VALUES VERSUS NORMS: A PRAGMATIST ACCOUNT OF MORAL OBJECTIVITY

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AMONG CONTEMPORARY THINKERS, HILARY PUTNAM is one of the strongest advocates of “moral realism.” At least since the publication of his book Reason, Truth, and History in 1981, he has developed ingenious and sophisticated arguments against moral skepticism and in favor of the possibility of objectivity regarding moral questions. “But not every defense of moral objectivity,” Putnam writes, is a good thing. We live in an “open society,” a society in which the freedom to think for oneself about values, goals, and mores is one that most of us have come to cherish. Arguments for “moral realism” can, and sometimes unfortunately do, sound like arguments against the open society; and while I do wish to undermine moral skepticism, I have no intention of defending either authoritarianism or moral apriorism.
And he continues: “It is precisely for this reason that in recent years I have found myself turning to the writings of the American pragmatists.”

For most experts on American pragmatism, Putnam’s view that pragmatism is both antiskepticism and antidogmatism is not really new; they were attracted to these American thinkers for exactly the same reason. But the fact that Putnam, despite earlier contact with pragmatist thinking in his student days, truly rediscovered it later in his life enables him not just to rephrase what the earlier pragmatists said, but to reconstruct and improve their arguments in view of possible objections so that a modified neo-pragmatism comes into sight—a neo-pragmatism that looks very different from Richard Rorty’s version.

The Rortyan version of neo-pragmatism has come to be perceived much more as a new and particularly radical form of value-relativism than as a contribution to the defense of moral objectivity. But Rorty’s position, whether it is defensible or not, cannot simply be identified with the intentions and the works of the historical pragmatists. Catherine Elgin’s formula “between the absolute and the arbitrary” is particularly apt to characterize the fact that the pragmatists were indeed anti-absolutists, but that this did not turn them into a species of value-relativists. Many contemporary pragmatists are visibly relieved that Putnam’s reputation makes it easier again to mark the differences between Rorty’s thinking and the classical pragmatists and to draw the attention of a wider public to these differences. It goes without saying, however, that “being closer to the classical pragmatists” does not mean “being right,” though any difference between the contemporary pragmatists and classical pragmatism for which no explicit reasons have been given may initiate a process of reflection about the reasons for this difference.

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In this contribution I will restrict myself to the question of moral objec-
tivity and to a different confrontation, not the one between Putnam
and Rorty, but the one between Putnam and the discourse ethics of
Jürgen Habermas and Karl-Otto Apel, which is also based on ideas
stemming from the classical pragmatists. Both sides claim—with good
reason—to be articulating the spirit of pragmatism today and both
defend the possibility of moral objectivity, but they are also in serious
dispute about the precise ways one can argue for moral objectivity on
pragmatist grounds.3 The topic I will be dealing with is the problem of
the relationship between values and norms—terms which are often
used almost interchangeably in the wider public but for which a clear
distinction has been made in philosophy and social theory since around
1900. While norms refer to the obligatory and restrictive dimension of
morality, values refer to its attractive dimensions. The problem in the
context of a discussion about moral objectivity is whether such objec-
tivity can apply to both dimensions of morality—norms and values—
or to only one of them.

Discourse ethics is characterized by a sharp distinction between values
and norms and by the view that moral objectivity can be reached on
the level of norms, but not on the level of values. Norms, according to
Habermas and Apel, can take on the character of universally valid state-
ments of obligation, but values are said to remain in the necessarily
subjective and contingent sphere of individual or collective commit-
ments. Hilary Putnam finds this side of the discourse-ethical project
unsatisfactory. In a talk he gave on the occasion of Jürgen Habermas's
70th birthday in 1999,4 he criticized Habermas for having an under-
standing of values as subjective. Reitering his argument about thick
ethical concepts, inspired by Iris Murdoch,5 Putnam tried to demon-

