

Applying Ethics

“Relativity applies to physics, not ethics”, might sound like a rather convincing quote especially because it was stated by Albert Einstein himself. While making this statement, he did have many ethical theories to support him. Theories such as ethical-egoism, Kantian ethics and utilitarianism have proposed many principles to guide our lives and hence have laid out a choice of set of principles to follow. While we may feel comforted in being able to pick among these rich philosophies, we should not forget that they are merely theories. According to James, the purpose of philosophy is to understand what has value to us and why. He further argues that ideas and beliefs have value to us only if they can be functional in our lives. As a result, we should expect these ethical theories to be applicable to our lives. However, none of these theories are able to fulfil their function since they rest on unrealistic assumptions. Ranging from viewing human beings as living in isolation to dismantling all our thought processes (separating reason and sentimentality), these theories remain impractical in their ready application to our lives. As a result, we require a theory that can guide our ethics based on our lives rather than unrealistic assumptions. Pragmatism seems to be the best answer since it proposes the abolishment of the rigid principles set out by the aforementioned theories. It requires creating a set of ethics without principles and has been popularised by Richard Rorty. As he revisits the works of John Dewey, he goes on to propose that ethics and morality are products of experience and hence develop as we live through the numerous experiences in our lives rather than living through the experiences with a fixed set of principles such as those proposed by Kant or Bentham. The key in Rorty, James and Dewey’s work is the practicality and the realistic assumptions under which they formulated their claims. Unlike the traditional philosophers such as Kant and Plato, they account for a person’s environment, rationality and sentiment which would thereby create novel situations and make life a dynamic experience. Unlike traditional philosophy, the

pragmatists feel that there is no absolute “Truth” for ethics as it is a by-product of our lives which in-turn are typically unique to every individual. The pragmatists’ proposition of the integration of reason, sentiment and experience, in my view, reflects a comprehensive thought process that is likely allow the application of pragmatism to the key areas that govern our lives.

Before examining pragmatism with these key areas of our lives, namely- social, political and economic, it is essential to first understand pragmatism. Pierce began defining pragmatism through his maxim which states that “Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conceptions to have. Then our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of these objects” (Peirce, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear", p293).As reflected in this maxim, pragmatism is shown to be chiefly concerned with consequences. However over time, James modified this maxim into “... to develop a thought's meaning, we need only determine what conduct it is fitted to produce; that conduct is for us its sole significance” (William James, What Pragmatism Means, 1906). Hence, in this statement pragmatism is explained to be concerned with not only the consequences but also with the intrinsic nature of the action taking place. The pragmatists express themselves to be flexible in their thoughts as they feel that the human life is a combination of unique situations. As a result they reject the idea that a set or a single principle can sufficiently guide the ethics of a human being for one’s whole life. When James states, “Theories thus become instruments, not answers to enigmas, in which we can rest....Pragmatism unstiffens all our theories, limbers them up and sets each one at work” (James, A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking, December 1904), he highlights the key concept that pragmatism prefers the use of those theories to achieve desired results rather dictating the results with them. To pragmatists, the theories are means to an end rather than ends in themselves. To summarise pragmatists, it is best to view them as the moderators

between the two extremes and thus finding the balancing point between “scientific loyalty to facts,” and the “the old confidence in human values and the resultant spontaneity, whether of the religious or romantic type” (*Pragmatism* (1907), p17).

The social aspect of our lives is probably one of the most dominant areas. It creates much potential for ethical dilemmas as we lead our lives as a family, as a society, as a country and as a world. As we are social beings, we commonly face situations that require us to make ethical decisions in relations to others. However, this is such a common aspect of our lives, that such decision making is a habit and without even realising our thought process we make such decisions every day. This relatively common ethical decision making is linked to the quality of being prudent. According to Rorty, morality is merely an extended version of this quality. Morality requires similar ethical decision making except that it faces more complex situations and hence we have to do conscious deliberation before making a final conclusion. This deliberation is thereby the key to the nature of the decision we make. Moreover, like Rorty points out “we follow the pragmatist's advice to see everything as constituted by its relations to everything else” (Rorty, *Social Hope*, p77); the pragmatists believe that one is constructed by the relationships one forms with others. Hence, a human being's identity is derived from the many relationships he develops as he leads his life. As a result we cannot lead lives independently of the people around us. This in turn leads us to Rorty's conclusion that human beings do have intrinsic concerns for others. These “others” are typically our closest relatives such as family and friends. Kantians on the other hand, as suggested by Rorty feel that human beings are “cold, self-interested, calculating, psychopath” (Rorty, “Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality”, p177) and hence do not have any concern for others. Their theory works under the assumption that reason alone governs our moral decisions and hence this reason would not release us to perform actions that are not useful to us. As a result we would need rigid principles such as the categorical imperative to

