Pragmatism and Pluralism

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1. Talisse and Aikin argue that pragmatists who take themselves to be pluralists are making a serious mistake. The pluralism in question here is 'deep' pluralism: the view that the persistence of disagreement or conflict is not due to a mistake on someone's part or to human frailty, but is due to the world. I think that Tallise and Aikin are on to something important here. Those pragmatists who take themselves to be pluralists (James, Dewey, Rorty, for instance)[1] do indeed turn their backs on something essential to pragmatism. I shall, that is, agree with Talisse and Aiken that pragmatism and a principled, across-the-board pluralism are in tension. Pragmatists cannot be pluralists who enthusiastically hold that the world makes pluralism inevitable. They ought to follow the founder of the doctrine — C.S. Peirce — in being unenthusiastic about pluralism. Nonetheless — and here I part company with Talisse and Aikin — pragmatists also ought to follow Peirce in reconciling themselves to the possibility of pluralism's holding here and there. We shall see that, despite this reluctant attitude towards pluralism, the pragmatist can and must celebrate and encourage the diversity of views.

2. The lever on which the pragmatist's position on pluralism turns is the concept of truth. It is unsurprising that James, Dewey, and Rorty take themselves to be pluralists, as they are constantly tempted by the view that there is no truth — only different, equally warranted, accounts of what is the case. Peirce was much more of an objectivist about truth and so it is also unsurprising that he is less keen on pluralism. Peirce argued that a true belief is one which would be indefeasible or one which would stand up to the rigors of inquiry (CP 5.569, 6.485). A true belief is one which is "unassailable by doubt"; it is a belief which would meet every demand we were to place on it (CP 5.416). On this view, truth is a stable property — a belief is either true (indefeasible) or not. And truth is not a matter for some particular community — if a belief is indefeasible, it would stand up to whatever could be thrown at it, by any community of inquirers.

3. Talisse and Aikin distinguish between meaning pragmatism and inquiry pragmatism. Meaning pragmatism, they say, is roughly: the meaning of a concept lies in its practical consequences. Conflict or disagreement is to be dissolved, not resolved, as it is often a problem about clarifying meaning. Inquiry pragmatism,

they say, is roughly: what drives conflict is that we haven't experimented enough to resolve the matter. Resolution, not dissolution, is what we must try to do with conflict. They say that Peirce, along with being a meaning pragmatist, "is an inquiry pragmatist *par excellence*": he argues that when we are agitated by doubt or conflict, we try to settle belief and get to the truth.

The distinction between the two kinds of pragmatism strikes me as being not terribly apt, as meaning pragmatism directly gives rise to inquiry pragmatism. Peirce asks how we determine the meaning of the concept of truth. His "meaning pragmatism" has it that we must see what its implications are for practice. The practice relevant to truth is the practice of inquiry, for truth is what we think we are after when we inquire. So "meaning pragmatism" advises us to look to the practice of inquiry if we want to get a fix on the meaning of truth. Peirce's examination of the practice of inquiry leads him to the view of truth on which truth is indefeasible belief. When we inquire — when we search for truth — what we do is try to resolve doubt or conflict. Were we to really and permanently resolve doubt or conflict, we would reach the truth. Meaning pragmatism and inquiry pragmatism are thus inextricably bound together.

Talisse and Aiken put forward a number of linked arguments about how both meaning pragmatism and inquiry pragmatism are incompatible with deep pluralism. Given that I don't take the distinction between meaning and inquiry pragmatism to be altogether helpful, I'm going to focus on — and put my own spin on — what I take to be the strongest argument they present. It suffices, I think, to pretty much end the matter.

4. The pragmatism found in Dewey, James, and Rorty holds that when we look to the practice of inquiry to get a fix on the concept of truth, we find only solidarity or the practice of arriving at beliefs which are warranted for our community. Indeed, we find that we don't in fact search for the truth, but merely for beliefs that are assertible in our culture. The pragmatism found in Peirce, on the other hand, holds that when we look to the practice of inquiry, we find that we do search for the truth — for the right answer, or for the answer which would be indefeasible.

I shall suggest that the pragmatism of James, Dewey and Rorty rests on a mistaken account of our practices. And once that is seen, there is no temptation for the pragmatist to be a principled pluralist.

5. Peirce thought that our practices in any domain of inquiry in which we make assertions or have beliefs are such that we try to get things right. That is, we aim at the truth,[2] rather than at what is justified by my own lights or what is justified by our community's lights. For instance: we distinguish between thinking that one is right and being right; we criticize the beliefs, actions and arguments of other individuals and other communities; we are bothered by disagreement; we think that we can improve our judgements; and we take ourselves to be able to learn and to identify our mistakes by gathering more evidence, by paying attention to the results of others, by putting ourselves in

another's shoes, by examining the arguments of the other side, by broadening our horizons, etc. All of these practices rest upon or presuppose a notion of truth. They rest upon the assumption that we are after one answer that will stand up to all the evidence and argument.