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3 John Stuhr misunderstands my intention here. I don’t take Putnam or Habermas or,
for that matter, Rorty as representatives of classical pragmatism, but as brilliant and
insightful contemporary thinkers who all try to make pragmatism vital again. I
admire many of the thinkers Stuhr calls “head pragmatists,” and probably nobody
can deny their enormous fruitfulness. See John Stuhr’s “Life without Spirituality,
Philosophy without Transcendence” in this issue of The Hedgehog Review, n. 1.


strate that the meaning of such concepts cannot be neatly divided up into a purely descriptive part, on the one hand, and an attitude-indicator, on the other. This is to say, value-terms are neither reducible to merely descriptive terms nor are they conceptually dispensable when we talk about human actions. For Putnam, we can indeed have reasonable communication about values; a discussion of ethics restricted to norms deals with only one part of ethics. In Putnam’s view, it is “the sharp separation that Habermas posits between ‘values’ and ‘norms,’” which thus has to be criticized.6

My point is the following: I agree with Putnam that we can have reasonable communication about values, and that norms are only part of ethics. But I agree with Habermas that we should indeed make a clear distinction between the restrictive and the attractive side of morality, between norms and values. Hence, I disagree with Putnam when he says that this sharp separation between norms and values is the origin of the problems he finds in Habermas’ work. I need three steps to make my point. First, I will try to show that the classical pragmatists made as sharp a distinction between these two dimensions of morality as Habermas does but that this did not lead them to an understanding of values as completely non-cognitive or subjective. Second, I will demonstrate at least in a cursory manner why discourse ethics needs to restrict its claims. And, third, I will attempt to show at least briefly how our communication about values differs from a rational discourse about norms. It is my interest in the particular logic of our communication about values that motivates this whole endeavor; I will argue that there can indeed be communication about the “attractive” side of morality as well.

*The Pragmatist Distinction between Values and Norms*7

William James makes the relevant distinction between different sides of morality, but his somewhat unusual terminology can lead us to over-

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6 Hilary Putnam, “Values and Norms.”

7 This section and the one following it are adapted from my book *The Genesis of Values*, trans. Gregory Moore (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000).
look this distinction in his work. From the outset of his work on religion, James distinguishes the question of religious experience from that of moral experience. In the Victorian age, religion was regarded as nothing more than, as Matthew Arnold famously put it, “morality touched by emotion.” The character of morality seemed clear, and so did the fact that all religions contained a moral code; but James’ contemporaries became increasingly uncertain of what religion was in a positive sense, that is, besides morality and largely problematic “unscientific” assumptions about the world. The way in which James delimits the subject of his inquiry already points to the different emphasis he puts on the question. For him, religion is not merely an ornament embellishing morality; it is, rather, distinguished from it in principle:

Morality pure and simple accepts the law of the whole which it finds reigning, so far as to acknowledge and obey it, but it may obey it with the heaviest heart, and never cease to feel it as a yoke. But for religion, in its strong and fully developed manifestations, the service of the highest is never felt as a yoke. Dull submission is left far behind, and a mood of welcome, which may fill any place on the scale between cheerful serenity and enthusiastic gladness, has taken its place.8

Although religion and morality may often be linked with one another in practice, James argues that they exercise their forces in opposite directions. Whereas morality restricts the possibilities for our action, proscribing certain goals and means, religion increases those possibilities. Whereas the moral person might be likened to a top-level athlete, having to concentrate on his will in order to act morally, the religious person lives his life, James claims, with passion and excitement, with an “added dimension of emotion...in regions where morality strictly so called can at best but bow its head and acquiesce.”9 In so far as we can

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9 James 46.
say that religion is something particular at all, then this fervor displayed by the religious person is an integral part of it.

