

## MORAL PRAGMATISM AND THE BUILDING OF A ROBUST MORAL SYSTEM

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### **Abstract**

*The task of presenting a moral theory of the pragmatic thought is daunting in view of the lack of consensus about some ethical or moral concepts. This challenge notwithstanding, the paper discusses the fundamental tenets that run mainstream in such thought and highlights some of them that critic's have often found reasonably worrisome. The paper argues that despite the pitfalls in moral pragmatism, when properly construed has embedded in it potential for the building of a robust moral system.*

**Keywords:** Moral Pragmatic, Moral System, Ethics, Morality, Philosophy, Society.

### **Introduction**

Moral philosophy also known as philosophical ethics has traditionally been concerned with issues of the rightness or wrongness of human actions, primarily to aid conduct and enhance a peaceful, stable and progressive relationships in the society. It deals with the morality of human actions or the norms of human behavior, and studies what is the proper course of action for man (Kanu 2018). In this direction, ethical theories that provides guide are recommended to ensure that people act morally reasonably. Moral pragmatism aspires to provide guide for moral decisions and actions. In its espousal, it recommends no absolute ethical principle in view of its criteria less paradigm, but emphasizes the need for a regular review or revision of our moral rules, standards or requirements in line with moral facts as the need arises.

This paper is an attempt to re-examine moral pragmatism. It discusses the limitation of the theory and argues that inspite of its limitations, it has embedded in it relevant moral requirement for the building of a robust moral system. Let us begin with an examination of the central teaching of moral pragmatism.

### **What is Moral Pragmatism?**

The task of presenting a moral theory of the pragmatic thought is daunting in view of the lack of consensus about some ethical concepts. This accounts for the

various perspective or diverse views regarding the subject. Stephen for example maintains that “moral pragmatism is one of the three main school under the umbrella of ethical relativism. Ethical relativism teaches that right and wrong, good and bad are relative to the situation, circumstances or personal conviction” (182). Such view as this must have informed Juan’s position that there has been attempts to establish a moral pragmatic theory:

Yet it would appear that work remains to be done in reconstructing the moral philosophy of pragmatism. Part of this deficiency resides in the diversity existing amongst pragmatist thinkers, which prompted F.C.S. Schiller to claim that there were as many pragmatisms as pragmatists...(1).

Again she notes:

It is also the case that the first impression that one receives on studying this field is that of a debate between mutually opposed positions, rather than a unified and homogenous discourse (1)

In the same vein Margolis argues that “although pragmatic ethic with its scientific origins may seem simple and straightforward, practitioners cannot agree on the definitions of the basic concepts or criteria with which it operate” (210).

These views notwithstanding, it is obvious that moral pragmatism is on course and we shall attempt in what follows to highlight the fundamental tenets that run mainstream in such thoughts. First, pragmatic ethical theory or moral pragmatism is a necessary conclusion that can be inferred from the pragmatic world view or conception of reality and their epistemology. This remark by William James is apt in this regard.

Mr. Pierce, after pointing out that our beliefs are really rules for actions, said that, to develop a thoughts meaning, we need only determine what conduct it is fitted to produce: that conduct is for us its sole significance. And the tangible fact at the root of all our thought-distinctions, however subtle, is that there is no one of them so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference of practice. To

attain perfect clearness in our thoughts of an object, then we need only consider what conceivable effects of a practical kind the object may involve – what sensations we are to expect from it. And what reactions we must prepare. Our conception of those effects, whether immediate or remote, is then for us the whole of our conception of the object, so far as that conception has positive significance at all (11).

It is clear from the views by James that for the pragmatists, whether in epistemology, ethics, metaphysics or aesthetics, words and ideas remain tools for solving problems, and the defining attribute of such efficacy is practicability and workability.

Central to moral pragmatism thus is the view that there ought not to be a gulf between the realm of science and that of human value. In this vein Dewey wrote in his book *The Reconstruction of Philosophy* thus:

when the consciousness of science is fully impregnated with the consciousness of human value, the greatest dualism which now weighs humanity down, the split between the materials, the mechanical, the scientific and the moral and ideal will be destroyed (173)

This seeming gap needs to be closed, hence he argues elsewhere that “things are objects to be treated, used, acted upon and with, enjoyed and endured, even more than things to be known. They are things had before they are things cognized”. (*Experience & Nature*, 21).

Thus, for Dewey the world of facts and value are one and the same. For this reason he maintains that: “Morals is as much a matter of interaction of a person with his social environment as walking is an interaction of legs with a physical environment” (*Human Nature and Conduct*, 318).

