understanding of experience can be emancipating in that he provides an account of how our inherited beliefs and institutions influence our current perceptions.[19] They do so by shaping our past experiences, the context of our current experiences, and our expectations of future experiences. In short, they shape our preconceptions of reality. They form the backdrop of inquiry that Dewey identifies as one of the important elements of context that must be brought to the forefront of philosophical reflection. Seigfried argues that this emphasis on how our inherited beliefs and institutions affect current perceptions coincides with and supports what feminists have long argued, that preconceptions shape reality. "When once we realize that what we take to be straightforwardly matters of fact are actually active transformations of experience that includes socially transmitted preconceptions, then we can dispute historically widespread claims

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[19]Because she draws primarily on Dewey and the classical pragmatists, Seigfried emphasizes experience. Contemporary pragmatists such as Rorty focus more on language than experience, but the argument is very similar. Our conceptions of reality are shaped by our linguistic understandings and language games, which are themselves shaped by our selective interests.

that women's perceived inferiority is due to a fact of nature and is therefore

unalterable. Even facts can be questioned" (152).[20]

2.2 Fallibilism

In Chapter 3 I argued that pragmatism was committed to fallibilism, to

the view that even our most firmly-held or well-founded beliefs may need

revision (see Chapter 3, Section 3.4). This commitment to fallibilism stems

from both epistemological and metaphysical considerations. It flows first of all

from pragmatism's rejection of the spectator theory of knowledge and the

aspiration to find an Archimedean point that would guarantee epistemologically

certain starting points. Such a God's-eye view is simply unavailable to a

subject who is an agent in the world rather than a spectator of the world, who

interacts with the world from a particular, and thus, limited perspective.

However, the fallibilism of pragmatism also has a second, more metaphysical

source. Whereas many philosophers have held to the view that Reality, what

ever else it is, must be permanent and immutable, pragmatists argue that our

experience is of a world that is dynamic and changing. If this is the case, then

our knowledge of the world must be dynamic and changing as well — what we

know to be true today could turn out to be false tomorrow even though were are

not now mistaken.

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[20]Seigfried also writes of Dewey, "By demonstrating the centrality of
experience to philosophical analysis, he also demonstrates that the recent
explorations of how experiences vary by ethnicity, gender, class, sexual
orientation, and so forth, should be at the center, not the periphery, of
philosophical discourse" (144).

This pragmatic commitment to fallibilism is quite compatible with an understanding of the problems of practical philosophy as problems that are dynamic and unstable, and for this reason, that admit of only provisional solutions. Provisional solutions are fallible and contingent — i.e., they may work in one context, but not in another, or they may work now, but not in the future. Though based on the best knowledge and evidence currently available, they are, nevertheless, always subject to revision in light of both philosophical and extra-philosophical considerations. They are not guaranteed to work once and for all, but are at least worth trying under the present circumstances. Practical philosophy's willingness to accept such fallible and contingent solutions to contextually-bound problems stands in contrast to theory-centered philosophy's striving for solutions that are certain, universal, timeless, and immutable.

It may be misleading to talk of the problems of practical philosophy as having "solutions" at all. Anthony Weston draws a distinction between two types of problems, "puzzles" and "problematic situations" (12-21).[21] Puzzles are problems that are fairly discrete and self-contained. They promise specific and definite answers, even if we have not yet arrived at them. Our answer to a puzzle is either right or wrong, and there is, at least in theory, a way of verifying which it is. In contrast problematic situations are neither discrete nor

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[21]Weston develops this distinction in order to argue that ethical problems should be considered problematic situations rather than puzzles. While he restricts his discussion to ethical problems, I see no reason why the distinction does not apply to a broader range of problems.

self-contained. They arise out of "larger patterns of life and practice" such that while we are aware that there is a problem, we may find it difficult to say what "the" specific problem is. Problematic situations do not promise specific and definite answers, and thus, Weston argues, it is somewhat inappropriate to speak of "solutions" to them. "Instead we must speak in terms of general strategies, approaches, even attitudes, and only indirectly of 'solving' a problem at all. As a matter of course we expect sustained engagement rather than conclusive resolutions" (13). In a similar vein Hilary Putnam argues that speaking of "problems" and "solutions" is not helpful when considering ethical issues. Such language, he argues, leads us to look at ethical problems as analogous to scientific problems, and thus, encourages the deductivist approach common to analytic philosophy. He recommends using the metaphors of "adjudicating" or "reading" rather than that of "solving" ("How Not to Solve Ethical Problems" 179-192).

It may be helpful here to illustrate with some examples of puzzles and problematic situations. Crossword puzzles, many (though certainly not all) mathematical problems, and truth-table tests for validity are all examples of puzzles. They are fairly discrete and self-contained problems, the answers to which can be shown to be right or wrong. In contrast, consider what is often loosely referred to as the "health care crisis" in the United States. This has all the elements of a problematic situation. For instance, what exactly is "the" problem referred to? Is it that millions of Americans are uninsured? Is it that health care costs have risen dramatically over the last two decades? Is it that

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some Americans can get access to the highest quality care available in the world, while others are denied access to even the most basic services? All of these concerns represent elements of the health care crisis, but none alone can be said to be "the" problem. Moreover, it is not at all clear that there is a single correct "solution" to any of these specific problems, much less to the health care crisis more generally construed. There are a number of proposals each of which 1) relies on certain economic assumptions, 2) makes tradeoffs between controlling cost, providing access to health care, and allowing individual choice for patients and providers, and 3) draws on a particular vision of the role of government in the provision of health care and other basic services.[22]

What I am suggesting is that we should think of the problems of practical philosophy as problematic situations rather than puzzles. This has two distinct advantages. First, it reflects a modesty that is consistent with the notions of contingency and fallibility. Asking practical philosophy to produce solutions,

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[22]These illustrations should not be taken to suggest that there is a clear dividing line between puzzles and problematic situations. Consider, for instance, the problem of designing a computer system for a particular business application, say customer billing. On the one hand, there are certainly elements of the problem that have the characteristics of puzzles — e.g., How much disk space will be required based on the software application and the volume of business expected? What algorithm is needed to perform this certain function? On the other hand, there are also elements of the problem that have the characteristic of a problematic situation. In particular, how one particular puzzle is solved may depend on decisions made regarding tradeoffs in other areas. For example, how to code a piece of software for optimal operating efficiency may be a puzzle, but the decision of whether to program for optimal operating efficiency is not. One would have to ask, "Given the present financial resources of the organization and its long range business plans, should we design a system for optimal operating efficiency, for immediate financial savings, or for ease of future adaptability?" (There will likely be tradeoffs between the three.)

particularly if these are understood to be either clearly correct or incorrect, is simply asking too much. Talk of "solutions" creates unrealistic expectations. Second, construing the problems of practical philosophy as problematic situations allows for a wider range of responses. Because puzzles are more clearly defined, the range of responses is limited to those that will provide a determinate answer. With problematic situations we have other options. We might propose multiple alternatives for consideration and appraisal, or, as Dewey would say, we might "reconstruct" the problem so that we see it in a different light altogether. Problematic situations can be reconstructed in a way that puzzles cannot. When given a puzzle to solve, it is not appropriate to ask, "Is this the right problem?" but when confronted with a problematic situation it is appropriate to ask, "Are we really asking the right questions here? Is X really the problem or do we need to think about Y and Z?"

In addition to the inherent instability of contextual problems, the endorsement of provisional solutions within practical philosophy has another source. As Dewey noted, inquiry takes place in various degrees of distance from concrete situations in which something must be done, and the distance from the concrete situation affects the level of urgency we feel. The closer we are to the concrete situation, the more closely our thinking is related to the immediate need to act, and the more strongly we feel compelled to respond ("Context of Thought" 104-105). This, in part, explains why practical philosophy must tolerate uncertainty — urgency increases uncertainty. Practically, we cannot wait until we solve the standard philosophical problem of

free will before we devise a penal code or decide what to do with *this* person

who committed *that* specific crime; we cannot wait until we know for certain

how a perfectly just society should be structured before we decide how to

allocate *these* heath care resources to people and institutions in *this* community;

physicians and families cannot wait until philosophers agree on what constitutes

human life, personhood, and death before they decide whether *this* patient

should be removed from the ventilator. In such situations certainty, if it is

possible at all, is a luxury that the constraint of limited time precludes. It is a

luxury that only distance from the immediate situation and, thus, from the

immediate need to act affords. Because theory-centered philosophers deal with

abstract and general problems removed from concrete and particular situations,

because they do not face immediate situations in which something must be done,

they do not feel the urgency of such situations.[23]

Fortunately, infallible knowledge, the type of certainty that is expressed

propositionally, is not a prerequisite for effective action. If it were, life would

almost certainly grind to a halt. We make decisions and act on those decisions

all the time in situations where this sort of certainty is inherently lacking.

When I sit down in my chair I assume (in fact I give it no thought) that it will

support me as it always has in the past. I assume that when I set my coffee cup

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[23]It is safe, I think, to assume that Dewey has theory-centered philosophy in mind in the following passage: "Thinking is always thinking, but philosophic thinking is, upon the whole, at the extreme end of the scale of distance from the active urgency of concrete situations. It is because of this fact that neglect of context is the besetting fallacy of philosophical thought" ("Context and Thought" 105).

down, it will stay put on the desk surface rather than float into the air. In short, in the course of day to day activities I rightly assume that nature is uniform even though I cannot give a conclusive argument that it is.[24] And yet, it would not be correct to say that I am not certain of it. I cannot genuinely doubt it — i.e., I cannot *act* as if it were not true. Martin Benjamin contrasts such certainty, what he refers to as "pragmatic certainty," with "propositional certainty" (unpublished manuscript). The source of pragmatic certainty is the action of embodied social agents, not sound propositional arguments or self-evident propositions entertained by the intellect. One could cite a variety of beliefs that are pragmatically certain even though philosophers have given sometimes powerful arguments to show that they are not propositionally certain. For instance, we act as if we have some measure of free will and that other people have minds despite philosophical arguments to the contrary. We claim to make decisions and to act on the basis of those decisions. We praise and blame people. We relate to people as if they had minds and conscious experience similar to our own.

Just as important, philosophers also find that they can meaningfully respond to problems of practical philosophy without certainty, either pragmatic or propositional certainty. This is a point made forcefully by Jonsen and

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[24]James makes this somewhat obvious point in "The Sentiment of Rationality." "The necessity of faith as an ingredient in our mental attitude is strongly insisted on by the scientific philosophers of the present day; . . . That nature will follow tomorrow the same laws that she follows today is, they all admit, a truth which no man can *know*; but in the interests of cognition as well as of action we must postulate or assume it" (23).

Toulmin in the account of their experience working with the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavior Research (*Abuse of Casuistry* 16-20). The commission was to review existing regulations and develop general ethical guidelines that would guide the development of future biomedical and behavioral research. Jonsen and Toulmin report that the commissioners were able to come to agreement on many practical conclusions in regards to specific cases, or types of cases. This was a somewhat surprising result considering the diverse educational, professional, and religious backgrounds represented on the commission. However, while the commissioners usually agreed on the practical conclusions, they nevertheless provided very different reasons and appealed to different general principles to support their conclusions. In other words, disagreements were more profound at the theoretical level than at the practical level. Importantly, however, the disagreement at the deeper theoretical level did not stop the commission from making practical recommendations that have provided significant guidance for researchers involved with human subjects. The experience of the commission demonstrates that solid contributions can be made to practical policy decisions without certainty, in fact, in some cases, even without agreement on theoretical matters that seem important.

2.3   Interdisciplinary Work

The third and final overlapping concern that I want to explore is the way both pragmatism and practical philosophy push us towards interdisciplinary

work. Unlike the commitment to the centrality of context or the insistence on fallibility, this theme is not so much an explicit emphasis in either pragmatism or practical philosophy as it is a common implication arising from other emphases.

It is tempting to make an argument connecting pragmatism and interdisciplinary work by pointing to the diverse interests and involvements of pragmatists and the range of fields that draw on pragmatic themes. For instance, one could look at the example of the classical pragmatists. The founders of pragmatism drew heavily on their knowledge and experience outside of philosophy, and resisted the trend toward increasing specialization in philosophy. Neither Peirce nor James was formerly trained in philosophy. Peirce had extensive training and experience in the physical sciences. James's formal training was in medicine, and he was appointed to teach physiology and psychology at Harvard before he became a professor of philosophy.[25] Furthermore, he was critical of specialized training in philosophy and of professionalization in the discipline ("The Ph.D. Octopus" 67-74). Dewey was one of the first people to receive a Ph.D. in philosophy at Johns Hopkins, but throughout his career he contributed to disciplines other than philosophy, particularly to education. Despite these indications that the early pragmatists viewed interdisciplinary work favorably, it must also be noted that all three, but

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[25]See Daniel J. Wilson's *Science, Community, and the Transformation of American Philosophy, 1860-1930*, pages 12-39 for a discussion of Peirce's and James' scientific backgrounds and how those backgrounds affected their understanding of an approach to philosophy.

particularly Peirce and James, came of age at a time when disciplinary boundaries in the university were not yet well set. Given the timing of their careers it might be more accurate to say that their support for interdisciplinary work is more evident in their resistance to narrowing the scope of philosophy, rather than in any self-conscious work across established disciplines.

Still, there are more than historical reasons for claiming that there is a connection between pragmatism and interdisciplinary work. There are at least two features of pragmatism that encourage interdisciplinarity. The first is its emphasis on pluralism and the value of multiple perspectives. The second is the holism reflected in the tendency of pragmatists to undermine distinctions such as those between the subject and object, experience and reality, facts and values, and practice and theory.

