The Status of Rational Nouns: A Pragmatist Perspective

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Epistemology has always carried on an uneasy affair with politics, as philosophers have so often attempted to justify political practices by means of a theory of knowledge. Scientists are prosecuted for heresy. Inalienable human rights are grounded in truths we take to be self-evident. Education, too, is a political practice; and so, predictably, we find proponents of educational policy bringing epistemology to their defense. Cultural conservatives urge curricula for critical thinking and character education as means of shoring up rational and moral truths being undermined by today's rampant relativism. Cultural critics, on the other hand, challenge not only the objectivity of the standard curricula but the very norms of objectivity used to justify it, as instruments of hegemony. They call for social restructuring but recommend multicultural curricula as an interim antidote.

Educators are right to be particularly interested in challenges to the exalted status conferred on rational norms since Plato. What's at stake for people on both sides of the debate are (let's be honest) research grants, degree programs, curricula standards, and publishing markets, as well as moral and political belief systems. It is my purpose in this paper to give a pragmatist[1] account of rational and other norms, which leaves most of those norms intact but makes their status provisional. I realize that in preferring the pragmatist account I will lose sympathy from the right and the left: from rationalists who can't distinguish pragmatists from postmoderns and other counter-culture relativists, and from cultural critics who can't distinguish pragmatists from rationalists and other enlightenment liberals who don't see their own imperialism. And in the conclusion of this paper, I too will use what epistemology I have come up with to defend some very general educational goals.

THE ROLE OF DOUBT IN INQUIRY

Doubt is an uneasy and dissatisfied state from which we struggle to free ourselves and pass into the state of belief... Charles Peirce, 1877[2]

Peirce constructed his views on inquiry in response to and in critique of Descartes, and I too find it useful to employ Cartesian epistemology as a foil against which the merits of the pragmatist model appear more distinctly. So I'll begin with this capsule of Cartesian epistemology:

> *Nothing is so unbearable to civilized people as uncertainty (or nothing should be), so we hardly need to justify the quest for certainty that has preoccupied the figureheads of the Western canon since Socrates. The goal of this quest is to find unshakable foundations for our most important beliefs. This quest isn't merely prudent; it's a moral duty, since, as Plato urged, if we can't trace our values to foundational truths, then we have no good reasons for preferring them, and no ground to criticize the sophists. So then, in pursuit of certainty, we need to answer two questions: First, what kinds of things can the human mind know absolutely, by direct apprehension or intuition, without possibility of error? And second, how can we build on those bedrock truths in ways that are truth preserving?*

Doubt and belief were both normative states for Descartes. One *ought* to believe propositions that could be rationally demonstrated, and one ought to doubt everything else. (It's a peculiarly monotheistic notion, isn't it? that we are morally culpable for what we *believe* or *don't believe.)* Descartes' famous advocacy of universal doubt must be understood in this context of skepticism as a moral disposition. All human inquiry - whether in physics or theology - should be conducted as a quest for certainty: as either a clarification of propositions the mind is able to know intuitively, or a logical extension of such propositions, which permits no infection of error. As with earlier and later rationalists, one is impressed that for Descartes, the primary moral good of inquiry is the accumulation of certitudes; the improvement of material and social circumstances for those of us who inquire is of secondary concern.

Contrast that simplification of Cartesian rationalism with this equally simple version of the pragmatist view:

> *All animate organisms reconstruct: themselves, their communities and their environment. Reconstruction is initiated when an organism is faced with either some kind of trouble or some kind of opportunity, which prompts it to make some kind of adaptive change. This is as true of microorganisms as it is of humans. The introduction of a threat or an opportunity puts the organism out of equilibrium and into a state of irritation or perhaps anxiety, which persists until the adaptive change is made. Inquiry is the process we undertake to look for, test, and implement adaptive changes.*[3]