The implication is that the methodology used in studying and understanding the realm of facts is applicable in the realm of values, hence James avers that the philosophy that had existed hitherto was “an empirical philosophy that is not religious enough and a religious philosophy that is not empirical enough” (*Pragmatism*, 15).

Moral pragmatism therefore is an attempt to bridge the gap between values and fact using the pragmatic method. In this regard, Pierce argues that the condition the method of inquiry must meet to be adequate is “the method must be such that the ultimate conclusion of everyman shall be the same. Or will be the same if inquiry was sufficiently persisted (1).

Equally fundamental to Moral Pragmatism is the pragmatic concept of an evolving world. In this vein Lawhead notes:

Dewey built his philosophy on the notion that we are rooted in our biological environment and our intellectual life is the result of our attempt to adapt to a changing world around us...just as evolution never reaches a finished state of perfection; so Dewey taught we continuously modify our ideas as they prove inadequate and replace them with fuller, richer conceptions (472).

The world is constantly changing and there is no reason why our ideas concerning the world must be static and unrevisable. And these ideas we hold comes from our active interaction with our environment, with situations or experiences. Hence Dewey wrote that:

The function of intelligence is therefore not that of copying objects of the environment, but rather a taking account of the way in which more effective and more profitable relations with these objects may be established in the future (*The Development of American Pragmatism*, 30).

Thus, ideas generated by interaction with the environment ought and are in fact used to remodify and understand our environment or reality better. Of importance too to an understanding of moral pragmatism is their understanding of truth. For the pragmatists truth is not something standing out there objectively for all to see. But as James will say, “truth happens to an idea...it becomes true, is made true by events” (201). That is, truth is what works or the practical consequences of our beliefs.

Lastly on the fundamental tenets, all pragmatists embraced the concept of fallibilism, which simply stated is the view that every belief is fallible and open to possible refutation: Dewey notes:

A moral law, like the law of physics, is not something to swear by and stick to at all hazards; it is a formula for the way to respond when specified conditions present themselves (*Quest for certainty*, 278).

In the same vein James remarked that “experience as, we know, has ways of boiling over, making us correct our present formula” (*Pragmatism*, 222). And again Dewey writes that:

All tenets and creeds about good and goods, would be recognized to be hypotheses. Instead of being rigidly fixed, they would be treated as intellectual instruments to be tested and confirmed-and altered-through consequences effected by acting on them (*Quest for Certainty*, 277).

In other words, the moral world is like the physical world, always subject to improvements towards perfection. Morality is not about discovery of fixed essences or eternal truth at the expense of everything else, but is about the use of norms, principles whether eternal in nature or not to the improvement of man’s moral system, and moral criteria are likely to be improved as a result of enquiry. For this reason, Stephen notes that:

Pragmatic ethics takes a more aggressive, approach, insisting that mankind is responsible for determining the best ethical system possible, which will be refined as new discoveries are made (165).

Contributing to what moral pragmatism entails, Beckwith argues that: “Pragmatic ethics does hold that absolute/universal truth exists. But it also teaches that the imperfect human intellect will never recognize truth; all we can do is endeavor to get close as possible” (226).

That is to say that we must be optimistic that if there is moral perfection, we shall ultimately access same as event unfolds. The implication of the above views is that moral pragmatism envisages the possibility of constructing a viable ethic based on pragmatic principles. In the same way that scientist are conscious of a

possible future supplant of their hypothesis yet act as though they are true, moral pragmatist acknowledge that there is nothing wrong to practice a variety of other normative approaches, yet recognize the need for mechanisms which allows society to advance beyond those approaches.

It does not hold any known moral criteria as beyond potential for revision. In this respect Bernstein maintains that “pragmatists disagree. If they speak of criterial at all, they think of them as tools for analysis and presents features people should consider in making moral decisions” (81). The belief that morality is primarily conscious adherence to prior and fixed criterial over rationalizes man in their view. Gibbard gives credence to this argument when he posited thus:

Pragmatism’s core contention that practices is primary in philosophy rules out the hope of logically prior criteria. Any meaningful criteria evolve from our attempt to live morally. Criteria are not discovered by pure reason, and they are not fixed. As ends of action; they are always revisable. As we obtain new evidence about ourselves and our world, we find that what was appropriate for the old environment may not be conducive to survival in the new one (195).

Thus, just like we do not make personal or professional decision by applying fixed, complete criteria all the time; no set of criteria could give a univocal answer about how we should behave in all circumstances. This view is supported by Pierce when he argues that “ethics consist in rational deliberation about how to act in order to shape our lives to an ideal. This ideal is neither a socially inculcated one nor a historically or traditionally fixed one” (4).

