PRACTICE, JUDGMENT, AND THE CHALLENGE OF MORAL AND POLITICAL DISAGREEMENT

A Pragmatist Account

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This book is a study in moral and political epistemology. Its aim is to clarify the function played within moral and political experience by what different philosophical traditions have termed “reason,” “reasonableness,” “rationality,” “thought,” “inquiry,” and “reflexivity.” This book draws inspiration directly (albeit not exclusively) from the pragmatist tradition. It emerges from a general dissatisfaction with the standard accounts that contemporary philosophy, with its increasing epistemic emphasis, has recently been giving of reason. It also emerges from an equal dissatisfaction with the anti-intellectualistic response these standard accounts have sparked.

From the vantage point of the pragmatist tradition, both currents give rise to serious philosophical doubts and call for a general reconsideration of the forms and functions of reasoning in moral and political experience. Faithful to the pragmatist tradition, this book strikes a middle ground between the excesses of rationalism and those of anti-intellectualism, arguing to this end that our trust in the efficacy of reasoning is best vindicated through a radical re-conceptualization of its nature and scope. This reframing of reason makes inquiry the essential frame of reference in seeking to understand the variety of forms of thought that agents rely on in dealing with moral disagreement and political controversy.

To tackle this broad issue, I focus on a specific dimension of practical reason: the way agents construct agreement by participating in collaborative processes of inquiry. This dimension is important not only owing to the increasing degree of conflict in our pluralist societies, but also because disagreement and controversy are distinctive and inevitable traits of a pluralistic world. This is acknowledged by a wide range of theoretical literature, and one can easily find that disagreement has become the central theoretical theme of most contemporary moral and political theory. Disagreement poses a twofold challenge: it is at once a natural condition of modernity and a permanent challenge to our rational powers.

It is my claim that by developing an original understanding of how human thought acquires natural and cultural meaning, pragmatism has devised some of the most promising ideas for dealing with these challenges. Pragmatism’s vantage point offers new ways to understand the place and scope of rationality within human agency and offers new solutions for dealing with rational disagreement along with new ways of conceiving the role of public reason.

As my argument unfolds, it will become clear that for the pragmatists rationality should be understood as a trait of agency: regularity of habits, stability of beliefs, and a capacity to face new and unexpected situations through the practice of judgment are some of its distinguishing traits. Through the reflective
functions of thought, belief may (defeasibly) become “fixed,” and this empowers human agents to stabilize action, establish regular patterns of conduct, and find innovative solutions to specific problems. In these elements lie the cornerstones of a pragmatist theory of rationality at both individual and collective level. It is around this conceptual bundle that the pragmatist tradition, despite its variety, has developed a general framework for understanding the place and scope of reason within human experience. Pragmatism, especially the variants developed by Peirce and Dewey, articulates this new understanding of rationality as an immanent, evolutionary, fallibilist, problem-oriented, and self-reflective dimension of human experience. It fosters an understanding of philosophy as an epistemology of practice. As I contend, this achievement provides an important resource for contemporary philosophical work that deals with issues of moral and political—broadly practical—rationality both inside and outside the pragmatist tradition.

This book is accordingly intended to open lines of conversation between the pragmatists and others working in contemporary moral and political theory. By tackling issues of moral disagreement, public reason, pluralism, and relativism, I wish to convince the reader that a pragmatist approach fares better than many others, and to this end I engage in particular with perfectionism, critical theory, political liberalism, and other philosophical traditions.

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Preface

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Introduction

Philosophy’s concern with thought and its cognate terms is certainly as ancient as philosophy itself. One might even say that all or most of the great philosophical traditions can be distinguished on the basis of the form through which they have proposed to conceptualize this dimension. We need only think of Plato’s concern with logos, of Aristotle’s theory of phronesis, of Hume’s theory of understanding, of Kant’s architectural account of reason, or of Hegel’s idea of Spirit. In more recent times, it is upon the idea of reason as reasonableness that John Rawls has rested his theory of political liberalism, while Habermas’s overall philosophical project is based on an understanding of thought shaped by the antithetical concepts of communicative and instrumental rationality. Pragmatism is no exception in this regard. Indeed, one of its lasting contributions to the history of philosophy lies in its replacement of the old philosophical epistemic vocabulary with a new notion, that of inquiry.

