**Comments on Diana B. Heney: *Toward a Pragmatist Metaethics***

This poised and articulate volume addresses an area of pragmatist philosophy as yet relatively unexplored in pragmatism’s welcome revival. Neopragmatism’s preoccupation with changing philosophers’ view of the relation between language (or as Rorty puts it: “vocabularies”) and reality, has largely focussed their discussions on the ‘metaphysics & epistemology’, rather than the ‘value’ side of philosophy, apart from Rorty’s brief flirtations with edifying Western political discourse. Yet the nature of *truth* in ethics has been a topic of keen discussion in recent mainstream philosophy, and it’s widely acknowledged that pragmatism has original and interesting things to say about truth.

This book seeks to contribute in particular to discussions of *objectivity* in ethics which are arguably somewhat bogged down in a wealth of finely divergent terminologies and positions: prescriptivism, fictionalism, intuitionism, quasi-realism and expressivism, to name just a few. Heney organises her own discussion around a distinction between *cognitivism* and *non-cognitivism* about moral claims: this boils down essentially to the issue of whether such claims are *truth-apt* (p. xvii). Since the area of mainstream philosophy specifically devoted to discussing truth and objectivity in ethics is known as *metaethics*, the book sets out to provide an alternative *pragmatist metaethics*, and it is this particular choice that my brief discussion will focus on.

Where many current philosophical treatments of pragmatism present its ideas without investigating the original view, this book is a beacon of scholarship. Its first half consists in careful expositions of Peirce, James, Dewey and C.I. Lewis with specific reference to their ethical ideas. In the book’s second half Heney turns to the more syncretic task of conceiving a pragmatist metaethics. She engages deeply with many key arguments in mainstream analytic metaethics, such as Moore’s open question argument, and the Frege-Geach embedding problem, and presents chapters on a pragmatist account of *truth* in ethics, *principles* in ethics, and – as might be expected from a pragmatist – how metaethics can be *useful* (an issue I have wondered about myself).

Heney initially defines metaethics as, “the study of the preconditions (and presuppositions) of moral thought and discourse” (p. xvi), and later refers to it as an account of truth in ethics which can “license and explain our normative theories” (p. 101). What kind of an account might achieve such an aim? Here Heney’s work moves in an interesting phenomenological direction, appealing to our *experience* of moral life and moral inquiry. She highlights how important it is that that moral life is *shared*; we have “respect for communities as the means and targets of improvements in…moral matters” (p. 148). She also highlights how our statements about ethics feel like *assertions of truth*, for which we are responsible in a game of giving and asking for reasons. To illustrate her pragmatist conception of moral guidance, Heney presents a real-life example which is interestingly different to the abstractly imagined scenarios one often finds in mainstream ethics publications, such as saving drowning children or connecting ailing famous violinists to one’s kidneys. She describes (and, crucially, actually links to) *Room for More*: a volunteer organization in Toronto who take Syrian refugees into their homes and assist them with immigration, thereby role-modelling tolerance and generosity for the community at large.

All of this shows us, helpfully, that the epistemology of ethics need not founder in Humean utter bafflement at how an ‘ought’ might be derived from an ‘is’, as invoked by error theorists such as Mackie. Nor need it seek and fail to find, further objects, ethical truthmakers, in misguided adherence to a correspondence theory of truth. Rather, ethical inquiry grows naturally from, is continuous with, and consists in nothing more than, the kinds of discussions about ethical questions that humans have always felt drawn to engage in. Such discussions just don’t *feel* the same as talk of simple preferences such as whether one enjoys pineapple ice-cream, and as Peirce taught, the opinion that would be agreed to by all who investigate is what we mean by the truth.

Heney has done her homework admirably across two philosophical traditions. This book is well-positioned to not only connect pragmatism with mainstream metaethical debates, but also make its own valuable contribution on that turf. Nevertheless as a working pragmatist philosopher myself, I would like to broach two questions for further critical reflection.

1) Does the very idea of a ‘pragmatist metaethics’ contain some essential tensions? Contemporary analytic philosophy sharply distinguishes metaethics as the *theory* which explains and justifies ethical claims from ‘normative theory’, which recommends what we should *do*. This is arguably a holdover from the positivist fact-value distinction – normative ethics’ *normativity* is considered somehow antinaturalistic, and thereby requiring explanation and justification. (Consider by contrast *chemistry*. Few philosophers have suggested that a special area of philosophy – ‘metachemistry’ – is needed in order to “license and explain” this subject matter, and show that it is genuinely truth-apt.) But Putnam taught us that one important goal of pragmatism is unbuilding the fact-value distinction. So should pragmatists retain a distinction between metaethics and normative ethics? After all, pragmatism is widely defined against representationalism and the ultimate message of Peirce’s “How to Make Our Ideas Clear” is that the meanings of all our terms consist in *imperatives* of the form, “If you want experience X, do Y”.

2) My second question concerns Heney’s phenomenological approach. Is merely reflecting on our own moral life sufficient to fully address “the preconditions (and presuppositions) of moral thought and discourse”? Heney’s favored pragmatist Peirce had an interesting trajectory here in his thinking about ethics. Whereas in his 1898 Harvard lectures he famously suggested that ethical claims should spring solely from instinct, or sentiment, due to the fallibility of our logical reasoning, by 1902 he began to see the value of a separate ‘normative science’. The way he describes it, this science’s method seems far from reflecting on and sophisticating current ethical debates. Rather, he claims that ethics’ normative character:

…may equally have its origin in the circumstance that the science which presents it is so very abstract, so alien to any experiential lineage, that ideals alone, in place of positive facts of experience, can be its proper objects (Peirce, CP 2.46).

How might such ‘ideals’ be studied? Unfortunately Peirce gives few hints about this. He does however make the useful observation that right and wrong is a *dualism*, to which (keeping in mind that prior even to phenomenology in Peirce’s philosophical architectonic lies mathematics) further studies of the number two might contribute. He also notes that the key to keeping the two poles of right and wrong separate is *self-control*. (“Moral Conduct is self-controlled conduct”, Peirce, CP 8.240.) I believe that further investigations should be pursued here, but Heney has laid down a helpfully broad and wonderfully clear framework in which they might be advanced.