ETHICAL PRAGMATISM

Raff Donelson

Abstract: Beginning with a thought experiment about a mysterious Delphic oracle, I motivate, explain, and attempt to defend a view I call *Ethical Pragmatism*. Ethical Pragmatism is the view that we can and should carry on our practice of moral deliberation without reference to moral truths, or more broadly, without reference to metaethics. The defense I mount in the paper tries to show that neither suspicions about the tenability of fact-value distinctions, nor doubts about the viability of global pragmatism, nor worries about the 'force' of ethical injunctions without reference to moral truths constitute good reason to reject Ethical Pragmatism.

Keywords: expressivism, metaethical internalism, metaethics, moral realism, moral truth, pragmatism, Richard Rorty

Imagine that a being, embodied and conscious much like we are, appears one day, claiming to be omniscient. Importantly, the being claims for itself only omniscience, not omnipotence, nor omnipresence, nor the distinct honor of having created the Universe. Those who first encounter this being – call it Delphi – are initially doubtful about its contention of knowing everything, but they are soon taken aback by Delphi's astonishing ability to relate personal information about them, even though it is entirely unacquainted with them. Personal histories, though, are far from the limit of Delphi's knowledge, and this is demonstrated when some skeptics try and fail to stump it. The skeptics test Delphi's knowledge of obscure historical, mathematical, and scientific facts, and Delphi answers in a way that satisfies them, sometimes just saying the answer and sometimes prefacing the response with "*You* think..." The case of Delphi becomes more than a curiosity when its knowledge

is employed to solve unresolved mathematical quandaries and to build impressive new medical and other technologies.

Before long, by Delphi's instruction, diseases are cured, deep space travel is enabled, and historical mysteries are uncovered. Delphi is widely regarded as omniscient. Its first pronouncements about ethics only seem further to confirm this, for these judgments accord with many widely and deeply held commitments that we have. But later and quite startlingly, Delphi makes some judgments that strike many as morally repugnant. "Enslaving other human beings is always morally permissible," says Delphi at one juncture. "Killing one's firstborn child is morally obligatory," it says some other time. Surely, some conjecture, this must be a prank or joke because the omniscient Delphi could not seriously believe such outrageous things. But the oracle isn't laughing. Others try to argue with Delphi about these alleged moral facts, but equanimous as it usually is, Delphi brusquely cites the assorted historical and sociological reasons that explain our commitments to other moral principles and then refuses to entertain more interlocutors.

No one continues to think Delphi's claims about ethics are jokes, but some begin to doubt that Delphi can be omniscient because, by their lights, these statements about ethics cannot be true. Others are persuaded that Delphi is right, seeing our ethical intuitions as much more doubtful than the pronouncements of Delphi, who knew so many other things about which we were ignorant. On all sides, however, no one is moved to act in accord with the distasteful principles Delphi announced.

*****

The Delphi Hypothetical, minimally, is supposed to inspire or perhaps bolster the following intuition. There may be moral facts, we may know them, and yet, we will nonetheless need to engage in moral deliberation. What is this practice and what is the upshot of this newly minted or bolstered intuition? The practice of moral deliberation is the process by which we figure out how to

lead our lives, which imperatives we might put to others, and which evaluations we might make of others and of ourselves.[1] If we imagine ourselves as among the ranks of those who continue to believe that Delphi is omniscient and continue to believe there is *no way* we can embark on slaughtering firstborn children or condoning the enslavement of people, that is, if we accept the thought experiment, then we have admitted that known moral facts, as such, cannot satisfactorily answer the questions over which moral deliberation is concerned. Once we admit *that*, we are one step closer to the more radical view that moral facts, as such, are unimportant, for what matters instead is our practice of moral deliberation. Why would the moral facts be unimportant? Well, moral facts look decidedly unimportant if we begin to accept the following notion: when moral facts cohere with the results of our moral deliberations, they can 'guide' us, but, when the moral facts clash with the results of our considered moral deliberations, the facts must go by the wayside.

In what follows, I attempt to clarify and expound upon this radical view I call Ethical Pragmatism. The view takes some inspiration from Richard Rorty, but it will become clear that my view significantly departs from global Rortianism. After explaining my view, the rest of this paper aims not at proving that my view is superior to all its prominent competitors; instead, I have the more modest goal of showing that the view ought not to be rejected out of hand because of other reasonable commitments one may have. More schematically, in §1, I clarify Ethical Pragmatism, by revealing its Rortian roots and then contrasting it with a variant of metaethical expressivism, Blackburn's quasi-realism. In §2, I re-examine the Delphi Hypothetical with the aim of showing that it does nothing illicit to motivate the case for Ethical Pragmatism. In §3, I avoid a dilemma between affirming full-scale (objectionable) Rortianism and invoking an untenable fact-value distinction. In

---

[1] In this essay, I use *moral* and *ethical* interchangeably.

§4, I explain how the normative language of an Ethical Pragmatist still has meaning and force, and, finally, in §5, I conclude.

§1 Sketching Ethical Pragmatism

For the rest of the paper to be meaningful, I need to make sure that I have made Ethical Pragmatism as clear as possible. I begin that task by highlighting the aspects of Rorty's neo-pragmatism that I adopt. Later, I distinguish Ethical Pragmatism from quasi-realism, a position with which my view might be confused.

