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ON A PRAGMATIC ARGUMENT AGAINST PRAGMATISM IN ETHICS

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Is it unwise—*pragmatically* unwise—for a person to be entirely pragmatic in thought and action? This question can be put in a positive form: Does it make good pragmatic sense—good sense, that is, from the perspective of a person's own desires and ends —for a person to ask not only how best to secure her ends, but also whether her ends are in themselves ethically good or right?

One common argument purporting to show that it is pragmatically unwise to be entirely pragmatic in thought and action is this: A person who fails to ask what the ethically sound course of action is, who fails to ask what would be the ethically right thing for her to do in the circumstances in which she finds herself, runs an extremely high risk of becoming nihilistic or quietistic in attitude and action. Thus, a person who wants not to be nihilistic or quietistic has good pragmatic reason to strive to contain her pragmatic deliberations within more properly ethical ones. Such a person, in other words, has good pragmatic reason to be concerned to discover just what would be ethically good or right for her to do. At the very least, this argument continues, because others might be influenced by her example to give up their own concern for ethical soundness, a person who reasons pragmatically and only pragmatically runs the risk of fostering nihilism and quietism among her fellows, and thereby of rendering worse by her own lights her situation as a person among others.

There is, however, or so I maintain, good reason to think that here and now, in Canada, in the West, perhaps in most of the world, most people who want not to be nihilistic or quietistic, and who hope nihilism and quietism do not take root around them, should attempt to divest themselves of beliefs about the nature of the good, the right, the ethically sound, and should instead reason even about the things that matter most to them entirely in pragmatic ways. The pragmatic argument against pragmatism sketched in the previous paragraph fails, as I hope to show, because our situation differs in important ways from how advocates of the argument imagine it.

In what follows I will spell out in some detail two versions of the general pragmatic argument against pragmatism in ethics given above. These versions complement each other: the first is directed toward people who wish to maintain their grip on their social and political values and ideals, who wish to see the society in which they live become more just and caring; the second is directed toward people who wish to maintain their grip on their personal values and ideals, who wish to continue to feel that their choices have a point and their lives meaning. Then I will explain why, in our present cultural and intellectual situation, few who seek to contain their pragmatic attitudes and beliefs within more properly ethical ones will succeed in forestalling nihilism and quietism. A person who attempts to inculcate in himself the belief that there is such a thing as the ethically good or right, and that it is crucially important that he know what is good or right and that he guide himself by this knowledge, actually runs a greater risk of becoming nihilistic or quietistic than does a person who attempts to divest himself of that belief.

First, though, I will describe what it is to be pragmatic all the way down about things that matter, and why one might want to be pragmatic all the way down.

I

Most often when we reason about what to do, we reason pragmatically. "What should I wear to Sue and John's party Saturday night?" a person asks himself. "I don't want to dress too casually, for they might take that as a slight. I'd better not overdress, though, for then I'd be too self-conscious to have a good time. I could wear my new sweater, but I've been wearing it everywhere lately. I'd look pretty sharp in my green sweater, but I'd have to get it cleaned and I'm not sure I want to take the time or spend the money to do that. Would wearing my leather shoes set a bad example, and reinforce the widespread idea that animals are simply ours to be used? On the other hand, given that they're already in my closet (I got them before I became sensitive to the plight of nonhuman animals), it would be a shame if they went to waste. All things considered, I suppose it best to wear my green sweater and my new canvas shoes; if it seems to matter to Sue or John that I've dressed casually, I'll explain why I'm wearing sneakers and hope they understand."

I trust this example makes it clear that just about any sort of consideration can turn up in one's pragmatic deliberations. Our subject is trying to make his way through a wide lake, if not an entire sea, of concerns: short term personal considerations about which courses of action will make him feel comfortable and which ill at ease; more profound personal considerations about whether his choices are out of step with his self-image; short term social considerations about his friends' feelings; longer term social considerations about the effects of his actions on the attitudes and actions of strangers; worries about money. He perceives both positive features and drawbacks in each option he imagines open to him. Of course he can make mistakes, mistakes of many different kinds. He can be wrong about the effects possible courses of action would have on others and on himself; he can be wrong about what his desires and values actually are, or about how he will react to the changes wrought by his actions; he might neglect to consider some option he would have found attractive had it occurred to him; and he might be inconsistent or shortsighted, from the perspective of his own beliefs and desires, to care as much as he does about, say, appearing fashionable or being kind.