One of the first things that strike the reader of Peirce's response to Descartes is his lack of a moralistic tone regarding doubt and belief. Peirce did not prescribe doubt or belief as duties. He spoke of them descriptively: doubt is the uneasiness we feel when our current beliefs and habits fail to solve problems or utilize opportunities we encounter; belief is a return to ease or equilibrium - a felt recognition of a state of amelioration. To read this account leads one to wonder whether genuine doubt is something we *can* just *decide* to feel - say, from a sense of duty - even about beliefs that seem to be

working well for us. One is tempted to call the experience of irritation or anxiety Peirce described, «genuine» doubt, which implies that Cartesian doubt is somehow feigned. Indeed, by comparison, Cartesian doubt does seem too stubborn, too zealous - dare I say, too principled? - to be genuine. One might even worry that a sense of duty would only repress the experience of genuine doubt, as it so often does the experience of genuine love. But then it must be remembered that the doubt Descartes advocated was not a feeling at all, but a strictly intellectual attitude, a mental act, even: the withholding of rational assent from uncertain propositions.

For Descartes, a belief is a representation - a proposition about the way things are - made as though from the perspective of one standing outside of what is represented. As such, it is a purely mental phenomenon (even though we may base our behavior on our rational beliefs and thereby make our behavior more rational). For Peirce, a belief is ultimately a way of acting. We are never spectators of reality, but always active participants in it.[4] And what makes a new belief more adaptive than the one it replaces is that the believer will behave in ways that bring amelioration. Somatically, belief is the cessation of the irritation of doubt, or as Peirce described it even more positively, «a calm and satisfying state which we do not wish to avoid, or change.»[5] That happy somatic condition is the result of our new beliefs having guided us to make adaptive changes in ourselves and/or our environment.[6] This difference in characterizing the state of belief points out an important difference of values between rationalists and pragmatists. What is at stake for the rationalist is the integrity of her beliefs, and what she finds most morally objectionable is to have believed the wrong things. What is at stake for the pragmatist are practical problems like social justice, and what she finds most morally objectionable is to have lived out a belief that made things worse.

WHY PRAGMATISTS DON'T TAKE CARTESIAN SKEPTICISM SERIOUSLY

First, universal doubt isn't necessary for pragmatic inquiry. For pragmatists, inquiry is occasioned by practical problems and opportunities: those faced by organisms (persons, institutions, communities) in the context of struggling to survive and flourish. For rationalists, all such practical inquiry implies a meta-level inquiry into how we justify claims to knowledge. Certainty is the only permissible outcome of this meta-level inquiry, and Descartes wanted to employ universal doubt as a tool strong enough to dissolve all of our fancies, misconceptions, and other uncertainties, leaving only insoluble, indubitable ideas in tact. But the goal of practical inquiry is not certainty, but amelioration: the avoidance of foreseeable disasters and the attainment of foreseeable states of betterment. And while amelioration is surely facilitated by a kind of objectivity, it clearly does *not* depend on the employment of immutable truths.

What's more, Cartesian skepticism isn't even *useful* to practical inquiry - to the business of living. The fact that a belief isn't certain - which only means that it *can* be doubted, that there wouldn't be any contradiction in doing so - is not itself a good enough reason to doubt it for practical purposes, let alone to stop using it. Indeed, the stability we seek in practical inquiry is too precarious to permit this kind of skepticism. Since the goal of practical inquiry is to preserve and expand our equilibrium, and since what equilibrium we have is attributable to the imperfect knowledge we have developed to now, we must

employ our doubts about that knowledge judiciously. However imperfect and uncertain our current knowledge, since it is based on the best evidence we have, we need good reasons to doubt any part of it, no less than we need reasons to believe. Nor can we suspend our current beliefs while we look for more certain beliefs to replace them with. Of course we work to improve our knowledge, but in the mean time diseases must be fought, buildings must be made more earthquake-safe, children must be educated, crops planted, conclaves of wilderness preserved. These are not matters that will wait on epistemology. Outside of the quest for certainty nothing requires us (or indeed, makes it reasonable) to distrust a belief that we currently rely on to make life secure (or just, or beautiful) simply because we don't take it to be a final truth. Only in the Cartesian distraction from pragmatic inquiry can we pretend to the luxury of doubting everything.