1.1 Roots in Rorty

To invoke a Rortian distinction, there are at least two ways to think about morality: as a quest for objectivity or as a quest for solidarity. "Insofar as [a person] seeks objectivity, she distances herself from the actual persons around her not by thinking of herself as a member of some other real or imaginary group, but rather by attaching herself to something which can be described without reference to any particular human beings" (Rorty 1991, 21). In other, perhaps more familiar terms, the quest for objectivity in ethics is a quest for Moral Truth. *Moral Truth*, as I employ the term here, is a shorthand for moral truths and their truthmakers, both of which serve to check and delimit our practice of moral deliberation, according to those on the quest for objectivity. That which checks our moral discourse, on such views, varies according to one's preferred metaethical theory. For some, there are bare moral truths with no truthmakers, and for them, our moral deliberations go well only insofar as we track those truths.[2] For those enamored with moral

---

[2] See Putnam 2004 and Scanlon 2014.

truthmakers, there are other guides. Brute 'non-natural' moral facts,[3] the hypothetical feelings of an imagined ideal observer,[4] whatever the moral agent truly wills or desires,[5] or commands of some deity[6] – these have all been advanced as candidates in the history of philosophy for a proper ground for, and check on, our moral discourse. Whatever the true grounding stuff turns out to be, those on the quest for solidarity refuse to look for it. Ethical Pragmatism is a quest for solidarity in ethics in this negative sense.

While Rorty further explains the notion of a quest for solidarity in terms of identification with a real or imagined community, whose values one embraces and tries to defend and improve, this positive characterization is far too communitarian by my lights. Moreover, Rorty has some misleading talk about justifying one's moral commitments by referring only to things inside the community as opposed to outside. This is misleading because it makes it seem as if Rorty bars us from wondering if other people in distant times and places have or had better ideas about how to

---

[3] This is the classic strategy of non-naturalist moral realists like Plato and G.E. Moore 1903, as well as contemporary philosophers like David Enoch 2011 and Russ Shafer-Landau 2003.

[4] This is how I understand the moral theories of Hume (1998) and Adam Smith (1982). Roderick Firth (1952) also had a variant of this view.

[5] Something like this characterizes Sartre's existentialist ethics (see Sartre 1956) and Korsgaardian constructivism (see Korsgaard 1996). If one adds some idealization to this, we get closer to ideal observer views, but the important difference between the classic ideal observer view and a subjectivism with some idealization is that, according to the subjectivist view, the agent's conative states (or those of the ideal version of herself) *create* value. Views of this sort have been advanced by Sharon Street 2010.

[6] This view is considered and rejected in Plato 1961.

live; he does not mean this. He just means that moral reflection is best practiced by thinking about how to live in a world with others, not by mirroring some truths.

This brings me to the next component of Rortian neo-pragmatism to which I avail myself. I share Rorty's diagnosis that ethics is typically understood as the quest for objectivity because philosophy is generally understood in this manner. I also accept Rorty's analysis that philosophy-on-the-quest-for-objectivity is an attempt to mirror the world, "to represent accurately what is outside the mind" (Rorty 2008, 3.)[7] Along with him, I think that in the domain of ethics this mirror-imagery can and should be set aside or abandoned. A key advantage to setting aside this mirroring activity is avoiding certain kinds of philosophical problems. If one is trying to accurately represent some ethical realm, naturally questions arise about whether and why this realm exists and whether and why anyone is primed to determine the contents of this realm. These and other sorts of metaethical questions become inapplicable and irrelevant when one turns one's attention away from the search for Moral Truth and focuses instead on finding good answers to practical questions. One might think that the same questions can re-emerge, for it seems (to someone ensnared by objectivity-seeking intuitions) that one might ask whether an answer to a practical question is *in fact* good. This question is a mistake, for supposing there is an answer about what is *in fact* good, all that matters anyway is whether we, on earnest reflection, can endorse it, as my Delphi Hypothetical suggests.

1.2 Contrast with Quasi-Realism

My positive characterization of Ethical Pragmatism goes some ways toward making clear what I propose, but explaining how it differs from other views in the neighborhood should prove

---

[7] Of course, Rorty was aware that sometimes philosophy-on-the-quest-for-objectivity is looking to mirror the goings-on inside the mind too.

helpful too. The particular neighbor I have selected is Simon Blackburn's quasi-realism. For the

sake of thoroughness, I provide a sketch of quasi-realism before illustrating how it differs from

Ethical Pragmatism.

It must be noted at the outset that the proceeding sketch of quasi-realism is but a rough

approximation; a careful explanation of the position is well beyond the scope of the present effort.

Complex as the various iterations of the view are, for my purposes, I claim that there are just four

basic commitments which compose the view.[8] These are moral nihilism, non-cognitivism, what I

call *doxasticization*, and anti-relativism.

Moral nihilism is the metaphysical claim that there are no moral properties or entities. For

example, according to the moral nihilist, there is no fact of the matter as to whether one morally

ought to lie in a particular instance. There *is* a fact of the matter as to whether one has an obligation

to refraining from stealing in a particular instance; one has no such obligation, but this is a trivial

first-order moral fact, because, for the nihilist, it just follows from the second-order moral (or

metaethical) fact that there are no such things as moral obligations. A famous proponent of this

was, of course, J. L Mackie (1977), but Blackburn (1993) and other quasi-realists support this view.

