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The Ethical Project. A Dialogue

Abstract: In this dialogue the position of Pragmatic Naturalism as defended in Philip Kitcher's *The Ethical Project* is presented and criticized. The approach is developed dialectically by the two interlocutors and a series of critical points are debated. The dialogical form is intended to honor the main objective in *The Ethical Project*: to establish an ongoing conversation on ways to improve moral conceptions and processes, which grow naturally out of the very conditions of human life.

STUDENT: Should we walk along the Hengsteysee?

KITCHER: Of course, this is a very good idea.

STUDENT: I am so glad that you have made it here to Herdecke, so that we can talk about your *Ethical Project*. It has been a good chance for a visit now that you are spending this year in Berlin.

KITCHER: Yes, indeed. I am really glad to be here. Let's walk then.

STUDENT: So, I understand that your ideas about ethics have now considerably matured. But your main message that the ethical project is something that has already started from our remote ancestors and is an ongoing enterprise still remains?

KITCHER: Exactly. My thesis is that tens of thousands of years ago, our remote ancestors began the ethical project. They introduced socially embedded normative guidance in response to tensions and difficulties of life together in small groups. They were equipped with dispositions to psychological altruism that enabled them to live together, but the limits of those dispositions prevented them from living together smoothly and easily. Out of their normative ventures have emerged some precepts we are not likely ever to abandon, so long, at least, as we make ethical progress. Besides those core themes, we have also inherited a conception of the good that includes conflicting elements and that provides us

with a far richer conception of human life than any the first ethical pioneers could have apprehended. Our ethical task is to decide how to go on.

STUDENT: Posing the issue as an ethical project means that you view it as fundamentally historical.

KITCHER: Exactly.

STUDENT: Why is this so important for you?

KITCHER: "History, if viewed as a repository for more than anecdote or chronology, could produce a decisive transformation in the image of science by which we are now possessed." This is the opening phrase in Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Much earlier, more than a century ago, Darwin outlined a novel way of thinking about the living world: his fundamental insight was to regard the organisms around us as products of history. We can liberate ourselves from mysteries about many of our current practices by emulating Darwin: think of them, too, as historical products. My main aim is, thus, to pursue this program in the case of ethics. Ethics emerges as a human phenomenon, permanently unfinished. We, collectively, made it up, and have developed, refined, and distorted it, generation by generation. Ethics should be understood as a project—the ethical project—in which we have been engaged for most of our history as a species.

STUDENT: I agree with that and I want to particularly welcome this point of view on ethics. It is particularly refreshing given the nature and quality of most contemporary discussions.

KITCHER: What do you mean? Which ones do you have in mind?

STUDENT: I mean all those discussions, particularly in the analytic tradition, framed in terms of desires, which seem to me to be entirely disconnected with human life.

KITCHER: Yes, my focus on ethical practice and its history attempts to honor John Dewey's call for philosophy to be reconnected with human life. In this sense I too dislike the kinds of discussions prevalent in the analytical tradition, which seem to hardly matter in everyday life. But I also dislike, if I may say so, ethical accounts, like that of Kant, which locate the moral law within us, identifying it with Reason and that end up defending quite nebulous processes supposedly legitimized by the aura of the apriori. And, of course, ethical codes inscribed on holy tables cannot be acceptable either.

STUDENT: So, no authorities in ethics then?

KITCHER: No authorities in ethics.

STUDENT: This is similar to the position of critical rationalism with respect to ethics.

KITCHER: Do you mean the position of Karl Popper?

STUDENT: Not really. I rather had Hans Albert in mind, the German philosopher whose work is highly original, arguing vigorously against authority in ethics; and it seems similar to your own.

KITCHER: Tell me more about this.

