The Pragmatic Turn:
A Practical Turn Toward Human Practices In Their Irreducible Multiplicity

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This collection of essays and responses is predicated on the assumption "neither traditional philosophy nor current bioethics seem to possess a vocabulary" adequate to treating the issues confronting us today, issues resulting from the highly dynamic character of our modern technological culture (Keulartz *et al.* 2003, xvii). The detailed descriptions and analyses of the interplay of technology and culture, offered by science and technology studies, are (the editors inform us) crucial for crafting such a vocabulary. But the hostility of those engaged in these studies to ethics limits their value for addressing bioethical questions (xviii). In contrast, pragmatism "gives serious ethical consideration to the…normative implications" associated with "the co-evolution of technology and society" (xviii). But it has not tended to give the same painstaking, detailed accounts of our contemporary practices as have been given by Science and Technology Studies (STS). Thus, the interplay between pragmatism and STS is likely to be mutually beneficial.

There are twenty chapters in and as many contributors to this impressive volume. The contributors cover a wide range of topics, from a broad array of perspectives, perspectives representing not only diverse philosophical traditions but also different articulations of the same tradition (most notably, the philosophical tradition of American pragmatism). Echoes of the voices of Peirce, James, Dewey, and Mead can be heard in these pages alongside those of the voices of Foucault, Habermas, MacIntyre, and Latour.

A tendency cutting across the differences at which I have just hinted is that, regardless of philosophical orientation, the contributors offer principally programmatic statements, some of which revolve around taxonomies of pragmatism. Indeed, in the "Epilogue," the editors call attention to pragmatism's allegedly "split personality"—rationalist or prosaic pragmatism, on the one hand, and romantic or poetic pragmatism, on the other (p. 255).

The predominant pattern exhibited by the individual contributions tends to take this form. A program of research is *outlined*, often in broad strokes, and then *illustrated*, though, in most cases, only in a highly abridged manner. The point, character, and novelty of this program are brought into focus by contrasting this program with other historically influential ones or even merely possible alternatives. Herein is one of the main motives prompting the contributors to propose the various taxonomies encountered in this volume.

In "Ethics in a Technological Culture," the editors characterize pragmatism negatively. The identity of pragmatism is taken by them to be bound up with three "anti-theses, theses aimed against particular philosophical principles that form obstacles to the productive solution of problems and a satisfactory settlement of conflicts" (p. 14). These are anti-foundationalism, anti-dualism, and anti-skepticism. In their explication of anti-dualism, however, the editors immediately mention the rejection of essentialism on the part of pragmatisms, so this anti-thesis might be added to the other three rather than subsumed under one of them.

This essay draws to a conclusion by stressing the need to develop new moral vocabularies. These alone will enable us to twist free from traditional impasses, so often due to the rigid dichotomies enshrined in our traditional vocabularies (such categorical dualisms as person and thing, human and animal, male and female, culture and nature, human and machine). Hence, the editors suggest: "One of the main ways to move on from traditional dichotomies, which stand in the way of workable solutions to emergent problems, is to develop new vocabularies, in which speaking in terms of boundaries is replaced by speaking in terms of degrees" (p. 18; however see Thompson, p. 207).

As do most of the contributors to this volume, I tend to identify with the pragmatic tradition, but in my case it is mainly the tradition of Peirce, James, Dewey, Mead, and (to a lesser extent) Lewis, rather than Rorty, Putnam, and other more contemporary figures. Part of my attraction to this tradition is the potential of the texts at this tradition's center to re-orient philosophical discourse and, indeed, to re-make such discourse, as integral to the task of reconstructing our practices and institutions. Another part of my attraction is, often despite appearances, the antipathy of this tradition to reductionism. I take this to be such a central feature of pragmatism that I am disposed to add it to the list of anti-theses already discussed. Much is typically made of pragmatic deconstruction of traditional dualisms and unquestioned hierarchies, also of philosophical fixations

on apodictic certitude, too little however is made of the critiques of the various forms of reductionism put forth by first-generation pragmatists and their progeny. Richard Rorty's very early essay "Pragmatism, Categories, & Language" (1961) compellingly calls attention to this feature of pragmatism, even if its author thereafter rather quickly distances himself from Peirce and only eventually returns to pragmatism as a valuable resource for re-orienting philosophical discourse.