Pluralism in pragmatism has many interrelated sources including emphases on concrete experience and the agent point of view, anti-foundationalism and epistemic fallibilism, and the inescapability of contingency and chance in the universe. These factors lead to the conviction that multiple descriptions of the world and multiple philosophic approaches[26] are unavoidable. Such pluralism could well degenerate into a sort of radical relativism, but this tendency is at least offset by a counterbalancing emphasis on the communal

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[26]James goes as far as to attribute a philosopher's general philosophic approach to his or her temperament. The "tender-minded" are drawn to rationalism, whereas the "tough-minded" tend towards empiricism (*Pragmatism* 8-11), and many cannot be easily categorized. The point here, although James does not draw it himself, is that if philosophical orientation is dictated, to a large degree by temperament, then there are bound to be many different orientations.

nature of inquiry found in the pragmatism of Peirce, Dewey, Mead, and others. The lack of epistemic foundations and the inevitability of multiple perspectives make intersubjectivity and community important, if not indispensable, factors in developing objective, but fallible, knowledge. According to Richard Bernstein, "it is only by submitting our hypotheses to public critical discussion that we become aware of what is valid in our claims and what fails to withstand critical scrutiny. It is only by the serious encounter with what is other, different, and alien that we can hope to determine what is idiosyncratic, limited, and partial" ("Pragmatism, Pluralism, and the Healing of Wounds" 9).

This combination of pluralism and community, what Bernstein refers to as "engaged fallibilistic pluralism" ("Pragmatism, Pluralism, and the Healing of Wounds" 15), encourages not only an openness to different philosophical approaches and orientations, but also an openness to other disciplines. It leads to the recognition both that there is no distinctive philosophical approach, and that no single discipline holds a privileged epistemic position over all the other disciplines. Furthermore, it leads to the recognition that the disciplinary boundaries that have evolved in academia may not serve us well in resolving intellectual problems. We may, according to Bernstein, "discover that we share more intellectually in common with colleagues trained in different disciplines than with our own departmental philosophic colleagues" (14-15).[27]

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[27]Bernstein refers to this as a "counter-disciplinary" movement to distinguish it from an "interdisciplinary" movement. In the latter, while attempts to deal with a given problem may require multiple perspectives, there is the presumption that there are distinctive (e.g., philosophical, anthropological,

(continued...)

A second, more subtle, feature of pragmatism that encourages interdisciplinary work is the way pragmatists have insisted upon breaking down dichotomies, particularly dichotomies between facts and values and between theory and practice. Undermining these dichotomies cultivates interdisciplinary work to the extent that such dichotomies are used to delineate boundaries between disciplines. For instance, once it is recognized that facts and values are inseparably entangled (they "interpenetrate" as Putnam would say) the fact/value distinction cannot be used to clearly distinguish the sciences from the humanities. On the one hand, the academic and professional world within which the activity of science takes place is imbued with culture, history, and values. On the other, humanistic study of culture, history, and values inevitably draws on knowledge of the world that science has made available. This is not to say that either science or the humanities can be reduced to the other, or that we cannot for many social and practical purposes distinguish the two. However, it does suggest that they cannot be completely isolated, and more generally, that the perceived boundaries between disciplines are more permeable than is often thought.

The openness to interdisciplinary work makes pragmatism particularly suitable to practical philosophy because the problems of practical philosophy, as I have argued, do not often fall neatly within the purview of a single discipline, much less exclusively under the purview of theory-centered philosophy. There

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[27](...continued)
sociological, etc.) approaches ("Pragmatism, Pluralism, and the Healing of Wounds" 14).

are two related reasons for this. First, the problems of practical philosophy

often emerge from philosophical reflection on the activities within other

disciplines and professions, and sometimes may actually be "brought to"

philosophy from people outside the discipline. In most cases, they will be

perceived to be not merely philosophical problems, but to be problems that have

some practical import or relevance outside of philosophy. Second, the problems

of practical philosophy tend to be interdisciplinary because they are context-

dependent. If a problem brought to philosophy is stripped of all its contextual

features — that is, if it is framed as an abstract and general problem suitable

for theory-centered philosophy — then it ceases to be a problem for practical

philosophy. However, if the contextual elements are retained as essential

elements of the problem, then philosophical training alone will be insufficient.

Aspects of the problem will lie outside the realm of philosophical expertise

alone.

The argument that the problems of practical philosophy are

interdisciplinary is supported by the way practical philosophers have effectively

worked with people from other disciplines on common projects. Some of the

most notable examples are the national committees and task forces created to

address issues in biomedical ethics.[28] At a more local level, philosophers have

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[28]A short list of the more prominent commissions would include the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavior Research, the President's Commission for the Study of Ethical Problems in Medicine and Biomedical and Behavioral Research, the President's Task Force on Health Care Reform, and the National Bioethics Advisory Committee Commission. While these national committees get a lot of attention, there are

worked effectively with nurses, physicians, social workers, chaplains, lawyers, and community members on institutional (hospital and nursing home) ethics committees. These committees often include representatives from various disciplines including law, medicine, theology, economics, and philosophy under the plausible assumptions that 1) a complete understanding of the problems they address demands input from multiple perspectives, and 2) that the quality of the recommendations they may ultimately make will be improved by consideration of multiple perspectives.[29] It is not always the case, however, that work on interdisciplinary problems must involve people from various disciplines. For instance, philosophers who work on problems in cognitive science, for instance, may find it necessary to draw heavily on work in neurophysiology, psychology, or computer science though they are not involved in any group decision-making process.

The question of precisely what role a philosopher should take in these interdisciplinary contexts is not one that I can fully address here. However, I will briefly sketch three suggestions that indicate the direction I think that

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[28](...continued)
also numerous such committees formed at the state or local levels as well.

[29]See also Paul Thompson's discussion of the role that the community of inquiry plays in a pragmatic reconstruction of environmental problems. He argues because the value of truth or knowledge is an essential part of the pragmatic theory of truth, the community of inquiry must include practitioners as well as theoreticians. "In practice, however, communities of inquiry that include practitioners — bridge-builders, farmers, policy-makers — have a reliable mechanism of self-criticism: the ideas must work. Thought and theory must help solve practical problems, and when it does not, we must revise in a fashion that is methodologically equivalent to falsification" ("Pragmatism and Policy" 203).

discussion should take.[30] First, to say that the problems of practical philosophy

require interdisciplinary attention is not to say that the practical philosopher

must be an expert in each of the other disciplines or professions involved. This

is simply unrealistic. An appropriate resolution may require input from a

number of people, each of whom brings a particular expertise. What the

philosopher needs is a basic working knowledge of the area(s) and an ability to

learn from the other people involved so that his or her unique contributions will

be appropriate to the context.

Second, in interdisciplinary settings philosophers, like people from other

disciplines, can and do make unique contributions of both knowledge and skill.

Many problems outside of philosophy have connections to problems that

philosophers have dealt with extensively. For instance, while the values of

autonomy, beneficence, and justice or the concepts of personhood and death

cannot be simply applied to resolve problems in clinical medicine, they are,

nevertheless, relevant to the issues that do arise there. Philosophers who have

spent a considerable amount of time reflecting on such values and concepts can

provide a unique insight that professionals from other disciplines may not be

otherwise aware of.   In addition to philosophical "knowledge" the skills in

critical thinking and conceptual analysis that philosophers consciously work to

develop in the course of their training can be extremely useful. Philosophers,

for instance, through careful argumentation have been instrumental in critically

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[30]See also E. Haavi Morreim, "At the Intersection of Medicine, Law,
Economics, and Ethics: Bioethics and the Art of Intellectual Cross-Dressing."

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examining some distinctions in medicine, such as the distinction between ordinary and extraordinary treatment or between withholding and withdrawing life sustaining treatment, that were found either conceptually flawed or morally irrelevant. Clear, critical thinking and careful attention to language are not the exclusive domains of philosophy, but they are aptitudes, developed in philosophical training, that philosophers can use to make unique contributions in interdisciplinary settings.

Finally, philosophers have a unique role to play in helping to see the connections between various disciplines. One must be careful not to make too strong of a statement here. This is not the claim that philosophy is the queen of the sciences or that it is the arbiter of all knowledge claims by virtue of some unique understanding of knowledge itself. The claim is something much more modest. What I have in mind is a vision of philosophy that conceives of itself, not primarily as a specialized discipline with its own exclusive set of problems and methods, but in the words of Wilfred Sellars, as an attempt to "understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term" ("Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man" 1).[31] Philosophers can play this role in interdisciplinary settings because they are trained to question the methods and presuppositions that professionals in other disciplines often take for granted. This is evident in the many second

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[31] Richard Rorty is fond of citing Sellars' conception of philosophy, but his usage of it tends to have the effect of making philosophy less professional. Downplaying the usefulness of other philosophical knowledge or skills, he envisions a "post-philosophical" culture in which the philosopher is an all-purpose intellectual (Introduction: Pragmatism and Philosophy" xiii-xlvii).

order areas of study that have long been part of philosophy — the philosophy of science, of religion, of art, of mathematics, medicine, etc. Moreover, unlike other disciplines, which draw a distinction between the discipline and the philosophy of the discipline (e.g., between science and the philosophy of science), there is no philosophy of philosophy understood as a distinct subject matter. When one does the philosophy of philosophy, one is still doing philosophy. Given this propensity to investigate the methods and assumptions of different disciplines, philosophers may be better able to bridge the gaps between disciplines, to foster communication between persons in different disciplines, and thus, to facilitate interdisciplinary work.

In this chapter I have argued that three overlapping concerns — the centrality of context, fallibilism, and the interdisciplinary nature of the problems — bring practical philosophy and pragmatism together. These three points of connection explain why pragmatism provides a promising and attractive framework for practical philosophy, and why several contemporary practical philosophers have turned to pragmatism to find a deeper understanding and justification of what they are doing. Perhaps less directly, the connection with pragmatism also supports the claim that practical philosophy is a philosophically defensible endeavor by showing that practical philosophy need not be considered an activity foreign to professional philosophy. Pragmatic practical philosophers need not leave the boundaries of the discipline when they do their work. They

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can draw on an important, but neglected tradition, the tradition of American pragmatism.

There is, however, an unresolved tension between the version of pragmatic practical philosophy outlined in this chapter and the type of theory-centered philosophy that provides the basis for much of contemporary professional philosophy. Pragmatism, like practical philosophy, seems to give priority to practice over theory. While this provides support for practical philosophy, it leaves open the question of how we are to understand the relationship between theory and practice in philosophy, and thus, of how we are to understand the relationship between theory-centered and practical philosophy. I turn to these questions in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

PRAGMATISM, PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY AND WIDE REFLECTIVE

EQUILIBRIUM

The previous chapters presented a somewhat stark contrast between practical philosophy and theory-centered philosophy. The former emphasizes concrete, particular, time-sensitive problems; the latter emphasizes abstract, universal, and eternal problems. The former insists that the need to act ultimately motivates our theoretical work, and that careful attention to context is an important feature of inquiry; the latter insists on stepping away from the particular immediate context in order to address problems more clearly and thoroughly at an abstract level. The former downplays the role of theoretical inquiry, giving practice a high priority over theory; the latter downplays the role of practice, making philosophy primarily, if not exclusively, a contemplative enterprise. Given this contrast, one might question whether practical and theory-centered philosophy have enough in common to legitimately be considered parts of the same discipline.

In this chapter I use the notion of wide reflective equilibrium, considered as a general model for philosophical inquiry, as a bridge between practical and theory-centered philosophy. As a model of inquiry that recognizes the mutual interdependence of theory and practice, wide reflective equilibrium provides a way of bringing practical and theory-centered philosophy together. Rather than two completely separate endeavors, they are different, but essential elements of

an integrated process of philosophical inquiry. For this reason wide reflective

equilibrium is quite compatible with the type of pragmatic practical philosophy

defended in previous chapters.

This chapter is divided into three sections. In the first I describe wide

reflective equilibrium, both as a model of justification in moral and social

philosophy, and as a more general model of philosophical thinking. In the

second I look at the connections or affinities between practical philosophy,

pragmatism, and wide reflective equilibrium, arguing that wide reflective

equilibrium helps to bridge the gap between theory-centered and practical

philosophy by offering an account of how theory and practice stand in a

relationship of mutual dependence. In the third and final section I raise and

respond to an objection that has been brought against both pragmatism and

reflective equilibrium, what I call the problem of "bad coherence."

1   Wide Reflective Equilibrium

Wide reflective equilibrium has been expounded primarily as an

alternative to foundationalist models of justification in moral and social

philosophy.[1] Broadly construed, foundationalism in ethics can refer to both the

content and the structure of an ethical theory. It is the view that moral

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[1]See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 20, 46-53, 579; *Political Liberalism*, 8,
28, 45; "The Independence of Moral Theory, 7-10; Norman Daniels, "Introduction:
Reflective Equilibrium in Theory and Practice;" "Wide Reflective Equilibrium and
Theory Acceptance in Ethics;" "On Some Methods of Ethics and Linguistics;" and David
Degrazia, *Taking Animals Seriously: Mental Life and Moral Status*, 11-35.

justification has a two-tiered structure. Some moral beliefs are justified non-inferentially through an appeal to reason or intuition. These basic beliefs serve as a foundation for other beliefs that are derived from them — i.e., that are justified inferentially.[2] While it is not necessary that a foundationalist theory of justification assert that foundational beliefs can be known with certainty or that inferences from them are infallible, the attractiveness of foundationalist theories is the promise that specific moral judgments can be given some independent justification. That is, they can be justified by appealing to more general beliefs or principles that are justified independently of specific moral judgments.

