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Pragmatism and Pluralism Revisited

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In 2005, Scott Aikin and I published a paper arguing that pragmatists must reject pluralism. As certain pragmatists describe themselves as pluralists, the essay received its share of criticism; however, no response has succeeded in defeating the essay's argument. Nonetheless, contemporary classical pragmatists persist in embracing the term.¹ Something's amiss.

In this paper, I defend a conclusion that differs from that of the 2005 paper. I will show that pragmatism is consistent with a view that I call *modest epistemological pluralism*. Thus pragmatists can be pluralists. However, contemporary classicalists should beware. My argument shows that pragmatism and pluralism are *consistent*, not that they are intrinsically allied. More importantly, the modest epistemological pluralism is not the pluralism that contemporary classicalists seem most eager to embrace.

¹ "Contemporary classical pragmatist" is meant to designate those who associate their philosophical views and ambitions with the so-called "classical" pragmatists rather than with the mid-century pragmatisms of, e.g., Lewis, Goodman, Hook, and Quine, the neo-pragmatisms of Rorty, Putnam, and Posner, and the new-pragmatism of Misak, Haack, Brandom, and Price. Such classifications are of course contestable, but the contemporary classical idiom is marked by the centrality reaffirming the importance of classical pragmatism, an intellectual legacy they allege has been marginalized or discarded.

I proceed in four steps. First, I dispense with a common but unacceptable conception of pluralism. Second, I establish what a conception of value must assert if it is to count as a pluralism. Third, I distinguish different varieties of pluralism. Fourth, I argue that pragmatist commitments require the rejection of all pluralisms except for the modest epistemological variety.

I. *What Pluralism Isn't*

Pluralism owes much of its popularity to its rhetorical force. It often is shorthand for a family of admirable commitments: anti-dogmatism, open-mindedness, non-conformism, inclusiveness, and so on. To simplify, let's say that pluralism in this popular sense is not merely the *recognition* but also the *appreciation* the diversity of projects to which people devote themselves. Notice that popular pluralism has a decidedly *second-order* flavor; it is not a view about what is good, but rather the view that we should embrace the diversity of conceptions of the good. Hence popular pluralism seems to stand above the fray of moral conflict. It therefore seems not only tolerant, but also irenic and conciliatory.

Yet serious difficulties lurk. One is that popular pluralism consistent with value monism. There is nothing

inconsistent about affirming the positive value of diversity while also holding that there is but one thing that's ultimately of value. It is hard to imagine a more compelling defense of diversity than Mill's in *On Liberty*. But Mill is a monist about value. Accordingly, popular pluralism is not opposed to monism, but to views that reject inclusion, open-mindedness, and diversity.

A second difficulty emerges. Concepts like "inclusion," "open-mindedness," and "diversity," are *ideal-dependent*. To be "inclusive" is to include everything that *ought to be* included; to appreciate diversity is to appreciate *what should be* appreciated, and to have an open-mind is to be open to those possibilities *that are worthy of* consideration. The content of such concepts derives from the normative theory accepted by the person employing them. Hence the popular pluralist's call to appreciate diversity is vacuous until she identifies her underlying normative commitments.

If it is to avoid vacuity, popular pluralism must affirm some *conception* of diversity's value. But once the popular pluralist does that, her view becomes just another conception of what is valuable; it thus loses its second-order character, and must enter the moral fray. But its seemingly second-order character was popular pluralism's

main selling-point. Thus popular pluralism is either vacuous or unstable. If pluralism is to be a philosophical view worth considering, it must say something more.

II. *What Pluralism Must Assert*

It helps to keep one's vocabulary tidy. Now, if pluralism is to avoid the difficulties that plague the popular version, it must be a thesis *about value* rather than one about *what is valuable*. This makes good terminological sense because pluralism's philosophical opponent should be *monism*.

Monism is the view that all valuable things are either instances of the one thing that is ultimately valuable, or instruments towards attaining or producing the one thing that is ultimately of value. To borrow a slogan from Ronald Dworkin, monism is the view that "value is one big thing" (2011: 1). Thus monism is *not* the claim that everyone should be the same, or that there is but one way that all should live. In affirming that "value is one big thing," monists need not deny the rich diversity of good things; they assert only that goodness is to be explained by reference to some one thing that is ultimately of value.

Think again of Mill. He claims that "utility" is "the ultimate appeal on all ethical questions" (1978: 10), but

then explains that as "progressive beings" (1978: 10) we do best with respect to utility when we each "[pursue] our own good in our own way" (1978: 12). There is the one ultimate value, but it can be realized in a variety of ways. Thus monism is not a one-size-fits-all conception of value; it says that value is one-thing-that-comes-in-many-sizes.

