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# Pragmatism, Education and the Problem of Pluralism

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## 1. Introduction

Pluralism concerning ethical and political opinion is the fact that different individuals and groups have different and to some extent incompatible ethical and political views. While any large enough society has exhibited such plurality, pluralism is increasingly visible under conditions of internationalisation and globalisation; in addition, the widespread use of digital media, including social media, has brought into light many profound differences of opinion within contemporary societies. In philosophy of education – as well as the theory and practice of education – pluralism has been taken to incur a problem. Ethical and political views, values and standards are relied on in any educational context. However, under conditions of pluralism, educators as well as devisers of public educational policy may find themselves puzzled over how much their own ethical and political views can influence the content and the framework of education. To what extent the ethical and political development of pupils and students should be left to their own individual preference, cultural background, families, and other social groups?

In this article, I consider two lines of response to this problem of pluralism based on, firstly, the educational current called critical thinking and, secondly, the notion that some

values and standards of justification receive universal or near universal support in our society. I argue that both of these approaches fail to give a satisfactory response to the problem, as they depend on curtailing the plurality of ethical opinion. Indeed, I argue that the problem of pluralism persists as long as we think that the acceptability of ethical views and standards in educational contexts depends on a consensus over those views and standards. Next, I present an alternative view on pluralism drawing from debates in the pragmatist tradition. Based on the pragmatist contention that ethical questions and problems can themselves be topics for scientific inquiry, I argue that pluralism appears as an important and beneficial catalyst for doubting, justifying and revising one's ethical opinions. Finally, I briefly consider the consequences of adopting this pragmatist approach in educational practice.

## **2. Education and the problem of pluralism**

Pluralism, as I here use the word, is a *descriptive* thesis concerning the plurality or variety of ethical and political opinion in our societies. It should be distinguished from *relativism*, according to which truth, validity or correctness is relative to some feature of the believing subject – such as a point of view or a “language game”. For the relativist, what is true from my point of view might not be true from yours, and vice versa. While pluralism also emphasizes the difference between opinions and points of view, as the word will be used here, pluralism differs from the relativist view in that these differences of opinion really matter. For a consistent relativist, conflicting opinions concerning relative truths do not ground real disagreement. Even if our views of, say, ethical issues are seemingly inconsistent, we may both be right: stealing is wrong from your point of view, but not from mine. There is no demand for objectivity concerning the ethical issues at hand; ethical disagreement is

treated analogously to disagreement over matters of taste. By contrast, a pluralist may and in some cases will find such inconsistency between our views to be troubling. Even we disagree, one of us must be mistaken. Unlike relativists, then, pluralists may find disagreement to matter: it points to a conflict to be resolved, at least if anything practically relevant revolves about it. It is, a pluralist may think, an objective matter of fact that stealing is wrong – and if others disagree, one side is mistaken. Pluralism, then, is the view that there is real disagreement (about ethical opinion) between individuals and groups in a society.

Pluralism has been taken to have important educational implications. In philosophy of education, a central challenge has been to defuse the following problem: if there is persistent disagreement with society, how are we to *educate* children (for example) without imposing our own ethical (and perhaps political) views on them? In different contexts, this issue – the *problem of pluralism*, as I will call it – has commonly been addressed under other terms, such as those of the problem of indoctrination and ideology. The issue is not only a philosophical one: it has been argued to be faced by many educators in different contexts. In practice, teachers face the question of how and to what extent their own ethical views should influence, and be evident, in teaching.

The problem is also one of educational policy. Formal education in the Nordic countries aspires to be both founded on central democratic values and principles, but also to build tolerance and support democratic society. For example, the Finnish national curriculum for primary education is explicitly founded on some basic values, such as respect for life and human rights, equality and democracy. At the same time, education is to aim at supporting both tolerance and the development of the pupils' individual cultural identity and cultural capital. In official documents the contents and precise nature of these values is typically left vague, and the potential clashes between tolerance and such values is left unaddressed.

Tolerance and appreciation of the different values and cultures of others is supposed to be the norm; however, pupils and students may support values which directly conflict with basic democratic principles, such as equality. Both teachers and educational policy makers may struggle with problems concerning how much pluralism one should tolerate (or celebrate); on what basis, if any, is it justified to pursue shared understanding in the realm of morality, and in what circumstances, if any, is it justified to impose educators' own moral norms and principles to students.

