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# Pragmatism, Objectivity and Normative Realism

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## 1. Introduction

There is a variety of views that get called pragmatism, and various positions that have been offered as *the* pragmatist position concerning meta-ethical questions such as those of moral realism. In this paper, I will draw from both contemporary and classical pragmatist approaches in an attempt to show that pragmatism enables us to reconceive and reconceptualize objectivity and realism in a way that allows for the development of a new and interesting stripe of normative realism. I will not claim that this is the only version that a pragmatist account of morality may take; what I do hope to illuminate the fact that the position developed is both plausible and compelling with respect to the contemporary philosophical debates in general.

Contemporary pragmatists such as Richard Rorty and Huw Price have proposed that there is no interesting philosophical theory to be given about truth or reference, or “aboutness” in a semantic sense, for any domain of language. In this, the non-representationalist view approaches the expressivist stance in the current meta-ethical debate—indeed Price calls his non-representationalist position “global expressivism”. However, we commonly think that at least some moral truths are independent of the opinions we, our groups and societies happen to have: our moral claims aspire to *objectivity*. The most central difficulty of the expressivist view is its unsettling implication that there is nothing to back our views beyond the preferences we merely happen to have—a form of relativism that this position appears to result in.

I will argue that the views of the classical pragmatists, especially Charles S. Peirce's account of the scientific method and its commitment to realism, will be helpful in addressing such problems. The Peircean view, which I will here refer to as *hypothetical realism*, is not motivated by strong representationalist assumptions but is, instead, compatible with the non-representationalist view. I will suggest that this version of realism goes along with global non-representationalism. Moreover, once we have adopted the global expressivist perspective, there is no principled, "representational" difference between normative and non-normative claims or opinions. Philosophical pragmatism, then, can help us develop a novel meta-ethical position which is robustly realist enough to avoid charges of relativism while avoiding the semantic commitments and tasks a realist position is usually assumed to incur.

## 2. Cognitivism and non-cognitivism

With their linguistic and analytic bent, contemporary philosophers working on issues of normativity have concentrated on its linguistic expressions: normative judgments or claims. To find out what it is to be right or wrong, good or bad, correct or incorrect, and so forth, we set out to find out what we mean by saying that something is so. Indeed the whole of *meta-ethics* has been considered the study of normative language. Accordingly, forms of normative realism (such as *moral realism*) have standardly been conceived as the combination of two theses. The first is the *cognitivist* semantic thesis: it maintains that normative claims are fact-stating, or describe the ways things are. The second thesis is ontological: it holds that things are as described by (some) normative judgments. As a third component, many moral realists have insisted that the facts in question are independent of what we think, believe, desire and so on, while others have been content to formulate "realist" views where the facts in question are dependent on what we do or would think or desire under certain (perhaps counterfactual) conditions.

The cognitivist semantic thesis faces two major challenges. The first is the problem of accounting for the facts our normative claims are "about"; the second is giving a suitable account of moral motivation, or the connection between normative claims and the motivation to act. The source of the first issue—and the starting point of the contemporary meta-ethical debate—is G. E. Moore's (1903) famous Open Question Argument. This argument challenges the cognitivists to make sense of the sort of properties

normative terms such as “good” and “right” predicate. In Moore’s view, such predicates cannot be analysed in other terms; moral judgments are *sui generis*. Specifically, as normative notions cannot be analysed in any *non*-normative terms whatsoever, Moore’s position came to be viewed as the strong defence of moral non-naturalism.

Following the lines set by Moore, some contemporary cognitivists have proposed forms of non-naturalism about normative “facts” (Shafer-Landau, 2003). But this view contradicts philosophical naturalism, which maintains that all of reality could be studied by science, resulting in countless difficulties with making sense of normative claims and properties—questions about what would count as evidence for a normative claim, how there can be properties that appear to have no causal consequences at all, and how two things with the same natural properties seem to (also) have the same normative properties.<sup>1</sup> The prospects of non-naturalism have commonly been considered dim, and cognitivists have mostly attempted to provide naturalist accounts of normative predicates.

The first strategy of doing so is what we could call *analytic* naturalism. It maintains that it simply does not follow, from the fact that competent speakers may wonder whether some explication of a term is correct, that the explication is mistaken, let alone that the term cannot be analysed (Smith, 1995; 2004; Pettit and Jackson, 1995; Jackson, 1998). By the second strategy, it is no wonder that attempts at analyses of normative terms will result in open questions, because reference of such terms is not fixed by their conceptual content (Boyd, 1988). Instead, following Saul Kripke’s (1980) and Hilary Putnam’s (1985) views of the reference of natural kind terms, this *synthetic* naturalist account holds that a moral term such as “right” refers to some natural property even if competent speakers are not aware of this; the analogy is to the way in which competent speakers for a long time were unaware that “water” refers to H<sub>2</sub>O. Both strategies thus admit the motivating premise of the Open Question Argument, the

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<sup>1</sup> Russ Shafer-Landau (2003), one of the few contemporary champions of meta-ethical non-naturalism, has attempted to address these concerns. He maintains that normative properties are constituted by, or supervene on, descriptive properties, which are the causally efficacious properties studied by the (social and natural) sciences, and that our knowledge of such normative properties is based on a number of self-evident truths about them which we may track by reliable methods of moral thought. But even if the sort of supervenience suggested by Shafer-Landau were a fruitful approach to normative properties, we still seem to be no further ahead in grasping what those properties are supposed to be “like”. The second claim is even more tenuous: reliance on ultimately self-evident (or self-justifying) moral beliefs and “reliable” methods of arriving at such beliefs looks simply implausible when contrasted with entrenched (first-order) disagreements about morality and moral procedure.

intuition that open questions about normative terms are bound to arise, but insist that this do not imply that the cognitivist project is doomed.