We shall attempt to make a critique of moral pragmatism at this point.

### **Critique of Moral Pragmatism**

Several criticism have been levied against moral pragmatism, some of which I think arises from a partial rather than a whollistic critique of its basic assumption. This perhaps informed James’ opinion that:

It is high time to urge the use of a little imagination in philosophy. The unwillingness of some of our critics to read any but the silliest of possible

meanings into our statements is as discretable to their imagination as anything I know in recent philosophic history. Schiller says the truth is that which "works". Thereupon he is treated as one who limits verification to the lowest material utilities. Dewey says truth is what gives "satisfaction"! he is treated as one who believes in calling everything true which, if it were true, would be pleasant (1907, 90).

In criticizing moral pragmatism therefore, we shall focus on those foundational premises that critics have found reasonably worrisome. First, it has been argued that the good for the pragmatists is linked with the true, even as James suggested that "the true is whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief." Russell thinks that Dewey believed that "whether a belief is good or bad depends upon whether the activities which it inspires in the organism entertaining the belief have consequences which are satisfactory or unsatisfactory to it" (825). Thus the consequential implication of moral pragmatism raises a problem according to critics namely: an action is good or bad because of its own effect ad infinitum. Russell in this vein argues that for any action to be carried out:

You must hold that your estimate of the consequences of a belief, both ethical and factual, is true, for if it is false your argument for the truth of your belief is mistaken. But to say that your belief as to consequences is true is, according to James, to say that it has good consequences, and this in turn is only true if it has good consequences, and so on ad infinitum. Obviously this won't do (817).

Thus, it is argued that moral pragmatism drives us into an endless abyss or at best it takes one into an adventure with an undefined goal. The thrust of this criticism anchors on the general consequentialist critique that one can never know the consequences of an action in its entirety.

Another criticism against moral pragmatism is that of conflating descriptive and normative ethics. Extremely stretched, this leads straight forwardly to the familiar is/ought controversy in ethics. But we must note that moral pragmatism unlike naturalism or ethical naturalism properly construed does not insist that there are no values in the world that defiles the naturalistic conceptual scheme.

Rather, it holds the minimal position that scientific method is the most adequate method of inquiry into the nature of ethics. “However, the criticism that there is a difference between how people make moral judgment and how they ought to make it may be considered valid because there seems to be no distinction between facts and values in pragmatic ethics. This criticism however, may be objected to as Juan Pablo has done when she argued that:

normative science is observational and based on ordinary experience. It studies phenomena in relation to ends, that is, phenomena is dyadic. Also, as a part of philosophy, the normative sciences derive their principles from mathematics, that is, they make claims about how certain things ‘ought’ to be or happen hypothetically. In this sense, they don’t describe but prescribe...(3).

From a moral or ethical standpoint, achieving a good act requires acting in a certain way, that requires approving and disapproving certain ideals. And as Juan Pablo has noted at least concerning the Piercian, “this means that you should adjust your life to an ideal, namely, to the development of concrete reasonableness, to make a more intelligible world with our actions and thoughts” (3). Without doubt whatsoever, the adjustment of ones act to an ideal is central to moral pragmatism and the basis of the aim of moving towards moral perfection by reconstructing our moral priorities consistently with our experiences.

Again the moral pragmatists view the truth as what works, and William James was even of the view that what is useful is true and what is true is useful. This assumption is without doubt questionable. What may be useful may not be true and what may be true may not be useful in all circumstances. In his article “In Defense of a Compatibility Theory of Value”, Esikot argues thus:

...although rules relating to lying as a vice may be considered universal and hence in a sense objective, yet reason places an obligation on an air plane attendant to tell a terrorist about to blow up the plane that the inmates are Britons rather than Americans, if that is what is required to save the inmates who as a matter of fact are Americans (8).

It is obvious then, that some useful lies may not be true, but could serve better purposes than truth in certain circumstances. That is, what works cannot be equated with truth in all circumstances. That is why Russell wrote thus:

In all this I feel a grave danger of what might be called cosmic impiety. The concept of 'truth' as something dependent upon facts largely outside human control has been one of the ways in which philosophy hitherto has inculcated the necessary element of humility. When this check upon pride is removed, a further step is taken on the road towards a certain kind of madness –the intoxication of power which invaded philosophy with Fichte, and to which modern men, whether philosophers or not, are prone. I am persuaded that this intoxication is the greatest danger of our time, and that any philosophy which, however unintentionally, contributes to it is increasing the danger of vast social disaster (828).

