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## Pragmatism's Instrumental View of Moral Reasoning

Through the influence of Peirce's pragmatic maxim, we associate pragmatism with what can be termed *cognitive instrumentalism*, the view that the meaning of descriptive sentences is determined by their effects on future experience. When applied to scientific theories this becomes the view that theories are instruments of prediction, and is commonly contrasted with *realism*, the view that the descriptions of theoretical entities provided by the natural sciences correspond to what exists in the physical world. Through the influence of Dewey's analyses of means/end reasoning, we also associate pragmatism with *practical instrumentalism*. This is the view that practical reasoning as deliberation about what we should do is means/end reasoning in which desired ends guide the selection of actions to be performed as instruments for achieving them. When applied to moral reasoning, practical instrumentalism can be contrasted with *rationalism*, the view that moral reasoning takes the form of deriving what we should do from cognitively apprehended moral principles. This cognitive apprehension has been characterized historically as being arrived at through direct rational intuition, by reasoning to the contradictoriness of a principle's denial, or by a process of abduction in which the principle is initially justified by its ability to explain a variety of moral intuitions and then tested relative to other intuitions.

I have just stated very rough contrasts that hide many difficulties, both in formulating in a coherent way the alternatives and in deciding between them. This work has been done with much thoroughness over the past few decades for the contrast between cognitive instrumentalism and realism as a result of a combination of historical studies of Peirce, James, and Dewey and systematic discussions of scientific method and alternative truth theories. Unfortunately, the same energy has not been exhibited for the instrumentalism/rationalism contrast. There have been systematic discussions of the contrast collected in a recent volume edited by Elijah Millgram,<sup>1</sup> but there is weak support of this in historical studies of the pragmatist tradition. The aim of this essay is to sketch the relationship between practical instrumentalism and pragmatism, and to provide some reasons for favoring the pragmatist alternative over its rationalist rival.

### 1. Pragmatism and Practical Reasoning

The first question we must ask is whether we can identify pragmatism with practical instrumentalism. The writings of Peirce are of little help, as ethics was not the focus of his attention. In his ranking of the normative sciences he does place priority of aesthetics over ethics, and this seems to suggest an aesthetic derivation of moral principles that is consistent with instrumentalism of the kind I shall be outlining. James's criticism of "intellectualism" is directed at rationalist ethical theories, and this indirectly indicates his adherence to the alternative instrumental view. But this in itself seems insufficient to identify him with this alternative.

The identification is perhaps most clearly stated by Ralph Barton Perry in his *General Theory of*

Value in his criticisms of the Kantian distinction between prudential conduct guided by inclination and moral duty determined by the dictates of reason. Value has traditionally been thought to reside in what are determined to be our moral duties, Perry notes, while inclinations or wants have been regarded as in need of restraint, with reason providing this restraint as the charioteer of Plato's metaphor reining in desires and passions. For Perry the conflict is of a very different kind. "The conflict between inclination and the sense of duty," he says, "is a genuine conflict between one interest and another, and there seems to be no good reason for imputing value to the object of the latter while denying it to the object of the other."<sup>2</sup> Moral duties are for him grounded in inclinations or interests, and thus any conflict between them and our personal inclinations must be traced to the different inclinations on which the duties are based. The categorical and authoritative character attributed to Kant for moral 'ought' judgments arises, Perry says, from ignorance of the background reasoning based on inclinations used in earlier times to derive through these judgments. The "irreducibility" and "impressive and categorically authoritative character" of an 'ought' judgment, he says,

is largely an effect of ignorance. Where the reasons for action have dropped out of mind, leaving only a vague, lingering trace of their force, the act takes on an aspect of mysterious imperativeness which the evident calculations of prudence lack. Indeed it might be said that unreasoning convictions take on a character of inflexibility because, being an expression of will or habit, they cannot be influenced by argument.<sup>3</sup>

The "evident calculations" of prudential reasoning reveal that judgments such as 'I should save my money' or 'I shouldn't drive recklessly' are based on inclinations such as those expressed by 'I want security in the future' or 'I don't want to injure myself or others'. Though originally arrived at by reasoning with some similarity to prudential reasoning, the reasoning for moral judgments such as 'I should always tell the truth' has "dropped out of mind." The result, according to Perry, is to convey on them their categorical character. If we accept Perry as our representative, then we can identify pragmatism with the view that practical reasoning, whether prudential or moral, has as its basis inclinations or desires, and from here it is a short step to conclude that deliberative actions, both prudential and moral, are directed to the means for their realization.

We would expect that Dewey would be in agreement with Perry's view that inclinations provide the bases for moral judgments, and indeed there are passages in which Dewey indicates this support. He does reject Kant's assigning to reason the role of evaluating our desires. "Rationality," he says, "is not a force to evoke against impulse and habit. It is the attainment of a working harmony among diverse desires."<sup>4</sup> Instead, reasoning is assigned the subsidiary Humean role of tracing the consequences of action. It "puts before us objects which are not directly or sensibly present, so that we then may react directly to these objects, with aversion, attraction, indifference or attachment."<sup>5</sup> But we also attribute to Dewey his much-discussed distinction between the desired and the desirable, and indeed this distinction may be suggested by Perry's use of 'interest' in defining his view, since a person can want what we recognize is not in his interest. That there is such a distinction seems to imply that there is some rationally apprehended principle in terms of which desired ends can be evaluated. But Dewey rejects this solution. The principle of maximizing utility certainly cannot provide the basis for evaluation, and we find him explicitly criticizing utilitarianism as setting up a "fixed end."<sup>6</sup> His attempts to state the desired/desirable distinction have been criticized by a number of writers, notably by Morton White.<sup>7</sup> This desired/desirable distinction

remains one of the least satisfactory parts of Dewey's otherwise admirable discussions of practical reasoning, and leads us to hesitate in identifying him with a practical instrumentalism that applies to moral reasoning.