Neither of these two strategies is without problems. Their most formidable difficulty is due to the second challenge to cognitivism, which is to explain the role that normative claims and thought plays in our agency—a role which appears to differ in kind from that of non-normative claims and thought. A central phenomenon concerning normative judgments is their *practicality*, their action-guiding force, often discussed in terms of *moral motivation*: if someone judges that it is right, or good, to perform some action, he is (at least usually) motivated to perform that action (Smith, 2004, ch. 15; Blackburn 1998, 59–68). This constant connection between normative judgment and motivation seems to be a central feature of the particular “oughtness” that comes with normative judgment. But it has caused problems for the cognitivist view when coupled with the so-called Humean theory of motivation, which maintains that beliefs are not sufficient for motivation, but require the presence of other mental states, commonly called desires.<sup>2</sup>

Non-naturalists and synthetic naturalists have not managed to account for the strong connection between normative judgments and motivation: they have traditionally been externalists, holding that the connection between normative judgment and motivation is contingent (Shafer-Landau, 2003; Boyd 1988). Intuitions about moral motivation are, I think, the reason why the Moral Twin Earth counterexample due to Terrence Horgan and Mark Timmons (Timmons, 1990; Horgan and Timmons, 1992a; 1992b) has been taken to cast the synthetic naturalist approach into serious doubt. Assume that our use of the concept “right” is causally regulated by the natural property *N*, and that on a Moral Twin Earth, the inhabitants’ use of the concept “right” is causally regulated by the natural property *M*. If the synthetic naturalist view were correct, Horgan and Timmons point out, we and the twin-earthlings, when calling actions “right”, are talking about different things, as is the case in Putnam’s (1985) famous Twin Earth example. But according to Horgan and Timmons, in the Moral Twin Earth scenario, there is a genuine disagreement about what is right (cf. van Roojen, 2006, 168). It is interesting to note that such disagreement seems to

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<sup>2</sup> The Humean account has considerable appeal: it seems plausible that two agents may be quite differently motivated despite sharing the exact same beliefs. In the jargon of these debates, motivational judgment internalists, who have argued that the connection between normative judgment and motivation is a necessary one, have an upper hand in the debate with the respective externalist view, which maintains that this connection is at bottom contingent.

plausibly exist only when the twin-earthlings are quite consistently motivated to do what they claim is right (as the thought example stipulates): if this occurred only occasionally, the intuition that we disagree with them would likely evaporate.<sup>3</sup>

Naturalists of the analytic sort have attempted to accommodate internalist intuitions. A common approach has been to maintain that normative judgments express beliefs *about* motivation.<sup>4</sup> According to speaker subjectivism, normative claims are the speaker's descriptions of his or her own desires: to say that murder is wrong is for the speaker to say that he or she does not desire to murder (see Dreier, 1990). However, as it does not appear plausible that normative claims are such simple reports of actual desires but, rather, claims concerning what it would be (in some manner) *correct* to desire, cognitivists have offered more refined accounts. Perhaps the most plausible such account is Michael Smith's (1995; 2004) view that our claims about what it is right for us to do (under some circumstances) are claims about what fully rational agents would converge to desire us to do (in those circumstances). But it remains unclear whether we can give any unequivocally *naturalist* content to the (ideal) circumstances of full rationality, or whether the conceptual buck is simply being pushed back.

Indeed, the more plausible an account the cognitivists offer of the properties and facts that normative terms and claims refer to, the less plausible it seems that such properties and facts can be studied within a naturalist framework or made sense of in any unequivocally descriptive terms, fuelling scepticism about the normative. The non-cognitivist alternative avoids these difficulties with a simple and elegant response. It holds that moral (or more broadly normative) statements do not express beliefs but, rather, non-cognitive states such as emotions or desires. The cognitivist project is futile as normative claims do not describe the world. Instead, they express such functional states that play the relevant practical role of setting the ends or purposes of action; thus internalist intuitions are

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<sup>3</sup> Indeed, by and large the "Moral Twin Earth" scenario is really just a rerun of R.M. Hare's (1952) famous "missionaries and cannibals" argument. Hare argues that, faced with an unknown language, we would not translate words used to refer to things we commonly consider good, right, and so on, with our normative vocabulary. Rather, we would reserve normative vocabulary for terms that appear to play the relevant action-guiding role for the speakers.

<sup>4</sup> This approach thus attempts to secure a *conceptual* (and *hence* necessary) connection between normative claims and motivation. Accounts of this sort in which the import of a central term is made at least in part dependent on the responses of agents are often called *response-dependent* views about their meaning (Pettit, 1995; Jackson, 1998).

readily accounted for. These features have made the non-cognitivist view attractive to many in contemporary meta-ethics.

### 3. Expressivism and non-representationalism

Non-cognitivism will however need to deal with a set of issues of its own. Traditional non-cognitivism as proposed by Stevenson (1944) and Ayer (1952) held that, as expressions of non-cognitive states, normative claims or statements—in contrast to non-normative ones—have no truth-values. But this appears not to do justice to several realist-seeming features of moral thought and talk. Firstly, it appears that moral claims, unlike, say, commands or cheers, are truth-apt: we can say that it is *true* that murder is wrong. Secondly, it seems that moral claims, unlike questions or boos, incur ontological commitments. Thirdly, moral claims do not appear to express non-cognitive states in embedded contexts, such as “she believes that murder is wrong” or “if murder is wrong, stealing is wrong”. As a variant of this last issue, the early non-cognitivist view was met by a criticism by Peter Geach (1965) and John Searle (1962), who argued, on Fregean grounds, that the non-cognitivist has no plausible account of how statements expressing non-cognitive attitudes enter into logical relations such as those involved in deductive inferences. For a while such difficulties, especially the Frege-Geach-Searle objection, were held to be a decisive refutation of non-cognitivism.