In pragmatic inquiry, the only thing that should prompt us to doubt a belief is some indication that it is not working to help us manage our experience, or that a revised belief would work better. Peircean doubt is that kind of indication: a felt disturbance or anxiety that results from our inability to solve new problems or fulfill new dreams by applying our current habits. Peircean doubt is a situation of mal-adaptation that we feel in our bodies - an unease that motivates us to start and to sustain our inquiry toward adaptive change. In such cases, the object of doubt is not universal but particular, and the first order of inquiry is to clarify what problem or opportunity is calling for adaptation, as indicated by our irritation.

Third, and most importantly, universal doubt is not actually possible - is not even a coherent idea - because we cannot revise all of our beliefs at once. We can only doubt certain beliefs on the basis of other beliefs that we *don't* doubt. (This goes for reconstructing our methods of inquiry as well.) Without having some beliefs we don't doubt, we have no way of knowing what we *should* doubt - which of our beliefs we should try to revise. Descartes saw that too, but he thought that by trying to doubt everything, we would run up against some things we *couldn't* doubt - beliefs it was impossible (for a rational person) to doubt, and these beliefs would then be the touchstone we could use to sort out all of our other beliefs. For Peirce, then, the significance of doubt as a feeling was epistemological as well as motivational, for without it (and without the experience of indubitable ideas) there would be no way for us to know which of our beliefs to question. Whereas for Descartes it was (meta-level) inquiry that gave rise to (intellectual) doubt, for Peirce, it is (somatic) doubt that gives rise to (pragmatic) inquiry.

Here we arrive at an irreducible dispute of fact between Peirce and Descartes: whether there is any such thing as direct intuition of truth; whether any of our beliefs are so certain that we are compelled to believe them as long as we call ourselves rational; whether any of our beliefs turn out, on reflection, to be not inferences at all but unmediated apprehensions of reality itself. Descartes tried to show that if we are sufficiently rational, then some of what we experience will be a direct apprehension of truths that are external to us; that we will be *caused* to have the right representations. Pragmatists, of course, see no reason to accept this.[7] (William James was fond of asking, Is there a little bell that goes off in the soul when we arrive at a belief that is also true?) What's more, they argue, we don't need indubitable beliefs to show us which of our beliefs to revise; it's enough that we have beliefs we can't bring ourselves to doubt, because they are supported by our best evidence, and are working well enough to warrant our trust, for now. Such beliefs are the only touchstone we need, and so inquiry can go forward without

recourse to intuition. The method of using what prove to be our most reliable beliefs as provisional standards we employ to evaluate and correct those that prove more corrigible, without appeal to absolute standards derived from outside our experience, is what pragmatists mean by the practice of *self-correction.*

But the practice of universal doubt requires precisely that we do not trust any of our beliefs prior to doubting *all* of them. And this commitment to detachment makes Cartesian skepticism not merely unnecessary and unhelpful, but actually an impediment to pragmatic inquiry. The kind of intuition Descartes wanted was something purely mental (as he constructed that category), and could only be achieved by disinterested rational contemplation - of the kind he outlined in his *Discourse on Methods.*[8] Pragmatists hold precisely the opposite view: that inquiry presupposes the context of an organism pursuing interests. First, since there is no direct intuition of truth, we must rely on doubt in the Peircean sense - a felt recognition of mal-adjustment -in order to know which of our beliefs need to be revised. Second, this felt recognition - our very susceptibility to genuine doubt - can only occur to us as passionate, feeling creatures pursuing our needs and desires in a world where the way we do so has consequences in terms of temporal, somatic experience. This is so, third, because what *counts* as a threat or opportunity depends upon our purposes. Without having some purpose in mind, nothing that happened to us could be taken as beneficial or harmful, so nothing would be cause for us to make adaptive changes. Likewise, what counts as *adaptive* depends on our end in view. Thus, for pragmatists, the attempt to achieve detachment - to remove ourselves from the position of agent and assume that of disinterested spectator - would be inimical to the process of inquiry, even if it were possible. «Knowledge,» Dewey said, «is a mode of participation, valuable in the degree in which it is effective. It cannot be the idle view of an unconcerned spectator.»[9]

OBJECTIVITY: WHAT CAN IT BE?