Richard Rorty is a much less ambiguous advocate of an instrumental view in his *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*. There he criticizes attempts to derive an unconditioned rational foundation of ethics, and restates the distinction between the moral and the prudent in a way consistent with Perry. Rorty goes beyond Perry in explicitly identifying the bases for moral judgments with community interests that are as contingent as those desires on which prudential decisions are based. The distinction between the moral and prudential can be retained, he says, "if we think of it not as the difference between an appeal to the unconditioned and an appeal to the conditioned but as the difference between an appeal to the interests of our community and the appeal to our own, possibly conflicting, private interests."<sup>8</sup> Those desires shared within communities that have contingently evolved within the human species provide for Rorty the principal bases for moral judgments. For this reason, he assigns to the arts and literature as the primary means of expression of shared ideals a central role in moral deliberation. Philosophy has in the past regarded its role to be that of guiding moral conduct by providing necessary and universally valid principles from which moral judgments can then be inferred. In rejecting this role for philosophy, Rorty aligns himself, along with the principal pragmatist tradition, against rationalism.

This identification of pragmatism with an instrumental view of moral reasoning is admittedly inconclusive. This is partly due to the diversity of the ethical views of those whom we label as pragmatists, a diversity at least as great as the views of Peirce and James on cognitive instrumentalism. Because he has little to say about cognitive instrumentalism, Perry is rarely included in commentaries on the classical pragmatist tradition. Dewey is the paradigm pragmatist, but we have just seen how he qualifies his endorsement. Perhaps the best we can say is that the pragmatist tradition is in general agreement that rationalism of the Kantian variety is to be rejected, but is in much less agreement over what alternative is to be put in its place. The pragmatists regard the Kantian distinction between prudential and moral reasoning as mistaken, but we have from them no clear indication of the similarities and differences between the two types of reasoning and the different forms of inference used in each.

In the next two sections I shall be outlining some patterns of practical inference that serve to clarify the relationships between prudential and moral reasoning and thus the instrumentalist alternative to rationalism. I believe the instrumentalist moral inference I shall be outlining in Section 3 is one that can be characterized as broadly pragmatist, though we should apply the 'pragmatism' label with the reservations just stated. In the concluding section I shall be returning to historical connection between early pragmatists and practical instrumentalism with a conjecture about their reasons for rejecting the rationalist alternative.

## **2. First-Person Prudential Practical Inferences**

The obvious starting point is an account of the familiar Aristotelian "practical syllogisms" in which normative 'should' or 'ought' conclusions are justified on the basis of premisses. Since they have been discussed in some detail,<sup>9</sup> their features can be summarized briefly. What we can refer to as a *positive basic pattern prudential inference* has a premiss expressing in the first person a want for an

end  $E$ , another describing an action  $A$  necessary to bring about what is wanted in a given situation  $S$ , and a statement to the effect that  $S$  does in fact obtain. Its form in the first person is roughly

- P1: I want  $E$
- P2: My doing  $A$  is necessary to attain  $E$  if  $S$ .
- P3:  $S$
- C: Therefore, I should (ought to) do  $A$ .

The end  $E$  can be a personal ideal, with the want being the agent's valuation of (or "pro-attitude" towards) what he or she regards as a virtuous life. Prudential reasoning as understood here is in the first person, but is not necessarily egoistic. Much prudential deliberation is directed towards the realization of our self-image, and if this self-image is that of a saint, it is certainly not what we would call "selfish." But  $E$  can also be a mundane condition of creature comfort. For example, someone might reason that she wants to keep warm this winter, that her buying a coat is necessary to keep warm if the winter will be cold, which it will be, and therefore she should buy a coat. The rule of inference used to infer from premisses to conclusion  $C$  is the conditional 'If one wants  $E$  and  $A$  is a necessary means to  $E$  if  $S$ , and  $S$  obtains, then one should do  $A$ '. The 'should' or 'ought' of the conclusion is only a prima facie requirement, since the conclusion could be defeated if the cost of performing  $A$  outweighs the perceived benefit of  $E$  (the agent prefers to be cold over the expense of the coat). Such consideration can lead to a change of the initial desire for  $E$ , and in this sense the end is not fixed, but is modified after consideration of costs in a way emphasized by Dewey. It can also lead to the abandonment of the end as a guide to action. It is not that we no longer want what has unacceptable costs; such wants can linger indefinitely despite our best attempts to rid ourselves of them. But they no longer function as ends in deliberation. We may not be able to choose what we desire, but we can at least choose what is not to be an end, and in this sense we exercise a degree of self-control.

There are other complications that can be only briefly summarized here. Left implicit is the assumption that the agent has both the ability and opportunity to do  $A$ . There also may be a range of  $n$  alternatives  $A_1 \vee A_2 \vee \dots \vee A_n$  used to specify  $A$  as a general type of action. A parka, lined rain coat, and dress coat may be alternative coats between which the agent must choose. In such cases, the conclusion is asserted "all things considered" relative to preferences between the costs and benefits of the alternatives. How the action is specified (whether buying a coat in general, or a type of coat) will vary with situation and interests. Where probabilities are attached to the outcomes of the alternative actions, the calculations of decision theory become relevant.