Simon Blackburn’s (1998) quasi-realist approach sets out to make sense of the realist-seeming features of normative claims, non-cognitivistically understood. Rather than attempting to give an account of the conceptual content of “true”, the deflationary view on truth concentrates on the use and function of the truth predicate. Expressivists argue that “true” in “it is true that murder is wrong” adds nothing semantically robust to the claim, “murder is wrong”. By the same token, claims such as “*it is a fact that murder is wrong*” incur no difficulties to the expressivist view: the italicized words add nothing ontologically robust to the initial claim (that murder is wrong).

Huw Price (1997; 2007; 2011b) picks up the expressivist’s deflationary attitude towards key semantic terms and argues that this approach is to be globalized. In Price’s non-representationalist view, there is no interesting philosophical theory to be given about truth or reference, or “aboutness” in a semantic sense, for any domain of language. The result is a pluralistic picture of the function of language. Different assertoric practices

are taken to incur differing but equally “deflated” ontological commitments. Instead of *object naturalism*, the attempt to give an account of the reference of a language and address the resulting ontological questions over the existence of the referents, the philosophical study of language is to take the form of *subject naturalism*, an (anthropological) inquiry into its function which does not assume its ontological commitments. Consequently, global expressivism does without any contrast between normative and non-normative statements (thoughts, beliefs) in representationalist (semantic or ontological) terms. The differences between these thoughts or commitments are functional rather than representational by nature.

The ontological commitments of the meta-language in which this inquiry is conducted—that of science, or more specifically the sort of (philosophically inclined) anthropology Price suggests—should not be taken to be more than perspectival, something that appears privileged from its own point of view. While for those already working in a scientific framework, scientific ontological commitments appear to have a privilege over the commitments made in other, non-scientific discourses, there is no non-circular justification of why the ontological commitments of *science* should be taken as primary, or understand all first-order ontological commitment as scientific ontological commitment (Price, 2007).

This is Price’s anti-metaphysical stance: there is no place for a specifically metaphysical inquiry over and above the “deflated” ontological commitments made in our assertoric practice. Price (1997) follows Carnap (1950) in arguing that there is no room for ontological questions external to a theory (questions about whether things “really are” as that theory has them from a perspective “outside” of that theory) but only “pragmatic” external questions of the choice of linguistic framework.<sup>5</sup>

Even when globalized, however, the deflationary approach does not immediately address the third issue (see Dreier, 1996). As of yet there

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<sup>5</sup> In Price’s view, even if Quine’s (1953) criticism of the analytic-synthetic distinction blurs the distinction between “pragmatic” and (empirical) internal questions, it does not leave room for external ontological questions. Instead, Price (2007) argues for what we could call a Quinean monistic attitude towards existence combined with a Carnapian pluralism about linguistic function: a single existential quantifier is applied in a variety of discourses which have their differing linguistic uses and purposes. My proposal here aligns with this picture: it resists the idea of (non-pragmatic) external questions and can well incorporate a “deflationary” attitude towards existential quantification. But taking advantage of the notion of pluralism of use and function, it also emphasizes the difference between a (linguistic) practice in which meeting an external standard is considered a norm, and other practices where no such norm is present.

is no generally accepted response to the Frege-Geach problem. Earlier expressivist responses maintain inconsistent normative claims express incompatible *attitudes* of, say, approval and disapproval (Blackburn, 1988). But this has the awkward implication of indefinitely expanding the number of differing relations of (in)compatibility between different claims and attitudes. In Allan Gibbard's (1990; 2003) view, non-normative statements are expressions of belief-like states instead of descriptions of the world. Despite its initial appeal, Gibbard's approach still does not yet yield us an account of how a normative claim and its negation are (logically) inconsistent (Unwin, 1999; 2001). Mark Schroeder's (2008) insight is to conceive of normative claims as expressing a single attitude towards *contents* which in turn may be compatible or incompatible. But this approach, as Schroeder then shows, will lead to insurmountable difficulties when applied to inferences mixing normative and non-normative premises (or conclusions).<sup>6</sup>

Recent research gives some good reason for optimism about expressivism's prospects, however. In accordance with the initial phrasing of the non-cognitivist view—that normative claims express attitudes—most extant solutions to the Frege-Geach problem maintain that the expressivist's logic must be a logic of attitudes. But the expressivist can point out that his basic position about the function of normative claims (as a thesis in its *pragmatics*) may turn out compatible with a variety of accounts of the semantics of such claims; in particular, that there is no need to view the *semantic values* of such claims simply in terms of the attitudes they express. The expressivist view may be supplemented, for example, by a suitably modified deontic logic, following Gibbard's initial ideas (see Yalcin, 2012; Charlow, *forthcoming*).

Another, more radical alternative to escape the clutches of the Frege-Geach-Searle objection is to note that the proposed solutions all set out with the received view that conceptual and propositional *contents* enter into logical relations such as that of deductive validity, and (certain) mental states are attitudes towards such contents. But rather than starting out with this picture of content, the global expressivist could take his reversal of the traditional picture to cut deeper.

The most prominent suggestion along these lines is Robert Brandom's (1994; 2000) inferentialist semantics. According to Brandom, logical language makes explicit material inferential relations, rather than vice versa.

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<sup>6</sup> In distinction to the *global* expressivist view that will be explored below, I have called Gibbard's and Schroeder's attitudes-towards-contents view *regional* expressivism (Rydenfelt, 2014b).