These points relate to the heart of the matter, the pragmatic meaning of pragmatism itself—what is practically involved in taking a truly practical turn toward our human practices (cf. Menand). The editors propose in their "Epilogue": "One of the things belonging to the hard core of the pragmatist research program is the reversal of the traditional relation between theory and practice, and the accompanying turn away from the prevailing philosophy, which has a strong fixation on epistemology" (p. 251). Though I have misgivings about framing this characterization in terms of the hard core of a research program (since it tends to encourage a scientistic and thus reductionistic understanding of pragmatism), there is much to recommend this formulation. Even so, we need to proceed carefully here. Pragmatism does not reduce theory to the handmaiden of practice, but rather conceives theory as itself a form of practice. If pragmatism pragmatically means anything, it heuristically means the self-conscious and self-critical turn toward the practices in which we are always already implicated and, as a consequence of this, by which we are defined (that is, by which we define ourselves in our transactions with other agents, human and otherwise). This turn toward our defining practices cannot help but be a turn toward our interwoven histories. It also cannot help but be a turn toward resources outside of pragmatism.

Though American philosophy includes far more than the pragmatic movement,[1] it is appropriate on the occasion to focus exclusively on this philosophical tradition. A philosophical or religious tradition is, as Alasdair MacIntyre suggests, an intergenerationally extended argument at the center of which is the question: What are we to make of this inheritance that has made us? Moreover, every tradition pivots around questions of identity. For instance, Judaism is an attempt to live the question, "What does it mean to be Jewish?" So, too, Christianity is an endeavor to live the question, "What does it mean to be Christian?" Analogously, philosophy is, in part, a series of responses to the challenge of ascertaining what it means to be a philosopher, though the insistently reflexive character of this question can, especially in an academic or

institutional setting, work toward rendering philosophy an ever more abstracted and insular meta-reflection on a distinctive genre of human reflection. The counterbalance to this tendency is the resolve to recollect that the question of what it means to be a philosopher is inseparable from that of how to live one's life and, thus, how to position oneself in a world of conflict and risk.[2] Temporality entails transience, just as loss and destruction impose the tasks of amelioration and reparation. In a world wherein everything is transient and precarious, also one wherein much lies in ruins and much else gives signs of decay and even implosion, the task of philosophers cannot be oriented principally to understanding their work; it must be ordained to protecting and repairing their world(s).

In "Transiency and Amelioration: Revisited," John J. McDermott suggests pragmatism is itself an attempt to plumb the deep significance of the term *practical*. How are we who today identify with this tradition (whatever misgivings we might have about the term by which it is identified[3]) to think through, in a truly practical manner, the deep significance of this seemingly trivial word?[4] How are we to translate even our most abstract theoretical terms and claims into concrete practical experiences and exertions? The resources of pragmatism are, however, not adequate for thinking through these and related questions, though these resources are invaluable. Thus, as aids in addressing questions regarding *praxis*, I turn to Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud as well as Peirce and James, to Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault as well as Mead and Dewey, to Ludwig Wittgenstein, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, Umberto Eco, and Paul Bourdieu as well as John Smith, John McDermott, Richard Bernstein, Richard Rorty, and Cornel West. Here I am simply imitating Smith (see, e.g., *Reason and God*), McDermott, Bernstein (e.g., *Praxis and Action*), and Rorty themselves. To treat the resources of pragmatism as adequate to address the question of practice[5] is, in effect, to betray the pluralism so central to this tradition. Peirce's careful study of the dusty folios of medieval authors and James' spirited engagement with his European contemporaries point to the need to look far and wide for help in addressing the questions at hand (see, e.g., Smith 1992, p. 196-99).

In particular, the genre of genealogy so imaginatively developed by Foucault is crucial for any truly pragmatic turn toward our historically evolved and evolving practices. In some important respects, Foucault is a better pragmatist than either Dewey or any other representative of American pragmatism.