If one is confused here, I can say more about Blackburn's moral nihilism. If one is not

confused, one can skip to the next paragraph. If one is confused, one might wonder why I called

Mackie (and Blackburn) proponent of moral nihilism when Mackie called his own view *moral error

theory*. Moral error theory names two joined theses: a) moral nihilism, the view that there are no

moral properties or entities and b) moral cognitivism, the view that our moral judgments are truth-

apt. When so joined, we arrive at the claim that, while moral judgments are propositions, none are

non-trivially true, for there are no moral properties or entities to serve as truthmakers for moral

---

[8] My discussion is primarily based on reading Blackburn 1993.

propositions.[9] Blackburn agrees with Mackie about moral nihilism, but he disagrees about moral cognitivism. If this reading of Blackburn sounds contentious, I can only note that more able commentators read him similarly. As Shafer-Landau writes, quasi-realists and other non-cognitivists "stake out their position precisely by rejecting the possibility that there might be unanalyzed normativity in the world. Their ontology is compatible with that proposed by the most advanced science of the day. We needn't add evaluative properties or relations to our world view in order to accommodate moral talk" (2003, 21).

The next component of quasi-realism is non-cognitivism. This is where the quasi-realist parts company with the moral error theorist. While moral error theory purports that moral discourse falls into inescapable error by positing entities or properties that do not exist (e.g. rightness, wrongness, and moral obligation), non-cognitivism claims that moral discourse does not purport to posit any such things or make any claims about what things exist at all. For Blackburn and other non-cognitivists, through moral discourse, we express conative states like desires and commitments to plans of action, not propositions capable of being true or false.

The third part of quasi-realism is what I call *doxasticization*. Quasi-realism, as a species of non-cognitivism, is committed to the notion that moral judgments are not beliefs because beliefs are understood to express propositions; however, moral judgments, according to the quasi-realist, can be *treated* as beliefs. Treating non-doxastic attitudes like doxastic attitudes is what I call *doxasticization*, and this is an essential part of the quasi-realist story, for this is what makes it quasi or

---

[9] Moral error theorists would also deny the claim of what I call "metaethical minimalists," those who claim there can be moral truths without moral truthmakers. Minimalists include Putnam (2004) and Scanlon (2014). For discussion of minimalism, see Donelson (Forthcoming).

almost realist. Moral judgments, for the quasi-realist, are not *real* beliefs, but they get to play them on TV.

And this brings me to the fourth and final component of quasi-realism, namely its anti-relativism. One might think that if moral judgments are just non-doxastic attitudes such as likes and dislikes, no such judgment can be right nor wrong. The judgments just *are*. Blackburn, however, rejects this picture because moral judgments get to behave like propositions, and as such, there can be right and wrong answers to moral questions. We need not to discuss Blackburn's rationale for this view because all that matters for our purposes is recognizing his anti-relativism. With the anti-relativism and the other three components of the view more clearly in our sights, we can move on to the question of how Ethical Pragmatism differs from quasi-realism.

The most important sense in which these views differ is metaphilosophically. Quasi-realism is a theory, explaining which things exist. It tells us that there are no moral facts, that there are no moral beliefs, that there are attitudes that we necessarily doxasticize. Ethical Pragmatism is not a theory about which things exist; it is not a theory at all, if theories are, by definition, explanatory. Ethical Pragmatism is not an explanation, but a suggestion to *stop* theorizing about certain things. Consider one pithy way to cash out the difference between the two views. Ethical Pragmatism is a visionary view while quasi-realism is a revisionary view. Ethical Pragmatism is visionary in the sense that it urges us to approach ethics in a new way, a way that casts off objectivity-seeking intuitions and projects, not because those intuitions and projects are false but because they are unhelpful. Quasi-realism is revisionary in the sense that its supporters ask us to revise our beliefs about metaethics because some of us are saying false things.

With this in mind, we can see that apparent similarities between the views are only, well, apparent. Both views are ways of eliminating talk of truth in ethics, in the strict sense, but the rationales are wholly different. Quasi-realists claim that, strictly speaking, there are no moral truths

because there are no moral properties and because moral discourse is not cognitive. Ethical Pragmatists, on the other hand, claim that moral truths, if they exist, are irrelevant. Both views hold that, even after their respective eliminations of moral truth talk, one can make sense of statements like "It's true that people should take steps to reduce their carbon footprint" and "If you interrupted that woman, you should apologize to her; I know you did interrupt her, so you should apologize to her." In other words, both views hold that we can use the truth predicate and arguments that look like they must include truth-bearers, but this, too, is for different reasons. The quasi-realists believe they have fancy arguments against those doubt that non-truth-bearers can function as truth-bearers in thought and discourse.[10] The Ethical Pragmatist, by contrast, has no such arguments and does not search after them. There is a fact of the matter about who has won or will win the day between cognitivists and non-cognitivists, but the Ethical Pragmatist sees no reason for anyone to be involved. Why not? Well, if first-order moral truths are irrelevant to moral thinking, seeking them out, figuring out how they are known, debating about the manner by which they are expressed – all the major concerns of second-order moral theorizing – these projects are probably irrelevant too.

I should say one more thing about the elimination of truth talk. When I say that Ethical Pragmatism encourages us to abandon reference to moral truth *in the strict sense*, one might wonder what that means. Uninformatively, I might say, we can engage in loose talk on this score. When talking loosely about truth, we can casually employ the truth predicate without really meaning it; for example, we sometime use "true" as a mere commendation of a judgment. By mentioning *loose talk*, I commit myself to a richer, more metaphysically loaded notion of what it would be like for a judgment *really* to be true. One might suspect that I have a particular (and particularly inflationist) view of truth operating in the background, one perhaps denied by some of my interlocutors.

---

[10] For the first clear anti-non-cognitivist argument of this kind, see Geach 1965.