A whole range of empirical religious phenomena attracts James’ attention precisely because they show up this difference between religiosity and morality with particular clarity. The analysis of mystical experiences, for example, demonstrates that such experiences are not a precondition for moral action, nor are they demanded by morality. It demonstrates, furthermore, that the individual does not have to aspire to these experiences in order to undergo them. James discusses at length the various trends towards a religion of “healthy-mindedness,” which were so important in late nineteenth-century America, as they are again today—that is, of an attitude of exclusively “positive” thinking propelled by a compulsive reaction to Calvinist pessimism focusing on human sinfulness. James sees in such trends a popular movement against the dominance of morality over religiosity—although he regards with hostility and concern its superficial ignoring of evil and guilt. Furthermore, he turns back from these contemporary trends to scrutinize Martin Luther’s doctrine of justification by faith alone, John Wesley’s teaching that one must learn to accept God’s grace, and Methodist conversions. In all of them he sees at work the liberating, empowering, and morality-transcending dynamics of the religious. The common denominator here is the impulse towards giving “your little private convulsive self a rest, and finding that a greater Self is there.”10 Plainly fascinated, he speaks again and again of the marvelous or repulsive, heroic or ascetic achievements, which religiosity has made possible in all ages and in all cultures.

Now, the demarcation of religious experiences from moral ones is not only the prerequisite for the study of exceptional states in human life, but also for the analysis of a permanent attitude that characterizes the religious person’s entire relationship to the world. James calls this state of religiosity the “faith-state.”11 This state has both a cognitive and an

10 James 96.
affective side; in order to avoid ambiguity, he proposes to designate the affective side as a “state of assurance.” Of course, James does not really think of these sides as wholly distinct from one another, nor does he hold the cognitive side to be the really decisive one; that would signal a relapse into Cartesian dualism, which pragmatism had first stepped into battle to overcome. The central characteristic of the “state of assurance” is

the loss of all worry, the sense that all is ultimately well with one, the peace, the harmony, the willingness to be, even though the outer conditions should remain the same…. A passion of willingness, of acquiescence, of admiration, is the glowing centre of this state of mind.

Second, this state is bound up with the sense of perceiving truths hitherto unknown, which are difficult, even impossible, to express in language. Thirdly, the objective appearance of the world is altered in this state, confronting the believer with beautiful and everlasting newness. Finally, a stream of bliss, even ecstasy, flows through the believer.

This characterization of the affective side already hints at some of the cognitive features of the faith-state. It should by now be clear that faith is not simply a cognitive holding-to-be-true that can be undermined by argumentative discourse. Though assumptions about a reality that is not accessible to the senses (a “reality of the unseen”) are also an integral part of religious faith, they do not take the form of intellectual hypotheses. James finds an appropriate expression for the idea he has in mind here when he compares the imagination of the religious person with the vital attitude of the lover: “A lover has notoriously this sense of the continuous being of his idol, even when his attention is addressed to other matters and he no longer represents her features. He cannot

12 James 201.
13 James 201.
14 James 51.
Faith is, then, an attitude towards reality sustained by a conviction that a stronger power is present. It is for this reason that James cites so many examples of this sense that the objects of faith are present. Experience shows that arguments for or against do not have the same force as this certainty that emanates from a sense of presence. Faith cannot be instilled by proofs, but neither can it be refuted by them:

If you have intuitions at all, they come from a deeper level of your nature than the loquacious level rationalism inhabits. Your whole subconscious life, your impulses, your faiths, your needs, your divinations, have prepared the premises, of which your consciousness now feels the weight of the result; and something in you absolutely knows that that result must be truer than any logic-chopping rationalistic talk, however clever, that may contradict it.16

Thus, the second element of faith stressed by James, in addition to the way in which the “religious” expands the possibilities for acting, is the feeling of certainty that is grounded in a sense of presence and to a large extent immune to reason. It is in his analysis of mystical experiences in particular that he develops the notion of the “noetic quality” or intellectual content of such feelings.17 They are experienced by the subject not only as emotional states, but as sudden illuminations, insights, and revelations, whose translation into words may indeed be difficult, but which yet radiate an intense authority. James does not sacrifice rational argument, as one might fear, to the irrational authority of such experiences of conviction. “Mystical truth exists for the individual who has the transport, but for no one else.”18 One can argue with such a feeling of conviction just as little as one can dispute the certainty we achieve through our senses, but this does not mean that it is not a com-

15 James 66.
16 James 67.
17 James 302.
18 James 321.
ponent of human experience and that to understand this aspect of our experience cannot be of fundamental importance.