STUDENT: Albert has criticized all attempts to construct an ethical system *more geometrico*, and successfully so, as far as I can tell. For him dogmatization is a possibility of human and social practice taken as a whole. It is an expression of the fact that the will to achieve certitude triumphs over the will to attain solutions that remain open to possible criticism—solutions subject to resistance both from reality and from other members of society, which must either prove their worth or come to grief in the process. He has pleaded for applying the criticist approach to the problems of moral philosophy. This application involves, of course, rejecting fundamentalism—not ethical pluralism, however. When we are concerned about treating ethical statements and systems not as dogmas but as hypotheses, then it is crucial to be able to consider alternatives and to generate new perspectives yielding other solutions to ethical problems than those hitherto current. Competing proposals should be subjected to a critical evaluation with reference to the problems of our present situation. A critical moral philosophy cannot be expected to provide the morality prevailing at any given time with spurious justifications in order to anchor it more firmly in the consciousness of people and in social conditions. Its task consists rather in shedding critical light upon it, throwing its weaknesses into relief and developing viewpoints through which it might be improved.

KITCHER: I think that I agree with that. The critical attitude is certainly constitutive of all philosophy, but probably this is not enough.

STUDENT: What do you mean?

KITCHER: I mean that I certainly agree that this general critical attitude might be able to protect us from a series of appeals to authority. Appeals to divine will, to a realm of values, to faculties of ethical perception and 'pure practical reason' have to go. But then, we should put something in their place.

STUDENT: And what should we put in their place?

KITCHER: Pragmatic Naturalism.

STUDENT: Which is what?

KITCHER: It is the position that envisages the ethical project as begun by our remote ancestors, in response to the difficulties of their social life. The naturalism consists in refusing to introduce mysterious entities—'spooks'—to explain the origin, evolution, and progress of ethical practice. Naturalists intend that no more things be dreamt of in their philosophies than there are in heaven and earth. The pragmatism consists in viewing ethics as growing out of the human social situation and consequently primarily in paying attention to actual ethical practice.

STUDENT: I can understand where the stress is. Quite different from Hans Albert, who is a fallibilist stressing the possibility of error in moral reasoning—you seem to focus on actual ethical practices and somehow take criticism and fallibilism as given.

KITCHER: The point is this: to declare that our ancestors invented ethics is to deny that they discovered it or that it was revealed to them. Pragmatic naturalism rejects the idea of a special moment—long ago on Mount Sinai, perhaps—when people received authoritative information about how they should live, and also abandons surrogate philosophical theories about external constraints discovered by special faculties. Yet to declare that ethics is a human invention is not to imply it was fashioned arbitrarily. The ethical project began in response to central human desires and needs, arising from our special type of social existence.

STUDENT: What exactly do you mean by that?

KITCHER: Think of altruism: the long-standing puzzle of the evolution of biological altruism has been solved by the recognition of two mechanisms, kin-selection and the disposition to reciprocate.

STUDENT: But you do want to differentiate between biological and psychological altruism?

KITCHER: Certainly. Psychological altruism is the kernel from which ethical practice grows, because it lies at the heart of the type of sociality our hominid ancestors experienced.

STUDENT: So, how did this type of sociality emerge in the first place?

KITCHER: In a world with scarce resources—of whatever kind—competition among vulnerable animals may require their participation in coalitions and alliances. So, imagine a population of solitary organisms (the largest units being mothers with dependent young) in an environment in which each must obtain

a certain number of resources in order to survive and reproduce. Suppose the resources are scarce, the animals fight over these resources, and the stronger typically win. A five-stage process could have led from the initial situation—no cooperation except for maternal care in early life—to the kind of social structure found in chimpanzees, bonobos, and hominids.

STUDENT: I am eager to learn about this five-stage process.

KITCHER: Start with the condition of asociality in which animals range alone finding some resources without contest and competing directly for others. In a second stage some animals arise that are disposed to act together in contest and to share the resources obtained so that the first coalitions are formed. Because of the success of the early coalitions, larger coalitions form, sharing the benefits they earn in contests—this is the stage of escalation. In the fourth stage community stabilization takes place: coalition size is ultimately limited by the difficulty of defending all the resources in a range, and the habitat becomes partitioned into ranges defended by stable communities, within which the resources are divided by the formation of subcoalitions. Finally, genuine cooperation emerges in which members of the stable communities increase their fitness by engaging in optional games and behaving cooperatively.

STUDENT: I can accept that. But then something more does distinguish human societies from our primitive relatives.

KITCHER: Yes, essentially language. Obviously quite a few changes have occurred since then, the most important being the acquisition of language. The cumbersome peacemaking of our original hominids is replaced by a new device, one pre-empting rupture rather than reacting to it and in principle capable of operating in a wide variety of contexts.