Indeed, it may look like I am committed to a correspondence theory of truth, which, perhaps for the reasons I cite or perhaps for other reasons, looks implausible in the domain of ethics. If one were a good deflationist, so the criticism might go, this all goes away.[11] The problem with this suggestion is that the Ethical Pragmatist worries not only about moral truths but also about moral facts. In other words, when the deflationist says "p" is true if and only if p, where "p" is some moral proposition and p is some moral state of affairs, I wonder what p is, and as soon as we specify it, I wonder why any of us should care about the fact that p when deliberating about what to do.

§2 Problems with the Thought Experiment

With this sketch of the position in view, let us now turn to proving that the Delphi Hypothetical does urge us to accept something like Ethical Pragmatism. In the foregoing, I assume that the Hypothetical offers at least *prima facie* grounds for Ethical Pragmatist; therefore, I concentrate on countering three key reasons one might doubt the connection between the Hypothetical and the position outlined above. First, one might wonder why moral realism is the position assumed and rejected. Second, one might wonder about the non-believers mentioned in the hypothetical. Third, one might think the thought experiment presupposes metaethical externalism.

2.1 Why the Moral Realism?

It is tempting to believe that my thought experiment hinges on the truth of moral realism. In the Hypothetical, I assume that moral realism is true and then show how strange, even fetishistic,

---

[11] This line of thought was put to me, more elegantly of course, by Richard Kraut, Michael Lynch, and Jeremy Wyatt on separate occasions.

it would be to feel impressed by the mere fact that a moral proposition is true. From there, I leapfrog to bolder claims: we should abandon the pursuit of Moral Truth and abandon much of metaethics. No doubt, if my efforts really do hinge on moral realism and if moral realism is false, nothing follows about seeking Moral Truth or the relevance of metaethics. This interpretation of the Delphi Hypothetical is misguided because the moral realism implicit in setting up the thought experiment is inessential. My point is not to embarrass the moral realist; on the contrary, the target is the representationalist, or objectivity-seeking, bent intrinsic to all metaethical theorizing.

Another way to understand this supposed problem for my position is to see it as presenting a false dichotomy: either you accept a picture of moral facts as transcendent of human interests and concerns, or you become an Ethical Pragmatist. Of course, so the claim goes, there is much between these two poles like moral constructivism à la John Rawls.[12]

What can one say in defense of Ethical Pragmatism? Well, I do present a dichotomy, but the dichotomy is not distorting. To give a thoroughgoing defense would be beyond the scope of this essay, but I can give some reason to see my dichotomy as plausible. The plan of attack is this: if I can show that the same problem that haunts the transcendent moral realist also plagues the moral constructivist, it is much harder to say that I have presented a false dichotomy.

So to begin my argument, let us review the dialectic. I tried to suggest that we ought not to care about moral facts and that we ought only to care about the results of our moral deliberation. I said this in part because moral facts can be radically removed from the results of our moral deliberation. One might retort by saying that there is a way to understand moral facts such that there are not radically removed from our moral deliberation. My answer to this claim: No, there is no such way. By mentioning constructivism, my interlocutor asks, What if the moral facts

---

[12] I thank Mark LeBar for raising this objection.

themselves are constituted by the results of our moral deliberation? My response is still: No, even then, moral facts can be radically removed from the results of our moral deliberation.

Let us think of a particular constructivist argument to see why this is so. Sharon Street (2010) has argued for what she calls Humean metaethical constructivism. According to this view, the coherent set of practical values and norms an agent holds – whatever those might be – determines moral rightness for that agent. Moral rightness does not, for Street, exist over and above the coherent practical point of view an agent happens to hold. While there are some nuances to her view, this is the basic picture. On its face, this form of constructivism looks maximally responsive to the results of our moral deliberation. But this is mere appearance. On Street's view, it could be morally permissible, even required, for someone to torture others for fun, if that were entailed by that person's practical point of view. That looks incredibly close to the situation described in the Delphi Hypothetical because, for Street and for Delphi, there are moral truths, which are plainly unacceptable. In both cases, it is not clear why we should care about those truths.

The obvious response is to find fault with Street's particular version of constructivism. Tinkering with it, I worry, will not get at the main problem because the issue is endemic to all attempts to talk of moral facts, whether ontologically dependent on us or not. The main problem is that, *qua* metaethicist, one tries to mirror or accurately represent a freestanding moral order of the world. It is freestanding because all the theses that compose the various metaethical views are purported bare metaphysical truths that hold necessarily and regardless of what anyone thought. The mind-dependence thesis that constructivists uphold is true or not, regardless of human interests and the like. The precise specification of this thesis is true or not, regardless of us. Finally, the first-order normative truths generated by a precisification of the thesis also are true, completely independent of what we think about them. And if we worry about a moral order "antecedent to and

given to us" to quote Rawls (1980, 519), we should be just as worried about constructivists as they are about 'transcendent' realists.

For some, this defense might not be enough. Even if the problem I have isolated touches both moral realism and constructivism, there are still more positions that look unaffected. But again, the problem is the representationalism integral to all metaethical theorizing, so the problem generalizes. To make this clear and perhaps convincing, let us return to the Delphi Hypothetical. In the case I describe at the outset, Delphi tells someone that slavery is morally acceptable. Arranging the case as I did, I imply that there could be non-trivial, first-order moral truths that are knowable, more or less independent of what any human thinks, and completely unacceptable to us. This is the hard rub of moral realism, a bullet every moral realist has to bite. Of course, this hard rub or bullet is not unique to the realists, nor unique to realists plus constructivists.