As a coherence model of justification wide reflective equilibrium stands in contrast to foundationalism. Like foundationalists, advocates of wide reflective equilibrium recognize that our moral system includes beliefs of various levels of generality, from specific moral judgments to general moral principles. However, unlike the foundationalists, they do not hold that justification moves systematically or exclusively from the general to the specific. Instead, both our specific considered moral judgments[3] and our moral

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[2]David DeGrazia identifies two types of foundationalism in ethics, rationalism and deductivism (*Taking Animals Seriously* 11). Rationalism makes claims regarding the content of ethics. It is the view that ethics has a metaethical foundation, that there are some nonmoral facts that make ethics rationally compelling. In contrast, deductivism is a claim about the structure of ethics. The claim is that there is a normative foundation for ethics, and that all moral judgments can, in principle, be derived from it.

[3]The term "considered" is added here to indicate that not all specific moral judgments have the same justificatory weight. Rawls characterizes considered judgments as those that are "rendered under conditions favorable to the exercise of the sense of justice, and therefore in circumstances where the more common excuses and explanations for making a mistake do not obtain (*A Theory of Justice* 47-48). Daniels describes them

principles are justified by how well they cohere with one another and with other relevant background beliefs and theories (philosophical, empirical, etc.) that we hold to be true or well-grounded. Norman Daniels describes this process of justification in the following way:

> The method of wide reflective equilibrium is an attempt to produce coherence in an ordered triple of sets of beliefs held by a particular person, namely, (a) a set of considered moral judgments, (b) a set of moral principles, and (c) a set of relevant background theories. . . . We can imagine the agent working back and forth, making adjustments to his considered judgments, his moral principles, and his background theories. In this way he arrives at an equilibrium point that consists of the ordered triple of (a), (b), and (c) ("Wide Reflective Equilibrium and Theory Acceptance" 22).

It is important to note that while there are, to be sure, different levels of generality, those levels of generality do not correspond to justificatory priority. None of our judgments, principles, or theories is privileged; none serves as an absolute foundation for the others, and each is open to revision. We may change a specific moral judgment so that it is more consistent with a general moral principle, or we may decide that a moral principle must be modified to better account for the range of specific moral judgments that we hold firmly. Say, for instance, that I find myself in a situation where I need to lie in order to protect a friend. In fact, in this particular case I feel it is the right thing to do. However, I also believe that it is wrong to lie. In order to reach coherence

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[3](...continued)
as initial moral judgments that have been filtered "to include only those of which he [the moral agent] is relatively confident and which have been made under conditions conducive to avoid errors of judgment. For example, the person is calm and has adequate information about cases being judged" ("Wide Reflective Equilibrium and Theory Acceptance" 22).

between my specific judgment and my general moral principle, I need to modify

one or the other. I could change my judgment, concluding that it would be

wrong to lie for my friend. Or, I could qualify my general principle to allow

lying in certain cases. However, according to advocates of wide reflective

equilibrium, there is no predetermined formula that can tell me which I should

revise.

Something needs to be said about the notion of coherence. What does it

mean to say that one's particular moral judgments, moral principles, and

background theories cohere or that they are in equilibrium? It is not my intent

here to offer any definitive analysis of the notion of coherence as it is

understood in wide reflective equilibrium. In fact, I am not sure that there is

any single definitive notion. However, three comments are, I think,

appropriate. First, it is important to note that the notion of coherence is a

complex notion that involves much more than just logical consistency. Daniels,

for instance, claims that coherence also involves inference to the best

explanation, plausibility, and simplicity ("Introduction: Reflective Equilibrium

in Theory and Practice" 2). In a more detailed account David DeGrazia lists

eight "theoretical virtues" that he argues are "packed into" the notion of

coherence. These virtues include logical consistency, argumentative support,

global illumination, simplicity, clarity, power, plausibility, and compatibility

with whatever else we know or reasonably believe (*Taking Animals Seriously*

14-17). So, while logical consistency is an important element of coherence, it

alone, does not suffice to make a system coherent.

Second, wide reflective equilibrium is an agent-centered model of justification. The model does not describe what it would be for a system of beliefs to be justified from a God's-eye point of view, but from the point of view of an agent or community of agents with practical as well as theoretical interests and values.[4] Thus, DeGrazia's terminology notwithstanding, the considerations, virtues, or values that are included in the notion of coherence have practical as well as theoretical dimensions.[5] In the first place, we may have good reasons for wanting our beliefs, taken as a whole, to enjoy argumentative support, to be simple, to be clear, and to be plausible. A system of beliefs with these qualities may be easier to teach and communicate to others, easier to understand and defend, and better able to provide guidance in situations where it is not clear what action to take. More importantly, coherence from an agent-centered perspective must account for what we *do* as well as the propositions we believe to be true. You may be able to put down on paper a clear, simple, consistent set of propositions, but if you cannot live by them, they do not form a coherent system. For instance, it may be possible intellectually to

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[4]One of the most eloquent arguments of the role that both theoretical and practical concerns play in rationality can be found in James' "The Sentiment of Rationality."

[5]Some precedence for the claim that the notion of coherence has both practical and theoretical dimensions can be found in James, particularly in "The Sentiment of Rationality." In that essay he argues that we perceive a "conception of the frame of things" as rational when it meets certain theoretic and practical needs. Among the theoretic needs he includes simplicity, clearness, and unity. Among the practical needs he argues that for a philosophy to be considered rational it must "define the future *congruously with our spontaneous powers*" (16). By this he means both that a philosophy must be capable of making future experiences comprehensible and that it appeal to the natural powers and impulses that we value.

defend the claim that other people do not have minds or that we have no free will. However, since it is not possible to *live by* such beliefs they cannot be part of a coherent system.

Finally, because the notion of coherence involves a complex constellation of practical and theoretical values or considerations, wide reflective equilibrium is not an algorithmic or systematic process that results in a single determinate state of belief. In fact, it is possible for different agents or communities who share a significant number of beliefs to reach different points of equilibrium — i.e., they can disagree on other beliefs without either being incoherent. One reason for this is that conflicts emerge between the values involved in coherence that cannot be resolved by appealing to the notion of coherence itself. Consider, for instance, the values of simplicity and clarity. The value of simplicity may move one to adopt only a small number of very general principles (e.g., It is wrong to lie), whereas the value of clarity may motivate one to adopt a greater number of more specific principles or to qualify the general principles to make them as specific as possible (e.g., It is wrong to lie, except when one must do so to protect a friend, etc.). The notion of coherence provides no determinate answer as to how the tradeoff between simplicity and clarity (or between other values) should be made.[6] Thus, different points of equilibrium could be reached by different agents or communities of agents who reconcile the values of simplicity and clarity differently.

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[6]James discusses the tension between the values of simplicity and clearness in "The Sentiment of Rationality" (4-8).

Though wide reflective equilibrium was expounded initially, and continues to be considered, primarily as a model of theory justification in moral and social philosophy, there is nothing in the structure of the model that would limit it to moral inquiry. There is no reason why the considered judgments must be limited to considered moral judgments or that the general principles should be limited to moral principles. Wide reflective equilibrium can be conceived as a broader model of philosophical justification. For instance, we might seek coherence between our beliefs about subjective visual experiences, what cognitive psychology and neurophysiology tell us about visual functioning in humans, and our general philosophical theories of mind, representation, and information processing. In so doing we will be engaged in philosophical inquiry as Sellars understood it, in an attempt to "understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term" ("Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man" 1). Though I will at points speak of it as a model of justification in moral and social philosophy, in what follows I want to consider wide reflective equilibrium as a more general model of philosophical justification that is particularly suitable to the version of pragmatic practical philosophy developed in earlier chapters.

The proposition that wide reflective equilibrium should not be limited to moral and social philosophy, but should be considered as a more general model of philosophical justification is by no means a new or unique proposal. Both

Rawls and Daniels suggest that the model is not limited to moral theory.[7]

Rawls, in fact, in a footnote attributes an initial formulation of the model to

Nelson Goodman who he claims advocated a sort of reflective equilibrium as a

method of justifying systems of induction (*A Theory of Justice* 20). Still other

philosophers have considered (both advocated and criticized) reflective

equilibrium as a more general epistemological theory.[8] Kai Nielsen has perhaps

been the most articulate advocate of wide reflective equilibrium as a general

approach to philosophical inquiry. Looking at Nielsen's work over the past

decade one can see a general transition and expansion in his use of wide

reflective equilibrium from a method of justification in moral and political

philosophy, to a component of critical theory, to a general non-foundationalist

approach to philosophical inquiry.[9] He writes that while wide reflective

equilibrium

> starts as a controversial philosophical thesis, it commends itself to
> reflective common sense and is a systematization of a way of
> proceeding we pervasively apply commonsensically in inquiry and

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[7]Rawls suggests that it is similar to the process of justifying principles of induction and linguistic principles (*A Theory of Justice* 20, 47-50) . Daniels argues that the coherentist account of justification is intended to be general and not limited to moral justification. He claims that the method is used in other domains as well, such as the justification of alternative logics and the justification of scientific theories ("On Some Methods of Ethics and Linguistics" 72-77).

[8]See for example, Ernest Sosa, "Equilibrium in Coherence?" and Stephen Stich, "Reflective Equilibrium, Analytic Epistemology and the Problem of Cognitive Diversity."

[9]Kai Nielsen, "How to be Skeptical about Philosophy;" "Scientism, Pragmatism, and the Fate of Philosophy;" "Philosophy as Critical Theory;" "Reflective Equilibrium and the Transformation of Philosophy;" "Relativism and Wide Reflective Equilibrium;" and "Philosophy Within the Limits of Wide Reflective Equilibrium Alone."

in the justification of belief and action. The method of wide reflective equilibrium, I would contend, is enlightened common sense rooted in our considered judgments and our use of public reason . . . It is a way of conceptualizing what we do when we are being reflective and careful and are not being carried away by some philosophical extravagance or other ("Philosophy Within the Limits of Wide Reflective Equilibrium Alone" 16).

2   Pragmatism and Wide Reflective Equilibrium

While wide reflective equilibrium is not typically touted as a model of inquiry emerging from pragmatism or as an approach to practical philosophy there are good reasons why a philosopher who is sympathetic to both pragmatism and practical philosophy should give it serious consideration. First, there are several features of wide reflective equilibrium — its non-foundationalism and emphasis on fallibilism, the importance it places on context, and the fluidity it allows between facts and values — that make it quite compatible with pragmatism. Pragmatists may find in wide reflective equilibrium an articulation of a model of inquiry that is both widely held and consistent with their pragmatic convictions. Second, the significant role that wide reflective equilibrium gives to concrete practice should appeal to practical philosophers. Moreover, the fact that it does so without denigrating theory makes it particularly attractive to those who want to maintain continuity with more theory-centered philosophy.

A few preliminary comments regarding the historical relationship between pragmatism and wide reflective equilibrium are appropriate. There are interesting passages in the writings of the classical pragmatists to suggest that

they anticipated and supported certain themes that later became elements of wide reflective equilibrium. For instance, Peirce's description of inquiry as a struggle to move from the irritation of doubt to the calm state of belief is not unlike a conception of inquiry as a process that moves us from a state of disequilibrium to equilibrium. James's description of rationality as a psychological state in which we experience a fluency or freedom of thought and irrationality as a state in which that fluency is disturbed expresses a similar view ("Sentiment of Rationality" 3-4). James also describes the process of developing new beliefs as one in which the individual, confronted with new opinions that conflict with his or her existing set of beliefs, experiences inward trouble and seeks to resolve the trouble by changing beliefs or adding beliefs until the new can be reconciled with the old.[10] At some points he even uses the term "equilibrium" to describe the process of reconciling old beliefs with new experiences, of expanding our knowledge (*Pragmatism* 78-79). Dewey's account of inquiry in "The Pattern of Inquiry" seems also to anticipate wide

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[10]It is worth quoting James at some length here.

The process here is always the same. The individual has a stock of old opinions already, but he meets a new experience that puts them to a strain. Somebody contradicts them; or in a reflective moment he discovers that they contradict each other; or he hears of facts with which they are incompatible; or desires arise in him which they cease to satisfy. The result is an inward trouble to which his mind till then had been a stranger, and from which he seeks to escape by modifying his previous mass of opinions. He saves as much of it as he can, for in this matter of belief we are all extreme conservatives. So he tries to change first this opinion, and then that (for they resist change very variously), until at last some new idea comes up which he can graft upon the ancient stock with a minimum of disturbance of the latter, some idea that mediates between the stock and the new experience and runs them into one another most felicitously and expediently (*Pragmatism* 31).

reflective equilibrium. His description of problematic situations that initiate

inquiry as those that are "disturbed, troubled, ambiguous, confused, full of

conflicting tendencies, obscure, etc.," is a characterization of incoherence or

disequilibrium (320). Moreover the process of inquiry, according to Dewey,

whether it be the scientific inquiry or the inquiry of common sense, is a process

intended to reestablish coherence.[11]

While the classical pragmatists predated Rawls' introduction of wide

reflective equilibrium in *A Theory of Justice* (1971), some recent ("post-

Rawlsian") philosophers have noted the apparent connections between

pragmatism and wide reflective equilibrium. DeGrazia, for instance, explicitly

places his coherence model of ethical justification within the framework of

philosophical pragmatism, particularly emphasizing the non-foundationalism of

pragmatism.[12] Rorty's position in regard to wide reflective equilibrium is

somewhat ambiguous, but I think it is fair to say that he would support the

general thrust of wide reflective equilibrium when it is construed quite broadly.

