

This article exposes a fundamental inconsistency between the philosophical pre-suppositions of certain pragmatist contentions through a critical analysis of the phrase 'good for what'. It notes that in replacing intrinsic value with instrumental value Dewey reduces value concepts to functional concepts. It establishes that functional concepts presuppose an object value structure and that knowledge of it comes through a wider range of experience than just sensory experience; but this is inconsistent with the pragmatist claim to be a strict scientific naturalism which presupposes that there is no objective value structure and that all knowledge comes through sensory experience. Similar results are obtained from the explication of valuation in terms of troubled experience.

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Inconsistent Presuppositions of Dewey's Pragmatism

Introduction

In philosophical discussions of 'good' the hallmark of the pragmatist seems to be the standard response 'good for what'. This phrase needs careful scrutiny through philosophical analysis to reveal its basic presuppositions. Close inspection of the details will show that it involves more than it seems to involve. Indeed for the pragmatist it involves more than he is able to accept consistently.

In the following remarks I am not attempting a general appraisal of the adequacy of pragmatism. There are many problems which I will not consider. Rather, I will simply be pointing out that certain contentions of pragmatism in matters of value have philosophical presuppositions which are problematic for the pragmatist and which, I believe, render it inadequate as a theory of value. More specifically, I will contend that there is a major inconsistency between the presuppositions of two of its claims. This will be established by first briefly stating the position neutrally and then philosophically analyzing the position for consistency. Two separate arguments will be employed to establish the inconsistency. Then a third *modus tollens* argument against pragmatism will be developed to corroborate the charge of inadequacy.

Statement of the Position

In stating the position of pragmatism in value theory the work of John Dewey will be taken as paradigm — especially his book *Theory of Valuation*. With reference to the pragmatist position Charles Morris says, "While this orientation to value considerations is common to all the major pragmatists, John Dewey is pre-eminently the axiologist of the pragmatic movement."¹ He has done more work and had more influence in value theory than any other major pragmatist.

Clearly Dewey is an ethical naturalist. The pragmatist position developed by Dewey is a thorough-going scientific naturalism. It holds that the categories

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¹Charles Morris, *The Pragmatic Movement in American Philosophy* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1970), p. 81.

acknowledged by natural science are the categories of reality. The descriptive-explanatory approach of natural science is taken to be the only way to know reality. It claims that only through sensory experience does one have knowledge-yielding or data-gathering confrontations with reality. All other modes of discourse are either reducible to this mode of discourse or explained as having some non-epistemic function. It holds that the language and concepts of all areas of discourse which make truth claims are reducible to or translatable into factual language. As a result, value judgments, which Dewey contends make truth claims, are reducible to psychological judgments which he contends are empirically verifiable by observation of behavior. For example, Dewey says:

... Valuations are empirically observable patterns of behavior and may be studied as such. The propositions that result are about valuations but are not of themselves value-propositions in any sense marking them off from other matter-of-fact propositions.²

In short, values are allowed no ontological or metaphysical status, i.e., values are not thought to exist in and of themselves independently of being experienced. This systematically reduces value language to factual language and explicates values in terms of facts. This point is made quite explicitly by Edward Moore when he says of Dewey:

... In reconciling these two facets (facts and values) of experience he does not hold with the ancients that factual judgments are reducible to value judgments, but rather that the converse is the case. The ultimate meaning and function of a value judgment must be expressible in terms of judgments about facts . . . On this view value judgments are not separable from factual judgments but are reducible to them.³

A corollary development from the naturalistic position of pragmatism is Dewey's elimination of the notion of intrinsic values and the replacement of it by only instrumental values. This is the source of the recurrent 'good for what' phrase. He says, "Value-propositions of the distinctive sort exist whenever things are appraised as to their suitability and serviceability as means . . ." ⁴ Ends and means are always linked together inseparably. Dewey heaps scorn upon the idea that ends could exist independently. He says that it is simply impossible to have an end-in-view without some consideration of the means of attaining it. Likewise he says that the notion of ends separate from consideration of means is "foolish to the point of irrationality." He even says that 'end-in-itself' is a self-contradictory term.