Consider the other end of the spectrum, the moral error theorists. They claim that slavery is neither wrong nor right. In the same way that we should not seriously concern ourselves with the pronouncements of the realists, touting potentially unconscionable moral truths, we should not concern ourselves with error theorists, exclaiming that every act is morally on a par. In both cases, that a moral proposition is true or false just looks irrelevant to the question of action.

2.2 What about the Non-Believers?

Another problem one might have with the Hypothetical is that it seems to ignore non-believers, those who doubt that Delphi's ethical judgments are true. The thought experiment seems merely to assume that we would or should be among the believers and then to proceed to tell us what, therefore, we ought to think about ethics. What if we are non-believers?

I can see three distinct ways of being a non-believer. First, one could find fault with the setup which involves people coming to believe that someone is omniscient. Perhaps, one finds the

notion of omniscience generally puzzling, so one has no reason to believe that Delphi utters truths about ethics. Perhaps, one thinks that updating one's web of beliefs to include the belief "Delphi is omniscient" is always irrational. Maybe that is because we should not infer from a being's apparent great knowledge about non-moral matters to any beliefs about its level of knowledge about morality.[13] Perhaps, the specific judgments Delphi utters are so at odds at with our mostly-coherent web of beliefs that we should question Delphi's sanity, not our own moral beliefs.[14] Perhaps, one has doubts about gaining knowledge through testimony or through moral testimony. These kinds of concerns, though legitimate, are not enough to resist the key move in the Hypothetical. It is still possible that there are moral propositions that we would not accept as binding, or even as something to seriously consider, even if we knew them to be true. The Delphi Hypothetical makes that point vivid, and with that in mind, we then can see that the truth of a moral proposition is practically irrelevant.

Consider a second way of being a non-believer. One might have reservations about the specific moral claims that Delphi purports to know. If one is in this camp of non-believers, one might think that nothing could convince you that slavery, for instance, is morally permissible, much less required. Fair enough. However, we understand this objection to center on the falsity of particular moral propositions, this does not yet amount to a problem for the Hypothetical. It is still possible that there are moral propositions that we would not accept as binding, or even as something to seriously consider, even if we knew them to be true.

Consider a third, bolder way of being a non-believer. One might deny that there are any true moral propositions that one does not see as binding. How might this be? Perhaps, one thinks that

---

[13] I owe this point to Axel Mueller.

[14] I owe this point to Alan T. Wilson.

one has perfect moral knowledge and takes all those known moral facts to be binding; alternatively, one thinks that, whatever the state of one's moral knowledge now, upon updating one's moral beliefs, one would also update what one finds binding. The question for this kind of non-believer is what she thinks about the connection between "A judges p true" and "A decides that p will guide her actions." If the non-believer thinks one *could*, in unlikely circumstances, judge a moral proposition true without finding it binding, one has not resisted the thrust of the Hypothetical. If the non-believer finds this situation impossible, she holds a form of metaethical internalism. The next part of this section deals with the thought that the Delphi Hypothetical presupposes the falsity of metaethical internalism, and so we turn this challenge now.

2.3 Committed to Metaethical Externalism

One might also think that Ethical Pragmatism only makes sense as an option if one holds various externalist views in metaethics. To understand the possible force of this complaint, it may help to quickly review the main internalist and externalist positions in metaethics.[15] The following is a rough approximation of three key internalist positions:

Judgment Internalism: having a moral belief entails having some conative attitude

Reasons Internalism: having a reason entails having some conative attitude

Morality Internalism: the existence of a moral fact entails having a reason to comply with the content of the fact

---

[15] Though my formulations are somewhat different, I am essentially following Tresan 2009, 53.

The externalist with respect to judgment, reasons, or morality denies the internalist contention in the relevant sphere.

With this quick sketch in mind, let us return to the question of why one might think that Ethical Pragmatism commits one to externalism. Suppose one held Reasons Internalism and Morality Internalism, and let us, further specify these views in the following manner:

Reasons Internalism 2.0: if A has a reason to φ, then A has a desire to φ

Morality Internalism 2.0: if there is a moral fact, then every person has a reason to comply with the content of the moral fact

Now, let us revisit part of the Delphi Hypothetical, namely the supposition that the obligation to kill one's firstborn child is a moral fact. An internalist who believes the 2.0 versions of Reasons and Morality Internalism might deny my supposition with the following argument:

(1) If the obligation to kill one's firstborn child is a moral fact, then I have a reason to kill my firstborn child.

(2) If I have a reason to kill my firstborn child, then I have a desire to kill my firstborn child.

(3) I have no desire to kill my firstborn child.

(4) Therefore, I have no reason to kill my firstborn child.

(5) Therefore, the obligation to kill one's firstborn child is not a moral fact.

Recall what hangs on rejecting the supposition that the obligation to kill one's firstborn child is a moral fact: I needed to show that there could be moral facts that we would not accept as guiding in order to show that moral facts as such are irrelevant, but if one cannot accept that there could be unacceptable moral facts, my suggestion is unmotivated.