Though he advocates a "pragmatism without method" in response to the

tendencies towards scientism in pragmatism and is suspicious of any general

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[11]*"Inquiry is the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole"* ("Patterns of Inquiry 319-320, italics in the original).

[12]DeGrazia advocates pragmatism as an alternative to foundationalism. "By *pragmatism* I mean, roughly, the view that the best way to approach philosophical and moral problems is not to try to get behind appearances and glimpse things as they are in themselves — an approach that assumes there is a "God's-eye" view of things — but to understand theories as tools for dealing with the world, and to use (and fashion) them accordingly" (*Taking Animals Seriously* 18).

philosophical methodology ("Pragmatism without Method" 63-77), his very

Deweyan reading of Rawls in "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy"

suggests support for wide reflective equilibrium, particularly of its non-

foundational aspects (179-186). Nielsen draws connections between pragmatism

and wide reflective equilibrium in several articles, arguing that it is a model of

philosophical inquiry that is consistent with the anti-foundationalism and

fallibilism of pragmatism.[13]

Still, while there is much to suggest a close connection between wide

reflective equilibrium and pragmatism it would be a mistake to imply that all

advocates of wide reflective equilibrium are pragmatists or that all pragmatists

employ the model of wide reflective equilibrium. It is important to note, for

instance, that there is little, if any, evidence that either Rawls or Daniels, two of

the primary defenders of wide reflective equilibrium, see themselves as working

within the pragmatic tradition. Nor do they explicitly connect wide reflective

equilibrium to the pragmatism.[14] Thus, it seems reasonable to contend that

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[13]In particular see "Scientism, Pragmatism, and the Fate of Philosophy" and "Philosophy Within the Limits of Wide Reflective Equilibrium Alone."

[14]For example, Rawls barely mentions James, Dewey, or Royce in *A Theory of Justice* or *Political Liberalism*, and when he does it is not in connection with reflective equilibrium. Maybe even more notable is the absence of any significant reference to either pragmatism or the pragmatists in Daniel's *Justice and Justification*, a compilation of his essays on reflective equilibrium that span nearly two decades. There may, however, be some indirect connection. Rawls does give some credit for the model to Nelson Goodman whom some have characterized as a pragmatist. Still, Rawls does not explicitly attribute Goodman's approach to his pragmatism.

while wide reflective equilibrium is consistent with pragmatism it is not

theoretically dependent on pragmatism.[15]

2.1 Non-Foundationalism and Fallibilism

Pragmatism and wide reflective equilibrium share a commitment to non-

foundationalism and fallibilism. As I argued in Chapter 3, pragmatism

developed largely as a reaction to Cartesianism, one of the hallmark

characteristics of which is a sort of radical foundationalism that claims that in

order to qualify as knowledge our beliefs must rest on some certain foundations,

and that humans have some special faculty by which we can know these

foundations. Pragmatists have questioned both of these claims.

In earlier chapters I explored in some detail the connection between

pragmatism's skepticism regarding human access to indubitable foundations and

its rejection of representationalism and the spectator theory of knowledge. In

rejecting the spectator theory of knowledge in favor of an agent-centered point

of view pragmatists put aside the project of trying to find any absolute or

infallible foundations for our knowledge of the world. In particular they dismiss

the idea that there could be a God's-eye view of the universe, that there could

be any foundation for knowledge independent of agents with their aims and

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[15]This point is made nicely by Kai Nielsen in his discussion of the similarities and dissimilarities between Rawls and Rorty in "Philosophy Within the Limits of Wide Reflective Equilibrium Alone." Nielsen argues that Rawls and Rorty would agree that in moral, social, and political philosophy one should "travel metaphysically and epistemologically light," but that they would give different reasons for doing so (31-34).

interests. However, pragmatists have argued, the absence of indubitable foundations does not preclude the possibility of knowledge and justification. Indubitable beliefs are not the only starting points for justification. While every belief is fallible, we cannot, as agents, doubt everything at once. Otto Neurath's useful metaphor of rebuilding a ship at sea is apt here. We can completely rebuild a ship at sea if we carefully replace one or two planks at a time, though we cannot entirely dismantle the ship all at once in order to rebuild from scratch. Some significant portion of the ship must always remain intact if it is not to sink, and if we are to have a steady platform to work from as we rebuild. So too it is with our system of beliefs. We can replace one or a few beliefs at a time, but we must always retain some relatively secure beliefs, provisional fixed points from which we reason.[16] Not that we always retain these self-consciously. These are beliefs, Peirce argued, that it does not even occur to us *can* be questioned at the time ("Some Consequences of Four Incapacities" 228). While it would be a mistake to assume that such beliefs are infallible, they are secure enough to provide a starting point for justification.

Moreover, it is not clear that justification is best accomplished by a two-tiered or linear structure in which some beliefs are justified inferentially from other more basic beliefs that are justified non-inferentially. Such a structure makes the justification only as strong as the single starting point, which,

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[16]James expresses this point in the following way. "To begin with, our knowledge grows in *spots*. The spots may be large or small, but the knowledge never grows all over: some old knowledge always remains what it was" (*Pragmatism* 77, emphasis in the original).

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pragmatists argue, can only be considered provisional. A more complex system of justification is required, a system in which beliefs and practices gain support not only from more basic beliefs, but from a network of beliefs and practices, and from how well they fit in a system of beliefs that coheres as a whole. Pragmatists appeal to a variety of metaphors to describe such a system of justification. Peirce argued that philosophical reasoning "should not form a chain which is no stronger than its weakest link, but a cable whose fibres may be ever so slender, provided they are sufficiently numerous and intimately connected" ("Some Consequences of Four Incapacities" 229). Later pragmatists, such as Rorty, appeal to Quine's notion of a web of belief as forming the basis for justification. This is reflected in Rorty's appropriation of Sellars' vision of philosophy. Quoting Sellars almost verbatim, Rorty urges us to view philosophy as "an attempt to see how things, in the broadest possible sense of the term, hang together, in the broadest possible sense of the term" ("Introduction: Pragmatism and Philosophy" xiv).

Wide reflective equilibrium should appeal to pragmatists, then inasmuch as it involves a non-foundationalist and fallibilistic approach to justification. Rawls and Daniels make it clear that they are advocating a coherence rather than foundationalist account of justification.[17] Rejecting foundationalist accounts of moral theory that appeal either to self-evident first principles or the attempt to

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[17]For example, see Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 577-587; Daniels, "Introduction: Reflective Equilibrium in Theory and Practice" 2; and Daniels "Wide Reflective Equilibrium and Theory Acceptance in Ethics", 26-27, 33-40.

define moral concepts in terms of non-moral concepts, Rawls states that "justification rests upon the entire conception and how it fits in with and organizes our considered judgments in reflective equilibrium" (*A Theory of Justice* 579). There has been some debate about whether or not wide reflective equilibrium gives a privileged, non-inferential status to considered judgments, and thus collapses into a sort of intuitionist foundationalism.[18] However, the insistence that all beliefs, including our firmly held considered judgments, are revisable seems to run counter to this claim.[19] No particular judgment (considered or otherwise), no principle or set of principles, no background theory is considered infallible or given a privileged epistemic status. Though some beliefs are initially more secure than others, each is, in principle, revisable in light of the others.

2.2   The Importance of Context

A commitment to the relevance of context is another feature of wide reflective equilibrium that resonates with pragmatism and makes it particularly attractive as an approach to practical philosophy. As I have already discussed the importance of context to both pragmatism and practical philosophy at some length I will not repeat that discussion here. Instead I will look at the

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[18]See Michael R. DePaul, "Reflective Equilibrium and Foundationalism" and Roger P. Ebertz, "Is Reflective Equilibrium a Coherentist Model?"

[19]For Norman Daniels' response to this sort of criticism and to the related criticism regarding the initial credibility of considered judgments see "Wide Reflective Equilibrium and Theory Acceptance in Ethics" 26-27, 33-34.

significance of context in wide reflective equilibrium as a model of theory justification in moral and social philosophy, making the assumption that if context plays a significant role in this limited use of wide reflective equilibrium, then it will also play a significant role when the model is construed as a broader model of philosophical inquiry.

As a model of theory justification in moral and social philosophy wide reflective equilibrium is particularly responsive to context in four distinct ways. First, the role that particular considered moral judgments play in wide reflective equilibrium assures that the process of justification remains attached, or at least sensitive to the local and particular context in which justification takes place. Justificatory weight is given to particular considered moral judgments made by particular agents or communities in particular cultural, historical and social contexts. Although these judgments are not epistemically privileged, they provide a starting point for reflection. Thus, from the start, justification is situated in a context. Furthermore, because a test of the adequacy of our more general moral judgments and principles is that they are consistent with these particular judgments, there is some assurance that even these more general or abstract judgments and principles have relevance to the cultural, historical, and social context.

Second, an important feature of wide (as opposed to narrow) reflective equilibrium is that the agent or community of agents must take into account and bring under scrutiny not only particular judgments and general principles, but

also relevant background theories and assumptions.[20] Such theories are to

encompass a wide range of knowledge — philosophical, empirical,

sociological, etc. The breadth of this background knowledge is best captured, I

think, by DeGrazia's eighth theoretical virtue of a coherent system, that our

moral beliefs should be compatible with "whatever else we know or reasonably

believe" (*Taking Animals Seriously* 17). This inclusion of such background

knowledge in the process of moral justification is consistent with Dewey's

admonition that we not neglect context in philosophical reflection, but instead

should pay attention to the background assumptions — e.g., assumptions about

how the world works, human nature, etc. — that we take for granted in most

situations ("Context and Thought" 98-103).

Third, wide reflective equilibrium remains sensitive to context inasmuch

as the equilibrium can always be upset by new problematic situations.

Reflection on and revision of our considered judgments, principles, and

background theories is not a one-time affair, but a constant and ongoing process.

The world as we experience it is a dynamic and changing place. Our knowledge

of the world increases, our technology improves, we encounter new people and

have new experiences, and our social and cultural institutions change. Such

change strains and sometimes upsets whatever equilibrium has been established,

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[20]According to Rawls and Daniels the inclusion of relevant background theories is
what distinguishes wide reflective equilibrium from narrow reflective equilibrium. ("The
Independence of Moral Theory" 8; "Reflective Equilibrium and Archimedean Points"
49). However, it should be noted that the relevant background theories that they mention
are philosophical arguments and theories (e.g., the concept of a person).

causing us to reevaluate, adjust, and revise our beliefs in order to reestablish

equilibrium. As James put it, "[e]xperience, as we know, has a way of *boiling*

over, and making us correct our present formulas" (*Pragmatism* 100, emphasis

in the original).

Fourth, wide reflective equilibrium is particularly responsive to context

because, as noted earlier, the notion of coherence includes practical as well as

theoretical dimensions. Wide reflective equilibrium is an agent-centered model

of justification. An agent's beliefs are presumptively action-guiding. If the

agent cannot bring himself to act in accordance with a set of beliefs that

otherwise appear to be in coherence, then there is something amiss. The set of

beliefs cannot actually be in coherence and some beliefs need to be revised. But

actions and practices, unlike propositions, are necessarily embedded in a

particular context; actions and practices are always local and particular.

The ongoing story of how we have grappled with the determination of

death in the United States serves to illustrate the process of wide reflective

equilibrium and the relevance of context to the process.[21] Prior to the 1960s

death was understood medically as the irreversible cessation of circulatory and

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[21]For a discussion of the definition of death as an example of wide reflective
equilibrium see Martin Benjamin and Joy Curtis, *Ethics in Nursing*, 3rd edition, 41-42. In
a more recent article Benjamin offers a pragmatic account of the debates regarding the
determination of death ("Pragmatism and the Determination of Death," 181-193). For a
broader discussion of the debate over conceptions of death see the President's
Commission for the Study of Ethical Problems in Medicine and Biomedical and
Behavioral Research, *Defining Death*; Karen Grandstrand Gervais, *Redefining Death*,
and Karen Grandstrand Gervais, "Advancing the Definition of Death: A Philosophical
Essay."

respiratory functions, and physicians declared death after a prolonged absence of these vital functions. This understanding or conception of death, along with moral norms for how we were to treat patients who were still alive — e.g., we should not withdraw or terminate treatment, nor should we take actions that would hasten their death — guided medical practice accordingly. There was, one might say, a relatively stable equilibrium or coherence between our judgments regarding most patients, our medical practices, our general moral norms, and our conception of death. In the 1960s, however, two developments within medicine combined to upset this equilibrium: 1) the development of technology that allowed physicians to maintain circulatory and respiratory functions artificially, and 2) the advancement of organ transplant procedures. These developments raised new questions. How were we to treat patients whose brains had been completely and irreversibly destroyed, and whose respiration and circulation could only be maintained through artificial means? How were we to meet the increasing demand for donated organs? That such questions were raised suggested that the previous equilibrium had been upset. For instance, our inclination to act in certain ways — e.g., remove treatment or harvest organs from patients whose brains had been completely and irreversibly destroyed — could not easily be reconciled with both the traditional understanding of death and norms prohibiting the termination of treatment or the hastening of death. The increasing number of such cases created what Dewey would have called a problematic situation.

At the risk of oversimplification, the "solution" to this problematic

situation was to revise the understanding of death so that it was more consistent

with our norms regarding how to treat living patients, judgments regarding how

to treat patients whose brains has been completely and irreversibly destroyed,

and the practice of harvesting organs. In 1968 the Ad Hoc Committee of the

Harvard Medical School recommended that such patients, based on neurological

criteria, should not be considered alive at all.[22] The members proposed that

certain neurological criteria be used to establish death when medical

interventions interfered with the application of the standard cardiopulmonary

standards. The committee's recommendations eventually led to what is now

known as "whole-brain death." This new understanding of death, now widely

accepted in both medical and legal practice, defined death as the irreversible

cessation of all functions of the entire brain, including the brain stem. More

importantly, it reconciled particular judgments and practices regarding patients

whose brains have been completely and irreversibly destroyed with moral norms

prohibiting withdrawal of life-sustaining treatment from living patients.