The goodness of a material inference depends on the contents of the claims inferred from and to, and not, as in a formal inference, on an explicitly formulated rule of inference applicable independently of the content of the inference. Within the Brandomian framework, the traditional embedding problem need not even arise. The inferences which the objection challenges the expressivist to explain—and which everyone thinks must be valid—depend on material inferential relations; the whole problem appears only when we take an inference already articulated with the aid of logical vocabulary and *then* attempt to find the suitable contents (and attitudes) that would secure deductive validity.

#### 4. Objectivity and relativism

The global expressivist position has, in my view, good prospects of tackling the technical issues faced by traditional non-cognitivism. The most central difficulty of the expressivist picture is rather its unsettling implication that there is nothing to back our views beyond the preferences we merely happen to have—a form of *relativism* that this position appears to result in.

Briefly put, the problem is this. Proponents of expressivism have themselves drawn attention to the demand of intersubjective agreement in many of our discourses (Price, 1998; 2003; Gibbard, 2003, ch. 4; see Brandom 2000, ch. 6). In particular, debates over normative issues count among them: differences in moral opinion certainly invite disagreement to be resolved. Moreover, we commonly think that at least some moral truths do not depend on the opinions we, our groups and societies happen to have. However, if our preferences or approvals and disapprovals—the stances that our normative claims express—are simply the products of the contingent development of ourselves and our societies, what are our hopes of attaining a lasting agreement over normative opinion?

Here it is needful to be more precise about the central notions at hand. Consider objectivity first. An aspect of the concept of truth as used in our assertoric practices that Price (1998; 2003) has drawn attention to is its function as a “convenient friction”. The response “that’s not true” points towards a disagreement to be resolved at least in many of our discourses. This “friction” between speakers points, first, towards a *standard beyond one’s opinion*: it draws a distinction between how things are and how the speaker thinks they are. Second, conversational friction demands of others to *share* our opinion, or *intersubjectivity*. Why disagreement matters

in many of our assertoric practices is because we aim to coordinate the underlying behavioural commitments (Price, 2011a).

Relativism is a broad notion; for the purposes of this discussion, it is useful to distinguish at least three different variants. A first variant might be called *conceptual* relativism. It maintains that truth is conceptually or indexically tied up to the opinion of some individual or group of individuals: to call some claim true is to say that the claim is believed by the speaker, his group, his culture, and so forth. Such relativism has not gained much popularity, but it has an analogue in speaker subjectivism, the meta-ethical position which maintains that usage of key normative terms is pegged to the speaker's own attitudes or desires. To be sure, the expressivist position is not a form of conceptual relativism: it precisely contests the view that normative claims or terms refer to the conative states of those who make such claims (cf. Horgan and Timmons, 2006).

A second variant we might call *factual* relativism, which argues that the world itself, or the "facts", are different for different individuals (groups, cultures) and hence truth, too, is relative. But again, expressivism hardly results in this form of relativism. The expressivist view of normative language does not imply that any normative view is as good as any other: this would amount to a normative stance of its own right, and arguably a very strange one at that (cf. Blackburn, 1998, 296).

A third and far more interesting form of relativism is the *historicist* position advanced by Richard Rorty. Global expressivism is akin to Rorty's (1979; 1982) *anti-representationalism*, which abandons the idea that there is something like "the world" which would constrain our opinion in a rational fashion.<sup>7</sup> All that remains, in Rorty's "Darwinian" story, are the *causal* connections that we, including our opinions, have with "facts". Following Donald Davidson, Rorty attempts to show that the idea of "the world", and of truth as correspondence with the world, have fuelled both realism and relativism alike. The upshot, Rorty argues, is that there is no hope for truth and objectivity in a sense that would exceed the approval of one's peers. There is no privileged language game or, in Rorty's terms, "final vocabulary"—there is only the game that prevails.

For Rorty's unabashedly ethnocentrist "Western liberal intellectual", there is "nothing to be said about either truth or rationality apart from de-

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<sup>7</sup> In distinction to Rorty's anti-representationalist position, Price takes seriously Paul Boghossian's (1990) argument that we cannot coherently formulate an irrealist view of semantic terms, and takes care not to overstep his subject naturalist position. Instead of saying that our statements do *not* represent or our terms do *not* refer, he emphasizes that the whole question does not appear in the subject naturalist framework as he conceives of it.

scriptions of the familiar procedures of justification which a given society—*ours*—uses in one or another area of inquiry” (2010, 229), admitting as he does that “we must, in practice, privilege our own group, even though there can be no non-circular justification for doing so” (2010, 335). In Rorty’s slogan, intersubjective agreement should be grounded in “solidarity” rather than (fact-based) “objectivity”. While we may hope to bring others under the same fold, our success is a sheer historical fact. Rorty does not think that his view amounts to a form of relativism deserving of the name. But as neither of the two other variants of relativism just listed have received much serious support, it is Rorty’s historicism that can seriously be advanced as a philosophically interesting relativist position.

It is this historicist form of relativism that expressivism risks collapsing into. In the expressivist’s own view of assertoric practices, as we saw, some discourses entail a demand of intersubjective agreement. But again, how is any lasting agreement to be achieved, if there is nothing beyond our contingent views to settle our common opinion? Moreover, in the global expressivist view, this is the case with *non*-normative opinion as well.<sup>8</sup> The problem is that while intersubjective agreement is obviously possible and achievable, there is nothing to back up such an agreement: our discourses lack full-blown objectivity. While Rorty would be unhinged by such a demand, ready to abandon the whole notion of objectivity in favour of “solidarity”, many others have tried to meet the demand. Securing objectivity has been a central motivation of *realist* views, which attempt to show that our opinions are answerable to something beyond the views of any (group of ) individuals.<sup>9</sup>

To be fair, contemporary pragmatists have begun to give just such accounts. Brandom has emphasized that assertions are subject to two kinds of normative assessment: aside asking whether an assertion was correct in light of the speaker’s commitments and entitlements, it may be assessed

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<sup>8</sup> A particular issue of interest concerns the global expressivist’s own view of language. Subject naturalism as presented by Price is the study of language from an anthropological perspective. Presumably, it does not equal global expressivism: competing subject naturalist accounts may offer a differing picture of the function of language. Indeed, some of these competing views might even validate object naturalism. I have previously argued that, without recourse to some normative notions to back his specific subject naturalist account, Price appears to face a choice between an internal realism (based on his particular subject naturalist account) and simply assuming a certain ontology of language-users as primary (Rydenfelt, 2011b).