We are searching for a viable conception of pluralism, and pluralism must oppose monism; thus whatever pluralism is, it must reject monism. The distinctive component of monism is the view that all goods are *commensurable*. On the utilitarian version, this means that for any two goods, it *must* be the case that one is better than the other, or they are equally valuable. Of course, it is open to utilitarians (and other monists) to hold that with regard to certain pairs of values, informational and other limitations will make it impossible to measure the relative worth of the options. But even in such cases, monists must hold that either one option is better than the other, or they are equally valuable. Commensurability follows from monism: if value is one big thing, then differences among good things are always differences of degree and never of kind. This is the *sine qua non* of monism.

Hence pluralism is not simply the claim that many things are valuable. It says that goods are *irreducibly*

many, that there are *differences in kind* among valuable things, that goods are *incommensurable*. It is the view that there could be two goods where neither is better than the other and they are not equally valuable. In a slogan, pluralism is the thesis that value is not one big thing.

One immediate implication of pluralism is that there could be *conflicts* among values that do not admit of a singular rational or optimal resolution. When two goods are incommensurable, there is no answer concerning which one trumps; thus when one must choose between them, there is no uniquely rational moral perspective from which one could decide which is best. Pluralism holds that moral theory runs out, and we sometimes confront tragic choices.

We now have a clear view of pluralism. It is the claim that there are incommensurable goods, and thus an irreducible plurality of goods. It holds additionally that certain value conflicts do not admit of a uniquely rational resolution, and thus that tragedy is sometimes inescapable.

III. *Varieties of Pluralism*

Pluralisms can be distinguished according to their different interpretations of incommensurability. Two broad categories suggest themselves: *metaphysical* and *epistemological*. Loosely put, in explaining

incommensurability, metaphysical pluralists appeal to *what values are*, whereas epistemological pluralists appeal to *what we know*.

Isaiah Berlin's "value pluralism" provides a straightforward example of metaphysical pluralism. Berlin regarded values as quasi-Platonic objects vying for instantiation in our lives, but without a Form of The Good to unify them. We can also count William James as a metaphysical pluralist. James holds that the good is the satisfaction of desire. Yet James denies that all desires are homogeneous. Hence there is incommensurability because one's desire for A can be different in kind from one's desire for B.

Epistemological pluralism claims that some values are incommensurable with others because we are unable to commensurate them. Epistemological pluralism comes in two grades: strong and modest. The strong grade treats incommensurability as *intrinsic*; our epistemic powers, even in full development, are not sufficient to commensurate all goods. The modest variant claims that given the current state of moral knowledge, we are unable to commensurate all goods. On both epistemological views, the moral explananda outstrip our moral theories and so our moral knowledge is incomplete. The views differ on the question of whether

this is a permanent feature of moral epistemology. The strong view says yes, the modest view does not.

This is all very crude; yet few points deserve emphasis. Strong epistemological pluralism is consistent with metaphysical pluralism. In fact, a value pluralist is likely to embrace the strong epistemological view, holding that value ontology explains the intrinsic indeterminacy of certain conflicts. Further, modest epistemological pluralists *must* be *quietists* about the metaphysics of value. They do not *reject* the claims of the metaphysical pluralist, but rather *decline to accept them*. Similarly, the modest epistemological view refuses the core of strong epistemological pluralism; again, the *modesty* of the view consists in its *quietism* on the deeper epistemological and metaphysical issues. Modesty is not evasion; the modest epistemological pluralist asserts that moral knowledge is not yet sufficiently developed to warrant bolder claims about the nature and epistemology of value.

IV. *Pluralism and Pragmatism*

Pragmatism always has been a querulous family of loosely-related claims and tendencies, so any statement of what pragmatism is will be controversial. But hopefully it will not invite too much trouble to say that pragmatism is

a naturalism that takes human practices of inquiry to be fundamental. Peirce of course proposed as the first rule of philosophy the maxim "do not block the way of inquiry"; subsequent pragmatists have followed suit in ways too complicated to rehearse here. But it should be noted that the emphasis on practices of inquiry leads to other recognizably pragmatist commitments, including fallibilism, experimentalism, collective problem-solving, and ontological parsimony.

It is easy to see why pragmatists must reject metaphysical pluralism. This is obvious in the case of Berlinian value pluralism's quasi-Platonist ontology. Yet pragmatists must reject Jamesian pluralism as well. James's view presupposes a phenomenalism that is as metaphysically objectionable as quasi-Platonism. More importantly, James's phenomenalism renders moral inquiry impossible. This is evident once we understand that morality is in certain respects a *shared* human project. If, as James alleges, the only thing that can be good is the satisfaction of desire (1977: 621), and desires are states of individual minds, then it is no wonder that James is so weak on the issue of *collective* moral problems. His advice to each of us is to satisfy as many desires as possible, including those of others (1977: 623). However,

a world with twenty desires satisfied cannot be *better than* a world with only ten desires satisfied, unless a world in which more desires are satisfied is a world in which there is *more good*. But the central premise of James's pluralism is that desires are heterogeneous states with "no common character" (1977: 621); thus the satisfaction of a greater number of desires does not cause there to be a greater quantity of good, only more *goods*. More good in the world is surely better than less good; but what is the value of there being *more goods*? So James's prescription seems unfounded given his pluralism. Indeed, it seems James cannot make any prescription concerning how we ought to regard the desires of others.