STUDENT: What kind of device?

KITCHER: I call it a 'capacity for normative guidance'. That device is necessary for what we think of as ethical practice.

STUDENT: But the major challenge for a naturalistic approach to ethics consists in showing how the achievement of the 'ethical point of view' might have evolved from more primitive capacities, of course.

KITCHER: No. The acquisition of a capacity for normative guidance, which we can best understand, I think, as an ability to follow orders does not mark the transition to the 'ethical point of view'. That is not because there is some further move that does the trick, one that shows how a very special kind of normative guidance—a special way of internalizing the orders, say—constitutes the 'ethical point of view', but because the entire conception of the 'ethical point of view' is a psychological myth devised by philosophers. There are many ways to be a

psychological altruist and, equally, many ways to undergo normative guidance. None of these latter modes is especially privileged as definitive of an 'ethical point of view'.

STUDENT: So, there are many 'ethical points of view'.

KITCHER: Yes. Behind the disposition to follow orders must stand practices of punishment. Conversely, when punishment is present in a group, it can make possible the evolution of elaborate forms of cooperative behaviour. The emergence of more sophisticated forms of punishment is probably intertwined with the evolution of language—and both are probably entangled with the acquisition of normative guidance.

STUDENT: This thesis is hardly novel, of course. In textbook sociology this is the standard story of internalization of norms based on different forms of punishment, which capitalize and exploit human fears.

KITCHER: It is hardly important whether this is textbook sociology or not. For the ethical project that concerns us here, even at its early stages, different groups may have cultivated different emotions, founding their ethical practices in distinctive ways. There may be several ways to build a conscience. However it is formed, conscience is the internalization of the capacity for following orders.

STUDENT: So, if society plays upon the individual as on a pipe, it need not always be the same tune.

KITCHER: Hamlet saw it correctly!

STUDENT: The ethical project can only begin, then, when normative guidance is socially embedded. But this is hardly novel, and sorry to be insistent, but this is good old sociological theory.

KITCHER: Please stop repeating this! Of course, this is good old sociological theory, but pragmatic naturalism is different from many other ethical positions, and if I may say so its distinctive character and persuasive power consists precisely in the fact that it is not encapsulated from scientific endeavours. Ethics cannot ignore scientific results—it is as simple as that. Neither sociology, nor anthropology for that matter: anthropological studies of societies whose ways of life are closest to those of our early human ancestors show, for example, that equality, even a commitment to egalitarianism, prevailed at the beginning of the ethical project.

STUDENT: Of course, I agree that one should take scientific evidence seriously. But please, nice stories of our ancestors sitting around campfires articulating

and agreeing on ethical codes is nothing but romanticism. I thought that these naïve socialistic stories were no longer with us.

KITCHER: I don't know whether the picture of campfire is romantic or not, and probably I could live without it. But in any case quite a few anthropological studies do show that norms of equality prevail in food sharing.

STUDENT: Equality in food sharing and the like does reflect actual ethical practice; and in this sense it is of great importance for your pragmatic naturalism. But from this you cannot infer that this has been the outcome of a deliberate search for norms according to which the group should live that has taken place in discussions around the campfire. This is not an argument; this is wild speculation.

KITCHER: It does contain, of course, some speculative elements, but this is a quite reasonable assumption to make. I suppose that the ethical project began with the acquisition of full language, at the latest fifty thousand years ago, and that human societies were small until, at the earliest, fifteen thousand years ago. I conclude that the social egalitarianism observed in contemporary hunter-gatherers, and the kinds of social discussions in which they engage, were central to the project for at least the first thirty-five thousand years.

STUDENT: What kind of mechanism is supposed to be at work here? I am still not convinced.

KITCHER: Small societies reasonably fear the interference and predations of neighbours. Social cohesion is vital, and no adult can be marginalized in normative discussion. The hominid bands out of which early human societies grew resulted from the partitioning of the physical environment through coalition building. The stability of the partition depends on the approximate balance among neighbouring groups; and, where the groups are small, the contribution of every member is necessary. Discussions that involve all adults, that aim to answer to the needs of all adults, and that blur distinctions of rank and ability were crucial—those discussions would have issued in agreed-upon rules for life together.

