Ethics & Experience: 
Toward a Pragmatist Metaethics

by

Diana Beverley Heney

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Abstract for Ethics & Experience: Toward a Pragmatist Metaethics

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By Diana Beverley Heney, 2014

Graduate Department of Philosophy, University of Toronto

This project develops a strain of pragmatist thought arising from the work of Charles Sanders Peirce, carried on by William James, John Dewey, and Clarence Irving Lewis, which is developed for the purpose of intervening in contemporary debates concerning truth and principles in metaethics.
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This work is for my parents, who taught me about hard work and the slow train.
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There is no such thing possible as an ethical philosophy dogmatically made up in advance.

William James, ‘The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life’
Preface

Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) was a brilliant philosopher but a poor fit in the professional academy. He was a founder of the American movement known as classical pragmatism and wrote prolifically for close to sixty years, but had a university job for just five years. During his lifetime, he was hampered professionally by his own obstinacy, by his second marriage (widely viewed as indecent due to its proximity to the first), and by extreme poverty. Since his death, his intellectual legacy has suffered similarly.¹ Trying to appreciate the scope of that legacy in the years immediately after Peirce’s death proved a challenging task due to the difficulty of accessing his writings, which number in the tens of thousands of pages and had been published in only a piecemeal fashion. Happily, the last few decades have been kinder to Peirce: his works have begun to appear in a complete chronological edition, and enough time has lapsed since his death for a new generation – unencumbered by the hurdles of Peirce’s poor reputation and lack of access – to take up his works on their own, considerable, merits.

This new engagement with Peirce has produced a great deal of interesting scholarship, but many points of intersection between Peirce’s thought and the debates now occurring in contemporary philosophy have yet to be explored. My task here is to take up one such intersection: that between Peirce’s account of inquiry and contemporary

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¹ Joseph Brent, who wrote an influential biography of Peirce, met with the following collection of reactions from his professors at Harvard when he informed them that he wanted to make Peirce the central figure of his dissertation research: ‘Did I know that he was a drunkard, a drug addict, a homosexual, a libertine who had died of syphilis; that he was an atheist who had married the granddaughter of an esteemed bishop, who fled him when he tried to seduce her into sexual perversion; that he then had a long adulterous affair with a French whore, whom he married for her money; that he had several bastard children by several women, one a Negress?’ (Brent, 1996)
debates in metaethics. As such, my project develops a historical basis for the purpose of pursuing constructive aims.

The historical basis in question is the writings of Peirce, along with selections from William James, John Dewey, and Clarence Irving Lewis. As with any work that purports to be a history of some aspect of American pragmatism, the question ‘why these pragmatists?’ can fairly be asked. The answer to that question is two-fold.

Firstly, there are important threads of continuity that connect these pragmatist thinkers. The pragmatist tradition has produced a variety of sometimes conflicting views because pragmatism has never been a doctrine; it is rather, as Peirce explained, ‘a principle and method of right thinking’. But among these pragmatists, who all follow Peirce consciously and closely concerning questions about truth, inquiry, and experience, there is a real unity of thought, one which plays out in interesting and fruitful ways when we turn to moral life.

That I offer justification for choosing to focus on these pragmatists while excluding others in constructing what I refer to as the pragmatist position should signal a rather obvious fact about the historical portion of this project, which is that it could have been different. An important way in which it could have been different is by focusing on diversity, rather than unity, amongst the pragmatists on the topic of ethical theory. A complete history of ethical thought in early American pragmatism could not fail to include Josiah Royce’s virtue ethics, organized under the overarching virtue of loyalty to loyalty; George Santayana’s existentialism-tinged expressivism; and Jane Addams’ didactic arguments for cosmopolitanism – views which receive no assessment here. The task of surveying and explaining the sometimes baffling coexistence of unity and
diversity amongst the classical pragmatists concerning the normative science of ethics is one that I will certainly address in future research, but it is not my task here.

This leads to a second answer to the question, ‘why these pragmatists?’. The view I extract and develop in Part I is a view that has a broad and exciting range of possible applications, including the purpose to which I put it in Part II. The work undertaken here is not ‘purely’ historical. It is instead an attempt to show, by argument and example, that a certain strain of thought in the pragmatist tradition is useful in contemporary debates – that the kind of pragmatist position I seek to develop is one that ‘pays’.

Thus, my aim in Part I is to determine what can be made of Peirce’s late normative turn, a shift in his thought around the turn of the century that led to his first serious engagement with ethical theory as a ‘normative science’ worthy of philosophical treatment. I show that despite Peirce’s own initial reluctance regarding the use of his model of inquiry for the study of ethics, a number of his fellow pragmatists saw that account as a promising beginning for modeling our engagement with moral questions and rightly adopted Peirce’s view of truth as an element of their own approaches. Of those fellow pragmatists, I argue that Lewis has done the most to advance the idea of a pragmatist, normative science of ethics. Lewis’ work is voluminous and far-ranging, and its unique aspects would certainly deserve more space in a complete history. Here, too, I anticipate many fruitful avenues for future research.

My focus here is considerably more narrow. My aim is to show that the pragmatist picture developed in Part I offers a view of truth and experience that puts us into contact with certain contemporary debates in metaethics in a profitable way. Thus,
in Part II, my constructive aim is to develop the resources extracted from Peirce’s writings on ethics and inquiry as the foundation for a new pragmatist position in metaethics. This leads me to intervene in debates about the place of truth in moral judgment and assertion, and the place of principles in moral reasoning.

I contend that while talk of truth in moral matters has not always been fashionable, it has always been – and continues to be – *apropos*. For human life is a mode of life deeply marked by cognitive aspiration: we strive to get our judgments right, and agonize over our mistakes. This aspiration is as present in moral matters as it is in any area of human deliberation, and we may rationally hope that it can be met in the production of true moral judgments.

I also contend that the use of principles in our reasoning about what to do in morally charged situations is amenable to what Lewis has called ‘pragmatic vindication’: vindication as rationally unimpeachable in practice (1957: 100). Indeed, such vindication is the best and only proof that we should seek in defense of the use of such principles, and serious consideration of the practices that shape and support our shared moral life suggests that moral principles are indispensable.

It will come as a surprise to some that the position that I arrive at is simultaneously pragmatist, cognitivist, and generalist. But my view is firmly rooted in two of the most basic elements of pragmatist thought: its view of truth, and its conception of experience. The pragmatist has an account of truth that goes beyond definition to encompass elucidations of the concept in practice, where we find truth thoroughly entangled with inquiry and assertion. The pragmatist also upholds a conception of experience broader than the deliverance of the five senses, tied up with possibilities of
surprise and recalcitrance, and anchored in the natural world. I shall argue that it must be Peirce’s version of the pragmatist account that we utilize in our engagement with contemporary debates, for James and Dewey each made critical missteps with respect to truth. But in order to make the most of the pragmatist conception of experience, we must take the insights of Peirce’s peers very seriously, for it is in exploring the moral dimensions of human experience that James and Dewey truly shine.

We will find the best of both worlds – the objectivist view of truth put forward by Peirce and the nuanced understanding of moral experience developed by James and Dewey – brought together in promising ways in the work of Lewis. As Lewis puts it, ‘the redness of the rose is as much feeling as the beauty of it’ (1970 [1936]: 54). Far from demoting redness, this comparison elevates beauty – and similarly, all experiences of value. ‘[V]alue-judgments represent a form of empirical knowledge’, he argues, for ‘they are objective in the same sense, or senses, that other empirical apprehensions are’ (1970 [1941]: 162). Lewis applies to ethics the pragmatist version of Kant’s insight that all experience of the natural world involves interpretation; for the pragmatist, this makes what is experienced no less natural.

It is the application of the best pragmatist ideas about truth and experience in ethics – ethics treated as a subject of inquiry, as a normative science, as a human practice – that leads me to defend cognitivism and generalism in the project of moving toward a pragmatist metaethics. I have tried throughout, as Dewey rightly says we must, ‘to face, and not to dodge, the question of how it is that moral and scientific “knowledge” can both hold of one and the same world’ (1977 [1908]: 132).
PART I

*Ethics & Experience in Early American Pragmatism*
I will...presume that there is enough truth in it to render a preliminary glance at ethics desirable. For if, as pragmatism teaches us, what we think is to be interpreted in terms of what we are prepared to do, then surely logic, or the doctrine of what we ought to think, must be an application of the doctrine of what we deliberately choose to do, which is Ethics.

Charles Sanders Peirce, ‘The Relations of the Normative Sciences’
Chapter 1  Charles Sanders Peirce: The Roots of Pragmatist Ethics

Peirce came late to the view that there is ‘enough truth’ in ethics to make it an appropriate target of philosophical investigation. The quotation above comes from the 1903 Harvard lectures, given in Boston in the spring of that year. This was Peirce’s second set of public lectures in five years, following his 1898 Cambridge Lectures, delivered in Lowell. Both sets had been secured and supported financially by the efforts of William James. It is a great irony that much of the work Peirce undertook in the Harvard lectures that James arranged was the work of disambiguating his own pragmatism, or pragmaticism, from the variant popularized by James. Insofar as the lectures serve this function, they are a critical text in the history of American pragmatism.

The Harvard lectures are also critical for what they signal about the evolving place of ethics in Peirce’s grand philosophical scheme – namely, that ethics has a place after all. Though Peirce had previously taken a notoriously unfriendly attitude toward moral philosophy, by the time that he came to view it as containing enough truth to merit the treatment of inquiry, he had developed all of the requisite tools. Most significantly, he had in place a naturalized account of truth and inquiry well-suited to the pursuit of ethics as a normative science. I begin with that account of truth and inquiry. I then argue that Peirce’s attitude toward ethics shifted dramatically in the years between the 1898 Cambridge lectures and the 1903 Harvard lectures, a period that I call Peirce’s normative turn. Finally, I suggest that we can readily see the suitability of Peirce’s model of inquiry for ethics, even though the promise of this application was merely hinted at by Peirce himself. When we consider how other pragmatists have appealed to Peirce’s view of
inquiry in their approaches to ethics, we will begin to see how that promise might be fulfilled.

1.1 Truth

Peirce was concerned with giving an account of truth that brought it down from the philosophical heavens – but not so far, one is tempted to say, as the philosophical gutter. A subtext of this discussion is that common caricatures of the pragmatist theory of truth – such as that it holds that the true is merely the expedient – do not apply to Peirce’s view. Peirce’s explicit theory of truth is a corollary of his pragmatic maxim. That maxim is a deeply embedded part of Peirce’s philosophy, and arguably the heart of all pragmatist approaches, which are united in a commitment to the idea that ‘we must look to the upshot of our concepts in order to rightly apprehend them’ (CP 5.4; 1901). Peirce first articulated the need for the pragmatic maxim in the 1878 ‘How To Make Our Ideas Clear’. In this paper, his aim is to show that philosophers who rely solely on notions of clarity and distinctness to explain what it is to grasp a concept are missing an important dimension, the pragmatic dimension.

He begins with the more familiar philosophical terms: ‘A clear idea is defined as one which is so apprehended that it will be recognized wherever it is met with, and so that no other will be mistaken for it’ (CP 5.389; 1878). This corresponds to a first ‘grade of clarity’, that of ‘perfect familiarity’ (CP 7.284; undated). Such perfect familiarity may nonetheless be inarticulate, and so we also need of the concept ‘a distinct idea’, ‘one which contains nothing which is not clear’ (CP 5.390; 1878). This corresponds to a second grade of clarity, that of definition.
We then face a new difficulty: we can have mastery of a concept at the level of recognition, and even definition, while failing to grasp what follows, or what to expect, from such a concept’s correct application. Hence, the pragmatic maxim:

Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object. (*CP* 5.402; 1878)

The inclusion of the third, pragmatic grade of clarity connects our ownership and articulation of concepts with our use of them in practice: grasping a concept means not just infallibly recognizing and precisely defining it, but understanding its use in practical terms.

What is distinctive about pragmatist views of truth as a group is that they arise from an exploration of this additional ‘grade of clarity’ to the concept of truth. So while Peirce maintains that the other grades of clarity are required for the grasp of the notion of truth, fully understanding the concept requires understanding its use in practice. Even though truth is amenable to definition, he stresses that this definition is merely ‘nominal’ (*CP* 5.553; 1905). So although he thinks we may say that ‘truth is the correspondence of a representation with its object’ (*CP* 5.553; 1905), such definition would be uninteresting and unhelpful without what Cheryl Misak has called ‘pragmatic elucidation’ (Misak 2004 [1991]: 4). Such pragmatic elucidations are on display in Peirce’s account of a practice central to human life: inquiry. It is in the context of that practice that we can actually see what developing the pragmatic grade of clarity amounts to for the concept of truth, and I
shall later argue that truth in this Peircean sense is indispensable both as an aim of moral inquiry and as a norm of assertion in moral discourse.

1.2 Two Arguments for Inquiry

Peirce’s model of inquiry is most famously articulated in a pair of papers: the 1877 ‘The Fixation of Belief’ and the 1878 ‘How to Make our Ideas Clear’. These papers contain all of the basic elements central to Peirce’s account of inquiry. One way to frame the project of these papers is as an articulation of how an individual works through the process of inquiry, and how being a member of a community shapes that process. In explaining that process, Peirce offers both a rationale for choosing inquiry over other methods of belief fixation, and an account of what a well-constructed inquiry involves.

Let us begin with the most basic question: why be an inquirer at all? When belief is called for, why choose inquiry as the means of acquiring that belief? The main task of ‘The Fixation of Belief’ is to convince us that inquiry is the only acceptable method of fixing belief. Peirce makes his case two ways: comparatively, by contrast with other methods of belief fixation; and positively, by appeal to the phenomenology of doubt and deliberation. While I find that positive argument stronger than the comparative argument, it is still worth rehearsing Peirce’s rejections of other methods of belief fixation. For better or for worse, ‘The Fixation of Belief’ is likely Peirce’s best known work.

The comparative argument presented there is simple: when we consider the advantages and disadvantages of other popular methods of belief fixation, we will come to see that none of them can offer us what inquiry does – real stability, which we desire.
for practical purposes, but also because it is a sign that our cognitive aspirations have been met.\textsuperscript{2} Such stability can be secured by inquiry because it is the attempt to fix belief in a way responsive to reasons and evidence. The other options Peirce entertains are the methods of tenacity, authority, and a priori rationalism. Each of these methods satisfies the demand for belief. They also seem to satisfy the demand for stability, but fail to do so in a durable way.

Peirce begins with tenacity, a ‘simple and direct method…really pursued by many men’ (\textit{CP} 5.377; 1877). Those who meet doubt with tenacious adherence to the belief that has been called into question can strengthen their conviction by a variety of means, such as electing to attend only to favourable evidence. This method is sometimes deliberately adopted, and Peirce suggests that those who have the temperament to be inclined towards it will never admit that its inconveniences are worse than its advantages. A beloved belief is secured at all costs when one meets doubt by asking, ‘why should we not attain the desired end [belief], by taking as answer to a question any we may fancy, and constantly reiterating it to ourselves, dwelling on all which may conduce to that belief, and learning to turn with contempt and hatred from anything that might disturb it?’ (\textit{CP} 5.377; 1877). Peirce points out that this mode of reasoning is popular in the defense of religious belief, which is often taken to be so valuable in the lives of its adherents as to merit tenacious defense as a mark of genuine faith.

\textsuperscript{2} That we have such cognitive aspirations – that we want true beliefs, and not merely expedient beliefs – is what Peirce means to show in what I term his positive argument for inquiry, the stronger but less known argument that we shall consider next.
Obvious problems present themselves to the tenacious believer. Meeting with disagreement from another person taken to be an epistemic peer\(^3\) is problematic: it can destabilize belief and allow the recurrence of doubt because it may force the tenacious believer to acknowledge that there are relevant sources of evidence that she is not considering. Still, if this interruption takes the form of one other person disagreeing with her, she may be able to tell herself a story about how this is possible – about how, in this particular case, the other person is simply mistaken.\(^4\) One person’s contrary belief (and supporting evidence) is a problem, but a problem that the tenacious believer can handle in practical terms: disagreement with another, one other, can often be worked around. One might agree to disagree, or isolate the disputed belief to exclude it from further conversation. The tenacious believer may not find her own belief genuinely brought into doubt by a solitary dissenter.

What she has much greater difficulty with is a community of epistemic peers, many of whom may have competing experience and evidence on offer with respect to the proposition she is trying to shore up. Thus, Peirce concludes, tenacity cannot hold its ground in practice, for ‘the social impulse is against it’: ‘The man who adopts it will find

\(^3\) I do not use this term in the sense it is used in the contemporary literature about epistemic disagreement, which relies on an idealized notion of ‘peer’ requiring peers to be equivalent with respect to their capacity to assess the evidence and to have, in fact, exactly the same evidence. On that notion of peerhood, there could be no dispute between peers where one had evidence the other lacked. I mean, more simply, to take an ‘epistemic peer’ to be someone whose beliefs cannot be dismissed out of hand, because she is responsive to reasons and evidence in the business of forming beliefs. This is no doubt imprecise, but nothing hangs on having a technical notion of ‘peerhood’ at work here.

\(^4\) In the current literature on peer disagreement in epistemology, the usual positions championed are the steadfast response to disagreement and the conciliatory response. Both positions take the relevant question to be how an individual faced with peer disagreement should adjust her credences. As will become clear in the course of this discussion, the Peircean response to peer disagreement is neither to dig in one’s heels nor to grant concessions simply on the basis of peerhood – it is to recognize the experience of the other as legitimate and in need of explanation, but not at the expense of one’s own experiences. It is, to put the point in slogan form, to switch from reasoning as an individual to attempting to reason as a part of a collective.
that other men think differently from him, and it will be apt to occur to him, in some
saner moment, that their opinions are quite as good as his own’ (CP 5.378; 1877). Thus,
the deepest difficulty of practicing the method of tenacity comes to the forefront: when
faced with the existence of securely held contrary views, the tenacious believer cannot
help but feel cognitive dissatisfaction, clinging to her method as she may.\footnote{Contemporary
discussions of the bootstrapping problem make a similar point: if I know that a certain
experiment has a result that supports my favoured belief, I still recognize that there is something wrong
with performing that experiment over and over and taking each new result as a separate piece of evidence
boosting my credence.}

Once it becomes clear that tenacity will not do, authority may seem the next-best
choice. ‘Let the will of the state act, then, instead of that of the individual,’ says Peirce.
An institution may have precisely the sort of power to quell individual doubts and
dissenting opinions, if that institution takes as its purpose ‘to keep correct doctrines
before the attention of the people, to reiterate them perpetually, and to teach them to the
young’. In terms of efficacy, the method of authority has this great advantage over
tenacity: a powerful authority has ‘the power to prevent contrary doctrines from being
taught, advocated, or expressed’ (CP 5.379; 1877).

Peirce thinks that appeal to authority is an improvement over tenacity in terms of
the level of vulnerability to doubt beliefs formed by this method face, but would-be
practitioners of the method of authority still encounter problems. The most immediate of
these is a practical problem: no institution can regulate belief on every subject, for even
the most powerful institutions – such as governments and religious governing bodies –
have limited resources. Peirce remarks that this imperfection ‘will be no source of
weakness so long as men are in such a state of culture that one opinion does not influence
another – that is, so long as they cannot put two and two together’ (CP 5.381; 1877).
But as this suggests, the method of authority falters once people do begin to put two and two together – and even in ‘the most priest-ridden states some individuals will be found’ who are capable of doing the math. Such contemplative individuals will be moved to doubt by the existence of divergent opinions. Even where such divergence is largely absent within a group governed by a single authority, the inquirer may become aware that other groups, with their own authorities, see things differently. That the same method practiced by different authorities can produce wildly divergent beliefs undermines the very practice of trying to fix belief this way, for we find ourselves in the same predicament as faced with the use of tenacity: we have to tell ourselves a story about why our local authority is right and the other wrong. If we cannot do this in a convincing way – or if we are disturbed that we find this necessary – we find ourselves doubting not just particular beliefs, but the method itself. And so we arrive at the same place: dissatisfaction, and the need for a new method.

Peirce moves on to the consideration of a method ‘far more intellectual and respectable from the point of view of reason than either of the others’ – the method he refers to as *a priori* rationalism (*CP 5.383; 1877*). This method stipulates that we should ‘Let the action of natural preferences be unimpeded…and under their influence let men…gradually develop beliefs in harmony with natural causes’ (*CP 5.383; 1877*). Tongue firmly in check, Peirce claims that we have a rich source of examples of the use of this method in the history of metaphysics, where grand systems have been developed through the use of reason alone. ‘Systems of this sort’, he remarks, ‘have not usually rested upon any facts’, but ‘been chiefly adopted because their fundamental propositions seemed “agreeable to reason”’ (*CP 5.382; 1877*).
What has really made such systems popular is a tendency to have sentiments and preferences similar to those with whom one shares contingent historical circumstances, which counts for Peirce as ‘accidental causes’. Even without the orchestrated influence of some central authority, our sentiments are nonetheless influenced by peculiarities of context. This is the point that Peirce is getting at in using the history of metaphysics to showcase the track record of a priori rationalism: the method makes belief fixation a matter of tracking intellectual fads, effectively by privileging what seems ‘agreeable to reason’ at that particular time. Thus, there is no real difference between this method and that of authority: each privileges some force (authority or prevalent opinion) capable of fixing belief without being able to argue for its legitimacy.

Once we realize that our sentiments are not the pure arbiters of acceptability we supposed, we find ourselves grappling with the same dissatisfaction that arose in the employment of the methods of tenacity and authority. Our sentiments are not pure products of reasoning, so they do not have the privileged foundational position the rationalist has supposed. This leads Peirce to conclude that of the three methods considered so far, the failure of a priori rationalism ‘has been the most manifest’ (CP 5.383; 1877).

Peirce concludes that if we are to overcome the dissatisfaction and the persistent return to doubt that comes with the exercise of these methods, we must find a method that meets our own standards as belief-acquirers. We may start out by seeking simply to acquire beliefs, but will find ourselves unable to secure such beliefs in a lasting way. In adopting inquiry as the method best-suited to providing the stability we seek, we set out to acquire true beliefs – those that will stand up to future experience, come what may. As
Peirce puts the point, these are the best beliefs for the long-haul: ‘It is certainly best for us that our beliefs should be such as may truly guide our actions’. It is best by our own lights, because ‘reflection will make us reject every belief which does not seem to have been so formed as to insure this result’. But the beliefs that can accurately guide our actions are not made true, on Peirce’s account, by having this feature; rather, it is a feature of true beliefs that they are stable, and of stable beliefs that they can stand as the basis for habits of action.

The method that can secure these stable beliefs, which Peirce points to as the ‘method of science’, is inquiry. By using it, ‘our beliefs may be determined by nothing human, but by some external permanency’ (CP 5.384; 1877). Peirce admits that this method involves certain assumptions, but suggests that such assumptions are just those that we must make if we are to escape the continual return to paralyzing doubt we face otherwise. Inquiry is predicated on the following assumptions: there are real things that are unaffected by our opinions about them; those things affect us in predictable ways, allowing us to grasp how things are; and anyone, with enough experience and the use of reason, will be led to the same conclusions.

This attachment to ‘external permanency’ allows inquiry to overcome the difficulties faced by the other methods that Peirce considered. Encountering other individuals or communities with divergent experience does not pose a problem, but an opportunity to recalibrate our own beliefs in light of new, additional evidence. Though no community has the time or resources to actually inquire into every question, every question that is scrutinized via inquiry has the prospect of being resolved by the application of that method. Inquiry tracks facts, rather than fads, and so overcomes the
failures of the methods that are disconnected from experience. And finally, dissatisfaction is not an issue: inquiry is the one method we can feel confident in when we assess how it actually works, as it leads to stable beliefs suitable for guiding our actions over the long term. Once we grasp the unique connection between inquiry and the capacity for grappling with our experience, we see that we should be inquirers: ‘the other methods do have their merits: a clear logical conscience does cost something – just as all that we cherish, costs us dear. But we should not desire it to be otherwise’ (CP 5.387; 1877).

If the comparative argument were all the support that Peirce offered for choosing inquiry, there would be plenty of room for response – especially from the rationalist, who could fairly complain that his interpretation of the a priori method is a caricature. Fortunately, in addition to arguing that inquiry can overcome the limitations faced by the other popular methods of belief fixation, Peirce offers us a more compelling, positive argument for adopting inquiry: the practice of inquiry is true to the phenomenology of doubt and deliberation. The place of inquiry is hallowed in Peirce’s philosophy, but it is also naturalized – it is a response to situations where action is arrested, belief undermined, and doubt faced. What we take ourselves to be doing when we experience doubt and engage in deliberation is aiming at the best belief; the best belief is a true one, one that allows us to act successfully because it is responsive to the evidence; and inquiry is unique in aiming at the truth, rather than mere settlement of belief.

When we set out to appease our doubts, what we want initially is for them to go away – the best belief by our own lights is a settled one. Well-settled beliefs are those that we will not be pushed into doubting again by experience, that we have arrived at by
pushing the process of inquiry as far as it can fruitfully go. Such beliefs, were they really to be well and permanently settled, are what Peirce calls ‘true’. What we want are the best beliefs for our purposes, which from a practical perspective includes their not being in constant need of shoring up. Such beliefs are true: they are rooted in the reality that accounts for the forcefulness and intractability of our experience. And the way to get true beliefs is via inquiry. Unlike tenacious adherence or appeals to authority or public opinion, inquiry addresses conflict (either between one’s own pre-existing belief and evidence to the contrary or between one’s own belief and the beliefs of others) via genuine engagement in reasoning. Inquiry is also unlike the a priori method, where we may happen to arrive at beliefs that cohere with the evidence of experience, but may also arrive at beliefs that float free of experience entirely. The commitment to reasoning in light of the evidence characteristic of inquiry has one great advantage: in pursuing beliefs that are true rather than merely advantageous or perspicuous, ‘it fixes belief more surely’ (W 3: 15; 1872).

In citing this as the advantage of inquiry, Peirce is pointing us toward the individual’s transition from doubt to belief. His analysis of belief focuses on what it feels like to us as believers, rather than on the metaphysical or psychological nature of belief. We recognize belief primarily by the ‘peculiar feeling of conviction’ that accompanies it (W 2: 205, 1868), a feeling that is ‘calm and satisfactory’, while doubt is ‘uneasy and dissatisfied’ (W 3: 263; 1878). This difference in sensation is accompanied by a practical difference: each prompts a different kind of action. Belief guides action in a predictable, habitual way, while doubt motivates us primarily to resolve it in favour of belief. Thus,

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6 Peirce goes so far as to say that it doesn’t matter whether we describe belief as a judgment accompanied by the feeling of certainty (which he terms ‘sensational belief’), or as a judgment that serves as the basis for action (‘active belief’), since the two occur together (W 2: 205, 1868).
the function of inquiry is to dismiss doubt and establish a belief that can stand as a basis for action (*W* 3: 263, 1878).

The application of Peirce’s pragmatic maxim to belief suggests that we can tell what someone believes by seeing what habits of action she is committed to. The maxim exhorts us to ‘Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object’ (*W* 3: 266; 1878). When we consider habits, we see that:

The essence of belief is the establishment of a habit; and different beliefs are distinguished by the different modes of action to which they give rise. If beliefs do not differ in this respect, if they appease the same doubt by producing the same rule of action, then no mere differences in the manner of consciousness of them can make them different beliefs, any more than playing a tune in different keys is playing different tunes. (*CP* 5.398; 1878)

We identify belief internally by its characteristic sensation, but it can also be identified externally by its motivational force.

Doubt, too, can be recognized both internally by its characteristic sensation and externally by its motivational force. But rather than expecting a particular doubt to always produce a particular action, we can expect *all* doubt to push us in one direction: that of trying to resettle our beliefs. The unpleasant sensation of doubt will not necessarily move one to inquiry; as we have seen, the other methods of belief fixation have their merits. But Peirce is clear on this point: if one wants to be successful in resolving the doubt in a way that will bring satisfaction in the long run, it is to inquiry that one must be committed. Without doubt, we would not be motivated to inquire. Without inquiry, we are not likely to find beliefs sufficiently stable to prevent the recurrence of doubt, to find true beliefs. And we know this, which is why beliefs formed
by other methods – when the weaknesses of those methods are brought to our attention – will cease to satisfy. Doubt recurs.

Lest this seem a ludicrous overstatement of the instability of ordinary human processes, one that threatens to leave us with precious few beliefs, Peirce returns us to the phenomenology of doubt and deliberation. He insists that in order for doubt to move us this way, it has to be genuine:

A person may, it is true, in the course of his studies, find reason to doubt what he began by believing; but in that case he doubts because he has a positive reason for it, and not on account of the Cartesian maxim. Let us not pretend to doubt in philosophy what we do not doubt in our hearts. ([CP] 5.265; 1868)

In the same vein, Peirce declares that ‘genuine doubt does not talk of beginning with doubting’; rather, doubt happens to us. ‘The pragmatist knows that…his genuine doubts will go much farther than those of any Cartesian. What he does not doubt, about ordinary matters of everybody’s life, he is apt to find no well matured man doubts’ ([CP] 6.498; 1906). Because inquiry is resolved by reaching a belief that is not easily threatened by the sorts of difficulties encountered in the use of other methods of belief fixation, the beliefs it yields become, over time, part of the stable background taken on by all the members of a community.

Peirce’s description of the interaction between doubt and belief tells us why an individual strives to attain stable, fixed beliefs. Further, it suggests a broad epistemological commitment to anti-skepticism – or rather, anti-pseudo-skepticism, or

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7 It is not the case that no one could honestly engage in the project of the Meditations, but it is the case that the doubts meant to be generated therein are likely rarely felt with the force and immediacy of a doubt encountered in the run of daily life, one which arrests action and demands immediate attention.
skepticism for skepticism’s sake. To take a doubt-inducing piece of evidence seriously is to actually stop believing the proposition brought into doubt, and to act accordingly – to have a practical difference follow from what would otherwise be an empty concern, one that motivates no difference in practice. Peirce’s pragmatism focuses on the doubts that make a difference; to take any other doubt seriously is akin to epistemic bad faith.

His account of the relationship between doubt and belief in the individual inquirer is meant to show that we do in fact desire the settlement of belief; by contrast, his portrayal of the relationship between the individual and the community shows how the stability we desire can be achieved by the process of inquiry. The point can be put this way: considering the internal interaction of doubt and belief shows that we do want what inquiry offers, while assessment of the outcomes of the other methods of belief fixation shows that we should want what inquiry offers, for it allows us to have confidence in our own method. Considering the external interaction of individual and community shows how inquiry can offer us the stability we want. The interaction between individual and community is helpful for taxonomic reasons (in marking inquiry off from other modes of belief acquisition); for increasing the likelihood of success of inquiry; and most importantly, for providing the stability associated with truth and successful action.

The taxonomic function of the role of the community in identifying genuine inquiry is a somewhat incidental one. What it offers us is mainly a corrective for those who are skeptical for skepticism’s sake. To take a doubt-inducing piece of evidence seriously is to actually stop believing the proposition brought into doubt, and to act accordingly – to have a practical difference follow from what would otherwise be an empty concern, one that motivates no difference in practice. Peirce’s pragmatism focuses on the doubts that make a difference; to take any other doubt seriously is akin to epistemic bad faith.

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8 Peirce’s account of inquiry requires us to take serious doubts seriously, so in a sense, his account is compatible with a certain kind of scepticism – that of the ancients who demand reasons at every turn and will brook no appeal to authority. I owe this point to Robert Talisse.
9 Peirce sometimes seems to be arguing that it is impossible to adopt methodological scepticism, not merely that it is ill-advised and disingenuous. He is not moved by the desire for certainty that typically gets methodological scepticism going: our beliefs need not be certain, they merely need to be reliably settled – a state which includes our holding them to be true.
10 Peirce does not appeal to research in the then-nascent science of psychology to support this, but assumes that the reader will agree, upon reflection, with his description of the phenomena.
who falsely believe that they have satisfied the requirements of inquiry, though, as Peirce acerbically notes, there is no correcting some people: ‘When an ostrich buries its head in the sand as danger approaches, it very likely takes the happiest course. It hides the danger, and then calmly says there is no danger; and if it feels perfectly sure there is none, why should it raise its head to see?’ (CP 5.377; 1877). Some people will cling to settled beliefs with ferocious tenacity, believing that the degree of their own certitude is an indicator of the truth of the belief – even though the certitude in such cases is bought by ignoring the evidence that would call one to genuine inquiry, all the while insisting that one’s belief fits the evidence best.

While we might be capable of stepping back from our own reasoning processes sufficiently far to tell reasoning that engages with the facts from post hoc confabulation disguised as reasoning, interactions with others force us to do this more quickly and more seriously.\footnote{In their defense of a social intuitionist model of moral reasoning, Haidt and Bjorklund suggest that the shift from post-hoc confabulation about one’s own reasons to genuine reasoning is often prompted by interaction with others. And like Peirce, they think that one is more likely to be able to take that step back if one is philosophically trained. See Haidt and Bjorklund (2007), ‘Social Intuitionists Answer Six Questions about Moral Psychology’.} The community may not be indispensable in the process of inquiry; individuals who are sufficiently committed to meeting the conditions of genuine inquiry – of inquiring as far as fruitfully possible into a matter – may sometimes be in the fortunate position to have access, on their own, to all of the data of experience required to settle belief. Nor does the fact that what appears to be reasoning is taking place at the community level, rather than the individual level, guarantee that the reasoning observed is a genuine inquiry; a sufficiently homogeneous community can jointly confabulate as
seamlessly as an individual. But despite its being neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for fulfilling the requirements of inquiry, we can take deliberative collaboration between individuals in a community as a promising sign that those individuals are jointly committed to inquiry.