Philosophers of education have attempted to provide perspectives from which to respond to the problem of pluralism. According to one line of response, as opposed to educating (first-order) ethical and political views, educators should concentrate on teaching good ethical reasoning, and criticism and consideration of ethical views. A central manifestation of this view is the variety of contemporary proposals according to which the central content of education should be *critical thinking*. In educational contexts, we are to teach skills and attitudes which are relevant to the revision and assessment of different ethical (and political) views. This ideal of education is commonly connected with that of rationality: students are to be taught to criticize their views and choices on rational grounds. A prominent example of this line of thought is Harvey Siegel's (1985) view that critical thinking as the skill or ability to appropriately assess reasons and arguments by logical and epistemic criteria. In Siegel's view, critical thinking should be the ideal of education: it is both what education is for, and how we should go about in educating children.

However, it quickly turns out that this approach suffers from problem not unlike our initial problem. The ideal of critical thinking is to develop the skills needed to assess different views on rational criteria. But who is to set these criteria? The issue of *how* to be critical – on what grounds ethical (or political) views are to be revised and criticized – may not be any less

contentious than the original question of the right values and norms to teach, under conditions of pluralism. Indeed, some of our most entrenched disputes concerning values and ethical issues are grounded in disputes concerning good evidence, reasons, and criteria for ethical views. In educational contexts, pupils or students may be quite convinced that, say, the teachings of their particular religion or social tradition are quite enough reason to hold steadfastly to an ethical view. Is the educator to criticize such justifications of ethical views?

Addressing potential criticisms of this kind, Siegel (1985) has argued that the whole issue arises only if our ideals of rationality are ideology-neutral or -transcendent; indeed, the whole criticism of “ideologicality” depends on a notion of rationality which finds ideology or pre-rational justification of ethical and political views to be a problem. In this, Siegel is surely correct. But in many ways, the response pushes the issue yet another step back. For by what criteria are we to deem one or another view of good reasons as itself pre-rational or “ideological”? In many actual ethical-political debates, it is a standard charge that the stance of an opponent is “merely” ideological as opposed to “rational”. Indeed, if we had a settled view of “rational” criteria – one that would be readily admitted by all – the whole issue of pluralism would be rather easily dissolved: any ethical debate could be resolved by scrutinizing different views at hand against such criteria.

A second perspective from which such issues have been attempted to tackle within the philosophy of education could be described as the consensus-oriented view. While we may disagree on some ethical (and political) issues, this view maintains, we are at least in the right in teaching what is commonly considered to be acceptable: the kind of ethical views and norms – and views of ethical reasoning – which there is an overarching consensus over. There is, after all, a wide array of ethical views which we almost without exception subscribe

to. Such agreement in opinion does not pertain to particular (first-order) ethical views, but also extends to some common ways of justifying ethical views in light of shared values.

Such views come in many forms and include various refinements. For example, in Michael Hand's (2014; 2018) extended account of moral education, education may rely on an "identifiable subset" of moral standards "to which more or less everyone subscribes and for which the reasons to subscribe are compelling" (2014, 528). In particular, Hand argues, some of our values are supportive of cooperation and diminishing of conflict, reducing the risks we face in our human condition, "our vulnerability to one another, our limited capacity for sympathy, and a limited supply of needed or wanted resources" (Hand 2014, 528). While Hand is careful not to give a blanket justification for the education of existing moral codes, he argues that our commonly accepted values counteract the potential instability of human societies.

However, such views of the grounds of ethical education, under conditions of pluralism, easily face issues of their own. To begin with, relying on the commonly accepted values in education may give reasonably justified starting points for teachers; nevertheless, the initial concern is hardly alleviated, as the *problem* of pluralism pertains to situations where values *do* conflict, and no consensus can be easily uncovered. Moreover, taking some moral standards as robustly justifiable based on their current appeal and popularity threatens – even with qualifications in place – to hinder ethical change and improvement. While we are obviously convinced of our current ethical views and standards of justification, history is replete of examples of mistaken, indeed horrible, ethical opinions and ways of justifying them. This concern extends also to the values and standards which currently contribute to the sustenance of human societies. Social cohesion, stability and cooperation may be – and is – maintained by very different understandings of basic values and ethical justification. As a

central example, even if Western societies have a special place of pride for their achievements in democracy, tolerance and human rights, other contemporary societies may and do strive to achieve cohesion and stability with distinctly other means and values: authoritarian rule, lack of free speech, inegalitarian “caste” systems, and the like. Even if democracy and related rights and freedoms appears as the best way to achieve cooperation and deal with human vulnerability *to us*, it may not appear so from the perspective of others – including, in some cases, of the pupils and students of our contemporary classrooms, or at the very least of their cultural heritage and background.

### **3. Why is pluralism a problem?**

Much more could be said of the merits and problems of these two lines of response to the difficulties of pluralism. However, I am here interested in taking a closer look at what makes pluralism such a problem when it comes to normative – ethical and political views – in education. Broadly speaking, the concern with pluralism tends to begin with the observation that differences of opinion concerning ethical issues persist and cannot be easily resolved. From this it is inferred that pluralism is a problem which needs to be somehow tackled both in theory in practice – in the case of interest here, in the theory and practice of education.