dictate us to help others. However, pragmatists' view that sentiment plays an equally important role when making moral decisions, aids in justifying our concern for others. As a result in the question of helping the poor, while Kant would propose us to help the poor as we are obligated to do so due to our duty, pragmatists would only expect us to help them if we are concerned with them in one way or another (our neighbours, friends etc). However, this is not to say that pragmatists do not support helping those unrelated to us. Pragmatists in fact do not assume such "unnatural" actions from us. However, if we were to perform them, these actions would be viewed as a sign of moral progress as we would be "enlarging the variety of relationships" (Rorty, *Ethics without Principles*, p79). Such moral progress, in Rorty's view, stems from increasing sensitivity to other people. As we become more sensitive, our conscience leads us to make moral decisions in favour of helping others. As a result while we may not be obligated to help the poor but we are certainly likely to help them since our sensitivity would trigger our conscience to do so. Opponents of pragmatism are likely argue that pragmatism does not guide us effectively since many people would be able to avoid helping others by thinking of themselves as still learning and hence not be a part of moral progress. While this point does illustrate a potential weakness, is it essential to realise that this lack of obligation would bestow liberty upon us. Kant limits a man's autonomy with his categorical imperative which is a stringent set of principles that make our moral decisions. However, pragmatism's view of not having such duties and principles that make us obligated, give us a sense of freedom to make our own decisions. We are able to gauge our situation in relation to others and hence make decisions that best suit our circumstances rather than trying to fit a rigid set of rules that is based on unrealistic assumptions. Such social liberty is important for a free society where individuals are able to lead autonomous lives and hence ensure that their morality is first in line with their own conscience rather than with any set of rules which might even be flawed.

The concept of liberty in pragmatism triggers us to examine another important part of our society, the political sphere. The political sphere sets the ideology of the country and thereby affects majority of the decisions that are made, with the most important one being of how to run the country. The question of ethics in this case directly affects the ideology being chosen. Utilitarianism is likely to imply the presence of collectivism as the key factor would be the happiness of the people. Such collectivism is supposed to maximise the happiness of the people and hence systems such as that of monarchy are likely to be able to administer it. As the king is in charge of ruling his kingdom, his chief duty would be to maximise the happiness of the people. However, in Bentham's view, this happiness is primarily materialistic in nature and thereby can be misused by the ruler. As suggested by Machiavelli in *The Prince*, the "appearance of virtue" is more important than virtue itself (Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*) and hence the King can easily fool his people by pretending to maximise the people's happiness when in fact he would be overriding their rights and fulfilling personal wants. The lack of measure with utilitarianism makes it difficult as a political tool as it creates excessive room for abuse. Pragmatism on the other hand is related to democracy. While many have suggested that democracy is "rule of the majority", it is in fact "rule of the people and by the people". Though the distinction might not be apparent, democracy is concerned with every individual. It places an equal amount of attention on the minorities as it does on majority and hence as pointed out by Dewey in "Philosophy and Democracy", primarily rests on individualism. Since pragmatism unlike other theories, realises the uniqueness of each person's life by acknowledging upbringing, sentiment, culture and other factors, it also works closely with the sentiment of individuality. As suggested by Dewey "democracy is not concerned with freaks and geniuses or heroes or divine leaders but with the associated individuals in which each by intercourse with others somehow makes the life of each more distinctive" (Dewey, *Philosophy and Democracy*, p377). This highlights to