Within this strict naturalism Dewey explicates valuation as the existence of troubled experience. For him valuation involves desire, and desire involves a lack or privation which one experiences in his environment. For example, Dewey says:

Because valuations in the sense of prizing and caring for occur only when it is necessary to bring something into existence which is lacking, or to conserve in existence something which is menaced by outside conditions, valuation *involves* desiring . . . however, desires are seen to arise only within certain existential contexts (namely, those in which some lack prevents the immediate execution of an active tendency) . . . ⁵

This involves him in an analysis of 'desire'. He emphasizes his empirical position by stressing that desires, and hence valuations, always occur in factual situations such that if the facts of the situation change the valuations about the situation

²John Dewey, *Theory of Valuation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1939), p. 51.

³Edward C. Moore, *American Pragmatism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), pp. 237-238.

⁴Dewey, p. 51.

⁵Dewey, pp. 15-16.

automatically change. For him desires as well as valuations must be verifiable by observations with sensory experience. He ridicules linguistic and philosophical conceptual analysis as dialectical manipulations of general concepts. He contends that progress is made only by examining the environment for the causes of desire. Dewey clearly positions himself within behavioristic naturalism when he says, "It is by observations of behavior . . . that existence and description of valuations have to be determined."⁶

Analysis of the Position

In stating the position it was noticed at first glance that in matters of value Dewey's pragmatism is basically a form of scientific naturalism. A necessary, logical implication of this is that the position is subjectivistic with respect to value experience, although Dewey is clearly objectivistic with respect to value language. Perhaps some explication would be helpful for this distinction will prove to be crucial.

First the distinction between value experience and value language needs to be clarified. Value experience is the affective-conative state that one experiences or undergoes when in evaluative or emotive circumstances. In contrast, value language is the language or terminology used to describe, report, or express value experience.

The subjective-objective controversy actually involves three positions. On one extreme is what might be called pure or complete subjectivism. The opposite extreme is what might be called pure or complete objectivism. Between these two positions is what might be called the subjective-objective approach. It is a combination of partial subjectivism and partial objectivism. These positions are determined by their stands on value experience and value language. One can be a subjectivist with regard to value experience and still be either a subjectivist or an objectivist with regard to value language. However, of course, one could not be an objectivist with regard to value experience and still be a subjectivist with regard to value language. This is why there are only three positions in the controversy instead of four. The fourth combination is not possible. It would not make sense to say that a value experience was semantically meaningful but that an expression of it was semantically meaningless. But all this needs explication.

Pure subjectivism is a subjectivism with respect to both value experience and value language. It holds that value experience is not cognitive, not epistemic, and not the discernment of a value structure in reality. In short, it holds that value experience is not ontologically significant. But also value language, as distinct from value experience, is held to be subjective in that value judgments are held to make no truth claim at all and so cannot be true or false. Pure subjectivism maintains that moral judgments are "expressions" of emotions, preferences, or decisions and are not cognitively significant; i.e., they literally do not make an epistemic claim. Value judgments are not even of or about value experience. They are merely "expressions" of such experiences. Emotivism and existentialism are examples of this position. They are subjectivistic in value experience and in value language. For them value discourse is not about experience, rather it is venting of emotion or expression of choice. For them value experience does not have semantic ties to the world.

⁶Dewey, p. 15.