The over-emphasis on workability plaques moral pragmatism and requires a rearticulation, because workability when fully stretched risks becoming insensitive to human values and infact support a technological regime that degrades human dignity ultimately. Moreover, the notion of “what works” needs to be redefined such that it is not misplaced. Who determines what works, the agent or the beneficiary?, Is it both or an independent assessor?

Lastly, moral pragmatism is accused of being relative in nature. Like Lawhead noted, James was of the view that:

Discarded theories such as Ptolemaic astronomy “worked” in its day, in terms of the problem it solved then. In our present situation, we now consider the situation false, although we could say it was relatively true or true within those borders of experience” defined by its own time (468).

This charge of relativism moral pragmatism cannot escape completely in view of the fact that what works in one moral system may sometimes require modification in another. But it can be argued that moral relativism is not altogether out of the ordinary, neither is it morally anomalous or aberrant. This

we shall attempt to show as we discussed the strength of pragmatism and the insights it holds for a robust moral system.

### **Moral Pragmatism and the Building of a Robust Moral System**

We intend to argue that despite the pitfalls in moral pragmatism, it is not really a case of a complete false dawn moral theory. Moral pragmatism can as a matter of fact support the aim of building a robust moral system. Simply put a moral system gives an account of the underlying justification for our correct moral judgments. A robust moral system gives expression and explains why our correct moral beliefs are true and challenges beliefs that are incompatible with the underlying moral justification to be revised. Herein lies the attractions of moral pragmatism.

Contrasting moral pragmatism albeit briefly at this point with other normative ethical theories would not be a futile discourse. First, consequentialist ethical theories with their emphasis on consequences of actions carries with it the implicit assumption that what is morally right is a bond between situational and general principles. The general principle relates to the outcome, while the situational principle requires the evaluation of each particular case on the strength of the prevailing or dominant moral ingredients/criteria.

For instance, while the moral agent has an eye on the outcome, the peculiarities of the situation the agent is in and the demand to effectively maximized manifest factors is no less significant in ensuring the desired outcome. The Kantian ethical theory with its focus on universalization, duty, obligation and treating human kind as an end, cannot be said to have an absolute moral disconnect with pragmatism. This is true because there are moral situations in which what is pragmatically relevant is that which treats the other agent as an end or what is obligatory. This must have been the same point made by Professor Ozumba when he wrote:

We can therefore say that Kant has done well in articulating pure ethical principles which are akin to the precepts and laws found in the Decalogue. In both cases, an abstract framework of morality is put in place but we stated that Kant has gone a step further to descend from the Olympian height of abstraction to the practical subjective platform or framework of the individual man through

categorical imperatives and the formulation of the maxims (71).

Thus at the concrete human situation the moral agent is confronted with moral variables that must be weighted critically and an option that aligns with one or more of the moral guide (ethical principles) is acted upon. Clearly, most normative ethical theories are split as to whether the rules each provides are the sole determinant of moral behaviour or not, hence elements of a theory may not be very apparent in another, yet, they are subtly implied at some point. This is true of situation ethics, Kantian ethics, consequentialist ethics, and even Christian ethics. In cognizance of this fact Esikot argues that:

If we view the claim of universality as an idealized approach to value, and the claim of relativity as acceptance of certain exceptions to resolve contradictions between values in practical situation, then the antagonistic posture assumed by these approaches would be unnecessary, for universality is not akin to absolutism. The Judeo-Christian tradition that proclaims universal, eternal and changeless order of value provides the clearest example of this view. While it proclaims certain absolute set of values (Obedience to Law, Sanctity of Life etc), in practice it includes exceptions. (*Sophia*, 9).

If the foregoing discussion is granted, we should concede also that often times our moral decisions are a mix of various normative theories as we deem necessary, especially when there are conflicts of principles. For instance what is the duty of a person who is confronted by an insane man wielding a machet to disclose the hiding place of an innocent young girl he intends to murder? Disclose the hiding place so as to be consistent with the principle of truth telling or lie to save her life?

In view of this fact, it would seem that the moral pragmatic rejection of criterial as espoused by the different ethical theories is not a denial of the necessity of using those moral criteria in resolving moral issues, but endorsing any as a necessary and absolute standard. Nozick must have had this in mind when he wrote: "each moral theory provides an absolute moral rule, which is bad for moral discourse" (341). What is apparent then is that moral pragmatism employs

criteria without making such absolute. Hence, Bernstein argues that “it acknowledges that ethical judgments are relatives without being relativistic. And it tolerates indeed, welcomes some moral differences, without being irresolute” (61). In support of this also, Amartya Sen maintained thus; “I propose a theory that recognizes the importance of certain rules, but these rules are not absolute” (166). As a matter of fact, most of the moral rules that appear very assertive and absolute like “thou shall not kill” always have the unstated premise “except this or that obtains” (in self-defense). And this is consistent with the moral law that requires that we do not hurt or harm our fellow men.