The second role played by the interaction between community and individual is much more important: it is likely to increase the odds that our inquiry will lead to the state of settled belief that we want. We cannot say that it does increase the odds: we might have the misfortune to live in a community where the collective experience is so homogenous as to make no difference whether we deliberate alone or with others who have experiences identical to our own. But if we can see that such factors are not at play, as they rarely are in contemporary pluralistic societies, we have reason to believe that consultation with others will help us to secure a better belief – one we will be able to rely on without further disruption from countervailing experience. The more widely a belief is supported by the experiences of disparate persons or groups, the happier we will be to count that belief among our own, for we have greater reason to take it to be true.

When others whose experiences we take into account agree with us, doubt is likely to gain traction only when it is very serious indeed, when the evidence motivating the doubt is indisputably salient.

12 Indeed, this is one of the prominent criticisms of Rawls’ original position thought experiment, which intends to motivate ideal reasoning by stripping away all contingent factors about the context of the reasoners: if everyone is starting with exactly the same information and is meeting a standard of logical accuracy in their reasoning processes, how can it make a difference that the deliberation is being performed by a group?

13 If Peirce is right about how strongly motivational our basic desire for settled belief over doubt is, his account of the role of community in inquiry contains the seeds of an argument for cosmopolitanism, albeit an argument that is not yet normative.
So again, while broadening the scope of deliberation from the individual to the community does not guarantee us well-settled beliefs, it is typically more likely to produce them, leaving us free to pursue our plans and projects without having to seriously consider the hypothesis that our actions are based on systematically false beliefs. We are no longer vulnerable to attack from the radical sceptic who refuses to engage in inquiry with us, who fails to recognize that her own position is not adequately motivated.

Finally, the interaction of individual and community not only gives us subjective satisfaction, but reason to believe that such satisfaction is warranted. Cooperating with others in the process of inquiry means that the individual has good reason to take the settled belief arrived at as true, and that it is more likely to actually be true. The latter is the case because the amount of information considered germane in an inquiry operating at the community level is simply much larger. Expanding the range of experience considered reduces the likelihood of sampling error and counteracts the effect of errors in reasoning on the part of individuals, allowing the community as a collective to make real progress. As Misak puts the point, ‘because inquirers are members of a community, they utilize the results of other members’ (2004 [1991]: 58). Peirce’s view of truth has it that the true belief is the best belief, given all the evidence, which makes it incumbent upon us that we get all the evidence in order to secure the best beliefs. Given that taking our peers seriously allows us to expand our available information by orders of magnitude, it is not surprising that Peirce takes it that it is the community, rather than the individual, which is suited for the pursuit of truth.
This feature of the pragmatist view of truth is salient in my later explorations of contemporary debates; as we shall shortly see, it is also one of the reasons why it must be Peirce’s view of truth that we adopt, rather than James’ or Dewey’s. In their most influential expressions of the pragmatist view of truth, James sometimes loses sight of the community entirely in focusing on benefits to the individual, while Dewey sometimes loses sight of anything beyond the community in focusing on warrant as granted by the community.

We now know how the community helps the individual to fix her belief and contributes to the success of inquiry. The prominent place of the community in Peirce’s account of the aspiration to truth connects to a second broad epistemological commitment on Peirce’s part, this time to fallibilism. We take ourselves to be corrigible – we accept that the evidence of our peers and our own acquisition of evidence constitutes a check on our beliefs. We accept the possibility of error in our own beliefs. One way in which we can discover that we are actually wrong about a matter is through the arguments of our peers. Being open to the possibility of correction in this manner signals a letting go of dogmatism. To do otherwise is to stall inquiry altogether, and to retreat from the possibility of deliberating with others in favour of insulating the beliefs one already has. Jointly, the commitments to fallibilism and anti-scepticism comprise what looks like a sensible attitude to take towards trying to answer any question whatever: we won’t get anywhere if we stop to entertain specious doubts, but we also won’t get anywhere if we refuse to stop to take serious doubts seriously.
1.3 Two Elements of Inquiry

Moving now from the relations that characterize inquiry, I focus on two features of Peirce’s model that deserve special attention: the broad conception of experience, and the idea of a regulative assumption. The broad conception of experience deserves attention because it is the thread of continuity that unites pragmatist approaches to ethics from Peirce to Lewis. The idea of a regulative assumption deserves attention because it is a key to the application of Peirce’s view of truth and inquiry in the contemporary debates I engage in Part II.

Peirce’s model of inquiry invokes a conception of experience that is broad in two senses. Firstly, what counts as experience in Peirce’s view is more inclusive than what we see in traditional empiricist views: it is not limited to sensory experience, but can be anything which surprises one in a way that calls previously held belief into doubt. Peirce alludes to the breadth of the range of surprises constituting experience by pointing to the possibility of ‘external’ and ‘internal’ experiences: ‘Belief…is a strong habit, and as such, forces the man to believe until some surprise breaks up the habit…due to some novel experience, whether external or internal’ (CP 5.524; 1905). The category of the external includes what we typically associate with empiricist accounts - impactful experience via sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. Yet what is experienced through the senses is not limited in advance to some conception of what ‘natural properties’ are. Rather, whatever is experienced – be it physical properties of objects or value properties

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14 This is not to say that in order for something to count as experience, it must be surprising. That an encounter is surprising, especially in a way that turns out to be resistant to assimilation with previous events – that is to say, in a way that turns out to be recalcitrant – may make us more sensitive to the fact that we are having an experience, but many experiences will be neither surprising nor recalcitrant.
This allows for the possibility that external experience can include moral experience, a possibility that James, Dewey, and Lewis all take very seriously – indeed, a possibility which I shall argue is worth taking seriously, and which plays an important role in conceiving of ethics as an area amenable to inquiry.\footnote{This important point resurfaces in Lewis’ ethical theory, as we shall see that Lewis argues that value judgments are empirical judgments.}

This account of the external clearly shows that Peirce did not locate a division between external and internal experience at a prefabricated junction between physical properties and value properties. This is further underscored by the fact that Peirce does not limit the category of internal experience to non-physical matters, and certainly not to experience of one’s own inner states. Indeed, his paradigmatic example of an internal experience is being surprised by the mental manipulation of a diagram when we come to grasp that the spatial relations between two diagrams that are presented differently are actually the same (\textit{CP} 5.398; 1878).

When we take the category of the internally surprising as really constituting experience, we get a thorough-going empiricism that allows us to re-describe certain puzzling cases. For example, on a Peircean view the slave boy from the \textit{Meno} is not learning via recollection of innate knowledge, but really learning via new experience. The slave boy can be described as experimenting when he tries the hypothesis that faced with two squares, the second being double the size of the first, a line bisecting the second square would form triangles with a hypotenuse double the length of the hypotenuse of

\footnote{Certain concerns swiftly arise in response to this assertion – moral judgments are not verifiable; moral deliberation is about agreement, not truth; and so on. These challenges will remain in proverbial peripheral view until we reach Chapter 4, where we shall see how Lewis responds to them, and Chatper 5, where I argue for the cognitive character of moral deliberation.}
triangles that would be formed by bisecting the first square in the same manner. When Socrates corrects him, he does so simply by coaching the boy to consider what he knows of squares generally and helping him to work through the proportions of squares of various sizes. By doing so, as Socrates tells Meno, he has given the boy ‘the “torpedo’s shock”’ – and this shock, in Peirce’s view, constitutes experience. Peirce lists ‘those sense-qualities that we…experience’ as including ‘colors, odors, sounds, feelings of every description, loves, griefs, surprise’ (CP 6.197; 1898).

So what can stand as an event suitable for provoking inquiry is much more inclusive than one might first think upon encountering Peirce’s insistence that doubt be a genuine product of one’s experiences. Simply reflecting on a belief may lead to the requisite genuine doubt if doing so causes me to realize that the belief has surprising implications that I did not notice when I first acquired it, and which should cause me to question its verity.  

In addition to taking a broad view of what counts as experience, Peirce’s appeal to experience in the process of inquiry is broad in terms of whose experience counts. As we can tell by the importance of the community in resolving doubt on Peirce’s naturalized view of inquiry, the experience that counts in the fixation of my belief is not merely my own. The difference between the method of tenacity and those of authority, public opinion and inquiry is the role of the beliefs and experiences of others, which act as checks and balances to our individual experiences. And to be sure that one is moving past securing shared public opinion to genuine inquiry, one has to consider not just the beliefs and experiences had by members of a limited, local community, but also those had

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17 One question that may arise at this juncture – whither the *a priori*? Does it simply cease to exist on a pragmatist account? The brief answer is ‘no’. I develop the longer, and more satisfying answer, in Chapter 4, for the best account of what the *a priori* looks like for a pragmatist is that presented by Lewis.
by members of other communities. For the more inclusive our survey of experience is, the more likely we are to get truth – and with it, subjective satisfaction in the moment and the expectation that our satisfaction is stable.

The other salient feature of Peirce’s account of inquiry is that it involves the employment of regulative assumptions, or ‘guiding principles’, of inquiry. Peirce shares Kant’s view that such principles are of human construction and can be appropriately invoked for the purpose of enabling human endeavours. He acknowledges that his own notion of a regulative assumption has its roots in Kant, specifically as that notion was developed in the first Critique.18

With respect to the origin of such principles, Peirce and Kant agree on this much: such principles are constructed by human reasoners. But in a departure from Kant, who marks certain transcendental ideas as required regulative principles19, Peirce argues that we determine which principles we need based on which practices we choose to engage in, such that ‘almost any fact may serve as a guiding principle’ (CP 5.369; 1877). He admits that some guiding principles are necessary once we recognize that we are committed to

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18 One place where the notion of a regulative assumption receives sustained treatment is in the ‘Appendix’ to the Transcendental Dialectic of the first Critique, where Kant explicitly discussed the nature, origin, and content of guiding principles in the context of how such principles can help us to resolve the antinomies of reason. A regulative principle, on Kant’s view, is a principle of reason that it adopted for ‘the greatest possible continuation and extension of experience’ (A509/B537).

19 An example of a transcendental idea in Kant’s philosophy is the idea of freedom he invokes to resolve the third antinomy. An antinomy is a paradoxical problem, to which two separate and opposing theses appear equally good solutions. In the case of the third antinomy, the problem is the resolution of the freedom of persons and the laws of nature. Kant finds that when we apply reason to experience on the question of freedom, equally good proofs are available for the thesis that there is some source of freedom that has causal force despite the apparent regularity of laws of nature, and for the antithesis that there is no freedom because everything in the world of appearances happens solely in accord with laws of nature. Trying to reconcile thesis and antithesis leads to an impasse: whatever we want to assert about causal spontaneity, we cannot claim that it is compatible with laws of nature at the level of empirical reality – so if we want freedom, it has to be ‘out there’, in the noumenal realm. We can affirm freedom only as a transcendental idea.
inquiry: once we have undertaken to pursue inquiry on a matter as far as fruitfully possible, no matter what the particular matter in question is, certain regulative assumptions are indispensable. Such principles are ‘necessarily taken for granted in asking why a certain conclusion is thought to follow from certain premises’. All other regulative assumptions are those ‘which have any other interest as objects of research’ (CP 5.369; 1877). In such cases, we are choosing our projects first, and then determining what guiding principles make sense of or support those projects.

Clearly, this leads to a view of regulative assumptions which allows them to have determinate content. Because the guiding principle is a proposition, in Peirce’s view, it does not have the ambiguous character of a transcendental idea. This is not to say that Peirce’s guiding principles commit the metaphysical error Kant was so anxious to guard against.20 Indeed, Peirce is just as anxious to avoid speculative metaphysics, which he rates a ‘scrofulous science’ (CP 6.6; 1903). On his account, we keep the adoption of guiding principles from becoming metaphysical meandering by recognizing their role: they are assumptions that license certain inferences, not assumptions about entities.

Peirce’s view of the origin, nature, and content of regulative ideas defends them as epistemically permissible assumptions constructed to support our practices, which are determinate in content – but crucially, not as beliefs. Regulative assumptions are not products of inquiry, as our beliefs are, but working hypotheses that we hold steady for the purpose of inquiry itself.

What, one is entitled to ask, is the real difference between believing and ‘holding steady’? A consideration of Peirce’s defense of two particular regulative assumptions

20 Roughly, that error is the hypostatization of the ideas that enable our practices into entities that causally account for features of our experience.
will help to demonstrate. These are the working hypotheses required for the enterprise of inquiry itself: the postulation of the existence of reality, and the principle of bivalence.  

The idea of reality is much discussed in ‘The Fixation of Belief’ and ‘How to Make our Ideas Clear’. Recall that in his comparative argument for inquiry, Peirce allowed that the method of inquiry relies on the supposition that there are real things that constitute the ‘external permanency’ with which we want our beliefs to be in harmony. In defense of invoking the postulation of reality as a regulative assumption of the practice of inquiry, Peirce claims that no one can really doubt that there is something to which our beliefs should answer. With respect to the hypothesis in question, Peirce finds himself ‘not having any doubt, nor believing that anybody else whom I could influence has’, and so ‘it would be the merest babble for me to say more…If there be anybody with a living doubt upon the subject, let him consider it’ (CP 5.384; 1877).

Clearly, Peirce thinks that anyone who claims to doubt the existence of a material reality has set up a ‘paper’ doubt, and lacks any real motivation to embark on an inquiry into the existence of the physical world. It is not just that we do not actually doubt whether there is some reality to which our beliefs must answer. When we admit and articulate the assumption, we find that the method of inquiry and the hypothesis that there is a reality ‘remain ever in harmony’, such that we do not face the difficulties that arise in the use of other methods of belief fixation (CP 5.384; 1877).

Peirce expands on the nature of the idea of reality as a guiding principle in ‘How to Make Our Ideas Clear’. The idea of reality, if we take clearness in the sense of

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21 As I indicated above, Peirce describes two types of regulative assumptions: those that are truly necessary (since they are necessary for inquiry and we are embedded in a context of inquiry), and those that are what we might call ‘locally’ necessary (since they are necessary for research into particular areas but not necessary simpliciter). Both of the assumptions I go on to discuss here are necessary for inquiry as a whole, and not merely for this or that particular inquiry.
'familiarity', is the clearest idea there is: 'every child uses it with perfect confidence, never dreaming that he does not understand it' (CP 5.405; 1878). The real is that which has a character independent of what anybody may think it to be; the effect real things have is to cause belief in a predictable way; and true beliefs can be sorted from false ones via the 'experiential method' of settling opinion – via inquiry.

As we have seen, truth and inquiry are inseparable in Peirce’s philosophy. This is exhibited by the second of his regulative assumptions, the principle of bivalence. This principle can be understood as a guiding principle which we initially adopt to make sense of pursuing inquiry at all. In inquiry, we are motivated by the aspiration to truth; that aspiration can be met only if we are dealing with an area where propositions can be true or false. If we are to resolve the doubts that give rise to an inquiry, we must assume of that inquiry at its outset that there is some truth of the matter on the question we are trying to settle. Still, it may be the case that we are mistaken about bivalence holding in some cases. The responsiveness to experience that Peirce demands of the would-be inquirer allows us to see that an inquiry could go the following way: one wants to know the truth of the matter on a particular question; one assumes that there is a truth of the matter of that question; and finally, one fails to arrive at any settled opinion despite having pursued inquiry in the right way. In such a situation, we can conclude one of two things: either that we have not reached the end of inquiry and must keep going, or that we have stumbled across a question with respect to which the principle of bivalence does not hold. Some questions are not appropriate targets of inquiry; there is considerable evidence that Peirce took moral questions to be of this type in the first thirty years of his philosophical writings.
But Peirce’s fallibilism shows itself to be genuine with regard to his early conviction that there is no end of inquiry in moral matters, a conviction he later abandoned. As was suggested in Peirce’s contrastive argument for inquiry, simply to be in a context of inquiry is to be committed to the pursuit of truth: ‘it is unphilosophical to suppose that, with regard to any given question (which has any clear meaning), investigation would not bring forth a solution of it, were it carried far enough’ (CP 5.409; 1878). Thus, to inquire at all is to aim to find the truth about the matter one is inquiring into; the principle of bivalence is a regulative assumption of all inquiry – including, as I shall argue in Chapter 5, of moral inquiry.22

1.4 Peirce’s Normative Turn

So far, so good. So good, indeed, that one might wonder why there is any problem in treating this model of inquiry as perfectly general, as equally suitable for pursuing the truth in ethics as in any other venture. The source of that puzzle is Peirce himself. Peirce’s often disparaging attitude toward ethics as a discipline and his commitment to a distinction between science and so-called ‘vital matters’ seem, on the surface, enough to discourage one from taking the idea of applying his model of inquiry to ethical questions seriously.

22 There will be concerns here about how we access the experiences of others, whether or not we can trust their reports, why we should think that we are all operating with the same regulative assumptions of inquiry, and whether there is any reason to think that objectivity – in some sense of that term – is afoot. These concerns can be met, at least in part, by appeal to a second pragmatic elucidation of the concept of truth – for truth is not only the end of inquiry, but also the norm of assertion. As we shall see, Peirce and contemporary philosopher Huw Price are in agreement on the importance of this point as a key ingredient in the best pragmatist views about truth.
In the early papers we have been considering so far, Peirce has little to say about what constitutes ‘science’ or where inquiry may be fruitfully pursued – but these topics were of great concern to him, especially later in his life as he made conscious efforts to set his own philosophy apart from that of the more popular pragmatists, James in particular. From the time of his controversial Cambridge Conference lectures in 1898 to his death in 1914, we find Peirce struggling to articulate what constitutes ‘philosophy’ and to locate ethics in a philosophical view primarily tied up with the philosophy of science. For the would-be Peircean ethicist, the crucial period in that span is from the Cambridge lectures of 1898 to the Harvard lectures of 1903, a period that I call Peirce’s normative turn – for by the spring of 1903, ethics had achieved an elevated status in Peirce’s architectonic.

Let us begin with the Cambridge lectures, which have achieved a degree of notoriety among Peirce scholars for two reasons. Firstly, the circumstances surrounding their organization and composition provide us with a snapshot of Peirce’s relationship with James. The lectures were organized by James, who drummed up the money after receiving a letter from Peirce written ‘to touch upon the delicate question of money…my wife asking me to do so for strong reasons’ (RLT: 29). Peirce was destitute, and it was James who found a way to bail him out. Perhaps because he felt responsible for the lectures, or perhaps because he knew better than Peirce the capacities of those to whom Peirce would be lecturing, James admonished Peirce to stay away from certain topics, namely logic and mathematics.

The topics in question were those Peirce had expended the most intellectual effort on through the years, and he reacted poorly to James’ attempt at steering him. But
though Peirce tells James he will accede to his request to lecture on ‘separate topics of a vitally important character’, there can be no doubt that the ideas expressed in the Cambridge lectures are Peirce’s own – though perhaps James’ intercession served as the impetus for their somewhat vitriolic expression.\(^{23}\)

I say that this is a snapshot of the relationship between the two philosophers, for the impatience Peirce shows to James’ programming stipulations is just one instance of such impatience. Peirce was continually aggravated by what he took to be James’ loose way of doing philosophy and lack of interest in logic, despite his own near-childish reliance on James for help in such practical matters as getting enough money to keep the heat on through the Pennsylvania winters. The pattern of Peirce relying heavily on James in practical matters while simultaneously pronouncing his philosophy ‘injurious’ was extant in their relationship for decades, and their exchanges surrounding the content of the Cambridge lectures is just one example. The longstanding balance of volatility on Peirce’s part, and forbearance on James’, gives us another reason to assert that Peirce interpreters are on the hook for taking these lectures seriously and not simply trying to excuse their content.\(^{24}\) As Mats Bergman has put the point, ‘even if one were to accept biographical explanations of philosophical positions, the stance of the 1898 lectures cannot be easily explained away as a mere anomaly’ (2010: 23, nt.6). Bergman makes his point by linking Peirce’s remarks about theory and practice in the Cambridge lectures to similar points elsewhere in Peirce’s writing, showing that there is a textual basis for taking the lectures seriously.\(^{25}\)

\(^{23}\) For instance, while disparaging the topic of ‘vital matters’, one dear to James’ heart, Peirce condemned such matters as simply not a fit occupation for philosophers.

\(^{24}\) In her (2004b) ‘C.S. Peirce on Vital Matters’, Misak offers an account of this type.

\(^{25}\) See Bergman (2010: 24-26).
This leads me to the second reason why the Cambridge lectures are notorious: their content, especially the stance Peirce takes on the role of belief in science and the capacity of philosophy to inform daily life, is difficult to reconcile with other elements of his pragmatism. Peirce makes a number of claims that suggest a tension in his thought about the connections between theory and practice, a tension that was not present in ‘The Fixation of Belief’, ‘How to Make Our Ideas Clear’, and the other papers of the *Illustrations of the Logic of Science*.

That tension is particularly problematic for the project of extending Peirce’s model of inquiry to handle moral questions, for ethics is the area of philosophy where theory and practice seem to connect quite obviously. Questions of conduct, in particular, seem both to press us with an immediacy that requires resolution and to be amenable to theoretical analysis. To crystallize the problem, let us consider some things Peirce actually says about the relationship between philosophy and conduct.

The first of the Cambridge lectures is titled ‘Philosophy and the Conduct of Life’, though anyone who came expecting to hear about how the former illuminates the latter would have left disappointed. Peirce grandly declares to his audience, ‘I stand before you…a scientific man, condemning with the whole strength of conviction the…tendency to mingle Philosophy and Practice’ (*RLT*: 107). He goes on to classify the instincts that guide our moral decision making as ‘radically unfitting for scientific investigation’, for which ‘nothing is vital – nothing can be’ (*RLT*: 107, 112). Philosophy, he opines, ought to be separated from ‘esthetic and moral culture’ – indeed, from any interest at the level of everyday life. ‘The true scientific investigator’, Peirce claims here, ‘completely loses sight of the utility of what he is about.’ (*RLT*: 106-7).
This austere view of science is not an accident of emphasis in Peirce’s first lecture at Cambridge. He widens the gap between science (of which he considers philosophy a part) and everyday practice in the fourth lecture, titled ‘The First Rule of Logic’. There, he says that science ‘takes an entirely different attitude toward facts from that which Practice takes’, for practice requires acting upon beliefs taken to be true, while science has no such requirement \((RLT: 177)\). The undercurrent throughout the lecture series is that philosophy has lost its way; if Peirce had his way, he’d certainly have given the audience an advanced course in logic by way of remedying this situation.

Fortunately, placing these remarks in the larger context – while it does not excuse their often belligerent tone – illuminates why Peirce made them in the first place, and how he later tried to reconcile them with the naturalistic account of inquiry on offer in *Illustrations of the Logic of Science*.

One element of the context I view as significant connects with the earlier discussion of regulative assumptions of inquiry. One of the reasons that Peirce reacts so strongly against James’ suggestion that he write on vital matters is that the suggestion comes in the wake of the publication of James’ tremendously popular, and widely attacked, paper, ‘The Will to Believe’.\(^\text{26}\) This paper appeared in a volume that James dedicated to Peirce, though it prompted the following assessment from him: ‘I thought your *Will to Believe* was a very exaggerated utterance, such as injures a serious man very much’ \((CWJ 12: 171; 1909)\). That Peirce thought this work ‘exaggerated’ is telling – for what has happened, from the Peircean perspective, is that James has abused the idea that certain hypotheses may be held for true in order to secure the business of inquiry. In

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\(^{26}\) Peirce’s Cambridge lectures took place before a general audience just two years after James presented ‘The Will to Believe’ to a rather different sort of audience, a group of divinity students at Harvard.
Peirce’s works, it is true that not all regulative assumptions are necessary in character; some guiding principles are chosen to support particular forays into elective fields of research, not for the very enabling of inquiry itself. But what justifies invoking those principles must be the quest for truth, or for the preservation of a deeply embedded and prized practice.

What does not justify making an assumption is the prudential concerns of an individual. On Peirce’s view, the comfort secured by forming full-fledged beliefs in the absence of evidence is on a par with the comfort the ostrich feels when firmly planting its head in the sand. Since Peirce reads James’ treatment of ‘vital matters’ – that is, genuine options which are forced, living, and momentous to the individual – as licensing just this sort of maneuver, he is anxious to distance himself from it. Hence, the too-strong separation of philosophy and practice: philosophy, as Peirce conceives it operating via inquiry, cannot proceed if it is tangled up with the particular needs of individuals. As we have seen, Peirce’s account privileges the community. By contrast, James’ account in ‘The Will to Believe’ tries to carve out a personal use for holding ‘vital’ propositions as true to the extent that they are actually beliefs; this is the injurious exaggeration for which Peirce takes him to task.

Another significant fact is that Peirce does not leave the question of how to deal with ‘vital matters’ behind in 1898. Indeed, perhaps prompted by a desire to redress the infelicitous tone of the Cambridge lectures, Peirce returns to the connections between theory and practice in his 1903 Harvard lectures. Here we find him trying again to spell out the difference in the role of belief, or holding-for-true, in science versus practice:

Speaking strictly, Belief is out of place in pure theoretical science, which has nothing nearer to it than the establishment of doctrines, and only the provisional
establishment of them, at that. Compared with living Belief, it is nothing but a ghost. If the captain \[of\] a vessel on a lea [leeward] shore in a terrific storm finds himself in a critical position in which he must either put his wheel to port acting on one hypothesis, or put his wheel to starboard acting on the contrary hypothesis, and his vessel will infallibly be dashed to pieces if he decides the question wrongly, Ockham’s razor is not worth the stout belief of any common seaman. For stout belief \textit{may} happen to save the ship, while \textit{Entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem} would only be a stupid way of spelling Shipwreck. (PPM: 162).

Peirce seems to be speaking directly to the type of situation James calls a genuine option, and the message is this: in such situations, inquiry and the stable, genuine belief it would produce are inappropriate. We are going on instinct. In such cases, there is no point in pretending to be philosophical.

This expression of the divide between theory and practice is clearly in tension with the naturalistic account of inquiry presented in ‘The Fixation of Belief’, where Peirce has us arriving at the necessity of inquiry because ‘social impulse’ is against the other methods of belief fixation. Social impulse is certainly closer to instinctual response than analysis, yet it is the catalyst for genuine doubt and the impetus for inquiry. So instinct is not to be ignored, on Peirce’s view, but the puzzle of how to reconcile his early view – where instinct plays a key role in how the scientific approach comes to be adopted – with this later view, that there is some fundamental difference in approach between addressing philosophical questions versus resolving practical dilemmas, remains.

Peirce goes some distance toward resolving this difficulty in his mature classification of the sciences.\textsuperscript{27} Here, he distinguishes between theoretical ethics and what he calls ‘practics’:

\textsuperscript{27} The classification of the sciences is a project that Peirce returns to time and again. He took it up as early as the late 1860’s, and was still engaged with it at the time of his death in 1914.
Ethics is not practices; first, because ethics involves more than the theory of such conformity; namely, it involves the theory of the ideal itself, the nature of the *summum bonum*; and secondly, because, in so far as ethics studies the conformity of conduct to an ideal, it is limited to a particular ideal, which, whatever the professions of moralists may be, is in fact nothing but a sort of composite photograph of the conscience of the members of the community. In short, it is nothing but a traditional standard, accepted, very wisely, without radical criticism, but with a silly pretence of critical examination. (*CP* 1.573; 1905)

Practics, then, is something like the theory of conformity to an ideal, in the sense of a response to the question of how one so conforms. It is, very loosely, applied ethics. Ethics proper, by contrast, takes the ideal of human action itself as a target of explanation. Peirce goes on to say that ‘It has been a great, but frequent, error of writers on ethics to confound an ideal of conduct with a motive to action. The truth is that these two objects belong to different categories’ (*CP* 1.574; 1905).

Ethics, as Peirce has come to conceive it at this stage, is a science – a normative science, alongside logic and aesthetics. His remarks about the separation of science and practice make more sense with this classification in place: he wants the science of ethics to be treated as such, as the theoretical study of what ought to be, not demoted to a mere decision-making rubric employed when one is faced with a moral dilemma.

In considering this dense quotation, we also gain a key insight into why Peirce initially refuses to take ethics seriously as an area for inquiry. His comparison of truth in ethics to a composite photograph reveals a concern that the end of inquiry, in ethics, is not so clean. Its truths may be both composite and contingent in nature, depending on the actual sentiments and evaluations of persons. This makes it far from obvious what actions follow from the beliefs that jointly constitute the end of inquiry, and what habits of belief can be supported by the complex truth.
Peirce viewed this, it seems, as a mark against ethics, but one might well think that the analogy is both accurate and illuminating. One can defend some standard of objectivity in ethics without expecting the end of ethical inquiry to be a single Polaroid, rather than a composite. And that there could be some kind of composite of actual human interests and sentiments involved in settling the truths of moral questions does justice to what we experience in trying to settle such questions: they are complicated, more complicated than questions in the physical sciences where the end of inquiry is often thought of as having a more singular character.28

Despite Peirce’s eventual elevation of ethics to a normative science, alongside logic and aesthetics, he does not get far in developing the subject matter of theoretical ethics or in reuniting it with applications via ‘practics’. He does tell us that aesthetics provides the end of ethics, and that the purpose of logic is to sort out what serves that end – which he claims is the growth of ‘concrete reasonableness’ (CP 1.615; 1903). The project of sorting out how theoretical ethics operates to determine what ideals serve the end of concrete reasonableness is left dangling; the potential for serious work in ethics to serve us in good stead when we do face moral dilemmas or Jamesian genuine options is not explored.

If my interpretation of Peirce’s late struggles to separate philosophy and practice as a struggle with the place of ethics in his architechtonic is plausible, the project of developing the pragmatist position in metaethics might be where Peirce was headed towards the end of his intellectual development. Thus, I leave the history of Peirce’s theory/practice divide with the suggestion that Peirce does care about ethics qua

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28 This is an oversimplification, of course. Science itself is a human practice and is shaped by human values. For a sustained argument in this direction, see Elizabeth Anderson’s 1998 ‘Pragmatism, Science, and Moral Inquiry’.
normative science, though he comes to recognize its importance too late to do much about it. It is ‘ethics’ *qua* instinctual reasoning in vital matters *as a replacement for proper inquiry* that Peirce disparages. But even if one contends that the historical evidence cannot be interpreted as I have suggested here, this is a hurdle, not a barrier, to extending Peirce’s account of inquiry to handle moral questions. I think that hurdle can be jumped by showing how well-suited Peirce’s model of inquiry is to theoretical ethics, whatever one’s interpretation of the historical record may be. The larger project of making that demonstration comes in showing how James, Dewey, and Lewis attempt to extend the Peircean framework, and in making my own extension of it with respect to contemporary debates. Here, I offer some preliminary connections and reasons for thinking that ‘a Peircean approach to ethics’ is not oxymoronic.

### 1.5 The Promise of Peirce on Ethics

Peirce’s occasional protestations aside, his model of inquiry turns out to be not only amenable to application regarding ethical questions, but indeed, perfectly suited. Here, as elsewhere, the oft-cited corollary of Peirce’s first rule of logic is fitting: do not block the path of inquiry. The pursuit of truth in moral matters, as in the physical science, should not be obstructed by tenacious dogmatism. And the pursuit of truth in moral matters is, in fact, a key feature of ethics as a philosophical discipline and as a going concern in human life. Deliberation in ethics at both levels is permeated with cognitive aspiration[^29], and it is often doubt about the veracity of a particular moral judgment that serves as the catalyst for ethical inquiry.

[^29]: I return to this theme in more detail in Chapter 5.
In addition to this very general sense of fit, there are specific outcomes of adopting a broad conception of experience in moral inquiry. Firstly, a broad conception of experience suggests that we have sources of evidence about moral questions that are often not taken very seriously; for example, thought experiments. It is not unusual for a person working through Foot’s trolley problem for the first time to feel (usually uncomfortably) surprised by what they find themselves concluding. Just as the mental manipulation of a diagram can reveal certain features of it that were not immediately noticed, serious contemplation of a scenario like the trolley problem can constitute experience that then carries weight in the deliberative process about such situations.30

Secondly, we can determine what kinds of regulative assumptions we require to support our moral practices via experience. It would seem surprising if we could determine what is good, right, and just in human conduct fully apart from our experiences of such conduct. This point is fully in line with Peirce’s general epistemology and invocation of regulative assumptions, and reminds one of the powerful metaphor given by Neurath for the position of the empiricist: ‘There is no tabula rasa. We are like sailors who have to rebuild their ship on the open sea, without ever being able to dismantle it in dry-dock and reconstruct it from its best components’ (Neurath 1983 [1932]: 92). What makes setting out on Neurath’s boat possible is a certain amount taken on board, so to speak: a stock of regulative assumptions meant to carry us to the end of the journey. As any savvy sailor would do, we do our best to ensure that our initial regulative assumptions are shipshape, but the journey itself provides the experience that will tell us whether the guiding principles we chose are appropriate guides.

30 Although the case is not a moral one, Peirce does describe how a thought experiment functions experientially precisely along these lines in his example of working out the best timetable for taking a train journey (W 3: 262; 1878).
Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, that Peirce’s conception of experience is broad in the second sense gives us a reason to strive towards universality in our moral judgments.\textsuperscript{31} We need to overcome in-group/out-group thinking when solving moral dilemmas if we are to stand a chance of resolving those dilemmas in a stable and satisfactory way – if we are to get to the truth of the matter. In \textit{Contingency, Irony and Solidarity}, Richard Rorty claims that there is no shared human feature that justifies cosmopolitanism, or the idea of a universal moral system. I want to suggest that we do not need such a feature to make it necessary to strive towards universality. All we need is to recognize that the experiences of others are relevant and that our odds of achieving true, satisfactory beliefs are improved by counting them as members of our community.\textsuperscript{32}

Taking on a Peircean version of the idea of regulative assumptions also has important consequences for how we frame and pursue moral inquiry. With respect to our understanding of the framework moral inquiry takes place within, the development of guiding principles and their adoption as standards of conduct in inquiry express very human attempts to cope with the context in which we are embedded. Indeed, experience may reveal that some of our moral practices are just the sort of thing that require assumptions to support them. I leave it an open question, for now, whether our context

\textsuperscript{31} We might instead say ‘the broadest applicable commonality’, but I am operating here under the premise that the inclusive attitude which Peirce’s view of truth requires us to take toward the experiences of others should be taken as broadly as possible at the outset – as including all of the others – before we let ourselves settle for less. ‘Less’, in this context, is a system of relative moralities that cannot speak to each other but each hold fast to their particular, local truths. It may turn out that such a system is the best we can do, but I will give reasons for doubting that this is the case in Chapter 5. At any rate, I think it clear that such a position is not desirable as a starting point, though others may think differently.