Pragmatists (Dewey in particular) are known for their antipathy to dualisms. But of course, it would be un-pragmatic to reject all dualisms categorically. A dualism is just a complex concept, and its merit depends on its utility in advancing the inquiries we have taken up. I hope that what I have said up to now will make it clear why pragmatist think the following dualisms are no longer useful:

appearance / reality

knowledge / opinion

fact / value (purpose)

absolutism / relativism

But there is another, long-standing epistemological dualism that pragmatism leaves intact, though reconstrucd: objectivity / subjectivity. Pragmatists have argued that certain methods of knowledge construction and verification, though contingent in their evolution and not justifiable in foundationalist terms, have nevertheless proven to be highly efficacious in reconstructing our beliefs and values in ways

that help us avoid trouble and make the most of new opportunities.[10] These methods include, for instance, public disputation, tools of reasoning, peer review, the solicitation of diverse views, the avoidance of censorship, replicated experiments, and the attitude of fallibility. Many of these are social practices methods of inquiry that can't be done alone or in isolation - and this explains the pragmatist's advocacy of communities of inquiry.

Central to this pragmatic method of inquiry is experiment: testing our beliefs in experience. Taking beliefs to be ways of acting, the purpose of inquiry is to discover the consequences in lived experience, of employing our beliefs. Again, this isn't something we can find out rationally, by exercising disinterested contemplation; by examining the relationships of ideas to each other. We can only learn how to reconstruct our beliefs while we apply them in the course of pursuing our interests. Nor can we test all of them in all possible experiences at the same time. We have to live with them and find out how far they work, in which situations. A rationalist eschews the idea of testing beliefs in experience, since the confidence we gain from experience can only approximate to but never reach certainty.

For pragmatists, social practices like peer review and replicated experiments, while they do not yield certainty, do yield a kind of objectivity. The goal of the community of inquiry is to see what kinds of inter-subjective agreement can be reached on questions both of fact and of value.

Here is another contrast to Descartes, for whom the goal of rational inquiry was clear and distinct ideas occurring to a solitary mind. What justifies the claim of objectivity regarding the conclusions of communities of inquiry is not that inter-subjective perspectives are less narrow than individual perspectives - for they might not be. Rather, it's that over time, the methods of inquiry these communities practice have been shown to generate beliefs that are more likely to last longer before needing to be revised, than beliefs generated by other methods. This makes objectivity a relative standard - a matter of more or less - but very determinate nonetheless. The fact that many of the practices of objectivity are social means that by cultivating and improving these practices as collective habits, communities can develop stronger habits of inquiry than individuals can. Indeed, Dewey held that making such methods into collective social habits is the purpose of public education in a democracy.

The attitude toward our knowledge that follows from the pragmatist model of inquiry is not skepticism but fallibilism. We fully believe the beliefs that our best evidence justifies, though we fully expect that we will need to revise them at some point. Rorty calls this «irony.» It does not follow from the expectation that we will need to revise our beliefs at some point, that we can or ought to make ourselves doubt them in the meantime, before we discover what's wrong with them by implementing them. In fact, it is only by trusting our beliefs enough to use them that we can find out their errors and limitations. We can only refute or reinterpret old evidence by means of new evidence, gained in further inquiry.