<sup>9</sup> As is familiar, Rorty abandons the whole idea of the possibility of such an account, and would not be budged by such demands. In what follows I am trying to develop an account for those of us who still feel that such demands should be met.

in terms of “whether the assertion is correct in the sense of being true, in the sense that things are as it claims they are” (2000, 187). Brandom takes it to be a “basic criterion of adequacy of a semantic theory that it explain this [latter] dimension of normative assessment” (2000, 187) and accordingly, attempts to show that his account of assertion incorporates this normative status. No discourse is taken as privileged in such an assessment; instead, the normative status is operative in any point of view: “What is shared by all discursive perspectives is *that* there is a difference between what is objectively correct in the way of concept application and what is merely taken to be so, not *what* it is—the structure, not the content” (1994, 600). Brandom thus attempts to account for this type of objectivity as a normative standard of our assertoric practices rather than by (for the most part) invoking traditional realist notions.

Whether Brandom’s account succeeds in securing the features of objectivity required while avoiding the problems of historicism is however debatable, and cannot concern us here. Instead, I will now turn to an exploration of the views of the classical pragmatists—Charles S. Peirce in particular—and argue that these views can be used to complement the expressivist position in a way that enables us to avoid the problems of relativism: it allows us to develop a notion of realism that goes along with (semantic) non-representationalism.

## 5. Pragmatism and the aim of inquiry

Philosophical perspectives already explored in the foregoing could well be called pragmatic or pragmatist. One is the expressivist view that our assertions express functional states or dispositions which in turn have consequences in our conduct. Another is the way in which views on central philosophical notions—such as that of objectivity—have been articulated by drawing from the features of our assertoric practices. The particular notion of pragmatism that I intend to advance, however, is its more traditional version, a distinctive approach to *truth* in terms of the *aim of inquiry* (see Rydenfelt, 2011a; 2014b).

In the contemporary philosophical debate over truth, there are two main contenders: the correspondence theory and a variety of deflationary or minimalist accounts. The former maintains that truth is a fit between a truth-bearer (idea, proposition, belief) and a truth-making reality. This account is often presented as an *analysis* of the predicate “true”. Instead of setting about to uncover the meaning of truth, the deflationary view gives

an account of the *use* of the truth predicate in our assertoric practices, an account that the deflationist argues is exhaustive of the predicate itself (Horwich, 1990). A somewhat less popular third alternative is a variety of epistemic accounts of truth, which attempt to analyse the concept of truth in terms of other notions such as justification, warrant and belief.

The pragmatist perspective on truth should not be simply identified with any of these alternatives; rather, it amounts to an independent approach. Traditionally pragmatists have viewed the correspondence account critically by raising the suspicion that “correspondence” will, in practice, either turn out to be meaningless or mean too many things to be helpful as an account of what it is for a claim or thought to be “true”. However, the pragmatists did not offer a competing analysis, participating in the analytic project.<sup>10</sup> In turn, drawing from notions such as *use* and *practices* has led many to assimilate the deflationary position with the pragmatist one. But while the classical pragmatists would likely have no objections to the deflationary accounts of the use of the truth-predicate, they would not agree with the deflationist that such an account leaves no important philosophical work undone. From their point of view, the most interesting questions about truth are those concerning its relation to other concepts and practices, especially inquiry and belief (see Misak, 2000, 57–66; Misak, 2007).

Indeed, rather than focusing on the conceptual content or the use of the truth predicate, the pragmatists approached truth in terms of the sort of *beliefs* that we should have. In James’s dictum, truth is just the “good in the way of belief”. The pragmatist perspective on truth is in one sense deeply epistemic: its notion of truth is indistinguishable from the notion of inquiry: truth is the *aim* of inquiry or belief (see Rydenfelt, 2009). During the past decades, the pragmatist perspective has been sometimes assimilated to the epistemic conception of truth largely due to the influence of Hilary Putnam (1981; 1990). Unlike with many contemporary epistemic accounts, however, the pragmatist does not attempt to analyse truth in terms of any particular aim of inquiry.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> James’s (1907; 1909) elucidations of truth in terms of what would be useful to believe have been used to ridicule the pragmatist position, as if James had aspired to uncover the conceptual content of the truth-predicate. The starting point of such reception of James is in Russell’s harsh criticism (see e.g. Russell, 1966 [1910]). In part, James himself is to be blamed for the confusion. For some reason, he decided to title his 1909 collection of articles on the topic *The Meaning of Truth*.

<sup>11</sup> Because of Putnam’s one-time proposal of such a view, pragmatists are often considered to have advanced an epistemic account of truth in terms of idealized justification. But the

Importantly, the perspective on truth as the aim of inquiry entails that the pragmatist is not wedded to the standard representationalist picture. Instead of attempting to explicate what it means for our thoughts or claims to "match" an independent reality, the pragmatist entertains no such assumption of correspondence. As I will now proceed to suggest, the pragmatist account ultimately does lead to a particular view of truth that entails realist assumptions: the account of truth codified in Peirce's *scientific method*. But this is not a reversal to the idea that our claims or thoughts "represent" an independent reality. For the pragmatist, realism does not fall out of a representationalist picture; it is the outcome of a substantial development of the aim of inquiry.