This can perhaps be made plausible by considering Larry Hickman's "Pragmatic Resources for Biotechnology" and Hub Zwart's response to this essay ("Philosophical Tools and Technological Solutions"). Considering these two texts also provides us with an opportunity to consider one of the explicit desideratum of the four editors, a desideratum to which at least Hickman subscribes. Let me thus begin with a consideration of this by calling our attention to a curious feature of the exchange between Hickman and Zwart; and then let me suggest several respects in which Foucault is a better pragmatist than Dewey.

At the conclusion of his contribution, Hickman asserts: "If we take seriously the core claims of pragmatism, then we will begin to develop a new vocabulary to deal with issues involving technology" (p. 35). For him, this vocabulary will concern at least the terms in which we articulate the business of inquiry: "Deweyan style pragmatism issues a call to change the *way* we think about *how* we think" (ibid.). Such conceptual change cannot avoid being also a lexical change, a change in the way we discourse about thinking and, indeed, discourse itself (e.g., the translation of truth as "warranted assertibility" and also that of proposition in terms of the function of gathering data and facilitating inference, rather than bearing truth in any traditional sense [p. 29]). But, in the pages leading up to this conclusion, Hickman has tried to show the superiority *of* a vocabulary crafted by Dewey before 1940 *to* our contemporary lexicons.

So, too, at the conclusion of his response to Larry's essay, Zwart recalls Foucault's efforts in the history of sexuality to come to effective terms with the focal object of his philosophical interrogation. Zwart rightly stresses the experimental nature of Foucault's writings, noting in particular how the author of the *History of Sexuality* came to feel the need to replace "biopolitics" and "panoptism" (Foucault's favorite philosophical tools in the 1970s) with such expressions as "practices of freedom" and "technologies of the self" (p. 40). On Zwart's account (one I fully endorse), Foucault's inquiry forced him to revise the terms in which the process could be most usefully carried forward. Expressions crafted in other contexts and for other purposes tended to be eclipsed by ones designed specifically for dealing with the field of discursive and non-discursive practices in which Foucault had immersed himself as an inquirer.

There is a weak and a strong sense of "*new* vocabulary." In a weak sense, one does what Hickman and perhaps also Zwart in effect propose: one carries an antecedently established vocabulary into a new domain of discourse or inquiry.

In a stronger sense, one does what Dewey and, even more arrestingly, what Foucault does: one devises novel expressions to meet the emergent and thus unexpected demands of an ongoing investigation, acknowledging thereby the inadequacy of inherited vocabularies. Nothing comparable to Foucault's linguistic or lexical innovations is found in virtually any of the essays in this volume, perhaps because of the unstated and (in my judgment) unwarranted confidence in the terms crafted by the heroes of these contributors (Dewey, Foucault, Habermas, MacIntyre, or some other author). Zwart's characterization of Foucault certainly highlights the respects in which this contemporary French thinker might be counted among the pragmatists.

Though he mainly pays attention to Habermas rather than Foucault, Paul Thompson appears to endorse a manner of philosophical engagement quite close to Foucault's, though ironically somewhat at a distance from his own. At the outset of what is arguably the strongest essay in this volume, Thompson boldly states, "pragmatism is always occasional philosophy" (p. 200). He concludes with a qualification, but perhaps not an adequate one. This qualification comes at the end of a passage worth quoting at some length:

> The most important thing for a pragmatist to do is to actually participate in some practical moral discourse, rather than talking about the philosophical reasons for doing so. To participate in moral discourse is to talk philosophy on the occasions that present themselves. It is to diagnose the audience's problems and to tailor a philosophical response that speaks to it as directly as possible. Of course, it is valid and important occasionally to step back and situate that doing, that practice, within a philosophical tradition" (pp. 215-16).