STUDENT: The mechanism that you describe and which is supposed to establish the claim that there have been discussions ending in agreed-upon rules is not very convincing, I am afraid. That our human ancestors have been living in small groups roughly until ten to fifteen thousand years ago is indeed a plausible assumption, relatively well-supported by findings of cognitive archaeology and other disciplines. And, of course there has been interference and predations of neighbours, so that a competition among groups must have been the normal prevailing condition. Friedrich Hayek was, according to my knowledge, the first

to analyze the group selection mechanism in the general framework of his theory of cultural evolution.

KITCHER: I did not know that.

STUDENT: Hayek conceptualizes the process of cultural evolution as a process of collective learning where the growth of civilization is equated with the growth of knowledge. Hayek, in explaining the evolution of culture, stresses, on the one hand, the innovation of individuals experimenting with new rules, and, on the other hand, the competition between old and new rules and the selection of those that led to the success of those groups who practiced them.

KITCHER: So, it is essentially a mechanism of group selection which is supposedly at work here.

STUDENT: Yes. And the growth of knowledge which comes out of this process does not include only the conscious, explicit knowledge of individuals, the knowledge which enables us to state that this or that is so and so. It includes also our habits and skills, our emotional attitudes, our tools, and our institutions – all adaptations to past experience which have grown up by selective elimination of less suitable contact.

KITCHER: And I guess that ethical rules are part of this general cultural stock.

STUDENT: Exactly. And they have emerged in the evolutionary process of innovation, competition and selection. The successful combination of knowledge and aptitude is not selected by common deliberation, by people seeking a solution to their problems through a joint effort; it is the product of individuals imitating those who have been more successful and from their being guided by signs or symbols, such as expressions of moral or aesthetic esteem for their having observed standards of conduct—in short, of their using the results of the experiences of others.

KITCHER: So, according to this mechanism there is no need for any discussions around the campfire.

STUDENT: Right. Individuals adopt ethical rules for the reasons that I have outlined, probably also for the fear of punishment; and the set of ethical rules prevails over time that leads the group in which it is prevailing to the greater relative success.

KITCHER: And what is the criterion of success?

STUDENT: Population size or population growth.

KITCHER: I can see some problems with this view, but this is not important here. Important is merely that you understand that my claim is quite moderate. I do not advertise my story as a 'how actually explanation', but merely as a 'how possibly explanation'.

STUDENT: I guess that a 'how actually explanation' aims to tell the truth about a sequence of events, but what is the aim of a 'how possibly explanation'?

KITCHER: A 'how possibly explanation' aims only to tell a story, consistent with evidence and with background constraints: its status is not impugned by pointing out that there are other options.

STUDENT: So, these explanations are based on conjectural history.

KITCHER: Yes, and given the temporal remoteness of the events and the limitations of our evidence, modesty is required.

STUDENT: Modesty is, of course, a virtue, but this is still not very convincing. My own conjectural history is, for example, that the hominid group in which the norm of equality has been invented (not discovered!) has been most successful vis à vis the other hominid groups, because it has been consistently supported by a group of invisible angels—I could not tell whether they were male or female, but they were angels in any case.

KITCHER: This is not a serious challenge.

STUDENT: Be that as it may.

KITCHER: By five thousand years ago, human beings had assembled in societies vastly larger than the groups in which the ethical project began—and we possess written records about that. Egalitarianism gave way to complex hierarchies, and in the cultural competition 'experiments of living' took place ending up with a vastly enriched notion of the good life. Desires to develop one's talents became central, as did engaging in particular relationships. To be secure, to be healthy, to eat and to copulate are no longer enough.

STUDENT: You seem to imply that there has been some kind of progress. Did I understand that correctly? But this does contradict with a Darwinian notion of local adaptations without an overall upward trend.

KITCHER: Yes, it does. At the end of the day, I do not believe that the evolution of ethics is a matter of mere change.

STUDENT: So, there is ethical progress.

KITCHER: Yes.

STUDENT: What kind of ethical progress are Nazism and Stalinism supposed to represent?

KITCHER: I want to oppose to the view that the history of ethics is just one damn thing after another. The evolution of ethics is not a matter of mere change. It is definitely not analogous to a Darwinian picture of the history of life, revealing only local adaptations without any overall upward trend. But I should make clear that to resist the mere-change view is not to defend the prevalence of ethical advances. It is to suggest the possibility of progress.