The founding pragmatist text on truth is Peirce's classic piece, "The Fixation of Belief" (1877), where Peirce's starting point is the pragmatist notion of *inquiry* as the move from the unsettling state of doubt to the settlement of opinion, or belief.<sup>12</sup> "Fixation" then discusses four aims of inquiry, or methods of settling opinion, in effect four different notions of truth from the pragmatist perspective. The first of the methods is tenacity, the steadfast clinging to one's opinion. However, under the influence of what Peirce calls the social impulse, this method is bound to fail. The disagreement of others begins to matter, and the question becomes how to fix beliefs for *everyone*.

The three latter methods Peirce discusses are ones attempting to reach such a shared opinion across believers. By the method of authority, a power such as that of the state forces a single opinion upon everyone, by brute force if required. However, a "wider sort of social feeling" will show that the opinions dictated by the authority are mostly arbitrary (Peirce,

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story of the development of Putnam's views and his reception of the classics of pragmatism is famously complex. In the 1980s Putnam advanced the view that truth is to be identified with idealized justification (e.g. Putnam 1981; 1990, 41, 114–5). Later, however, he criticized the classical pragmatists for a suggestion along these lines and argued that truth cannot be *defined* in terms of verification (Putnam, 1995, 11). However, it would be a mistake to think that the classical pragmatists attempted to simply define truth in terms of (or identify truth with) any epistemic notions.

<sup>12</sup> Peirce points out that we might think this is not enough but insist that "we seek, not merely an opinion, but a true opinion". However, this "fancy" is immediately dispelled: "we think each one of our beliefs to be true, and, indeed, it is mere tautology to say so" (1877, 115). This remark can be taken as anticipating the deflationary account of truth (cf. Short, 2007, 332–3). The "tautology" Peirce would have in mind would be that to assert or to believe that *p* is to assert or believe that *p* is true simply because this is how "true" operates as a linguistic or grammatical device. This operation of the truth predicate as a *linguistic device* has no implications on what the aim of inquiry is or should be (see Rydenfelt, *forthcoming*).

1877, 118). The third, *a priori* method attempts to rectify this problem by demanding that opinion is to be settled, under conditions of liberty, by what is agreeable to joint human reason. However, this method “makes of inquiry something similar to the development of taste; but taste, unfortunately, is always more or less a matter of fashion” (1877, 119). It is required to develop a method which does not make our belief dependent of our subjective opinions and tastes altogether, “by which our beliefs may be determined by nothing human, but by some external permanency” (1877, 120). This method is the scientific one. Truth, from its point of view, is the opinion which accords with a reality independent of our opinions of it. The hypothesis that underlies the scientific method is that there is an independent reality which “affects, or might affect, every man” (1877, 120). This assumption of *hypothetical realism*, as I will call it, finally makes intelligible the attainment of a single answer to any question across inquirers.

Peirce’s discussion of the different methods reflects our lessons so far. The move from tenacity to the notion of truth as *public* incorporates the aspects of objectivity that expressivists have later reflected upon. The “social impulse” points to a standard beyond one’s own opinion and demands that opinion is to be shared by inquirers. The three latter methods attempt to settle such a shared opinion by offering criteria by which opinion is to be fixed for all. The affinities between Rortian historicism and the third, *a priori* method are evident (see Rydenfelt, 2013b). This method relies on the notion of a node of consensus common to all inquirers, such as a common human reason. But eventually this method is not sustainable: it leads to no lasting results.

The scientific method solves this problem by rendering that our opinions answerable to an independent reality. However, the account of truth entailed in the scientific method is not a naïve correspondence view insisting that we should somehow be able to compare our beliefs with reality. Neither is it an explication of how an in-built fit between our beliefs and the world can be achieved or recognized. Rather, what it practically speaking *means* for our opinions to accord with an independent reality is itself to be worked out in a concrete fashion. Here epistemic notions are employed, although truth is not identified with any set of such notions.

The preceding remarks enable us to respond to two traditional objections to the Peircean approach. The first is that truth again becomes mystical correspondence, an idea which has in turn been the subject of much well-rehearsed philosophical criticism. The second, *converse* objection is that this method identifies truth with justification at an idealized end of

inquiry, which will not satisfy our intuitions: we may imagine something being ideally justified, but still untrue (cf. Price, 2003). Against the first objection, Peirce maintains that "correspondence" is merely the "nominal definition" of truth (for scientific inquiry). What it means for our opinions to accord with an independent reality is to be worked out in a practical fashion. The second objection is substantially answered by the same token. Peirce nowhere *identifies* truth with justification, no matter how ideal. This objection confuses Peirce's notion of truth with what he took to be its hallmark in practice.

As a first approximation, Peirce suggested that truths are those opinions that would continue to withstand doubt were scientific inquiry pursued indefinitely (1878, 139). However, scientific inquiry is not just *any* investigation that would bring about an agreement, but one that has finding out how things are independently of us as its aim. While the aim of meeting an external standard is (unavoidably) internal to this practice, the standard itself remains external. Instead of a *consensus* which may be arbitrarily or contingently formed among inquirers, it is hoped that scientific inquiry will lead to a *convergence* of opinion due to the influence of an independent reality.<sup>13</sup>

Accordingly, *hypothetical* realism does not entail a commitment to any particular ontological picture: it is not a realism about the results of science, past, contemporary or future. Rather than defining what there *is* in terms of science, it is the science that is defined in terms of reality.<sup>14</sup> The hypothesis underlying science is that there is a reality independent of our opinions.