\textsuperscript{32} I certainly don’t mean to suggest that there is no more compelling argument for cosmopolitanism that this, but this is an account of why we ought to take others – all of the others! – seriously. If we take ourselves to be in the business of finding out the truth of moral questions, we need to know how things are for those others. This is a sketch of an argument that would be very different in content from the argument for inclusion put forward by Peter Singer in his \textit{Practical Ethics}, but would share the conviction that treating others as members of the moral community cannot be predicated on any empirical fact about them.
has an unavoidable moral dimension – whether there are at least minimal moral practices that are inescapable for us, being the kind of creatures we are.\textsuperscript{33} Whether moral practices and their supporting assumptions are something we are stuck with or something we have chosen to engage in, the fact remains that the assumptions play a critical role in making the practices coherent.

With respect to our pursuit of moral inquiry, as with inquiry more generally, certain regulative assumptions are indispensible.\textsuperscript{34} We have already seen two of Peirce’s

\textsuperscript{33} I return to this question in the next chapter while tracing the trajectory of pragmatist work in ethics. It is precisely on this point that James makes his most significant contribution to the development of a pragmatist position in metaethics.

\textsuperscript{34} When we consider some other twentieth century accounts of the framework in which moral practices take place, it becomes apparent that the idea of a regulative assumption is alive and well. Two well-known examples which I see as employing regulative assumptions at critical junctures are John Rawls’ development of the idea of a political conception of justice as an overlapping consensus and P.F. Strawson’s invocation of the idea of freedom as the necessary underpinning of our practices of holding one another morally responsible. Rawls argues that we must develop a political conception of justice, rather than a metaphysical one, for we can achieve agreement at the political level across people with seriously divergent metaphysical commitments – in other words, in pluralistic societies, we are more likely to achieve political consensus than metaphysical agreement. Like Peirce, he rejects the idea that such guiding principles can be arrived at by \textit{a priori} or ‘mechanical’ reasoning, and argues in favour of the use of public reason to establish an overlapping consensus between persons who disagree in terms of their broad conceptions of the good. On his view, the reason we need such a conception is to assess the basic structures and institutions of a modern constitutional democracy, which is a practical goal particular to a certain type of society. Of the two types of regulative assumptions Peirce describes, a guiding principle based on this type of conception would clearly be a non-necessary regulative assumption. People are not constituted so as to necessarily live only in constitutional democracies; there is no fact of reason making it incumbent upon us to inquire about how they best function. But nonetheless, \textit{if} one is going to live in a society with that structure, one will have to take up guiding principles, such as those that secure a Rawlsian political conception of justice. Strawson’s assumption that we have freedom, on whatever notion of ‘freedom’ is requisite to the task, can also be understood as a regulative principle, adopted for the purpose of supporting our deeply imbedded practices of treating one another as morally responsible through praising and blaming. Although Strawson allows that it is conceptually possible that we could excise such practices from communal living, he thinks it is not practically feasible because praising and blaming as expressions of moral evaluation are so central to the ways in which we engage with one another. This makes Strawson’s regulative assumption of freedom look like the necessary variety, analogous to Peirce’s assumptions regarding reality and truth rather than Rawls’ guiding conception of justice. In fact, the role freedom plays for Strawson is very similar to the role reality plays for Peirce: just as the existence of an external reality is the essential hypothesis for the use of inquiry with respect to the physical sciences, the principle that we are free in whatever sense required for moral culpability is taken by Strawson as the
suggestions, which hold of moral inquiry as well as inquiry more generally. One such idea is the postulation of the existence of a moral ‘reality’. Insofar as moral inquiry is inquiry, it shares the need for an assumption that there is something being investigated. Just how regulative assumptions stand as principles in moral inquiry, and how substantial such assumptions can be, is a question I return to in Chapter 6, which takes up the topic of the role of principles in moral reasoning.

The other idea is the supposition that there is truth in moral matters, at which moral inquiry should be aiming. The aspiration to truth, which is what motivates us to be inquirers rather than tenacious dogmatists, comes as a part of package deal. Just as we cannot do without the idea of a moral ‘reality’ which is the subject matter of moral investigation, we cannot do without the principle of bivalence as a starting point: moral inquiry, like all inquiry, shares the need for an assumption that there is an end of inquiry, a fact of the matter, a truth at which we aim. The nature of moral subject matter and the nature and source of the relevant moral facts can remain more or less up in the air, but that we engage in moral deliberation at all presupposes them. How Peircean notions of truth and experience support moral cognitivism, which I will argue is an independently attractive position, forms the substance of Chapter 5.

Despite Peirce’s own reluctance to apply his model of inquiry to ethical questions, other members of the pragmatist pantheon were very happy to do so. It is probably fair to say that every pragmatist other than Peirce took ethics more seriously than he did. This is good news; it means that we have accounts that develop Peirce’s insights, particularly
those about the operation of inquiry, in ways suited to answering moral questions. Two of Peirce’s closest contemporaries, William James and John Dewey, take up the challenge of supplying the pragmatist movement with a moral philosophy, and each brings light to bear on questions that Peirce neglected or began to address too late.

In terms of the two notions I have taken as central in my approach to the history of pragmatist ethics, James and Dewey both excel with respect to their development of the pragmatist conception of experience, but both falter with respect to their interpretations of the pragmatist view of truth. Thus, the picture is not all rosy. The moral theories James and Dewey offer involve constructive extensions of Peircean themes, but I will argue that there are also missteps. Despite the fact that James and Dewey express intellectual allegiance to Peirce, the threads of his thought have sometimes become tangled in their hands. Where their accounts go wrong, I suggest, is precisely where they get Peirce wrong. But where their accounts go right, they suggest tremendous potential for applications of classical pragmatism in ethics. Thus, in the remainder of this historical portion, my task is to bring forward the best of James’ and Dewey’s accounts, and to unify their contributions with the improvements and innovations suggested by another, highly Peircean, pragmatist: C.I. Lewis.
Whether a God exist, or whether no God exist, in yon blue heaven above us bent,
we form at any rate an ethical republic here below.

William James, ‘The Moral Philosophy and the Moral Life’
Chapter 2  William James: Radical Empiricist, Moral Philosopher

Though they came from similar backgrounds, James and Peirce lived very different lives. Both were born into families of influence and educated in large part by their fathers, both attended Harvard, and both were committed to the enterprise of developing and elucidating the methods of pragmatism. But their academic fortunes were polar opposites. James enjoyed in full measure the success that eluded Peirce, and was not shy about using his own connections to promote Peirce. Peirce’s utter failure as an academic seems to have motivated James to continue to call attention to his friend’s work. Never one to betray any anxiety of influence, James frequently professed his allegiance, as in this recommendation he gave Peirce permission to reprint:

My dear Peirce,
I am heartily glad to learn that you are preparing to publish the results of your philosophizing in a complete and connected form. Pray consider me a subscriber to the whole series. There is no more original thinker than yourself in our generation. You have personally suggested more important things to me than, perhaps, anyone whom I have ever known; and I have never given you sufficient public credit for all that you have taught me…(CWJ vol 7: 482-483; 1894).

James went on to dedicate ‘The Will to Believe’ to Peirce, and to continue to think of himself and Peirce as hitched to the same plow.

This indebtedness to Peirce is often noted, but rarely seriously excavated by contemporary readers of the classical pragmatists. Nor will a full excavation be attempted here; instead, my interest is narrowly focused on exposing the Peircean elements in James’ approach to moral philosophy, which is in many ways an exemplar of the Peircean model of inquiry. James invokes a broad notion of experience, in both of the senses previously discussed; and, at his best moments, gives the aspiration to truth a central role in the pursuit of moral philosophy. As we shall see, James’ moral philosophy
also corrects a deficit in Peirce’s account of inquiry: though Peirce saw quite clearly that human beings are embedded in a context of inquiry, he failed to appreciate the extent to which that context has inherently moral dimensions. But we shall also see that James and Peirce sometimes part ways on the issue of truth in a way that has caused lasting damage to public perception of the prospects for pragmatist ethics.\textsuperscript{35} The main source of this rift is James’ account of what it is permissible to believe ahead of the evidence in his argument for voluntaristic resolution of ‘genuine options’, but what lies behind that account is a deep division in James’ own thinking about truth that causes difficulties not only in interpretation, but also in application.

2.1 James On Experience in Moral Inquiry

The single best presentation of James’ approach to moral philosophy is his 1891 essay, 'The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life'.\textsuperscript{36} Here, James leads off with a metaethical question: ‘what is the position of him who seeks an ethical philosophy?’(1979 [1891]: 141) From the outset, James describes the attitude and attributes of the would-be moral philosopher in terms very like those Peirce used to describe the person embarked on inquiry.

The moral philosopher cannot be a sceptic, since committing to the pursuit of moral philosophy presupposes a subject matter. James, like Peirce, takes a strong stance

\textsuperscript{35} As shall become clear in Chapter 5, it does not seem like the subjectivist Jamesian version of the pragmatist view of truth can make sense of our appeal to truth as a norm of assertion in moral discourse.\textsuperscript{36} Despite the centrality of this work for my project here, I hasten to add that no work of James’ should be read without consideration of the \textit{Principles of Psychology}, as the scientific naturalism that informs that work permeates all of James’ subsequent attempts at philosophy. For an example of this permeation, see Henry Jackman’s analysis of James’ view of concepts and conceptualization in his (2008: 63ff). In search of the most plausible reading of James’ moral philosophy, I will sometimes make reference to his psychology.
against the authenticity of global skepticism, claiming that ‘so far from ethical skepticism being one possible fruit of ethical philosophizing, it can only be regarded as that residual alternative to all philosophy which from the outset menaces every would-be philosopher’ (1979 [1891]: 141). The would-be philosopher does not start with an attempt to generate doubt. She starts with the observation that there are moral relations, rather than from any antecedent convictions about the nature of morality.

Prompted by this experience of moral relations, the moral philosopher can ask herself three types of questions: psychological questions, which are questions about origins, about the history of our moral ideas and judgments; metaphysical questions, which are questions about what the ethics-words we use attach to; and casuistic questions, which assess the value of the various goods and bads we recognize, so that conflicts between them can be adjudicated. James considers how one should go about answering the three types of moral questions and answers them himself, giving us both a framework for the pursuit of metaethics and his own attempts at that pursuit. In doing so, he shows that he shares Peirce’s commitment to invoking a broad conception of experience.

James begins with the psychological question: where do our moral judgments come from? In ‘The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life’, he suggests that answering this question requires a level of analysis that outstretches the scope of the project at hand,

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37 This might prompt the question, ‘how does one observe or experience a relation”? The short answer is that on a pragmatist account of experience, all experience involves interpretation – and one way that interpretation can carve up what is experienced is into things that are separable but connected, things that are seen to be importantly related in our experience of them. The longer, better answer must wait for Chapter 4, where we will see that Lewis’ account of the pragmatic a priori and the ‘ungetoverable’ in experience make significant advances for the pragmatist understanding of experience – though also see note 37, below.
and so states his view dogmatically: moral judgments originate in our cerebral structure.\textsuperscript{38} Though this is clearly a resolutely naturalistic account, James is quick to distance himself from crass versions of utilitarianism. Valuation in terms of pleasure and pain, he argues, is too simple to adequately explain all of our preferences – it cannot explain, for example, bashfulness, the capacity to be moved by music, or the passion for poetry. The origin of such attunements ‘is in incidental complications to our cerebral structure whose original features arose with no reference to the perception of…discords and harmonies’ (1979 [1891]: 143).

What is significant about this highly abridged solution to the psychological question is that in giving it, James asserts that ‘a vast number of our moral perceptions are…of this secondary and brain-born kind’. Such moral perceptions ‘deal with directly felt fitnesses’ (1979 [1891]: 143). Here, James is clearly identifying ‘moral perception’ as a distinct mode of perception. There are many ways we might understand such an ability to relate to our environment, but for my purposes here, what is salient about James’ invocation of moral perception is that it is one of the building blocks of his broad conception of experience – a conception of experience that is broad in the sense that it counts as experience more than the classical empiricist’s typical sensory inputs. Despite his expressed allegiance to Peirce, James would have been at the forefront of the development of this aspect of pragmatism.

\textsuperscript{38} Of course, the psychological question of metaethics does receive attention in James’ \textit{Principles}, where he sets out to prove that there are relations in thought that are not merely additive, that do more than conjoin episodes of experience in sequential order. The most salient sections are Chapter IV, ‘Habit’, and Chapter IX, ‘The Stream of Thought’. Here I must echo James and only remark that arguing for a natural (rather than a supernatural) origin of our moral judgments is rather too large a task for the present moment.
While we will later see that ideas like that of a regulative assumption, or the broader category of the held-for-true for the purposes of inquiry do come to James through the filter of Peirce’s work, James’ role in developing the pragmatist view of experience is not a derivative one. Like Peirce, James was a practicing scientist and took the data of experience seriously.

Not surprisingly, James shares with Peirce a conception of experience that is broad in the second sense, too: it is not just the experience of the individual but that of a whole community that contributes to inquiry. James invokes this second sense of experience in his response to the metaphysical question of metaethics; namely, what is meant by words like ‘obligation’, ‘good’, or ‘ill’? James’ answer to this question is that every ‘ought’ can be traced to the feelings of an actual person. Our moral language does not attach to any absolute value, but to actual feelings and desires, present in actual minds. It is the moral experience of individuals that make up the ‘moral constitution’ of the universe, in James’ terminology. So not only are we capable of directly having experience that has a distinctly moral character, we are also members of a universe where what counts as just or reprehensible is determined by such experience as had by ourselves and our fellows.\(^{39}\)

\(^{39}\) James is certainly affirming what would now be called a supervenience view about the relation between the moral and the non-moral: facts about what ought to be done supervene on facts about persons and their relations. My impression is that James really means something slightly different in responding to the metaphysical question, which is that the very language of morality would be meaningless without actual moral agents. But it may be that this reading is even more metaphysical freighted than James intended. At any rate, the point can be reframed in epistemological terms: rather than trying to mark the universe as a place where morality exists because that universe is partly constituted by moral agents, one can take the Peircean line that inquiry, because conducted by moral agents, is thoroughly permeated with normative character.
There is abundant evidence that James takes the role of a broad conception of experience in philosophy as a whole very seriously. The resolute naturalism that informs his philosophy has its source in his work in psychology, which justifies James’ reputation as a ‘radical’ empiricist. An instance of this staunch naturalism, which is familiar-sounding now but was truly pioneering in James’ own day, is his description of the science of psychology as the science of ‘finite individual minds’ (*POP* 1981 [1890]: 6). This makes the data of psychology, just like the substratum of ethics, actual thoughts and feelings along with the physical world with which finite minds (and their thoughts and feelings) co-exist. In addition to giving experience this fundamental role in the development of theory, James also has profound respect for the lived experience of individuals. This is perhaps best exhibited in his willingness to investigate seriously all manner of unlikely psychic phenomena, including table-turning, possession, and the use of mediums.

It is also exhibited in his defense of the impulse to religion, despite his own apparently conflicted relation to deep-seated religious conviction. The most famous instance of James’ defense of the legitimacy of a religious worldview is his ‘The Will to Believe’, a work upon which vitriol was heaped (not least of all, by Peirce) and which James spent the remainder of his career struggling to clarify.\(^{40}\) I return to a problematic aspect of ‘The Will to Believe’ below, but in order to see that James’ metaethics adopts another element of a Peircean inquiry, entanglement with and aspiration to truth, it is

\(^{40}\) It is perhaps worth noting the most serious clarification at the outset: James’ argument in ‘The Will to Believe’ is not about religious belief in particular, but takes religious belief as an example the type of case for which James wants to defend obeying one’s passionate nature. Since ‘The Will to Believe’ was originally given to an audience of divinity students, the example was no doubt apt in context, but has led to a good deal of criticism from careless readers who mistake the aim of the work.
helpful to salvage the best part of that essay: James’ account of how empiricism works as an enterprise under the idea of truth.

James, like Peirce, thinks that we must assume that the principle of bivalence holds regarding a matter to make it a topic of inquiry. James is unflinching in his defense of the centrality of experience to advancing inquiry, but also in his commitment to a Peircean phenomenology of inquiry: we want our experiences to lead us toward the truth, and will be unsatisfied with any method which seems to us to be specious, any method which seems to aim at something other than the truth. As he puts it, ‘when as empiricists we give up the doctrine of objective certitude, we do not thereby give up the quest or hope of truth itself. We still pin our faith on its existence, and still believe that we gain an ever better position towards it by systematically continuing to roll up experience and think’ (1979 [1896]: 23-4).

Echoing the balance Peirce struck, and which has led Hilary Putnam to characterize pragmatism as ‘simultaneously fallibilist and anti-skeptical’41, James states that ‘we must go on experiencing and thinking over our experience, for only thus can our opinions grow more true; but to hold to any one of them – I absolutely do not care which – as if it could never be re-interpretable or corrigible, I believe to be a tremendously mistaken attitude’ (1979 [1896]: 22). So like Peirce, James sees that the hope of arriving at true beliefs about moral matters must motivate our inquiries. We must be prepared to revise even our most cherished beliefs in the face of recalcitrant experience.

Although this subtext comes from the discussion of voluntarism and evidentialism in ‘The Will to Believe’, the point can also be made by a return to James’ deliberately

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developed metaethics in ‘The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life’. For here, we see that James answers the third question of metaethics, the casuistic question, by invoking the regulative assumption Peirce thought necessary for any inquiry whatever: that there is a truth at the end of the inquiry in question.

Recall the anti-sceptical attitude James takes at the outset of his essay on metaethics: what makes an inquiry a philosophical one is that it is not sceptical; the inquirer operates under the premise that the truth is a goal. Like Peirce, James tempers this anti-scepticism with fallibilism. In his discussion of how moral relations exist between people, James allows for the possibility that a plurality of moral thinkers could produce a disjunctive moral universe, where each thinker is an island unto himself and there can be no standard of adjudication between them. But to ask the casuistic question at all – to ask how to determine which moral system is the true one, and how to search for such a system – is to be committed to the ideal of truth in ethics. James show that he is so committed when he argues that a standardless moral pluralism is not what the philosopher is after.

As a close reading of ‘The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life’ shows, James thought that we should accept an account that treats the members of a moral community as each contributing her own part of a standardless moral pluralism only if our best attempts at an inquiry into moral relations fails to identify any core code within the community. For if we suppose that members of a moral universe take no notice of each other, ‘we find realized for us in the ethical sphere something like that world which the antique sceptics conceived of – in which individual minds are the measure of all things,

42 It does seem that James has a maximally inclusive idea of community in mind here (i.e. everybody): ‘there can be no final truth in ethics any more than in physics, until the last man has had his experience and said his say’ (1979 [1891]: 141).
and in which on one “objective” truth, but only a multitude of “subjective” opinions can be found’ (1979 [1891]: 147). James allows this possibility only to reject it: ‘this is the kind of world’, he says, ‘which the philosopher, so long as he holds to the hope of a philosophy, will not put up’ (1979 [1891]: 147). We must set out with the expectation that objective truth is available. The value of James’ extension of Peirce’s view of inquiry would be more evident had James always made this clear.

However, James has sometimes been read as having a view of truth that allows each person to prize her own prudentially useful beliefs as ‘true’, and thus as championing precisely the relativist view that every person is a moral island unto herself.43 This reading is not without foundations in James’ writings, brings me to the main departure that James makes from Peirce with regard to inquiry: his two conceptions of truth.

2.2 Two Conceptions of Truth

The pragmatist theory of truth is one of the things that marks it as a distinct school of philosophy. James answers Peirce’s call to move past the previously accepted pattern of giving a merely ‘nominal definition’ of truth, to elucidate the concept further by grasping its place in practice (CP 5.553; 1905). Unfortunately, James did not always contribute positively to the reception of pragmatism’s theory of truth.44

43 On such a view, we can be, at best, chains of islands (when we have sufficiently overlapping moral codes). I believe that Rorty interprets James as primarily or even exclusively supporting a view of this kind. In yoking Freud and James together as defenders of ‘private poems’ and fans of ‘redescription’, he seeks to focus on the subjective side of James’ theory of truth (1989: 38-9).
44 For an account of how James’ work was received, and how it impacted the fortunes of pragmatism more generally, see (Misak 2008b).
This is in large part because James held two different ideas about truth, each leading to a different conception. These are the idea that it only makes sense to talk about truth in the context of human practices, and the idea that truth just is whatever turns out to be useful to individuals engaged in those practices. Despite his own contrary avowals, there is good reason to think James really did sometimes confuse these two ideas, and to be put on the defense for the latter when he was really referring to the former. The former sits comfortably alongside what Peirce says about truth, which I have taken to be the defensible claim that to say something is true is to say that it will stand up to whatever tests experience might offer. The latter is a subjectivist view of truth, which James’ critics pinned him on time and again. In a 1907 review of *Pragmatism, G.E.* Moore expressed concern about the changeable nature of truth on James’ view, which he ultimately dismissed as ‘silly’ (1992 [1907]: 174).

In response to such criticisms, James would typically claim that he had been misunderstood. Surely this was true some of the time. James was enormously widely read and, consequently, a common target – one who was not always treated fairly. In correspondence, he singled Moore’s review out as a ‘pretentious fiasco’ (*CWJ* 11: 26 Jan 1908), and gave the following curmudgeonly assessment of its value:

Poor childish Moore! . . . He is too weak & silly for any comment at all, so I wont waste a minute on him. A monument to the folly of pretending to have no *vision* of things, but to admit anything as possible and then select by 'logic' which is most probable! He crawls over the outside of my lecture like a myopic ant over a building, seeing only the spot he touches, tumbling into every microscopic crack, and not suspecting even that there is a centre or a whole at all. Bah! (*CWJ* 11: 12 Feb. 1908)
James also took issue with Bertrand Russell’s consequentialist reading of the term ‘useful’⁴⁵, attempting to rescue himself by claiming that it is a task, not a problem, for pragmatism ‘to discriminate the various types of truth-making satisfactoriness’. He complains to Horace Meyer Kellen that

> Our critics try to head us off from doing this by insisting in limine that we shall recognize no other kind than the economically or emotionally satisfactory. Then Russell, because I say that truth means "satisfactory leading towards an object," first equates "the true" with "the satisfactory" at large, then "the satisfactory" with "the useful," and performs his reductio ad absurdum by the mathematical process of substitution, leaving all reference to the "object" out!! The real way to refute me would be to offer a tenable and intelligible alternative—but this no critic tries to do.

Despite this dissatisfaction, James’ optimism wins out, and he ends the letter by remarking ‘we shall certainly win thru, and I personally have no fault to find with the tone in which they handle me. Russell's article tickles me by the splendid style of it, so clear and english’ (CWJ 11: 12 Feb 1908).

These entertaining protestations aside, there can be little question that James really does, at least some of the time, equate truth with utility. In the massively influential *Pragmatism*, the work placed so squarely under attack by Moore and Russell, James claimed that ‘Any idea upon which we can ride…that will carry us prosperously from any one part of our experience to any other part, linking things satisfactorily…[is] true instrumentally’ (1949 [1907]: 58). If there was any doubt what the emphasis on satisfaction might entail, James clears it up by adding that ‘Satisfactorily means more satisfactorily to ourselves’ (1949 [1907]: 61). Plead as he may, it would be hard for even

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the most sympathetic interpreter of James to understand this notion of satisfaction as
anything other than personal and subjective.46

Elsewhere, James seems to be prepared to actively defend a subjectivist view of
truth. In Varieties of Religious Experience, James begins with the kind of aspiration to
truth which seems to animate his own approach to metaethical questions in ‘The Moral
Philosopher and the Moral Life’: ‘philosophy publishes results which claim to be
universally valid if they are valid at all’ (1985 [1901]: 340). To this he adds, ‘To find an
escape from obscure and wayward personal persuasion to truth objectively valid for all
thinking men has ever been the intellect’s most cherished ideal’ (1985 [1901]: 341). But
though that ideal may be valuable for animating us in inquiry, James professes scepticism
about whether it can really be met in philosophy. Regarding its track record with respect
to securing ‘objective’ truths, James is highly critical of philosophy as a whole: ‘I need
not discredit philosophy by laborious criticism of its arguments. It will suffice if I show
that as a matter of history it fails to prove its pretension to be ‘objectively’ convincing. In
fact, philosophy does so fail’ (1985 [1901]: 344). The hopefulness about truth and the
value of dedication to its pursuit suggested elsewhere in James’ writings is thoroughly
absent here, and the pessimism expressed seems to suggest that James sometimes thought
even a Peircean view of truth, affirmed alongside a thoroughgoing fallibilism, makes too
much of the ideal of objectivity.

If we unite these diverse remarks about truth with the preceding discussion of
how James adopts Peirce’s model of inquiry, we begin to see why being of two minds

46 Jackman argues that although it seems as if James’ ‘insistence on referring to our temporary beliefs as
truths of any sort is just perverse’, his protection of this class of ‘subjective’ truths ‘stemmed from a
suspicion that, at the end of the day, there might not be anything else for the term to pick out’ (2008: 80).
James would never have abandoned truth-talk, even if ‘truth’ could never be more than the least careful
passages in Pragmatism make it out to be.
about truth causes philosophical difficulties for James. Although James’ approach to ethics exemplifies Peirce’s model of inquiry in certain ways, one place where his approach decisively departs is in his treatment of the category of what it is epistemically permissible to take on board prior to launching an inquiry.

James hints at the need for Peircean-style regulative assumptions of inquiry is his remarks about skepticism in ‘The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life’: the person who would pursue moral philosophy at all must set aside the possibility of global scepticism; she must be conducting her inquiry under the guiding principle that there is some subject matter to ethics which deserves investigation. This is a regulative assumption for the first class described by Peirce: those that are necessary to the enterprise of inquiry itself. But in ‘The Will To Believe’, James moves well past the idea that certain hypotheses can be adopted as the starting place of an inquiry to the idea that certain beliefs can be formed ahead of evidence. It is also in the ‘The Will to Believe’ that we can most clearly see a difficulty for James’ sometime commitment to the subjectivist, or ‘personal’, conception of truth. What I want to suggest is that although James may begin with an idea close to that of a Peircean regulative assumption, his approach is problematic for reasons that can be traced back to the subjectivist version of James’ view of truth. Before considering this line of argument, we need to consider the general form of what James calls ‘genuine options’.

James uses the term ‘option’ to describe any choice between two hypotheses. The decision between competing hypotheses can be differentiated on three dimensions: whether the hypotheses in question are ‘living’ (plausible to the believer) or ‘dead’ (not plausible); whether the choice between the hypotheses is a forced or avoidable one; and
whether the choice itself is momentous or trivial. A ‘genuine’ option is one that is living, forced, and momentous; that is, both hypotheses strike one as possible, the choice cannot be avoided, and there is a significant stake involved in making a choice at this time. A genuine option case is also one where neither hypothesis is adequately supported by the available evidence; however, since the choice is a forced one, we must make a decision. The entire thrust of James’ solution is this: in such cases, all we can do is make the choice that seems most rational to us.

Unfortunately, James uses the expression ‘passional nature’ to capture the personal tendencies a person has to consider one hypothesis more rational than another. As a result, the focus on rationality present in his account tends to be overlooked. Had James stressed, as he does elsewhere\textsuperscript{47}, that what we consider rational is not determined by some faculty called ‘reason’ operating apart from any biological or social context, the suggestion that we can choose between hypotheses based on what seems most agreeable to us might not have seemed such an easy target – that choice would just be understood as the ‘rational’ choice based on a broader understanding of rationality than ‘that which reason prescribes’.

But this is not the tactic James uses in ‘The Will to Believe’. Instead, he frames his position this way: our ‘non-intellectual nature does influence our convictions’ (1979 [1896]: 19). Since this is a fact, the question that follows is what we should now say about the legitimacy of that practice. And it is in response to that question that James offers his now infamous thesis: ‘Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its

\textsuperscript{47} For example, see his 1879 \textit{The Sentiment of Rationality}. 
nature be decided on intellectual grounds’ (1979 [1896]: 20). James’ defender will protest that it is only in genuine-option cases that he believes we can, and should, choose what we will believe. As he himself puts the point, ‘wherever there is no forced option, the dispassionately judicial intellect with no pet hypothesis…ought to be our ideal’ (1979 [1896]: 27). Though this clarification is enough to forestall complaints in the vein of ‘James says we can believe whatever we want!’, it does little to combat the objections I now wish to raise.

There are two crucial errors in James’ account of how we can be justified in choosing to believe. The first such error is one of scope. The range of cases James offers as examples distort the justification appealed to by Peirce for the use of regulative assumptions. James’ account of how to select a belief in genuine-option cases focuses not on what enables central, shared human practices of inquiry, but instead concentrates narrowly on the benefits to the individual.

To articulate this criticism, it will be helpful to consider James’ own examples. One is the alpine climber who finds himself faced with the choice of whether to stand still and freeze to death or take a chance on the path that will lead him to safety, if he can avoid the treacherous mountain chasm (1979 [1896]: 33). James describes this as a case where ‘faith in the fact can help create the fact’, where establishing a truth ‘is dependent on…personal action’ (1979 [1896]: 29). Another such case is the person who wishes to make a friend, but is uncertain whether the target of his interest will reciprocate (1979 [1896]: 28). In both of these cases, what will be preserved (or compromised) is the welfare of the individual – her social happiness, or her protection from a grisly end in some alpine pass. Consider Peirce’s description of regulative assumptions: they are
propositions endorsed for the purposes of an inquiry pursued. It would be a stretch to describe either of James’ examples as involving an inquiry. Whereas Peirce suggests taking regulative assumptions on board that we may have a rational hope of finding the truth, James clearly has the more subjectivist conception of truth at work here: what the subject of each example wants it not to get to the truth of the matter, but to create a new truth.

Here I am echoing James’ fellow in the Harvard philosophy department, George Santayana, who complained that James had the matter backwards: he saw cases where a truth needed to be established to satisfy the individual as cases where the truth had really been there all along (2009 [1920]: 60-61). Combined with James’ sometime defense of the notion of subjective or personal truth, this obscures the core of truth in his defense of choosing our beliefs in genuine-option cases: in some cases, and in some types of inquiry central to human life, there are beliefs we simply need to carry on. They are guiding principles, regulative principles in the Peircean sense.

The second crucial error is one of emphasis. By emphasizing difference in temperament between the evidentialist and the voluntarist, James draws attention towards the supposed right of the individual to believe as she likes at her own peril and away from a fundamental fact about the pragmatist model of inquiry: it is best pursued by communities, not by individuals. I think that on many inquiries important enough to warrant the employment of guiding principles, rather than patiently awaiting new evidence, James is simply wrong to assert that ‘my own stake is important enough to give me the right to choose my own form of risk’ (1979 [1896]: 31). And we must certainly hope that his blithe assurance that ‘As a rule we disbelieve all facts and theories for
which we have no use’ is not accurate (1979 [1896]: 19). The difficulty here is that when James says that ‘Our errors are surely not such awfully solemn things’ (1979 [1896]: 25), he has lost sight of the fact that the aspiration to truth – to truth as durable and resistant to future recalcitrant experience – is most likely to be satisfied by a community. The errors of the individual, of enough individuals, cannot but undermine that aspiration – one which, despite this confusion, James is deeply committed to.48

It is, I suggest, James’ commitment to the personal notion of truth that led him to take a disastrously liberal approach to the insight that motivates Peirce to admit regulative assumptions. The idea that the true is the useful could be seen as licensing both of the moves that James makes that I have claimed are mistakes. These moves could not be licensed on the other, Peircean idea of truth, which James sometimes does clearly endorse.49

First, the model of the true as the useful allows one to choose whatever is required to stand as an assumption to get one to a desired truth. If the truth is what is expedient in human practice, without any further qualification, it is mutable. As James puts it, ‘everything here is plastic’ (1949 [1907]: 61). What I am in search of is not the end of inquiry, not a belief that will stand up to all of the vagaries of experience – for though that sort of belief may be useful, it sometimes may not be. It is its stability rather than its utility that characterizes it, and that demands it be acquired by a method which stands up to internal scrutiny.50 The means to secure a truth which is mutable does not need to

48 For an alternate account of James’ employment of regulative assumptions, see Alex Klein (forthcoming), ‘Science, Religion, and ‘The Will to Believe’.
49 As I think my reading of ‘The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life’ shows, James often – and crucially, in ethics – does more carefully express his adherence to a Peircean model of truth and inquiry.
50 This is a topic contested in contemporary epistemology under the topic of epistemic value, and is often framed as the question: if a truth isn’t useful to me, ought I to pursue its acquisition?
stand up to such rigorous limitations as Peirce placed on inquiry, included restrictions on the range and role of regulative assumptions, for the ‘truth’ here and now could be supplanted by a different ‘truth’ later when recalcitrant experience undermines the first but is compatible with the second.⁵¹

Despite this difference, Peirce and James both explicitly rule out the suitability of certain patently silly candidate working hypotheses (or full-fledged beliefs formed ahead of the evidence). Peirce remarks that ‘It may be indispensable that I should have $500 in the bank—because I have given checks to that amount. But I have never found that the indispensability directly affected my balance, in the least’ (CP 2. 113; 1902). In a similar vein, James questions whether we can, ‘by any effort of our will, or by any strength of wish that it were true…feel certain that the sum of the one-dollar bills in our pocket must be a hundred dollars?’ The answer is no: ‘We can say…these things, but we are absolutely impotent to believe them’ (1979 [1896]: 15-6). This qualification on James’ part goes some distance toward making his version of the category of working hypotheses – more akin to working beliefs – palatable, but not far enough. He still allows the criterion for the acceptability of a belief as true to be whether or not it is believable to the individual facing a problematic, genuine-option type situation.