Treatment could be withdrawn from such patients because, under the new

conception of death (or under the application of new criteria), they were no

longer living. It also allowed more healthy organs to be harvested from patients

who were technically no longer alive, but whose circulation and respiration had

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[22]See Ad Hoc Committee of the Harvard Medical School, "A Definition of Irreversible Coma."

been maintained by artificial means. In short, it established a new state of equilibrium.

What is important to note here is the important role that context played, and continues to play, in our understanding of death. The factors that led us to reevaluate the conception of death were not abstract theoretical considerations, but particular medical and technological developments that arose in a particular social, cultural, and historical context. These developments not only challenged previously held beliefs, they also generated new possibilities for action. Without the advent of mechanical ventilation and organ transplantation procedures we might never have been led to revise our understanding of death.

Furthermore, contextual factors continue to influence the debate in such a way that the established equilibrium, although widely accepted in practice, is not entirely secure. For instance, there continue to be advocates of a "higher brain" understanding of death who would define death as the permanent and irreversible cessation of consciousness.[23] While there are good philosophical arguments for such a view, it also gains support from increasing public awareness of the significant number and plight of patients who are permanently and irreversibly unconscious. Recognizing that one's understanding of death is connected to one's religious views New Jersey has passed a state law that, though based on the whole-brain conception of death, includes a conscience clause allowing individuals to be pronounced according to heart-oriented

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[23]See for instance, Robert M. Veatch, "The Impending Collapse of the Whole-Brain Definition of Death."

criteria.[24] Recently, Robert Truog has argued that we should abandon brain death and return to the more traditional cardiorespiratory definition of death (29-37). Interestingly, part of Truog's argument appeals to the social context in which norms and practices regarding termination of treatment have changed significantly. Since the acceptance of the brain-death criteria the general norm prohibiting the termination of treatment has been replaced or overridden by an emphasis on respect for patient autonomy, including respect for a patient's autonomous refusal of life-sustaining treatment. This respect has even been extended to apply to a formerly competent patient's previously stated wishes. Truog's argument could easily be construed as proposing a new equilibrium. We do not need the whole-brain conception of death, since our judgments and practices regarding termination of treatment for patients in many cases no longer depend on a determination of death. An emphasis on patient autonomy makes these judgments and practices consistent with other conceptions of death as well.

2.3 Intermingling Facts and Values

The preceding example reveals another feature of wide reflective equilibrium that makes it particularly suitable as a model of inquiry for a pragmatic version of practical philosophy, the complex and highly fluid relationship between facts and values. When problems arise that upset the

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[24]See New Jersey Declaration of Death Act (1991).

current state of wide reflective equilibrium, a new equilibrium can be achieved by revision of beliefs at any level of generality. Though some of these beliefs may pertain more clearly to facts, while others pertain to values, for the sake of establishing the new equilibrium it makes little difference. Neither facts nor values are privileged; either may be revised.

In the example of defining death, new developments in medical technology upset the equilibrium between particular judgments regarding certain patients, general moral norms regarding the termination of treatment for patients, and background theories regarding the determination of death. In this case, a new equilibrium was established by revising a background theory, the conception of death. While one might argue that the "facts" of the matter did not change (i.e., nothing about the patients' physical condition changed), our conception of death, the societal understanding of what the facts meant and how we should act in light of them, did change. However, as Truog's article suggests, there would have been other ways to reestablish equilibrium that would not have involved revising the conception of death. We could have revised certain norms regarding our obligations to continue treatment (and subsequently did so) and the conditions under which it would be permissible to harvest organs. Placing greater emphasis on respecting a patient's autonomy, and allowing surrogate decision-makers to represent the patient's previous wishes or best interests could have resolved many of the questions of how to treat patients whose brains had been completely and irreversibly destroyed. In principle, there is no reason why reestablishing wide reflective equilibrium by

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revising facts or societal concepts is more correct than doing so by revising moral norms.

Another way to put this is that problematic situations are situations in which our current state of wide reflective equilibrium has been disrupted. However, because reestablishing equilibrium may involve revising either facts, concepts, or values, it is difficult to determine in advance whether the problem is a factual, conceptual, or moral problem. The question of how to reconcile our particular judgments about certain sorts of patients, our general norms prohibiting the termination of treatment, and our understanding of death is not clearly a normative, conceptual, or factual problem. Most problematic situations are multi-dimensional. The process of retaining wide reflective equilibrium is a process of altering and re-weaving the separate strands of the problematic situation together so that they once again form a more continuous and tight-knit fabric. How we choose to do so will depend on our overall aims and the comparative advantages of different possible patterns of fabric.

Moreover, how we choose to describe the problematic situation not only suggests what elements or dimensions of the problematic situation most firmly capture our attention, but also what we see as the most productive way of resolving it. For instance, we will likely see a problem as a moral problem if we are less sure of the moral norms that seem to govern the situation, than we are of the background concepts and facts. For this reason, both the description of the problematic situation and what may be seen as the best way to reestablish coherence will depend in part on the background and interests of the different

agents involved. Consider for instance, the question of whether a pension fund should invest in tobacco or gaming companies. An investment manager may view this primarily as a technical question to be decided based on a financial analysis, whereas, an ethicist may believe that there are ethical concerns that need to be resolved before any final investment decisions should be made. These views need not be mutually exclusive — both parties might consider both financial and ethical concerns to be relevant, but simply emphasize one over the other. Still the different parties may piece the various dimensions of the problem together differently, resulting in different equilibria. There is some truth to the saying that a carpenter with a hammer sees almost every problem as a nail. Practical philosophers, in such cases, play a dual role. Like other parties, their background and skills lead them to emphasize certain aspects of the problem (it is no surprise that philosophers have been most concerned with the conceptual and normative issues involved in the example cited earlier). However, they also play an integrative role, stepping back and trying to help the various parties involved re-weave the strands of the problem together into a fabric that all can be satisfied with.

2.4   Connecting Theory and Practice

To anyone advocating the sort of pragmatic practical philosophy defended in this project a final, but significant, appeal of wide reflective equilibrium is its potential to bridge the apparent gap between practical and theory-centered philosophy. In previous portions of this project I went to some length to draw a

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contrast between these two activities. Practical philosophy, I argued, emphasizes concrete, particular, time-sensitive problems, and minimizes the practical value of abstract theoretical inquiry. In contrast, theory-centered philosophy emphasizes abstract, universal, and eternal problems, and downplays the significance of practice in philosophical inquiry. It envisions philosophy primarily, if not exclusively, as a theoretical enterprise. The chasm between practical and theory-centered philosophy, thus, seems to be created by differing visions of the role and significance of theory and practice in philosophical inquiry. On the one hand, theory-centered philosophy at its most extreme finds no place for practice. Even when philosophical inquiry is presumably intended to answer questions of practical import, practice is given no justificatory role. True answers to such questions, it is thought, are best sought beyond practice in the realm of abstract thought. On the other hand, it is difficult to clearly identify what role, if any, practical philosophy gives to abstract theory in the process of resolving particular, concrete problems. If one is to argue, as I want to do, that practical and theory-centered philosophy are not two completely separate endeavors, but complementary parts of a more comprehensive, integrated process of philosophical inquiry, then one must provide an account of how theory relates to practice.

Wide reflective equilibrium has the potential to connect practical and theory-centered philosophy because it provides a plausible (if not commonsensical) account of the close relationship between theory and practice. Briefly stated, wide reflective equilibrium brings theory and practice together in

a justificatory relationship of mutual dependence. Theories are justified, in part, by their ability to systematize and account for our particular considered judgments and practices. Likewise, particular considered judgments and practices are justified, in part, by how well they conform to more general theories. Neither abstract general theories nor particular, concrete practices can be justified apart from one another; both are indispensable elements of a unified view of justification.[25] Appealing to the illustration provided earlier, reevaluation of the conception of death, a seemingly theoretical endeavor, was motivated by the practical concerns. How were we to deal with certain particular patients? How were we to procure more organs for transplantation? However, it was also the conflict between our considered judgments and our more general moral norms in these cases, *and* the felt need to *justify* our particular judgments in terms of more general norms that led to acceptance of the whole-brain conception of death.

If philosophical inquiry is understood as a unified view that includes both theory and practice in a relationship of mutual dependence, then the apparent gap between practical and theory-centered philosophy can be bridged. Practical and theory-centered philosophy are not two completely separate and self-contained activities. While there may be heuristic merit in drawing a contrast

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[25]Rawls writes of abstract conceptions and general principles on the one hand and particular judgments on the other as two sides of a unified view. "These two sides of our practical thought (not to mention intermediate levels of generality in between) are complementary, and to be adjusted to one another so as to fit into a coherent view" (*Political Liberalism* 45).

between the two, the claim that the two are completely separate is a result of a certain distortion — i.e., of the exclusive focus on one element of philosophical inquiry to the neglect of the other. So, too, is the view that practical philosophy is merely dependent or parasitic on theory-centered philosophy (as in the model of applied philosophy discussed in Chapter 2). Viewing philosophical inquiry as a process of wide reflective equilibrium corrects these distortions. Practical and theory-centered philosophy are two intermingled and equally important elements of a single broader process of philosophical inquiry. Envisioned as wide reflective equilibrium, philosophical inquiry is an attempt to see how things, both practical and theoretical, hang together in the broadest and most coherent way. It seeks to help us integrate our practical concerns — e.g., our needs and aspirations, both long and short term — and our theoretical concerns — e.g., our understanding of what and who we are, of how we are to live together, of how the natural world works, of how we relate to it and might best live in it. Philosophical inquiry understood as wide reflective equilibrium allows no sharp distinction between practical and theory-centered philosophy.[26]

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[26]Daniels claims accepting wide reflective equilibrium forces us to give up the sharp distinction between theoretical and practical concerns of ethics. "If we take this account [of wide reflective equilibrium] seriously, then we must abandon some of the strong divisions that exist in the field between work in ethical theory and work in practical ethics" ("Introduction: Reflective Equilibrium in Theory and Practice" 10). For an excellent (and balanced) discussion of the relationship between theoretical and practical ethics see Daniels, "Wide Reflective Equilibrium in Practice" 333-352.

So why draw the distinction at all? The most direct answer is that in the attempt to resolve problematic situations, to see how things hang together in the broadest possible sense, there is value in recognizing a certain division of labor. To see why this is so, consider a parallel between the relationship between facts and values in wide reflective equilibrium and the distinction between theory and practice. When our current equilibrium or sense of coherence is upset it may be reestablished by making adjustments to practice, to theory, or to both. Nothing in advance requires that either practice or theory be given priority or be preserved at the expense of the other. The problematic situations that upset the equilibrium are complex situations that involve both practical and theoretical dimensions. Theory-centered philosophers tend to focus on, and bring to light, certain theoretical and abstract dimensions of problematic situations. There is much value in having men and women who attend carefully to such issues, not the least of which is providing reasons for, and providing a more systematic account of our practices.[27] We might even want to give them a fairly free rein,

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[27]It is hard to improve on the words of Norman Daniels. Recognizing the value of close attention to particular cases in ethics, Daniels also acknowledges the limits of an exclusive focus on cases and argues for the importance of theoretical work.

> But this close examination must employ some views about how to convert details or "data" into real evidence for a conclusion. We do insist on reasons. We want to treat relevantly similar cases in similar ways. We need some way of determining what counts as similar in the relevant ways. We need to know when to discount differences and when to rest weight on them. We need, in effect, more systematic accounts of what we're doing. But that is exactly what reason giving, appeals to principle, and the development of moral theory was supposed to do: provide us with a basis for converting observations into evidence for a view ("Wide Reflective Equilibrium in Practice" 337).

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not requiring that worth of their work be measured in terms of its direct practical applications. However, there is also obviously great value in having men and women who focus on, and bring to light, the more practical and concrete dimensions.

The task of the practical philosophers, as I envision it, is not only to solve practical problems, but also to help us achieve a comprehensive equilibrium in which our more abstract and theoretical philosophical concerns cohere with more concrete and practical concerns. This requires, I have argued, more careful attention to the context than is required of theory-centered philosophy. However, it does not allow us to dismiss more abstract and theoretical concerns as irrelevant. Practical philosophy appeals to both theory and practice. It appeals to theory to explain, systematize, refine, and improve practice; it also appeals to practice to test and refine theory, and to channel it in directions that will be useful. At its best, it reminds us that any inquiry that emphasizes either theory or practice to the exclusion of the other, while it may have certain value, is incomplete.

3   The Problem of Bad Coherence

Despite its compatibility with pragmatism and promise as an approach to philosophical inquiry, there are still problems that wide reflective equilibrium must address if it is to be accepted as an approach to practical philosophy. In this final section I want to examine and respond to one problem that has arisen in connection with both pragmatism and wide reflective equilibrium, though it

could be raised, I believe, against most coherence theories of justification. Drawing on the terminology suggested by Margaret Jane Radin I call it the "problem of bad coherence."[28]

3.1   Bad Coherence, Relativism, and Conservatism

In "The Pragmatist and the Feminist," Radin asks the following question, "Is it possible to have a coherent system of belief, and have that system be coherently bad?" (135-136). Though she asks this question specifically of pragmatists and in the context of moral, social, and political philosophy, she actually raises a much broader problem for coherence theories of justification in general. The "problem of bad coherence," confronts coherence theorists with a profound dilemma. On the one hand, if they admit that a system might be coherently bad, then they are apparently committed to the existence of some additional, external criteria of justification, independent of coherence, that could be used to assess coherent systems of belief or adjudicate between equally coherent, but incompatible systems of belief. However, if this is the case, then coherence is no longer the criterion of justification. On the other hand, if they deny the possibility of "bad coherence," then it seems that they give up on the possibility of critiquing any set of beliefs, social norms, institutions, and practices once we have established it to be coherent.