STUDENT: This seems challenging.

KITCHER: Let' s have a closer look at what has actually taken place in the history of ethical practice. The historical figures who figure in ethical transitions, the vast majority of them unidentifiable as individuals, do not start from some situation in which they lack ethical convictions, follow a process of reasoning or observe some facet of reality, and thereby arrive at a well-grounded belief in an ethical judgment. Actual historical agents were born into societies and socialized from early childhood. They acquired practices of expressing ethical evaluations, an extensive repertoire of ethical concepts, and dispositions to accept a body of ethical statements, most of which were never questioned. However, reformers—actual reformers not philosophers!—take up the ethical project as framed in their culture, making proposals on the basis of empirical information they find salient.

STUDENT: So, I guess the point that you want to make is that reformers of ethical practice always start from somewhere—nothing happens really de novo.

KITCHER: Ethical innovation does happen. But the fundamental principle is that we always start from here.

STUDENT: So, ethical progress is not really aimed at?

KITCHER: No. It probably is not aimed at, but rather fortunate occasions take place in which blind stumbling turns out well.

STUDENT: Ethical progress is not the product of reflection according to the principle of reason or of any other rational procedure.

KITCHER: Ethical progress is something like 'sleepwalking'. The sleepwalkers stumble along, often, indeed perhaps most of the time, lurching from error to error, but occasionally lighting upon new ethical truths.

STUDENT: Ethical truths? Is there something like that?

KITCHER: Yes.

STUDENT: 'You must stop preaching to me.' Show me the referent of this.

KITCHER: You do not need to adopt the framework of truth as correspondence.

STUDENT: I do not need to, but it seems reasonable to do so, if we want to have a sensible discussion.

KITCHER: I want to propose a rival approach to truth: instead of considering the *structure* of truth, how the truth of statements arises (what makes truths true), one may adopt a *functional* account, seeking to understand what we aim at in various areas of inquiry.

STUDENT: What are we aiming at in the case of ethical practice?

KITCHER: We should approach ethical practice in the following fashion: we should seek the functions that ethical prescriptions and other parts of ethical codes are to serve.

STUDENT: From what you say, you seem to have an argument that somehow connects function, truth and ethical progress.

KITCHER: Exactly. Here is the rough outline idea of the argument. Truth is readily seen as prior to other notions used to explain the objectivity of our practices, concepts like progress, justification, and knowledge. To make progress is to accumulate truth; to be justified is to proceed in ways reliably generating true beliefs; to know is to have a true belief generated by a reliable process. In this way of relating the concepts, an adequate response to the mere-change view has to start with ethical truth. I propose the opposite: ethical progress is prior to ethical truth, and truth is what you get by making progressive steps. Truth is attained in the limit of progressive transitions. Truth, as William James put it, happens to an idea. Pragmatic naturalism retains a notion of ethical truth for expository purposes, but it starts from the concept of ethical progress.

STUDENT: This is a quite strong thesis.

KITCHER: My claim is simply that it is better to approach ethical practice primarily under the point of view of progress: thinking in terms of truth narrows the focus. For truth applies to statements, so we are led to conceive of the decision as one about descriptive counterparts of rules of the alternative code. There are other components of ethical codes—concepts, exemplars, habits, emotions, modes of inducing compliance—and improvements to our own practice could occur in each of these respects. Thinking in terms of progress responds more directly to the practical choices we face.

STUDENT: This seems strange to me.

KITCHER: Why? Take a parallel case which I am sure you will find illuminating.

STUDENT: Which one?

KITCHER: The case of technology. Our world is full of instruments, machines, and devices that improve on previous efforts. The chair in which I sit, the light illuminating my desk, and the computer on which I type are all refinements of similar things I used some decades ago, and spectacular advances on things my ancestors employed to similar ends. Progress with respect to these artefacts, and in the domain of technology generally is readily understood as functional refinement.

STUDENT: I agree with that.