It should also be noted in passing that replacing the first premiss of the above inference by a sentence of the form 'I intend to bring about  $E$ ' will not provide even a prima facie derivation of the 'should' conclusion, though the conclusion 'I shall do  $A$ ' would follow. Intentions are often directed towards what we want or value, and when they are we speak of the bringing about of  $E$  as the purposive "goal" of the agent. But they can also be arbitrary, the outcome of mere whim or indifferent choice, and in this form they fail to support a normative conclusion. Failing such support, they provide no basis of comparison to inferences used in reasoning to moral normatives.<sup>10</sup>

Further, corresponding to the positive basic pattern inference just outlined, there is a negative basic pattern whose first premiss expresses an aversion (or "con-attitude") towards a "bad" state of affairs

$E^*$  and includes a premiss stating that an action  $A$  is sufficient to bring about  $E^*$ . Its form is thus

- P1: I don't want  $E^*$
- P2: My doing  $A$  is sufficient to bring about  $E^*$  if  $S$ .
- P3:  $S$
- C: Therefore, I shouldn't do  $A$ .

The "bad"  $E^*$  is often encountered in past bitter experience, and this provides a definiteness often lacking in wants directed towards unattained states of affairs. This is but the familiar truth that we are aware more of our aversions than our wants, and insures that the negative pattern is more commonly used than the positive. Again, there may be other consequences of  $A$  that the agent does want. This may outweigh for her the aversion to  $E^*$ , and lead her to conclude that she should do  $A$  in spite of this aversion.

It should be obvious that we seldom use a full-blown version of the basic pattern inferences just described. Typically one or more of the premisses is suppressed as a background assumption. It may be P1, the expressed want for  $E$ , or it may be P2, P3, or P4, or some combination of them. The agent may reason, for example, 'Since I want to keep warm, I should buy a coat' as the analogue of a hypothetical imperative with the addition of an asserted antecedent. P4 may be the focus of attention, and appear by itself in the foreground, as in 'Since this winter will be cold, I should buy a coat'. In such prudential cases, agents can sometimes make explicit the want or accepted information suppressed in the background. But even for simple prudential reasoning of the kind being considered, much that we take for granted can be below the threshold of consciousness and be difficult or impossible to verbally formulate. As for theoretical reasoning, to make explicit the premisses used is a task of reconstructing what agents are often only dimly aware of and will acknowledge only after reflection.

Provided the agent forms an intention to act based on a 'should' conclusion and actually performs the action, for every prudential inference used by an agent  $X$  in *justifying* an action  $A$  in the first person there will potentially be a corresponding third-person *explanation* of why  $A$  was performed. This feature of prudential reasoning we can refer to as *justification/explanation correspondence*. This explanation will be in the past tense and substitute descriptions of beliefs for what are asserted in the practical inference. Thus, corresponding to the positive inference we have the explanation,

- P1:  $X$  wanted  $E$
- P2:  $X$  believed that doing  $A$  was necessary to attain  $E$  if  $S$ .
- P3:  $X$  believed that  $S$  obtained.
- C: Therefore,  $X$  did  $A$ .

The justification/explanation correspondence relation is obviously asymmetrical, for there will be explanations citing unconscious motivations not articulated within a justifying prudential inference. What is in the foreground of the explanation need not have been in the foreground of the corresponding prudential inference used to justify the action. Indeed, the agent herself may become aware of her own desire at the time of deliberation only when she begins to explain later why she performed the action. Knowing her beliefs and realizing what she has done, she infers her past desire.<sup>11</sup> For the negative pattern there will be a corresponding explanation why  $A$  was not performed, and again this explanation may cite an aversion that was not in the foreground of the

prudential inference used to justify the abstention.

As for the practical inference, an explanation may highlight some premisses and suppress others as assumed background. Thus, an explanation why *A* was done might be simply 'X did *A* because she believed *S*' (bought the coat because she believed there would be a cold winter), with *X*'s desire and other beliefs omitted as not relevant to what happened to be in question. In such cases, we would regard the explanation as incomplete, as an ellipsis for one with a fuller complement of premisses. It is doubtful, however, we can give a clear account of the contrast between what is an elliptical explanation and what we regard as "complete." All explanations seem to be made relative to varying interests, and it would seem all of them could be supplemented by additional premisses. To the explanation given above, for example, we could add that *X* preferred the advantages of *E* to the costs consequent on the performance of *A*, or we could introduce specific alternative ways of *A*-ing (buying a parka or raincoat) for which preferences must be specified.

Granted that we can't specify sufficient conditions for completeness, we do seem to be able to specify the presence of some set of desires or preferences as a necessary condition. It is reasonable to think that at least for explanations of prudential actions for which the interests of others are for the most part irrelevant a complete explanation of an action must include mention of some form of desire as a motivating reason. The citation of beliefs only is invariably an ellipsis for a more complete explanation in which desires of the agent are included. That desires are necessary conditions for completeness of explanation we can refer to as the *desiderative condition* for prudential action. This condition seems to be implicitly accepted by those stating the Kantian inclination/duty distinction, since such a distinction concedes for the prudential the explanatory role of inclinations.

There are familiar rationalist objections to the use of desires for justificatory reasons, even in prudential reasoning. Many have insisted (Dewey for one, as we have seen) that only an end *E* worth wanting or desirable enables us to derive a normative 'should' conclusion, and this requires asserting that attaining *E* satisfies certain conditions, e.g., is in the agent's best interests or conducive to her greater happiness in the long run. Such an objection implies that the belief that *E* satisfies these conditions can itself explain why *A* was performed, contrary to the desiderative condition for a complete explanation. A close look at such evaluation of a desire reveals, however, that it invariably takes place relative to some other desire, just as Perry maintained. I have a craving to eat a box of chocolates, and know that buying a box is a necessary means. But I also know that eating the chocolates contributes to obesity and bad health, which I don't want. Though I want to eat the chocolates, I thus realize that eating is not worth wanting. We can be said to endorse a want for an end *E* that survives such consideration of costs, and is used to justify action. This endorsement is a type of evaluation of a want, but it is made relative to desires or aversions directed towards other consequences of the means, not some cognitive hedonistic standard to which wants are irrelevant.