Take the example of the American institution of trial by jury. Two values this institution is meant to pursue are truth and justice: finding out what really happened, and dealing with people fairly. These

two values explain the complex features of the institution, including rules of evidence, standards of proof, and an antagonistic, advocacy system. Of course, no one supposes that these rules and procedures are guaranteed to yield perfect truth and justice in every case. Yet we do suppose that this system is likely to yield more truth and justice than alternative systems; and every time we adjust the system, it is in the attempt to make that result more likely. Fallibilism is the ironic capacity to be critical of, and loyal to the same belief or practice, at the same time, and both for good reasons. It doesn't follow from our fallibilist attitude toward the trial system that we may as well flip a coin to determine criminal culpability, or do away with the rules of evidence, or simply let judges decide the cases. After all, the system we have is the result of the best social inquiry we have been able to conduct.

With this fallibilist epistemology in mind, pragmatists are not against the notion of normative standards: standards of inquiry in the disciplines, standards of practice in the arts and professions, standards of behavior in various social contexts. Such standards are not normative in the Cartesian sense, that to ignore them is to turn irrational and therefore inhuman. Our obligation to them is practical, in the broadest sense of that term. Our normative standards represent the ends we have adapted ourselves to cherish most (e.g. justice, beauty, strength) and the means we have found most suited to their procurement (e.g. reason, equity, empathy, novelty, solidarity). To ignore them, therefore, involves tremendous practical risks - though of course, they are risks we sometimes need to take. Our most revered normative standards are liable, eventually, to cause us to become mal-adapted to our changing natural, social and moral landscapes. (Here again, are the footsteps of Darwin.) Without the practice of fallibilism, our normative standards are liable to overrun their status as meaningful guides to the art of living, and assume a more dictatorial (dare I say, Cartesian?) office. But again, fallibilism is a vigorous irony. It is as important to uphold these norms, to educate for them, and to defend them against meritless criticism, as it is to critique them, to look out for their limitations, and to be willing to revise or abandon them when we find reason to.

ABSOLUTISM, FALLIBILISM, RELATIVISM

Pragmatist epistemology displays the problems that rationalists like Plato, Descartes and Kant hoped to obviate by reasoning their way to certainty - in particular, the prospect of a never-ending, piecemeal process of inquiry with no guarantee of any final answers or adjustments. Nietzsche, Darwin and Dewey did their best to make that seem like the most hopeful of scenarios, rather than the most hopeless. But rationalists are people who remain unconvinced. And what they fear most is uncertainty. If none of our beliefs are certain, and if our method of inquiry itself has no solid foundation, they argue, then everything is up for grabs: not only our science but our morality too. Then we can't say of either science or democracy that it is any more right or true or otherwise preferable than any other system of beliefs! For rationalists, it seems, fallibilism is indistinguishable from relativism. We either have certainty or *complete* un-certainty. Pragmatists think that's a false dichotomy. Most, if not all of the beliefs we rely on are not completely certain, but it doesn't follow that we are completely uncertain about them either - that we have no good reasons for relying on them. We hope to have enough evidence to make our beliefs reasonable at any one time. All that follows from fallibilism is that none of our beliefs are final, that we can't guarantee, in advance, that any of them won't need to be revised some time. But

again, to see that isn't the same thing as being able to say why any particular belief is erroneous or limited.

To the left of pragmatists are postmodernists and other critics of rationalism. Critical thinking, for instance, is often derided as one more exercise of colonialism, it's standards being no more true or right than the indigenous thinking it attempts to «civilize.» Pragmatists are willing to go part of the way with postmodernists: they agree that what we get by being rational isn't Truth or certainty, but belief systems that have to be judged instrumentally - according to what can be done with them. And many pragmatists agree further that what is often done with rational knowledge is some form of oppression. But pragmatists stop short of condemning all rational norms as so tainted with power as to be irredeemably oppressive. That is, a pragmatist may agree with a postmodern genealogy of power behind a particular form of rational discourse, but take that to be indeterminate of how that discourse might be employed and reconstructed in the future.