This seems to me right as far as it goes, but it does not go as far as Thompson himself characteristically does in his own investigations. In accord with Thompson's own practice rather than his description of it, we must repeatedly step back from the immediate foreground of some practical engagement or some problematic situation, and then we must situate that engagement or situation itself in a thickly narrated history of the present. Moreover, we must view this engagement or situation in reference to formally elaborated frameworks having heuristic relevance far beyond any particular occasion.[6] This is just another way of stressing the extent to which the pragmatic turn is at once a historicist and a theoretical turn, a genealogical turn toward our enveloping practices making use of the resources from diverse traditions of theoretical reflection. Our task is not

simply to situate the practice under scrutiny within a philosophical tradition, but mainly to contextualize it within the complex interplay of the various factors constitutive of the historical present (including of course technological factors). Paul Thompson's theoretical description of his pragmatic engagement in occasional philosophy, especially concerning his distinctive manner of addressing normative questions, is (I submit) somewhat at odds with the scope and character of that engagement. It is far less occasional and more encompassingly historical and formally theoretical than this description conveys.

This is, however, more or less true of virtually all of our self-descriptions and self-depictions. Hence, part of the task of pragmatism is, in reference to any actual practice, to refine and correct the distortions and occlusions in our reflexive accounts. The European traditions of hermeneutic suspicion (especially psychoanalysis and Marxism) provide especially useful tools for carrying out this crucial task.

Related to this is Glenn McGee's claim regarding the role of experience in the context of inquiry and also Peter-Paul Verbeek's response to McGee's essay. McGee contends: "Knowledge is not grounded, for the pragmatists, by some pre-given reality apart from experience" (p. 109). The aim of his essay seems to be to show the need for recovering a pragmatically reconceived ground for our epistemic claims. Such a recovery involves a reconceptualization of experience in light of pragmatic and phenomenological accounts of our lived experience. According to McGee, we have to take seriously what in bioethics counts as "founded knowledge." There is indeed a danger in failing to do so. "The peril of ignoring the classical philosophical problem of the foundation of knowledge is," he insists, "great, at a minimum because … it puts those contemporary exponents of pragmatism at odds with the pragmatic philosophical tradition, which takes as its starting point the reconstruction of the quest for certainty" (p. 109). The dangers of clinging to the metaphor of foundations (hence, also to that of knowledge as an edifice) might be, however, as great or even greater than those of jettisoning these metaphors.

In his response to McGee, Verbeek suggests: "Humans never have a direct contact with reality; they cannot reach 'the things themselves'" (p. 120). *Direct* here means *immediate* and, in turn, *immediate* means *not mediated*. The claim being defended by Verbeek is that all of our experience *is* mediated, not only linguistically but also technologically. He calls attention to the work of Don Ihde

as a tool for exploring the technologically mediated character of our lived experience, especially in a technological culture such as our own.

My own position, derived from Dewey and even more from Peirce, is that our experience is at once direct and mediated. We have direct yet mediated encounters with the things themselves, things in their actuality and tenure apart from our whims and wishes, also potentially apart from the conceptual frameworks dominant at any particular time. In this context, the recognition of multilayered mediations (or what Peirce calls thirdness) does not entail the denial of brute otherness (what he calls secondness). Peirce claims, "we have *direct experience of things in themselves*. Nothing can be more completely false than that we experience only our own ideas. That is indeed without exaggeration the very epitome of *all* falsity" (1935, 6.95). He immediately adds: "Our knowledge of things in themselves is entirely *relative,* it is true [relative in various respects, relative to the range of our perceptual organs, etc.], but all experience and all knowledge is knowledge of that which is, independently of being represented" (ibid.) and in a sense even independent of the mode of representation and thus mediation (cf. Rosenthal; Colapietro).

My two final points regard mediation, but mediation in a more immediately practical and normative sense than the one just discussed. The first point can be sharply brought into focus by recalling a recent exchange between Giles Gunn and Louis Menand. In defense of the pragmatists against Menand's criticism that pragmatism cannot explain how humans acquire their wants and desires but only what outcomes might result if these wants and desires are enacted, Gunn suggests the direction in which we should look for the pragmatist's explanation. The charge that the pragmatists have nothing to say regarding how desires and wants are acquired in the course of experience is, in Gunn's judgment, "at least partially answered by pointing out that people's sense of desire is not unrelated to their sense of need, and James and Dewey expended a good deal of energy...pondering the significance that the second [our sense of need] might have for the first [our sense of desire]" (2002, p. 99). In his response to this attempt to defend the pragmatists against his criticism, Menand reframes the question in terms of "what we would call *mediated* desires" (p. 121; emphasis added). On this score, he insists, "compared to Nietzsche, Weber, Veblen, and Freud—not to mention the modernist artists and writers—the pragmatists relied on a relatively unsophisticated model of belief and action" (ibid.). That is, they paid insufficient attention to the complex processes by which even our seemingly most immediate desires (e.g., our desire for food or sex) are densely mediated affairs. On this