Another objection arises from Thomas Nagel's observation that for prudential reasoning there is always the possibility of a person's desire for *E* at some time  $t_1$  at which the reasoning takes place changing at the later time  $t_2$  at which the action *A* is to be performed. The agent must believe that what she desires at  $t_1$  persists until  $t_2$  in order to conclude that *A* should be done later.<sup>12</sup> Her justifying reason for *A* is then not the desire for *E* itself, but instead the belief in its persistence. It

would seem to follow that the explanation of her having done *A* could omit mention of the desire and instead cite only this belief.

But this objection seems to conflict with our practice of both justifying and explaining. Desires do change, and beliefs about them can be part of the informational basis of justification. I may believe that, though I want to travel now, I probably won't want to travel when an octogenarian. As a result, I judge that I shouldn't save now for travel in the distant future. The decision not to save is based, however, not simply on the belief in a change of wants, but on a desire not to forego present use of money for a future in which it will not be gainfully used. This other desire guides justification, and should be cited in any explanation of why I don't now presently save.

There are also, of course, second and third person versions of basic and option pattern inferences where evaluation of wants becomes relevant, though here again there is no desire-free rational standard that is brought to bear. From 'You (or he) want(s) *E*' and 'Doing *A* is necessary for your (his) bringing *E* about' the speaker would infer a normative 'should' conclusion only if he or she endorsed the subject's want for *E*'. If we disapprove of the subject's attaining *E* (as for the satisfaction of a harmful craving), our aversion to this attainment may outweigh for us the agent's own want and preferences, with the result that we conclude that the subject shouldn't do *A*.

It can also be objected that often our actions are guided by prudential maxims such as 'One ought to save for the future' or 'One ought never to put off now what must be done later'. Such maxims we learn from others or from our own experience, and then apply to situations in which we find ourselves. The application is made by means of a deontic inference of the general form,

Everyone ought to do *A* in situation *S*  
I am not in *S*  
I ought to do *A*.

One using such an inference can be regarded as justifying *A* (for example, saving some money) on the basis of the normative first premiss (everyone should save when having surplus money). The argument is then that any explanation of why *A* was performed could cite only the belief in the truth of this normative proposition.

The reply to this objection should be obvious. One using the deontic inference would want whatever advantages come from following the normative prudential maxim, though he may not be aware of what these exactly might be if following blindly what has been told to him by others. Trusting the maxim's source that these benefits will accrue, whatever they may later prove to be, he complies with it. The fact that prudential maxims have been passed down through generations should be at least some indication to him that following them has had beneficial consequences and these will be likely be repeated in the future. Again, a desire guides the justification, and should be cited in any complete explanation.

Despite such objections, then, let's concede with Kant that for prudential reasoning of the kind just discussed wants or desires (inclinations) are essential components of both a justifying practical inference for an action *A*, though possibly only as part of the background, and of a complete explanation of why this action *A* was performed. The central question for us now is whether these conclusions can be extended to inferences used to both justify moral obligations to do *A* and to

explain *A*'s performance.

### 3. Moral Inferences and Shared Desires

The answer of practical instrumentalism is that reasoned moral 'should' or 'ought' conclusions are to be based, at least in part, on shared desires within a community. This answer enables us to overcome the Kantian dichotomy between inclination and duty in the manner suggested by Perry and Rorty. Much of the mystery surrounding shared desires and their association with Rousseau's "general will" should have been dispelled by recent discussions of joint intentions and cooperative actions by a number of writers.<sup>13</sup> A shared desire is simply one for which there is overlap in the content of desires of individual members. Sufficient overlap becomes the basis for the forming of joint intentions and cooperative action, and the justification for such intentions and action would seem to be derived from a practical inference. For example, the members of a neighborhood may share a desire for their block to be cleared of snow after a storm (*E*). Realizing that hiring a plow (*A*) is necessary for this if one is not supplied by the city (*S*) and that the city won't supply one, they conclude that they should hire a plow. The inference as used by some speaker representing the neighborhood is thus of the form:

- P1: We want *E*
- P2: Our doing *A* is necessary to attain *E* if *S*.
- P3: *S*
- C: Therefore, we should do *A*.

They then form the joint intention to hire a plow, and act accordingly. The inference used is simply a positive form basic pattern inference with a plural 'we' subject. Just as for the singular inferences discussed above, it is the analogue of a hypothetical imperative that can function as its rule of inference, a hypothetical that would have as its antecedent a shared desire.

Despite the introduction of a plural 'we' subject, however, the 'ought' of this inference's conclusion would seem to have only prudential force, for we would not regard the group as under a moral obligation to hire the plow. Indeed, all the principal features of first person prudential forms seem to carry over: the inference is agent-homogeneous for the plural 'we', the conclusion is defeasible, and there are option and negative forms parallel to those for singular prudential inferences. Also, justification/explanation correspondence holds: if members of the group do indeed use the plural form to justify their action of hiring a plow, then there will be a corresponding explanation with a third-person 'they' subject that cites the shared wants and beliefs of the justifying inference. The reason why they hired the plow was that they wanted the streets cleared and believed that the hiring was a necessary means given the city's lack of help. As before, from the fact that we are able to produce such an explanation does not guarantee that there was a corresponding justifying inference used within the group. Its members may have not have been aware of the wants and beliefs they shared in common, nor be able to reconstruct after the fact their justification of what they did.