This agreement between pragmatists and postmodernists on the foibles of rationality lies at the intersection of their very different, and ultimately incommensurable aims. The thrust of postmodernism is criticism, genealogy, deconstruction: a backward-looking critique of power. And the *telos* of postmodernist critique is typically either a pronouncement of doom - an explanation of why there is no escape from power - or the recommendation of some kind of *laissez-faire* stance, in which power is sufficiently diffused that the beliefs and practices of no identifiable group are privileged above those of any other. The thrust of pragmatism, on the other hand, is amelioration, reconstruction, adaptation: a forward-looking project of renewing and readjusting our understandings, commitments and institutions. The *telos* of this project is the adaptation - what Peirce called *self-correction* and Mead and Dewey called reconstruction - of our personal and cultural habits by what we are able to learn - in part, from other cultures.

Pragmatists believe that as important as it is to cultivate diversity, it is equally important not to institute cultural preservation in a way that makes it difficult for cultures to reconstruct. Fairness to other cultures is not achieved either by abandoning one's own cultural insights and practices, or by instituting a policy of mutual *laissez-faire.* The only kind of fairness we are capable of consists in inquiring into other cultures in such a way that their ideals have the best chance we can give them of appearing true, beautiful or good - to us. In doing so, we have no choice but to take the notions of truth, beauty and goodness we have evolved so far in our own (sub)culture as provisional standards, i.e. standards we employ and uphold but are prepared to doubt in light of new insights. Indeed, one of the reasons we hope to bring more, and more *diverse* people to join in our inquiries is the chance that their views and complaints and visions will be just what we need to take the next step in reconstructing our own - including our own understandings of what it is to reason well. Beyond this, there is no principle of reason or equity that will guarantee, in advance of such inquiry, that we will give each culture (including our own) its due. Hence the need to remain ironic and fallibilist about our own standards, the need to keep our worries about injustice alive.

EDUCATION

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.... John Dewey, *1920*[11]

Pragmatist philosophers of education have argued that if intelligence is the practice of deliberate adaptation, and if one of the purposes of education is the cultivation of intelligence, then the experience of schooling should be, at least in part, an enculturation into modes of reconstruction our society has found efficacious. By «enculturation,» I mean to suggest something more than acquiring knowledge and skills - for the rational and other norms we value as the means and ends of our reconstruction are as much a matter of disposition and habit as of knowledge and skill - but something less than indoctrination. In this paper I have only mentioned rational norms - the so-called cognitive virtues. But there are other categories of norms that we value: ethical norms, social (democratic) norms, affective norms, somatic norms, etc. We wish for our children, in their personal and social lives, to have the habits of inquisitiveness and sensitivity that will prompt them to recognize significant problems and opportunities, as well as the habits of social inquiry that will enable them to respond in ways that will bring about personal and collective amelioration.

The norms we cherish enough to educate for are those without which it would be neglectful, in our judgment, to cause our community's children to make their way through life. There is no such thing as education that is value-neutral, though the criticisms of some anti-foundationalists seem to call for just that. They urge us to see our children as immigrants from a foreign culture, deserving not merely respect but non-interference. The recommendations that come from this line of thinking overlap with those coming from two very different approaches: what I would call romantic philosophies of childhood, that take children to be quasi-divine and/or noble savages (whom the norms of civilization can only corrupt) and libertarian proponents of children's rights, who argue that children no less than adults should be protected in their freedom of conscience. Each of these schools of thought condemns a large scope of traditional American education as inter-generational imperialism. Romantic and libertarian philosophers typically criticize the overt education of values but allow for «factual» education, because they share rationalist assumptions about the distinction between facts and values. Postmodern theorists, on the other hand, are apt to criticize not only the knowledge presented as objective by those in power, but also the rational norms with which that knowledge was constructed. The positive educational advice of all of these critics is necessarily vague: that we bring up children in the way that will least interfere with the kinds of people they either «really are» or will choose to be. In practice, however, this advice proves to be not merely vague but incoherent. The insistence on value-neutrality requires that we educate children toward no particular ideal; that we nurture them to grow in ways as yet unknown to us, perhaps even to the children themselves.