Still, what makes our subject's deliberations entirely pragmatic is what doesn't appear in them. When his reflections suggest to him that he wants or desires something, he does not ask whether that want or desire is the desire for something in itself right or good, or whether it is in itself right or good for him to have that desire. He might, as said above, ask whether he actually *does* want or desire what he believes he does (or whether he wants it more than he wants something else), and he might ask whether it is unwise for him to desire some particular thing—unwise for him in the sense that having that desire will, because of other things he wants or fears, cause him trouble. (An over-the-hill boxer's desire to continue to fight will, for instance, cause him trouble if he is averse both to physical pain or damage and to the psychological pain of yearning to fight—it'd be best for him, from his own perspective, to lose his desire to fight if he can.) But the fully pragmatic reasoner above does not ask whether it is right or wrong in itself to be fashionable or to hurt his hosts' feelings, or whether it is reasonable or unreasonable in itself to want to be fashionable or to want to avoid hurting his hosts' feelings. If he is asked why he cares about fashion or his hosts, he might first seek to show how that care fits in among other desires, values, cares and concerns he believes he has. But if this does not satisfy his questioner—if his questioner asks him for grounds for his grounds for action—he will simply say that he has those desires, values, cares and concerns because of his particular psychological history. He will, that is, move from talk of his reasons to talk of the social and psychological history that made him what he is, the history that explains why he takes certain claims to be reasons. He won't take a narrative of this history to be a *justification* (or an excuse) for his values or personality, but simply to be an explanation of them.

This can be put more succinctly. The notion of ought common to traditional normative systems such as Christianity, Kantianism and utilitarianism, with its overtones of universality and necessity, with its implication that there are reasons for actions binding on a person that might have nothing to do with that person's own current beliefs and desires, with its suggestion that there are moral laws that command the respect of all just because they are moral laws, is foreign to the reflection and argument of a pragmatic agent. Of course, like all reflective people, a wholly pragmatic agent will possess what we can call a final vocabulary, a vocabulary in which she formulates and debates her options, and in which she attempts to justify her choices and actions to herself and to those to whom she cares to justify them (and in which she attempts to explain them to those whose final vocabularies differ significantly from hers).[1] But the final vocabulary of such an agent simply does not contain any term that functions as the traditional ethical "ought" does.

Perhaps it should be said here that to be pragmatic about ethics is not to be an ethical relativist. To be without the concepts of the ethically good or morally right is not to say that what is good or right depends on the standards of good or right current in one's culture, or on those which one has chosen or affirmed. It is, rather, simply not to employ the concept of the ethically good or the morally right in describing oneself or others. One's own or someone else's actions can be shameful or painful ("shameful" and "painful" understood purely descriptively), and their shamefulness or painfulness might constitute reason for one, given one's beliefs and desires, to take some action against oneself or that other. Neither the fact that some action is shameful, however, nor that its shamefulness is one's reason to do something, is relative to anything.

It is also not the case that a person who is pragmatic about ethics is one who declares, perhaps at some meta-ethical level or nonverbally through her actions, that it is good or right, *ethically* good or right, to be pragmatic. A wholly pragmatic person does not maintain that reasoning pragmatically is the best way to discover just what is the ethically right thing to do. When there is no issue about the nature of ethical soundness, there can be no issue about the relation of pragmatic wisdom to ethical soundness.

II

But why, we must ask, would anyone *want* to be pragmatic about even the things that matter the most to her? What *reason* could a person have to be pragmatic all the way down?

Now some people who are pragmatic about things that matter to them indeed have *no* reason to be so—they have no *more* reason, that is, than some people have to be entirely physicalistic about objects and events. They have simply been brought up to be entirely pragmatic, just as some people are brought up to be physicalists while others are brought up to be animists or to be Christians. Of course, many do have good reason to be, and to continue to be, pragmatic; and, in fact, many people who presently are not entirely pragmatic also have good reason, from the perspective of their own present beliefs and desires, to attempt to revise their views. To discover just what these reasons are, let us follow the reasonings of a person not entirely pragmatic about things that matter to her. What makes her not entirely pragmatic is that she occasionally asks herself whether something she contemplates doing is in fact the ethically right thing for her to do in the circumstances, or is at least not an ethically wrong thing to do.