The reason that the above plural form fails as a moral inference is that, because it is agent-homogeneous, it cannot apply its 'ought' conclusion to individuals or to sub-groups within the larger group. As Christopher Kutz notes, for joint action by members of a community there are expectations for cooperation accompanied by temptation for free-riding on the part of individuals.<sup>14</sup> The need to impose moral norms is introduced by this possibility of individuals (or sub-groups)

attaining a special advantage for themselves by opting out of a general activity that contributes to an end valued by all. Often legal sanctions against such opting out are imposed that alter the preferences of individuals and reduce the temptation. Penalties for avoiding taxes is an obvious example of this. But general compliance to laws seems to require at least some moral justification to the legal system of which they are a part, and there are areas of conduct that are not effectively legislated. Here moral reasoning is relevant. Inferences used in this reasoning would seem to have the feature of the expression of a shared want for an end as a premiss and a conclusion that requires individuals to contribute to attaining what is of general benefit. Since mutual trust is a necessary condition for cooperative action, maintenance of this trust seems to be an especially central moral obligation placed on members.

As a consequence of this, truth-telling and promise-keeping are regarded as paradigm actions to which moral norms apply. It is possible to reconstruct from our practice of imposing these norms a plural form of practical inference that provides their justification. Its first premiss is a shared desire for mutual trust within the group (*E*). Then there is the realization that mutual trust requires nearly everybody to keep their promises (*A*). We say "nearly everybody," since some breaking of promises would not itself destroy mutual trust in the word of others; only widespread defection would accomplish this. But we regard it as unfair that some individuals gain advantage for themselves by breaking a rule complied with by others that advances the mutual trust that these individuals themselves want. As Kant noted, promise-breaking itself presupposes mutual trust established by nearly everybody keeping their promises. Hence we need a *universalization principle* preventing free-riding to the effect that if nearly everybody's doing *A* is necessary for the mutually desired *E*, then everybody should do *A*. With these premisses, the obligation to keep promises can be applied to a specific member *X* of the group. The form of the agent-heterogeneous inference used in this reasoning is thus:

- P1: We want *E*
- P2: Only if nearly all (or most) of us do *A* will *E* be attained
- P3: If nearly all (most) of us should do *A*, then everyone should
- C1: Therefore, everyone should do *A*
- C2: Therefore, *X* should do *A*.

The conclusion C1 follows from the three premisses in the loose non-deductive sense characteristic of basic pattern prudential inferences. The universalization principle is stated as premiss P3. For instrumentalism, premisses such as these provide the justification for general moral obligations such as 'Everyone should keep their promises' and 'Everyone should tell the truth'. The application to a particular individual *X* is made in the second conclusion C2. As for prudential inferences, the use of 'should' in the conclusion implies some aversion on the part of *X* to doing *A*. *X*'s performance of *A* can thus be described in Kantian terms as an overcoming of an inclination.

Notice that a situation *S* in which *A* is to be performed is not part of this positive moral inference, as general obligations are typically imposed that are not situation-specific in order to attain widespread compliance. Instead, there are often a number of possible types of situations that if present are understood as releasing *X* of the obligation. P3 could thus be understood as 'If nearly all of us should do *A*, then everyone should do *A* unless *S*<sub>1</sub> or *S*<sub>2</sub> or ... *S*<sub>n</sub> obtain', with the additional premiss added that none of the extenuating situations do in fact obtain to release *X* of his moral obligation.

If one or more of  $S_1, S_2, \dots, S_n$  do obtain, we may infer 'It is permissible for  $X$  to forbear from  $A$ '. As for the conclusions of prudential inferences, the conclusion  $C_1$  'Everyone should do  $A$ ' is defeasible, as the costs of doing  $A$  may outweigh the advantage of  $E$ . Also, there is a negative form in which the inference is made from a shared aversion and the sufficiency of most doing  $A$  for bringing about the object of this aversion to the conclusion that an individual  $X$  shouldn't do  $A$ . Here the universalization principle is that if most shouldn't do  $A$ , then no one should. Because the members of a community are more likely to be aware of their shared aversions than their positive desires, moral prohibitions based on these aversions are more likely to be conclusions of moral reasoning than are positive obligations.

The effect of a universalization principle is to enable conclusions applied to specific individuals to be inferred from group wants and activities. To be sure, this represents a complication of premisses that seems inconsistent with the ease with which we usually make moral judgments. Though we are able to philosophically construct a justification of moral requirements, the question arises whether such moral inferences are actually used in moral deliberation, but this can be answered in the same manner for the prudential case. As for the prudential, there is no need for all premisses to be in the foreground, no more than this was necessary for prudential forms. A community may have not articulated its shared wants, and its members may be unaware of their common contents. There is some awareness of the immorality of an individual free-riding and taking advantage of others following rules in a way that benefit him or her. This awareness is vague, and certainly not articulated in a way that would allow inferring to a moral 'ought' conclusion. But such lack of articulation of premisses is also a characteristic of prudential inferences, and there seems little doubt that these are used in agent-centered deliberation.

It is also true that for the great majority of moral 'ought' judgments there is a direct deontic "rule-case" inference from some moral maxim such as 'Everyone ought to keep their promises', 'Everyone ought to tell the truth', or 'Everyone ought to come to the aid of those in distress' to a requirement imposed on an individual. Typically we apply these maxims of the form 'Everyone ought to  $A$ ' to particular situations facing ourselves and others without deriving them from wants and means-end premisses. These maxims are typically inculcated during moral education and reinforced by praise and scolding. For those with fundamentalist religious beliefs, the maxims can be recorded in authoritative sacred texts. The tendency to act in accordance with them is also undoubtedly part of our innate inheritance through processes of selection. Both this inheritance and education confer on them that intuitively "self-evident" character that has been appealed to by rationalist thinkers.