Partial subjectivism-partial objectivism is a subjectivism with respect to value experience only. It is objective with respect to value language — thus the subjective-objective label. It holds that value judgments are of and about value experience in a cognitively significant manner such that they make epistemic claims which can be confirmed to be true or false. But it holds that value language is reducible to or translatable into some other kind of language — usually the descriptive-explanatory language of psychology. The value experience itself is subjective and not a discernment of objective values in the world. It has no semantic connections with the structure of reality. Utilitarianism and Dewey's pragmatist position are examples of this position. They are subjectivists with respect to value experience but yet objectivists with respect to value language. That is, for them value language is of and about value experience. It serves a definite function. It makes truth claims about value experience. It expresses and describes value experience. Yet it does not express the semantic content of value experience for they deny that value experience is intentional or that it has a semantic content. They do not acknowledge value experience as irreducible or separate in kind from factual experience. Their objective value language is not grounded to the world through experience. For them value language can be reduced to or translatable into non-value language, i.e., to factual language in terms of the descriptive-explanatory language of natural science. This is usually done in terms of the language of psychology such that value judgments become empirically verifiable.

Pure objectivism is the exact opposite of pure subjectivism. It is an objectivism with respect to both value experience and value language. It holds that value judgments are objective in that they are cognitively significant and make an epistemic claim which can be confirmed to be true or false. They embody a significant semantic claim. The content of value judgments is not dependent upon the peculiarities of the agent but is determinable by any rational observer appraised of the relevant facts. Pure objectivism maintains that value language is not reducible to non-value language since value experience discerns a dimension of reality not discernible through any other mode of experience. Value judgments are not merely expressions of emotions or attempts to evoke similar attitudes in others, but rather are of and about an objective value structure, for value experience itself is held to be epistemic and a discernment of such a value structure in the world. Values exist independently of a discerning mind, and there are norms or value requirements regardless of whether or not anyone is aware of them. Like necessary connections they are not dependent upon knowledge of them. Value realism is an example of this position. Value realists are objectivists both with respect to value experience and value language. For them value language is of and about features of reality which are semantically located through value experience. Value language is expressive of value experience, i.e., it translates into language what is semantically present in value experience. It relates a dimension of experience which is not expressible through any other language. That is, value language is not reducible or translatable into any other language. No other kind of language can express the semantic content expressible in an ordinary value judgment. Value language is grounded to the world through experience. That is, value experience has semantic ties to the world, and the dimension of reality discerned through it cannot be located in any other mode of experience.

Now it was seen earlier that the pragmatist position allowed no ontological or metaphysical status to values and reduced value language to factual language. However, it was also seen that Dewey's position allowed value language a semantic function subject to truth-values. For Dewey value judgments can be consistent, incompatible, correct, in disagreement, or in any of the relationships to which the whole team of logical appraisal concepts are applicable. This indicates that there are logical relationships among one's value experiences which are reported in one's value judgments. This in turn means that there must be a semantic function to value language for logic is concerned with semantic relationships. In matters of value there is a way to get things right and a way to get them wrong. Indeed for Dewey ethics is a consideration of the proper or correct ways to act in a situation so as to harmonize conflicts and promote growth through the release of blocked impulses. As a result, Dewey's pragmatist position is clearly seen to be a partial subjective-partial objective position since it is subjective with respect to value experience but objective with respect to value language.

Now, with this established the inconsistency between the philosophical presuppositions of two pragmatist claims can be pointed out. And this gets back to our initial concern with the phrase 'good for what'. Dewey wants to replace the notion of intrinsic value with that of instrumental value. For him for *x* to be good it has to be good for something or good as something. He interprets 'good' in terms of utility value. He says, "Ends-in-view are appraised or valued as *good* or *bad* on the ground of their serviceability in the direction of behavior dealing with states of affairs found to be objectionable because of some lack or conflict in them."⁷ When explicated this means that *x* serves well as something or fulfills its function. For the pragmatist '*x* is good' means '*x* is useful as' or '*x* serves well that which it is intended for' or '*x* has the properties or characteristics it should have to be *x*'. This in turn is to reduce value concepts to functional concepts. But functional concepts presuppose a value structure and a relation to it. For an object to be an instance of a functional concept presupposes that there is a normative concept of the object, i.e., that the object has properties *F*, *G*, and ought to have (or be) *H*. For example, the concept 'knife' entails that it has properties *F*, *G*, and *ought* to cut. However, this is not a factual judgment determined empirically; it is a value judgment. But the presupposition of the existence of a value structure to which concepts can be in relation is a major inconsistency with regard to the rest of the pragmatist position in value theory. Clearly this 'ought' is not used figuratively here in such a way that it could be just as well replaced by 'will' or used interchangeably with 'does'. For the concept 'knife' is not such that it has properties *F*, *G*, and will cut or these properties and does cut. A knife can have these other properties and not cut but still be a knife. It simply is a bad knife. This does not mean that it is not useful, even as a knife. Rather it means it is not as useful as it *should* be. That is, it is not as useful as it would be if it had all the properties it *ought* to have to be a knife. And again this is not a factual judgment determined empirically but a value judgment. That it is a value judgment and not a factual judgment is clear from the syntactical form used to express it. Factual relationships are expressed by the syntactical form '*x* is *F*'. Apodictic relationships of logical necessity are expressed by the syntactical form '*x* must be *F*'. Evaluative relationships are expressed by the syntactical form '*x* ought to be *F*'. This points out that reality is multi-dimensional and thus richer