As Talisse and Aikin point out, this view of truth (this "inquiry pragmatism") has the inquirer always looking for the one right answer. The inquirer takes disagreement to point to a problem or to a mistake on someone's part. She tries to resolve disagreement, not glory in it or claim that it is due to the world. That goes very much against the grain of pluralism.

6. Another way of putting this point is to say, with Huw Price (2003) that our practices rest upon the assumption that disagreement points to a mistake on somebody's part. If disagreement matters to us (and it does indeed seem to matter to us), then we have to see disagreement as being something that requires resolution. As David Wiggins says:

> Suppose that I am convinced that something is so. Then it is disturbing to me if nobody else can be brought to agree with me. Why? Well, if something is so, *either* it must be capable of impinging upon others in the way it impinged on me or I shall have in principle to account for its inaccessibility to all others. And if I could have accounted for that, then I should never have been disturbed in the first place by disagreement. If however there were no prospect at all that arguments founded in what made me think it true should have non-random efficacy in securing agreement about whether *p*, I should be without protection from the idea that (unless I was simply wrong) there was just nothing at issue. (1991: 149)

Disagreement *matters* to us and this betrays the fact that there is something at issue. It betrays the fact that there is a truth of the matter and that we try to discover what the truth is.

It may be clear enough by now how Peirce's account of the practice of inquiry is superior to the account on which inquiry merely aims at getting an answer for our community. But if it isn't clear enough, let me put it bluntly. We do learn, we do improve our beliefs, we do take disagreement to matter. All of this makes sense only on the assumption that there is something to get right — that there is a truth of the matter. That is the core pragmatist idea that is in tension with the pluralism of James, Dewey, and their followers.

7. Peirce's account of truth and inquiry is entirely general: it is applicable to any domain of inquiry. Of course, different kinds of inquiry (science, mathematics, ethics, etc.) will have different standards for what is indefeasible.[3]

Peirce gave careful consideration to science and to mathematics, arguing that both are experience-driven and reason-driven inquiries. Indeed, he carried out significant first-order inquiry in logic and mathematics, experimenting upon diagrams, just as his conception of experience for that kind of inquiry requires.

He gave less sustained consideration to ethics, although it is clear that he thought that it too is responsive to experience and argument. When we deliberate about what we ought to do, we take our beliefs to be responsive to reasons, argument, thought experiments, and first-person experience. We try to put ourselves in the shoes of others, to broaden our horizons, to listen to the arguments of the other side. That is part of what it is to make a moral decision and part of what it is to try to live a moral life. It would not be a moral life — it would not be engaged with the complexities of moral requirements — if we simply made our decisions about how to treat others by following an oracle, or an astrologer, or the toss of the dice.

8. The pragmatist must, of course, be prepared for the possibility that, as Bernard Williams thinks, "ethical thought has no chance of being everything it seems" (1985:135). But the commitment to keeping philosophy in touch with practice is such that we should not be too quick to jump to the conclusion that there are no right answers in ethics. Some aspects of moral deliberation do indeed pull us in this pessimistic direction, but many pull us in the direction in which ethics is a domain of inquiry that legitimately aspires to truth.

What we want, of course, is a philosophy that reflects the complex nature of moral deliberation, not one that over-simplifies it. Peirce was very clear that his view must reflect the difficult, problematic, and perhaps tragic nature of moral deliberation. For instance, at one point he distinguishes disagreement in moral matters from disagreement about taste: "However it may be about taste, in regard to morals, we can see ground for hope that debate will ultimately cause one party or both to modify their sentiments up to complete accord" (CP 2.151, 1902). But he then says:

> Should it turn out otherwise, what can be said except that some men have one aim and some another? It would be monstrous for either party to pronounce the moral judgments of the other to be *bad*. That would imply an appeal to some other tribunal. (CP 2.151, 1902)

At first glance, this looks like a straightforward contradiction. But Peirce here is articulating his rather subtle and perfectly general position on the principle of bivalence (the principle that, for any sentence p, either p is true or p is false). Peirce is clear that should it turn out that there is no possibility of accord, then there is no truth of the matter at stake. He says that we cannot know for certain that experience and debate, however long and full, will bring an answer to the

question into which we are inquiring. He muses that perhaps the question of whether there is free will is such that no answer would be forthcoming, no matter how long the discussion were to go on and no matter how advanced our methods of inquiry were to become. "Then in regard to that question, there certainly is no *truth*" (CP 5.565, 1901).