Immediate moral judgments need not be based on some articulated moral generalization, however. In many situations, we undoubtedly also directly apply moral exemplars derived from story telling or other imaginative sources, as argued by Mark Johnson.<sup>15</sup> Just as we instinctively classify relative to prototypes, so these exemplars seem to guide our judgments of what should be done in a given situation, but not on the basis of any reasoning from shared wants and means/ends premisses.

All of this can be conceded without threatening the thesis that *reasoned* moral judgments are conclusions derived from the premisses of a practical inference.<sup>16</sup> In the case of prototype application there is no reasoning, but instead immediate judgment. In the case of applications of general maxims to an individual in a particular situation, there is a type of deductive reasoning from

the general to the particular, but the general premiss is itself justified by prior reasoning. As Perry noted, habit and tradition dictate what we think we should do, conveying on moral requirements their inflexibility and categorical character. For most actions it is preferable that they not be fully reasoned, as quick action forbids tracing through the steps in a justification. It is usually only for novel situations created often by new technologies -- moral issues raised by euthanasia, artificial prolonging of human life, new means of birth control -- that full-fledged moral deliberation occurs. And when it does occur, the conflict between preferences characteristic of prudential reasoning, becomes evident. We noted in the previous section how inculcated maxims such as 'Everyone should save for the future' are applied in prudential reasoning, but we recognize this as an economical short cut that avoids the need to subject every 'should' judgment to full-fledge deliberation. In the same way, past experience and moral education furnish those generalizations allowing us to guide conduct without rethinking the basis for them. Judgments made on the basis of previously accepted generalizations or exemplar application are essential for the purposes of most conduct, as Simon Blackburn has so convincingly argued.<sup>17</sup> But they can from time to time be challenged, and both the criticism and defense argued within the ensuing moral deliberation will appeal to ideals shared within the community that they want to have realized.

Moral inferences thus share certain basic features with prudential inferences, and if we grant the latter are used to justify, in light of these similarities there seems no reason to deny that the former are too. The basic contention of the pragmatists is upheld, at least initially. Whether we should accept it requires first considering the rationalist alternative.

#### 4. The Rationalist Alternative

For rationalism, moral reasoning involves the use of a deontic inference of the form

Every member of the community ought to do *A*  
*X* is a member of the community  
*X* ought to do *A*.

In most versions of rationalism, the community includes all human beings at all times and places, with this providing the universality and timelessness of moral requirements. For utilitarianism, the action *A* is some form of utility maximization, whether maximizing the sum total, the average utility for the community of *n* members, or some other variant. From '*X* ought to do *A*' as premiss and another descriptive premiss stating that a specific action *B* is an instance of *A*, the moral requirement to do *B* is then inferred. That everyone should maximize utility is regarded as rationally self-evident. Utilitarianism of this rationalist variety has been extensively criticized, and I have nothing to add to this here. Suffice it to say that criticisms have led to it being replaced by a form of preference utilitarianism consistent with the model of moral reasoning of the previous section.

For the Kantian alternative, action *A* is a specific action such as keeping a promise, telling the truth, aiding others in distress, or forbearing from suicide, and there is an a priori argument purporting to show that failure to will *A* to be a universal maxim would be self-contradictory. The so-called "categorical imperative" morally requires a person to act only in ways he or she would be willing for everyone else to act. This can be regarded as a "higher" self-evident premiss from which the obligation to do *A* is deductively inferred after establishing by *a priori* reasoning that not

universalizing *A* would be self-contradictory. The difference between the instrumentalist and the Kantian rationalist view of moral reasoning can be summarized in this way: For instrumentalism the universalization principle is a premiss used together with another premiss expressing a desire shared within the community. It performs the essential role of distinguishing moral from first-person plural prudential inferences and of providing the condition for an agent-heterogeneous moral inference to a requirement on an individual. Accepting the common criticism of Kant's categorical imperative as a "formal" principle devoid of content, instrumentalism provides a "heteronomous" reading of it, with the content for a moral requirement derived through shared end and means-end premisses. For Kantian rationalism, in contrast, the universalization principle is a self-evident general obligation used to rationally justify a more specific moral requirement. This rational justification is thought to be independent of any individual or community ideals. Rationalists reject the charge of formalism, but in doing so must provide content by arguments demonstrating the self-contradictoriness of a refusal to universalize. Onora O'Neill is a good example of an able advocate willing to accept this challenge.<sup>18</sup>

The debate between practical instrumentalism and rationalism has occupied much of ethical discussion over the past several decades. I find instrumentalism the more plausible of the alternatives, but my interest here is less in entering into the debate than in clarifying it in a way that indicates how instrumentalism is consistent with classical pragmatism and can be regarded as "neo-pragmatist." But clarification is usually best provided in debate, and hence some brief replies to some common rationalist objections to instrumentalism are in order. The rationalist objections are first stated, followed by the instrumentalist reply.

**Autonomy and Freedom.** We don't choose what we desire or value. I like ice cream and dislike spinach; it is beyond my powers to reverse these preferences. We may accept the fact that personal decisions are determined by wants over which we have no control, but in making moral decisions we exercise our autonomy and freedom. They are *our* decisions, not the causal effects of motivations we happen to possess. By basing these decisions on desires and preferences, instrumentalism denies this.