Pragmatists have three arguments against this insistence on value-neutrality. The first is that the postmodernist, the romantic and the libertarian all attribute too much teleology to the child, as if the human being in childhood possessed both an essence to be true to and enough self-knowledge to do so, if permitted. For Mead and Dewey, the individual only comes to have its own point of view by learning

the language and ways of a community, though of course, this socialization does not completely determine that point of view. The nature we have is the nature we construct in the process of bringing our idiosyncratic ideas and desires into dialogue with conventional knowledge and values. Some of our idiosyncrasies will be supplanted, by our own decision, with social norms we learn to value instead. Some, on the other hand, will catch on around us and be the impetus for social reconstruction. Some will be merely tolerated; and some will be resisted by our community as long as we attempt to live them out. Be that as it may, there is nothing in the nature of idiosyncrasy itself to oblige the community to appreciate, or even to tolerate it, since its source is contingent - our unique genetic and social circumstances - and its value is indeterminate. And this is true for children as for adults: only some of their idiosyncratic tendencies, if nurtured, could be seen as good, either by society or by themselves, at later points in time. Many could only be judged pathological.

Such idiosyncrasy, then, does not present a community with good reasons to neglect what James and Dewey called its «funded experience» with various norms. The fact that a pragmatist community holds all its norms ironically means that it values fresh insights, such as children commonly offer; and there follows a commitment to helping children construct and defend their unique points of view. But then, doing so comprises a very value-laden educational agenda. And the point of doing so is to bring children into the social inquiry we carry on regarding our beliefs and values, in the process of which their insights will be submitted to whatever standards of inquiry we have evolved. In this process, we have no alternative but to judge the insights of our children by our own provisional standards. And this is true even when what is being considered is which of our values regarding children will be perpetuated by force, rather than by persuasion alone. This is how we justify, for example, compulsory education and the removal of children from parents who endanger or neglect them.

The second argument is that the stance of value-neutrality is inconsistent with the values we actually hold, since, for the pragmatist, we have more reasons for preferring them than simply the fact that it is we who prefer them. We have formulated our beliefs and values, as well as the norms we use to formulate them, in a process of inquiry which we take to be fallible but highly reliable. And the beliefs and values we end up with are such that to hold them is to know why they matter to us, and so, to think it would be a harm not to share them with our children - not to teach them, for instance, reading, nutrition, democracy, hygiene, and art appreciation. These are not value-neutral enterprises, however widely shared they are across cultures. To admit that we are fallible about even these values is merely to admit that we cannot defend them by appeal to non-human truths - that it is, after all, we who value them. To admit that they may not be final is *not* to say that we can imagine a time when we would not want them.

Third, the stance of value-neutrality is a block to inquiry. More than obliging us not to impose our values on others (including our own children), it obliges us not to be critical of others' values, and, reciprocally, to think that it would be abusive for others to criticize our own. By pragmatist standards, this kind of deference is a poor substitute for intellectual respect, which involves curiosity, investigation, and critique. The behaviors of value-neutrality amount to a stand-off rather than a dialogue; and so in the place of inquiry we have stagnant, mutual toleration. For instance, pragmatists should side with critics who condemn the right-wing moral education now typical in American schools as politically oppressive and personally cruel. They should add the criticism that it inhibits children's habits of inquiry; but so does the exclusion of moral content

from the curricula. Pragmatists should call for the inclusion of children in the process of value inquiry, in which adults are not permitted to perpetuate their values with authority backed by aggression, but are obliged to be up-front about their reasons for preferring them, and are obliged, as well, to give fair-minded consideration to counter-values presented by children. It's true that not every cultural practice or childhood desire will be upheld in this process, but the attempt to validate all value candidates indiscriminately is an incoherent notion, both of non-cruelty and of value inquiry, since to value something is necessarily to discriminate it from among other options, and to privilege what we value above other candidates.