Pragmatism as presented here does not rely on the received notion of truth as correspondence with reality; instead, it approaches truth in terms of the aim of inquiry. And despite its realist underpinnings, the scientific method as suggested by Peirce does not hinge on the idea that our claims or thoughts "mirror" an independent reality. Instead, that method is to

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<sup>13</sup> A further objection maintains that it is impossible to grasp what it would be for an opinion to withstand all future inquiry. This objection, however, rests on a confusion between the abstract and the particular. It is not inherently difficult to abstractly conceive of what it would mean for an opinion to be sustained even at the end of inquiry pushed indefinitely. On the other hand, however, there is no way for us to tell that we have, on any particular question, reached the end. But this is only to be expected: the scientific method implies a thoroughlygoing *fallibilist* attitude towards any hypothesis. The scientific method *unfixes* our opinion: as James put it in describing the empiricist's attitude, "no bell in us tolls to let us know for certain when truth is in our grasp" (James, 1897).

<sup>14</sup> This Peircean direction of understanding scientific realism is not prevalent today, but has its staunch defenders (e.g. Niiniluoto, 2002).

be seen as the practice of settling opinion defined by the aim of meeting such an external standard. This aim cannot be elucidated in conceptual or representational terms; rather, what suggests that this standard is being met is up to the norms of science developed within its practice. Indeed, if Peirce relied on the idea that beliefs or claims “represent” an independent reality and it is *hence* that the scientific method is successful, his discussion of the different methods of fixing belief would be moot: science would win as if by default.

## 6. Normative science and the norms of science

Why, then, is the scientific method successful? Many pragmatists have attempted to devise (based on Peirce’s texts or otherwise) arguments that would show that belief is to be fixed by the scientific method. Cheryl Misak (1991; 2000) and Robert B. Talisse (2007; 2010) have used Peirce’s discussion of the scientific method as a key conceptual node for a defence of democracy. Their arguments involve two main steps. The first is that, due to the nature of belief, inquiry must be conducted, or at least is best conducted, in a scientific fashion. The second is that a democratic setting is required or at least the best societal framework for such an inquiry.

In Talisse’s view, democratic processes and institutions are required for beliefs to be tested against the full range of reasons, arguments and evidence. Misak, in turn, argues (more specifically) that our moral opinions are sensitive to the experience and argument of others, and consequently inquiry into moral questions can be most successfully pursued in a framework of liberal democracy. In order to justify the first step, both Misak and Talisse rely (not on an analysis of the concept of truth but) on an account of the concept of *belief*. They argue that belief is by its nature responsive to reasons, evidence and experience—that belief “aims at truth”. In particular, Talisse maintains that as epistemic agents or believers we are (at least implicitly) committed to the scientific method; for Misak, beliefs are sensitive to reasons, including the experience of others.

This line of argument however turns on an equivocation of its central terms (see Rydenfelt, 2011a; Rydenfelt *forthcoming*). Merely arguing that belief is always sensitive to evidence, reasons and argument (or “experience”) will not suffice to distinguish between the different methods Peirce discusses: what counts as evidence (or the relevant kind of “experience”) depends on the particular method or aim of inquiry that the believing individual or group follows. If the scope of the central terms—“evidence”,

“reasons”, “argument” and “experience”—is in no way defined or restricted, this is just the trivial claim that our beliefs are sensitive to whatever our beliefs are sensitive to. If however the aim of truth is understood more narrowly as it is by the scientific method, the notion of belief proposed is implausible. Certainly there are those whose beliefs are not (at least always) sensitive to *scientific* reasons, such as the followers of Peirce’s method of authority—say, religious fundamentalists.<sup>15</sup>

The pragmatist should not resort to such conceptual maneuvers; indeed, Peirce nowhere suggests that the opinions fixed by methods other than the scientific one are less than genuine beliefs. There is no non-circular argument available for the method of science: the choice of the method—the choice of what counts as the relevant kind of evidence or argument—is itself a substantial normative issue, which allows for no such simple resolution. But the defender of the scientific method is not left completely empty-handed: he may argue that the scientific method—its normative principles concerning the fixation of opinion—are those imposed upon us by reality itself.

Equipped with the representationalist picture, the traditional cognitivist has been looking for a match between normative claims (or their conceptual contents) and the objects or “facts” of the naturalist worldview. The problems of this project have been prone to fuel scepticism. The cognitivists have not managed to supply a plausible account of the conceptual content of normative claims and terms, and the “facts” our normative claims are “about” seem to fall out the scope of the scientific image of reality.

Pragmatism as presented here is able to escape these difficulties by eschewing representationalism. But it also evades the most formidable problem of expressivism, that of historicist relativism. Pragmatism may exploit global expressivism in bringing normative and non-normative claims under the same fold: the difference between these claims and thoughts con-

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<sup>15</sup> We might of course argue that such non-scientific opinions amount to something other or less than full-fledged beliefs; indeed, this is exactly what Misak and Talisse at points suggest. However, then the conclusion that beliefs are sensitive to evidence as understood by the scientific method follows simply because we have *defined* beliefs as just such opinions. Such a stipulation seems too restrictive; in any case, it will not be a viable argument against those who do not follow the scientific method to simply insist that their opinions are not genuine beliefs. Indeed, here the argument for democracy turns out to be an application of the *a priori* method. It maintains that a certain notion of evidence and argument—a certain notion of what counts for or against an opinion—would be shared by all believing agents. When concrete examples of fixing opinion cast this view into doubt, these pragmatists can only rely on an artificially restricted notion of belief (see Rydenfelt, 2013b).

cerns their functions in discourse and action rather than in their “representational” capacities. Neither is by its very nature more “cognitive”: by adopting the scientific method, *both* kinds of opinions may be settled to accord with an independent reality.