Reply: This objection oversimplifies. Not even our prudential decisions are determined by our desires. As we saw in Section 2, a prudential 'ought' conclusion is inferred only after consideration of the costs of a means *M* to a given end *E*. If after this consideration we decide that we should do *M*, the state of affairs that was initially only desired becomes an end that is a basis for action. It is this process of deliberation converting initial desire to end used to infer what should be done that provides our measure of self-control and distinguishes uncontrollable impulsive action from reasoned action. These considerations apply to moral reasoning. It is true that we don't choose to share the want for mutual trust; this is a condition for social cooperation, and the motivation is part of our biological inheritance, part of our common humanity. We exercise self-control, however, when deciding how to apply this shared want within the context of moral deliberation, when deciding, for example, whether certain situations permit exemptions to the general requirements of promise-keeping and truth-telling. In this way, moral deliberation is also this process of determining whether what is generally wanted is to be an end guiding conduct.<sup>19</sup>

**Objectivity, Universal Validity, and Timelessness.** Moral obligations such as the obligation to tell the truth, keep promises, help others in distress, and forbear from inflicting needless suffering are

objective and valid for all persons at all times and places. If we deny them a foundation or grounding in what is objective and universally binding, we deny these requirements their special moral character.<sup>20</sup> But this is exactly what instrumentalism does by basing them on desires that happen to be shared at a given time within a given community and by its implicit moral relativism. The community of which I am a part may have happened after the September 11th terrorist attack to share a desire to restrict the movements of Moslems of Middle Eastern descent (though in fact mine does not). This would provide absolutely no moral basis for discriminating against such persons, but it would be possible to infer to this by a desire-based moral inference from the shared desire. History gives us countless examples of actions we find now to be morally repugnant, but in fact were justified by the instrumentalist account on what were desires shared within the community.

Reply: Moral deliberation would be much easier if there were some impersonal standpoint providing an objective and universally valid standard that we could use as a foundation for normative conclusions. But in fact there is no such standpoint. Some claim to find such a standard in the values of past generations as recorded in sacred texts, and given the constancy of human basic ideals over generations, this can indeed provide important guidance. But what we value also changes, requiring interpretation and selection from among the texts, and use of the texts disguises their original sources in the shared desires of past generations. What we desire in common is notoriously difficult sometimes to determine, given the variability of individual preferences. The arts and literature provide the principal expression of shared positive and negative ideals, and through them we form community values. Utilitarianism did offer the "benevolent spectator" as a means of removing the partiality of individual perspective, but this should be recognized as a heuristic device for determining what we value in common. Other heuristic devices have been provided by thought experiments such as the role reversal of the Christian Golden Rule, Kantian applications of the categorical imperative, and the "veil of ignorance" of Rawls's original position. All of these should be regarded as heuristic devices for overcoming individual bias and as complementing what is provided by the arts and literature.

It is because valuations change over time that there is retrospective correction of what we judge now to be the moral mistakes of past generations. When we conclude 'They should not have done A' we are using presently held valuations to judge the past. To realize that future generations will criticize what we smugly find morally obvious is but to acknowledge our moral fallibility. As we engage in dialogue with other cultures, the scope of the first person plural 'we' of moral inferences becomes extended, with the final extension, at least on this planet, making possible the shared desires of humanity becoming the basis for normative agreement. That such agreement need not extend over all aspects of cooperative human behavior is a type of relativism, but with salutary effects that all should be willing to accept.

**Failure of Justification/Explanation Correspondence.** Practical instrumentalism derives its plausibility from an analogy between prudential and moral inferences. In one important respect they seem to be very different, however. As noted in Section 2, for prudential inferences we have general justification/explanation correspondence: in the absence of self-deception and unconscious motives, the premisses used to justify an action are used in its explanation. But even this rough correspondence seems to fail for moral inferences. Why did X keep his promise? The motivations we would cite would be derived from individual psychology, and might include a desire for social approval, fear of disapproval, Hume's feeling of sympathy directed towards the promisee, or

perhaps some general desire to do one's duty as revealed by reason that has been inculcated in *X* by education. They would not include a desire shared by *X* with his community for an end such as mutual trust. What is termed the "Humean view" of morality is a thesis of individual psychology about what explains actions, and it is commonly regarded as equivalent to the "internalist" thesis that motivations of the kind used to explain an action must be included in justifying reasons.<sup>21</sup> But since these explanatory motivations are individual, they are not the kind that are expressed by the 'we' premiss of a moral inference. Without this general correspondence, we lack an essential part of the analogy between the prudential and moral on which practical instrumentalism is based.

Reply: This objection succeeds only in distinguishing internalism from practical instrumentalism. As Korsgaard correctly notes, the thesis of internalism is consistent with rationalism. A moral requirement could be based on what are purported to be purely rational grounds and then its performance explained on the basis of a general desire to do one's duty.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, utilitarians have historically appealed to such a desire in explaining why individuals act in accordance with the utilitarian principle rather than self-interest, and urged the educational system instill this motivation for compliance. The desire to do the right thing might be both an agent's reason for keeping a promise and the reason why he kept it. The internalist requirement is thus satisfied, but there is no instrumentalist justification. The instrumentalist reply to the objection just stated is simply that explanations should not be limited to those of individual psychology. We explain why groups act as they do in terms of wants shared within the group. Similarly, we must recognize that an individual's actions can sometimes be explained by a desire shared with others. Kant invoked the concept of a "good will" to distinguish actions explained by individual motivations such as fear of disapproval from those that are morally worthy. For instrumentalism, the person of good will is to be understood as one for whom desires and preferences shared in common with a community are used both to justify moral requirements and explain actions so justified.

## 5. Pragmatism and Instrumentalism

I conclude with a conjecture about the reasons writers such as Perry, Dewey (with qualifications), and Rorty might have had in opting for instrumentalism over the rationalist alternative. The preservation of justification/explanation correspondence may have been one of them, though there is no direct evidence for this. Dewey was, of course, a close student of 19th century motivational psychology, and there is little doubt that his interest in this influenced his emphasis on means-ends reasoning. But the internalist/externalist issue itself has only been raised explicitly within recent philosophy, and is certainly not considered as such by Dewey. Emerson was a decisive influence on early pragmatist thinkers, and we can perhaps trace to him the view that the aesthetic plays a primary role in moral justification in a way formulated in the instrumentalist moral inference of Section 3. But again, this influence is indirect, and there is no explicit acknowledgement of it.