Let us suppose our subject asks herself whether it would be ethically right to wear canvas shoes to Sue and John's party. It occurs to her, as it did to the entirely pragmatic agent of the previous section, that it is not unlikely that Sue and John's feelings will be hurt if she shows up dressed casually, and she is aware that to do something that hurts someone's feelings, especially when it is in one's power not to do that thing, is to be unkind to that person. Now, that it would be unkind to Sue and John to wear canvas shoes could, to our subject, if she was entirely pragmatic about things, be a perfectly fine reason not to wear canvas shoes. (Of course it could as well be for her a perfectly fine reason to go ahead and

wear canvas shoes. It all depends on our subject's current attitude toward unkind acts directed at Sue or John.) But she is not entirely pragmatic about things—she wants to know not just whether it would be unkind to wear canvas shoes, and whether it is in her interests to wear them if it would be unkind, but whether it would be ethically *wrong* to wear them. She must ask herself such questions as whether the unkindness of wearing canvas shoes is in these circumstances ethically justified. What must she know in order to answer such questions?

It would seem that she would have to know what it is for something to be ethically good or some action to be ethically justified. Perhaps she would have to have a criterion by which to tell right from wrong. But what would she have to know in order to know that she has the right criterion? This is, of course, a question central to the thought of philosophers of value from Plato and Augustine to Kant, Mill, Moore and beyond. Now according to these philosophers she would have to have at least some knowledge of the nature or essence of man or humankind, or of history or (the) tradition, or of reason or conscience or consciousness; or of the plan nature or God has drawn up for her; or of a nonnatural or suprasensible realm of value. But what sense, she wonders, can she make of any of these ideas? What sense can she make of, say, the idea that man or humankind has a nature, or that history has an essence, or that states of affairs can have nonnatural properties? Can she take seriously the idea that there are plans drawn up in nature or anywhere else? And what sense can she make of the idea that she is ethically required to do what conforms to these plans, even when it is not in her interests to do so?

Now that questions about what it is for something to be ethically good or right have arisen in her reflections, our subject has found herself appealing to ideas about ultimate meaning and justification that she really doesn't understand or feel comfortable with. Many of the words she uses, she notices, have resonances and overtones that embarrass and frustrate her—when she presses herself or is pressed by others to make clear what she is saying, and what her words commit her to ontologically, she finds that she cannot, or (embarrassed by them) that she would rather not. How can she make that which she believes must be true, if her words about things that matter to her are to have sense, cohere with other things she believes—with her commonsense physicalism, for instance? Perhaps when she was thinking about whether it is wrong to be unkind it occurred to her that a person has an inalienable right not to be treated unkindly, and thus that it is wrong to be unkind. But then, she wonders, what could an inalienable right be, and what could it be to have one of them? Or perhaps it occurred to her that it's only rational to take the greatest happiness of the greatest number to be the goal of social organization, and thus, since unkindness creates unhappiness, that it is wrong to be unkind. But then, she wonders, what can be made of the idea that it is rational to be kind even on those occasions when one does not want to be, when one has no motivation and thus no reason to be kind?

Through puzzling over these matters our subject has come to doubt that sense can be made of a great lot of the ethical concepts, and their associated reflective and argumentative practices, she has inherited. She is not alone; many in our culture have come to find traditional ideas about the nature and provenance of the good or the right doubtful, embarrassing and frustrating. Now I hope it is clear that her doubt that being unkind is ethically wrong is not equivalent to the question whether unkindness is ethically right; it is, rather, part of a doubt that kindness is either wrong or right, part of the suspicion that neither the concept "right" nor the concept "wrong" actually has conditions of application. Perhaps, she thinks, "right" and "wrong" are like "phlogisticated" and "dephlogisticated."

She is not, then, questioning her commitment to be kind, though she is concerned about her reasons for having such a commitment. Her predicament is this: she suspects, if only inchoately, that she is unable to continue to use in good faith a vocabulary that contains the terms "ethically right" and "ethically wrong." This is because the epistemological and metaphysical or theological theses and principles required to make intelligible those terms and the practices in which they figure, now, after reflection, appear strange and implausible to her.