The internalist argument above is probably valid, and if one accepts it, as it stands, Ethical Pragmatism is unmotivated. How then can I claim that Ethical Pragmatism does not favor externalism? Following in the spirit (if not the letter) of Jon Tresan (2009, 55–60), I think the various forms of internalism can be made stronger or weaker. The stronger forms are the only ones that stand in conflict with Ethical Pragmatism. Notice what happens if we retain Reasons Internalism 2.0 but weaken Morality Internalism in the following way:

Morality Internalism 3.0: if there is a moral fact, at least one person has a reason to comply with the content of the moral fact

Now, an argument of the form (1)–(5) cannot be used against Ethical Pragmatism. One might suspect that this suggestion to weaken Morality Internalism is just a way to save my view and does not enjoy independent motivation, but not so. If one really were wedded to the idea that having a reason to φ entails having a desire to φ (Reasons Internalism 2.0), if one were wedded to some version of Morality Internalism, and if one were not a moral error theorist, an eminently sensible Morality Internalist view would be some weak version. Broadly, the total outlook would claim that there are moral facts, that only some people have reason to comply with them, as only some people, maybe the virtuous people (or those who incidentally have the same sorts of attitudes as virtuous

people), have a reason to comply with the moral facts, for only they have cultivated the right sorts of desires.[16]

Having shown that Reasons and Morality Internalism can both be true while the motivation for Ethical Pragmatism remains intact, I have thereby provided the tools to develop an argument to show that some other forms of metaethical internalism could be true while the motivation for Ethical Pragmatism remains intact.[17] For instance, if one held a strong Morality Internalism but a weakened Reasons Internalism, one still could have an entirely reasonable view that does not resist the crucial move I make in motivating Ethical Pragmatism.

Granting all of this, what is the big picture payoff? While it might have seemed that my thought experiment assumes metaethical externalism, we can now see that the Delphi Hypothetical is compatible with internalism. Only very strong versions of metaethical internalism conflict with my motivations for Ethical Pragmatism. Since my goal in this essay is to show that Ethical Pragmatism ought not to be rejected out of hand because of other reasonable commitments one may have, I discharge my duty on the externalism/internalism front insofar as I show that one needs weightier assumptions to challenge the motivations for my position. Parenthetically, I should add that, while strong versions of Morality Internalism and Reasons Internalism together *can* resist the

---

[16] Such a view is in the ballpark of Foot 1972.

[17] I do not have the space to develop an argument here, but it seems likely that a weakened version of judgment internalism can be made compatible with the motivation for Ethical Pragmatism and that a weakened version is the more plausible candidate for truth.

motivation I gave for Ethical Pragmatism, they can also be used in an argument for moral error

theory, and it is not hard to make the jump from error theory to Ethical Pragmatism.[18]

§3 Facts and Values

Having shown that my thought experiment does have the radical consequences I suggest,

now I turn to considering reasons why one might reject Ethical Pragmatism anyway. Perhaps the

most pressing theoretical reason for rejecting Ethical Pragmatism is the following dilemma: either

the view is fully committed to Rortian neo-pragmatism, a highly contentious metaphilosophical

position, or the view, by seeing something special about ethics which licenses pragmatism in that

domain but not elsewhere, invokes a fact-value distinction, which is an increasingly unpopular

position. To resolve the dilemma, I reject full-scale Rortian neo-pragmatism and show that the type

of fact-value distinction I maintain is fairly innocuous.

3.1 Rejecting Rorty

Ethical Pragmatism, as I have sketched it, encourages us to proceed with moral deliberation

without reference to Moral Truth. This stance I have toward ethics is what Richard Rorty applies to

all of philosophy, indeed to all areas of inquiry. Given this, he concludes, "there is no

---

[18] Holding a strong version of Morality Internalism combined with Reasons Internalism pushes one

toward moral error theory. That very combination of views led Mackie to offer his famous

Argument from Queerness (1977: 38–42). David Brink (1984, 111–15) concurs in this assessment

of Mackie. The move from moral error theory to Ethical Pragmatism does not seem particularly

hard to make because many error theorists still think the question of how to act is a live one. This is

why both moral fictionalism and moral abolitionism developed.

epistemological difference between truth about what ought to be and truth about what is, nor any

metaphysical difference between facts and values, nor any methodological difference between

morality and science" (Rorty 1980, 723). The first horn of the dilemma I mentioned asks whether I

follow Rorty and other global pragmatists down this path.

The answer is "One need not to." While a careful response to Rorty's metaphilosophical

position is beyond the scope of this paper, a 'quick and dirty' response is not. Ethical Pragmatism

roughly says "Who cares about moral truths and truthmakers?" because these things do not, as such,

impinge upon our moral deliberations. I will not (nor should anyone else) say "Who cares about

scientific truths and truthmakers?" because these things, as such, rightly impinge upon all sorts of

deliberations we have. Returning to the Delphi Hypothetical might make this point even clearer. If

Delphi said that the cure for HIV is not to be found in any of the existing lines of research, but

rather the actual cure is eating passion fruit, it would be insane for us to reply that we are

unconcerned about the truth and are going to continue with our research. On the other hand, it

would not be the least bit insane if, after Delphi announced that sexual harassment was morally

permissible, we replied that we are unconcerned about the truth and are going to continue with our

deliberations about the boundaries of sexual harassment and how best to eliminate it.

3.2 Embracing Fact-Value

Denying full-scale Rortian neo-pragmatism with my quick and dirty response was a way of

navigating around the first horn of the dilemma, but is Ethical Pragmatism victim to the second

horn? Is Ethical Pragmatism committed to some untenable distinction between morality and

science, facts and values?

Many philosophers find any invocation of a fact-value distinction suspicious. Trying to

defend the distinction from all lines of attack is far beyond the scope of the present effort, so I focus

here on the forceful arguments of ethical naturalists like Peter Railton (1986a; 1986b). Railton

denies the fact-value distinction because he maintains that the 'values,' too, are facts.[19] Note how

this is supposed to cause a problem for my view. If I claim that pragmatism is the right approach to

questions of value and the wrong approach to questions of natural fact and if Railton and others

maintain that values *are* natural facts, I seem to have two options: try to refute Railton or admit that

pragmatism is not the right approach to anything. My goal is not to refute Railton. Instead, I show

that his view, in a way, is perfectly compatible with Ethical Pragmatism.