By this radical terminological innovation, pragmatism introduced in philosophy a new image of thought: by conceiving thought through the model of inquiry, pragmatism provides us with a fresh account of what human reason is, of its place in human affairs, of how agents should rely on it to engage in their ordinary interactions. In conceiving rationality as inquiry, pragmatism resists the temptations of a rationalistic assessment of rationality as a faculty. As an attribute of human agency, rationality appears to be inextricably intertwined with all other dimensions of agency, such as habits, impulses, and the emotions. Moreover, by conceiving rationality as the adaptive outcome of the human evolutionary strategy, pragmatism averts the risk of transcendental flights into the ideal domains of pure forms and rarefied procedures. As the self-reflective dimension of human experience and practices, rationality is directly concerned with issues of regulation, adjustment, transformation, and control. At the same time, this naturalistic conception of rationality does not expose pragmatism to the shortcomings of the instrumental accounts of reason. Nor does it commit pragmatism to an anti-intellectual dismissal of the epistemic goals usually associated with the functioning of reason.

On this reading, rationality describes the way agents critically take hold of their experience. Rationality lies at the basis of their capacity to control action. It is also the factor that agents resort to when engaging in self-criticism. It therefore figures as a central dimension in moral and political experience, a dimension that plays a fundamental role in the complex and manifold phenomenology of practical lives. Pragmatism sees moral and political life as being in one way or another taken up with the question of conflict. Moreover, pragmatism is committed to the idea that it is our rational capacities—our ability to reflect and
to exchange reasons—that we should rely on in seeking to achieve our personal goals of self-realization and our collective goals of collaborative association. It is thus fair to say that pragmatism has given us an original theory of rationality, provided we redefine this term in accordance with the pragmatist theory of inquiry.

Proceeding from these premises, in this book I will be using the term *rationality* in a way that covers a broad spectrum of forms of intellectual undertaking. The word’s use will thus range from the informal, where it can be taken to designate any form of reflection, to more specific areas that in turn range from specialized forms of problem setting to institutionalized processes of decision making. Indeed, this book is in an important sense taken up with an effort to expand the boundaries of the notion of rationality. One of the central intuitions at the heart of the pragmatist conception of inquiry is in fact the idea, powerfully outlined by Dewey, that a continuity exists that underlies the multifarious forms through which human agents seek to control their behavior and their environment. And as I argue in this book, if we accept this pragmatist starting point, we thereby commit ourselves to the idea that rationality has a central role to play in human affairs. I will call this conception the “wide view of rationality,” setting it in contrast to narrower conceptions of the nature and scope of reason. Using a formula introduced by Bernard Williams a couple of decades ago, we might say that the goal of a “wide view of rationality” is to contrast the drive toward a “*rationalistic conception of rationality*” (Williams 1985: 18). Indeed, the expression “non-rationalistic understanding of rationality,” far from being self-contradictory, aptly captures the idea at the heart of the project developed in this book. Such an understanding is called forth by the awareness that the ideas of rationality embodied in most contemporary moral and political philosophy fail to meet the demands that action in the actual world presents us with.

Other terminological choices would have been consistent with this wide view. If I insist on using the term *rationality* (rather than, say, *thought* or *judgment*) to account for the reflective dimension of moral and political experience, it is because I believe that the term rationality better grasps the justificatory dimension built in the idea of agreement. Yet, by bringing rationality home we are in no way committed to downplay the role of the tacit, affective, prereflective factors the pragmatists have urged us to acknowledge as ineludible parts of any intellectual undertaking. Therefore, the appeal to rationality should not be taken to imply a commitment to strategic, instrumental, utilitarian, or otherwise “rationalistic” conceptions of rationality. Indeed, I am well aware that unless the notion of rationality is radically reconstructed, our understanding of what makes agency rational will continue to remain inadequate, dependent as it is on a reductive understanding of what rationality is. A unified account of rationality (the “wide view”) will help us grasp the common traits shared by the wide range of undertakings through which we reflect on our experience in the effort to make it
more intelligible, to converge on terms of cooperation with others, to justify and criticize the normative positions we take, and so on.

This wide view of rationality covers and attempts to keep conceptually unified at least those types of intellectual undertaking through which agents: (a) set and pursue goals; (b) account for actions, properties, or events; (c) make explicit the conditions for making their normative positions intelligible; (d) search for shared bases of agreement; and (e) deal with normative controversies.