The pragmatist notion of science supplies a view of how our thoughts and claims can be made answerable to an independent reality by way of scientific practice instead of the conceptual terms of representationalism. In this way, the pragmatist approach can accommodate the objectivity of normative claims. It both makes intelligible the hope of a lasting agreement over normative ideas and makes good on our intuitions that such claims are responsible to something independent of what we may or may not think. Consequently, there is no principled barrier to a scientific study of normativity; indeed, to deny this is to block an avenue of inquiry. It is not coincidentally that Peirce (1903) coined the term normative science.

Among the benefits of this perspective is that it enables us to fit normative inquiry in a broadly speaking naturalist framework, where science is conceived of not merely in terms of its current image but in the broad terms of the inquiry into an independent reality. The pragmatist does not assume an ontology based on our current conception of science: at the outset, no domain of inquiry can be disclosed from the purview of scientific inquiry.

A particularly interesting application of such inquiry leads to a novel understanding of philosophical naturalism. The scientific method itself cannot be defended on *a priori* grounds: the choice of the method is a substantial normative issue. Normative science enables us to inquire and defend the norms, aims and methods of science *by* scientific inquiry.<sup>16</sup> Normative science is not a “first philosophy” that attempts to lay a foundation for science that is, in Quine’s phrase, “firmer than the scientific method itself”. This picture is circular, but not viciously so (see Rydenfelt, 2011b).

Abandoning the representationalist assumptions while reconceptualizing realism, pragmatism may then give rise to a newly conceived normative realism. Although for the purposes of the argument developed here the mere possibility of hypothetical realism concerning normativity will suffice, the pragmatist will inevitably be asked for an account of the sort of reality that our normative opinions can be made to accord with, and

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<sup>16</sup> The fact that scientific practice is inevitably norm-laden is a partial motivation to Putnam’s criticism of what he calls the “fact/value dichotomy” (Putnam, 2002, 30–31; see Pihlström, 2005).

how that reality may affect us as inquirers. While both scientific discovery and (philosophical) conceptual work will be required to outline hypothetical realism concerning normativity, the beginnings of such an account are fortunately at hand in Peirce's later views, which have been further developed and elaborated by T. L. Short (2007).

According to Short, Peirce recognized that teleology had been reintroduced to modern science in that some forms of statistical explanation are not reducible to mechanistic causation.<sup>17</sup> As an extension of this naturalistic view of final causation, he suggested that certain ideas (or ideals) themselves may have the tendency of becoming more powerful by gaining more ground: that there is an irreversible tendency toward affirming certain ends instead of others. Such tendencies are the natural "facts" that our normative opinions may be settled to accord with, independent of but affecting our particular inclinations and desires. While this picture may seem outlandish, the historical development and spreading of certain ideals—say, concerning human rights and the freedom of opinion—may be taken as evidence of the power of certain ideals gaining more ground, of progress rather than mere change. As Short (2012) construes Peirce's later semiotic view, these ideals can affect us through experience by eliciting feelings of approval and disapproval, satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Experience may correct our feelings, and eventually force convergence among inquirers.

Of the methods (and norms) of *normative* science, very little can (as of yet) be said. It seems plausible that normative claims, unlike some other claims, cannot be tested based on evidence constituted by their predictive power and success. But perhaps this is due to a lack of scientific (and philosophical) imagination in this area.<sup>18</sup> Here as elsewhere, normative science may be simply less developed than other branches of science and common sense.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> More specifically, Short (2007, chs. 4–5) argues that there is a class of statistical explanation which is not mechanistic: the explanations of anisotropic processes of (practically irreversible) evolution of systems toward final states, which encompass a part of statistical mechanics and natural selection in biology.

<sup>18</sup> Indeed, an extension of this sort of Quinean holism and thus empirical testability to normative claims by moral feelings or emotions has been proposed by Morton White (1981; 2002) in his hitherto largely neglected work. For discussion, see Pihlström (2011) and Short (2012).

<sup>19</sup> That is, perhaps we can learn to understand the predictive power of normative ideas (in terms of feelings such as those of approval and disapproval) in a manner analogous to the development of other fields of science. To disclose this alternative at the outset would be against the thoroughgoing *fallibilism* that is part and parcel of the scientific method. A Peircean fal-

## 7. Conclusion

Traditionally, normative realism is assumed to entail the semantic view that normative (or moral) judgments are fact-stating, or describe ways things are. This cognitivist stance however faces major difficulties in accounting for the conceptual content of normative terms as well as for the phenomenon of moral motivation. Initially conceived of as non-cognitivism, contemporary expressivism contests the idea that our thoughts and claims attempt to describe or "fit" something in the world. When extended to all of assertoric language, the result is a global expressivism (or non-representationalism). The most difficult problem of this view is the unsettling implication of a form of relativism, historicism.

The views of the classical pragmatists, especially Charles S. Peirce's account of the scientific method and its commitment to realism, are not derived from a representationalist picture or other *conceptual* considerations. The scientific method is the outcome of a substantial development of *criteria* for the sort of opinions we should have. It assumes *hypothetical realism* about an independent reality which our claims may accord with. Such realism is not committed to any particular ontological picture: rather than defining reality in terms of science, science is defined in terms of reality. Hypothetical realism is thus compatible with the non-representationalist view: it is a realism without representationalism. This pragmatist approach enables us to reconceptualize normative realism. Once we have adopted the global expressivist perspective, there is no principled, "representational" difference between normative and non-normative claims or opinions. The pragmatist may argue that both kinds of opinion are to be fixed by the same—scientific—means. This is the possibility of a normative science.

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libilist maintains that (in principle) any of our theories may turn out to be wrong; this fallibilism extends to all particular methods applied in scientific inquiry.

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