Railton argues that intrinsic non-moral good for an individual is "what he would want for

himself to want, or to pursue, were he to contemplate his present situation from a standpoint fully

and vividly informed about himself and his circumstances, and entirely free of cognitive error or

lapses of instrumentality rationality" (1986a, 16). Well, this is not quite his view, because Railton

further reduces these hypothetical, idealized desires to the "facts about a given individual's

psychology, physiology, and circumstances that are the reductive basis of his dispositions to desire"

(1986a, 25). If one accepts this suggestion, a value like someone's intrinsic non-moral good

becomes a natural fact.

Railton pushes his argument further in his article "Moral Realism" (1986b). Here, Railton

gives us naturalized morality, locating it in the aggregation of every individual's non-moral good.

That means "considering what would be rationally approved of, were the interests [i.e. non-moral

intrinsic good] of all potentially affected individuals counted equally under circumstances of full and

---

[19] There is another celebrated way to worry about fact-value distinctions: they could all be values.

Lee Goldsmith reads hermeneuticist philosophers like Heidegger and Gadamer in this way. This

may might even be the right way to understand Rorty's view. I find this kind of view intriguing, but

space does not allow me to explore it here. I thank Lee for bringing this issue to my attention.

vivid information" (Railton 1986b, 190). In other words, Railton gives us a consequentialist moral theory; moral rightness, on this view, depends on promoting the societal interest understood as the sum of each individual's intrinsic non-moral good.

Let us assume Railton is right that moral facts are a species of natural fact. Couldn't one ask whether we, after all, should comply with the prescriptive consequences of this class of facts? Assuming that Railton is right in his particular consequentialist theory, it would be open to question whether we should comply with the imperatives generated by the aggregation. Philosophers who dream up unlikely scenarios where consequentialists would have us do something unconscionable (see, e.g. Taurek 1977; Thomson 1985) do not, thereby, disprove consequentialism. Read in their best light, anti-consequentialists show us something far more important: if consequentialism were an accurate representation of the moral facts, we would still have to deliberate about what to do. This is the central claim of Ethical Pragmatism: moral facts, natural or not, are not guiding; therefore, the project of seeking them out looks pointless and ought to be jettisoned.

§4 Real Moral Critique

Another important objection to adopting Ethical Pragmatism is the thought that, without grounds or supports for our moral discourse, normative language becomes *just talk*. There are at least two ways of cashing out the full force of this objection, and in this section, I explain each and offer reasons why each form of the objection is not as damning as might be imagined.

4.1 Nonsense

One might think that without metaphysical grounds for our moral discourse, normative language becomes literally meaningless. To begin to explain this contention, I rely upon a similar sort of contention from Elizabeth Anscombe. Anscombe (1997) argues that notions such as *moral*

obligation, *moral duty*, and *moral ought* are, in the mouths of many, literally meaningless. Anscombe's

argument works as follows. Ethics, conceived as conformity to the moral law, is a tradition of

thought invented by theist traditions from the past. This conception made sense in those past

traditions because the moral law was thought to have a moral lawgiver, namely the deity. Now,

however, it is hard to see what sense it makes to speak of a moral law, since we, by and large, no

longer think there is a deity from whom moral injunctions issue. Anscombe then offers an

argument-by-elimination designed to show that other placeholders for the deity make no sense, so

her result is that all ethics-as-law notions are meaningless, given an atheist or deist worldview. *Pace*

Anscombe, it is wild to think that nothing besides a deity can render the notion of moral obligation

coherent, it does seem much more plausible to claim that one needs something, *some* sort of

metaphysical grounding to render moral obligations coherent or meaningful.

What can the Ethical Pragmatist do to appease someone who asks what sense it makes to

say we *have* to φ, absent any metaphysical story? Perhaps the best response is to note that if citing

the first-order considerations are insufficient for senseful dialogue, nothing could secure it. If we

say everyone must φ, someone can always ask why. We can, in turn, cite some metaphysical ground,

but then someone can always ask why that ought to be authoritative. If we then supply a higher-

order metaphysical story to justify the lower-order one, someone can always question the authority

of *that*. A skeptical question can always re-emerge if one plays this game. The Ethical Pragmatist

refuses to play but does not thereby fall into nonsense, or at least, not any more than anyone else.

4.2 Useless

Another way to spell out a worry about the force of normative language in the mouth of the

Ethical Pragmatist is to doubt the efficacy of such language. If there are no metaphysical props to

one's moral judgments, the judged people will not care about being deemed immoral or esteemed as

virtuous, and, so the argument goes, if no one cares about one's moral judgments, making them is useless. The argument might even go further: counseling us all against relying upon grounds for our moral judgments, as the Ethical Pragmatist does, could have a pernicious effect, for none of our moral judgments will have the persuasive power they would have enjoyed, and everyone may behave even worse than they currently do.

This type of worry finds perhaps its best expression in the works of moral fictionalists. Moral fictionalists tell us that, even if there are no moral facts at all, we ought to pretend as if there were because so doing makes people 'play nice.' To my ears, moral fictionalists give modern voice to a panicked outburst from Dmitri Karamazov, "if [God] doesn't exist, man is chief of the earth, of the universe. Splendid! Only how is he going to be virtuous without God?" (Dostoyevsky 1990, 592). True, Dmitri thinks belief in God is necessary to motivate good behavior, while contemporary moral fictionalists deny this, but both positions have a common pessimism about people's capacity to act on or even have moral convictions without people telling themselves some *extra* story, something *beyond* the first-order considerations that led them to their views.