Rationality so conceived corresponds to what in the pragmatist tradition has been conceptualized as intelligence and as inquiry. In developing this pragmatist thread, I have been confronted with a terminological problem. Indeed, while these two terms make perfect sense within the frame of the pragmatist tradition, their use in the broader context of contemporary moral and political philosophy is inevitably exposed to profoundly damaging misunderstandings. This is one of two main reasons why I have decided to keep to the terms reason and rationality, as this is the prevalent way of referring to those intellectual undertakings to which the terms of intelligence and inquiry refer. My reliance on these terms, however, should not in any way be taken to suggest the rationalistic understanding emphasized above, nor does it imply an assumption that these undertakings are ranked above the other dimensions of human experience. As will become clear, my understanding of rationality as inquiry is rooted in the priority of what John Dewey called “the qualitative.” My concern will rather be to explain how, given the priority of the qualitative, we can defend a viable conception of the epistemic validity for the moral and political domain.

The other reason why I assign theoretical priority to rationality has to do with a philosophical interpretation of what has been termed the “fact of pluralism.” While modernity urges us to understand ourselves according to rational categories, it has also shown that rationality is powerless to deliver the solutions we expected from it. In understanding the nature of moral disagreement and political controversies, in learning to deal with problematic situations, in grasping the pragmatic meaning of justification and critique in political practice, in identifying the right kind of objectivity needed in moral and political discourse and in working out new conceptions of public reason lie some of the challenges that a theory of practical rationality is expected to take on.

However much in a still too inchoate way, these remarks point to a central philosophical question: How can normative beliefs legitimately and reliably be fixed in conditions of pluralism? Once it is no longer feasible to converge on an external, independent reality, and once the idea of converging in the long run on a shared account of reality can no longer serve as a practically useful regulative idea, but rather acts as a misleading imposition, how will we be able to ensure that our moral and political practices can still be held to a standard of public accountability? As many liberal thinkers have persuasively shown, democratic societies are pervaded by radical, often rational, forms of disagreement that con-
stantly threaten our individual and joint undertakings. And so the idea—as we strive to manage our deep disagreements in ways that do not undermine individual self-assurance and social stability—is to rely rationality as the underlying capacity normative practices rely on. Yet confronted to this task, we have to admit that the contemporary understanding of rationality in moral and political theory proves inadequate. The current trend, as evinced in the justificatory turn in political theory and the resurgence of Kantian approaches in ethics, is toward a hyper-rationalistic account of rationality whose main consequence lies in a decoupling of reason from experience and of normativity from context. One need only think here about the vast literature that has been spawned since Rawls,¹ or about the resurgence of moral realism (D. Brink) and of Kantian approaches to moral theory (O. O’Neill, C. Korsgaard). At the same time, the false promise of these idealistic and hyper-rational approaches to normative issues has provoked an opposite excess, giving rise to some equally troubling forms of anti-intellectualism. Dissatisfaction with the epistemic turn can thus be identified as the common theme behind the antirational stance of philosophers otherwise so far apart from one another as Richard Rorty and Bernard Williams, as well as behind the wide array of criticisms directed at philosophical modernity. It also explains the persistent attractiveness of skeptical and relativistic philosophies. Other examples of this reaction against the hyper-rationalism of the dominant moral epistemology can be found in the works of Cora Diamond, Alice Crary and of the so-called new Wittgenstein. Contra the reductionism of contemporary moral theory, these thinkers reclaim the irreducibility of moral thought to reasoning and judgment. Yet, as the Coetzee debate has shown,² it is not always clear how dangerously close to anti-intellectual positions this critique of rationalism comes. Other examples of this attitude, which I discuss at length in Chapter 4, are to be found in the approaches that critical theorists take to the public sphere.

These two tendencies—the hyper-rationalistic one and the anti-intellectualistic one alike—can be counteracted by adopting a twofold strategy. Overcoming this dualism requires a firm commitment to rationality, while at the same time reconstructing this notion from the ground up, so as to make its grounding in experience and the practices explicit. My contention is that the pragmatist conception of rationality as inquiry provides a fruitful starting point in working toward this goal. Indeed, the theory of inquiry provides at the same time a model for describing the reflective dimension of human agency and a theoretical model for distinguishing appropriate from inappropriate ways of thinking and acting. It explains why rationality is a necessary and intrinsic trait of human agency, and it describes the different ways in which rationality is deployed in human experience. In relying on the pragmatist tradition, then, my goal will not be to provide a historical account of classical pragmatist conceptions of inquiry. My use of pragmatist sources will rather be aimed at devising theoreti-
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The overall design of the theory I defend is informed at its core by Peirce’s conception of rationality as a reflective process through which beliefs that have come into doubt are stabilized. At the heart of this conception are three broad assumptions. The first is the idea that we engage in rational inquiry only when faced with real doubt, and that we engage in such inquiry in order to stabilize beliefs whose uncertainty has hampered our capacity to act. This assumption makes it necessary to bring inquiry back to the real and genuine problem that gave start to inquiry. The second assumption is that rational inquiry proves superior to other, competing ways of fixing beliefs because of its greater capacity to make beliefs stable over the long run. This assumption sets a constraint on the way rational inquiry is to be conceived: its superiority and limitation are both defined by that pragmatic capacity. The third assumption is that the stability of beliefs is defined in terms of their responsiveness to arguments and to experience. While arguments and reasons provide the material through which we defend and criticize given normative positions, our responsiveness to experience provides a practical benchmark against which to check those arguments and reasons. From this perspective, experience should be understood in its widest sense as encompassing all kinds of interactions between human agents and their contexts. It follows from this assumption that in any given area of inquiry we need to specify what should count as an argument and what should count as experience and how our reliance on them can legitimately sustain the processes through which beliefs are fixed. This understanding of inquiry as a rational enterprise aimed at fixing beliefs through arguments and experience provides the first key to my understanding of pragmatism.