issue, I tend to side with Gunn against Menand, though I readily concede the pragmatists (especially in comparison with the figures mentioned by Menand) relied on a largely unarticulated model of desire. But an unarticulated model is one thing, an unsophisticated model is quite another. Consider, for example, the extent of Dewey's anti-Cartesian construal of mind in this passage from *The Public and Its Problems*:

> The idea of a natural individual in his isolation possessed of full-fledged wants, of energies to be expended according to his own volition, and of a ready-made faculty of forethought and prudent calculation is as a fiction in psychology as the doctrine of the individual in possession of antecedent political rights is one in politics. The liberalist school made much of desires, but to them desire was a conscious matter deliberately directed upon a known goal of pleasures. Desire and pleasure were both open and above-board affairs. The mind was seen as if always in the bright sunlight, having no hidden recesses, no unexplorable nooks, nothing underground. Its operations were like moves in a fair game of chess. They are in the open...Mind was 'consciousness'...[and, in turn, 'consciousness'] was a clear, transparent, self-revealing medium in which wants, efforts and purposes were exposed without distortion. (1988b, p. 299)

Such a view of wants and desires can hardly be called unsophisticated or uncritical, even if Dewey and the other pragmatists frequently failed to spell out in detail how the most "immediate" of our desires and wants are always mediated by factors of which we characteristically are *unconscious* in both the weak sense of unaware and the dynamic sense of strenuously ignoring.

What Dewey in *The Public and Its Problems* says about wants and desires he in *Experience and Nature* says about beliefs and attitudes. Experience

> is already overlaid and saturated with the products of the reflection of past generations and bygone ages. It is filled with interpretations, classifications, due to sophisticated thought, which have become incorporated into what seems to be fresh naïve empirical material...If we may for the moment call these material prejudices (even if they are true, as long as their source and authority is unknown), then philosophy is a critique of prejudices. (1988a, p. 40)

Contra Menand, this model of beliefs and attitudes is no more unsophisticated than the model of wants and desires put forth by Dewey in *The Public and Its Problems*. There is, thus, an explicit recognition of the mediated character of human beliefs and desires and, in accord with this recognition, a felt need for an ongoing critique of the largely invisible processes by which seemingly incontestable beliefs and innocent desires are generated. The ideal of political self-rule is impossible apart from that of moral self-rule and, in turn, the ideal of moral self-rule is impossible apart from psychological self-critique (part of the goal of such self-critique being making more transparent the mediated character of even our most firmly held beliefs and our most deeply characteristic desires).

The second point regarding mediation concerns the political rather than the psychological, though (as the passage from Dewey might be taken to suggest) the political and psychological are in actuality tightly interwoven. In their "Epilogue" to *Pragmatist Ethics for a Technological Culture*, the editors assert:

> An ethical consensus can exist only *within* a single community. In modern pluralistic societies, however, discussions take place primarily *between* different communities, which often hold competing views of the good life. In that situation ethical consensus is impossible, and because ethical convictions differ from negotiable interests a fair compromise is not suitable either; in ethical matters one cannot bargain nor make concessions without compromising oneself and one's integrity (2003, p. 262).

I take this to be a distressingly unpragmatic conclusion to an otherwise consistently pragmatic book.

One of the dualisms most needful of being broken down is that upon which the allegedly pragmatic ideal of "equal coexistence" is predicated. The limits of compromise and consensus are, *for pragmatism,* experimentally determinable. An unblinking recognition of plurality as a fact and an unwavering commitment to pluralism as an ideal do not necessitate ruling out (especially ruling out *a priori*) consensus *among* diverse historical communities or compromise with radically antagonistic regimes. The ideal of pluralism bids us to cultivate the moral imagination by which an ever more encompassing and less fragile consensus among warring cultures might be secured.