James constantly contrasts the affective and cognitive characteristics of faith with descriptions of a melancholy and depressive state. This is of interest not only because we can recognize in this the memory of the depression which was so decisive for the development of James’ thought, and which lingers as the dark backdrop to his inspired descriptions of the cheerful serenity of the faithful. What is more important is that, by making this contrast, James invites us to participate in a thought experiment that demonstrates the vital impossibility of abstracting from the value-contents that bestow meaning in our experience of the world. Anyone who sees faith as a merely irrational addition to the world of facts has not grasped that we could not act, that we could not live, in a world of mere facts:

Conceive yourself, if possible, suddenly stripped of all the emotion with which your world now inspires you, and try to imagine it as it exists, purely by itself, without your favorable or unfavorable, hopeful or apprehensive comment. It will be almost impossible for you to realize such a condition of negativity and deadness. No one portion of the universe would then have importance beyond another; and the whole collection of its things and series of events would be without significance, character, expression, or perspective.\(^19\)

The world of pure facts is for us not simply neutral, but dead. Although it is our organic (and spiritual) needs which first invest the world with interest and meaning, we do not experience these as something super-added to the world, but as the world itself. James returns to the example of the lover, for whom the beloved, and the whole world around him or her, appears in a different light than for a person who is not in love. For James, love and faith are cases of the “sense of value in general”\(^20\)—and he is concerned not so much with the question of the gen-

\(^{19}\) James 126.

\(^{20}\) James 126.
esis of this or that value, as with the genesis of the world of values in general.\textsuperscript{21}

In my book \textit{The Genesis of Values}, in which I have relied on this interpretation of James for my own systematic argument, I criticized James for a sort of emanationist assumption about the interpretation of such “religious” experiences.\textsuperscript{22} James never dealt seriously with the questions of how we articulate and interpret such experiences and how we have to imagine the interplay between available cultural patterns and the force of these experiences, which do not dictate their own interpretation but also do not allow all possible interpretations, at least not in the self-understanding of the actor. Though I still hold this critical point to be valid, one could give a benevolent subjective twist to James’ views and say that it is indeed the case, in the perspective of the actor, that the interpretation seems to arise out of the experience and is not merely grafted onto it. The cognitive interpretation has a quality of evidence for those who believe in it, and this is the more true the stronger the affective commitment is.

I do not have an opportunity here to demonstrate that Dewey, in his own book on religion, followed James in the relevant aspect of a sharp distinction between “religion” and “morality,”\textsuperscript{23} that is, between the attractive and the restrictive, or to present the ways in which George Herbert Mead connected the concept of values with his understanding of action.\textsuperscript{24} In sum, my point is that the classical pragmatists did indeed make a sharp distinction between attractive values and restrictive norms.

\textsuperscript{21} Stuhr’s plea for “a pragmatism that feels no need of spiritual things” can be called the direct opposite of James’ intentions.

\textsuperscript{22} Joas 67-8.

\textsuperscript{23} See Joas 103-123.

\textsuperscript{24} George Herbert Mead, \textit{The Philosophy of the Act} (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1938).
Why Discourse Ethics Needs to Restrict Its Claims

The way in which Habermas distinguishes between the ethical and the moral, the good and the right, values and norms is deeply problematic. His explanations in this regard are not always consistent; for such a conceptually astute and self-critical thinker, this is already in itself a sign of festering problems. There are basically three characteristics that Habermas invokes to define his distinction. First of all, norms and values are distinguished from one another by their relationship to the obligatory or teleological aspect of action. Second, they are distinguished in terms of their prescriptive validity in such a way that norms are said to aim at universality, and values at particularity. Third, Habermas declares that norms are necessarily concerned with the regulation of interpersonal relationships, as opposed to values, which refer to the telos of each individual life and therefore “by no means call for a complete break with the egocentric perspective.”