An important corollary that follows from this conception of rationality is that no normative theory can thrive if it fails to take into serious account the role that arguments and experience alike play in fixing beliefs: from Peirce’s discussion of the social impulse to Dewey’s acknowledgment of the experiential basis of inquiry, the pragmatist tradition is imbued with the idea that stable and durable agreement will come only by seriously engaging with the beliefs held by others and with the responses that reality offers as we take on the challenges we constantly face. At the same time, the pragmatist tradition has always insisted on the social and contextual rootedness of the reasons and evidences that can be deployed in the process of inquiry. A society-centered and practice-based interpretation of such reliance on arguments and experience forms the bedrock of the pragmatist approach to moral objectivity as the outcome of fallible, experience-based processes of shared inquiry within the context of problematic situations. I am of course well aware of the apparently insurmountable problems that plague social and institutional approaches to rationality and normativity. Therefore, if
we want to have a chance to overcome the several objections raised against these
approaches, we will need to rely on a strong epistemological framework. This is
one of the main reasons why rationality enjoys pride of place in my project, and
why I think that even if we are skeptical about Peirce’s conception of practical
rationality, we should still rely as much as possible on the epistemic resources of
his thought. These two reasons explain why this book devotes an entire chapter
to his theory of inquiry.

The second key to my pragmatist understanding of moral and political ra-
tionality lies in Dewey’s appraisal of Peirce’s theory of inquiry, and in the origi-
nal conception of the qualitative that Dewey developed in making that appraisal.
In several articles, in Experience and Nature, and in the central chapters of his
Logic, Dewey showed that human thought operates in continuity with our capa-
citites for feeling and imagining. Imagination and feeling are central, in that they
shape our first, immediate, and inarticulate access to reality. However, in giving
temporal and logical priority to the qualitative, Dewey was not downplaying the
role that reasoning plays in human affairs. Quite the contrary, he was urging that
we understand this role in a radically new way. Which is to say that the grasp
and articulation of the indeterminate qualitative trait of situations gives thought
its central motivation. Indeed, any felt perception of the qualitative provides o-
ly an incomplete, inchoate grasp of reality. Thought is therefore required in
fleshing out the initial insight, in bodying forth this initially grasped trait. In ad-
dition, we have to remark that this felt understanding of the situation forms not
only the starting point of any intellectual undertaking but also its point of arrival,
thought is by its very definition conceived as having a transformative finality
built into it. As I intend to show, this peculiar understanding of rationality as
being articulative and transformative not only characterizes and singles out the
pragmatist epistemology from competing theories of knowledge and thought: it
is also the cornerstone of the pragmatist approach to moral experience. Indeed, it
explains the pragmatist understanding of how and why human agents should rely
on their intellectual capacities—their rationality—in dealing with moral dis-
agreement and political controversy. In defending a conception of rationality as
being articulative and transformative, I intend to bring the normative practices of
critique and justification down to earth, pulling them from the heavenly realm of
the abstract, formalistic conceptions of theoretical argumentation common to
many contemporary philosophical approaches and dragging them into the earth-
bound habitat of the living, reflective processes where the point of normative
inquiry is to defend, revise, transform, and extend our present values and institu-
tions.