James legitimizes such working beliefs as a useful device to get to the useful – that is, to the subjectivist version of truth. It should be obvious that this is a departure from the position of Peirce, who made the point against such inclusiveness strongly:

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⁵¹ We must note, however, that James had limitations on the subjective notion of truth even if they were less rigorous. In Principles of Psychology, he provides a definition of plasticity that makes this clear: it is ‘the possession of a structure weak enough to yield to an influence, but strong enough not to yield all at once’ (1981 [1890]: 110). So though subjective truths yield, they don’t yield under any pressure whatever, but are stable to at least a minimal degree.
If [the] object [of a regulative assumption] were any determinate fact, any private interest, it might conflict with the results of knowledge and so with itself; but when its object is of a nature as wide as the community can turn out to be, it is always a hypothesis uncontradicted by facts and justified by its indispensibleness for making any action rational. (*CP* 5.357; 1869)

A connection between James’ second mistake about what it is permissible to belief ahead of the evidence and the model of the true as the useful can also be made. That model lends itself to individualism about truth, for what is useful will not always be the same to persons of different temperaments or in different circumstances. This is what leads to the pluralist strain of pragmatism coming out of James, the strain picked up by Rorty and his followers.

Pluralism about truth is cherished by many liberals, as it allows them to avoid political perfectionism with its oft attendant paternalism. But the cost of pluralism about truth is very high when it leads, as it does in Rorty’s case, to the expectation that there will always be an ‘us’ and a ‘them’, that agreement can be broadened but never universal.52 While this sounds admirably tolerant in the academic sphere, it may prove disastrous in practice – a rather unwelcome result for a view that began under the description of ‘critical common-sensism’ (*CP* 5.497; 1905), and led philosopher and social reformer Jane Addams to argue that cosmopolitanism is a prerequisite for the pursuit of truth by emphasizing the experiences and knowledge of a ‘them’ far from the club of Rorty’s ironic liberals – the poor and marginalized. Pluralism about truth seems egalitarian and generous when it allows each individual to tell her own story in a way that allows her to be satisfied with her contingent circumstances, but ultimately blocks the

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52 Rorty makes this point explicitly in *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, when he says that ‘our sense of solidarity is strongest when those with whom solidarity is expressed are thought of as “one of us,” where “us” means something smaller and more local than the human race’ (1989: 191). Enshrining the tendency to in-group/out-group thinking seems to me indefensible.
path of inquiry when it maintains that any conception of ‘us’ as a community requires some contrastive ‘they’ (1989: 190).

In sum, the problem is this: when James (and the others who follow him down this road) goes past the point of considering practices and focuses too narrowly on the experience of the individual, he loses sight of the role of the community in inquiry, and of the need for such a community to be maximally inclusive. It may sound odd to praise pragmatism as a philosophy that takes experience seriously and then claim that James goes too far by taking the needs of individuals so seriously – but where he goes too far is in mischaracterizing what satisfies the needs of an individual as ‘personal truth’. That mistake leads to a failure to satisfy the standards of inquiry.

Peirce himself took James to task for lack of precision, brusquely and repeatedly. A review of *Principles of Psychology* published in the *Nation* captures Peirce’s typical exasperation: ‘With an extraordinarily racy and forcible style, Prof. James is continually wrestling words and phrases of exact import to unauthorized and unsuitable uses’ (*CP* 8.57; 1891). Peirce goes on to remark that ‘James's thought is highly original, or at least novel; but it is originality of the destructive kind’ (*CP* 8.58; 1891). Unsurprisingly, he gets most agitated when truth is the topic. After the publication of James’ *The Meaning of Truth*, Peirce wrote to him that ‘I thought your Will to Believe was a very exaggerated utterance, such as injures a serious man very much; but to say what you now do is far more suicidal. I have laid awake several nights in succession in grief that you should be so careless of what you say’ (*CWJ* 12: 1909 Mar 9). He also saw that James was leading others astray: ‘Mr. Ferdinand C.S. Schiller informs us that he and James have made up
their minds that the true is simply the satisfactory. No doubt; but to say "satisfactory" is not to complete any predicate whatever. Satisfactory to what end?’ (CP 5.552; 1905).

Despite all this, Peirce does not like others to criticize James’ pragmatism. In response to a critical article by Edwin Tausch in the Monist, Peirce writes James that he stands ready to defend his friend: ‘Nothing would gratify me more than to take up the cudgels in your defence though controversy is not, generally speaking, to my taste. The January Monist, which I have just received, appears to open with an article…that at a hasty glance seems to be an indecent attack upon you (CWJ 12: 1909 Jan 8). Presumably Peirce thought his own attacks ‘decent’, but those that cut at the heart of pragmatism – to which he saw James as committed, despite his imprecision about the notion of truth – unfounded.

Crucially, Peirce also saw that James could do for pragmatism what he himself could not: James could make it accessible, accepted, and popular. James single-handedly made it a position that had to be considered. This was partly because of his relative good-fortune in the academic sphere, contrasted with Peirce’s terrible misfortune in the same arena. It was also partly because of the differences in temperament between the two, a difference Peirce himself saw clearly: ‘Who…could be of a nature so different from his as I? He so concrete, so living; I a mere table of contents, so abstract, a very snarl of twine’ (CP 6.184; 1911). James was not ‘concrete’ and ‘living’ merely by nature, but also attempted to be so in the focus of his philosophy – a fact that allowed him to see applications for Peirce’s philosophy beyond those originally intended for them by their author.
2.3 James’ Improvements to the Pragmatist Picture

This leads me to the major improvement that James makes in his articulation and application of Peirce’s model of inquiry. Peirce saw that we are, as human beings and members of a community who have to cope with conflict, always immersed in a context of inquiry. What James added to this is that the context of inquiry we find ourselves immersed in is unmistakably marked by a moral dimension. He puts the point beautifully in ‘The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life’:

Were all other things, gods and men and starry heavens, blotted out from this universe, and were there left but one rock with two loving souls upon it, that rock would have as thoroughly moral a constitution as any possible world which the eternities and immensities could harbor…while they lived, there would be real good things and real bad things in the universe; there would be obligations, claims, and expectations; obediences, refusals, and disappointments; compunctions and longings for harmony to come again, and inward peace of conscience when it was restored; there would, in short, be a moral life. (1979 [1891]: 150)

The phenomena picked out by James here suggest that on Peirce’s own account of what it is to be a scientist, the ethicist can qualify. In his ‘Lessons from the History of Science’, Peirce claims that there are three types of people: artists, entrepreneurs, and scientists. Only the scientist sees nature as ‘a cosmos’, as a target of explanation (rather than inspiration or exploitation). The scientific person is animated by the ‘impulse to penetrate into the reason of things’, and science itself is identified with that which the scientific person does in the pursuit of truth (CP 1.43; 1896). An exploration of the phenomena James describes as the components of moral life can clearly be scientific in the sense that Peirce argues so strenuously that philosophy must be made scientific. In giving that which we observe and experience in moral life the characteristically curious
and investigative treatment that made him such an effective empiricist, James begins to show us what it might mean for ethics to be a normative science.

As we have seen, Peirce was anxious to keep ‘vital matters’ at arms reach when dealing with topics like truth. I have suggested that he took matters too far. James sometimes took matters too far in the other direction, arguing for the possibility and permissibility of voluntarism in genuine option cases based on the claim that the very vitality of such cases allows for a kind of epistemic looseness. In each case, the aspiration was a reasonable one. Peirce sought to protect science from the prospect of having its agenda set by pressing, immediate concerns it could not satisfy, but also to protect what he saw as the correctly instinctual business of moral decision-making from overbearing scientism. James sought to make naturalism utterly thoroughgoing, and to make sense of morality in the same terms we might sense of any other avenue of human investigation.

Though James’ efforts were not an unqualified success, one area where I have suggested that he does succeed is in showing that the structure of morality, the metaethical support for the implements used in everyday moral decision-making, is scrutinizable by a Peircean mode of inquiry. And James is right in pointing out that simply being together brings us into moral relationships with one another. This makes getting on with others the most vital of vital matters.
Inquiry is the life-blood of every science and is constantly employed in every craft, science, and profession.

John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*
Chapter 3  John Dewey: Champion of Inquiry

Like James, and unlike Peirce, Dewey had a flourishing academic career and was a prominent public intellectual during his lifetime. After completing his graduate studies at Johns Hopkins (where he took pains to avoid Peirce’s seminar in logic53), Dewey made a lasting impact in Chicago, where he and Jane Addams might be said to have been developing the theory and practice of pragmatism. James had great enthusiasm for Dewey’s work, remarking that the system he was working at with his colleagues in Chicago was ‘simple, massive, and positive’, and deserving of ‘the title of a new system of philosophy’ (1977 [1904]: 102). From Chicago, Dewey went to Columbia, where he taught for the remainder of his career, influenced a generation of students, and left a lasting pragmatist imprint on the university’s philosophical leanings. More than any other philosopher, Dewey was the face of pragmatism in the 20th century.

Like James, Dewey came to see his own views as a continuation of Peirce’s. Despite his initial disinclination to engage in Peirce’s study of logic, Dewey came to see in Peirce’s work an antidote to the problems of idealism and Hegelianism that dogged his own early philosophy. In framing his own understanding of logic, Dewey remarks that ‘with the outstanding exception of Peirce, I have learned most from the writers with whose positions I have in the end been compelled to disagree’ (1986 [1938]: 5). As we shall see, Dewey’s agreement with Peirce is deep, and leads to important treatments of questions overlooked by Peirce.

53 An account of Dewey’s refusal to engage with Peirce’s logic at that time is presented in Jay Martin’s biography, The Education of John Dewey. As Martin reports, Dewey’s opting out of Peirce’s course meant that he had to seek another to fill his timetable. Thus, passing on Peirce’s logic meant reading Hegel’s Philosophy of History instead; a work Dewey would certainly have read differently with Peirce’s ideas about Hegel in the background (Martin 2002: 64).
3.1 Dewey on Experience in Moral Inquiry

One challenge of elucidating Dewey’s considered views is the great mass of work he produced over the span of a long and productive career. Much of what he wrote can be understood as an application of his version of pragmatism as a method for philosophy, but the works that are most salient here are his 1908 *Ethics* and the 1938 *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*. The latter shows that Dewey eventually self-consciously adopted Peirce’s account of inquiry, while the former shows how Dewey’s approach to moral philosophy was shaped by that account of inquiry even before he saw himself as deliberately working in the Peircean tradition. An analysis of selections from these texts will show that Dewey, like James, exhibits a commitment to the features of a Peircean mode of inquiry in his approach to ethics: he conceives of experience as broad in both senses, carves out a role for regulative assumptions of inquiry, and conceives of moral inquiry as aiming at the truth.

Dewey follows Peirce and James in maintaining a broad conception in terms of what counts as experience. In his discussion of experience and the methods of philosophy in *Experience and Nature*, Dewey dismisses both the transcendentalist who has to maintain a realm beyond experience, and the empiricist who takes a materialist view of experience and limits experience to the classical sensory model:

> according to some thinkers...Experience...is not only something extraneous which is occasionally superimposed upon nature, but it forms a veil or screen which shuts us off from nature, unless in some way it can be "transcended." So something non-natural by way of reason or intuition is introduced, something supra-empirical. According to an opposite school experience fares as badly, nature being thought to signify something wholly material and mechanistic. (1981 [1925]: 10)
As with most problematic or dichotomized discourses, Dewey finds the solution in the middle: in granting to the transcendentalist that experience goes beyond what is captured as physical, sensory inputs while granting to the materialist that experience has an immediacy and a palpability that suggests we are coming hard up against what Peirce termed ‘external permanency’, without anything diaphanous inbetween. Indeed, Dewey cites ‘stars, rocks, trees, and creeping things’ as capable of provoking experience directly (1981 [1925]: 11).

We have seen that Peirce united his broad conception of experience under the heading of ‘that which surprises’, allowing him to count manipulations of mental diagrams and processing of thought experiments as ways of gathering experience. Dewey’s work on aesthetics, especially his seminal *Art as Experience*, shows how interaction with artworks can also be seen as a way of gathering experience. In this context, Dewey differentiates between the constant stream of experience – what James called the ‘blooming, buzzing confusion’ – and having ‘an experience’. This latter sense, Dewey says, is the critical one: ‘Experience in this vital sense is defined by those situations and episodes that we spontaneously refer to as being "real experiences"; those things of which we say in recalling them, "that was an experience”’ (1987 [1934]: 43).

Dewey argues that one way of understanding what marks an experience, whether it is viewing sketches based on the full set of Beethoven’s piano sonatas or discovering how to double the area of a square, is that there is something about the episode that stands out from the background noise of non-differentiated experience. This allows for an extremely broad range of factors to be that which causes the episode to stand out, to be
that which surprises – for example, we can have an experience of beauty. Clearly, Dewey has the pragmatist brand of empiricism at the heart of this account.

Like Peirce and James, Dewey also emphasizes that a conception of experience must be broad in the second sense, in terms of counting the experience of the wider community. In his discussion of the relation of social organization to individual life in *Ethics*, he argues that breadth of community life increases individual powers. One such ‘power’, if it can be termed such, is the spirit of scientific inquiry. A varied society offers new experience and also makes certain demands; in particular, he says, it demands a certain ‘congruence’ (1978 [1908]: 386).

This will sound like an echo of Peirce’s account of how social pressure functions to rule out unsatisfactory methods of belief formation, which fail to produce either congruence (anchored by stable, true belief) or satisfaction. Dewey adds to this that some of the evidence garnered by taking the experience of our fellows into account is distinctively moral in character, and can be put to work in developing better habits. Social conditions encourage us to select and endorse our better tendencies; the power of discrimination is awakened and made into a habit by our immersion in society. Thus, in his *Logic*, Dewey devotes much consideration of what he terms the matrix of inquiry, including a whole chapter on the social component captured in the ‘cultural matrix’ of inquiry. The most salient Peircean parallel lies in Dewey’s view that the cultural matrix is the key to our epistemic betterment.

In addition to taking a broad view of what constitutes experience, Dewey professes a commitment to the second element of Peircean inquiry, the use of regulative assumptions. In his own expression of the pragmatist motif of the rejection of ultimate
and invariant first principles of philosophy, Dewey points out that there are propositions that function as ‘primary logical principles’ for us – but they are produced in the process of inquiry, not decided antecedently. By now, this will sound familiar. And for good reason: Dewey’s elucidation of his own primary logical principles is a deferral to Peirce: ‘Neither the existence nor the indispensability of primary logical principles is…denied. The question concerns their origin and use. In what is said upon this matter, I follow in the main the account given by Peirce of “guiding” or “leading” principles’ (1986 [1938]: 19).

Dewey connects the idea of regulative assumptions with Peirce’s claim that inference is guided by habit. He argues that our habits express regulative principles: ‘when it is found that there are habits involved in every inference, in spite of differences of subject matter, and when these habits are noted and formulated, then the formulations are guiding or leading principles’ (1986 [1938]: 21). As habits are developed in the course of experience, the ground for such guiding principles simply is that experience. Thus, while such principles may be ‘operationally a priori with respect to further inquiry’54, they have naturalistic origins (1986 [1938]: 21). ‘A priori’ here really means pre-established, not ‘without reliance on experience’.

On the question of use, Dewey claims that the validity of regulative principles can only be determined ‘by the coherency of the consequences produced by the habits they articulate’ (1986 [1938]: 21). Use of the logical term ‘validity’ may be misguided here, but what Dewey is trying to articulate is a resoundingly Peircean point, one that we shall

54 This is an insight that Dewey shares with Lewis – as we shall see in our discussion of Lewis, his notion of the pragmatic a priori also seeks to explain the sense in which regulative assumptions are prior to inquiry without making them products of, and justified by, reason alone. Curiously though, Dewey doesn’t mention Lewis here – even though A Pragmatic Conception of the A Priori was 15 years old by the time Dewey’s Logic arrived.
see is well-articulated by Lewis: the vindication of regulative principles of inquiry can only be a pragmatic one. When we look to the consequences of adopting a principle, either as a necessary element of a particular inquiry or for the business of inquiry in general, we follow through on Peirce’s pragmatic maxim. Though that maxim was originally expressed as a means of testing for the pragmatic grade of clarity, its application to a proposition expressing a regulative principle of inquiry provides a helpful guide: to consider whether or not a principle is vindicated in pragmatism, look to the consequences of treating that principle as a working hypothesis for action and deliberation. It is not the task of a principle such as that of bivalence to prove itself true; if it proves itself the right kind of instrument for the project of inquiry, no further justification of its adoption can be demanded.

To this point, all of what Dewey says about the nature of regulative assumptions fits comfortably within the Peircean rubric. In this respect, Dewey’s view is closer than Peirce than to James, for he maintains that such principles remain assumptions and do not become full-fledged beliefs selected in advance of evidence. But one problem that arises in making Dewey’s view here fully coherent is that he fails to distinguish between the two types of regulative assumptions set out by Peirce. Indeed, rather than classifying one set of regulative principles as those necessary for inquiry itself and another set as those locally necessary for particular, prized human inquiries, Dewey seems to make James’ mistake, but in the opposite direction.

Recall that in his approach to genuine option cases, James focused on locally necessary beliefs supporting individual aims, and allowed the ‘necessity’ in question to be personal and prudential. Dewey goes in the other direction, claiming that all
regulative assumptions are ‘free from connection with any particular subject-matter’ (1986 [1938]: 21). On its own, this assertion could be taken as simply rejecting Peirce’s division in favour of a unitary class of regulative assumptions – those which are necessary to inquiry itself. There would be no issue of coherence. But taken alongside Dewey’s claim that inquiries furnish us with experience that leads to the production of the habits that are formalized into regulative assumptions for further inquiry, there may be a problem. If initial inquiries produce the habits that lead to principles for future inquiries, the particular subject-matter of the initial inquiries could be playing a role in the origination of such principles. The most generous interpretation should take Dewey as saying that what we abstract from the initial inquiries are rules for inference that are perfectly general, and which could have been extracted from any experience whatever. Thus, they really are free from the taint of particular subject-matter, and we have no reason to suppose that what is really being captured are only the locally necessary regulative principles.

Though I think that Dewey can deflect this worry, unpacking the process of how one inquiry, or set of inquiries, provides guiding principles for future inquiries leads to a problem that is not so easily solved. How does the first inquiry get off the ground? If regulative principles of inquiry can only be the product of past inquiries, how can inquiry begin at all? If the answer is that regulative principles are not necessary after all, Dewey risks backsliding into a Jamesian position where we can adopt the useful as true. If the answer is that such principles are necessary, Dewey owes an account of how proto-inquiry evolves into inquiry proper once the right guiding principles are in place. The latter, I take it, is the kind of defense implicit in Dewey’s logic – with its focus on the
biological and social matrices of inquiry, an evolutionary account of how full-blooded inquiry comes into being would seem the natural solution. The question, and one which I leave open, is whether such a solution can be satisfying: if inquiry is marked by the use of necessary regulative principles, there will some ‘gestalt’-type point after which a person becomes an inquirer and before which they were doing something else, although they were trying to inquire.55

With James, Dewey clearly adopts the Peircean idea that inquiry is bound up with the concept of truth, as he takes the aspiration to truth to be part and parcel of a philosophical approach to moral questions. In the ‘Preface’ to his *Ethics*, Dewey proclaims that the aim of the text is to produce ‘vital conviction’ that moral problems are real, and that they can be dealt with (1978 [1908]: 4). And like James and Peirce, he wanted that dealing to be scientific, giving a nominal definition of ethics as ‘as the science that deals with conduct, in so far as this is considered as right or wrong, good or bad’ (1978 [1908]: 7). In his discussion of ethical theories, Dewey devotes basically no space to concerns about relativism or non-cognitivist theories like emotivism, which would not have counted as ethics in the scientific sense he stipulated.

Instead, he focuses on consequentialist and ‘attitude’ theories of knowledge (including virtue ethics and deontology), working under the hypothesis that each of these families of theory has resonance with our intuitions precisely because each has picked out a different feature of the moral. The error of each is to presume that the feature it focuses on is the only important one, a partisan position Dewey chides. So long as truth is the aim and experience the ground, he is happy to declare that ‘[T]here is a place in the moral

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55 This type of solution might not be unwelcome to Dewey, given the emphasis on character and virtue found in his ethics, but it strikes me as a solution that would be idiosyncratic within a pragmatist framework.
life for reason and a place for happiness – a place for duty and a place for valuation’ (1978 [1908]: 4). Which of these elements is the appropriate focus relies, Dewey firmly maintains, on the situation. This leads me from the resoundingly Peircean elements of Dewey’s view of truth and experience in inquiry to two problems that arise in its application.

3.2 The Moral ‘Situation’ and Warranted Assertability

Dewey sounds like a model Peircean inquirer when he urges us to use the scientific method for ethics, to let the ‘tardy processes of the investigator’ unfold as they may, rather than resorting to comparatively swift a priori means of setting up an ethical system (1978 [1908]: 5). His attempt to take the peculiarities of the human context into account begins from a laudable commitment to following through on the shared pragmatist thought behind James’ claim that ‘there is no such thing possible as an ethical philosophy dogmatically made up in advance’ (1979 [1891]: 141). The attempt to make sense of context begins with Dewey arguing that theory must be historically situated in order for its ‘intellectual instruments’ to be seen as developed in response to real problems (1978 [1908]: 4). Just as we must understand history to make sense of ethical systems that might seem outlandish on their own, Dewey argues that we must understand how actual moral problems present themselves in a way that demands resolution. To give a naturalistic account of the wellspring of moral inquiry, Dewey adopted Peirce’s doubt-belief model.56

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56 Murphey (2005) makes the point that Dewey adopts Peirce’s doubt-belief model, but does not mention the dramatic differences between the sparse ethical theory of Peirce, and the extensive and wide-ranging ethical theory of Dewey.
Where Dewey makes a critical error is in moving the doubt in question from the inquirer into the situation that makes up the context of the inquiry. Dewey describes such situations as contextual wholes involving the inquirer and the salient circumstances of inquiry. Because he wants to give some kind of metaphysical status to such situations rather than merely delimiting epistemically salient factors, this view is worrisome.

The problematic shifting of doubt from inquirer to situation is signaled at the beginning of Dewey’s logic, where he frames ‘inquiry as determination of an indeterminate situation’ (1986 [1938]: 3). Since what Dewey terms the science of ethics takes conduct as its subject, the kind of indeterminate situation in question is one where what is indeterminate is what to do. To pick out such situations, what we are looking for is an indeterminate situation demanding resolution where ‘the differentiating traits, the special earmarks’ of distinctively moral considerations are present (1978 [1908]: 187).

One feature that Dewey thinks undisputed is that moral situations involve voluntary activity. We would have an amoral situation rather than a moral one if we were dealing with ‘a somnambulist, or an imbecile, or insane, or an infant’ (1978 [1908]: 187). But not all situations involving voluntary activity must be moral ones, so a further criterion is required. Dewey’s suggestion is that the ‘moral factor’ enters the picture when there is a felt incompatibility between ends, a conflict between the proposed end and some interest – when ‘an end has to be developed out of conflict’ (1978 [1908]: 192).

We now have two defining traits of the moral situation. Moral experience is a matter of conduct, of activities called for by ideas about the worth of an end. In the course of such experience, there will be demands to take a direction when we are faced with a situation where there is conflict and not all ends can be met. Thus, Dewey defines
moral conduct as ‘activity called forth and directed by ideas of value or worth, where the values concerned are so mutually incompatible as to require consideration and selection before an overt action is entered upon’ (1978 [1908]: 194).

To this, he adds that when a person is trying to decide what to do, the appeal he makes is to himself – what does he think is the desirable end? And so for Dewey, the fundamental question in any moral situation is ‘What shall the agent be? What sort of a character shall he assume?’ (1978 [1908]: 194) Resolving a problematic situation when choosing between incompatible ends is also choosing one’s character. This added consideration complicates matters for Dewey, because the question of character can arise at any time: there is ‘no fixed line between the morally indifferent and the morally significant’. This is so because of the introduction of considerations of character, for the resolution of any situation ‘strengthens or weakens some habit which influences whole classes of judgments’ (1978 [1908]: 195).

This leads me to one cause for serious concern about Dewey’s approach, which is that trying to apply it leads to issues with how to frame the situation. There seems to be no non-arbitrary way to delineate a situation. In a given problematic situation, there is no way of knowing which elements of that the situation could be morally significant without considering each one by one. This means that in every situation, we have to set the frame anew, and because every situation is a unique contextual whole, there can be no principled way of doing that. In some cases, ‘that it is Tuesday’ will be salient; in other

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57 The fact that there is no fixed line between the morally indifferent and the morally significant has led some interpreters to hold that Dewey’s view as a particularist one: reasons that may count as moral in one situation because of their effect on habit may not have such an effect elsewhere, and may in that second case be morally indifferent. I return to the question of whether Dewey really is best read as particularist in Chapter 6, where I argue that the pragmatist should be a generalist about the use of principles in moral reasoning.
cases, ‘that Grandmother lives in Philadelphia’. Even if we could, through exhaustive attention to the potentially morally salient particulars, set the frame for the ‘size’ of the moral situation, we would still have to know what the downstream effects for our habits of choosing one resolution over another would be. And even if we could do this reasonably well, it would mean that the ‘situation’ we just succeeded in focusing has once again become impossibly large and indefinite.\(^{58}\)

This view is untenable for a second reason: as Dewey says, his position entails that ‘every situation has its own measure and quality of progress’ (1983 [1922]: 195). On such a view, it is impossible to compare cases in any meaningful way – if each has its own standard, its own measure, by what possible criterion could we compare them? One possible response is to say that we could judge how well each meets its own standard, and then compare those judgments across cases. But this is a non-starter. Either such a comparison would require invoking an overarching principle for sorting the relative worth of the standards of situations, or it could offer no verdict more informative than something like ‘success in case A by Y’s standards is such-and-such’, ‘success in case B by Z’s standards is such-and-such’. The impossibility of comparing cases in a constructive way is a real detriment in a view meant to make the most of experience, as it seems to rule out learning something in one case and then applying it in another. In fact, I can see no way of sensibly articulating how we make a judgment at all without appeal to either the experience of past cases or general principles.

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\(^{58}\) Jennifer Welchman sees Dewey as having argued that ‘very few [situations] ever become genuine moral situations’ (1995: 170). Given the focus on character, this is initially surprising. However, when we consider the importance Dewey places on education and the development of good habits, it may not be so surprising that he thought that relatively few situations would really impact one’s character in a way that had downstream moral consequences.
Defenders of Dewey will argue that his version of the pragmatist theory of truth is the key to resolving this difficulty. Dewey conceives the end of inquiry as ‘warranted assertability’. In his *Logic*, he describes a Peircean inquiry ending there, rather than with truth so-called:

That inquiry is related to doubt will, I suppose, be admitted. The admission carries with it an implication regarding the end of inquiry: *end* in both senses of the word, as end-in-view and as close or termination. If inquiry begins in doubt, it terminates in the institution of conditions which remove need for doubt. The latter state of affairs may be designated by the words *belief* and *knowledge* … I prefer the words "warranted assertibility". (1986 [1938]: 14-15)

Dewey’s stated reason for preferring to speak of warranted assertability rather than truth or knowledge is that to focus on what we can be presently be warranted in asserting is to remind ourselves of the ongoing and incomplete nature of inquiry: ‘The use of a term that designates a potentiality rather than an actuality involves recognition that all special conclusions of special inquiries are parts of an enterprise that is continually renewed, or is a going concern’ (1986 [1938]: 17).

Taken on its own, this reason for preferring one way of describing the end of inquiry rather than another – to emphasize fallibility – is non-problematic. But though emphasizing fallibility may be what initially motivates Dewey to adopt the language of warrant, that adoption has other consequences. One such consequence is that a question naturally follows: who grants or underwrites the warrant? Dewey’s focus on the community as the social matrix of inquiry places that responsibility for granting warrant on the members of the community. But where the warrant is secured from one’s peers or community, whose consent makes one’s judgments admissible in shared deliberation, the idea of ‘external permanency’ present in Peirce’s philosophy disappears. One might think that this is all to the good – without a working hypothesis of reality tied up with
warranted assertability, we get a notion of truth appropriate to persons and their conversations. But as I shall argue in Chapter 5, it is truth and not warranted assertability that we aspire to in the shared deliberations of moral discourse. With this promissory note in place, here I merely suggest that in addition to having difficulty with considerations about the scope of situations, the direction Dewey takes with warranted assertability would not be the most fruitful direction to take in developing a pragmatist position that responds to today’s metaethical debates.

I also think that the historical record ought to be set straight on how seriously un-Peircean Dewey’s view becomes, despite using Peirce’s doubt-belief model as its jumping off point. Dewey’s take on moral situations not only leads into philosophical difficulties, it leads to a metaethical position unlike anything Peirce would have endorsed. Insofar as Peirce had begun to develop any actual content under his heading of ethics as a normative science, he said things that point away from Dewey’s approach and, as we shall see, in the direction of something much more like the account developed by C.I. Lewis.

In a long letter to Christine Ladd-Franklin where Peirce tries to sum up his own philosophical development, he comments on the status of crucial normative notions: ‘I, to whom nothing seems so thoroughly real as generals…regard Truth and Justice as literally the most powerful powers in the world’.\(^\text{59}\) This tantalizing declaration occurs in a passage where Peirce laments that James thought his 1903 Harvard lectures unpublishable, because James himself could not understand them. Peirce thought that James’ failure to understand them stemmed from his status, as Peirce took it, as a

‘thoroughgoing Wundtian’. Peirce inferred that James’ interest in the particulars of psychology meant a disinterest in the possibility of universal ‘forces’ such as truth and justice. This comment, however, could have been applied even more forcefully against Dewey, who went past refusing any moral philosophy ‘made up in advance’ to a moral philosophy that has to be made anew from scratch each time a problematic situation arises.

I will go on to argue in Part II that the kinds of problems Dewey runs into on account of the problematic moral metaphysics he adopts are problems that reappear, in equally troubling forms, in contemporary particularist accounts. This will be one plank in my argument that the pragmatist should be a generalist.

This is not, of course, to say that Dewey offers nothing novel of lasting value. As we shall see in the next section, like James, the breadth of Dewey’s exploration of the moral vastly outstrips Peirce’s, and he, too, makes a significant contribution to adapting the Peircean model of inquiry for moral questions.60

### 3.3 Dewey’s Improvements to the Pragmatist Picture

Dewey’s main improvement on Peirce’s comparatively austere account of inquiry is to make it clear how widespread and central a practice inquiry really is, which motivates the attempt to apply inquiry to concrete moral problems. As he points out in the ‘Preface’ to his 1938 *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, inquiries do exist and are everywhere: ‘Inquiry is the life-blood of every science and is constantly employed in

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60 This is to say nothing at all, of course, of his signal accomplishments in philosophy of education and aesthetics, some of the strongest areas of Dewey’s massive philosophical production.
every art, craft, science, and profession’ (1986 [1938]: 12). Even more than James, Dewey developed the insight that ethics is an area of inquiry.

His voluminous works are characterized throughout by the pragmatist attitude of anti-scepticism tempered by fallibilism. Dewey’s great contribution, which cannot be overstated, is that he was tremendously sensitive to the range of difficulties faced by inquirers as human beings, as persons living together in communities needing to get along to go along. He saw which modern questions were amenable to, and often desperately in need of, philosophical treatment via inquiry.

Dewey draws attention to places where doubt about moral matters is real and pressing. In doing so, he is expressing the pragmatist anti-scepticism we have seen in both James and Peirce. Doubts that generate inquiry must be genuine, not spurious, merely conceptual, or academic. Here is one such attempt to shine light on a genuine doubt and demand its resolution via inquiry:

When the whole civilized world is giving its energies to the meaning and value of justice and democracy, it is intolerably academic that those interested in ethics should have to be content with conceptions already worked out, which therefore relate to what is least doubtful in conduct, rather than questions now urgent. (1978 [1908]: 4-5)

While justice and democracy are, at least since Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice*, a constant part of the conversation in political philosophy, Dewey also cited problems inducing real doubt that continue to need serious philosophical attention, such as child labour, failure to care for the elderly, and the consequences of economic disparities (1978 [1908]: 398; 468ff). Concern about child labour has receded in the minds of many North Americans since such labour has largely been outsourced to developing countries, but though the problem is out of our immediate sight, the moral issues are no less pressing.
The issue of elder care is a massive problem in North America as the largest generation ever is arriving at retirement age with nowhere near the requisite social and health care resources in place. And Dewey’s century-old account of ‘Unsettled Problems in the Economic Order’ could easily be updated for contemporary America.

Though I have suggested that Dewey’s account has trouble on the metaethical front, he sets precisely the right sort of targets for normative ethics. By raising the actual, urgent questions of the day, Dewey shows that he is committed to the need for progress in both of Peirce’s categories, ‘ethics’ and ‘practics’. He argues that ethics is a science but also maintains that ‘Whatever may be true for other sciences it would seem that ethics at least ought to have some practical value’ (1978 [1908]: 10).

If a pragmatist metaethics free from the stumbling blocks of confusion about competing notions of truth and untenable metaphysics could be constructed, the normative ethics that could be conducted within such a framework might indeed have some practical value. I turn now to C.I. Lewis, whose work provides hope that such a pragmatist account of the structure of ethical theory is available.
I hope you will not object that there is no general answer to any question of the goodness of a good life. I am not talking about the recipe for a good life, what ingredients to put in, in what proportions and how to mix them; I am talking of the inescapably found quality of it. How to cook up a good life, out of whatever ingredients, or of the ingredients to be found in the cupboard, is indeed the practical problem of every man. But it would be an utterly hopeless problem if he did not know what manner of thing he was wishing to achieve; if he had no touchstone of success or failure of this most final of final aims.