I assume it is agreed that our subject's embarrassment and frustration constitute excellent reasons for her to abandon the concepts she finds doubtful and the practices they support. But do they also constitute excellent reasons for her to become entirely pragmatic in her thinking? By themselves they would not, so long as there happened to be some alternative to pragmatism. Is there, then, some way of reasoning about practical matters that neither employs the metaphysical and epistemological concepts at the root of her problems nor is based entirely on her own present set of desires, preferences, cares, and concerns? Perhaps nothing short of investigating one by one proposed alternatives to pragmatism could definitely settle the issue; still, it is difficult to see how any claim that our subject should perform some action, when it is not strictly in her interest to perform it, could be defended on any but what to her are problematical metaphysical grounds.

Given the suspicion that nothing lies between the many metaphysical traditions of thought concerning value and wholehearted pragmatism, I conclude that the embarrassment and frustration our subject has come to experience constitute excellent reasons to adopt entirely pragmatic ways of deliberating and deciding what to do. She has especially good reason to become pragmatic if she happens also to value clarity of thought or honesty. This is simply because to continue to employ concepts and ideas, and their associated argumentative and rhetorical strategies, that one seriously doubts are intelligible is at least to reason and act in bad faith.

III

Now, then, how could it be unwise for such a person to become pragmatic all the way down? Our subject has, it seems, excellent reason to become entirely pragmatic about what to do. Could she, though, have even better reason to attempt to remove her doubts about traditional ethical concepts? Could it be in her very best interest to seek to reaffirm her commitment to traditional ethical ideas concerning the nature and provenance of the good and the right, and to the practices of reflection, deliberation, argument and justification they support?

According to the pragmatic argument against pragmatism in ethics we are considering, our subject probably should resist the solution to her difficulties pragmatism holds out to her. She should resist pragmatism, this argument concludes, for by embracing it she will put many of her current values at risk. At present, let us suppose, she wants to contribute to the wellbeing of others, and to lead a satisfying life, and, importantly, she *wants* to want these things. She wants, for instance, to be kind to friends and strangers, and she wants to want to be kind to them. But her reason for wanting to be kind to friends and strangers is that it is *good* to be kind. Clearly, then, becoming pragmatic in thought and action will rob her of her current reason to be kind. If, therefore, as we are supposing, she wants to want to be kind, she would be well advised, from a pragmatic standpoint, to avoid doing something that could cause her to lose her reason to be kind. More generally, any want or desire or value she presently has, so long as it rests on beliefs about the ethically good or right, will be put at risk by pragmatism.

The contention that pragmatism in ethics is dangerous because it deprives people of their reasons for acting as they presently want to act, or of their reasons for not acting as they sometimes are tempted to act, can be argued on a more general level. People like us are people who were brought up in a culture saturated with ideas about human nature and rationality. Because of this we just need to hold, among other things, that there is a distinction that must be respected between a person's practical reasons for performing an action and agent-neutral reasons why that action is or is not ethically sound. Without the thought that there are reasons for affirming some of our values that have little to do with our other values, we would find ourselves without the motivation to act on those values. And this, of course, is to be nihilistic or quietistic in outlook and action.

Let us develop a version of this argument directed toward the person who wants to see some set of humane social or political goals—

the goals, say, of liberal pluralistic democracy—approached, as nearly as possible, in his society. Political liberalism, the argument runs, or any other political system a person who cares about the wellbeing of others might champion, simply cannot survive among people like us as just political, and not also metaphysical. This is because, in the absence of metaphysics, there are but two sources of social cohesion left in the world: the overlapping consenses on specific policies, procedures and institutions that happen to emerge among different social groups; and the desire many people presently happen to have to get along with their neighbours (if only because they fear them). But even together, it seems, these provide an extremely thin basis for cohesion, especially when one's society is pluralistic. Neither supplies members of a society with any commanding reason not to hijack the government or any other source of power when doing so will serve the hijacker's personal interests. Each makes dialogue, respect for the interests of others, and compromise mere happenings or potentially useful tools, not imperatives. Thus the idea that any individual's final vocabulary is just that—final, absurd, without sanction from a transcendent authority—could easily lead to the ascendancy in our culture of naked *Realpolitik* and worse.

Further, a person who is without the constraint placed on his deliberations by the idea that some project or policy he favours, though it is in touch with his desires and concerns, could nonetheless be ethically wrong, might have no incentive to consider alternatives to that project or policy. This is clearly to foster nihilistic attitudes and actions, at least on the part of others. And a person who is without the encouragement provided by the idea that some project or policy he opposes is ethically wrong, and not just out of touch with his own wishes, might feel he lacks the authority he needs to stand against it. This clearly will stimulate the growth of quietistic attitudes like detachment and resignation.