In advocating a fallibilist conception of inquiry and by defending a context-
tual, problem-driven conception of justification, pragmatism seeks to change our
current philosophical practices so as to bring them more in tune with the social,
moral, and political needs at the core of contemporary experience. Therefore, in
exploring issues of disagreement and controversy from a pragmatist perspective, I intend to show how radical the pragmatist conception of rationality as inquiry proves to be once it is applied to moral and political issues. As to the question of disagreement, the primacy of consequences at the heart of the pragmatist maxim brings about a shift from a theory-based to a practice-based conception of disagreement, enabling us to define a situation of disagreement as one where people disagree about how to act rather than as a form of conflict or contradiction among forms of epistemic content (among beliefs, doctrines, and values). This conceptual revolution, which brings to the fore the experiential dimension of disagreement, also forms the basis of my interpretation of relativism. In the same way, once the notion of public reason is couched in terms of consequences associated with beliefs, important conceptual implications follow. As I intend to show, pragmatism aims to cast conflicts over values, beliefs, and principles in a new light by framing them as conflicts about actions and their consequences. More generally, this reframing of theoretical issues in terms of practical consequences for the agent forms the basis of the original approach that pragmatism takes in dealing with issues of pluralism, relativism, disagreement, and controversy. On this approach, we are urged to take more seriously the impact of expected consequences in the fixation of our beliefs, fostering a fallibilist and experimental attitude as a self-critical guide in moral and political matters. While acknowledging the tangible existence of value conflicts, the approach seeks to relocate the normative discussion from the theoretical sphere of a divergence among beliefs to the properly moral and political sphere of interactions mediated through reflective and shared processes of inquiry.

At this point of the introduction I expect some of my pragmatist readers to raise serious objections about the compatibility between my project and the pragmatist predicament. In focusing on the epistemological dimension of moral and political experience, I realize I am taking a philosophical stance might be taken to be at odds with the priority of practice which is at the heart of any truly pragmatist undertaking. I want to reassure these readers that my approach to epistemological issues has developed out of a pragmatist concern with the philosophical primacy of practices, precisely in the manner advocated by pragmatism. Indeed, I take it to be a central point of pragmatist epistemologies that a thoroughgoing pragmatist approach to moral and political theory requires in the first place a full-fledged account of the nature and scope of our rational capacities. If so many of the shortcomings of contemporary moral and political theory can be traced to the inadequate account of human rationality on which they rely, it is only through a different account of this dimension that we might hope to provide a fresh start in facing the most compelling moral and political issues of our time. This is the main reason why I call for a renewed account of rationality rather than accepting to drop the terms reason and rationality altogether, as
many would suggest. This move is not unlike what Dewey did when he rejected the epistemological theory of knowledge, not in order to enter a post-
epistemological era, but to replace it with a new, non-reductionistic one. Indeed, I am persuaded, as Dewey was, that pragmatist epistemology contains the anti-
dote necessary to counter the increasingly rationalistic trends that in contempo-
rary moral and political philosophy threaten to reduce moral experience to moral
discourse, moral thinking to moral argumentation, and public reason to a com-
pliance with formal procedures. While being very skeptical of the recent epis-
temic turn in moral and political philosophy, I believe that epistemological is-
ues should remain a central concern in our understanding of moral and political
practice and experience. It is a matter of evidence that the increasing complexity
of moral and political experience in an age of pluralism is irresistibly bringing to
public awareness the idea that our epistemic powers might be inadequate in fix-
ing our moral and political beliefs. My contention is that we should resist this
trend.

In the previous paragraphs I have indicated how classical pragma-
tism might help us framing a new approach to rationality. One of the assumptions that lies
at the background of this approach is that while moral inquiry can be accounted
for through a unified model, the meaning and scope of “inquiry” in the moral
domain may vary considerably, depending on its objects and on the situations in
which inquiry takes place. Just to give some examples, the concept of inquiry
covers at least the following types of intellectual undertakings, (a) the reflective
activity of agents engaged in solving concrete cases of disagreement, (b) prac-
tices of civic and public deliberations, (c) philosophical practices of moral justi-
fication, (d) journalistic and other forms of empirical inquiry and social critique,
(e) institutional practices of political decision making. At all these levels, inquiry
denotes the reflective attitude of agents who engage in normative reflection in
order to find shared schemes for joint action. In these and other varied settings,
agents engage in a rich and articulated variety of normative practices of justifi-
cation, critique, and institutionalization of new norms and values.

In order to shed some light on the rich complexity of these forms, I want to
introduce a simple fourfold taxonomy of forms of inquiry. These forms of in-
quiry can be understood as an expansion of the conceptual core of rationality as
inquiry. I propose distinguishing four different forms of inquiry to which agents
resort while dealing with conflict and disagreement in moral and political life:
social, political, expressive, and imaginative. This rapid sketch provides a first
presentation of how the idea of rationality as inquiry might help reshape the no-
tion of practical rationality into a form compatible with the specific constraints
and needs that characterize human reasoning in practical situations.