KITCHER: It is exactly the same thing in ethics. Socially embedded normative guidance is a social technology responding to the problem background confronting our first full human ancestors. None of them had a clear understanding of that problem background—crucially, the problems arise not for a single individual, but for the social group. The problems are felt by all. Ethical codes serve the function of solving the original difficulties, dimly understood by these ancestors. Initially, they offer only partial amelioration. Ethical progress consists in functional refinement, first aimed at solving the original problems more thoroughly, more reliably, and with less costly effort. In the course of progress, however, the problem background itself changes, generating new functions for ethics to serve, and hence new modes of functional refinement.

STUDENT: So, the function of ethics is the remedying of altruism failures.

KITCHER: Exactly. Neither we nor our descendants are likely to achieve a complete solution, one that will correspond to a complete and exact characterization of the altruism failures to be remedied—or, correspondingly to a complete system of ethical principles. At its most progressive, the evolution of ethics is a series of responses to the most powerful sources of residual social conflict.

STUDENT: So, how do ethical function, ethical progress and ethical truth tie up in the end?

KITCHER: Descriptive counterparts of ethical rules count as true just in case those rules would be adopted in ethical codes as the result of progressive transitions and would be retained through an indefinite sequence of further progressive transitions. There is no prior conception of ethical truth, so that people make ethical progress when they discover or stumble on independently constituted ethical truths. Progress is the prior notion, and descriptive counterparts of rules come to count as true in virtue of the fact that they enter and remain in

ethical codes that unfold in a progressive sequence—truth happens to an idea. Derivatively, Tarskian machinery of correspondence truth allows the extensions of ethical predicates as 'wrong', 'good', and so forth, to be fixed to make the counterparts of rules accepted under indefinitely proceeding progressive transitions true, but there are no prior independent properties to which those who formulate and preserve the rules respond.

STUDENT: But given this understanding of ethical truth, can we make claims about the truth or falsehood of ethical statements?

KITCHER: We are never at the end of the ethical project, never at some hypothetical limit of any progressive sequence of ethical practices. Yet, we confidently assert some, relatively imprecise and vague, ethical statements, declaring that honesty is typically right and that murdering people who have done no harm is typically wrong.

STUDENT: How can we be confident these statements will endure as our ethical practices progress?

KITCHER: We cannot. There are quite a few issues involved, the most important being that there are obviously areas in which the convergence of progressive tradition is genuinely in doubt. We can imagine two different ethical traditions proceeding indefinitely, making a series of progressive transitions, without its ever being possible to integrate their differing accomplishments.

STUDENT: This sounds like an incommensurability problem à la Kuhn.

KITCHER: Yes, indeed. I think that there is sometimes a real incommensurability of practices, hence also a possibility of pluralism. And I can live with the consequences of that: where that possibility is realized there will be no determinate ethical truth.

STUDENT: So, your position is that notions of truth and falsity do not always apply in the ethical domain, for the core of ethical truth is surrounded by a periphery of pluralism.

KITCHER: Exactly.

STUDENT: They only apply when there is commensurability of practices and they can be compared.

KITCHER: Indeed.

STUDENT: I can see that your position is quite delicate and differentiated. But the naturalistic fallacy can hardly be shown to be avoided. Hume is still with us.

KITCHER: No, not at all. The Humean challenge can be tackled head-on. The worry concerns the justification of the elements of ethical practice. I acknowledge that naturalists must elaborate an account of the justified beginning and growth of the ethical project, showing it to be free of the sorts of inferences Hume questioned, the types of inferences appearing, for example, in social Darwinism and human socio-biology.

STUDENT: Exactly.

KITCHER: Here is how the worry can be met: in my framework, ethical progress, not ethical truth, is the fundamental notion. So, instead of posing the challenge as a question about whether inferences from factual statements to normative statements would be likely to yield correct conclusions from true premises, the issue has to be reformulated. Is it possible to understand how our ancestors made progressive transitions, and did so on the basis of processes—observations, emotional responses, modes of reasoning—likely to promote progressive transitions? An affirmative answer would remove the sting from the challenge. For it would demonstrate how any inferences made accord with the fundamental criteria for good inference, and thus are exempt from the mysteries Hume rightly queried.

STUDENT: I think that I now have got the big picture of the ethical project. The appearance of having confronted Hume's problem successfully is founded on the notion of function, which is crypto-normative. You present it such as if it were entirely positive, but in the end it hijacks normativity into the game.