Nonetheless, we must forever continue in the hope that an answer will eventually come for the questions we are genuinely trying to answer. A regulative assumption of inquiry is that we must hope, for any question into which we inquire, that bivalence will hold. We simply cannot know that it will:

> Now the different sciences deal with different kinds of truth; mathematical truth is one thing, ethical truth is another, the actually existing state of the universe is a third; but all those different conceptions have in common something very marked and clear. We all hope that the different scientific inquiries in which we are severally engaged are going ultimately to lead to some definitely established conclusion, which conclusion we endeavour to anticipate in some measure. Agreement with that ultimate proposition that we look forward to, — agreement with that, whatever it may turn out to be, is the scientific truth. (CP 7.187, 1901)

But that hope need not be fulfilled — we may in some cases not come to a definitely established conclusion. In that case, there is no truth of the matter at stake.

9. Moral deliberation is especially interesting because we may expect that bivalence will fail more often in moral inquiry than in chemistry and less often than in deliberation about matters of taste. We might, for instance, think that there are situations in our moral lives where no decision can be right. Such tragic contexts are exemplified by those horrors from Nazi Germany, where a concentration camp guard tells a mother that she must choose one of her two children for the gas chamber. If she does so, one child will live; if she refuses to choose, both will die. There seems to be no decent solution to this kind of problem. Not even a random choice, a flipping of a coin, will be right, for the mother will surely feel that in making the decision in any way, or in refusing to make it, she betrays something that is valuable and fundamental.

We should not want to set up our moral epistemology so that we do away with the possibility that some issues will prove to be impossible — so that we do away with situations in which wretched compromise is the best that we can manage. Ruling out such possibilities would be untrue to the practice of morals. It would be untrue to all those occasions where we feel at a loss, where we feel that no matter how hard we persevere, there is no right answer to be had. To aim

for precision where there may be none would be to do a disservice to the kind of inquiry we are trying to characterise. The Peircean view of truth, with its explicit accommodation of the possibility of the failure of bivalence, is well-suited to capture this kind of phenomenon.

12. Another kind of complexity in ethics is that sometimes there seems to be a number of equally good and culturally specific ways of answering a moral question. Again, the pragmatist is well-suited to describe this kind of situation. She can shift the focus here and think of the potential agreement not as agreement about which one way of life is best, but as agreement about which ways of life are reasonable or permissible. What we might agree upon is that a number of conceptions of how best to live are acceptable and these conceptions will produce different, equally acceptable, answers to some moral questions. There is nothing in the Peircean view which suggests we must hope for an agreement which will level all difference. Rather, one would expect that plurality of belief would sometimes be preserved, were moral deliberation to continue. (P or Q) may be true for the whole community of inquirers. This is very different from saying that P is true for one subset of the community and Q is true for another. And it is very different from saying that there is no way of adjudicating between culturally-specific answers to a question. It is just that, in some instances, different answers will be equally acceptable.[4]

It is important to see that we are not short of explanations for why we find things as we do in moral deliberation. It might be that moral judgments require more collateral information. The judgment that the bullies are cruel requires, for instance, that we know that they intend to cause distress. Perhaps the scarcity of goods and resources explains some kinds of irresolvable conflict in the moral and political domain.

13. I hope that I have been able, in this short piece, to be clear enough about how Peirce presents us with an account of truth on which we can see ourselves as aiming at getting things right in ethics without over-simplifying the nature of moral deliberation. It is a view of truth which is set against the kind of deep and principled pluralism James, Dewey, and Rorty seem so keen on. Our aim is to get things *right*. If that goal is not reachable for some questions, then there is no truth of the matter for those issues. We might expect to encounter this kind of situation in ethics. Peirce thus explicitly leaves room for deep — if occasional or accidental — pluralism. It is not what we are hoping for. We hope that there would be an upshot to our inquiries, but our hopes might be dashed.

So Talisse and Aikin are right that pragmatism is not "instrinsically allied with pluralism". But they are wrong to think that pragmatism and pluralism are incompatible — that "pragmatists cannot be pluralists". What they cannot be are principled pluralists who think that there is something about the world that makes it such that competing, equally good descriptions of it are inevitable and everywhere.

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NOTES

1.   Much argument is required to lump these three together. Perhaps it will suffice here to say that each of these three pragmatists is at times tempted by deep pluralism. At other times, they appear to reject it.

2.   Talisse and Aikin are surely wrong to say that truth is our "tool for conflict resolution". How could truth be a tool? Truth is our aim in conflict resolution and the tools we use to further that aim are experimentation, dialogue, etc.

3.   For details about the various kinds of inquiry, see Misak (2000) and (2004).

4.   See Misak (2000) for a sustained discussion of this point.