Political inquiry refers to all forms of intellectual undertaking that are car-
ried out in the public sphere and that are aimed at assuring the governance of all
that has public relevance. In my appraisal of the notion of public reason (Chapter 4), I will propose to broaden this notion to make it hospitable to all the forms of intellectual undertaking that deals with issues having an impact on public life. The notion of public inquiry is larger than Rawls or Habermas’s conceptions of public reason, as it covers also form of collective discussion, deliberation, and decision making that take place outside what is generally taken to be the sphere of public reason. Political inquiry so conceived encompasses a wide range of deliberative practices, from the field of constitutional essentials (deliberation in the courts, parliamentary practice) to that of more distributed forms of political deliberation as they take place in citizens’ forums and other forms of collective decision making. All these forms of political inquiry share a commitment to experimental practice as the methodological prerequisite for attaining valid outcomes in decision making.

**Social inquiry** identifies any knowledge-oriented form of inquiry focused on the clarification of a problematic situation, through the examination of facts, the use of arguments, and the critical reflection on existing knowledge. Social inquiry operates as a theoretical exploration of a situation with the practical aim of transforming that situation. Inquiry is undertaken as a cooperative and public enterprise: “the community formulates the problem, develops facts, evidence, and explanations, reasons carefully to develop hypotheses, and evaluates these hypotheses through practical, social interaction” (Campbell 1992: 46). Social inquiry provides the information about relevant facts of the matter which is needed in order to undertake intersubjective discussion of the effects each decision might have on agents’ lives. It provides decisive contributions to render moral and political inquiry more objective. Considered as collaborative social inquiry, it offers active support to social transformation. Social inquiry includes both the practice and outcomes of academic research and all forms of inquiry run by journalists, social activists, educators, professionals, etc. aimed at transforming our perception of social life, making visible traits which call for a change in our individual or collective attitudes. Dewey’s idea of the philosopher as a liaison officer between the disciplines and between the academia and the ordinary world fits this conception of social inquiry perfectly.

**Expressive inquiry** denotes forms of moral inquiry aimed at making explicit the experiential basis of moral judgments. It is an inquiry into experience principally aimed at showing the conditions of intelligibility of agency. It has a self-transformative dimension that operates through the critical articulation—in view of its potential revision—of an agent’s normative position. The concept of expressive inquiry stems from the idea that in our judgments we always start from a set of beliefs, habits and attitudes taken for granted (the background that defines our basis of evidence). It states that only through the critical articulation of these taken-for-granted judgments we can become fully aware of their meaning and of their consequences (our inferential commitments). Pragmatist epistemol-
ogy starts from the general assumption that doubt is always localized and that in order to settle some problematic belief we rely on a background of beliefs that we consider valid and that we therefore take for granted or simply assume tacitly. This same paradigm applies to moral epistemology through the idea that articulacy is a fundamental phase of moral inquiry, whose function is precisely to make these underlying assumptions explicit. Articulation is a central dimension in the moral practices of justification and critique, and plays a central role while dealing with cases of disagreement.

Imaginative inquiry is a type of self-reflective, often internal form of inquiry. Through it, an agent assesses in his internal forum the different options open to his agency through the imaginative representation of the consequences associated with each, in order to gather the needed elements for a critical decision. Imaginative inquiry discloses a field of self-reflection based on the critical examination of the consequences of our beliefs and decisions on both our agency and our shared world. The idea of a self-reflective kind of inquiry is based on the assumption that personal conceptions are not immutable but are responsive to reasons and experience and that this responsiveness, even if carried out within a self-reflective imaginative process, always presupposes an encounter—even if imaginative—with the outer world and with the consequences of our choices and actions.