Examining these three definitions, one recognizes that the first does indeed correspond to the usual distinction between the good and the right or between norms and values. The other two dimensions, however, are a different story entirely. The assertion that values are only maxims that formulate what is good “for me” or “for us,” while it is

25 Compare these definitions with Jürgen Habermas, Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy, trans. William Rehg (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1996) 255; and Habermas, “On the Employments of Practical Reason,” Justification and Application (Cambridge: Polity, 1993) 6 (where the quotation is also to be found). I won’t deal with two further determinations, the binary versus graduated coding of the validity claim and the different criteria for the coherence of “systems of norms” or “constellations of value,” since these are, it seems to me, only logical properties of the first distinguishing feature.

26 Habermas, though, seems to waver as far as his precise understanding of the concept of value is concerned. In Between Facts and Norms, he still defines values along utilitarian lines as “intersubjectively shared preferences” (255). In The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory (ed. Ciaran Cronin and Pablo De Greif [Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1998]) he writes: “What in each instance is valuable or authentic forces itself upon us, so to speak, and differs from mere preferences in its binding character, that is, in the fact that it points beyond needs and preferences” (6). Here the feeling of captivation inherent in the experience of value, which must be central to a modern theory of value, finds appropriate expression (under Taylor’s influence?).
norms that aim at what is good for all, is wrong. Habermas falls victim to the linguistic ambiguity of the expression “for me” or “for us.” Values do not describe what is good “for me” in the sense of my own happiness, but what is good “for me” in the sense of my honest understanding of the good, of my being captivated by values. In the one case, I myself am, or my happiness and well-being are, the standard of my judgement; in the other, I am only aware of the fact that in making a judgement I am the one who judges—the standard, however, lies outside myself. To claim that all values are only ever concerned with the happiness of the members of a particular culture or religious denomination is—as Richard Bernstein has written with uncharacteristic causticity—“a violently distortive fiction.” It does an injustice to all universalistic ethical traditions (like the Christian one), and even to that fund of ideals of justice and value conceptions regarding conduct towards strangers that are present in every cultural ethos. The same goes for the third dimension of the distinction. It is simply inaccurate to say that values are not essentially directed at the formation of interpersonal and social relations, and that they do not motivate us to break with egocentric perspectives.

I argue, therefore, that Habermas, in the development of his discourse ethics, and particularly where he is concerned with the question of the primacy of norms over values, conflates the distinction between them with that of universalism and particularism, as well as that of egocentricity and altruism. These distinctions are definitely not different dimensions of one and the same distinction; they are different distinctions, which are to a large extent variable in their relationship with one another. A universalistic value system is logically possible and empirically real. Moreover, none of these three distinctions coincides with that between an ethics centered on argumentation and justification, and an ethics from the perspective of action. This fourth distinction, which is essential for understanding pragmatist ethics, must also be taken into consideration. Both values and norms must arise in an ethics from the perspective of the actor; the universalization potential of the

normative interacts with the contingent values and produces different ways for the motivating value systems to approach the potential universality of the norms.

**Communication about Values**

If discourse ethics is only a part of ethics and if we do indeed have to make a sharp distinction between the “restrictive” character of norms and the “attractive” character of values, we cannot avoid the question of how communication about values (as distinguished from norms) can be possible. To conclude my argument, a few remarks on the specific logic of communication about values are necessary. I see at least three differences between a discourse about norms and a communication about values.

The first difference I see is different degrees of the binding character of understanding. In a discourse about norms, a speaker tries to convince the listener. The listener is expected not simply to listen, but to accept the validity of the norm presented—or otherwise to give better reasons why he or she cannot or can only partially agree. I as the speaker will then be confronted with an alternative claim, which implies that I will now be expected to accept the views of my partner on this matter—or to repudiate them with better reasons, and so on until we have reached a rational consensus.