Furthermore, it is also clear from the moral pragmatists proposition that moral pragmatism is not anti-thetical to the fundamental aim of morality, namely, finding principles that can apply to everyone universally. This is so because a pragmatic moral principle could find application in several settings, cultures and moral situations. A moral theory that is relevant in building a particular moral system may be equally relevant in other moral systems or societies and hence “universally relevant”. If on the otherhand a morally pragmatic rule that is beneficial in one moral system or society finds no relevance in any other moral system or society, then it shows that there are no universally valid principles for all times and situation.

On the demand by moral pragmatism that scientific methodology be applied in matters of value, the objection against this demand which is to the effect that no account of how things are in nature can conclusively indicate how they ought to be though valid, does not completely eliminate other merits of this demand. Following Gibbard the moral pragmatists have argued that:

As we obtain new evidence about ourselves and our world, we find that what is appropriate for the old environment may not be conducive to the survival in the new one: therefore they need to be abolished (195).

The crucial point to note about the moral pragmatist contention above is the creation of the awareness that value or morality is integral to experience. And since experience whether for an individual or society is never static; then any robust moral system must be flexible without being extremely morally relative. For relativism in morals Esikot contends “restricts and in a way outlaw the need to seek and discover the true nature of value, and as such tramples moral progress...” (*Canadian Journal of Politics and Law*, 133)

But this is not the case with moral pragmatism which lays emphasis on revision of our moral criteria in response to the consequences they bear on real life and to everyone affected by it. The necessity of moral progress is forced upon humanity by contemporary moral realities even when we would have preferred to remain in the cloak of moral conservatism. Hence Esikot reasoned thus:

Are there no such things as moral progress, moral reformation or transformation? If not, why is human slavery not applauded globally today? What informs moral progress if not that there is a higher moral order or principle to which obedience is considered morally necessary, compelling or more humane?  
(*Canadian Journal of Politics and Law*, 133)

Moral progress or retardation is therefore a fact of life, and to have a robust moral system, the system itself must be subject to moral upgrade, respond to changes and enhance moral creativity. Moral pragmatism seems to have some truth in this regard. Society is dynamic and the moral rules that regulate social relationships need not be static, unprogressive or moribund, otherwise a structural imbalance becomes inevitable.

For the moral pragmatists, we achieve moral progress and maturity by habitually reflectively revising our value judgments and correspondingly our moral system in the light of our previous value judgments, and the satisfactory consequences or otherwise of our previous actions, in the light of empirical evidence and the supposedly ideal moral rule or requirements that are putative standards.

For those who have argued that a sane generation may adjust good values to accommodate ridiculous demands of a few deranged persons in the name of evolving or revision, we need only remind ourselves that the pragmatic principles of workability or revision are progressive in nature and as such the fear is misplaced. Even if a generation can evolve from good to bad, it won't be morally repugnant to suppose the inverse. It is equally wrong to conclude that what is morally pragmatic cannot also be right.

On the alledge charge that consequences of actions are never exhaustively determinate and as such moral pragmatists allusion to consequences makes their proposition untenable, the crucial point is that if consequences are not construe as extremely remote from action, then the argument should not be considered as

a death blow to moral pragmatism or sufficient to deny the beneficial consequences of moral pragmatism. Most importantly, the recourse to consequences appeals to common sense and when applied to ideas it is beneficial. In real life situations we often find ourselves apply other normative rules in our judgments without regards to the consequences, but are sometimes compelled to have a rethink by the consequences, and we wished we had assessed the situation better than we had done earlier.

### **Conclusion**

We have seen that moral pragmatism emphasizes the method of improving our value judgment above the goal of identifying an ultimate or supreme principle that can serve as a criterion of ethical/moral evaluation or judgments. But we have argued that this does not amount to the denial of the usefulness of these ultimate principles as guide or component of a pragmatic moral judgment. We have agreed also that the very notion of “moral progress” implies re-visitation or revision of our moral attitudes and values, and this is consistent with the aims of moral pragmatism. We maintain that though values may be relative or universal, moral values that are universal and absolute without regards to the nature of the moral issue and the circumstances of the moral agent, cannot fulfill the basic obligation of morality which aims primarily at regulating human relationships and foster harmonious and peaceful co-existence. A moral system that is not susceptible to positive change must be anachronistic. If man and society are progressive in nature, there is no impeccable reason while the moral system that is at the service of man and society should not evolve as both do. This fact informs the view that moral pragmatism properly construed is an imperative for the building of a robust moral system.

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