Political liberals and other caring people in our culture need, then, according to this argument, to have the idea that social cohesion and general wellbeing are transcendently important if there is to be any assurance that they will reap even the practical benefits cohesion and wellbeing bring. Liberals need the idea that there is a reason to pursue liberal goals that need have nothing to do with their own or any particular person's practical interests. They need, finally, to have epistemological and metaphysical theses, if not indeed theological ones, concerning value, justification and adjudication in back of their deliberations and discussions if they are to create and maintain a society of the sort they favour. Thus, this argument concludes, liberals have a pragmatic reason to shun pragmatism in ethics.

Let us now develop a version directed toward the individual concerned to live a life she finds satisfying and meaningful. We can begin with the claim that it is not psychologically possible for most people raised and educated in this culture to be convinced of the contingency of their cares and concerns, of their desires and values, of their projects and prospects, and yet still to find those cares and concerns meaningful and worthwhile.[2]

This is because in this culture the idea that a life is valuable or well spent only if it contributes to something larger than itself, or conforms to the plan God or Nature or History or Reason has drawn up for it, is so pervasive that its members could hardly fail to be gripped by it, even as they doubt they can make much sense of it. Thus if a person fails to consider what is in itself or transcendently important and valuable, what pursuits are worth pursuing, what sort of life is worth living, what place her life has in a larger scheme of things, then there is an excellent chance her projects will appear empty to her and her life absurd, devoid of significance. She will perceive in herself the god-shaped hole Salman Rushdie has reported perceiving in himself.[3]

Similarly, this argument continues, for many people it is the idea they possess that their long-range projects are in themselves worth pursuing, that these projects are suitable for a human to devote time and effort to, that enables them to continue to pursue them. To accomplish something one feels is important one often has to bear up under difficulties and forego short term pleasures. The peace, contentment and wellbeing a person brings to herself as she completes a difficult task can, of course, well outweigh the immediate pleasures she passed by on the way; but the promise of future wellbeing might provide little motivation to a person who lacks the sense that his assiduity is appreciated by a viewer from nowhere. Now if a person who needs such a viewer in fact very much wants to maintain his or her happiness and good health over the long run, he or she would do best to hold onto the idea that what she does, what she lives for, is at every moment sanctioned or redeemed by some authority or source of value beyond herself. Whether or not there is such an authority or source of value, she has a good pragmatic reason to be more than simply pragmatic about things that matter to her, since both her sense that her life has meaning and her overall happiness and wellbeing depend on her belief that there is.[4]

IV

These arguments that pragmatism is dangerous are frankly about what *probably* will happen. They begin from what are taken to be facts about our particular situation and our particular psychologies, not facts taken to be necessarily about any human's or any agent's situation. If one of us turns out to be somewhat different from the rest of us in his needs and wants, they do not apply to him. The arguments must, of course, be probabilitistic in this way if they are to count as pragmatic. They have to take reasons to be belief-desire pairs, not agent-neutral imperatives, even as their goal is to get us to allow that indeed there are agent-neutral ethical imperatives. They do not, that is, beg the question against the pragmatist by presupposing that there is a normatively foundational human nature or moral sense or inner light, things the pragmatist rejects.

Because they are pragmatic arguments they cannot be countered by denying that there is such a thing as human nature or by pointing out that there is no reason to think they apply to everyone. This is granted by all (though on the one side, it should be added, it is granted only for the sake of argument). In particular, one cannot respond to them by saying that as a general matter of psychological fact there *need* be no reason why a person couldn't both be aware of the contingency of his or her beliefs and values and be a committed liberal. Those who argue against being pragmatic all the way down on pragmatic grounds can cheerfully allow that being one of the two doesn't exclude being the other, for the question whether they are mutually exclusive is irrelevant to the issue at hand. What is relevant is whether *I* can combine the two attitudes, whether *you* can, whether *she* can. What, we ask, would incline any of us three particular people to try to combine a belief in the contingency of our projects with a commitment to liberalism, especially as we find so frightening what we have been told are the probable consequences of failure?