us that the main link between democracy and pragmatism is individualism. Democracy in contrast to a monarchy liberates people to a substantial extent. The public is empowered and hence freedom can be practiced, such as that of questioning, rebelling and expressing. Such freedom forms an important basis of feedback for a democracy as it creates a constantly improving system which considers the feedbacks and modifies itself to suit the public needs. However, opponents of pragmatism would argue that democracy in practice is unable to reflect individuality as it commonly ends up being a “rule of the majority” and hence succumbs to collectivism. While this may potentially happen, considering the societal set-ups of each country, the important point to realise is that democracy creates room for expression. Even if the majority is ruling, the minorities are given the freedom to express their unique views in forms of the council for minorities’ rights which is often reflected in current day governances. Such avenue for expression creates a more ethically sound situation in which the minority is not completely oppressed such as in the case of utilitarianism. This is also reflected by Dewey when he mentions “Hence democracy....but upon the whole to be accepted because somehow or other it works better than other schemes and seems to develop a more kindly and humane set of social institutions” (Dewey, *Philosophy and Democracy*, p376). As evident from this, pragmatism’s realistic view of the uniqueness of every individual leads us to the best form of governance. For those who question democracy’s status as the best form, there is no better evidence that the fact that current day governances seem to be converging to democratic forms.

On the economic front, the importance of ethics is clearly on the rise. As the world economies continue to grow and more complex corporations and institutions dictating the economies are formed, there is also a growing room for unethical behaviour such as fraud. The case for ethics in business is truly unique. As every person in the corporate world assumes a role and is thereby bestowed with a certain amount of power, the role of ethics

comes into utilising this power morally. It is important to notice that in business ethics, individual responsibility is the key. In order for firms and institutions to run well and remain in consensus with their ethical codes, every employee of their firm has to follow that code. As a result, the ethical standard of each firm is a summation of the ethical standards of its employees. Typically the capitalist market which has served us well in the past would be associated with ethical egoism. This would thereby constitute everyone to make decisions that are in their own self-interest. While this concept works well on a macro-scale which means that each business entity (individual or a firm should maximise their own interest), it is limited in its application. If every individual involved in the corporate world was to serve his own interests, many unethical practices could be justified. Crimes such as “insider trading” would not be immoral anymore since they would be maximising the interests of those committing it. As a result, given the complex situations in business, a more flexible model would be required. The model of pragmatism would serve us well as it would be able to address each ethical dilemma in its original form rather than bending the dilemma to match our fixed set of principles which would then probably result in incorrect decisions. When James mentions “nothing final in any actually given equilibrium of human ideals, [so that] as our present laws and customs have fought and conquered other past ones, so they will in their turn be overthrown by any newly discovered order which will hush up the complaints that they still give rise to, without producing others louder still” (James, *The Will to Believe, The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life*, p206), he is implying the need for constant self-revision in the human world. This is especially true in the corporate scenario which has had numerous learning points in history. Until we come up with new ideas and apply them to the existing situations, we remain unaware of their consequences and hence after executing those ideas, we need to correct them in order to remain coherent with our conscience. An example could be drawn from the global financial crisis of 2008. When the credit rating agencies did

not fulfil their roles of genuinely grading the loans due to their greed for more business, this resulted in rather devastating consequences that we are still facing today. As a result, we used this feedback to correct their ethical decisions regarding finding more business and giving genuine credit ratings and hence are putting in place greater regulation to prevent future problems. One may argue that the presence of these regulations and code of ethics set by companies illustrate the need for a set of principles which pragmatism defies. Moreover, the flexibility offered by pragmatism may be abused to a level of excessive subjectivism and hence results in lack common standards that are essential to regulate our firms and institutions. Though this is in fact is a key deficiency of pragmatism, it can be coped with. While pragmatism does acknowledge the subjective ethics due to presence of differences, this idea should be regulated in its use to individuals only. When concerned with larger entities, such subjectivism can be substituted with common standards that can be derived from a combination of experience, rationality and sentiment as suggested by Rorty. Such an alternative method will maintain the self-sustaining improvement mechanism while also minimising the potential for abuse due to the subjectivism.

As examined above, pragmatism is essentially an over-arching umbrella that is rather inclusive in nature. While it condemns the pre-supposition of any fixed principles to guide our ethics, it also allows room for modifiable rules. Such flexibility and realistic assumptions further support this comprehensive framework to be applicable to the key areas that govern our lives and thereby fulfil its aim as a philosophy. As the mankind continues to progress and face more ethically complex situations in the future, while we may not be able to rely on the fixed principles of Kant or Bentham but we can always fall back on pragmatism since if not for anything else, it at least lets every human being be in peace with its inner conscience.