KITCHER: I do not see that.

STUDENT: If you do not want to admit this, then please allow me to point out what is probably the main trick of your approach.

KITCHER: Now I learn that I am a jongleur. I thought that I am a philosopher!

STUDENT: Taking ethical progress as the fundamental notion, rather than ethical truth seems to me to be exactly the same move that you have made in your philosophy of science. The innovation there has been to propose to ground causal claims in claims about explanatory dependence rather than vice versa. Your main idea there is that our view of causal dependency in many cases stems from an appreciation of the explanatory ordering of our beliefs. This accounts for the intuition, for example, why we do not accept that the length of shadows explains the heights of towers, but, by contrast, that shadow lengths are causally dependent on tower heights. The move there was to make explanation the fundamental notion, rather than causality, exactly as you suggest now to make ethical progress the fundamental notion, rather than ethical truth.

KITCHER: I think that you are right in your diagnosis! However, as you know, I have in fact now abandoned the unification view of explanation.

STUDENT: I hope that you will not do the same with your ethical theory after twenty years!

KITCHER: I always learn as I age![1]

STUDENT: I like that you acknowledge the dynamic character of your own knowledge development!

KITCHER: I do. And I also do in the case of ethics. I think that the static vision that guides almost all approaches to normative ethics is futile. It is not the case that correct principles and precepts await discovery, and once apprehended they can be graven in stone. The ethical project evolves indefinitely. Progress is made not by something independent of us and our societies, but by fulfilling the functions of ethics as they have so far emerged. The project is something people work out with one another. There are no experts here.

STUDENT: I think I share with you the conviction that the ethical project has a fundamentally dynamic character. But if this is so, then what is the role of the philosopher in this project?

KITCHER: In his famous image, which I am sure you are familiar with, Otto Neurath specified our epistemological predicament, comparing us to sailors who must constantly rebuild the vessel on which they sail. Pragmatic naturalism takes a similar approach to ethics, assigning philosophers the task of facilitating discussion on how we should continue the project of living together. Philosophy makes proposals—and this is itself a proposal.

STUDENT: What kind of proposals?

KITCHER: Basically two types. One type of proposal identifies the problems, unsolved and partially solved, to which ethical practice has responded: call this the diagnostic *proposal*. The other type of proposal, the *methodological proposal*, should offer suggestions about how proposals are to be adjudicated, about the rules of the continuing ethical conversation.

STUDENT: So, you propagate a specific method for ethics?

KITCHER: I do not propagate one—I propose one.

STUDENT: What is your proposal then?

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[1] "Γηράσκω άεί διδασκόμενος"—an ancient Greek proverb.

KITCHER: The first ethicists focused on the altruism failures within small groups, treating the members of those groups as equal with respect to the simplest preconditions of the good life and seeking the cooperation of all with all. Because the pertinent population has expanded dramatically—to include all of us—and because the evolution of ethics has bequeathed to us a richer conception of the good life, the goal has been modified: equality with respect to basic needs has given way to equality of opportunity for a worthwhile life. Now, I propose that in our modern 'group', which is numbered in billions, we should scale up the circumstances of mutual engagement—the deliberations among band members—from those that prevailed in the original venture. Public ethical deliberation can proceed by attempting to simulate a conversation of the pertinent kind. Faced with functional conflict, so that revolutionary change is in order, public contributors to ethical discussion are judged by their ability to ground their proposals in mutual engagement: that is, to introduce the considerations and lines of reasoning that would be brought forward to achieve consensus were the entire human population to participate, under conditions of mutual engagement, in a conversation about the regulation of conduct.

STUDENT: I think I have made clear before that the idea of discussions around the campfire at the beginning of the ethical project are least convincing to me. This is so mainly on evidential grounds and because the emergence, dissemination, and prevalence of ethical rules over the early millennia of the existence of our species can be perfectly well explained without any assumption of conscious deliberation about norms around the campfire. The idea of an ideal conversation which would supposedly lead to a consensus about norms is even less acceptable. As you know, this is hardly a new idea. Apel and Habermas have made a career out of it in Germany.

KITCHER: I know that, but Habermas is not really clear and Apel, though inspired by the pragmatists, defends other kinds of claims in his *Transzendentalpragmatik*.