Nor can one, for much the same reason, respond to them by pointing out that various things people in the past had supposed were ultimate sources of justification and motivation are currently held by most people to be less than ultimate if not entirely fictitious. It is true, for example, that in recent historical times religious beliefs and hopes ceased to be felt as ultimate by many people and yet the lives of these people did not become savage, and neither did their wills to act nor their convictions evaporate. (Which isn't to say this event caused no lives to become savage and no wills to evaporate.) The pragmatist cannot cite against the above arguments the fact that today lots of wonderful and compassionate people manage without religion, for her suggestion is that we do without ultimate sources of justification and motivation altogether. Historically, when God died in an individual's heart, He was replaced by (indeed He was usually killed by) one or more of His doubles—Reason or History or Progress or Socialism or Humanism. Something was waiting to fill the hole. The question the above arguments raise is whether it is wise simply to dig a hole.[5]

V

According to the pragmatic arguments against pragmatism we have canvassed, if a person in our culture develops serious doubts about the plausibility or intelligibility of the concepts she employs in reflecting on things that matter to her and in making decisions

about what to do, it would probably be in her best interest, if she wants to avoid becoming nihilistic or quietistic, to overcome those doubts, and to reaffirm her commitment to the concepts that trouble her. This is because those very concepts presently support her positive values and her particular plans and projects. Without that support her values, plans and projects would appear absurd and empty to her.

Any adequate response to this line of reasoning must grant that the ideas the pragmatist recommends we give up have a firm hold on the minds even of those who have come to have doubts about them. It is true that for many people liberal values and their own self-image as liberal agents in their cultures are bound up with, for instance, ideas about the transcendent worth of the individual; thus when these ideas become strange and murky to them, so too do liberal values. It is also true, however, that the doubts many of us have about these ideas, the sense that they are strange and murky, that they are out of step with most of the rest of our beliefs and ideas, run deep. We must ask, then, what if our subject *cannot* overcome her doubts about the concepts of ethical worth and justification she has been using? What if she cannot lose her sense that there is a profound conflict within her current commitments? What price will she have to pay if she continues to deliberate about what to do using concepts she finds, in her heart of hearts, strange, foreign, unintelligible?

It is not impossible, of course, for a person to overcome whatever doubts he or she has about the concepts he or she uses when deciding what to do, or at least to remove those doubts from his or her conscious mind. Certainly it is true that for the most part people cannot choose what they will believe, nor for the most part can they simply will their doubts away. But there are tactics a person can employ to encourage himself to come to believe something, or to shed his doubts. These tactics generally involve acting *as if* one believes. More specifically, one can, on the one hand, place oneself in situations where evidence for the belief one wants to reaffirm is plentiful and the usefulness of holding it is apparent, and one can, on the other hand, avoid those situations that tend to bring one's doubts and suspicions to mind.[6] A person who determines that it is in his best interest to lose his doubts about his ethical concepts can set about his task by rereading the *Republic*, for instance, or by taking introductory courses in ethical theory. There questions about ethics are framed so as to exclude his sort of doubt: the opponents of Socrates and his heirs are by and large versions of Thrasymachus, people who proclaim such things as that might makes right or that custom is king. They are interlocutors, that is, who merely gainsay some of Socrates's conclusions while sharing his concepts. He can, as well, in his everyday life, seek out and surround himself with people who do not share his doubts. If all goes well eventually he will find himself wondering how he could ever have doubted that there is a question about, say, whether killing is ethically right or wrong, and not just whether particular killings are wise or foolish as seen through particular eyes, or that he doubted that it is crucially important that he know which side of the ethical line killing falls on and that he guide himself by this knowledge.

It is not *impossible* for a person today to overcome her doubts, then; but it is, I think, unlikely that she will. This is because there are so few places a person who has come to have such doubts can go where it is unlikely they'll be raised. Since few people today are free of such doubts, and since many people either have abandoned traditional ideas about the source and justification of value or have simply been raised without them, it might be difficult for her to find the sort of associates she needs. Even those people who continue to employ traditional concepts often engage in practices that have the potential to undercut those concepts. One currently popular strategy of ethical and social critique, for instance, involves showing that some institution, policy or course of action serves some interest, and that that interest is an historically contingent one, a parochial interest of some specific group of people. Demonstrating the parochial nature or class bias of an institution is taken by the critic to be a demonstration of its ethical illegitimacy. But anyone who at some level

suspects that her own interests are just as contingent and parochial can easily come to see that the same strategy can be turned against her values and the institutions she favours. It also happens to be the case today that claims that some institution or course of action is in line with some ethical fact are routinely dismissed as humbug or bullying rhetoric.