In calling for a broadened view of rationality, and in articulating the multifarious forms through which moral and political inquiry is conducted, pragmatism urges us to acknowledge the powers of reason in such a way as to take into account the full import of the qualitative dimension of human experience and the intertwining of thought and action and of theory and practice as the real conditions from which epistemic validity and objectivity can emerge and beliefs can be stabilized. Through a reflection spanning nearly one hundred and fifty years, pragmatism has striven to provide a satisfactory account of how this can be achieved. As is known, the pragmatist account is based on a theoretical appraisal of the epistemic implications that follow once we take seriously the idea that knowledge and thought are qualitative traits of agency whose properties can be defined only by reference to their function in different contexts of practice. This, in turn, shapes the experimental and fallibilist approach that pragmatism advocates for all domains of inquiry. Indeed, in this novel understanding of rationality as situated experimental inquiry lies the pragmatist key to the moral and political issues of disagreement, pluralism and public reason. This understanding, however, cannot be confined within an instrumental conception of rationality, as pragmatism has sometimes been understood to imply. On the contrary, the general model set out through the notions of inquiry, fixation of belief, and problematic situation should be understood as broad enough to encompass the whole range of experiences where agents reflect on their beliefs once these have been
cast into doubt in consequence of an encounter with experience or with the beliefs of other agents. In this sense, moral disagreement as well as public controversies qualify as specific kinds of problematic situations, accordingly to be reckoned as proper objects of rational inquiry.

To exemplify how such an attitude might change philosophical thought, in this book I discuss two highly contentious issues in contemporary moral and political philosophy: that of cultural constraints on individual liberty and dignity (as in the case of female genital mutilation) and that of the justification of political and social institutions (as in the case of antidemocratic challenges to democratic institutions). I indicate how a pragmatist answer to both of these challenges would be worked out, showing the extent to which evidence-based considerations should be brought to bear on philosophical inquiry in making such inquiry experimental. This is the main reason why I urge that the pragmatist theory of inquiry be conceived as a wide view of rationality.

This wide view of rationality I outline by relying on two distinct and successive approaches. I begin by laying out a comprehensive account of practical rationality based on pragmatist sources, to this end drawing for the most part on Peirce and Dewey, as it is through their work on the idea of rationality as a form of inquiry aimed at the fixation of belief and at the stabilization of conduct that an original, properly pragmatist conception of rationality has developed. Then, once the case for a pragmatist epistemology of practice will have been made, I will introduce a model of rationality suited for the moral and political domain. After that, I will enter into a quite detailed examination of different and competing approaches in moral and political theory both inside and outside the pragmatist tradition. The discussion here will mostly be concerned with moral and political epistemology in connection with the issues of pluralism, moral disagreement, public reason, moral objectivity, and justification.

This strategy requires some words of explanation. Recent scholarship that draws on the pragmatist tradition in moral and political theory has worked under the assumption that in order for a theoretical position to be truly pragmatist, it ought to draw inspiration from one or another of the founders of this tradition. This is especially evident in political theory, an arena dominated by an apparently unquestioned opposition between Peircean and Deweyan approaches. In this context, a commitment to a Peircean approach implies from the start to privilege epistemological arguments, while a commitment to a Deweyan approach is taken to ground his discourse in a thick normative conception, such as that of democracy as a way of life. In this either/or frame, siding with Dewey is implied to mean downplaying epistemological concerns—accepting some form of relativism—in favor of psychosocial or culturally oriented accounts of moral and political issues. I take this partitioning of the pragmatist field to be particularly unhelpful, as it reintroduces within the pragmatist doctrine these dualisms
against which pragmatism has unrelentlessly striven. In addition to that, this approach relies on an interpretation of Dewey and Peirce’s thought that recent scholarship has cast into serious doubt. We therefore should be content with either option: not with dismissing Dewey by casting him in a relativistic and anti-pluralistic light, as some Peircean scholars have done; not with downplaying epistemological concerns, as some advocates of the Deweyan approach have done. Similarly, an analysis and assessment of Peirce’s contribution to a pragmatist conception of practical rationality should not be taken to imply a commitment to his theory of truth or any preference for justificatory approaches to normative theory.

Contrary to these tendencies, which I discuss at length in Chapters 5 to 8, I believe that Peirce and Dewey should be taken jointly into account in providing the theoretical starting point for a pragmatist answer to some of the most compelling moral and political issues of our time. On the one hand, we need to rely on Peirce’s seminal account of rationality as a process of belief fixation, as well as on his strong account of our intellectual powers. This is necessary to defend the importance of responsiveness to arguments and experience for problem-solving and deliberation. On the other hand, we cannot forego Dewey, since it was he who clearly saw that in order to account for the rationality of such processes we must relocate our intellectual undertakings within the social and affective dimensions distinctive to any human situation. Banking on Peirce while discarding Dewey would expose us to the risk of embracing overly idealistic accounts of moral and political rationality (or the anti-intellectual reactions against them), eventually reducing moral and political problems to their epistemic and justificatory dimensions. On the other hand, banking on Dewey while rejecting Peirce would expose us to the risk of embracing overly contextual accounts that, in magnifying the theme of “democracy as a way of life,” underestimate the momentous challenges that modernity has thrown at moral agents. Dewey provided some key arguments in support of an idea of democracy as a thin value-laden political theory—a conception recently defended by Charles Larmore and others. However, if we are to justify social and political institutions, we need a theory of public reason that can benefit from Peirce’s more solid account of rational inquiry.