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[28]Margaret Jane Radin, "The Pragmatist and the Feminist."

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The problem of bad coherence is reflected in two seemingly different criticisms brought against both wide reflective equilibrium and pragmatism. These criticisms attack from opposite directions. From one side comes the criticism that coherence theories result in a skepticism that ultimately leads to some form of relativism. How can we know that our beliefs about the world, although coherent as a whole, actually match up with the world as it is? And, if we cannot know that our beliefs match up with the world, then how can we decide between equally coherent, but seemingly incompatible systems of belief? This concern is that pragmatism and wide reflective equilibrium, because they rely solely on coherence, are not restrictive enough. Without some sort of foundation for knowledge, independent of coherence, there is no way to distinguish the true from the false, the good from the bad. From the other side comes the criticism that pragmatism and wide reflective equilibrium are too conservative. If the only goal is achieving coherence or equilibrium, it is argued, then changes to our system of belief will be made as seldom as possible, and with as little disruption as possible to the system as a whole. When scientific, social, or moral changes threaten to upset the existing state of equilibrium, then coherence theories will always favor the status quo, even when the status quo involves the oppression of certain individuals or social groups. This criticism is not that pragmatism and wide reflective equilibrium are not restrictive enough, but that they are too restrictive.

In the literature on wide reflective equilibrium these problems emerge most clearly in discussion of what has become known as the problems of initial

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credibility and bias.[29] The problem of initial credibility results from the significant justificatory weight given to considered judgments in wide reflective equilibrium. We strive to find principles that systematize and organize our considered judgments. In fact, we evaluate sets of principles in terms of how well they do so. Critics, however, have challenged the appropriateness of giving considered judgments such justificatory weight. Brandt, for instance, argues that it is not enough that we should believe these judgments. In order for them to have initial credibility we must have reasons, other than coherence, for believing them (*A Theory of the Good and the Right* 20). Without some means of establishing the credibility of our initial judgments we are driven toward skepticism, for we have no reason to believe that the system as a whole is credible. Daniels, though he argues against it, captures the concern nicely, "The result is that we have no reason to think that increasing the credence level for the system as a whole moves us closer to moral truth rather than away from it. Coherent fictions are still fictions, and we may only be reshuffling our prejudices" ("Wide Reflective Equilibrium and Theory Acceptance in Ethics" 29). From this skepticism it is only a small step to credibility-depleting relativism.[30]

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[29]See DeGrazia, *Taking Animals Seriously*, 19-31; Daniels, "Wide Reflective Equilibrium and Theory Acceptance," 29-33; and Daniels, "Two Approaches to Theory Acceptance" 84-87.

[30]These concerns are summed up nicely by Nielsen,
    It is natural to believe the WRE [wide reflective equilibrium] has relativistic implications because WRE appeals, and essentially appeals, to

Daniels' comment also reveals a connection between the problem of initial credibility and the problem of bias. It is not just that we lack independent evidence that our initial considered judgments are credible, we also have reasons for believing that they are likely to be infected with personal bias, cultural and historical prejudices, ideology, etc. Considered judgments are, after all, the considered judgments of fallible, self-interested human beings who have been socialized in certain ways. Because wide reflective equilibrium depends so heavily on these initial considered judgments, and because these judgments are so likely to be biased, our entire system of belief, it is argued, will be infected with these biases as well. Moreover, while it is possible to revise our considered judgments, if our only goal is to maintain or reestablish equilibrium, we will be inclined to change as little as possible. In short, our system of belief will be both biased and conservative.

The charge that pragmatism implies relativism is a fairly familiar one that I will not pursue in great detail here.[31] Very briefly, it stems from pragmatism's

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[30](...continued)
considered judgments and considered judgments sometimes vary between individuals, classes, and cultures. Given that there are these differences in considered judgments and given the strategic role considered judgments play in WRE, relativism, the claim goes, is inescapable ("Relativism and Wide Reflective Equilibrium" 317).

[31]Though familiar, the debates about whether pragmatism does or does not entail relativism or who, among the pragmatists is or is not a relativist are complex. Not surprisingly, they depend, in part, on what one means by "relativism." For more detailed discussion of pragmatism and relativism see Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?; Rorty, "Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism"; Rorty, "Putnam and the Relativist Menace"; Putnam, "Realism with a Human Face", and Forster, "What Is at Stake

(continued...)

rejection, discussed in Chapter 3, of a cluster of related concepts — the spectator-subject, representationalism, and the possibility of a God's-eye view of the universe. Rejection of these concepts leads many pragmatists to dismiss claims about the way the world is, independent of human interests and desires, as meaningless. Thus, they are accused of espousing relativism. If we cannot make claims about the way the world is independent of us, then our claims about the world must be dependent on, or relative to us as individuals, social groups, cultures, etc. While evidence can readily be found in the writings of many pragmatists,[32] the charges of relativism have been particularly fueled by provocative comments from Rorty such as knowledge "is what we are justified in believing" (*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* 3), and that there is nothing more to say about truth "save that each of us will commend as true those beliefs which he or she finds good to believe" ("Solidarity or Objectivity?" 24).

The criticism that pragmatism, as a coherence theory, tends to be too conservative is perhaps not as familiar. This, however, is the concern that leads Radin to raise the question of bad coherence. In particular she asks whether pragmatism, as a coherence theory, is too conservative to be of much use to feminism. In defending her concern Radin understandably cites passages from James' *Pragmatism* (135). Though James emphasizes the epistemic importance

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[31](...continued)
Between Putnam and Rorty?"

[32]See, for instance, James' claim that the "trail of the human serpent is thus over everything" (*Pragmatism* 33).

of new experience, and insists that our knowledge of the world does grow and change, there are certainly many passages in which he suggests that we are quite conservative when it comes to accepting new beliefs and modifying existing ones. In fact, he argues, we try to assimilate new experience with as little change to our existing beliefs as possible. He writes, for instance, that when a new idea is adopted, it "preserves the older stock of truths with a minimum of modification, stretching them just enough to make them admit the novelty, but conceiving that in ways as familiar as the case leaves possible." As a result, even the "most violent revolutions in an individual's beliefs leave most of his old order standing" (31).[33] Change in belief is possible, in fact required as we work to assimilate new experiences, but it comes in small increments. To use a mercantile metaphor, it comes retail, not wholesale.

Although Radin finds convincing evidence of conservatism in James, contemporary pragmatists such as Rorty have been subjected to the charge as well. Rorty argues that all claims to knowledge and truth are ethnocentric, that is, the justification of any claim is dependent on our social, historical, and linguistic context. There is no view from nowhere; we cannot step outside of ourselves to any point from which we can objectively evaluate ourselves, our

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[33]There are other passages in which he expresses the same basic idea. After arguing that our minds grow only in spots (as opposed to all over) and that these spots, like grease-spots spread, he adds, "But we let them spread as little as possible; we keep unaltered as much of our old knowledge, as many of our old prejudices and beliefs as we can" (*Pragmatism* 78)

norms, or our social practices. Socialization, as Rorty puts it, "goes all the way down" (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* xiii).

It should be noted that conservatism in maintaining beliefs is not altogether a bad thing. After all, we do not want a system of belief that is inherently unstable, or one that is subject to frequent and drastic change. For embodied agents to act purposefully over the long haul, particularly if they are to act socially, a certain amount of stability is required. Furthermore, systems of belief confer identity on agents. For agents to maintain continuity of identity their system of belief must remain relatively stable, though it need not be completely unchanging, over time. However, the charge of conservatism expresses the concern that stability may be maintained at the cost of our ability to effectively criticize social norms and institutions. Rorty acknowledges this as a legitimate concern for pragmatism. "So it may seem that we pragmatists, in our frenzied efforts to undercut epistemological skepticism by doing away with what Davidson calls 'the scheme-content distinction,' have also undercut political radicalism" ("Feminism and Pragmatism" 239).[34]

It is important to note that while the charges of relativism and conservatism brought against both wide reflective equilibrium and pragmatism seem to come from different directions and raise different issues, they share a common assumption. Both accept the problem of bad coherence — that is, they assume that it is possible for a system of belief to be coherent and yet bad.

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[34]Rorty addresses the problem of conservativism in several other places. For instance, see his discussion on pages 73-95 of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*.

This assumption, in turn, suggests that coherence is not sufficiently critical to work as a criteria of justification. There must be standards of moral or epistemic evaluation external to, or in addition to coherence. The problem of bad coherence, thus, poses the version of pragmatic practical philosophy that I am advocating with the following challenge: Where does such a philosophy get its critical edge? Where does one gain purchase for critiquing social institutions and practices if one cannot find a foothold in universal principles or truths?

3.2   Responses

One might respond that to a coherence theorist, the notion of bad coherence is itself, incoherent. If one holds a coherence theory of truth, goodness, or justification, then one uses "coherence" normatively — i.e., as a term of commendation. Thus, to the advocate of a coherence theory the concept of "bad coherence" is something of an oxymoron. While this response has some merit, it is probably too dismissive. Rather than an argument in defense of coherence theories of justification, it is an avoidance of such an argument. More importantly it does not really address the legitimate concern that the charges of relativism and conservatism raise — Where does a version of practical philosophy that espouses a coherence theory of justification get its critical edge? If pragmatic practical philosophy is to be accepted it must address this concern. Thus, in the remainder of this chapter I want to sketch some additional ways the pragmatic practical philosopher who advocates wide reflective equilibrium might respond. Though it is not clear to me that any one

of the responses is, by itself, completely adequate, taken together they provide

sufficient reason to think that the problem of bad coherence does not present

pragmatism or wide reflective equilibrium with an insurmountable obstacle.

3.2.1 Bad Coherence and Foundationalism

Without minimizing their concerns, it is fair to ask of critics who raise

the problem of bad coherence, "What are the alternatives?" Behind the problem

of bad coherence is the assumption that it is possible for a system of belief to be

coherent and yet bad or defective. This, in turn, implies that there must be some

standard, independent of coherence, by which we can evaluate individual beliefs

or entire systems of belief. In other words, implicit in the problem of bad

coherence is the assumption of some version of foundationalism in which certain

basic beliefs are taken to be justified independent of all other beliefs. There is,

however, both argumentative and historical support to suggest that the

foundationalist project in both epistemology and moral philosophy has failed.

In Chapter 3 I explored the pragmatic critique of foundationalism and I will not

repeat it here. While such arguments are powerful in and of themselves, they

are also bolstered by historical support. Despite more than 2500 years of trying,

no foundationalist approach to either epistemology or ethics has yet managed to

gain anything close to universal support. In short, there is no reason to believe

that the foundationalist project can succeed and several reasons to believe that it

is doomed to failure.

The failure of the foundationalist project has a couple of important implications. First, our ability to get along fairly well for so long without unshakeable foundations suggests, among other things, that it may not be as important to establish epistemic or moral foundations as is often thought by philosophers. For instance, the seemingly intractable debates between rationalists and empiricists or between realists and anti-realists (or, for that matter, any other epistemological debate) have not greatly impeded the progress of science. Most scientists, in fact, are indifferent to such philosophical debates. Even in ethics, persistent arguments between deontologists, utilitarians, and virtue ethicists do not keep us from agreeing on a wide range of ethical issues. (The propensity of philosophers to focus on the most difficult moral dilemmas and points of conflict between theories tends to obscure this fact.) Second, if the foundations that foundationalists appeal to are neither self-evident nor indubitable, then foundationalism collapses into coherentism. This is the truth in the initial response that the problem of bad coherence is itself incoherent. The critic's claim that a system is coherent, but bad, is a claim that the system is inconsistent with some external standard. However, if the standard cannot be justified, independent of other beliefs, then the claim amounts to nothing more than the claim that when the system is broadened to include the standard (which may be important though not self-evident or indubitable), it is no longer a coherent system. Without undisputed foundations, the assertion of bad coherence is really a claim of incoherence.