Moreover, the terms of coexistence cannot be defined in advance of the sites of and participants in the always multiple and often enduring conflicts concerning coexistence. It may or may not be on equal terms. The ideal of equality is certainly not one to be suspended lightly, but the contrite fallibilism of Charles Peirce encourages a readiness to make an act of contrition, a confession of *not* knowing in advance what the terms of our coexistence or even what the most ideal resolution of those problematic situations bearing upon possible coexistence would be. The resilient ingenuity of situated agents must continuously seize whatever cultural and technological opportunities are available to secure a global consensus regarding certain issues (e.g., the use of military arms, that of scarce resources, and the treatment of the ecosphere) and, inseparable from this task, to forge more equitable compromises than those presently in place. Such resilient ingenuity is nothing other than experimental intelligence, i.e., intelligence self-consciously committed to learning as quickly and deeply from experience as it can. For such intelligence, it is, at bottom, always a matter of looking and seeing (Wittgenstein), but after having tried and failed, most likely after having failed repeatedly.

Pragmatism is no panacea. It might not even be an *–ism*. The most pragmatism can do is to illuminate the conflicts, confusions, and crises in which our commitments and indeed successes implicate us. What is often most dissatisfying or disappointing about pragmatism is, in my judgment, most commendable and urgent – the insistence upon framing cultural conflicts in moral terms but the reluctance to proffer definitive solutions to these moral conflicts. This does not entail that *methodological* pragmatism is the most truly pragmatic (cf. Light). There is no locus outside of the practices, discourses, and institutions in which we live and move and have our being. The insistence upon the primacy, irreducibility, and authority of our practices does not solve any specific issue; it merely points us in the general direction in which any effective solution is likely to be found. Pragmatism is, as James and even Peirce often suggested, far more a sensibility than a doctrine, far more an orientation than a theory. It is a critical orientation toward our historically evolved and evolving practices. As such it drives in the direction of hermeneutics and genealogy, critique and celebration (p. 70). In turning toward our practices in all of their variety, pragmatism does not drive away from the history of philosophy or that of any other discipline, but rather takes up these histories in other than an antiquarian manner.

A pragmatist ethics in a technological culture will most appropriately take the form of a critical turn toward the various practices in which we are implicated, including those pertaining to bioethics. For such a task, the writings of Foucault, Habermas, Latour, and MacIntyre are as often as useful as those of Peirce, James, Dewey, and Mead. The ideal of creative democracy is, practically, one with the ideal of securing an ever wider consensus of warring parties on the basis of compromises in which the integrity of the parties making these is not felt by those parties to have been compromised.

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[1] There is often a double and even triple reduction—first, of American philosophy to pragmatism, then, of pragmatism to Dewey's instrumentalism and, finally, of Dewey's pragmatism to its "strong misreading" by Richard Rorty.

[2] "To be a philosopher is," as Henry David Thoreau notes in   *Walden*, "not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust. It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically" (New American Library [1980], 14).

[3] One of the main points of John McDermott's essay was how unfortunate a label *pragmatism* is.

[4] In *Pragmatism,* James stresses the term is derived from a Greek word meaning "action, from which our words 'practice' and 'practical' come" (1975, p. 28). Max H. Fisch explains more fully the meaning of *pragma* when he identifies as its principal meanings "deed, action, behavior, practice, affair, pursuit, occupation, business, going concern." He goes on to note: "The Greek formula has several advantages over the Latin. The Latin *factum* emphasizes the completed actuality, the pastness, of the deed; the Greek *pragma* covers also an action still in course or not yet begun, and even a line of conduct that *would* be adopted under circumstances that may never arise. The Latin is retrospective; the Greek is, or may be, prospective. The Latin is, on the face of it, individual...The Greek leaves room for possibility and for generality..." (1986, 223-34).

[5] This is a misleading expression insofar as it suggests that there is a single question or problem, rather than a tangled cluster of issues.

[6] There might seem to be and, indeed, there might actually be a tension between my earlier point regarding the importance of crafting novel vocabularies and the recognition of frameworks having relevance across countless occasions for moral deliberation.