As they seek metaphysical parsimony, the epistemological pluralisms should appeal to the pragmatist. However, the strong epistemological view is objectionable in that it affirms that certain kinds of limitations on human inquiry are insurmountable on the grounds that we have thus far been unable to surmount them. This is surely a block to inquiry of the kind that Peirce railed against. But there's a further worry. The strong epistemological pluralist needs a way to distinguish between value conflicts that cannot be resolved given our current resources, and those that are intrinsically irresolvable.

Yet it would seem that the distinction requires the strong epistemological pluralist to go beyond talking about moral epistemology and say something about *the values themselves*. Consequently, strong epistemological pluralism depends on metaphysical pluralism.

This leaves modest epistemological pluralism. Note that it is indeed a pluralism because it does not affirm what monism must: All goods are commensurable. Recall that monism contends that this is a *conceptual* truth; commensurability is a necessary condition for being a good. Modest epistemological pluralism denies this insofar as it affirms that there is no *contradiction* in claiming that A and B are both goods, but they are incommensurable. But the modest epistemological pluralist says little beyond this. The claim is that our moral knowledge is underdeveloped, and that this condition calls for further inquiry, even with respect to cases that seem intractable. Yet the modest epistemological pluralist also recognizes the possibility that inquiry could lead us to adopt a more robust form of pluralism, or even a version of monism. The call is for continuing inquiry. Accordingly, the modest epistemological view is clearly consistent with any version of pragmatism rooted in human practices of inquiry. It is moreover metaphysically parsimonious, and also a

comfortable fit with fallibilism, experimentalism, and the application of collective intelligence to shared problems.

Therefore pragmatists can be (modest epistemological) pluralists. But pragmatists need not embrace pluralism, and, moreover, there is nothing in modest epistemological pluralism that is distinctively pragmatist. This latter point will no doubt sour contemporary classicalists who think of pluralism as a uniquely pragmatist doctrine. I hope to have made at least a *prima facie* case for thinking that any pluralism more robust than the modest epistemological variety is unavailable to the pragmatist. I close, however, on a note that returns to the popular sense of pluralism with which we began.

It has long been an ambition of pluralists to devise an entailment from pluralism to attractive social norms such as toleration, open-mindedness, inclusion, and so on. The ambition is doomed: One cannot derive a conclusion about what is valuable from a thesis about what values are. Modest epistemological pluralism thus does not *entail* that we should honor such social norms. However, I contend that modest epistemological pluralism provides a *basis* for such commitments that other pluralisms cannot muster.

I am able only to sketch the argument here. To begin: Modest epistemological pluralism holds that our moral

knowledge is incomplete, but for all we know it could be completed with further inquiry. It therefore holds open the possibility of moral progress. Hence modest epistemological pluralism thus has a *conative* component; in inquiry, we strive for something we are not sure is possible, but may be. And this striving is fueled by the realization that, as things stand, we do not have adequate knowledge. Though it does not require it, modest epistemological pluralism engenders a kind of *epistemic humility* that rides alongside its exhortation for further inquiry. And this humility is a natural cognitive counterpart to social and moral commitments to familiar understandings of toleration, open-mindedness, diversity, inclusion, and the rest. That is, modest epistemic pluralism gives us a *reason* to adopt these norms.

By contrast, the other varieties of pluralism do not. There is no reason why value incommensurability, when taken in the way offered by metaphysical pluralism, would provide a motivation for toleration. The fact that values are irreducibly many and thus clash could just as easily underwrite a Schmittean commitment to moral authoritarianism. The strong epistemological view says that incommensurability is a feature of moral epistemology, but claims that, since it is impossible to know how to

commensurate all goods, we are stuck with certain value conflicts. Again, this view seems to provide comfort to the authoritarian, who could simply conclude that when values clash, one should simply eliminate the conflict by eliminating one of the opposed values.

Of course, this is not to say that proponents of the other pluralisms are secret authoritarians or unable to appreciate the value of open-mindedness, diversity, and inclusion. The point rather is that since their pluralism is fully compatible with authoritarianism, it cannot be the source of these commitments; they must come from elsewhere. To repeat, modest epistemological pluralism certainly does not *entail* that we must be tolerant, inclusive, and open-minded appreciators of diversity. But, as a call for inquiry, it does have within it a need for certain epistemological attitudes, such as humility, that tend to encourage the adoption of attractive social commitments. Hence it holds the promise of satisfying in practice the longstanding ambition of devising a justification of norms of diversity, inclusiveness, open-mindedness, and toleration that could be addressed to someone not already inclined to adopt them.

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