⁷Dewey, p. 47.

than the narrowly conceived pragmatist position which endorses the one dimensional factual reality advocated by a consistent scientific naturalism. As a scientific naturalist the pragmatist can allow the use of apodictic and evaluative syntactical structures in language, but they must ultimately be reducible to factual language. The pragmatist attempts this by reducing value concepts to functional concepts. But, as has been seen, functional concepts presuppose the existence of a normative structure to which the concepts can be in relation. And this is inconsistent with the rest of pragmatist value theory. Perhaps some elaboration will prove helpful here for this is integrally related to the position's being naturalistic.

An example of Dewey's empirical naturalism is explicit when he says:

Valuations exist in fact and are capable of empirical observation so that propositions about them are empirically verifiable. What individuals and groups hold dear or prize and the grounds upon which they prize them are capable, in principle, of ascertainment, no matter how great the practical difficulties in the way.³

It is clear from the context that he means that value judgments are empirically verifiable by the methods of natural science. But if value judgments are empirically verifiable by the methods of science then they must reduce to naturalistic descriptions in terms of sensory experience. Of course, this is exactly the position a typical thorough-going naturalist would affirm. He would claim that all value experience is reducible to or locatable in another mode of experience — namely, factual experience subject to the descriptive-explanatory language of natural science.

Even so, Dewey makes a fundamental mistake when he claims that value judgments are empirically verifiable by sensory experience. He confuses categories. Take, for example, the concept 'knife'. If one says 'This is a good knife' the pragmatist will respond 'good for what'. This points out that the concept is a functional concept. A knife is serviceable as an instrument when it fulfills its function well. And value judgments are made about it on this basis. This is part of what constitutes being a knife. Indeed for the pragmatist its essence is its function. Now consider the statement 'This is a bad knife'. This is a value statement. All that can be empirically verified by scientific methods is a factual statement like 'This knife will not cut.' But only when this factual statement is in conjunction with the value statement 'The nature of a knife is such that a knife ought to cut' is the value conclusion 'This is a bad knife' warranted. That is, the concept of a knife is such that it entails that it ought to cut. But entailing that it *ought* to cut just shows that the concept 'knife' is a value concept. It is conceived in terms of its function or of what it exists to do. Then knowing the way a knife ought to be one can get at the facts empirically and discover that it is not the way it ought to be. But one does not empirically discover that it is not the way it ought to be, just as one does not empirically discover the way it ought to be. Rather one knows from the concept of knife that it ought to cut. There is a normative aspect built into the concept. But that it ought to cut is a value judgment entailed by what looks like a purely factual judgment — namely, 'This is a knife. However, when clarified and explicated it is seen to contain suppressed value aspects. Only when the empirically discoverable factual aspects are combined with the suppressed value aspects can the value conclusion be legitimately drawn.