The costs to an individual who continues to deliberate using concepts she finds unintelligible will without doubt be high. It is clear that the psychological need or desire to know the good, to do that which is in itself right, can easily outlive the idea that there really is a good to know or a right thing to do, that there really is a plan or a goal for one's life stored in the heavens or in nature. Won't then a person's attempt to lose her doubts while remaining in an environment that encourages them tend only to cause her need for traditional conceptions of the source and justification of value to increase? Such attempts will merely tie her particular values, and her ability to find meaningful her projects, even more tightly to ideas she, at least at the back of her mind, rejects. Her doubts about these conceptions, her sense of their implausibility, will thus become even more distressing.

Illiberal attitudes, *Realpolitik*, nihilism and quietism, this is to say, are more likely to be fed by attempts to foster belief in traditional philosophical and theological ideas about value and justification than they are to be quelled by them. The sought-after beliefs will not take hold, but the desires and psychological needs they serve will grow in strength. Feeding what one takes in the back of one's mind to be illusory will only increase the possibility that one will become disillusioned, desperate and bitter.

Consider, for instance, the slogan, "If there is no God, everything is permitted." Why do so many think this both true and frightening? It is not too much of an exaggeration to say that an image found throughout our philosophical and theological traditions is that of the person as self-centred pleasure seeker, constrained only by divine commands or by his humanity or reason to care for others, or at least to avoid harming them. When the notions of divinity, humanity or reason that inform this image go fuzzy, though, the image itself need not. The nihilistic slogan will continue to seem a truth, so long as the image remains clear; but now it is frightening, for in the absence of God it no longer seems merely counterfactual. The attempt to remove one's doubts can, then, ironically, lead one to conclude that everything is permitted.

It is only, however, because the image remains clear—only, that is, because one continues to think one needs a transcendent source of authority to give one reason to act kindly or out of respect for the interests of others—that the slogan continues to appear reasonable. Without this image, without the original need, it becomes apparent that in the absence of a God the notion of "permission" the slogan draws on is empty. The idea that everything is permitted is not so much false as it is opaque and useless. The idea that everything is permitted, one who lacks the psychological need for a transcendent source of value realizes, can offer a person no guidance or prodding at all.

VI

Both sides to this debate agree that what a person has most to fear, if she desires not to become nihilistic or quietistic, if she wants to find her projects and her life worthwhile, is this: the combination in herself of a need to see her projects as in line with something beyond the habits, tastes, preferences and desires at their roots, and profound doubts that there is anything beyond her desires for her projects to be in or out of line with. Anti-pragmatists say that if a person wants to avoid this situation she should attempt to remove her doubts about the intelligibility of traditional ideas about the source and nature of value. But there is good reason, or so I have argued, to think most people these days, once the doubts in question are stirring in them, will not be able to remove them. And there is also good reason to think that attempts to remove these doubts will tend to cause the psychological need not to have such doubts to increase.

Thus the better idea, it seems, is for one to remove the need to see one's projects as in line with an ethical reality. Advocates of pragmatism maintain that it is not our belief that we are contingent beings, beings for whom

claims are reasons only when they fit appropriately with our present propositional attitudes, that threatens what we hold dear, but rather our foolish refusal to admit that we believe we are contingent beings.

Can, though, a person become reconciled to her contingency? We must ask this question just as we asked whether a person can remove his doubts. And this we cannot deny: some people, because of their circumstance or psychology, will not be able to regain the sense that their lives are worth living should they cease to see their lives as conforming to some truth or will beyond themselves. Nonetheless, individual people can try to reconcile themselves to their contingency, and to develop needs and hopes appropriate to this condition. A person can attend to her particular joys—to the pleasure she finds in being with her friends, for instance, or in playing the piano—and to her sense of accomplishment when she completes specific tasks, and ask herself if she really needs anything more; she can imagine what it would be like to live without doubtful ideas; and she can observe those people around her who are reconciled to their contingency, or for whom the issue has never arisen, and note that many of them lead interesting, caring, creative lives.