Clarence Irving Lewis, ‘The Empirical Basis of Value Judgments’
Chapter 4  Clarence Irving Lewis: The Bridge to Today’s Pragmatism

I have suggested that in addition to adopting Peirce’s model of inquiry for moral philosophy and finding it applicable to a broad range of ethical questions, James and Dewey have also made critical errors in their departures from the Peircean framework. A century after Peirce’s death, the rich potential of the pragmatist framework for ethics and metaethics has been seriously underdeveloped. The historical reasons for this are complex, but the result is clear: the original classical American pragmatists and their immediate successors have failed to make it into the mainstream canon of moral philosophy. This might be thought to suggest that pragmatism died out and that contemporary work in this vein is an attempt to resuscitate it, but that suggestion is simply false. To begin to show that this is the case, I turn now to a philosopher as deserving of a place in the canon as Peirce, James, and Dewey, and who stands as a bridge between the original pragmatists and contemporary analytic philosophers: Clarence Irving Lewis.

Lewis took his undergraduate and graduate degrees at Harvard while it was still the uncontested hotbed of pragmatist thought, studying with both James and Royce. He also taught at Harvard for over thirty years, and was the steward of the mass of material bequeathed by Peirce’s widow, Juliet, to the university. While Dewey was stubbornly standing against the tide of contemporary advances in logic, Lewis was part of that tide, publishing widely on modal and alternative logics. Still, Lewis self-identified as a

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61 After James’ death in 1910 and Santayana’s early retirement, the seat of pragmatism could fairly be said to have shifted to Chicago with the core group of Dewey, George Herbert Mead, and Jane Addams. Lewis’ students contributed to this shift by publicly repudiating their teacher’s pragmatism, although some – Quine is the most obvious example – continued to work in ways that are largely continuous with classical pragmatism, save for their abandonment of philosophical treatments of value.
pragmatist, labeling his own view ‘conceptual pragmatism’, and developed an epistemology and value theory that clearly have their roots in classical pragmatism.

As with James and Dewey, Lewis professes his intellectual allegiance to Peirce. But unlike James and Dewey, Lewis did not know Peirce and was able to engage his work directly without having to contend with the challenges of his abrasive character or tragic personal circumstances. Lewis recalls his own first impression of meeting Peirce through his manuscripts:

The large room in which they were stored became my study, and I practically lived with them for two years. They seemed to include everything Peirce had ever written…One could easily conclude that Peirce had no wastebasket, and had never discovered such conveniences as files. (1968 [1960]: 16)

Lewis adds that ‘merely to bring together what belonged together would involve examination of the greater part of them, page by page’ – a task he undertook, and which he likened to ‘receiving a thousand suggestions, on a hundred topics, which eventually round out to a total impression’ (1968 [1960]: 16).

It is clear that this impression made quite an impression on Lewis. The views that he develops are remarkably consistent with the groundwork of Peirce’s philosophy. Indeed, his later papers on metaethics show that his inquiry into values exemplifies the characteristics of a Peircean model of inquiry.

4.1 Lewis on Experience in Moral Inquiry

One thing that is remarkable about Lewis’ philosophy is that is has a systematicity rarely found in such a voluminous body of work. Much of the later part of Lewis’ philosophical career was devoted to applying the resources he developed in logic and epistemology to the construction of value theory, which he consistently understands as an
empiricist project. The development of that theory spans decades, from at least the preliminary papers of the thirties, such as ‘Judgments of Value and Judgments of Fact’, to the last short volume he published, the 1957 ‘Our Social Inheritance’.

The centerpiece of this period is the 1946 book *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation*, a work expressly dedicated to giving an account of how value judgments can be both empirical and truth-apt. Lewis spent a good deal of time deeply entrenched in the analysis and development of metaethics, always with the end of a positive, pragmatist position in normative ethics in view: ‘From the early years of my teaching’, he says, ‘I had thought of ethics as the most important branch of philosophy’ (1968 [1960]: 11).

What kept Lewis from following through on his commitment to ethics earlier was the need to deal with epistemological considerations germane to the construction of a framework for moral inquiry: ‘I…came to recognize that the ethical conceptions of which I was convinced required the premise that objective and valid valuations represent a species of empirical knowledge’ (1968 [1960]: 20). It was the need to develop the premise in question – that valuation is a form of empirical knowledge, meaning that value judgments are valid/invalid, empirically testable, and true/false – that motivated Lewis to write *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation*, and informed much of the work that followed.

Of the pragmatists whose work I am considering here, Lewis grappled with problems of metaethics in the most sustained way. And like James and Dewey, Lewis is committed to a Peircean model of inquiry for value theory: to a broad conception of experience, most especially in the first sense; to the use of regulative assumptions as principles of ethical inquiry; and to the aspiration to truth.
Peirce’s view of experience emphasizes the importance of taking an inclusive view of what constitutes experience, and an inclusive view of whose experience is relevant to the pursuit of truth. It is most clear that Lewis has a broad conception of experience in the first of these two senses: what constitutes experience, on his account, is not limited to sensory inputs. Like Peirce, Lewis finds that whatever can surprise one and unsettle previously held belief, or lead to the establishment of new belief, counts as experience. In Lewis’ case, this includes felt goodness and badness. In an early attempt to formulate this crucial point for his moral philosophy in his 1936 ‘Judgments of Value and Judgments of Fact’, he says:

It is…evident with respect to the various goods and bads of experience that they are not separate from the qualities of sense, but only separable by abstraction and construction. Mostly the predominantly “cognitive” interest seizes upon the more colorless elements called “sense”, and those more poignant goods and bads are left behind and labeled “feeling” or “subjective”. But, as given, the redness of the rose is as much feeling as the beauty of it. (1970 [1936]: 53-4)

The same explanation, one might say from the opposite direction, comes in ‘The Objectivity of Value Judgments’, where Lewis says that ‘value-judgments represent a form of empirical knowledge, and that in general they are objective in the same sense, or senses, that other empirical apprehensions are’ (1970 [1941]: 162).

Just as Peirce thinks that mental manipulation of a diagram can surprise us and thus, offer us new experience, Lewis thinks that discovering the moral dimensions of a situation can constitute experience, as doing so has an immediacy and a capacity to be surprising just like more typical sensory experience does. This broadening of the empiricist position is markedly pragmatist, and allows Lewis to claim truth for valuations while operating in naturalist terms. Goodness is ‘directly findable’ in experience (1970 [1950]: 179), not transcendent or mysterious.
Examples may help to render this claim more persuasive. Here, I submit three cases for consideration: one of Lewis’ own; a second from Lewis’ fellow pragmatist, Addams; and a third, involving the case of Huck Finn, which is quite popular in the philosophical literature, especially in discussions of agency, character, and virtue. In each case, goodness (or badness) is experienced in, as Lewis puts it, an ‘ungetoverable’ way. And in the latter two examples, we shall see that Lewis’ explanation of his own example applies equally well to cases that are morally freighted.

In *Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation*, Lewis gives a series of cases illustrating how we move from immediate experience of value to truth-apt judgments of value. One such example involves taste in the most immediate sense: ‘If I bite an apple, I cannot be in error about the good or bad taste of the present bite; but if I conclude from this directly found value-quality that it is a good or a bad apple which I hold in my hand, then I may be wrong’ (1946: 410). The point Lewis is after here, and the one that is important in the present context, is not merely than one can be mistaken in one’s initial assessment. This is so, but the salient addition is that the corrective for misapprehension is more experience: whether I am right or wrong about the goodness of the apple ‘is something concerning which the present experience affords some evidence, but also something for further experience to corroborate’ (1946: 410). ‘Every experience requires to be further assessed in its relation to a possible whole of experience’ (1946: 478). The point here is perfectly general: Lewis argues that the process of appreciation and correction applies to apples, to music, to paintings, and to moral life (1946: 410; 481ff).

To see that this is so, let us consider an experience of self-correction regarding a judgment of value in light of further experience. The case comes from the first
autobiography of Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House*. There, she recounts her visit to Spain in the spring of 1888 prior to the solidification of her plans to start Hull House in Chicago. Addams and her party went to see a bull fight, ‘rendered in the most magnificent Spanish style, where greatly to my surprise and horror, I found that I had seen, with comparative indifference, five bulls and many more horses killed’ (1910: 85). Rather than the appropriate response, Addams found herself moved by ‘obscure yet vivid associations’ producing the ‘sense that this was the last survival of all the glories of the amphitheater’ (1910: 84-85). It was not until she realized that the rest of her party had left during the fight that she grew critical of her own lack of negative response to the slaughter, which she judged as mistaken.

Importantly, Addams’ own experience of the bull fight, revisited in memory, changed – much as on Lewis’ example, one might enjoy the first bite of an apple but later judge it no good, Addams enjoyed the violence and urgency of the fight but later judged it an immoral abuse of animals. She was responsive to the condemnation of her peers, noting that ‘I had no defense to offer to their reproaches save that I had not thought much about the bloodshed’, but also self-correcting: ‘in the evening the natural and inevitable reaction came, and in deep chagrin I felt myself tried and condemned’ (1910: 86). Addams credited this ‘disgusting experience’ of her own failure to draw the correct judgment with serving as the impetus to do the necessary research, and take the necessary risks, to begin Hull House.

My final example is the case of the protagonist in Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*. Jonathan Bennett presents the character of Huckleberry Finn as an exemplar of a person who has a good conscience, or moral instincts, but a bad moral code. He is,
according to Bennett, ‘someone who accepts a bad morality…struggling to make himself act in accordance with it in a particular situation where his sympathies pull him another way’ (Bennett 1974: 124). That situation is the one Huck finds himself in when he is helping his slave friend, Jim, to run away from Jim’s owner, Miss Watson. Huck’s experience is, in Bennett’s terms, of his own ‘unargued, natural feeling for his friend’, of the value of treating Jim as a person ought to be treated (Bennett 1974: 125).

Whereas Addams’ narrative is a story of a person who lacks the appropriate response in a situation, Twain’s is of a person who has the appropriate response, but judges that he does not. Philosophers have taken this to mean many different things. Bennett concludes that Huck Finn has the right sympathy, but a bad morality; M.J.Sidnell says that Huck is in ‘mental chains that [he] never breaks (Sidnell 1967: 206); and Nomy Arpaly uses Huck as a case of what she calls ‘inverse akrasia’: someone doing the right thing through weakness of the will (Arpaly 2003). But Lewis’ approach allows us to take a different tack: Huck Finn is a character who simply does not learn from experience, because he does not trust his experience as against a system of morality handed down to him and accepted as binding. And though Twain may have fully intended the irony of the character who does the right thing in spite of his best intentions, we would think that there is something wrong with a real-life Huckleberry Finn. That this is so is precisely because we expect people to attend to their experiences, and not to ignore them.

Lewis clearly has a broad conception of what counts as experience that includes experience of goodness and badness, one that allows us to learn from that experience. He also comes to invoke a broad conception of experience in the second sense: whose experience counts must be broadly understood in order to improve our chances of
learning the truth in moral, as in other, matters. But in order to see that this is so for Lewis, one has to trace the evolution of his thought to its very end.

As late as the 1950 ‘The Empirical Basis of Value Judgments’, Lewis’ position on this point seems conflicted. It is clear that he places an importance on the judgments of others as a source of evidence about what is valuable, as he says that our knowledge of what is valuable is ‘no less empirical because we can learn some part of it by being told, instead of the hard way, just as physics is no less an empirical an inductive branch of knowledge because we learn most of it from books’ (1970 [1950]: 180). So testimony is a legitimate source of knowledge about the valuable.

Yet he also indicates that he has misgivings about the role of the community in working toward the truth. He observes, rightly, that ‘community is not essential to objectivity’ (1970 [1950]: 188). To this, Lewis adds that ‘most of the community so easily assumed is in fact spurious’, and agreement in observation is often ‘only skin-deep’ (1970 [1950]: 189). What he means by these seemingly pessimistic remarks is not entirely clear. He does go on to distinguish ‘value for a person’ from ‘value to the community’, but as he reaffirms that the ultimate arbiter of whether any judgment is true will be the corrective force of experience, the practical motivation to gather as much experience as possible from as many persons as possible would seem to be present for Lewis’ picture of inquiry into moral matters.

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62 In doing so, Lewis puts a distance between his notion of the objective and that of Dewey’s warranted assertability. The latter would be odd, if not incoherent, without others to be on the receiving end of one’s assertions.

63 It may be that Lewis thought our actual communities to be sufficiently homogeneous so as to undermine any corrective clashing of substantive views, or our need for social harmony to be sufficiently strong so as to undermine any shared commitment to the truth, but these interpretations are speculative.
In the even later *Our Social Inheritance*, the last work Lewis published in his lifetime, we see him coming to recognize that a conception of experience that is broad in the sense of combining the shared experience of the community is necessary. He argues that the understanding needed in contemporary societies is knowledge of ourselves as members of communities, claiming that ‘it is beyond all doubt that the requirement is to understand [oneself] as a social animal’ (1957: 42). The community is not ‘spurious’, at least not in the sense of being inauthentic or unnecessary to the functioning of the individual in pursuit of truth. In fact, Lewis here portrays the participation in communal life as the source of the potential for improvement at all aims that are part and parcel of being a human being: ‘The positive force which operates to give him his peculiar power and determines his destiny lies in his capacity to create and maintain a social order which preserves and transmits the conquests of the human mind, and by doing so progressively enlarges and secures to men the possible realization of their common aims’ (1957: 72).

Lewis also gives reason to suppose that the agreement of a community is not, as he earlier thought, ‘skin-deep’. We have, he says, a shared ‘heritage of ideas’ – a background of beliefs against which we jointly operate (1957: 73). Our agreement has this shared basis, tested in some cases by the experience of generations. This means that one of the criticisms sometimes raised against Lewis, that he cannot secure shared concepts between persons because of sceptical problems of the Humean variety regarding

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64 The necessity in question is a practical necessity: the larger pool of experience is required for its corrective answer, as a means of realigning one’s own beliefs in the direction of the truth in response to what Peirce identified as the ‘social pressure’ of living cheek by jowl with others, others who may disagree with us. As Lewis says, the community is not necessary to render truths about value objective.
memory and other minds, may be misguided.\textsuperscript{65} As Dayton puts the point in his discussion of Lewis’ ethics, ‘The practical problem of morality is that it is hard to move oneself to be guided by the good when it is the good of the other, not that one needs special glasses to see that it is a good’ (2006: 23).

### 4.2 Regulative Assumptions and the Pragmatic \textit{A Priori}

With less interpretive adventure, it can be made clear that Lewis’ invocation of regulative assumptions is Peircean in character. For evidence of this estimation, let us consider Lewis’ most famous article, ‘A Pragmatic Conception of the A Priori’. There, he claims that traditional notions of the \textit{a priori} commit two mistakes: they misconstrue ‘the relation of necessary truth to mind’, and they misunderstand the relation of the \textit{a priori} ‘to empirical fact’ (1923: 169).

With respect to the first point, Lewis argues that though the \textit{a priori} is necessarily true – by which he means that it cannot be decisively undermined by any experience – our adoption of \textit{a priori} concepts and laws is elective. This is an atypical account of necessity, for the necessity involved is not such that we are compelled to accept the truth of any particular \textit{a priori} proposition. We are free to choose between them because they are that which we use to systematize our experience, not a consequence of our experience. ‘The \textit{a priori},’ Lewis says, ‘represents an attitude in some sense freely taken, a stipulation of the mind itself, and a stipulation which might be made in some other way if it suited our bent or need’ (1923: 169). Thus the ‘necessity’ correctly associated with the notion of the \textit{a priori} is not that which is opposed to ‘voluntary’, rather it is that

\textsuperscript{65} See, for example, Murphey (2005). See also Greco (2006) for the argument that Lewis can handle Humean scepticism after all.
which is opposed to ‘contingent’: ‘That is a priori which is true, no matter what’ (1923: 169).

What makes the a priori necessarily true in this sense is not that it accurately predicts how things are in the world, but that it constitutes an attitude or scheme adopted toward the world. We may choose between schemes and attitudes freely, and there is nothing in the world that can render them false. Nonetheless, the meaning of concepts is not utterly indeterminate, which means that the choice of concepts can be better or worse. This is so because of the given element of experience, which is what must be systematized under the concepts chosen.

This brings us to the second problem Lewis identifies, which is a misunderstanding of the relation of the a priori to empirical facts. It is the latter, not the former, which is ‘necessary’ as opposed to ‘voluntary’: ‘It is given experience, brute fact, the a posteriori element in knowledge which the mind must accept willy-nilly’ (1923: 169). While a full discussion of Lewis’ idea of the given would be out of place here, it bears saying that his tripartite theory of knowledge combines three elements not unlike the three categories defined by Peirce. Importantly, both recognize that genuine experience has an intractability, a character of needing-to-be-dealt-with. We are choiceless about this part of the package of knowledge, but not about the conceptual

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66 Lewis anticipates Quine on this point, arguing that while we may choose whatever concepts or names for things we like, this does not mean that all choices are equally apt, even if they are – being equally legislative – equally true. Lewis could have been arguing against Quine when he says that ‘A name itself must represent some uniformity in experience or it names nothing. What does not repeat itself or recur in intelligible fashion is not a thing. Where the definitive uniformity is a clue to other uniformities, we have successful scientific definition. Other definitions cannot be said to be false; they are merely useless. In scientific classification the search is thus, for things worth naming’ (1923: 172). ‘Undetached rabbit parts’ are not worth naming, Lewis might say, while rabbits are. This doesn’t mean that translation is fully determinate, but it is not so indeterminate or inscrutable as Quine supposes.
scheme we bring to bear – a scheme that will employ regulative assumptions that might later be undermined by further experience, or might be similarly vindicated.

That Lewis’ notion of the pragmatic *a priori* is an adaptation of the Peircean understanding of regulative assumptions is most clear in his discussion of how we choose the *a priori* concepts that we use to structure our experience. On his view, the choice of concepts is supported by, but need not have any justification beyond, a pragmatic vindication of the chosen principles. This conception of the pragmatic *a priori* fits with Peirce’s arguments for the adoption of the principle of bivalence. Its use admits of pragmatic vindication, as do other logical constraints Lewis mentions, such as the law of excluded middle: ‘the law of the excluded middle formulates our decision that whatever is not designated by a certain term shall be designated by its negative. It declares our purpose’ (1929: 170). Whether it satisfies our purpose is put to test in practice. Like Peirce, Lewis sees the only role for regulative assumptions as a type of scaffolding that can be used to build up a particular enterprise. They are the purposeful overarching principles of individuals and communities.

Late in his career, Lewis seemed irritated by the ‘considerable pother’ surrounding the topic of the *a priori*, particularly as it pertains to the idea that regulative principles of inquiry in the form of practical principles could be established *a priori* in the pragmatic sense. He proposes to resolve the pother by showing that those who would deny *a priori* status to practical imperatives hold an incoherent position:

With respect to any who would dispute the claim that the *are* imperatives which it is not possible rationally to repudiate, there is a suggestion which can be briefly made: If they did not implicitly claim that their own expressed conviction is intelligent and rational, and imperative to believe, their verbal formulation would be sound and fury, signifying nothing. Like Epimenides the Cretan, who asserted that all Cretans are liars, those who so deny imperatives commit themselves to a
statement which, if believed, would rob their assertion itself of significance and frustrate any purpose in making it. That, we may call a “pragmatic contradiction”. (1957: 100)

Lewis goes on to explain that ‘A rule of decision is valid a priori if the repudiation of it would be self-contravening…such a non-repudiable principle is “pragmatically a priori”’ (1957: 100). Like Peirce, and unlike Kant, Lewis holds that what makes such principles ‘non-repudiable’ is their place in human practices, not the dictates of a personified faculty of reason.67 And like Peirce, and unlike James, Lewis sees that though any regulative principle might be chosen in theory, those that fail to be rational imperatives of the kind that can be pragmatically vindicated – such as the belief, adopted to win a friend, that the friendship is already made – do not deserve to be adopted ahead of evidence.

4.3 Lewis on Truth in Moral Inquiry

Lewis’ entire project in metaethics begins from the aspiration to truth. Peirce took the aspiration to truth to be a constitutive feature of inquiry, which requires us to take the principle of bivalence on board as a regulative assumption. But while Peirce was reticent to recognize the possibility of a science of moral inquiry until very late in the development of his thought, Lewis was prepared to take ethics as amenable to inquiry at the outset. Lewis also saw that any inquiry into the content of normative principles

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67 One might protest that the only essential human practices are those that are dictated by reason, because otherwise the ‘essential’ nature of such practices would be relative to these or those humans. The difference here between the pragmatist position and what might be called the orthodox Kantian view is whether practices secure principles or vice versa. When working from actual human practices to determine which principles are necessary, the concern about relativity becomes how to account for bad, brutish, or downright stupid practices and the worry that the principles required to support them may as reasonably be candidates for the status of the pragmatic a priori as any others. In defense, the pragmatist can appeal to the idea of convergence on best practices as a critical function of communities of inquiry. This concern throws into relief the importance of what I have called Peirce’s epistemic cosmopolitanism (see notes 13, 31).
would require us to take there to be truths about such principles toward which such an inquiry would aim.

Lewis thought that the empirical basis of value judgments meant that ‘Pragmatism could not consistently admit that value-judgments are incapable of an objective test unless it should be prepared to admit that truth in general is subjective.’ In having a comparatively robust sense of ‘objective’, Lewis self-consciously puts himself closer to Peirce on the question of truth than to James or Dewey. Lewis locates himself with respect to his fellow pragmatists on the question of truth in his brief autobiography, where he says that his early impression of the pragmatist theory of truth was shaped by James and Dewey: ‘It was the besetting sin of James’ pragmatism to confuse validity with truth; and of Dewey’s to avoid the issue by the near absence of any distinction of the two’. He then adds, ‘If I had known more of Peirce at the time, I should have felt confirmed in my failure to go along with James and Dewey on such points’ (Lewis 1968 [1960]: 11).

But in the breath of his application of inquiry, it may be fair to say that Lewis is closer to Dewey’s position, that ‘Inquiry is the life-blood of every science and is constantly employed in every art, craft, and profession’ (1986 [1938]: 12). If Lewis would not go so as far as Dewey regarding arts and crafts, it is at least fair to say that he was swifter than Peirce to consider a science of ethics viable and necessary.

The outcome of Lewis’ argument that valuation is a form of empirical knowledge, and one that he deliberately had in view, is the affirmation of moral cognitivism – a view in metaethics that makes taking ethics as a normative science dealing with a realm of

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truth possible. He opposed non-cognitivism in the very strongest terms, taking on the emotivism of the day directly:

It has been held that value-apprehensions are subjective or relative in a sense which is incompatible with their genuinely cognitive significance. Or it has been maintained that value-predications are not matter of fact statements at all, being merely expressions of emotion and hence neither true nor false. But this is one of the strangest aberrations ever to visit the mind of man. The denial to value-apprehensions in general of the character of truth or falsity and of knowledge, would imply both moral and practical cynicism. (1946: 366)

To this charge of strangeness and cynicism, Lewis adds a concern about impracticability: emotivism would ‘invalidate all action’, because ‘action becomes pointless unless there can be some measure of assurance of a valuable result which it may realize’ (1946: 366). The concerns raised by Lewis foreshadow my argument, in Chapter 5, that pragmatism gives reasons to be a cognitivist – one of which is that any philosophical position in metaethics that would arrest action at the level of first-order moral inquiry should be abandoned.

Lewis’ application of Peirce’s pragmatic maxim in ‘The Empirical Basis of Value Judgments’ is meant to clarify why it is not telling against the objectivity of a value that it has not actually been experienced. All properties of any kind at all are ‘potential’ in the way that value-properties are potential: all salt is soluble in water even if most salt is not now being dissolved in water (1970 [1957]: 187). This is highly reminiscent of Peirce’s claim that ‘the real is that which is such as it is regardless of how it is, at any time, thought to be’ (CP 5.457; 1905). Indeed, Lewis’ account of the objectivity of ethical

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69 Lewis holds that ‘Success is the desideratum of all action: that statement is a tautology’ (1946: 370).

70 This is a correction to Peirce’s less careful presentation of an example in the 1878 ‘How to Make Our Ideas Clear’, concerning the hardness of diamonds, where he opined that thinking there was a ‘fact’ about the diamond’s nature was an ‘arbitrary usage of speech’.
values is resonantly Peircean and shows that he has an excellent grasp of the subtleties of Peirce’s account of truth.

In fact, though Lewis claimed that it would be hard to read five pages of Peirce’s writings without disagreeing with him, his own agreement with the basic commitments of Peirce’s philosophy is remarkable in its consistency. Though Lewis’ system was animated from the outset by concern about how to address moral questions, while Peirce’s was animated from the outset by concern for logic, in the end they both elevated the normative science of ethics to the highest rank of philosophical endeavours.

4.4 Lewis’ Improvements to the Pragmatist Picture

Like James and Dewey, Lewis sees the centrality of normative imperatives in structuring human life:

To act, to live, in human terms, is necessarily to be subject to imperatives; to recognize norms. Because to be subject to an imperative means simply the finding of a constraint of action in some concern for that which is not immediate; is not a present enjoyment or a present suffering. To repudiate normative significances and imperatives in general, would be to dissolve away all seriousness of action and intent, leaving only an undirected floating down the stream of time; and as a consequence to dissolve all significance of thought and discourse into universal blah. (1946: 481).

This thought brings together the best of Peirce, James, and Dewey. The structural point is well made by Peirce (and recently echoed by Huw Price) in the context of assertion\(^71\), and the widespreadness of the practice coheres with the extensions of the pragmatist view of moral inquiry undertaken by James and Dewey.

Lewis claims that the impulse to discover and pursue the valuable is so central to human life that ‘the value of any science’ is

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\(^{71}\) I return to this important theme in the next chapter.
a value which accrues when scientific learning becomes applied, by the engineer, the technologist, or the craftsman, for the production, devising, or arrangement of things so as to conduce more largely to what men find satisfactory for their living, and the avoidance of what brings grief and sorrow. Correct evaluation is the first and most essential of all learning, and without that any other manner of learning could be of little worth. (1970 [1950]: 182)

Lewis’ account of inquiry gets the centrality of the moral dimension right: ‘To seek the good and to avoid the bad is the basic bent of conscious life’ (1957: 83). Since this is so, a science of valuation is called for.

One could read Lewis’ focus on valuation as a step away from Peirce, but I think that would be a mistake. Instead, we can profitably read Lewis as the first of Peirce’s followers to really understand, and attempt to articulate, what Peirce meant when he said that logic is a ‘normative science’ organized under the *summum bonum* of concrete reasonableness. For unlike James and Dewey, Lewis emphasizes the idea of the objectivity of value in a way that is consonant with Peirce’s theory of truth. The most important advance Lewis makes to Peirce’s account is articulating what ethics as a ‘normative science’ could look like. In designating logic a normative science, Peirce was pointing to the fact that logic evaluates habits, the basis of action. Lewis’ account of the structure and vindication of imperatives extends Peirce’s underdeveloped idea of the normativity of logic.

Insofar as Peirce had normative theory at all, it had relatively little content. In order to flesh out what ethics as a normative science could take as its good, Peirce placed aesthetics above it. From this perspective, he gets only so far as declaring the *summum*

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72 Although the details of Lewis’ many advancements in modal logic are outside the scope of my current enterprise, it is worth saying that Lewis, like Peirce, was an innovative and insightful logician. Peirce lamented James ‘almost unexampled incapacity for logical thought’ (*CP* 6.182; 1911), and thought Dewey’s early forays into logic unhelpful, but – at least on this front – Peirce could have found little to criticize in Lewis’ work.
bonum of human life to be the growth of ‘concrete reasonableness’ – a rather opaque good, and one which Peirce never articulates more fully.

Lewis, on the other hand, had no need to make such a move in order to furnish ethics with a conception of the good, as the imperatives he puts forward as those pragmatic a priori principles suitable for guiding a human life are meant to be amenable to pragmatic vindication. They need not answer to a higher authority, aesthetic or otherwise. The ethical imperative that Lewis believes passes the test of pragmatic vindication, and his candidate for the ‘final and universal imperative’ is given in two forms: first, ‘Be consistent in thought and action’ (a logical constraint); and second, ‘Be concerned with yourself in the future and on the whole’ (a practical constraint) (1946: 482). Any attempt to reject this imperative, Lewis argues, would be a practical contradiction for any human agent. Much of the latest period of Lewis’ life was spent trying to work out a full system of imperatives derived from this universal one, including a duty to act justly. This project was left incomplete, but its beginnings mark an important moment in the history of pragmatist ethics: the conclusion of a systematic approach to logic, epistemology, and metaethics culminating in a contentful normative ethics.

There are a significant minority of contemporary philosophers consciously choosing to work at ethics from within a pragmatist framework. Hilary Putnam, David Wiggins, Cheryl Misak, and Robert Talisse all do work that would have a place in a complete articulation of the history of ethical thought developed by pragmatists in the Peircean tradition. Through Lewis, there is in fact an unbroken lineage linking those philosophers to Peirce and the original Metaphysical Club – a story worth telling in detail
another time. The key to appreciating the potential fruitfulness of this heritage, I have suggested, is starting with Peirce’s view of truth and inquiry and taking that view places that Peirce himself didn’t realize it could go. In what follows, I leave the history of pragmatism behind and offer my own attempt – suitably enriched by the contributions of James, Dewey, and especially Lewis – to take Peirce’s view places.
PART II

Pragmatism & Problems in Contemporary Metaethics
That we shall be better and braver and less helpless if we think that we ought to inquire than we should have been if we indulged in the idle fancy that there was no knowing and no use in seeking to know what we do not know – that is a theme upon which I am ready to fight, in word and deed, to the utmost of my power.

Socrates, in the *Meno*
Chapter 5  A Pragmatist View of Truth in Ethics

Suppose one thinks that the philosophical heritage explored in Part I seems compelling. What follows? More specifically: what follows with respect to the fundamental metaethical questions that exercise contemporary philosophers? I take up two such questions here, beginning in this chapter with the question about truth; namely, do we have reason to treat moral judgments as capable of being true or false?

This is a question that may initially seem unmotivated. After all, consider the various phenomena of everyday moral discourse. We ask questions. We make assertions. We agree or disagree, quarrel and resolve. We hold ourselves and one another responsible. We deliberate, alone or together. We aspire to get our judgments right, and agonize over our perceived mistakes. All of these basic exchanges seem to involve notions of truth and falsity. The questions are posed as having genuine answers; the assertions are framed as statements of fact; disputants believe that they know the truth and must persuade the other to see it. From these basic exchanges, more elaborate moral architecture emerges. We pass laws. We forbid, permit, and punish. We structure our societies and our institutions. All this is the rough ground that has given rise to fertile philosophical debate about the place of truth in moral discourse.

And that debate has indeed been fertile. In the contemporary metaethics literature, varieties of non-cognitivism and cognitivism have proliferated to the point where providing a complete taxonomy of those positions would be a project of its own.73

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73 The increasing subtlety of positions on both sides, but especially on the non-cognitivist side, has led some to wonder whether the distinction remains a theoretically significant one. I work here under the conviction that if we are to have any view of truth as something other than a linguistic device, the distinction is significant.
Fortunately, all we need at this juncture is a grasp of what difference causes the basic cleavage between positions in the two camps.

At its most basic, non-cognitivism is the view that moral statements are not truth-apt. That is, moral sentences are not appropriate candidates for assessment as ‘true’ or ‘false’. Non-cognitivists may situate their refusal to attribute truth to moral statements on a linguistic basis or on a psychological basis, though the two bases are often jointly endorsed.

Those who focus on the linguistic case for non-cognitivism deny that moral statements that appear to have a predicative form actually express propositions which have truth conditions. Moral statements are not actually assertions that predicate something of the world, but some other form of speech act that makes them not bearers of truth or falsity. They are imperatives. Thus, the true form of moral statements disqualifies them as candidates for cognitivist explanation. Those who focus on the psychological case deny that moral statements express beliefs. Moral statements are not reports of one’s epistemic states, but expressions of some non-cognitive state, such as desire or attitude. Thus, the true content of moral statements disqualifies them as candidates for cognitivist explanation.

In the contemporary literature, cognitivism is often expressed as the denial of non-cognitivism. Stated in positive terms, it is the view that moral statements express beliefs and are truth-apt. Acceptance of cognitivism does not imply acceptance of the view that there actually are true moral statements – the error theorist, for instance, thinks that moral statements are candidates for truth but are in fact all false. Still, many
cognitivists are also moral realists: they think that moral statements are truth-apt, and that many of them are in fact made true by some form of moral reality.

With this preliminary distinction in place, it may be prudent to head off one particular line of thought at the pass. The following may seem tempting: Peirce advocates the adoption of the principle of bivalence as a regulative principle of any inquiry, so inquiry into any moral proposition – on a Peircean model – must assume that the answer to that question is either ‘true’ or ‘false’. However, at this stage, that line of thought would be question-begging. It assumes that the outcome of Peircean inquiry in metaethics must be aligned with moral cognitivism because the notion of truth is at play in all inquiry. But the appropriate question at this juncture is precisely whether investigation of moral experience could lead to a settled belief – the kind of belief that would stand up to the tests of experience over the long run. Thus, the question is open and it is properly metaethical: are moral inquiries of the kind that can end in well-settled belief, or of the kind that cannot?