One might ask where one gets the concept 'knife'. But it is not a concept groundable solely in sensory experience. Rather one has a notion of an imperative

³Dewey, p. 58.

or a function built into the concept of a knife. And this notion is grounded in a wider range of experience and thought than in merely sensory experience and the refinement of it under scientific development. Likewise, all other functional concepts are value concepts. This points up the fact that common everyday experience, including scientific experience, is more thoroughly saturated with value concepts than is generally thought to be the case. It also points up the fact that functional entities or instruments are in a relationship to a value structure which exist in reality, that they have a normative nature, and that they may be correctly judged to be the way they ought to be or not the way they ought to be with regard to that nature. But this is thoroughly inconsistent with the rest of the pragmatist theory in matters of value and totally alien to the scientific naturalism which it espouses. Nevertheless, this is the consequences of the pragmatist emphasis on instrumental value and the corresponding 'good for what' phrase.

For example, if one says 'This is a good pine tree' the pragmatist will respond 'good for what'. But this indicates a narrowness of the pragmatist point of view. There are many notions of 'good' besides the strict utility value which the pragmatist employs. There is a legitimate sense in which a pine tree can be said to be good without being said to be good for anything. And this does not require that the pine tree be good in itself or have intrinsic value. A given pine tree can simply be good of a kind, i.e., have all the characteristics it ought to have to be a pine tree. Certainly there are characteristics which a pine tree ought to have. It ought to have scale-like bark, be coniferous, have needles, etc. With its emphasis on scientific method the pragmatist position would certainly acknowledge that there is a descriptive account of what it is to be a pine tree. And, as seen earlier, such a purely empirically descriptive account would not contain functional aspects. Rather it would be an enumeration of the characteristics for classifying an entity as a pine tree. This constitutes the essence or nature of a pine tree. Then that which exemplifies these characteristics adequately could be truthfully said to be a good pine tree. It would simply be good of a kind. It may happen to be useful for (or good for) a lot of things, but that is incidental to its essence or nature. For instance, a pine tree may be good for building a house, but if it were not it would still be a pine tree. This points out that in its narrowness pragmatism acknowledges only instrumental good and overlooks the many other aspects of good.

A second argument likewise establishes the existence of an inconsistency in the presuppositions of pragmatism. Earlier it was seen that Dewey explicates valuation in terms of troubled experience. For example, he says:

. . . valuation takes place only when there is something the matter; when there is some trouble to be done away with, some need, lack, or privation to be made good, some conflict of tendencies to be resolved by means of changing existing conditions.⁹

However, when analyzed closely this passage is seen to involve much more than it might seem. Indeed the notion of troubled experience presupposes a value structure and a relation to it. The very fact that it is experienced as troubled indicates a value aspect to what otherwise might seem a factual statement. Only when a certain interpretation is placed upon the facts of the circumstances does it make sense to refer to the experience as troubled. And that interpretation is one in which some condition is taken to be not the way it ought to be. This is what serves as the grounds for the imperative to change the existing condition — an

⁹Dewey, p. 34.

imperative which the pragmatist finds so basic in all value experience. The whole team of concepts which Dewey uses to explicate his position in value theory presupposes this objective interpretation of values, i.e., that certain things are the way they ought to be, or as Dewey says, are 'going smoothly' and 'it suffices to let things take their natural course', while other things are not the way they ought to be, or as Dewey says, are such that 'there is something lacking, wanting, in the existing situation as it stands, an absence which produces conflict in the elements that do exist.'¹⁰ He says that when analyzed this 'something the matter' in the situation is found to spring from the lacking or wanting or absence in the situation. But when analyzed further the 'lacking or wanting' is found to spring from the normative structure of the situation to which the existing situation does not measure up. The entire team of concepts which Dewey employs to explicate valuation — including troubled, lacking, wanting, need, and privation — all presuppose a value structure and a relation to it, in this case a negative relation. This is required in order to make sense of one's experience in these terms. Indeed these are value terms which relate one's value experience of reality. But this requires an ontological status to values which the pragmatist does not acknowledge. However, this is the consequences of the pragmatist explication of valuation as troubled experience. It leaves a basic inconsistency unresolved.