The issue between those who advocate pragmatism on pragmatic grounds and those who reject it on pragmatic grounds is ultimately an issue about which programme of therapy for those who have come to have serious doubts about the intelligibility of traditional ethical concepts has the greater chance of preventing nihilistic and quietistic ideas and attitudes from taking root in them and growing. No individual can know ahead of time, of course, which programme will succeed in his or her case. He or she can, however, have good reasons for opting to pursue one rather than the other. I have sought in this paper to supply individuals who find themselves seriously doubting that sense can be made of traditional ideas about value and ethics with good reasons to try to become pragmatic all the way down.[7]

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NOTES

1. The term "final vocabulary" comes from Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 73.

2. If Denis Donoghue is right, Paul de Man is an excellent example of a person whose sense that there is no transcendent source for political values renders him psychologically unable to engage in concrete social or political tasks. According to Donoghue, no merely mundane reason for action could foster in de Man the conviction needed to act, perhaps because he thought none could bestow legitimacy on an act in the face of opposition to it; but he saw through the illusion that any reason could be more than mundane. The only task he could find ethically acceptable once he developed this sense was that of exposing the transcendent, and thus empty, source of the conviction evinced by many thinkers and writers of "being at home to themselves and to the world" (p. 36), and thus of showing them to be as homeless as he felt himself to be, but somewhat less aware of their predicament. He was unable to see that one could be at home in the world despite the absence of transcendent sources of value, for he could not but experience that absence as a lack, a deprivation. That he could not but experience it as a deprivation, Donoghue conjectures, had everything to do with the fact that he collaborated with the Nazis during their occupation of Belgium, and a lot to do with the forms of existentialism and Heideggerian thought he encountered after the war. See Denis Donoghue, "The Strange Case of Paul de Man," *New York Review of Books*, vol. 36 (1989), especially section 3.

3. James Fenton mentions Rushdie's report in "Keeping Up with Salman Rushdie," *New York Review of Books*, vol. 38 (1991), p. 26.

4. Pragmatic arguments against pragmatism in ethics can be found in the following:

Ron Bontekoe, "Rorty's Pragmatism and the Pursuit of Truth," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 30 (1990);

Anthony J. Cascardi, "An Afterword: The Lines Redrawn," *Redrawing the Lines*, ed. Reed Way Dasenbrock (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 231;

Jonathan Crewe, "Toward Uncritical Practice," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 9 (1983), p. 759;

Lloyd Gerson, "Literature, Philosophy and Truth," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, vol. 59 (1990);

Thomas McCarthy, "Private Irony and Public Decency: Richard Rorty's New Pragmatism," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 16 (1990), p. 366;

Anthony O'Hear, "Obituary: Sir Alfred Ayer," *Erkenntnis*, vol. 32 (1990);

Glen Tinder, "Can We Be Good Without God?," *The Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 264 (1989).

Perhaps it should be added that most of these writers offer pragmatic arguments against pragmatism meaning only to show that the pragmatist's suggestion is wanting even on his or her own grounds. They go on to argue that pragmatism is defective on non-pragmatic grounds, that we have good ethical, epistemological or metaphysical reasons for rejecting pragmatic conceptions of value and warrant.

5. The two responses to pragmatic arguments against pragmatism I criticise in this section are Rorty's, from *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Rorty misconstrues the second pragmatic argument I recounted in the previous section, rendering it essentialist. He takes it to hinge on a universal claim that "it is psychologically impossible to be a liberal ironist" (p. 85), rather than on the modest and more plausible claim that most of us happen not to be able to combine the two attitudes, for various contingent reasons having to with the fact that our individual psychologies are products of a culture in which a lot of weight is placed on universalistic claims about human nature and value. About the conclusion of the first pragmatic argument against pragmatism, that liberal society would fall apart if pragmatic attitudes toward ethical matters were to take root, Rorty wrongheadedly says, "one excellent reason for thinking it false" is "the analogy with the decline of religious faith" (p. 85). If I am right, there is no analogy, for religious faith was typically replaced by something that functioned in just the same way.

Implicit in the chapter in which these inadequate responses are found is, however, a response similar to that provided in the next section of this paper. (In fact, this paper began as an attempt, at a symposium on *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, to say for Rorty what he had not quite managed to say for himself.)

6. As Pascal says to those who wish to acquire or renew religious belief: Behave *as if* you believe, take holy water, have masses said, grow accustomed to faith. Blaise Pascal, "The Wager," *Pensées*, A.J. Krailsheimer, ed. (Markham: Penguin Books, 1966), pp. 152 & 153.

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