Finally, if the foundationalist project is unsuccessful, then there are good reasons to accept a coherentist view. The pull of foundationalism, in part, is the promise it offers of a universal and independent foundation for belief — e.g., indubitable judgments or *a priori* first principles that transcend all historical and cultural biases. In other words, the attractiveness of foundationalism is the promise of objectivity and neutrality, the type of objectivity and neutrality that one would enjoy from a God's-eye view of the universe. However, if we have reason to believe that the foundationalist project is doomed to failure, then we should be suspicious of any claims to this sort of neutrality. What we take to be foundational and neutral beliefs will actually be shaped by historical and cultural accident — they will be biased. However, when philosophers appeal to indubitable judgments and *a priori* first principles, this element of bias is denied, and thus hidden.[35] Coherence theories do not avoid bias, but they have the advantage of acknowledging bias in such a way that it can be openly addressed and countered. Daniels cites this as one of the advantages of coherence models of justification in moral philosophy. "It is therefore better to lay all our moral cards on the table, where they can be assessed, as wide

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[35]This sort of concern lies behind some of the criticism of claims to ethics expertise. Many critics of expertise seem to presume that for there to be expertise some sort of foundationalist approach to ethics must be possible. Noble, for instance, has argued that philosophers who claim to be ethics experts merely reinforce prevailing social norms under the guise of self-evident first principles (7-9). Scofield makes similar claims, suggesting that because there are not objective moral facts, ethics expertise is not possible and claims to such expertise are actually dangerous (421). See also Wikler, "Ethicists, Critics, and Expertise" (12) and Shalit, "When We Were Philosopher Kings" (27).

reflective equilibrium proposes, than to pretend we can end up justifying moral beliefs without appealing in any way to other moral beliefs" ("Introduction: Reflective Equilibrium in Theory and Practice" 5). This is not to say that all pragmatists and the advocates of wide reflective equilibrium who reject foundationalism give up on the notion of objectivity. Many do not. They simply do not accept the claim that there can be no objectivity without foundationalism.[36]

3.2.2 The Value of Incoherence

How might the inherent conservatism of pragmatism and wide reflective equilibrium be mitigated? Here it is worth noting how feminists interested in pragmatism and pragmatists supportive of feminism have tried to address this issue. It is not difficult to see why feminists should be bothered by conservatism, and thus leery of both pragmatism and wide reflective equilibrium. Any philosophical model of justification that serves to support the status quo — in this case a patriarchal status quo — either by direct defense or by being resistant to change, can be seen as supporting a system that

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[36]DeGrazia, for instance, argues that the appropriate notion of objectivity in ethics is "one of intersubjectivity, one that appeals to the concepts of reasonableness and making sense. Such concepts are embedded in our practices of moral deliberation, persuasion, and reflection (including philosophizing). None of these concepts is inherently metaphysical" (*Taking Animals Seriously* 17). See also Daniels, "Wide Reflective Equilibrium and Theory Acceptance in Ethics" 34-40. The subject of objectivity in other domains comes up frequently in the writing of the neopragmatists. See, for instance, Rorty's "Solidarity or Objectivity?" as well as several essays in Putnam's, *Realism with a Human Face*.

oppresses women. It is for this reason that Radin, who is interested in the relationship between pragmatism and feminism, is prompted to ask the question that I have formulated as the problem of bad coherence.

Responding to this problem Rorty argues that the key to overcoming conservatism lies in understanding and protecting the role of the "strong poet." He develops this theme rather abstractly in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* and employs it more concretely in the article "Feminism and Pragmatism." The idea is that absent any transcendent, atemporal criteria of evaluation (i.e., without foundationalism), current social practices can only be criticized in relation to other existing practices or to imagined alternatives.

> Pragmatists should reply to this charge [of conservatism] by saying that they cannot make sense of an appeal from our community's practices to anything except the practice of a real or imagined alternative community. So when prophetic feminists say that it is not enough to make the practices of our community coherent, that the very *language* of our community must be subjected to radical critique, pragmatists add that such critique can only take the form of imagining a community whose linguistic and other practices are different from our own ("Feminism and Pragmatism" 239).

The role of the strong poet is to articulate these real or imagined alternatives. Given his views on the ubiquity of language and importance of narrative, it is not surprising that Rorty chooses a literary/philosophical figure, Nietzsche, as his archetypal strong poet in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity.* However, inasmuch as he also cites Marilyn Frye and Catharine MacKinnon as examples of strong feminist poets, it is clear that the strong poet need not be a literary figure. It need only be a person who can articulate with sufficient clarity and

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strength, a broader or more coherent vision of how the world might be. Social

progress is made when the dominant linguistic community, in this case the

patriarchal culture, takes seriously and assimilates the language of the

alternative community. [37]

Radin seeks to overcome conservatism by supplementing pragmatism's

commitment to embodied experience with the feminist concern for the

perspective of the oppressed. This combination forces us to ask who the "we" is

that seeks coherence (136). She argues that the perspective of the oppressed

draws the pragmatist towards the conclusion that there are a plurality of groups,

each of which represents a "we" that is striving for coherence. In other words,

it leads to the recognition that there is not a single coherent system of belief,

but a plurality of coherent perspectives. According to Radin, what leads some

pragmatists into complacency is "the failure to ask, Who is "we"?" (137).[38]

Still, critics of pragmatism who are interested in radical social reform

may not be satisfied. While Rorty provides an account of how social practices

might be criticized — i.e., through the strong poet — he does not explain

why any particular strong poet should be taken seriously. The burden is on the

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[37]Although Rorty, in focusing on feminism, seems to be making a point about social and political philosophy, there is nothing that would prevent his comments regarding strong poets to apply to other fields. For instance, one could argue that many of the people responsible for important and drastic changes in science — "paradigm shifts" to use Kuhn's terminology — played the role of a strong poet. A short (and by no means exclusive) list might include Newton, Einstein, Darwin, and Freud.

[38]The themes of moral pluralism, and the importance of paying attention to all human needs, including those of the oppressed, can be found in James' "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" (72-75, 81-83).

strong poet to articulate an alternative that can be planted at a time when the social soil is fertile. However, there is no guarantee that the crop will flourish or be harvested. The dominant linguistic community is under no obligation, and is in no way compelled, to consider any particular alternative seriously. In other words, strong poets lack any moral authority, save the authority they can generate themselves. Similarly, it is not clear why, without presupposing a commitment to feminism (or some other liberation movement), the dominant culture should pay special attention to the perspective of the oppressed as Radin suggests.

Rorty's and Radin's proposals, however, make more sense in light of the pragmatic commitment to fallibility. If one accepts the notion that all of our beliefs are fallible, then one must also accept the implication that though our system of belief seems to be coherent, it may not be the best or most coherent system that we could have. In other words, the commitment to fallibilism implies that coherent systems can still be improved. This, however, happens only when our beliefs are challenged and subjected to scrutiny. Thus, ironic as it may sound, for a coherence theorist incoherence is valuable.[39] In fact, a coherent theorist may want us to pursue incoherence, that is to aggressively

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[39]This, I think, underlies the pragmatic commitment to democratic equality suggested in James' moral theory, seen more explicitly in Dewey's emphasis on education and democracy, and expressed in Rorty's claim that democracy should be prior to philosophy. See for instance, James, "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life"; Dewey, *Democracy and Education*; and Rorty, "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy."

examine and test beliefs, in much the same way that scientists try to disconfirm or falsify a theory.

What I think both Rorty and Radin are saying, albeit in different ways, is that the problem of conservatism can be at least partially mitigated by valuing and pursuing incoherence. Both Rorty's strong poet and Radin's attention to the oppressed can be used to test, widen, and enrich the experience of the dominant culture. For instance, it is possible through great literature to have experiences, if only vicariously, that one might not otherwise have. I cannot know, for instance, what it is like to be an industrial laborer in 19th century England or a Jew under Nazism, but by reading Dickens' *Hard Times* or *The Diary of Ann Frank*, I can come to have a better understanding of what it might mean to have such experiences. Likewise, by participating in consciousness-raising groups or activities, I can broaden my experience by becoming conscious of experience that was previously invisible to me. Whenever the perspective of an oppressed group is added to its experience, the dominant group (at least if it claims allegiance to the liberal tradition) may find its oppression of others conflicting with other stated values. Or the oppressed may discover the incoherence of their own situation. If one can make any sense of the notion of "bad coherence" it would be coherence that is based on an impoverished experience, coherence that is incomplete and systematically blind to the experience of whole groups of people.

Understanding the value of incoherence helps to show how the pragmatic practical philosopher might counter the charge of conservatism. On the one

hand, he or she will work to re-establish coherence when the problematic situations upset our equilibrium. On the other hand, he will not simply be content with the status quo, whether coherent or not. The pragmatic practical philosopher will continually seek to test beliefs and practices in order to deepen and extend the coherence of our system of beliefs. However, he will argue that this does not require unshakeable foundations. What Wilfrid Sellars said of empirical knowledge applies equally well to philosophical inquiry. "[E]mpirical knowledge, like its sophisticated extension science," he writes, "is rational, not because it has a *foundation*, but because it is a self-correcting enterprise which can put *any* claim in jeopardy, though not all at once" ("Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" 170, emphasis in the original).

3.2.3 Embodied Experience

If the commitment to fallibility, and subsequent valuing of incoherence is a partial response to the problem of conservatism, what can be said in response to the charge of relativism? An adequate response, I think, must begin by noting that the charge of relativism is magnified by over-intellectualizing belief and overemphasizing logical consistency in coherence. When beliefs are conceived exclusively as propositions, the tendency is to think of logical consistency among propositions as the only requirement of a coherent system. When this is the case, then the charge of relativism appears to be a serious one, for it is possible to envision an infinite number of sets of propositions that are logically consistent. However, pragmatism's understanding of belief in terms of

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dispositions to act and its emphasis on *embodied* experience place practical constraints on what will count as a coherent system of belief. The emphasis in wide reflective equilibrium on practice has a similar effect. Pragmatically, for a system of beliefs to be coherent it must not only be logically consistent, it must also be practical — i.e., it must be livable by and conducive to the well being of embodied human beings.

The requirement that a system of belief must be practical eliminates many possible metaphysical and epistemological beliefs. In particular, it rules out beliefs that conflict with those things of which we are pragmatically certain (see Chapter 4, section 2.2). For instance, it may be intellectually tempting to consider a logically consistent system that includes the belief that other people do not have minds or that humans have absolutely no free will (i.e., hard determinism). However, it strains credulity to suppose that such beliefs could be part of the operative belief system of an embodied social agent. Systems that include such beliefs would be practically incoherent — they could not be consistently acted on by a human living in *this* world. Similarly, radical epistemological skepticism is possible only if we construe knowledge exclusively in terms of propositions. In a reflective moment alone or in the philosophy classroom it may be possible to question whether propositions such as, "The floor will not fall away when I take a step" or "I am not a brain in a vat" are true or false. However, we live and act as if such propositions are certain; pragmatically, we cannot doubt them.

This response to the charge of relativism is similar in many ways to the pragmatic response to global skepticism. The skeptic's fear is that we may be totally wrong in our beliefs about the world — i.e., that our representations may not represent the world as it really is at all. The pragmatist will reply that the skeptic's fear is unfounded. It is possible for a spectator-subject, but not an embodied agent, to be completely mistaken about the world. At the risk of sounding glib, an embodied agent who is systematically out of sync with the world would have a very short life. For this reason, we simply cannot *genuinely* doubt certain things. We cannot doubt that we have arms and legs, that we need sleep and food to eat, that the floor will not fall away when we take our next step, etc. There are limits on what will count as coherent systems of belief. While there may be more than one way to describe the world, the fear of relativism, the fear that because there are no limits anything goes, is unreasonable. For this reason, Peirce urges philosophers to put global skepticism aside in order to focus their energies on issues that produce genuine doubt. "Let us not pretend to doubt in philosophy" he writes, "what we do not doubt in our hearts" ("Some Consequences of Four Incapacities" 229).

The requirement that a system of belief must be practical may even place constraints on our moral beliefs, providing some guidance as to what this minimal set of shared values might include. Whatever other characteristics humans may have, they are sentient, social beings — i.e., they are able to feel pain and pleasure, they need to affiliate with others, and they have the capacity to envision their own deaths. We need not view these characteristics

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metaphysically as the eternal essence of what it means to be human in order for them to be morally relevant. They are not necessary and sufficient conditions of humanity. In fact, if we view humans as evolving biological creatures, then we must be open to the possibility that someday humans may have different characteristics. However, for all practical purposes at this time these characteristics seem to transcend cultures and world views, and thus, may be considered universal. Rorty argues that within the liberal tradition characteristics similar to these provide the basis for prohibitions against cruelty and humiliation (*Contigency, Irony, and Solidarity* 92). He confines the scope of their authority to the liberal tradition, assuming that any broader application would have to rely on insupportable metaphysical claims. However, if these characteristics are universal in the sense that I have described, there is no reason why their application should be limited to cultures that ascribe to liberal values. These features constitute a minimal set of shared values by which to evaluate competing world views.[40] While they will leave many moral questions unresolved, they do provide what Daniels refers to as "provisional fixed points" (Wide Reflective Equilibrium and Theory Acceptance in Ethics" 28). It is wrong to cause needless pain and suffering; it is wrong to support practices that

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[40]Another attempt to establish universal moral norms that do not rely on any sort of deep metaphysical foundations can be found in Martha Nussbaum's "Human Capabilities, Female Human Beings."

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alienate people from each other needlessly and destroy or inhibit bonds of

affiliation; it is wrong to kill people needlessly.[41]

In closing I want to return to Radin's question, "Is it possible to have a

coherent system of belief, and have that system be coherently bad?" I have tried

to argue that the pragmatist should respond "Well, yes and no." On the one

hand, there are no eternal and transcendent criteria that can be thus used to

judge whether a coherent system is good or bad. On the other hand, coherence

can be based on an incomplete or narrow set of experiences. Pragmatism's

commitments to fallibilism and embodied experience counter the charges of

conservatism and relativism by reminding us that 1) foundationalism is not a

viable alternative, but that we do all right without it, 2) the status quo may not

be the best we can do, and that we should seek to improve on it by aggressively

examining beliefs and practices and by widening our base of experience, and 3)

there are elements of human embodied experience that, though contingent, are

sufficiently universal to restrict the range of possible coherent systems. These

considerations provide a basis to counter the problem of bad coherence in

pragmatism and wide reflective equilibrium. They suggest that it is possible for

an approach to philosophical inquiry to be both non-foundational and critical,

and thus, strengthen the case for pragmatic practical philosophy.

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[41]See also Degrazia (*Taking Animals Seriously* 21-22).