A brief reflection on Dewey's preoccupation with growth will substantiate or corroborate the existence of a basic inconsistency between the pragmatist identification with a strict naturalism and the presupposition of an objective value structure. Dewey says that growth itself is the only moral end and that the origin or end of growth is simply the capacity for more growth. But this seems to make growth become good in itself or an intrinsic value, a notion which Dewey argues against. Nevertheless, the concept 'growth' involves a process of something becoming what it ought to be. That is, it is an intentional concept. Things do not just grow. They grow toward some state and are then evaluated relative to that state. But this process of becoming what it ought to be presupposes a value structure and a relation to it. Again this is inconsistent with the claim of a strict naturalism but, nevertheless, the consequences of the pragmatist emphasis on growth.

Lastly, a *modus tollens* argument against pragmatism will corroborate the charge of inadequacy. A *modus tollens* argument is a logically valid form of the following type:

$$\begin{array}{l} \text{if } p \text{ then } q \\ \text{not } q \\ \hline \text{therefore, not } p. \end{array}$$

Now, if pragmatism properly explicates 'good' in terms of utility value and contends that 'good' means 'useful', then the term 'useful' would be interchangeable with the term 'good' without loss of sayable content. But this is not the case, and the term 'useful' is not interchangeable with the term 'good'. Therefore, 'good' is not properly explicated in terms of 'utility' as the pragmatist contends. For example, in none of the following cases is the term 'good' interchangeable with or translatable in terms of utility value without loss of sayable content: I had a good time, it was a good meal, the test was a good deal harder than expected, or he is a morally good man.

¹⁰Dewey, p. 33.

Conclusion

In conclusion let me briefly summarize how a major inconsistency in pragmatist value theory has been uncovered. It is the inconsistency between the philosophical presuppositions of the claims of a strict naturalism and the reduction of value concepts to functional concepts. The presupposition of the first claim is that there is no ontological status to values and that all knowledge comes through sensory perception. The presupposition of the second claim is that there is an objective value structure in reality and that knowledge of it comes through a wider range of experience than just sensory experience. In critically analyzing the recurrent pragmatist phrase 'good for what' it was noticed at first glance that pragmatism is a thorough-going form of scientific naturalism. From this it was then established that pragmatism is a partial subjectivist-partial objectivist position since it allows no ontological or metaphysical status to values and reduces value language to factual language, although it allows value language semantic significance. With this in view it was noted that in replacing intrinsic value with instrumental value Dewey reduces value concepts to functional concepts. But then it was established that functional concepts presuppose an objective value structure and a relation to it. And this presupposition of the existence of such a value structure is a major inconsistency with respect to the presupposition of the claim of pragmatism being a strict scientific naturalism.

A second argument corroborated the preceding findings. It established that in spite of the pragmatist claim to a strict naturalism with no ontological status to values its explication of valuation in terms of troubled experience presupposes an objective value structure and a relation to it which requires an ontological status for values. Thus a major inconsistency exists between two of the basic presuppositions of pragmatist value theory.

Finally, a *modus tollens* argument was used to show that the pragmatist explication of 'good' in terms of utility value was inadequate.

RESUME

Au travers d'une analyse critique de la phrase "bon pour quoi", cet article expose les fondements illogiques des présuppositions philosophiques de certaines affirmations pragmatiques. Il note qu'en remplaçant une valeur intrinsèque par une valeur instrumentale, Dewey réduit les concepts de valeurs à des concepts de fonctions. Il établit que les concepts de fonctions présupposent un ensemble de valeurs objectives et que cette connaissance est apportée plutôt par un large éventail d'expérience que par une expérience purement sensorielle. Mais ceci est contradictoire avec le pragmatisme défini comme étant un naturalisme scientifique pur, qui ne présuppose pas de structure de valeur objective, et pour qui toute la connaissance est apportée par une expérience sensorielle. On obtient des résultats semblables en étudiant les estimations en terme "d'expérience troublée".