STUDENT: *Transzendentale Träumereien*.

KITCHER: Independently of how other ethical approaches have made use of the idea of an ideal conversation, I think that it is consistent to insist on public ethical deliberation, modified to the modern conditions, given the continuity of the ethical project and the successful use of this method throughout the development of the ethical project—admittedly under different conditions.

STUDENT: I see that you insist on public discussions, around campfires, ancient and modern—and I think that I can understand your insistence since this is an integral part of a normative ethics propagating the possibility of ethical progress. So, if you do not want to accept this criticism of mine, let me ask something else: don't you view it as inconsistent and highly problematic that, on the one hand, you seem to suggest that those norms should be accepted that

will be the outcome of an ideal public ethical deliberation, but, on the other hand, you seem to want to make substantive proposals about ethical norms?

KITCHER: Yes, of course I want to make substantive proposals. One is that the conception of the good may well demand that affluent people sacrifice certain luxuries, for doing so could ease the burdens of the poor. Another is that rather than providing diet pills and cosmetic treatments, biomedical research ought to be reoriented to tackle infectious diseases, in the environments in which they kill and disable millions. Besides, pragmatic naturalism proposes that further resources, including quality education and medical care, be distributed to all. I have many further substantial suggestions; and I do not see why they should be inconsistent with my methodological proposal?

STUDENT: Propagating an ideal conversation as the method of ethics, which yields as an outcome the ethical norms that the group should respect clearly makes pragmatic naturalism a procedural approach to normative ethics. In other words, this is an approach which focuses on the process and christens as 'good' or 'moral' whatever consensually comes out of this process. It evaluates the rules that guide the process rather than the outcomes of the process. However, this very same approach is propagating at the same time a series of substantial proposals which are supposed to further 'the good'. It thus evaluates existing outcomes directly, designates them as 'bad', and proposes instead other, 'good' outcomes. It is quite obvious that there is a fundamental inconsistency involved here.

KITCHER: I do not see this. Pragmatic naturalism denies ethical expertise. The role philosophy plays in ethics can only be of midwifery: to suggest a direction for renewed conversation and some rules for mutual exchange. The egalitarian conception of the good and the method for ethical decision that aims to simulate wide-ranging deliberation under conditions of mutual engagement are not for any single person to answer. Philosophers can make proposals, attempting to facilitate the conversation that would deliver answers. This work of facilitation, I call philosophical midwifery.

STUDENT: I see. Philosophical midwifery is nothing else than the Socratic maieutic method with an evolutionary and pragmatic touch. But, if this is the case, then there is no authority at all conferred upon the proposals and so I cannot understand why one ought to make fuss about ideal conversations and the like. If you are willing to let the conferral of authority upon normative proposals go, then everything that seemed interesting in pragmatic naturalism evaporates. And, of course, you cannot claim that there is anything like ethical progress—since this diagnosis also presupposes the force of some kind of normative authority.

KITCHER: You do not seem to appreciate my modesty.

STUDENT: Of course I do, but it seems to me that this is not an honest modesty in the end, if I may say so. Someone who defends a massive redistribution of the scarce resources of a society towards the fulfilment of what he regards as the appropriate conception of the good, prompted by promoting ethical progress is not really modest. Taking also into consideration that these supposedly progressive steps, if sustained, would even lead to something like ethical truths makes the whole approach even less modest, I think.

KITCHER: Even if I depose the philosopher-king from his throne, you still do not want to acknowledge the modesty of my position?

STUDENT: Of course I do. However, this is not going far enough. Ethical pluralism is also concomitant with a non-cognitivist approach to ethics which you do not seem to consider seriously as an alternative: human beings, philosophers and non-philosophers, just make decisions trying to solve the problems they encounter in their social environment in what seems to them an apt way to do so, i.e. taking into account the specifics of the situation and the emotions and needs of others. Their freedom of choice is not and must not be constrained by moralizing philosophers. This seems to me to be a truly modest position.

KITCHER: For me this is not a modest position, but the castration of the endeavour to even start to work on the ethical project.

STUDENT: This needs more discussion, but I am afraid that we should be heading back now.

KITCHER: Yes. Let us continue our conversation when I come to Athens next summer.