Santayana articulates a central insight of pragmatism in his reflection on the embedded nature of human inquiry: one must join ‘the procession wherever one happens to come upon it’, and follow it ‘as long as one’s legs hold old’. Thus all proofs, he says, begin ‘in the middle’, for we have no choice but ‘to plunge in medias res’ (1923: 1-2). The approach I take to this question is characteristically pragmatist, then, in the sense that I plunge in at the level of first-order ethical inquiry. This puts us in the position to see what metaethical claims can be supported by our consideration of actual processes of moral deliberation.
Some metaethicists may find the idea that we can work from practices or cases to a second-order ethical theory implausible, preferring instead to focus on theory before practice. But such an approach is not obviously preferable. To quote David Wiggins, ‘it may seem that any proper philosophical position is, if true, true \textit{a priori}. But that is just a prejudice’ (1990-1: 79). One is also tempted to quote Lewis, who prefaced his account of valuation with the comment that ‘I draw some comfort from the thought that if the experts find my suggestions unacceptable, at least that is a complement they also pay to one another’ (1946: xi).

My strategy here will be to appeal to features of our shared moral life to argue that the pragmatist view of truth is perfectly placed to intervene in this debate, that our experience of the phenomenology of moral judgment is of a cognitive enterprise, and that our assessment of such judgments as expressed in both private deliberation and public discourse hold moral assertions up to a norm of truth. Thus, I argue that investigation that moves from first-order moral inquiry to a metaethical stance strongly supports moral cognitivism. Despite the fact that a pragmatist non-cognitivism may be conceivable, alignment with cognitivism is the better fit. So one aim here is to show that pragmatists ought to be cognitivists. The other is to give reasons to find the pragmatist version of moral cognitivism compelling.

5.1 A Defusing View of Truth

The cognitivist requires a view of truth that is compelling independently of the dispute about moral judgments. The first way in which pragmatism can be taken to support moral cognitivism is by supplying such a view, one which is both plausible and
has the capacity to defuse much of the tension about truth in moral discourse. The plausibility part of this requirement has been met, I hope, by the discussion of Peirce’s view of truth in Chapter 1. Recall that truth, on this account, is characterized by indefeasibility or stability over the long run. The pragmatist wants to get leverage on the idea of truth as it operates in our practices, including our moral practices. The pragmatist project with respect to truth is not purely one of analysis of the concept, but one that demands engagement with the idea as it features in human conversation.

In addition to the independent plausibility of the pragmatist view of truth, it defuses the debate between cognitivism and non-cognitivism in a favourable way. It does this by showing that our requirements for true beliefs need not appeal to the transcendental or the metaphysical. Instead, a question can be settled as true, to borrow terminology from Wiggins, when we conclude of its accepted answer that ‘there is nothing else to think’ (1990-1: 67). Whereas views of truth more strongly anchored in metaphysical considerations about the nature of reality demand we say a good deal more about what makes a belief true, the pragmatist view of truth prioritizes explanation over existence, epistemic satisfaction over metaphysical speculation. It focuses on picking out the ‘marks’ of true belief, instead of enumerating kinds of entities needed to stand as truth-makers.

Despite its agent-centered viewpoint, pragmatism does not commit the error of letting go of the connection between truth and objectivity – the error committed by the expressivist who is willing to adopt deflationism in order to maintain that moral judgments are true ‘in some sense’ because they convey sincerely held non-cognitive attitudes. When the pragmatist says that ‘there is nothing else to think’, she means not
just that she is satisfied with her belief, but that anyone, anywhere, should be satisfied
with the same belief.

Consider, then, what the cognitivist is saying when she says that some moral
judgments are both truth-apt and true. She is saying that moral judgments are genuine
assertions, just as their form indicates – that they convey cognitive states and not
attitudes. And she is saying that for at least some such judgments, the true ones, that
there is something we ought to think, given the evidence, and nothing else to think
instead. Just as we should think, given our evidence and experience, that gravity holds
over the whole of the Earth’s surface, we should think, given our evidence and
experience, that slavery is morally impermissible across geographical and cultural
context. The judgment ‘slavery is wrong’ has all the same marks of truth as the judgment
about gravity: it is stable, immune to future recalcitrant experience, and (when it is a
product of inquiry) secured by a method that stands up to social pressure.

Some non-cognitivists – those who are willing to import a deflationist account of
truth in order to preserve inferential practices – might be moved by this alternative. A
pragmatist view of truth preserves such practices without imposing onerous metaphysical
commitments specifying the nature of an underlying moral reality. This spares the non-
cognitivist the adoption of a view of truth that looks rather ad hoc, and perhaps assuages
concerns that had the non-cognitivist avoiding truth in the first place. On a pragmatist
view of truth, we can both assert that some moral statements are true and that this does
not grant them mysterious or transcendental status.

Those non-cognitivists who are animated by relativist-type sympathies may not
find this view of truth compelling, but are in the uncomfortable position of explaining

74 In particular, not imposing commitments that are anti-naturalistic – a point I return to in the next section.
how there is something else to think about the impermissibility of slavery – presumably, whatever thoughts would license the adoption of attitudes like ‘slavery, okay!’, ‘slavery, meh’, and so on. They are also, as I shall now argue, on the hook for explaining away the fact that the phenomenological feel of first-order ethical inquiry is that of being engaged in a cognitive enterprise – of trying to get our answers right with respect to an objective standard.

5.2 Engaging Experience: The First Person Phenomenology of Moral Judgment

Wiggins has framed moral cognitivism as centrally involving two claims. First, the claim that ‘judgments of morals are irreducibly cognitive in their aspiration’: that ‘there is no other way for them to be seen by their authors, qua moral judgments, than as aimed at truth’. Second, the claim that ‘the cognitive aspiration of moral judgments need not necessarily or always go unachieved’ (1990-1: 62). My suggestion is that when we consider the phenomenology of moral judgments from a pragmatist perspective, we see that both of these standards are met.

First, let us consider the requirement that what we are doing when we utter moral judgments – by our own lights – is making truth-claims. The non-cognitivist argues that the propositional form of moral claims is a red herring. Moral claims merely wear the clothing of truth-apt assertions. But the linguistic case for non-cognitivism is problematic because it simply does not fit with the phenomenology of assertion in moral

75 Wiggins advances this second claim in opposition to error theory, which is nonetheless still a cognitivist position. Thus, it would be more accurate to say that the two requirements Wiggins puts forward detail what is involved in non-error theoretic moral cognitivism. I follow Wiggins here in taking it that the ultimate target – ‘ultimate’ in the sense that it should be the final focus of philosophical interest in this terrain – should be moral judgments that are both truth-apt and actually true, though I will say relatively little about which judgments meet those standards. Doing so is the pressing business of normative ethics.
discourse. Moral claims do not differ in ‘feel’ from claims readily accepted as truth-apt; we assert that one ought not perpetrate a genocide with all the confidence that accompanies any defensible thesis about the world.

In the other direction, the intense conviction associated with a strongly held moral claim does differ in feel from what we recognize as individual attitudes: we do not think that a staunch belief that genocide is wrong expresses something like the attitude of being a superfan of the hapless Toronto Maple Leafs.

Peirce comments on this phenomenological difference, observing that there is something ‘in an assertion which makes it more than a mere complication of ideas’ (a very fine assessment of what it is to be a Leafs fan). Rather, there is a ‘difference between throwing out the word[s] speaking monkey, and averring that monkeys speak’ (*CP* 4.56; 1893). This difference is that ‘assertion has its…measure of assurance’. That is, assertion is delivered with a certain confidence, a confidence itself rooted in the belief that there is something outside of the assertion itself that stands as its guarantor. When we arrive at a belief that is the end of a moral inquiry, one which stands in judgment as an assertion about how things are, Peirce holds that we consider ourselves responsible for the truth of our claims.

The conclusion to be drawn is that the non-cognitivist linguistic analysis of moral assertion fails to reflect how moral discourse is experienced and how it is (at least partly) constructed by our aims. The appeal to competent language users is turned on its head: competent language users may recognize the possibility of different assertions seeming like appropriate claims because they are appropriately fallibilist about their own cognitive powers. But in uttering moral judgments, we both appear to be genuinely asserting *and*
to feel that we are genuinely asserting.\textsuperscript{76} The onus is on the non-cognitivist to show that this phenomenology is mistaken.

The non-cognitivist is not without rejoinder here. But though there are all kinds of explanatory stories on offer about how we purportedly come to confuse ourselves into thinking there are objective moral facts about which we can make cogent assertions, such stories do not adequately respond to the point that there is something we take ourselves to be doing in asserting – something which is as present in moral assertion as it is anywhere.\textsuperscript{77} Crucially, it is not just the case that we privately experience our own thought processes in moral reasoning as aiming at the truth – we also experience ourselves as responsible for expressing the truth, and not just our own attitudes regarding moral matters.

### 5.3 Engaging Experience: Truth as a Norm of Moral Assertion

To his comments about the first-person feel of assertion at the end of inquiry, Peirce adds the functional claim that assertion ‘is intended to stimulate the hearer to make an answer’ (\textit{CP} 4.57; 1893). Assertion warrants response as a claim about how things are. To conceive of assertion instead as a revelation of one’s own attitude and demand

\textsuperscript{76} Terence Cuneo makes a similar point in ‘Saying what we Mean: An Argument against Expressivism’. Cuneo argues that a focus on the intentions involved in such illocutionary acts as expressing an attitude or making an assertion suggests that expressivism is false. Cuneo claims that expressing an attitude in a sentence is a different type of illocutionary act from stating an assertion in sentence-form, and argues that ‘It is false that…when an agent performs the sentential act of sincerely uttering a moral sentence, that agent does not thereby intend to assert a moral proposition, but intends to express an attitude toward a non-moral state of affairs’ (Cuneo 2006: 46). At the heart of Cuneo’s argument is the fact that illocutionary acts, as a form of doing, are what they are partly because of what we intend them to be. This is a linguistically-oriented way of making a point very like the point I am making regarding the phenomenology of moral discourse.

\textsuperscript{77} This is at least part of what motivates error theory: we might be wrong about everything we say, but we know what kind of saying we’re doing.
for the other to report her attitude as a means of explaining the exchanges that make up moral discourse simply fails to do justice to the measure of assurance that accompanies claims uttered therein.

In Peirce’s 1903 Harvard lectures, he responds to the question, ‘What is the nature of assertion?’ at length:

We have no magnifying-glass that can enlarge its features, and render them more discernible; but in default of such an instrument we can select for examination a very formal assertion … If a man desires to assert anything very solemnly, he takes such steps as will enable him to go before a magistrate or notary and take a binding oath to it. Taking an oath is … not mere saying, but is doing … it would be followed by very real effects, in case the substance of what is asserted should be proved untrue. This ingredient, the assuming of responsibility, which is so prominent in solemn assertion, must be present in every genuine assertion. For clearly, every assertion involves an effort to make the intended interpreter believe what is asserted, to which end a reason for believing it must be furnished. But if a lie would not endanger the esteem in which the utterer was held, nor otherwise be apt to entail such real effects as he would avoid, the interpreter would have no reason to believe the assertion. Nobody takes any positive stock in those conventional utterances, such as "I am perfectly delighted to see you," upon whose falsehood no punishment at all is visited. At this point, the reader should call to mind, or, if he does not know it, should make the observations requisite to convince himself, that even in solitary meditation every judgment is an effort to press home, upon the self of the immediate future and of the general future, some truth. It is a genuine assertion, just as the vernacular phrase represents it … Consequently it must be equally true that here too there is contained an element of assuming responsibility, of "taking the consequences." (CP 5.546; 1903)

This rich quotation marks genuine assertion – both in private judgment and in engaged discourse – as taking responsibility for the truth of what is asserted, and being prepared to accept the consequences if we prove mistaken. In other words, we place ourselves under a truth-norm when we utter assertions, and we take those assertions as
embedded in argumentative and practical contexts in a way that makes it appropriate for the asserter to ‘pay the price’ if she asserts falsehoods.

Huw Price makes a similar argument about assertion in general in his ‘Truth as Convenient Friction’. Price argues, against Rorty, that truth (not warrant or justification) is a normative constraint on assertion. This argument is made in characteristically pragmatist fashion by pointing out the ‘in order to account for a core part of ordinary conversational practice, we must allow that speakers take themselves and their fellows to be governed by a norm stronger than that of justification’ (2003: 168).

Not only do we view ourselves as bound by the truth norm when we make assertions, but ‘this behavioural pattern’ is ‘central to what we presently regard as a worthwhile human life’ (2003: 168). The notion of truth that underpins our practice of holding ourselves and others up to that norm of assertion provides ‘the grit that makes our individual opinions engage with one another’ (2003: 169). As Wittgenstein memorably put the point about the dubious value of working at a certain level of abstraction from phenomena, ‘We have got onto slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk so we need friction. Back to the rough ground!’ (PI I.107). Price’s point is that as with walking, friction is a crucial aspect of our moral lives, where it enables the genuine engagement of opinions with one another in serious discourse.

What is important here is that Price’s argument rings as true for moral assertion as it does for any other topic on which we advance judgments. As Misak has put the point, ‘the pragmatist does not think that our aim in moral and political deliberation is
agreement for agreement’s sake or for impartiality’s sake. What matters to us is that… we reach the belief that is the best belief, and we call that kind of belief true’ (2000: 145). As in any natural-scientific inquiry, we cannot rest satisfied with beliefs that are undermined when we consider the methods by which they were attained, and we cannot rest satisfied with a mere attitude when an action-guiding, habit-securing belief is what’s called for.

What of Wiggins’ second standard, that moral cognitivism demonstrate that the cognitive aspiration of moral judgments is sometimes achieved? There is evidence that this modest expectation can be met. Even in non-homogeneous communities, there is often agreement – widespread and settled belief – about particular cases, or about the extension of particular concepts. Cases like slavery and genocide fall into this category; when disagreement about such cases does arise, it is disagreement that we ought to respond to with inquiry.78 Maintaining a form of moral cognitivism more ambitious than error theory gives us reason to keep seeking agreement, despite the challenges of pluralism. Rawls’ argument about the acceptability of the principles of justice as fairness is meant precisely to show that even in pluralistic societies, a consensus on some normative notions (as reasonable to adopt) is possible.

We can overcome the gap that non-cognitivism generates between ground-level and meta-level ethical theories, if we ensure that both meet the pragmatist standard of being responsive to evidence and experience. As I have argued here, being responsive to

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78 Consider the error theorists’ alternative: no moral assertion is ever actually true, and ‘genocide is wrong’ is no different. Such a position makes conversation regarding what to do about slavery and genocide no more than an exchange of opinions, or a skirmish to see whose opinion will carry the day. This is one description of what disagreement in moral discourse is and does, but not the most compelling description, for it is not the one that matches our phenomenological experience of such discourse.
evidence and experience about the role of truth (in the pragmatist sense) in moral judgment and assertion clearly supports moral cognitivism.

At this juncture, there is a rather large elephant in the room. I espouse a pragmatist-inflected cognitivism. I am not alone. James, Dewey, and Lewis can all be read as moral cognitivists of the variety who maintain that some moral judgments are both truth-apt and true. Amongst the classical American pragmatists, non-cognitivism was rarely endorsed. More recently, Misak, Putnam, and Wiggins have all argued in the same direction. But on the issue of the truth-aptness or cognitive aspiration of moral judgments, as on a wide range of acute questions, contemporary pragmatism is a house divided. We do see contemporary pragmatists, many following Rorty, who align their views with non-cognitivism. I shall now argue that this is a mistake. Popular arguments for cognitivism fall comfortably inside the pragmatist’s wheelhouse, while popular arguments for non-cognitivism are in tension with central themes of pragmatism.

5.4 A Pragmatist Reading of Popular Arguments for Cognitivism

The majority of popular arguments for cognitivism involve generating problems for the non-cognitivist. The implicit thought behind this strategy, I take it, is that cognitivism has a common sense appeal that can be vindicated by showing that non-cognitivism faces insurmountable problems. The purportedly close connection between non-cognitivism and a properly scientific worldview has put cognitivism on its heels, the reasoning might go – a defensive strategy is what is called for. I consider what I take to be the strongest elements of that defensive strategy here, in order of rising concern for the

79 The one classical pragmatist who is clearly a non-cognitivist is George Santayana, who I have argued is best understood as an expressivist (Heney 2012).
pragmatist metaethicist. They are: the embedding problem, the wishful thinking objection, the concern about relativism, and the failure of explanatory capacity in relation to normative theories. The substance of these cognitivist critiques coheres nicely with the pragmatist’s bottom-up approach to moral inquiry.

The embedding problem is often known as the Frege-Geach problem, for its development in work of Peter Geach (who credited the central insight to Frege). The problem raised is that early accounts of non-cognitivism give an analysis of moral propositions that considers such propositions only in the form of stand-alone assertions. On the basis of analysis, they conclude that such propositions are not really assertions at all, but avowals of attitude. But when we consider moral propositions as parts of more complex sentences, where they are ‘embedded’ in other types of expressions, a difficulty arises. The non-cognitivist account of how moral propositions function in freestanding cases does not translate easily for embedded cases. This is problematic, Geach argues, because we need to think of predication as constant across embedded and unembedded occurrences of predicative moral sentences, on pain of equivocation.

Consider an example:

(P1) If lying is wrong, the souls of liars will be punished in the afterlife.
(P2) Lying is wrong.
(C) The souls of liars will be punished in the afterlife.\textsuperscript{80}

The argument has the form of \textit{modus ponens}. However, on the non-cognitivist account, (P2) is not truly propositional, but merely the expression of the attitude, ‘boo to lying’. What is unclear is whether the occurrence of (P2) as the antecedent of the conditional in (P1) has the same meaning as it does when it stands alone. That it is desirable that meaning be constant across contexts is the insight Geach credits to Frege: ‘a proposition

\textsuperscript{80} Example from Dorr (2002).
may occur in discourse now asserted, now unasserted, and yet be recognizably the same proposition’ (Geach 1965: 449). If a moral proposition cannot be recognized as the same across contexts, normal practices of inference and explanation would be seriously undermined.

Responding to the embedding problem is a challenge taken up by many non-cognitivists, who handle it in a variety of ways. To take these strategies up in detail here would take me too far afield of the central question at issue in the debate between cognitivists and non-cognitivists, which is whether or not moral propositions are truth-apt. Thus, the solution I want to highlight here is one which centrally involves a notion of truth. That solution is to sidestep the issues of meaning variance across context, and the types of logics which might accommodate it, by adopting a deflationist theory of truth. On such a view, to assert that a statement is true is just to assert the statement itself. The hackneyed example is that utterance of the proposition ‘it is true that snow is white’ is just equivalent to utterance of the simpler ‘snow is white’. Crucially, the deflationist thinks that there is just nothing else to say about truth. That is, the deflationist rejects the Peircean idea that achieving clarity about the notion of truth involves more than giving a definition of equivalence, but also requires understanding how the concept operates in our practices. There is no normative requirement associated with the concept of truth. When the deflationist notion of basic equivalence as the only suitable definition is coupled with the idea that appropriate assertion when it comes to

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81 One strategy is to propose an alternate account of what the main factor in a logical analysis of meaning should be (such as attitudes rather than propositions). Another is to simply deny Geach’s claim that it is desirable that meaning be held constant across embedded and unembedded contexts.
moral propositions is no more demanding than sincerely holding the attitude expressed, the non-cognitivist has a solution that doesn’t involved incurring any metaphysical debts.

If such a view of truth allows the non-cognitivist to say that moral judgments are true in the deflationary sense, there simply is no embedding problem. Those judgments can be subjected to the various logical operators that allow us to form complex expressions without any concern about equivocation regarding meaning. There is no threat to our usual practices of inference, which operate just as well for minimally true propositions as they would for robustly true propositions.\(^8\)

This solution will seem odious to pragmatists, who see the project of understanding truth as involving more than definition. Recall Peirce’s demand that we need a pragmatic grade of clarity about truth, one obtained by getting a fix on how the concept of truth operates in human practices. Deflationism about truth is not only merely a definition of truth, it is one that – when it is combined with non-cognitivism – has a hard time making sense of moral discourse as anything other than collective reporting of our own inner states. What the deflationist denies is that the normative standards the pragmatist associates with truth, such as the propriety of uttering an assertion only when one is prepared to ‘take responsibility’ for its truth, are real standards. The notion that there is anything moral which is sufficiently objective as to demand the same moral response from each of us is lost.

\(^8\) For an argument that minimally true propositions do not operate just as well, see Dreier’s ‘Expressivist Embeddings and Minimal Truth’. Dreier argues that propositions that convey certain types of speech acts – such as accosting, but also expressing – do not support inference. As Dreier says, ‘the idea of inferring is out of place when the conclusion is a speech act of accosting’ (1996: 43). Following Dorr, inferring is also out of place when the conclusion is a speech act of expressing.
A second argument against non-cognitivism that focuses on how moral judgments *qua* attitudes embedded in inferences operate has become known as the wishful thinking objection. Let us reconsider our case of *modus ponens*:

(P1) If lying is wrong, the souls of liars will be punished in the afterlife.
(P2) Lying is wrong.
(C) The souls of liars will be punished in the afterlife.

Again, if non-cognitivism about moral propositions is right, (P2) expresses an attitude. (C) is clearly a cognitive state – a belief about what to expect of the world if the antecedent of the conditional in (P1) is fulfilled. (P1) and (P2) jointly imply (C). But how can drawing an inference based on such an implication be rational, when possession of a non-cognitive attitude plays the role of a weight-bearing premise? As Dorr puts the objection:

> Only a change in one’s cognitive states, or in one’s evidence, can make the difference between a case in which it would be irrational to believe something and one in which it would be rational to do so. It is often rational to modify your views about one part of the world so that they cohere with your views about the rest of the world. It is irrational to modify your views about the world so that they cohere with your desires and feelings. That’s wishful thinking! (2002: 99)

The moral Dorr draws, and one which is a serious challenge to the possibility of maintaining some semblance of moral discourse alongside an affirmation of non-cognitivism, is that ‘if non-cognitivism about wrongness is true, it can *never* be rational to infer factual conclusions from premises about wrongness’ (2002: 100).\(^3\)

This objection should seem, to the pragmatist or any empiricist, to be very bad news for the non-cognitivist. Drawing an inference from one’s previously held attitude to some fact about the world is certainly likely to put one on a collision course with

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\(^3\) Having already rejected the deflationist strategy, we may resist the move here to say that the wishful thinking objection could be solved – and ordinary discourse preserved – by an account of truth that makes attitudes ‘true’.
recalcitrant experience. But on the non-cognitivist view, premises like (P1) and (P2) will continue to support conclusions like (C) regardless of what the evidence dictates, so long as the attitude expressed in (P2) remains constant. This is to say: the fulcrum that moves the argument is simply being in possession of a particular attitude. By contrast, even prior to settling on any particular view of truth in ethics, the pragmatist view of truth and inquiry has it that we must be responsive to evidence. We must take the capacity of recalcitrant experience to surprise us seriously if we are to secure beliefs capable of guiding action successfully over the long run.

These two related concerns about meaning of, and inference involving, embedded moral propositions should be worrisome. But perhaps those concerns do not tell decisively against non-cognitivism. I now want to consider two arguments against non-cognitivism that I believe are decisive. If non-cognitivism is not ruled out by the phenomena, the pragmatist might be willing to tinker alongside the non-cognitivist in search of an alternate logic capable of responding to the embedding issues. But no one – and especially, no pragmatist – should be happy with a metaethical view that leads into relativism and has no power to underwrite ground-level normative theory.

First, let us consider how the non-cognitivist winds up facing something akin to the charge of relativism. Typically, relativists argue for something like a notion of ‘personal truth’ that secures the judgments of an individual from any external criticism. The relativist avoids any genuine moral conflict by saying things like, ‘well, I think that’s wrong, but it might be right for her’. The staunch relativist will meet convictions about the permissibility of slavery, genocide, and caste oppression with philosophical aplomb – though perhaps with regret that everyone doesn’t have similar personal truths, since
widespread agreement is certainly more comfortable than accommodation of advocates of
slavery, genocide, and oppression.

The non-cognitivist is not a relativist, exactly. She need not say that the truth of
moral judgments is relative, since there is no truth at all on her account. But what non-
cognitivism has in common with straightforward moral relativism is that it undermines
the idea of any standard of corrigibility. If, as the non-cognitivist claims, judgments are
merely expressions of attitude, it would seem that it is appropriate for a person to utter
such judgments whenever she feels like expressing her attitude. Whether the utterance
(or the attitude itself) is appropriate seems to be a nonsensical question: appropriate with
respect to what standard, to what measure? The most we might expect as a standard for
expression is authenticity, a constraint that people only utter judgments that really do
express their own attitudes. Even relativism typically imposes constraints like internal
consistency, based on the notion that moral judgments are truth-apt, but subject to a very
loose or tolerant standard of truth that can be highly individualized. Non-cognitivism has
no such framework on which to hang constraints about attitudes, and leaves us with
nothing to say about any highly repellent attitude save ‘boo to that attitude’.

There are general reasons to think that relativism is mistaken. And they are
pragmatist reasons. Relativism proceeds from a perfectly reasonable epistemic attitude –
‘I believe such-and-such is wrong, but I know that I’m fallible, so I must be tolerant when
others disagree with me, for they could well be right’ – to a metaphysical judgment that
there is nothing objective which can and should inform judgments across persons. There
is another reason that relativism should be particularly worrying to the pragmatist, who
has it that the community has the power to play a catalytic role in the quest for truth.
Peirce even goes so far as to say that community has the power to constitute reality, for it is the other who gives me the sense of the external needed to support a reality of external permanency: ‘The real…is that which, sooner or later, information and reasoning would finally result in, and which is independent of the vagaries of me and you. Thus the very origin of the conception of reality shows that this conception essentially involves the notion of a community’ (CP 5.311; 1868). Finally, the phenomenological feel of first-order ethical inquiry winds up utterly unaccounted for – an outcome at odds with any bottom-up approach to moral matters.

When the blanket tolerance advocated by relativists replaces inquiry, the capacity for a community to work together toward shared ends, or even to stay in touch with reality, is seriously undermined. Given that non-cognitivism faces similar problems about a lack of corrigibility, the pragmatist has reason to think that it, too, cannot make sense of the social pressure we feel as members of communities, who have to get along to go along, who have to jointly endorse public systems and institutions that will inevitably be a reflection of what someone thinks is good.

Finally, non-cognitivism faces a pressing practical issue: if it is true, we have no adequate explanation for the ground-level normative theories that we actually employ in assessing cases. Despite their differences on questions about principles, education, and more, there are versions of views as disparate as consequentialism, deontology, and virtue ethics that all rely on a robust notion of truth as a plank in their assessments. Whether what the right thing to do is act for the best outcome, act according to duty, or act as the virtuous moral agent would, these theories commonly rely on there being some
objective and discoverable facts about what the right thing to do is.\textsuperscript{84} Non-cognitivism about truth in morals not only undermines the corrigibility of moral judgments, it also undermines the idea that there is anything distinctively moral to be captured in such judgments. If true moral nihilism is endorsed, all of our normative ethical theories are cut loose from any ground that could make them applicable. While our normative ethical theories are surely capable of being improved upon, to think that every one of them is wrong about the existence of their very subject matter would be a drastic result indeed.

This failure to hook up with any of the common theories appealed to in our normative practices is very worrying to the pragmatist, who is committed to working from practice to theory rather than the other way around. Normative ethicists try to capture what can license or explain our practices of praising and blaming, training and evaluating, in theories based on those everyday practices. On a pragmatist view, metaethicists have a different, but compatible mandate: to try to capture what can license or explain our normative theories. We should resist the view that turns up the answer ‘nothing’ in favour of any reasonable alternative that preserves some connection between ground-level and meta-level theories about the ethical.

5.5 A Pragmatist Reading of Popular Arguments for Non-Cognitivism

When we consider the usual arguments advanced in favour of non-cognitivism, we see that the pragmatist has good reason to reject even the arguments that seem tailor-made to seduce those who have broad pragmatist commitments. Popular arguments for non-cognitivism have been advanced from a range of adjacent positions in philosophy of

\textsuperscript{84} The non-cognitivist might protest that the question is precisely whether this reliance is real, but it is certainly the case that the reliance is commonly taken to be real.
language and philosophy of mind, as well as within metaethics itself. Some of these arguments are highly durable, while others are more easily undermined. Here, I take up three arguments that seem like they ought to be taken particularly seriously by the pragmatist: the open question argument, the argument from naturalism, and the argument from persistent disagreement.

The open question argument is one that has proved highly durable. Originally articulated by G.E. Moore as an argument against reductive theories of the good, the open question argument was meant to target those who try to define what is good in terms of some natural property (such as being that which we desire to desire). Moore’s claim is that when one asserts of a thing that it has the natural property suggested as the ground of goodness, it can always be intelligibly further asked, ‘but is it good?’:

To take…one of the more plausible…of such proposed definitions, it may easily be thought, at first sight, that to be good may mean to be that which we desire to desire. Thus if we apply this definition to a particular instance and say ‘When we think that A is good, we are thinking that A is one of the things that we desire to desire’, our proposition may seem quite plausible. But, if we carry the investigation further, and ask ourselves ‘Is it good to desire to desire A?’ it is apparent, on a little reflection, that this question is itself as intelligible, as the original question’. (1966 [1903]: 15)

That this question is intelligible is meant to demonstrate that competent users of the concept ‘good’ plainly see that goodness is a property irreducible to any other. Any attempt to perform such a reduction would be an instance of the so-called naturalistic fallacy: making an inference from purely natural premises to some normative conclusion. As W.K. Frankena observes, the charge of committing the naturalistic fallacy ‘has had a considerable currency in ethical literature’, though it is not truly ‘a

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85 Some authors have equated Moore’s notion of the naturalistic fallacy with Hume’s is-ought problem. I am not convinced that they are actually equivalent, thus, I limit my exposition to Moore’s version and those that clearly follow from it.
logical or quasi-logical fallacy’ (1939: 464). Moore’s claim that good is indefinable, ‘and that to deny this involves a fallacy’, supposes the battle won for non-naturalism when the battle has yet to be waged (1966 [1903]: 77). Frankena rightly observes that ‘the charge of committing the naturalistic fallacy can be made, if at all, only as a conclusion from the discussion and not as an instrument of deciding it’ (1939: 465).

Thus, there is a query prior to the one Moore wishes to raise: it remains an open question whether or not goodness truly is a property that cannot be related (if not reduced) to natural properties.87

Originally an argument for ethical non-naturalism, the open question argument has been repurposed as support for non-cognitivism. Non-cognitivists provide an alternate explanation as to why claims about moral goodness can never be reduced to claims about the natural world. Their iteration of the open question argument is that the question, ‘but is it good?’, always remains open because moral propositions simply do not refer in the way that typical propositions do. Since moral claims are really just expressions of one’s own attitude, they say, the possibility of differences in attitude ensures that there is no settled response to the open question. What the competent language user recognizes is not that goodness is sui generis, but that their moral claims do not actually describe states of the world.

Pragmatists who have cognitivist leanings have at least one reason not to quake in fear in the face of the open question argument, which is that the pragmatist rejects the traditional dichotomy between fact and value. Facts are value-laden. Our practices,

86 As Tom Hurka has put the point, Moore and his intuitionist followers at times took their non-naturalist version of moral realism ‘almost for granted’ (Hurka, forthcoming: Chapter 4).
87 At least one other intuitionist, W.D. Ross, saw the need to attempt an empirical proof that all attempts to define the good in natural terms fall short (Ross 1930).
including our best scientific fact-collecting practices, are shot through with normativity. Elizabeth Anderson argues that enshrining the fact-value dichotomy has led philosophy to neglect the importance of evidence and experience to the justification of ethical principles, and has also led the ‘human sciences’ to fail to reflect on the value-aspect of their classification of phenomena (1998: 14-15). There is, so to speak, normativity present on both sides of the inference implicated in the charge of naturalistic fallacy: the premises are not pristine facts devoid of value, so the fallacy of deriving a normative conclusion from purely descriptive premises is never instantiated. This response is directed to Moore’s original version of the open question argument – but there is also a compelling reason for any pragmatist to question the value of the open question argument in its non-cognitivist form, which is the more direct target here.

A second argument by way of metaethical defense advanced by the non-cognitivist has a heritage at least as long as the open question appeal. This is the invocation of naturalism. In addition to its durability, the naturalist appeal shares another feature with the open question argument: it was not originally formulated as an argument for non-cognitivism. As such, the term ‘naturalism’ in this context requires serious disambiguation. Historically, naturalism was opposed to supernaturalism: the former was applied to explanations that made appeal only to natural facts or causes, while the latter permitted explanations that made appeal to divine or otherwise supernatural facts or causes. Much of the current confusion surrounding disputes about naturalism and non-naturalism can be traced to the influence of the cognate debate about moral realism; roughly, about whether or not there are moral entities or properties that somehow stand as the truth-makers of moral judgments.
Because many non-naturalists, especially those amongst the intuitionist school anchored by G.E. Moore, and W.D. Ross, have a tendency to vilify naturalism as invariably reductionist, it takes some work to see that there is also a kind of naturalism about moral experience that preserves the character of the phenomena as experienced, which is precisely the position of the pragmatist. In the sense of the debate that concerns me, what is crucially at issue between the naturalist and non-naturalist is not whether God or nature furnished the basis of our moral judgments, but rather, what is the correct form of explanation for moral propositions. The naturalist supposes that there is nothing which is ‘non-natural’ in any intelligible sense and that explanations all arise in some way or another from the natural world; the non-naturalist supposes that there are some facts – perhaps including moral facts – that defy categorization as anything ‘natural’, even if they arise in some way or another from the natural world.

The leads me to one reason to suppose that this debate has lost much of its force: it now occurs against a backdrop of shared materialism. The notion of a category of being, in some robust metaphysical sense of ‘being’ that arises *sui generis* is decidedly out of vogue. Discussion has shifted from the metaphysical question of what kinds of things are there that might underpin moral discourse, to the epistemic question of what counts as an adequate explanation. What is most pressing in the debate between naturalists and non-naturalists as I have framed it is whether explanations of moral phenomenon in a naturalistic worldview should be reductionist, or maintain some form of

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88 All that I mean by ‘materialism’ here is the view that every thing that exists rests, in some way or another, on the matrix of matter. This is exceedingly loose and will irritate metaphysicians, who may rightly press – What does ‘exists’ mean? In what way does existence ‘rest’ on matter? What matrix? – but the point is merely that relatively few philosophers today think that there is some other substance in addition to matter.