Pragmatists consider that it would be just as neglectful of children to cultivate their conformity to rational and other cultural norms presented as absolutes, as not to cultivate in them any sense of obligation to such norms. [12] The broad educational ideal that follows from pragmatist fallibilism is to teach children the two sets of habits mentioned already: habits of practicing norms identified by society as most conducive of meaningful living (as that notion is currently constructed), and habits for reconstructing those same norms. The first part of this ideal requires that we don't pretend to be more relativistic about these norms than our conduct reveals; that we don't teach only those norms so globally pervasive and so blandly definable that they seem not to pose a threat to any more particular values. The second part of the ideal requires that children learn to conduct meta-level inquiry: to critique and modify the same norms they have learned to use in regulating their more particular beliefs and values. This also requires that we don't teach norms as closed or final; that we teach their contingent origins, the limits of their applications, and the history of their adaptations; that we share our curiosity about how they might need to be adapted in the future. The two parts of this educational ideal are commensurable, even complimentary, within the pragmatist construction of inquiry described above. Pragmatist philosophers of education have urged that in the context of classroom communities of inquiry, it is not only possible but highly desirable to share with children our ambivalence toward rational norms. Indeed, it is the experience of this practitioner that children are, in many cases, more comfortable with this ambivalence than adults are. Many of them exhibit a deeply-felt mistrust both of orthodoxy *and* of anarchy. Far from feeling destabilized or compromised, they find fallibilism to be a helpful attitude, and reconstruction a hopeful prospect to bring to their task of coping with the conceptual, political and moral difficulties that trouble them.

NOTES

1. I realize that speaking for all pragmatists, as I appear to do in this paper, is as ludicrous as speaking for all Marxists or all Buddhists (in spite of the relatively small number of self-proclaimed pragmatists); but I've chosen to bracket all the disagreements I'm aware of among pragmatists - even regarding the issues I take up here - rather than complicate this paper enormously by addressing them. If pragmatism is a more heterodox 'ism than many, I'm convinced it is coherent enough to justify my calling the positions I discuss here, `pragmatist.'

2. «The Fixation of Belief,» in Justus Buchler, ed.: *Philosophical Writings of Peirce* (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), p. 10.

3. William James describes the scenario this way: «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 become

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 (©* 1907; New York: Meridian Books, no pub. date), p. 50.

4. Dewey wrote, for instance, that, «intelligence is not an outside power presiding, supremely but statically over the desires and efforts of [hu]man[ity], but is a method of adjustment of capacities and conditions within specific situations.» «Intelligence and Morals,» in *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy and Other Essays (©* 1910; Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1997), p. 68.

5. Buchler, p. 10.

6. William James wrote, «Truth ... is a relation, not of our ideas to non-human realities, but of conceptual parts of our experience to sensational parts. Those thoughts are true which guide us to beneficial interaction with sensible particulars as they occur, whether they copy these in advance or not.» *The Meaning of Truth (©* 1909; New York: Meridian Books, no pub. date), p. 245.

7. See, e.g., «The Idea of a `Theory of Knowledge,»' chapter 3 of Richard Rorty: *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton University Press, 1979).

8. John Veitch, trans. (Buffalo, New York: Prometheus Books, 1989).

9. Democracy and Education (New York: The Macmillan Company1916, 1947), p. 393.

10. See, e.g., Joyce Appleby, et al.: «Telling the Truth About History,» from The Future of History (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994), pp. 271-309, cited in Louis Menand, ed.: *Pragmatism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), p. 4s8.

11. Reconstruction in Philosophy (© 1920; New York: Mentor Books, 1955), p. 82.

12. Matthew Lipman has said, «Math is normative, grammar is normative and logic. ls normative, in the sense that we want students to feel that there are things they ought to do and things they ought to say, and that we have a job to dispose them to accept normative standards, as obligations. But while this seems to be a concession to conservatism on the one hand, there is a concession to liberalism on the other hand, in that these standards are themselves the products of a democratic political process, in which they don't have any ultimate foundation. They are simply picked up where we can find them and used where they have expedience.» In Maughn Gregory: «Inquiry, Democracy and Childhood: An Interview with Matthew Lipman,» *Inquiry: Critical Thinking Across the Disciplines, Winter 2000.*

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