But this description does not apply in exactly the same way to a communication about values. A positive model for such a communication about values is found in interreligious dialogue, for example, between Christians and Jews in Germany or Christians and Buddhists in East Asia.

But we talk about values, a strongly affectual dimension comes in. We have to take seriously that we cannot simply have values as we may have opinions; we have to feel strongly committed to them if the term “value commitment” makes any sense. William James saw parallels between religious faith and love—not only in the sense of a religion and ethics of love, but also in the sense that we feel committed to par-
ticular values as we feel committed to particular persons in our lives. We are certainly able to make plausible why we love a certain person, for example, why I love my wife, my son, my closest friends—but I do not expect those to whom I speak about them to share my feelings and instantly to fall in love with the same people. It may be an exaggeration to assume that values are exactly like personal relationships in this respect, though I would claim that even these personal relationships have a cognitive side or a propositional content, that is, they are based on, for example, certain assumptions about the character and future ways of behavior of the beloved person. Values have to be “experienced” because value-commitments cannot arise if we are not “captivated” ("ergriffen") by values. This means that our communication about values is oriented toward a communication about feelings and experiences in ways that are different from rational discourse. Rather than trying to bring about a consensus as in a discussion of norms, a discussion about values aims to make plausible why I believe what I do and why you believe what you do. The goal of plausibility is more modest than the goal of consensus, and yet the reference to our experiences makes this communication richer than a purely rational discourse can ever be.

The second difference between our communication about norms and our communication about values lies in what I call the necessary narrativity of a communication about values. In Reason, Truth, and History Hilary Putnam argues that value judgments are not isolated judgments, but form groups or clusters: we find only those preferences morally irrelevant that are not closely connected to other preferences that we do find morally relevant. I fully agree, but I would go a step further to include the temporal dimension. We cannot make plausible and defend our value commitments without telling stories—stories about the experiences from which our commitments arose, about other people’s experiences or about the consequences a violation against our values had in the past. Biographical and historical narration in this sense is not just a matter of illustration for didactic purposes, but a necessary part of our self-understanding and of our communication about values.

The third difference between communication about values and discourse about norms I can most easily explain with respect to the con-
cept of “value-generalization” as it is developed in sociology, namely in Talcott Parsons’ theory of social change. What Parsons had in mind was that different value traditions can produce more general, more abstract understandings of traits they have in common without those traits losing their roots in the specific traditions. Here my example of interreligious or intercultural dialogue, for example, about human rights and the value of equal human dignity, would be particularly appropriate. In its current version, a value may be the result of one cultural tradition, but this does not mean that other traditions cannot be reinterpreted or rather cannot reinterpret themselves, so that their own potential to articulate this same value comes to light. This reinterpretation, however, cannot be disconnected from the affectual side of a tradition. Such a reinterpretation is not an intellectualization, because as such it would be ineffective. Value-generalization is the discovery of commonalities among binding traditions, value systems, and beliefs—a discovery that does not diminish their binding power. If value generalization is the possible result of a dialogue between religious or value systems, an alternative to mere struggle or merely peaceful coexistence in view of differing values becomes evident. Again it is at once more and less than rational discourse: a dynamic mutual modification and stimulation toward renewal. The pragmatist vision of a combination of moral universalism and an understanding of values that takes their contingency and subjectivity into account leads us towards an elaboration of the “logic” of our communication about values.

For me the fact that values are different from norms does not mean that there can only be a clash of civilization, culture wars, a struggle between values, as Max Weber prophesied, speaking of a new polytheism. But so far we have hardly begun to understand the specific logic of such debates about values within and between cultures. A better understanding of this type of debate would be of enormous practical importance and would also help us to further realize the potential of the pragmatist vision of moral objectivity in the contemporary philosophical landscape to which Hilary Putnam has contributed so enormously.