If, as I have suggested, the vast majority of contemporary positions are committed to naturalism in some very basic sense, what do non-cognitivists hope to gain by securing the honorific of ‘naturalistic’ for their metaethical view? One way to understand the non-cognitivist position as naturalistic is to take it as a metaphysical position, one which is reductionist in the sense that it leaves no unexplained moral remainder. Non-cognitivism explains away any mystery about moral properties or entities by arguing that such metaphysically dubious categories are not actually the referents of moral propositions. Instead, such assertions have an entirely natural base: attitudes of approval or disapproval, which might be understood even more basically as the attraction or aversion responses of an organism to salient features of its environment. Thus, a category that was metaphysically ‘queer’ has dropped away entirely.

At first glance, it seems like any position that claims to have the market cornered on naturalism should be very compelling to the pragmatist, who situates herself firmly in the naturalist heritage that exploded out of Darwinian science at the same time pragmatism was finding its philosophical footing. Naturalism is one of the few commitments that is incurred by essentially every philosopher who self-identifies as a pragmatist.

But one needn’t be a non-cognitivist just because one finds the general idea of naturalism compelling. Naturalism is some suitably basic sense is widely available; it should not be understood as the special purview of reductivist theories. As Wiggins has put the point, the moral cognitivist can ‘take a positive view of the phenomenon of
morality’, one which is naturalistic ‘by virtue of…treating human morality as a certain sort of natural phenomenon’. Such a view is ‘not naturalistic in the sense of the term “naturalistic” associated with the diatribes of G.E. Moore’, for ‘No analysis or reduction is offered of the content of morality’ (1990-91: 68). Recall that for the pragmatist, the project of explanation has priority. For now, it is enough to say that the invocation of naturalism – at least in the sense in which that label marks anything distinct at all in the contemporary literature – does not privilege non-cognitivism after all.89

Moral cognitivism can be naturalistic without reducing moral discourse to mere reporting. As we saw earlier, getting the right sense of ‘naturalism’ on the table is crucial to making sense of this claim. The relevant distinction is between naturalism and supernaturalism, not between the category of natural phenomena easily explained by appeal to a more basic level and the category of natural phenomena that resist reduction. Pragmatism offers an account of the human standpoint that is perfectly naturalistic without urging reductionism or scientism. This is partly so because it rejects the fact-value dichotomy, forcing us to recognize that our best, ‘hard’ scientific practices are infused with value. Nor is the value imported from some non-natural place. Pragmatism can affirm the supervenience thesis about moral phenomena – roughly, that moral properties supervene on non-moral, natural properties such that any difference in the

89 A closely related argument is that once one has affirmed a commitment to naturalism, a preference for the supervenience option in the choice between supervenience and reduction favours non-cognitivism (see, for example, Blackburn 1993). For any metaethicist who affirms naturalism but rejects reductionism, this supervenience thesis will be part of the story. I do not consider this argument in detail here because it quickly becomes a metaphysical dispute, the intricacies of which far outstrip what is necessary for the project of explanation – and which, in any case, is highly unlikely to be amenable to a definitive conclusion.
moral must arise for a difference in the non-moral – without giving moral properties a status any more mysterious than that enjoyed by consciousness.

Wiggins engages this point directly. ‘Moral properties do not vary independently of physical properties’, he maintains. ‘If that is the truth in supervenience, let us not deny it!’ (1990-1: 84). Changes in the supervenience base lead to changes in what supervenes, a point well made in studies of consciousness and brain activity. That consciousness is difficult to fathom is indisputable, but it is no less natural for being difficult to fathom. Likewise, that moral properties do not look like hardness or opacity is indisputable, but they are no less natural for it. We have no reason to posit an extra category of non-natural entities to account for the moral; we simply have to accept that understanding something as part of the natural world does not necessarily require breaking it down into a recipe of recognizable component parts. Though it may continue to seem remarkable that matter can produce consciousness and moral value, focusing on whatever mystery remains puts us at risk ‘of failing to understand fully what can be fully understood’ (1990-1: 85).

In addition to affirming supervenience without giving in to the temptation to create new categories as a result, the pragmatist insists that disciplinary limits about which questions merit inquiry cannot be put in place prior to inquiry itself. Inquiry is the method we ought to adopt toward any human question whatever. Though we may discover of some questions that there are no truths – that there are many things to think – that there is no telling in advance which questions merit the ‘scientific’ treatment of inquiry. Certainly, there is nothing telling against making the attempt for either first-order or second-order moral questions. Pragmatism, then, is naturalistic in this second
sense: it proposes a single method, rather than separating ‘scientific’ questions for empirical study and moral questions for \textit{a priori} rumination. The pragmatist approach is empiricist all the way down, asking always what is supported by the most evidence and experience that could be gathered by a community. It starts with our practices and our experiences, seeking adequate explanation over metaphysical grounding.

Put this way, I think that the naturalism of non-cognitivism is at a serious disadvantage. Our practice of treating moral discourse as involving truth-apt judgments is met by the non-cognitivist with reductionism that leaves the status of moral discourse prone either to elimination or apologism, to convoluted means of parsing the attitude from whatever truth-like factors present in moral assertion merit recognition, or to the adopting of a view of truth too anemic to do justice to our own expectations of moral assertion.

A final argument in favour of non-cognitivism that is likely presently at its zenith is that persistent peer disagreement about a topic in some way indicates that the subject matter lacks the marks of truth that could lead us to resolve such disagreement decisively. The typical constraints placed on discussions of disagreement are that the disputants are epistemic ‘peers’ in some suitably qualified sense, none of whom has given another any reason to suppose they are unreliable in the case at issue. Some theorists think that the appropriate response is (nearly) always to be conciliatory in the face of peer disagreement; others think that the appropriate response is (nearly) always to be steadfast.

Adherence to a conciliationist standpoint is unlikely to produce persistent disagreement, since the solution it proposes – adjustment of one’s credence regarding the disputed proposition – can be repeated until disputants have matching, or at least
compatible, credences. Adherence to a steadfast standpoint, however, can lead to situations where a persistent disagreement becomes entrenched, as each disputant maintains that ‘The mere fact that others whom I acknowledge to be my equal with respect to intelligence, thoughtfulness, and acquaintance with the relevant data disagree with me about some issue does not undermine the rationality of my maintaining my own view’ (Kelly 2005: 192).

The disagreement literature is fertile ground for non-cognitivists, who have an explanation for the occurrence of disagreement between true epistemic peers on moral propositions. Their view is that peers disagree about the truth of moral propositions due to confusion about the status of those judgments as truth-apt. Once we see that the disputed propositions are actually expressions of attitudes, the non-cognitivist can say, we lose any reason to expect convergence in those attitudes. This is clearly an explanation that licenses the steadfast response. In fact, it secures a main component of the steadfast view: rejection of the uniqueness thesis, which claims that that ‘a given body of evidence justifies exactly one attitude toward any particular proposition’ (Feldman and Warfield 2010: 6).

This is an argument that it seems the pragmatist should be concerned about. But as with the open question argument’s presupposition that the naturalistic fallacy is a fallacy, there is something to be noted here about the order of explanation: if non-cognitivism is true, it does offer a plausible explanation for the occurrence of persistent peer disagreement. However, if we begin with the phenomenon of persistent peer disagreement.

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90 The norm expressivist may say something rather different here, but at least some non-cognitivists will maintain that people can take any attitude they like toward issues that cannot be settled by appeal to any facts of the matter.
disagreement without presupposing the truth of non-cognitivism, there are many plausible explanations compatible with the truth of cognitivism. The most obvious is that the disputants in such a disagreement are not committed to inquiry at all. Indeed, today’s steadfast reasoner bears more than a passing resemblance to Peirce’s tenacious believer. The epistemic isolationism that allows the steadfast reasoner to maintain her belief in the face of competent opposition is certainly contrary to the community-driven model of inquiry. As David Christensen has put the point, steadfast adherence in the face of peer disagreement ‘can seem like a dogmatic refusal to take [the peer’s] epistemic competence sufficiently seriously’ (2009: 231). It is to prize one’s established belief at the price of resisting what Peirce called the ‘social impulse’ that moves us to inquiry. It is to hold that tenacity is more rational than inquiry – an attitude that may well be permissible when it has antecedently been shown that there is no fact of the matter, but one cannot be presumed justified by the mere existence of persistent disagreement about moral propositions.

Equally plausible is the cognitivist-friendly explanation that cases of persistent peer disagreement regarding propositions couched as truth-claims about moral matters are a helpful diagnostic tool for sorting cases of moral truths from cases of mere convention. On such an explanation, we can imagine the cognitivist cheerfully allowing that apparently moral propositions about sexual preference, purity, and the necessity of caste systems turn out not to be moral at all, but instead to be cases where all that is being expressed are different attitudes, some of which are rather pernicious. Conversely, cases of widespread agreement cannot be assumed to be clear cases of moral truths
underpinning convergence, but if some such cases are appropriately explained in truth-terms, the cognitivist is well on her way.

Again, the argument from the plain fact of persistent disagreement does not stand in the category of decisive proof for non-cognitivism. It joins the open question argument and the argument from naturalism as arguments that no one, especially the pragmatist, ought to be persuaded by. I have suggested that the pragmatist has special reason to reject these arguments, committed as she is to rejecting the dichotomy of fact and value, to maintaining a naturalism that preserves the human element of human practices, and to inquiry.

A pragmatist moral cognitivism emphasizes the importance of taking both our practices and our own fallibility seriously. We cannot assume that any of our moral judgments are actually true, but we must recognize that the aspiration to truth plays an important role in motivating moral deliberation. The cognitivist requires a view of truth that is compelling independent of the dispute about moral judgments. Pragmatism – in particular, Peirce’s brand of pragmatism – can be taken to support moral cognitivism by supplying such a view, one which gives us leverage on how the notion of truth operates in practice, including our practice of treating our moral discourse as truth-apt. Following Socrates, I conclude that with regard to moral questions, ‘we shall be better and braver and less helpless if we think that we ought to inquire’.
Those are my principles, and if you don't like them... well, I have others.

Groucho Marx
Chapter 6 A Pragmatist View of Principles in Moral Inquiry

I have argued that our practices in moral deliberation are driven by cognitive aspirations, and that keeping the aspiration to truth along with the pragmatist commitment to fallibilism in view is necessary to keep us engaging in moral deliberation together. A turn to pragmatism can help us to make headway in a second area of contemporary debate in metaethics: the debate about the nature and use of principles in moral philosophy. Much of the current conversation is cast in terms of the doctrines of generalism and particularism. I will take ethical generalism to be roughly the view that moral thought and judgment is either impossible or irrational without moral principles. But I do not require those principles to be necessary or determined \textit{a priori}.

By contrast, ethical particularism is roughly the view that general principles are not required to make moral thought and judgment possible or rational. Particularism has been given its best-known articulation in the work of Jonathan Dancy, who gives the following nutshell expression of its central commitment: ‘Moral thought, moral judgment, and the possibility of moral distinctions – none of these depends in any way on the provision of a suitable supply of moral principles’ (2004: 5).

Mark Schroeder has characterized the particularism/generalism debate as ‘notoriously obscure’ (2009: 568). James Dreier has remarked that it is hard to formulate these two positions without vagueness ‘in part because it has not been altogether clear in the contemporary dispute over particularism just what is at stake’ (2006: xxii). There is some truth to these remarks, but I think that we can get at least this far in saying what the debate is centrally about: it is the necessity or the utility of some type of moral principles that is at stake. But what Dreier gets exactly right is the point that the metaphysical
question of whether such principles have a foundation in some moral features that actually exist, and the constellation of associated epistemological questions, have been insufficiently separated, leading to a good deal of confusion about who really believes what when it comes to the status of moral principles (2006: xxii).

True subsumptive generalists are those who claim that what it is for an act to be moral is that it can be subsumed under an exceptionless general principle. Schroeder has suggested that until recently, ‘no one set out to defend generalism as such’ (2009: 579). The position has not gone undefended because it is uninhabited; rather, enough normative ethicists are generalists (via Kantianism or utilitarianism) to have made the defense perhaps seem unnecessary. But the most cursory survey of recent titles in metaethics will show that this is changing. By contrast, there are also relatively few hardcore principle-denying particularists (those who claim that there are no meaningful or useful moral principles of any kind at any level). But some consideration of the extreme versions of these positions – especially as seen through the assessment of the classical pragmatists – will prove helpful. The many permutations in between those two extremes are often individually interesting for what they reveal about what it is that we care about in asking questions about moral principles in the first place.

One thing that can be observed about the debate between adherents to generalism and particularism is that it is largely internal: it asks about whether one can (or must) appeal to principles in ethical deliberation, and if so, what kinds of principles are useful (or required). This debate is internal in the sense that it asks what happens within a process of moral inquiry that is already underway. Before engaging in the debate in those terms, I begin by taking a step back to argue that there is a type of principle that we must
– or simply implicitly do – adopt before ethical deliberation can even get off the ground. The indispensability of regulative assumptions for the enterprise of inquiry structures the very terrain on which this debate takes place. Without those guiding principles, moral inquiry is a non-starter.

Once the role of regulative assumptions in setting the frame for ethical deliberation is addressed, I take up the internal debate as it arises in its contemporary form: should the pragmatist endorse particularism, or generalism? I conclude, in a departure from many contemporary readers of pragmatism, that the pragmatist should espouse a form of generalism. Seeing why this is so will involve taking a tip from Dreier, and separating the metaphysical question of principles in ethics from epistemological considerations.

6.1 The Indispensability of Principles in Moral Inquiry

In Part I, I argued that Peirce’s model of inquiry, augmented through the efforts of his fellow pragmatists, is not only amenable to addressing moral problems, but is in fact particularly well-suited to dealing with them. The Peircean model, with its broad conception of experience, takes the experience of individuals seriously. This seems an obvious desideratum of moral inquiry, as moral problems often take the form of conflicts experienced between individuals where both cannot have their needs met, or cannot preserve the truth of their cherished beliefs.

As we saw in Chapter 5, the principle of bivalence and of the existence of a moral reality cannot be assumed directly in support of any metaethical thesis, but may nonetheless be locally necessary for gathering evidence at the level of first-order moral
inquiry. That evidence is favourable to moral cognitivism, the view that I have argued best captures how the notion of truth functions in our practices with respect to moral reasoning and discourse. We aspire, in our moral judgments, to get things right. We believe, in setting out as inquirers, that there is something to get right.

While the aspiration to truth is a general feature of Peirce’s model of inquiry, which has truth and inquiry as deeply entangled notions, the assumption of the principle of bivalence is nonetheless necessary for any particular inquiry: to make a proposition amenable to the method of inquiry, we must assume that it has a truth-value.

What concerns me now is to locate this type of principle in relation to the discussion of principles in moral inquiry that is currently cast in terms of particularism and generalism. The aim is simple: to show that guiding principles in the form of regulative assumptions do not fit either of the categories of principle typically taken to be at issue in the dispute between particularists and generalists. Rather, they are a separate category of principle that serve to provide a framework for moral inquiry; they are, to use Lewis’ term, pragmatically a priori to the business of settling any moral question.

The usual types of principles discussed in the literature are absolute (or ‘decisive’ or ‘universal’) principles, and pro tanto (or ‘defeasible’ or ‘contributory’) principles. The former are the type of principle most familiar from well-established theories in normative ethics, while the latter are the result of the theoretical footwork that some ethicists deem necessary to make those theories practicable.

Let’s consider the first category, absolute moral principles. The simplest examples of such principles are those that act as the backbone of Kantian and utilitarian moral theories, each of which relies on a single universal principle. For the Kantian, the
categorical imperative – roughly, act always from the motive of duty and in such a way that that the maxim of your action can be willed a universal law – is the single principle against which all prospective action must be tested.\footnote{There is some dispute as to whether or not the two formulations of the categorical imperative – the universal law formulation and the humanity formulation – really are two ways of framing a single principle. I take it that enough Kantians think so to make it legitimate to treat Kantianism as a system organized under a singular universal principle.} Similarly, the utilitarian takes the principle of utility or greatest happiness principle – roughly, act so as to always produce the greatest aggregate utility – to be that which should be used to determine the moral worthiness of an action. Despite their substantive disagreement about what it takes for an act to be moral, Kantianism and utilitarianism have the same form: all right acts can be subsumed under a single, decisive principle. Indeed, the rightness of those acts stems from their adhering to the principle – it is not just that all right acts can be categorized as a single type, but that their rightness itself results from being principled in the requisite way to meet the demands of morality.

The difficulty posed by a normative theory that operates with a single, universal principle is that there are situations where it seems that it is unable to rule, where there is more than one thing that satisfies the principle. Such situations are the all too familiar dilemmas of ordinary moral life. Another way to put this point is that it is well and good to say, taking Kantianism as our exemplar\footnote{One might think that this worry does not apply to utilitarianism, since there is only one thing that would promote the \textit{greatest} happiness. But if there are plausibly scenarios where two outcomes produce the same, maximum possible amount of happiness with the relative portions of happiness and unhappiness distributed in different ways, the worry applies.}, that we should do whatever follows from the motive of duty, but we are often crippled by scarcity of resources, by limited time and energy. A tragic but everyday fact about moral life is that it seems that we cannot do
everything we ought to do. When duties conflict, if we have only a single principle to
guide our moral reasoning, we find ourselves stuck.

It is this problem that the second group of principles widely appealed to is meant
to address. Pro tanto principles, corresponding to pro tanto duties, can pick out any
number of things that one ought to do in a given situation. Because such principles are
not required to cover all cases, they can apply to some aspect of a situation that is morally
salient without being decisive with respect to the problem at hand. What is then needed
is some mode of assessment that allows us to make an overall judgment between the
principles that apply in a case, some process of weighing or apprehending the worth of
each dutiful act to determine what we have most reason to do, which duty is the most
worthy of being fulfilled. Instead of being paralyzed in situations where duty points in
many directions, not all of which can be satisfied, we are able to satisfy at least the most
significant duty.\footnote{The tragic nature of moral dilemmas does not simply evaporate on this
account, but at least a cogent story about which horn of the dilemma to choose can be
told: it will turn out that the dilemma is not as dilemmatic as it first appeared, since we
will have most reason to do some proposed act rather than another.}

It is clear that regulative assumptions employed as guiding principles of inquiry
cannot be principles of either of these types. They are not universally applicable in the
same sense in which the substantive, singular moral principles are meant to be. Recall, as
we saw in Chapter 1, that an important feature of Peircean regulative assumptions is that
they are not necessary in the way Kant supposed – they are not demanded by reason

\footnote{How the assessment of competing pro tanto principles is supposed to work is somewhat mysterious. It
seems that we either need a hierarchy, in which case there is still some one principle that trumps all others,
or we need some kind of ‘gestalt’, where we just see which of the duties pressing us is most important.}
itself, but only when we engage in the activity of reasoning in certain ways. Nor are these guiding principles logically necessary. They are only what I have called locally necessary; that is, necessary for the particular enterprise they support.

Regulative assumptions also do not have the sort of content exhibited by universal moral principles. They propose to set a certain kind of frame for dealing with moral problems, but do not offer any view of what the substantive content of moral truths must be. Thus, regulative principles do not aspire to be subsumptive in the way that universal moral principles do. Guiding principles do not perform the function of picking out only a certain set of actions stipulated as right. With respect to any particular moral question, they recommend nothing determinate.

This should make it clear that regulative assumptions are even less like pro tanto principles than they are like absolute principles, for such principles are even more concerned with the choice-worthiness of particular actions. As guiding principles regulate one’s approach to the problem rather than being employed as a tool for solving the problem, they are simply not the kind of principle that will tell us to follow through, say, on a duty to be just rather than a duty to be beneficent.

So regulative assumptions cannot serve as either absolute or pro tanto principles in moral inquiry. To treat them as principles that can offer a ruling on a particular case would be mistaken. The use of regulative assumptions as principles of inquiry occurs at a different level – a level that is, in a sense, prior to the invocation of substantive moral principles of either type discussed above. Regulative assumptions function as guiding principles: they help us to set the structure within which we engage with such moral questions. One might think of them as setting the framework. Rather than saying of a
particular moral question or moral dilemma, ‘here is what ought to be done’, regulative assumptions only equip us with a framework that allows us to make assessments of the sort, ‘is this the kind of question inquiry can rightly be applied to?’ Thus, the priority of guiding principles is that of the pragmatically a priori, and they are ‘necessary’ in Lewis’ sense of that term. They are chosen to systematize our experience, rather than derived from our experience or chosen in a conceptual void. Recall Lewis’ definition of the a priori as comprised of those attitudes ‘freely taken, a stipulation of the mind itself, and a stipulation which might be made in some other way if it suited our bent or need’ (1923: 169). What suits our need, in moral life, is to have an apparatus suitable for looking into moral matters. That apparatus is a model of inquiry whose application involves assuming both that there is something into which we are inquiring, and some end of inquiry.

The principles that can be adopted in this category are external to the framework, or set the framework, within which we might develop moral principles with determinate content. None of the features of regulative assumptions – their changeability as principles, their local necessity, and their adoption prior to investigation – is exemplified by the other types of principles discussed here.  

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94 The necessarily true, in Lewis’ system, is that which cannot be decisively undermined by experience because it is chosen as a means of demarcating experience.

95 In their 2006 Principled Ethics: Generalism as a Regulative Ideal, Sean McKeever and Michael Ridge argue that generalism itself is a regulative ideal of moral philosophy. Although I agree with much of what McKeever and Ridge say – in particular, their commitment to approaching ‘moral philosophy in full recognition of our own fallibility’ and their emphasis on both practice and progress are nicely in line with the spirit of pragmatism – I am at a loss as to how they can find a substantive metaethical position a regulative ideal.
6.2 Against the Prevailing View

The prevailing view in contemporary metaethics is that if pragmatism clearly supports anything, it must be particularism. One can see how James’ notion of personal truth and Dewey’s idea of the moral situation would seem to suggest that this reading is right; however, there is another reading – one which is more faithful to the complexities of the positions held by the classical pragmatists – available.

In considering whether or not the pragmatist should really be thought to be for particularism and against generalism, I begin here with Dewey, for he is the most frequently held up as a representative of pragmatist particularism. That reading of his view, while tempting, fails to appreciate his concern about theoretical challenges faced by particularism – challenges to which his own considered position is sometimes open. David Bakhurst gives a thorough accounting of the ways one might read Dewey’s work as supporting particularism in his 2007 ‘Pragmatism and Ethical Particularism’\(^\text{96}\), but I shall argue that the recognition of a place for principles in Dewey’s ethics – paired with the observation that such principles are deeply embedded in our shared moral practices – points us in a rather different direction.\(^\text{97}\)

One point we can be certain about with respect to Dewey’s position is that he shares James’ conviction about the uselessness of ‘ethical philosophy made up in advance’. It is this conviction that drives Dewey’s criticism of categorical imperatives, for the defense of such imperatives as absolute principles is entirely \textit{a priori}. The target

\(^{96}\) See especially (Bakhurst 2007: 134-139).
\(^{97}\) Bakhurst does point out that Dewey’s work is most useful for moderate particularists like Margaret Little, who admit that moral life exhibits ‘generalities’ that play an ‘indispensable role’ (Bakhurst 2007: 134), (Little 2000: 278). My view is that particularism as moderate as this has already conceded so much that it may as well be a fallibilist, pragmatist-inflected generalism – a view I shall strive to make attractive in the final section of this chapter.
James and Dewey share is not the idea of any principles being employed in moral reasoning, but the idea that we could arrive at such principles through *a priori* reasoning, and that they could be beyond revision in response to the pressures of experience. This is why Dewey claims that among the theoretical questions one can ask when approaching the terrain of normative ethics, the problem of knowledge of the good comes first. That is, the epistemological question ‘How is the good known?’ has priority over metaphysical questions.

In a decidedly Peircean vein, Dewey declares that this is so because the experience of conflict – and the ensuing demand for resolution that arises in shared contexts of living – is what inspires us to search for the good. The centrality of the experience of conflict has caused ‘the problem of the relation of the individual and the social, the private and public, [to be] forced into prominence’. ‘In one form or another’, the issue of such relations ‘has been the central problem of modern ethical theory’ (1978 [1908]: 204). But we must recognize, Dewey cautions, that we need ‘experience of the good, before knowledge can be attained and operate as the motive force’ in our dealings with one another (1978 [1908]: 201).

In the ‘Preface’ to his *Ethics*, Dewey makes the sort of move that typifies his intellectual engagement with divergent theories: a shift to the middle ground, and an attempt to undermine a dichotomous understanding of the options. Thus, we find him opening this volume on the history and theory of ethics, and a presentation of the pressing problems for ethical theory today, in a peace-making tone: ‘There is a place in the moral

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98 It is precisely this problem that Rorty would have us abandon: if we let go of the notion of an objective truth that underlies experience, the project of redescription takes the place of the project of attempting to capture the truth in some meaningful way. This makes the resolution of conflict a matter of settling on terms – substantive disagreement about those terms is really a battle of personal preferences, born of aesthetic or historic differences between individuals.
life for reason and a place for happiness – a place for duty and a place for valuation’ (1978 [1908]: 4). Despite the genial tone, Dewey goes on to develop extensive criticism of two of the most recognizably generalist theories in normative ethics: Kant’s deontology and Mill’s utilitarianism.

The central point of Dewey’s critique of Kant is that his ethics privileges the will to such an extent that what the will aims at, and in fact produces, is neglected: ‘The view of Kant is that the moral core of every act is in its ‘how’, that is in its spirit, its actuating motive; and that the law of reason is the only right motive. What is aimed at is a secondary…and an irrelevant matter’ (1978 [1908]: 211). Some features of the Kantian good will fit with ordinary convictions: we do think that a good character has a certain dignity on its own. But there is a crucial ambiguity in the notion of good will that may explain why we seem to value character in this way: either a will is ‘good’ because it leads to good, or it is good in itself quite apart from what it promotes. Kant’s interpretation is, as Dewey puts it, ‘formal’: it is the good will in itself that has ‘whole value’, and thus actions derive worth from the maxims (or rules) they can be subsumed under, rather than the inverse. This is the heart of Dewey’s critique of Kant: though we esteem the kind of character exemplified by having a good will in the Kantian sense, we cannot approve of character utterly apart from actions. ‘Will’ cannot be understood as apart from its ends, and ends cannot be understood as deriving all of their worth from being produced or pursued by a will, whatever the orientation or quality of that will might be.

The central point of Dewey’s critique of utilitarianism is the other side of the same coin: utilitarianism privileges the production of ends over the means by which such
ends are achieved. ‘The view of Bentham says in effect that the ‘what is significant’, and that the ‘what’ consists ultimately only of the pleasures it produces; the ‘how’ is unimportant save as it incidentally affects resulting feelings’ (1978 [1908]: 211). In prizing the ‘what’ over the ‘how’, the utilitarian misses the fact that motives inevitably make a difference in the act. The positive truth of utilitarianism is that the moral quality of intention can only be revealed in action – but every outcome springs from some motive. Consequences and motives are always mixed, in the sense that there is no isolating one or the other in attempting to locate moral worth.

Whether Dewey’s assertions about the interconnectedness of character and conduct are accurate or not, the criticisms leveled against deontology and consequentialism reveal something of the considerations that drove him towards enshrining the importance of context to our grappling with moral problems in the form of ‘situations’. What Dewey’s complaint about both generalist views comes down to is the following: each places the crux of moral action in the relation of such action to an absolute requirement. In one case, that requirement is that an act be an expression of a certain quality of will that obeys the law of reason; in the other, that requirement is that an act fit under the principle of utility in terms of its (intended or produced) consequences.

But it would be a mistake to see Dewey’s criticisms here as being especially supportive of particularism, for his arguments are aimed not at the notion of employing principles in ethics, but at the idea that such principles could be universally applicable or arrived at through the use of reason alone. One might happily concede that moral principles need not be either accessible through a priori reasoning or exceptionless, and
still maintain a form of generalism due to epistemological considerations – an option I consider in detail below. Despite the fact that Dewey himself does make the shift from a critique of Kantianism and deontology to what can be called a kind of particularism, there are other options available to the pragmatist – and even calling Dewey’s own view ‘particularism’ is an anachronism, for his view is markedly different from the most common varieties on the metaethics market today.

One place where this becomes apparent is in Dewey’s response to the main alternative to rule-based normative theories prevalent at the time, the ethical intuitionism of G.E. Moore. Dewey understands Moore’s view as relying on the idea of a moral sense, which detects the quality of rightness by direct perception. Dewey raises two objections against such a view. First, there is no clear evidence for the existence of such a sense: the supposedly intrinsic quality can be traced back to experience. And second, our supposed sense is not infallible: acts can seem right and be wrong; deliberation corrects for this, which is why we deliberate. He concludes that the well-trained person will appear to have direct perception of the moral good, but this is actually the result of inculcating good habits. The phenomenological support for the presence of a moral sense is overstated, because perception and recognition rely on a ‘fund’ of past experiences, which often occur (at least early in life) under the guidance of others (1978 [1908]: 291).

By invoking the guidance of others and granting a role to past experiences, Dewey is locating the explanatory priority at the locus of moral learning – a phenomenon generally not well accounted for in either a priori or intuitionist models. In characteristically pragmatist fashion, he casts deliberation as a kind of mental

99 Dewey refers to Moore’s view as ‘moral sense intuitionism’, and much of his critique focuses on the reliance on a moral sense. Modern interpreters of Moore might well be able to respond to Dewey with a more nuanced account of how the requirement for a ‘sense’, in some sense, can be satisfied.
experiment, one of the results of which is the experience of having certain feelings when options are entertained. Dewey stakes his own claim on the metaethical terrain in the following passage, which beautifully highlights the emphasis on epistemology over metaphysics:

[I]t is reconstruction of moral judgment that needs emphasis, rather than the existence of a lot of ready-made “intuitions”. When adjustment is required, deliberate inquiry is the only alternative to inconsiderate, undirected, and hence probably violent changes: changes involving undue relaxation of moral ties on the one side and arbitrary reactions on the other. (1978 [1908]: 291)

In denying the role of emotion and the need for flexible response, a priori accounts of the ground of moral judgment miss out on a crucial part of the experience of being a moral agent. In making the moral sense prior to, or a replacement for, deliberation, intuitionism fails to appreciate that while the moral sense of a good person could furnish a standard, moral sense simpliciter cannot.

While attempting to find a middle ground between constitutivist generalist theories and seemingly ad hoc intuitionism, Dewey engages the problem of the place of general rules directly. There is a problem here for both sides: we do have generalizations that fall somewhere between the formal principles of Kant and the particular judgments generated in actual cases. If we take a ‘common-sense view’ of moral life, we can see that mankind has ‘registered its experiences’ in concrete maxims and formulas (1978 [1908]: 297).

Dewey’s analysis takes the form of considering under what conditions a rational rule can be a specific help. We can’t take the rules of the past on board without reflection; to do so would be to submit to the ‘regime of custom’ (1978 [1908]: 300). But we still do need customs, and customary rules. We typically go beyond custom to
reflection when we are faced with conflict – and when we have such a conflict, we consider principles. Such principles are not rules, which are habitual ways of doing things; rather, they are tools for analyzing a challenging situation. In short, what moral principles do is ‘simplify judgment of the situations requiring intelligent deliberation’ (1978 [1908]: 302).100

If Dewey is right that simplification and education are the main utility of moral principles, they might conceivably, in at least some situations, be done without. But if he is right that we do, as a matter of fact, have concrete maxims and formulas that capture shared moral experience, and that are useful to us in situations requiring serious deliberation, the onus would seem to be on the philosopher agitating against the use of any principles whatever to provide some rationale for their abandonment. There is, I believe, considerable room to respond to Dancy’s claim that ‘morality can get along perfectly well without principles, and…the imposition of principles on an area that doesn’t need them is likely to lead to some sort of distortion’ (2004: 2).

Even though James and Dewey were critical of particular normative theories that involve a commitment to a priori reasoning, I have suggested that it is only certain, metaphysically demanding forms of generalism – such as that of the rigid subsumptive generalist – to which they were objecting. Whether there are positive reasons to think that pragmatism and some more moderate form of generalism make a happy pair remains to be seen. Before entertaining such positive reasons, I turn to what might be thought of as

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100 If one is working with Dewey’s notion of a ‘situation’ here, the simplification will certainly be needed.
the negative basis for trying to understand pragmatism as amenable to generalism: its conflicts with particularism.\[^{101}\]

### 6.3 A Pragmatist Rejection of Particularism

Bakhurst has noted that ‘there appears to be an affinity between [particularism] and certain ethical views advanced by American pragmatists’ (2007: 123). Indeed, it may seem like the pragmatist should be a particularist because one of the places where pragmatism leaves Kant (a candidate for the title of ‘arch-generalist’) decisively behind is in moral theory. As we have seen, James and Dewey are particularly scathing about the idea of arriving at universal moral principles through *a priori* reasoning, and even Lewis’ defense of a modified notion of the *a priori* cannot get us back to the idea that the moral law within us is as certain as the starry skies above. Indeed, even Lewis’ ‘imperatives’, the most concrete principles offered on paper by any classical pragmatist – ‘Be consistent in thought and action’ (a logical constraint); ‘Be concerned with yourself in the future and on the whole’ (a practical constraint) – are presented in the awareness that their capacity for action guidance lies in their intelligent application (Lewis 1946: 482).