The more likely explanation seems to be provided by the influence of evolutionary theory on pragmatist writers. Rationalism requires a sharp distinction between human beings endowed with freedom and powers of rational self-control and lower animals whose behavior is determined by wants over which they have no control. The uniquely human powers of control were thought to be exercised in the making of moral decisions. Such a distinction was plausible before Darwin, and it is thus understandable that it is assumed by the moralists of modern philosophy writing before his time. But it became entirely implausible after Darwin, and it was during this period that pragmatism

developed as a distinctive philosophy. Prudential reasoning exhibits the continuity between human adaptation to a changing environment and the adaptation of animal species from which we have evolved, with its combination of desires and beliefs paralleling the combination of motivation and learned anticipation at the infrahuman level. It was a natural step for post-Darwinian pragmatism to extend such combinations to moral reasoning, and to reject rationalist views that made such an extension impossible.

Whatever their reasons, pragmatists did undeniably make this extension. To be sure, many details remain to be added to this sketch of an instrumental view of moral reasoning. The extent to which this view can be attributed to specific writers to which we affix the 'pragmatism' label remains to be decided with accuracy. I hope what has been provided here, however, indicates a promising avenue of historical scholarship and an important area in which pragmatist views remain part of ongoing debates within contemporary philosophy.

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### Notes

1. Elijah Millgram, ed., *Varieties of Practical Reasoning* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).
2. *General Theory of Value* (New York: Longmans, 1926), p. 101.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 102.
4. *Human Nature and Conduct* (New York: Henry Holt, 1922), p. 196.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 200.
6. See *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (New York: Henry Holt, 1920), p. 181.
7. In "Desire and Desirability: A Rejoinder to a Posthumous Reply by John Dewey," *Journal of Philosophy* 93 (1996): 229-242. White notes that for Dewey the desirability of *E* is identified with *E* being desired by normal persons in normal circumstances. This counterfactual has the effect of enabling the inference of a moral 'ought' from descriptive statements, and thus committing the naturalistic fallacy.
8. *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 59.
9. See my *Practical Inferences* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), Robert Audi, *Practical Reasoning* (London: Routledge, 1989), and Douglas Walton, *Practical Reasoning* (Totowa: Rowman and Littlefield, 1989).
10. See E. M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1963), Sec. 32 and Michael Bratman, "Taking Plans Seriously" in Millgram, ed., *Varieties of Practical Reasoning* for alternative formulations of inferences with 'shall' or resolute conclusions.

11. This inference would be based on the behavioral definition of a desire for *E* as disposition to perform *A* when *A* is believed to be a necessary means to . That background desires are known in this way is argued by Philip Petit and Michael Smith in "Backgrounding Desire," *Philosophical Review* 91 (1990): 565-92.
12. See *The Possibility of Altruism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), Ch. VIII. Practical reasoning is directed not only towards what should be done in Nagel's view, but also towards what should be wanted.
13. See Margaret Gilbert, *On Social Facts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), Ch. 4; Michael Bratman, "Shared Cooperative Activity" in Bratman, *Faces of Intention: Selected Essays on Intention and Agency* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Raimo Tuomela and Kaarlo Miller, "We-Intentions," *Philosophical Studies* 53 (1988): 367-90; and Christopher Kutz, "Acting Together," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 61 (2000): 1-31. The focus of these studies has been on the problem of stating conditions for mutual awareness and common content of intentions that qualify an intention as jointly held within a group and an action as cooperative.
14. Kutz, "Acting Together," p. 12.
15. *Moral Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). See especially pp. 189-192 for a discussion of exemplar application in moral judgments that is analogous to prototype perceptual identification.
16. This must be the reply to critics of the "inferential view" as described by Candace Vogler's "Anscombe on Practical Inference" in Millgram, ed., *Varieties of Practical Reasoning*, pp. 437-464. To reason is to use an inference, but where there is no reasoning there may be no use of an inference.
17. See *Ruling Passions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 40-43 for Blackburn's example of a referee calling a game. The game may be designed to entertain spectators, but a good referee applies its rules strictly on each occasion. Deliberation with reference to the game's larger purpose, Blackburn notes, would diminish the sport itself. For morality, questioning the larger purpose would diminish the expectations that are requisite for cooperation.
18. See her "Consistency in Action" in N. Potter and M. Timmons, ed., *Universality and Morality: Essays on Ethical Universality* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1985), pp. 159-186.
19. It is thus possible for instrumentalism to agree with Christine Korsgaard's distinction in *Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) between willing and desiring: "To will is not just to be a cause, or even to allow an impulse in me to operate as a cause, but, so to speak, to consciously pick up the reins, and make myself the cause of what I do." (p. 227) Willing of an end, she says, is to be distinguished from desiring an end, for the former requires adopting a "reflective standpoint" in a way absent for the latter. Using this terminology, we can say that a state of affairs may be initially desired, but is willed when it becomes an end and the basis for an inference to a requirement to action.
20. This equation of morality with what is objective and universally binding is stated in Thomas

Nagel's *The Possibility of Altruism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), where he sets out to "rescue the subject" from desire-based ethical views (p. 6). To base moral requirements on what is unchanging requires for Nagel the "impersonal standpoint" provided by some rationalist theory (p. 114). Nagel's view has since been frequently restated.

21. For an exposition and defense of the internalist view see Bernard Williams, "Internal and External Reasons" in R. Harrison, ed., *Rational Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

22. Korsgaard, "Skepticism about Practical Reason" in Millgram, ed., *Varieties of Practical Reasoning*.

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