EPILOGUE: PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY,

PRAGMATISM, AND PROFESSIONAL PHILOSOPHY

As we turn toward a new century philosophers are increasingly shifting

their attention from the rather narrow set of abstract and technical problems that

have characterized professional philosophy to problems of a more practical and

public nature. Issues of medical ethics, business ethics, environmental ethics,

racism, sexism, social justice, and cognitive science are now examined in

professional journals and university course listings alongside issues in more

traditional philosophical areas like metaphysics, epistemology, history of

philosophy, logic, and moral theory. This shift in attention has come, in part, as

a response to criticism that academic philosophy has become focused on a

narrow set of issues of interest to professional philosophers, but largely

irrelevant to the general public. While these changes have been welcomed by

many people both within and without philosophy, they have also met with

significant skepticism and criticism. Many professional philosophers still view

philosophical treatment of more practical concerns as academically suspect, if

not professionally inappropriate. For this reason, my goal in this project has

been to defend practical philosophy. More specifically, I set out to develop a

fuller understanding of practical philosophy and to offer a philosophically

defensible framework for doing it.

This defense of practical philosophy has included several different

elements. I have argued that though we have, in the modern period, come to

think of philosophy as a theory-centered discipline largely unconcerned with practical matters, there is ample evidence to suggest that throughout much of the history of philosophy practical concerns were considered legitimate subjects for philosophical investigation. If this is true, then the recent interest in practical philosophy is not a new interest, but a renewed interest, a reclamation of a type of philosophy that had been lost or overlooked.

I have also tried to clarify more precisely what practical philosophy is by contrasting it with both theory-centered philosophy and applied philosophy. In contrast to theory-centered philosophy, which emphasizes problems that are abstract, universal, and eternal, practical philosophy, I argued, addresses concrete, particular, and timely problems — i.e., problems that are highly dependent on the context in which they arise. While both practical and applied philosophy claim that philosophy can legitimately address practical concerns, practical philosophy rejects the assumption implicit in applied philosophy, that practical problems of philosophical interest are merely particular instances of more general philosophical problems. Such a view encourages a distinction between *doing* philosophy and *applying* it. Philosophers who address practical concerns of applied philosophy are merely applying philosophy; philosophers who work on the abstract problems of theory-centered philosophy are actually doing philosophy.

To support the claim that philosophers who address practical concerns are actually doing philosophy, I argued that American pragmatism provides a philosophically defensible framework for understanding practical philosophy. I

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noted several features of pragmatism, particularly its insistence on the philosophical relevance of context and practice, its commitment to fallibilism, and its openness to interdisciplinary work, that make it especially well suited as an approach to practical philosophy. Furthermore, connecting practical philosophy to this important, but often neglected, tradition within philosophy, lends support to the claim that practical philosophy has a place alongside its more theory-centered counterpart in the discipline of philosophy.

Finally, I argued that wide reflective equilibrium is a model of philosophical inquiry that has the potential to bring practical and theory-centered philosophy closer together, to allow both to be seen as important elements of a integrated conception of philosophy. Wide reflective equilibrium is attractive for two main reasons. First, it is a non-foundationalist model of justification that is quite compatible with pragmatism. Second, it brings practical and theory-centered philosophy closer together by showing how justification requires that theory and practice work together in a relationship of mutual dependence.

If this philosophical defense of practical philosophy has been successful, then it would seem that practical philosophy is an activity that has a legitimate place in professional philosophy. Unfortunately, however, I believe there are additional problems to overcome. In closing, I want to briefly identify one such problem. My hope is that by so doing I will stimulate further work on practical philosophy and its place within professional philosophy.

In earlier chapters I explored two accounts of the demise of practical philosophy. These accounts can be used to remind us of two important points. First, philosophy is a practice that takes place within and is affected by a particular social and historical context. As Toulmin argues persuasively, the transition from practical to theory-centered philosophy sometime around the time of Descartes was not merely the result of an intellectual dialogue between philosophers, but a response to the social, intellectual, religious, political, and economical turbulence of the times. The quest for theoretical certainty was a quest for stability, an attempt to find firm foundational beliefs that would command the assent not just of those who shared your political or religious convictions, but from all rational persons as such. Thus, the dominance of theory-centered philosophy is a historical contingency. The second point is closely related. If philosophy is a practice that takes place within and is affected by a particular social and historical context, then to assess the current prospects for practical philosophy one must look carefully at the social and historical context in which the current re-emergence of practical philosophy is taking place.

One feature of the current philosophical setting in the United States that must be given consideration when discussing the prospects for practical philosophy today is the professionalization of the discipline. The significance of this professionalization should not be underestimated. In his historical survey of philosophy as a practice, D.W. Hamlyn prefaces his analysis of the twentieth century, with the following comment: "In any case, when considering

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the practice of philosophy, differences between philosophical doctrines and theoretical approaches pale into significance by comparison with the almost universal fact that in this [Twentieth] century philosophy has become an academic and professionally managed subject" (127).

Historian of philosophy Bruce Kuklick argues not only that professionalization was significant in shaping the character of philosophy, but also that it led to a decline in practical or public philosophy in favor of a more narrowly defined academic and technical agenda ("The Changing Character" 4-13). This agenda is consistent with the theory-centered approach to philosophy that Toulmin describes. Thus, while they offer different explanations of why professional philosophy is predominantly theory-centered, Kuklick's and Toulmin's analyses are in this sense complementary. The professionalization of philosophy merely reinforced a preoccupation with theory-centered philosophy that was already developing. Because theory-centered philosophy dominated at a time when the discipline became professionalized it was "institutionalized" as the professional mode of doing philosophy. For this reason, the reclamation of practical philosophy requires a reconceptualization of the profession of philosophy.

One way of reconceptualizing the profession would be to envision a split or division of labor between the theoretical and practical elements.[1] I want to

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[1]Noting that a separation between the theoretical and applied sciences (e.g., between physics and engineering), Edwin Layton suggests that the some sort of professional separation could be conceivable in the humanities as well. Applied disciplines such as medical ethics could separate from their parent

(continued...)

resist this move. In fact, I presented wide reflective equilibrium as a model of

philosophical inquiry that brings theory and practice together in order to avoid

just such a split. However, the historical connection between theory-centered

and professional philosophy requires us to think seriously about the professional

status of practical philosophy, or more broadly, of a discipline that includes both

theory-centered and practical philosophy. According to sociologists of the

professions one of the defining characteristics of a profession (as opposed to

other occupations) is the mastery of some particular body of knowledge or skills

(Larson x). Professionals are expected to possess some special knowledge or

skills — i.e., some particular expertise — by virtue of which they merit the

respect, recognition, and privileges associated with the professional status. This

assumption about the nature of a profession raises a question for practical

philosophy. In what sense is the practical philosopher a *professional*?

It is, I suppose, an open question whether one could or should delineate

the precise expertise that would qualify theory-centered philosophy as a

profession.[2] Philosophy may always be a essentially contested subject, and as

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[1](...continued)
humanities (e.g., philosophy) to become separate, but related disciplines with
independent professional associations and graduate programs for training future
practitioners. As in the sciences, the professional separation of the applied and
theoretical disciplines is understandable. "The need to master a novel context"
he writes, "as well as the implicit value commitments provides the basis for
some sort of separation between applied humanities and their parent disciplines"
(70).

[2]For some interesting discussion of whether or not philosophy is or
should be a profession see Paul Durbin, "The 'Professionalization' of
Philosophy: An Essay in the Sociology of Philosophy;" Allison Jaggar,

anyone who has attended a philosophy conference knows, it is next to impossible to get philosophers to agree on much of anything. Still, there has been sufficient agreement to support at least the outward manifestations of a profession. Whether or not it is a profession, it is undeniable that over the past century the discipline of philosophy has become more professional. We have witnessed the development of the first professional organizations for philosophers, the sharper definition of disciplinary boundaries, the training and placing of teachers through doctoral programs, and the proliferation of philosophical journals. These developments, I think, justify using the term "professional philosophy."

However, the interdisciplinary nature of practical philosophy makes defining philosophy as a profession even more difficult. If the philosopher (and here I am not distinguishing between practical and theory-centered philosophers) is to work effectively on problems that arise in settings outside of what we typically associate with philosophy, and if those problems require interdisciplinary approaches, then she, at least as she deals with practical issues, will have to be a something of a generalist. In fact, her effectiveness will depend on her ability to be a generalist, to make the connections between disciplines, to see how things in the broadest sense of the term hang together in the broadest sense of the term. The idea of professionalism noted above implicitly equates professional expertise with specialization. To be a

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[2](...continued)
"Philosophy as a Profession;" D.G. Brown, "On Professing to be a Profession;" and Cecil H. Miller, "Vocation versus Profession in Philosophy."

professional is (among other things) to be an expert, and to be an expert is to be

a specialist. If this is true, then the philosopher as a generalist could not be an

expert, and thus, could not be a professional.

This problem is only magnified if one accepts the pragmatic version of

philosophy I have presented defended in this project. It is magnified because in

rejecting Cartesianism, pragmatists seem to reject many of the traditional

epistemological problems upon which the profession of philosophy in the United

States has been built. In short, the pragmatic critique of the traditional

problems of philosophy, leads to the deprofessionalization of philosophy.

Perhaps more than any other pragmatist, Rorty is cognizant of the implications

of the pragmatic critique of the traditional problems of philosophy for

professional philosophy.

Rorty is somewhat ambiguous about his assessment of the future of

philosophy as a profession. In many of his writings he is quite critical of

professional philosophy and advocates for a "post-philosophical culture," calling

for an end of the profession as we know it.[3] However, in other essays he seems

more open to the possibility of philosophy being valued in the future

("Philosophy & the Future" 197-205). This ambiguity is largely attributable to

the ambiguity of the word "philosophy." Rorty tries to overcome this ambiguity

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[3]See for instance, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* 3-13, 389-394 and *Consequences of Pragmatism* xiii-xlvii, 211-230. These are perhaps some of the most explicit accounts, but the criticisms permeate much of his writing in the last 20 years.

by distinguishing between "Philosophy" and "philosophy."[4] Philosophy is a specialized field historically linked to the Platonic tradition. Doing philosophy in this sense is "following Plato's and Kant's lead, asking questions about the nature of certain normative notions (e.g. 'truth,' 'rationality,' 'goodness') in the hope of better obeying such norms." ("Introduction: Pragmatism and Philosophy" xv). It is Philosophy that the pragmatists such as Rorty find problematic. He is clearly pessimistic about any profession of philosophy construed as Philosophy. He thinks we have no need for, and would be better off without, this type of profession.

In contrast, philosophy is less of a specific discipline and more of a broad endeavor — an avocation rather than a vocation. It is not bound to the subject matter or problems of Philosophy. Rorty claims this is the type of philosophy that Sellars had in mind, an attempt to see how things hang together, in the broadest sense of the term ("Introduction: Pragmatism and Philosophy" xiv). Rorty seems somewhat more optimistic about the profession of philosophy construed as philosophy. I say "somewhat," for while Rorty argues that this is the sort of philosophical activity that would be valuable, it is not clear how professional the profession would be. Philosophers given the task of seeing how things hang together would have to reverse the predominant trends of the first 70 years of this century. They would have to lower their boundaries with other disciplines and resist the temptation to define philosophy by distinguishing

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[4]Rorty uses only an upper case 'P.' I will underline the upper case 'P' in Philosophy in order to avoid confusion at the beginning of sentences.

between distinctively philosophical and non-philosophical (political, religious, economic, etc.) questions. In short, philosophers would have to give up the attempt to make philosophy an autonomous discipline or activity ("Philosophy & the Future," 200-201). The philosopher in Rorty's "post-Philosophical" culture would be a specialist without a specialty. He would not be a specialist in any certain area, but an intellectual generalist engaged in what we might call "culture criticism" ("Introduction: Pragmatism and Philosophy" xl). He would be a person who compares the advantages and disadvantages of vocabularies or ways of describing ourselves and our world, a person concerned with the big picture of how things hang together.

> Such a culture would, doubtless, contain specialists in seeing how things hung together. But these would be people who had no special "problems" to solve, nor any special "method" to apply, abided by no particular disciplinary standards, had no collective self-image as a "profession."...They would be all-purpose intellectuals who were ready to offer a view on pretty much anything, in the hope of making it hang together with everything else ("Introduction: Pragmatism and Philosophy" xxxix).

What Rorty recognizes clearly is that is the pragmatic critique of the traditional problems of philosophy, leads to the deprofessionalization of philosophy. Without special problems, special methods, disciplinary standards, or collective self-image there would be no profession of philosophy at all. There might be people who play the role of cultural critic and who work at the broad task of seeing how things hang together in the broadest sense of the term. We might even call these people philosophers. But without a fairly well defined subject matter and/or methodology it is unlikely that such people would be

grouped together in separate departments within universities, that they would publish special journals about their work, or that they would form professional organizations. Such institutional structures are simply not required to support, and in fact may be detrimental to these "all-purpose intellectuals."

Thus, while I have tried to defend practical philosophy in this project more work needs to be done to develop a vision of an expanded profession of philosophy that includes it. If Toulmin is correct, practical philosophy is not new to philosophy. However, it is relatively new to professional philosophy. Making room in the profession for practical philosophy, and more specifically for pragmatic practical philosophy will require changing philosophy's self-image, and may even result in a less well-defined discipline. While I believe that a profession based on such a discipline would be both possible and valuable it would be quite different from the profession of philosophy today in at least one important respect. Philosophy would shift its attention outward, deriving its problems from public life, and approaching its work with an eye towards improving the human condition. This is what Toulmin refers to as "'philosophy' in the practical sense, as a contribution to the reflective resolution of quandaries that face us in enterprises with high stakes" ("Recovery" 352).

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