In addition to extant quarrels with certain variants of generalism, a number of pragmatists have views that seem particularist-friendly. As we saw in Chapter 2, Dewey develops a position that is liable to be understood by many in this way. I have argued that this position is marred by its metaphysically onerous understanding of ethical

\[^{101}\] An obvious complication here is that Dewey’s metaphysics pushes us to read him as a kind of particularist, despite what he says about the existence of widely accepted principles. The commitment that forces us to read him that way is his metaphysical attempt to incorporate consideration of context into the entity of the situation.
‘situations’, a feature of Dewey’s view that stands in unproductive tension with his general commitment to the priority of epistemological questions in metaethics.

For better or for worse, Dewey inspired Rorty and his followers to take the putative support for particularism to be found within classical pragmatism very seriously indeed. Steven Fesmire has praised Dewey’s work for freeing us from ‘the idolatrous worship of systematized rules’ (Fesmire 2003: 3). Rorty has insisted that Dewey be kept apart from the rest of the tradition of classical pragmatism on the very issue of appreciation of context and its implications: ‘To lump Dewey with Peirce, James, and Quine is to forget that he was swept off his feet, and into a new intellectual world, by Hegel’s and Comte’s visions of our past’. In being so swept, Rorty claims that Dewey became a ‘unique, unclassifiable, original’ philosopher, who was ‘historicist to the core’ (1982: 46).

What is emerging from the background here is a critical thesis from Part I of this work: where pragmatists like James and Dewey begin to go wrong – and to take Rorty and much of current pragmatist thought with them – is where they lose touch with Peirce’s view of truth. Dewey’s philosophy would have fared better, I believe, if he had resisted being ‘swept away’ and instead kept his philosophy grounded in the Peircean view of truth. With the loss of a notion of truth that can support any coherent sense of the objective, we lose the sense we very much need to combat the tendency of some

102 Rorty seems not to have noticed that Peirce was also influenced by Hegel. In the part of the Collected Papers titled ‘Lessons from the History of Philosophy’, Peirce claims that ‘My philosophy resuscitates Hegel, though in a strange costume’ (CP 1.42; 1892).

103 For a full accounting of the idea that there are two distinct strands of pragmatist thought extant in today’s philosophical community – one which stems from Peirce and one which stems from James and Dewey – Misak (2013) is an indispensible resource.
pragmatists to slide into what Bakhurst has called ‘narcissistic anthropocentrism’ (2007: 139).

Where I disagree with Bakhurst is in his assertion that the so-called ‘new pragmatism’ which captures the ‘the best of the old pragmatism’ can lend substantial support to would-be particularists (2007: 139). It is true that much of the best pragmatism is the very oldest, rearticulated for contemporary debates. But when we take the best of the old pragmatism seriously, it points us away from particularism. As we have already seen in Chapter 5, when we take the work of Peirce and his followers seriously, we get decidedly different – and preferable – results in metaethics than if we allow ourselves to take the particular features of our own situations to render us deliberative and justificatory islands in a sea of contingency. But those results are clearly much more closely in line with generalism.

If we reorient ourselves from within the Peircean tradition, we see that particularism is untenable alongside pragmatism, for at least three reasons. First, attempts to explain the significance of context in particularist terms leads one swiftly into ‘scurrilous’ metaphysical territory, territory where we lose our epistemological footing. That is, Dewey’s problems arise all over again for contemporary particularists. Second, particularism struggles to make sense of applying past experience to new problems; that is, it struggles to explain the operation of moral judgment. And finally, particularism is out of step with our everyday moral practices. Those practices are not self-justifying, but they are also not to be dismissed out of hand. As James suggests, moral philosophy requires understanding moral life. What has led many philosophers astray is engagement with the debate between particularists and generalists in robust metaphysical terms. If we
instead focus first on moral life, we see that even if Dancy is correct that ‘the possibility of moral thought and judgment does not depend on the provision of a suitable supply of moral principles’, the effective exercise of moral thought and judgment in a human life – embedded in a context, liable to conflict, and evolving in understanding over times – does.

Let us begin with the claim that particularism leads from metaphysical commitments into epistemological quandaries. As saw in Dewey’s attempts to explain the nature of a moral ‘situation’, the insight that moral problems arise in particular contexts can, if interpreted in a metaphysical manner, lead one swiftly into trouble. Prominent contemporary particularists have done no better at avoiding the pitfalls of ad hoc metaphysics. To see that this is so, let us consider in some detail the work of particularism’s best-known proponent, Jonathan Dancy.

Dancy’s work on particularism as a metaethical view is deeply connected with a view about reasons: holism. In the sense he uses the term, being a holist means that one believes that ‘a feature that is a reason in one case may be no reason at all, or an opposite reason, in another’ (2004: 7)\textsuperscript{104}. This is to say that all reasons have a variable ‘valence’, being positive reasons (or reasons in favour of action) in some cases while standing as negative reasons (or reasons against a course of action) in others. There are no invariant reasons.

So far, this is an account of how reasons operate. There is no obvious metaphysical murk in an ‘explanation of what reasons do’. Dancy begins with the

\textsuperscript{104} Dancy is well aware that other philosophers, including Robert Brandom, adopt the label of ‘holism’ while meaning something less extreme that this view. This seems to be part of what motivates the more moderate tone of *Ethics Without Principles*, where Dancy says that holism supports particularism (as contrasted with his earlier work, where he claimed that holism implies particularism).
modest stipulation that ‘to be a reason for action is to stand in a certain relation to action, and the relation at issue is that of favouring’ (2004: 29). Where matters do become murky is in Dancy’s development of reasons as distinguished from the factors that influence their polarity, for which he develops a complex taxonomy (Dancy 2004: 15; 38-52).

Those relevant features, Dancy claims, are enablers, defeaters, attenuators and intensifiers. Only reasons can stand in favour of doing an action; other features ‘are relevant, but not in the favouring way’ (Dancy 2004: 39). Enablers can be either the presence of a condition or the absence of a condition, as in the case of promising, where Dancy claims that not being given under duress is an enabler.105 Symmetrically, being given under duress would be a disabling condition (or ‘disabler’) operating on the reason(s) in favour of keeping the promise. In addition to enablers and disablers, which we might crudely think of as switching reasons on/off, Dancy also suggests that relevant but non-favouring features of moral situations include intensifiers and attenuators. The former take the reason for action that is already favoured and render it more pressing. In the promising case, an intensifier might be that I stand in a fiduciary relationship to the one to whom I have made the promise, giving me some additional responsibility. An attenuator, by contrast, lessens the strength of the favoured reason to maintain the promise. Dancy maintains that favouring/disfavouring, enabling/disabling, and intensifying/attenuating are all ‘forms of relevance’ determining how the balance of features in a moral situation stand (Dancy 2004: 42).

105 This makes the absence of a disabling condition an enabling feature.
That this taxonomy is problematic is revealed in consideration of the consequences for ethics of accepting Dancy’s version of holism as the exhaustive theory of reasons. I see two main points of concern amongst these conclusions: the inability to determine what is to be included in the ‘resultance base’ that determines the moral rightness or wrongness of an action, and the reliance on the questionable notion of an organic unity to secure holism about value at the cost of the introduction of unintelligible ‘default’ reasons. That these are fairly viewed as points of concern is borne out by the epistemological difficulties that arise.

First, the notion of a ‘resultance base’. Dancy, like most contemporary metaethicists, accepts the general idea that the moral supervenes on the non-moral, such that changes in the moral rely on changes in the non-moral. He is quick to point out, rightly, that not everything in the supervenience base – which is, after all, everything – is relevant to the production of the moral. ‘Resultance’, he says, ‘is a relation between a property of an object and the features that ‘give’ it that property’ (2004: 85). The reluctance base is thus the features that produce the properties of interest. Dancy argues that without the notion of resultance added to the supervenience thesis, that supervenience thesis would leave us blind to what changes in the natural world generate changes in moral value. For ‘The subvenient base…contains all the features that diminish the value as well as those that add to it, and it contains also every other feature…that can in any circumstances make a difference to the ability of the features in the resultance base (i.e. the features that act as ground for the value) to play their special role’ (2004: 178).
Where trouble arises is in the application of Dancy’s taxonomy of reasons, enablers, defeaters, attenuators and intensifiers to the demarcation of the resultance base. The generalist has an easy answer to the question of what belongs in the resultance base that determines moral value: all of the moral reasons, some of which are admittedly complex, but which are nonetheless all of a type – reasons standing for or against the performance of an action. Because Dancy uses his more complex taxonomy of morally salient features to explain how the valence of reasons come to vary across contexts, it is not only moral reasons that belong in the resultance base for moral value. We must also include the other features: enablers, disablers, attenuators and intensifiers. Because these features are not themselves reasons, but relevant facts about how the reasons stand in a situation, literally anything – that is it Tuesday, that I slept poorly last night, that the dog is barking – might stand as such a feature.

What does this mean? In effect, it means that despite Dancy’s helpful distinction between the supervenience base and the salient, resultance base of the moral, we still do not know how the particularist faced with assessment of an action determines what is in the resultance base. I think Dancy is wrong to claim that on his model, ‘we are able to discern the salience of those features that are salient in a situation, and the overall evaluative shape of the situation’ (2004: 143). As we saw with Dewey’s account of the situation, it is impossible to practically discern its shape. While Dancy doesn’t call the situation itself an entity, as Dewey does, the status of the non-reason morally salient ‘features’ is rather opaque – in calling them ‘considerations’, Dancy seems to avoid making any metaphysical commitment. Nonetheless, the insight about the usefulness of isolating the resultance base of an action’s being morally favoured or disfavoured is
seriously undermined by the epistemological difficulty of how to settle what is in the resulstance base.  

A second woe stems from Dancy’s reliance on the questionable notion of an organic unity. The route taken to that reliance is circuitous. The notion itself can be traced back to the ethical intuitionism of G.E. Moore, who relied on organic unities to explain what is ultimately valuable. ‘Organic unities’, Dancy says, ‘are those ‘wholes’ whose value may be either more or less than the sum of the values of their parts’ (2004: 176). The reason Dancy engages in discussion of such entities is to explain a key feature of holism about reasons as it plays out in value theory: ‘there is room for an object to change in intrinsic value even if intrinsic value is grounded in intrinsic features of that object and the object itself remains unchanged in respect of those intrinsic features’ (Dancy 2004: 178). Although he maintains that ‘we should be wary of…talk of parts and wholes’, Dancy resorts to talk of ‘arrangements’ to explain how moral reasons can have their valences altered by other features of situations such that the intrinsic value of actions supported by those reasons can change (Dancy 2004: 183). The moral reasons (the ‘contributory features’ of moral value) are altered by standing in certain arrangements with enablers, defeaters, intensifiers and attenuators (the ‘enabling conditions’ of moral value) such that in specific arrangements, the intrinsic worth of the moral reasons themselves change. Thus, there is some situation where that an act is just is a reason not to do it, that a behaviour is abusive is a reason it should be done, and so on.

106 Along similar lines, Brad Hooker suggests that if we conduct a thought experiment where an entire society adheres to particularism in practice, we see that it leads to wildly unpredictable results (Hooker 2008). I will return to this claim below.
Dancy argues that holists of the sort he is trying to inspire ought not to embrace Moore’s notion of an organic unity. But although Dancy enumerates a number of significant ways in which his conception of an arrangement is distinct from Moore’s version of the notion of an organic unity, he is nonetheless reliant on the peculiar – and metaphysically ambiguous – notion of unique ‘arrangements’ to explain how counter-intuitive cases (like the ones just cited with respect to justice and abuse) can have the value that renders them counter-intuitive. Again, Dancy’s explanation of the basis of particularist assessment looks a lot like Dewey’s invocation of situations, and is crippled by the same woes: determining what belongs in the unique arrangement, what its metaphysical status is, and operating at the level of detail required to make arrangements that look awfully similar be understood as properly unique.

Dancy seems to recognize that reliance on ‘arrangements’ poses an epistemological difficulty for particularism: if ‘there is nothing constant in the realm of value’, then ‘If one wants to know whether some feature is of value here, one cannot get one’s answer by looking at how it behaves elsewhere’ (Dancy 2004: 184). This means that particularism struggles to make sense of the relation of current judgments to past experiences. Particularists share the widespread conviction that moral learning happens, but give an implausible account of how it operates.

The reasoning behind my charge has two parts: we believe that we are capable of learning in moral matters, and we believe the experience plays an important role in explaining how that comes to pass. The first part of the claim is the easier of the two for the particularist to address – she may simply admit that moral learning is a phenomenon we observe, and that her own view owes some account of how it comes to pass, without
recourse to the application of general principles. But it is worth noting that there are, at least, early strands of particularist thought amongst the British moral philosophers that involve reliance on intuition, not learnt knowledge or ability, as the mechanism of true, particular moral judgments.  

Modern particularists generally eschew total reliance on the notion of a moral sense, allowing at least some room for reaping the benefits of experience by some cognitive means. It is really in explaining how moral learning operates on the basis of past experience that the particularist has difficulty, for she insists that it is impossible to ‘unproblematically apply a rule…twice’ (Fesmire 2003: 58). There is thus no prospect of learning a rule (via testimony, say, or absorption of shared background beliefs) in one case and then applying it to another case that seems sufficiently similar – for no cases can ever be sufficiently similar. Each moral situation presents one with reasons afresh, and requires a brand-new engagement with each reason to determine its valence in this particular scenario.  

One response to this challenge that is popular with particularists across the spectrum is the invocation of so-called ‘default’ values of reasons. Particularists as extreme as Dancy and as moderate as Margaret Little appeal to the notion of a default reason to explain why moral judgment is not as onerous on the particularist picture as it might appear, that there are ‘props for judgment’ and ‘regularities’ available to get the show of moral learning on the road (Dancy 2004: 184; Little 2000: 277). This strategy

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107 See Hurka (forthcoming).
108 One response the particularist might make is that although rules are initially involved in the processes of moral learning, they fall away as we reach what Hubert Dreyfus has called ‘moral maturity’ (Dreyfus 1989). As I suggest in the final section of this chapter, there is good reason to think that even if such a model were true of the learning processes of individual moral agents, it would sell short our need for agreement about rules – perhaps even their deliberate adoption – for engaging in the shared conversation of moral discourse and the shared business of moral life.
fails. At least in extant versions, recourse to ‘default’ values is either unintelligible or
concedes so much to the generalist, at least on the epistemological front, that one
wonders what the hang-up in keeping principles out at that point is.

The unintelligible version of the notion of default values comes from Dancy
himself, who introduces the inclusion of such reasons as a feature of ‘moderate’ holism:

The moderate form of holism allows the possibility of what we might call ‘default value’. By this I mean that it can accept a distinction between those features that
bring no value to the situation, though once there they acquire a value that they
can contribute to the whole, and those features that bring a value with them,
though once they are there that initial value can be wiped out, or even reversed,
by other features of the situation. (Dancy 2004: 185).

This explanation is not easily parsed, but seems to suggest the following: some reasons
have ‘default’ values such that they come into any moral situation ‘switched on’ (where
‘on’ just means ‘carrying a value, be it positive or negative). Other reasons lack any
value prior to inclusion in a situation. Once we know which reasons have default values
and which don’t, we have a starting place: ‘with default values…rationality has
something rule-like to work from…one is not reduced to starting from scratch again each
time’ (Dancy 2004: 185).

Yet it quickly becomes clear that the ‘default’ in Dancy’s ‘default values’ does
not signify what one would be naturally inclined to think it does. A default value, he
qualifies, is ‘nothing like an unvarying value’. And it is ‘not the same as a normal value
– a value that a feature has in most contexts, or in normal context in some other sense of
“normal”’. Nonetheless, he maintains that it is only on ‘unusual occasions’ that default
values can ‘be overturned’ (Dancy 2004: 185-6). So default values are as variable as all
other values in the holistic scheme of reasons and have no ‘normal’ value (in the sense,
perhaps, of any statistical regularity that would render their contribution predictable), but
only need to be paid particular attention in atypical scenarios (which one would be
tempted to understand in terms of deviation from normalcy, if that notion were available).
If this can be understood at all, it still seems a far cry from something ‘rule-like to work
from’, and I doubt whether this notion of a default version is really of any help at all.

A less opaque version of the notion of a default value is given by Little and Mark
Lance. They concede that when it comes to moral learning, although ‘discernment forms
a more important, and less mysterious, part of the epistemological repertoire than
structuralists’, or subsumptive generalists, like to admit, more is needed than ‘a huge
wallop of Aristotelian mojo’ (Lance & Little 2006: 309). Part of what is needed, they
suggest, are defeasible generalizations – generalizations that ‘in some way are meant to
capture the nature of the object in question’, despite admitting of exceptions – which can
supply the requisite default values. Crucially, the exceptions are to be understood by
reference to the standard case, and where the valence of a reason is switched,
‘explanations reside in appropriate relations to the standard case’ (Lance & Little 2006:
310). Like Dancy, Lance and Little are swift to reject the intuition that a ‘default’ value
is the statistically prevalent value. But unlike Dancy, they offer some account of what
makes the default a ‘default’ in the first place: ‘the conditions in which it does hold are
particularly revealing of that item’s nature, or of the broader part of reality in which the
item is known’ (Lance & Little 2006: 310). Exceptions are to be understood as ‘carrying
a trace’ of the standard case, and the standard case as ‘privileged’ in a structural,
conceptual, or justificatory sense.

While this more lucid explanation of the nature of a default value is constructive,
it also relies upon there being standards that are not merely constructed, but actually
situates in some reality. Given that Lance and Little are conceding the existence of identifiable generalities as the basis of default moral reasons that, in the paradigm case, carry a particular valence, they have conceded a great deal to the moderate generalist. The reasons they insist on maintaining particularism are thorough-going holism about moral reasons and a resistance to the project of codifying whatever moral regularities really do exist – points I shall return to in the final section below. For now, I think it sufficient to say that once one has conceded that assessment of moral life and learning relies upon a grasp of default reasons as privileged and providing ‘*hos epi to polu’* working generalizations, one really does need to give reasons to suppose that one ought to be a particularist anyway.\(^{109}\)

Abstracting from these accounts, it is worth asking whether even the notion of default reasons can give us any leverage. It seems that it is crucial of every such reason that even if one admits that it has a ‘normal’ or ‘privileged’ value, it is always possible that the problematic situation at hand is one where the polarity is not normal, where the privilege has given way to the exception, where the reason contributes in an unpredictable way.\(^{110}\) Indeed, if particularism is to live up to one of its supposed advantages – greater sensitivity to the nuances of context in determining the moral worth of actions – the particularist must, in every case, be suspicious of whether the default values are contributing as expected.

\(^{109}\) As shall become clear below, I do not find the positive reasons Lance and Little give for particularism compelling, though their moderate view will no doubt have appeal to those who have some attraction to particularism but are not convinced by Dancy’s strong view.

\(^{110}\) Much is made in the generalist camp about the importance of predictability as a measure of ethical theory. While a theory that gives us predictability at the cost of truth is obviously not desirable, I have advocated engaging with the issue of moral principles at the point of practice rather than the point of existence. Thus, it will be good enough if we can say of our preferred metaethical theory about principles, following Wiggins, that there is no reason to think anything else. I return to the issue about predictability below.
Despite being unable to appeal either to default reasons or to principles, the particularist might think that she can still appeal to the mechanism of learning from experience – indeed, she might insist that her view is preferable to generalism precisely because it offers the right account of how one learns from moral experience. In the particularist’s account, learning always begins with specific cases. If she is the sort of moderate particularist that allows some manner of principle a place, she must say that true moral judgments about specific cases always comes before the acquisition of principles – which, if they are nuanced and exception-prone, may turn out to require scrutiny in every situation that leaves one no further ahead in the deliberative game than if one must start from the reasons themselves.111

Even if this picture is plausible, we are entitled to step back and ask whether it meshes with our observations of apparent moral learning. Generalists, of course, say not. Brad Hooker puts the point forcefully:

I flatly deny that moral knowledge always does start off with judgments about particular cases. Moral knowledge, for virtually all of us, starts with learning such general moral truths as that there are moral reasons against hurting others, harming or taking others’ possessions, breaking one’s promises and lying. [The] argument that moral principles are epistemologically otiose begins with the assumption that we do make moral judgments about particular cases before believing general moral principles, and therefore without recourse to them. I cannot see what that assumption has going for it, except the backing of such clever people as Ross…and Dancy. (2008: 24)

The particularist might respond with her own flat denial, leaving us at a clash of opinion. But she nonetheless owes an account of how experience illuminates judgment without recourse to the truly general.

111 Considerations like this motivated Dancy to be extremely dismissive of the utility of principles even as heuristics in his 1993 Moral Reasons, where he claimed that the use of principles is actually pernicious. The 2004 Ethics Without Principles is generally less vehement, but still contains moments where principles are described as not only unnecessary, but actually harmful to good moral reasoning.
Inevitably, it seems that her story must involve honing a sense or perfecting an ability, or securing some item of purely ‘local’ knowledge. If she takes the former route, we wind up with a picture of being a decent moral agent as being analogous to being pretty good at playing the guitar—it is a skill, but it does not involve any transferable knowledge. But if we suppose that there are moral truths, as I have argued in Chapter 5 that we should, we should at least hope that experience of morally freighted situations can lead to knowledge of some such truths. If the particularist takes the latter route of suggesting that we attain ‘local’ knowledge, she will say that we do learn some moral truths, but they are not the sort of truths we should expect to help us or anyone else in any future situation. Moral knowledge is not transferable knowledge.

As we can easily imagine, the generalist has myriad replies to this, all of which point in the direction of the final reason that I suggest the pragmatist ought not be a particularist: particularism is ill-supported by our everyday moral practices. This would not be off-putting to every philosopher, but it should be off-putting to every pragmatist who takes seriously Santayana’s claim to stand in philosophy where we stand in everyday life, on pain of dishonesty.

One way to see that this is so is to consider Hooker’s thought experiment of a society of moral particularists. Hooker prompts us to consider what is would be like to make the choice between living in a society of conscientious particularists or a society of conscientious Rossian generalists (Hooker 2008: 28). The moral he wishes us to draw is that you cannot predict what the particularist will do, because she is not responding to general reasons – she believes there are none. And this predictability is important ‘in the special case of choosing between moral theories that are otherwise equally plausible’ not
because it necessarily indicates some underlying metaphysical truth, but because moral life is shared. We have to get along to go along, and we simply cannot do that when we never know what the other will do next.

I suggest that Hooker’s thought experiment should lead us to draw an additional conclusion: even if the two moral metatheories in question really were equally plausible, the particularist society he describes (albeit briefly) really looks nothing like ours – or anyone’s – at all. If we do try to imagine a society that does not have any shared belief in ‘general reasons of fidelity, reparation, gratitude, beneficence, non-maleficence, or even perhaps justice’ (Hooker 2008: 28), we would not imagine anything that approaches actual human societies, which demonstrate such shared beliefs embodied in forms ranging from codes of social manners to legal systems. The impetus to be faithful, or to grant reparation for perceived wrongs, or to show gratitude, or to strive to act justly is not radically individual, a mere product of what a single person believes morality requires of her.

As Bakhurst has pointed out, ‘The particularist literature…is almost wholly focused on private morality…a phenomenon that intensifies the suspicion that particularism’s contempt for principles leaves it with nothing to say about public policy and the law’ (Bakhurst 2007: 138). He further remarks that this would be a ‘fatal ineptness’; that fatality is in winding up with a picture of moral life that simply doesn’t catch anything like the reality. As James emphasized, the reality of moral life is that it is a shared life. And as Peirce pointed out, and Price has reminded us, participating in the discourse characteristic of a shared life involves placing ourselves under certain norms – norms that we might well conceive of as implicitly involving the sort of moral
architecture the particularist would have us avoid, norms that might be expressed as the shared principles that organize moral discourse and moral life.

6.4 Principled Pragmatism

I have suggested that pragmatists should reject any attempt at moral theorizing that puts the metaphysical cart before the epistemological horse, whether such an account takes a generalist or a particularist tack. So what type of view about moral principles ought the pragmatist to endorse, and to dedicate her energies to developing?

I believe that the pragmatist should endorse generalism on the basis of the following line of thought, which is fundamental to the pragmatist tradition as it emerges from Peirce: moral principles are deeply entrenched in our everyday moral practices, and that they are so entrenched is a sign of their indispensability for moral learning and improvement, tasks the pragmatist takes to be at the heart of our social existence. Dancy has claimed that ‘the imposition of principles on an area that doesn’t need them is likely to lead some sort of distortion’ (2004: 2). True – but so too would the excision of principles from an area that does need them. Shared moral life is such an area.

First, let us consider the claim that moral principles are deeply entrenched in our everyday practice. What is the evidence for this claim, and what kind of moral principles are those anyway? The principles present in our ordinary dealings with one another are not merely ubiquitous, but also sufficiently robust to defy particularist assimilation. This is because (at least some of) our thick moral concepts simply do furnish us with invariant reasons that are not merely ‘default’, but important products of, and points of agreement in, our shared moral life.
What kinds of things might we mark as prevalent moral principles in everyday life? This speculation is the inverse of Hooker’s thought experiment: rather than trying to imagine whether we could do without, let us consider what we appear to seriously rely on. The prime example in this territory, and one that is much discussed in the generalism-particularism literature, is justice. The staunch holist has no choice but to say that the fact that some act would be the just thing to do is sometimes a reason not to do it, for she holds that no reason—moral or otherwise—is invariant. Note how much stronger this is than the claim that sometimes, an act’s being just does not matter much in the final assessment of whether or not it should be done. It is instead the claim that in some cases, justice actually counts against the performance of certain acts.

The generalist, by contrast, has room to say that this type of variability might hold of some moral reasons that are generally considered positive, but not all—or to say that all moral reasons are invariant, if they are just described carefully enough.

Justice is the most obvious candidate for an invariant moral reason, but I doubt that it is alone. Other thick moral concepts that seem plausible candidates for invariance include abusiveness and perhaps depravity. Abusiveness, properly fleshed out, involves connotations of damaging disproportionality. To say of some act that it is abusive seems, at least colloquially, to imply that it is not just. Depravity, properly fleshed out, involves connotations of inexcusable corruption, sexual or otherwise. To say of some act that it is depraved seems, again colloquially, to imply that it cannot be appropriate.¹¹²

¹¹² Compare this to Dancy’s account of lewdness as having a changeable valence, which seems to turn on there being proper times for impropriety—an analysis I am not sure is incoherent. If the time is proper, the action—or the joke, or the gesture—is also proper. In the case of, say, a bawdy joke, its humour is derived not from its actually being lewd but from its having been told in a way that makes it humourous rather than truly lewd. But even if Dancy is right about lewdness, there may be thick concepts even in areas as
The generalist has a choice of explanatory projects: picking out the truly invariant reasons in a moral landscape that does contain some variability, or giving detailed descriptions of our thick moral concepts to illustrate the invariability of the reasons they furnish us with. The particularist has just one project: explaining how reasons that we do, as a matter of fact, take as invariant really can alter. She owes us an account of appropriate injustice, abuse that is called-for but nonetheless still abusiveness, discomfitting depravity that is corrupt in the right way.

Dancy has remarked that if there should turn out to invariant reasons after all, this would be nothing more than a ‘cosmic accident’. My view is that it hardly matters whether their existence is accidental or not – and anyway, if such reasons are about, and can be captured in moral principles, this is quite a lucky ‘accident’ for the exercise of moral judgment. Little has put the point in almost exactly the same terms, claiming that the existence of moral generalities that could be helpfully captured in principles would be ‘philosophically serendipitous’ (Little 2000: 277). But as it turns out, our moral life has what might loosely be called generalist tendencies: we do think principles inform our moral reasoning, and we do take certain reasons to stand as invariant in moral reasoning (that something is just or fair is always a reason to do it; that something is abusive is always a reason not to). The principles and reasons here are of human origin and are situated in human contexts but they are principles and reasons nonetheless.

So morally invariant reasons, and principles we base upon them, are around. What about the claim that the fact that they are so entrenched is a sign of their indispensability for moral learning and improvement? The best defense for this claim, I

unclearly morally delimited as sexual conduct that are invariant. The concept of depravity is not among these, despite its distant origin in Christian doctrines about original sin.
think, is an account – here, a mere sketch – of how moral learning takes place and how invariant reasons furnish us with principles for moral deliberation.

The pragmatist has it that an important way of learning how things stand is through the shock of recalcitrant experience, which forces us to reconsider previously entrenched beliefs. As I have argued, it is clear that we can learn lessons through recalcitrant moral experience. But how does this learning actually proceed? As Arpaly notes in her work on the conditions of moral responsibility, ‘Moral education is more complicated than learning to play football, but it seems clear that some ability to deliberate and some ability for abstract thinking are necessary for it’ (Arpaly 2003: 147). The deliberation component of this recipe, on the pragmatist model, is a response to conflict and doubt – the very experience that makes us realize that deliberation is needed. Deliberation is also engaged in under the aspiration to truth, which we are aiming at ourselves and which we also hold others responsible for aiming at. No merely sense-responsive account of moral sense as the sole engine driving the choice of morally correct actions will do.

Despite this, there must certainly be some affective dimension to the process of moral learning. After all, part of what makes recalcitrant experience truly recalcitrant is that it stops one short. Arpaly again: ‘Responsiveness to moral reasons is particularly important. One cannot blame or praise a creature who cannot be expected to perceive the morally relevant features of situations any more than an elephant can be expected to perceive legal factors, aesthetic factors, or contexts in which a baseball player should not bunt’ (Arpaly 2003: 131).
What is needed to underpin the principles we need in practice may be something like Rawlsian overlapping consensus. Because such principles are corrigible propositions generated on the basis of (and to support) our practices, they do not seem to have the objectionable character that particularists suppose – they need not come packaged with demands for codification, hierarchy, and subsumption as essential components of explanation.

Hooker muses that ‘Perhaps moral reasons need to be predictable, stable and mutually recognized, in ways that other practical reasons do not need to be’. ‘And perhaps’, he adds, ‘this is because many more moral reasons are associated with particularly important co-operation and co-ordination, and enforced by important sanctions’ (Hooker 2008: 18). Crucially, invariant reasons can supply this kind of agreement in a way that we have seen even sophisticated notions of default reasons cannot. This is not to say, or course, that invariant reasons and their concomitant principles always carry the day – they may contribute their weight, strictly valenced as it is, without deciding the case. This is the wisdom in particularism: the vagaries of complex moral situations mean that even the most general principle need not be decisive. But the value of the invariant reason is as it is, nonetheless – it is simply that its contribution winds up, as Sergio Tenenbaum has memorably put the point, ‘on the scrapheap of small values’.

As a final point, the reader may wonder why – given that the main lines of argument in this chapter are epistemological rather than metaphysical – I insist on saying that the position the pragmatist should could to must be termed a generalism rather than a particularism. If the target of explanation is stable practice that stands up to the force of
experience, rather than underlying entities, why subscribe to either label? Certainly, in insisting that this position be viewed as a species of generalism, I may be bucking the trend of rather moderate particularists, who would be happy to count my view as one of their own.

Focusing on one such moderate particularist, Little, helps to illuminate the reason for refusing to join that camp: I am in disagreement with those moderate particularists about the relative importance of shared practices involving moral principles, or the relative importance of the principles to those practices. Little insists that her own position, despite its recognition of actually existing moral generalities, is a particularist one. ‘Particularism’, she says, ‘is deserving of the name, for it insists on the importance of discernment, highlights our over-reliance on generalities, and views as folly any search for a moral architecture. While particularism dethrones ethical generalizations…it hardly exiles them’ (Little 2000: 304). It seems to me that Little is making a metaphysical point about what underlies principles – that is, that moral generalities actually do while seeking to undermine their epistemological prowess. This is precisely the inverse of my own position, which emphasizes the epistemological indispensability of moral principles, whether they be – in the metaphysical sense – based on something found or constructed. Our shared practices are reliant on principles in a way that cannot easily be reconciled with Little’s disinterest in ‘moral architecture’.

In addition to this commitment to a practice-focused methodology, I think that there is good reason to judge the particularist mistaken about key facts. I deny Dancy’s claim that ‘there is something incoherent in [a] mix of variability and invariability’ (2004: 10). In fact, what he describes as an ‘unholy marriage’ looks an awful lot like any
marriage: somewhat complex, requiring careful attention, and involving certain principles that stand as chosen bedrock. And I maintain that there are, as a matter of cosmic accident or shared human construction, at least some invariant moral reasons which can stand as the ground of general imperatives.

Lewis’ late ethical theory offers a version of the argument that we do, in fact, place ourselves under imperatives – and crucially, that in doing so, we recognize their liability to exception in the abstract and their absolute generality in application:

[I]mperatives in general, and the basic imperatives…must be categorical or else valid in no sense at all. But Kant has confused us about categorical and hypothetical imperatives; the division between the two is not between those which are moral and those requiring a technical sanction or one of antecedent inclination. Instead, this division is between principles which are final and general and apply in all cases, and their application to particular instances. No such general imperative implies a direct and unqualified dictate of rightness in any particular instance. That requires other premises expressing the particularities of the case. There is absolutely no concrete act which is right to do under any and all circumstances. There are even times when you ought to hold your breath instead of breathing. Correspondingly the dictate of right in any particular instance is hypothetical, when fully stated, though let us not overlook the commonplace fact that when the hypothesis of it is satisfied, a hypothetical imperative becomes an unqualified dictate. (Lewis 1954: 226).

Our shared moral life turns on a number of hypotheses – ‘if one has to get along with one’s fellows…’, ‘if one requires institutions of law and education to organize one’s society…’ – and is thus governed by a corresponding number of unqualified dictates. How to go about satisfying them best is the province of normative ethics, an enterprise that I have suggested can be well-supported by a pragmatist metaethics armed with practicable notions of truth and principles.

In focusing on our shared moral life, the pragmatist focuses on experience – experiences of individuals and of communities, experiences of goodness, badness, joy, sorrow, and beauty. But she maintains that the interpretive aspect of experience, the
evaluative component, makes judgment no less objective. Moral knowledge and scientific knowledge hold of the same world, and in the same way. The pragmatist emphasis on truth and experience in the realm of the moral allows us to see that we can do better, and be better, by striving to know better.
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