Surely, there is no conceptual reason to assume that these pessimists are right; the question must be decided empirically. Given how the facts have played out for Dmitri's hypothesis, we can presume that the worry expressed by the fictionalists is little more than conservative paranoia. One might rejoin with the thought that the very chance that extremely pernicious consequences might obtain militates against Ethical Pragmatism, but a consideration, inspired by moral abolitionists like Richard Garner, can deflect this rejoinder. Garner (2007) and other moral abolitionists argue that belief in morality is more harmful than is disbelief in morality, and the abolitionists support this claim by looking at the history of using morality to justify atrocities. While I have serious reservations about this view as it stands, the Ethical Pragmatist can modify this view for her purposes, arguing that if everyone believes that her moral outlook is licensed, or even required, by

the Universe or Human Reason, the result very well might be more harmful than a situation in which people do not refer to those notions and instead think about the relative merits of their first-order commitments.

§5 Conclusion

This essay began with a hypothetical about a Delphic oracle, and, insofar as it succeeds, it shows us that our moral inquiry cannot be exhausted by Moral Truth. I extended the point further, trying to inspire doubt that the truth of a moral proposition is ever an important consideration in moral deliberation. If one holds this doubt, one might be led to wonder whether one should even be *involved* in the practice of figuring out whether moral judgments are capable of being true and whether any are true and how might we come to know any of this. These questions and their assorted permutations are not worthwhile if one doubts that moral truth itself is a relevant consideration when engaged in the practice of moral deliberation. Posing the question of whether trying to answer those sorts of questions – the entire space of contemporary metaethics – is a worthwhile endeavor is a radical move, one rarely raised in the literature. In drawing on Richard Rorty, I pose this question and answer in the negative. As the rest of my paper has tried to make clear, the obvious reasons for rejecting this path are either orthogonal to the point or dubious in the final analysis. I do not claim to have vindicated my pragmatist approach to ethics, but I hope to have made it an important and viable alternative to take seriously.

Raff Donelson

Louisiana State University

Paul M. Hebert Law Center *and*

Department of Philosophy & Religious Studies

Baton Rouge, Louisiana 70803

rdonelson1@lsu.edu

References
1. Anscombe, G.E.M. 1997. "Modern Moral Philosophy." In *Virtue Ethics*, edited by Roger Crisp and Michael Slote, 26–44. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
2. Blackburn, Simon. 1993. "How To Be an Ethical Anti-Realist." In *Essays in Quasi-Realism*, 166–81. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
3. Brink, David. 1984. "Moral Realism and the Sceptical Arguments from Queerness and Disagreement." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 62, no. 2:111–25.
4. Donelson, Raff. Forthcoming. "Rorty's Promise in Metaethics." *Contemporary Pragmatism* 14.
5. Dostoyevsky, Fyodor. 1990. *The Brothers Karamazov*. Translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
6. Enoch, David. 2011. *Taking Morality Seriously: A Defense of Robust Realism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
7. Firth, Roderick. 1952. "Ethical Absolutism and the Ideal Observer." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 12, no. 3:317–45.
8. Foot, Philippa. 1972. "Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives." *The Philosophical Review* 81, no. 3:305–16.
9. Garner, Richard. 2007. "Abolishing Morality." *Ethical Theory and Practice* 10, no. 5:499–513.
10. Geach, P. T. 1965. "Assertion." *The Philosophical Review* 74, no. 4:449–65.
11. Hume, David. 1998. *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, edited by Tom Beauchamp. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
12. Korsgaard, Christine. 1996. *The Sources of Normativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
13. Mackie, J. L. 1977. *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. Middlesex, UK: Penguin Books.
14. Moore, G. E. 1959. *Principia Ethica*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

15. Plato. 1961. *Euthyphro*. In *Plato: Collected Dialogues*, edited by Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns. Translated by Lane Cooper. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
16. Putnam, Hilary. 2004. *Ethics Without Ontology*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
17. Railton, Peter. 1986. "Facts and Values." *Philosophical Topics* 14, no. 2:5-31.
18. Railton, Peter. 1986. "Moral Realism." *The Philosophical Review* 95, no. 2:163–207.
19. Rawls, John. 1980. "Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory." *The Journal of Philosophy* 77, no. 9:515–27.
20. Rorty, Richard. 1980. "Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism." *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 53, no. 6:719–38.
21. Rorty, Richard. 1991. "Solidarity or objectivity." In *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*: *Philosophical Papers Volume 1*, 21–34. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
22. Rorty, Richard. 2008. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
23. Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1956. *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*. Translated by Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Washington Square Press.
24. Scanlon, T. M. 2014. *Being Realistic about Reasons*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
25. Shafer-Landau, Russ. 2003. *Moral Realism: A Defence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
26. Smith, Adam. 1982. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, edited by D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie. Indianapolis: Liberty Classics.
27. Street, Sharon. 2010. "What is Constructivism in Ethics and Metaethics?" *Philosophy Compass* 5, no. 5:363–84.
28. Taurek, John M. 1977. "Should the Numbers Count?" *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 6, no. 4:293–316.
29. Thomson, Judith Jarvis. 1985. "The Trolley Problem." *Yale Law Journal* 94, no. 6:1395–1415.
30. Tresan, Jon. 2009. "Metaethical Internalism: Another Neglected Distinction." *Journal of Ethics* 13, no. 1:51–72.