Our theoretical journey must therefore start from Peirce. It will take its starting point in Peirce’s naturalistic insight that our rational powers are not primarily geared toward a theoretical knowledge of the world but rather serve to control our interactions with it. This naturalistic moment, seminally opened by Peirce’s article “The Fixation of Belief,” is subsequently brought to full theoretical fruition in Dewey’s epistemological writings. Indeed, it was Dewey who saw how to transform Peirce’s naturalistic insight into a full-fledged naturalistic account of thinking and knowledge through an evolutionary anthropology whose construction was achieved with the indispensable contribution of G. H. Mead.
Therefore, it was only by taking up the Peircean project that Dewey could develop his original account of rationality as inquiry. This exploration of the historical roots of the pragmatist conception of inquiry will provide the conceptual framework within which to examine the theoretical issues of moral disagreement and political controversy in contemporary debates. Moreover, it will help place into context contemporary discussions developed in the pragmatist tradition. While not providing a complete pragmatist theory of practical rationality (a task that will have to be postponed), I will nonetheless provide its basic skeleton by giving a tentative account of four distinct but correlated forms of inquiry which I call imaginative, expressive, social, and political. Together, these forms explain what it means to be rational in different areas of moral and political practice; or, stated otherwise, they show what rationality looks like in these different areas.

The book develops these ideas according to the following plan. The first two chapters respectively explore Peirce and Dewey’s contributions to a pragmatist theory of rationality as inquiry. In the first chapter I show that the importance of his contribution notwithstanding, Peirce’s account of practical rationality remains incomplete. In the second chapter I discuss Dewey’s conception of inquiry as an articulative and transformative process and contend that it achieves the theoretical project initiated by Peirce through his theory of rationality as inquiry. It is therefore to Dewey’s epistemology of practice that we have to turn if we wish to understand practical rationality from a pragmatist perspective. The third chapter introduces the notion of expressive inquiry as a way to enrich the pragmatist understanding of moral experience by expanding the notions of inquiry and problematic situation so as to make them better suited to dealing with moral issues. The fourth chapter extends the pragmatist paradigm to the domain of public reason, outlining the most relevant traits of a pragmatist conception of public reason through a comparison with competing contemporary paradigms of public reason so as to illustrate the originality and fruitfulness of pragmatism. The fifth chapter puts the pragmatist conception of rationality to the test by discussing the issues of pluralism and relativism, and in so doing it defends a theory of modest relativism compatible with the epistemological requirements necessary to sustain normative practices. In the sixth and seventh chapters I discuss some of the dominant approaches to moral objectivity and political justification in the pragmatist tradition. I do this by examining some recent attempts to build a pragmatist theory of moral objectivity and of political justification, tracing these attempts back to their classical pragmatist sources in Peirce, Dewey, and James’s conceptions of rationality and criticizing some contemporary approaches. And, finally, in the last chapter I present and defend my own conception of objectivity and justification, a conception based on the Deweyan approach to rationality as inquiry and consistent with the epistemology of practice outlined in the previous chapters.
Notes

1. Three authors who exemplify this trend in political philosophy are David Estlund, Gerald Gaus, and Cheryl Misak are. See my discussion in Chapters 5 and 6.

2. See my discussion from a pragmatist perspective in Frega 2011b.


4. Further inquiries will have to show how this fourfold taxonomy can be developed into a more general theory of normative practices. I provide a first instantiation of this model in Frega 2012b, where I use a simplified model of normative practices to criticize the clause of the proviso in the liberal theory of public reason.

5. In dramatic rehearsal, agents examine competing options of action through consideration of what would happen if a given option were adopted. Robert Goodin’s model of “democratic deliberation within” offers a theory of democracy which is precisely based on imaginary processes through which the individual assesses the different policies in imagination, projecting himself into the place of every other individual. Cf. Goodin 2003: ch. 9. Ralston 2010 offers a comparison between the concept of deliberation in Dewey and in Goodin. The pragmatist basis of this model, notably in Dewey’s work, has been set out by Caspary 1991 and Caspary 2000: ch. 4. See Frega 2006a: pp. 256–259 for an analysis of the epistemological implications of the notion of “dramatic rehearsal” in Dewey.