However, this problem of pluralism of opinion seems to pertain to the ethical and the political mainly, not in the least to non-normative issues, or so-called “matters of fact”. We think it obvious that, in questions of so-called fact, our opinions sometimes differ. When they do, one side must be mistaken. Indeed, in many cases our views might be widely different, and those differences themselves difficult to resolve. But from these assumptions we do not conclude that pluralism in such opinions is a problem – in particular, a problem for education.



Pupils and students may entertain views concerning matters of physics, or chemistry or biology, say, or be fully ignorant of central theories or concepts. Their families, groups and cultures may not fare any better; indeed, they may entertain curious views about matters of fact which conflict with the results of contemporary science. Nevertheless, aside some notable exceptions (to which I will presently return), we do not shy from teaching pupils what we think is the case concerning such facts. In particular, we do not commonly argue that such teaching risks indoctrination or is founded on “ideology”. This asymmetry, one should think, demands explanation. Why are we not at all as concerned with educating children non-normative “facts” they do not agree with as we are with ethics, politics and other normative views?

A reply which quite immediately springs to mind is that the non-normative views we may and should teach are those that are due to scientific inquiry: ones scrutinized and (tentatively) validated by contemporary science. This answer seems a natural and plausible one to give. Our reliance on science and the scientific method runs so deep that, in many cases, we can hardly offer any justification to our opinions concerning non-normative issues, other than that they concur with our current best science. We are less certain about *how* to justify ethical and political views: there is nothing that would occupy the place of “moral science” in our culture. Plurality of opinion about ethical matters is matched by a plurality of opinion concerning ethical standards, evidence and justification; by contrast, concerning non-normative “fact”, we may always rely on science and its various achievements – including in education.

Notice, however, how this response – as plausible as it is – does not (and cannot) rest on the premise that our current best theories and other results of science, or the scientific method, including its conception of standards of justification of theories, receive universal or

near universal support. As already noted, both pupils or students and their background – families, groups, cultures – may be quite ignorant of the products or methods of contemporary science. In some particular cases, pupils and students and their families or other groups may even be prepared to contradict some of the best supported scientific theories, leading to some well-known debates on the education of whatever lessons of science are considered to contradict the teachings of some prevailing religion. For example, there is an ongoing discussion, especially in some parts of the United States, on whether evolutionary biology and our contemporary theories concerning the origins and the age of the universe and our planet should be taught at school at all or without presenting also a “competing”, religiously motivated account. But such disagreements are not, in most contexts, understood to undermine science, or to render science-based teaching problematic or “ideologically” laden.

The problem of pluralism, then, is due to the fact that there is no source for values and standards of justification of ethical views analogous to science and the scientific method. Rather, in the absence of such a source, the current lines of response to the problem of pluralism draw from the idea that the ethical views or standards of rationality and ethical reasoning which (at least) can be raised in educational context receive universal or near-universal support. More or less explicitly, they take agreement or (reasonable) consensus within society to be the main criterion by which we assess whether one or another ethical view can (justifiably) be incorporated into education, at least without considerable reservations or qualifications. The underlying, even if often implicit view is that there are core values that everyone in our society could agree upon, even if for somewhat different reasons. The response to the problem of pluralism is, then, to *curtail* pluralism, at least to an extent: it is to argue that there are *some* values or standards acceptable to everyone – and,

hence, that those values can be relied upon in educational contexts. But as we have seen, however, this approach is vulnerable to salient counterexamples of disagreements concerning actual educational contexts.

It is instructive to note how the issues here are related to famous attempts to deal with what could be called the problem of *political pluralism*, the political analogue of our pluralism. In John Rawls's description (1996), political pluralism is the view that, in societies with freedom of opinion, conflicting political and ethical views will develop. In Rawls's particular take of pluralism, this development is not due to clear fault on one or another side of the debate: pluralism is not rooted merely in narrow-mindedness and faulty reasoning, or "solely in ignorance and perversity, or else in the rivalries for power, scams, or economic gain" (Rawls 1996, 58). In order to overcome the difficulty of legitimizing the use of political power and the imposing of a rule over a diverse citizenry, Rawls famously proposed that reasonable citizens can – despite their differing ethical and political opinions – reach a consensus concerning political principles of justice on their own, in many cases varying reasons. Just as the consensus-oriented perspective attempts to find a foundation for ethical education in the values which maintain social cohesion and cooperation, in his account in *Political Liberalism* Rawls emphasizes that shared ideas and ideas of public political culture to build a political conception of justice agreed upon by all (Rawls 1996, 99–101).

However, this approach suffers from the same difficulty as the consensus-oriented view of ethical education discussed above. As Rawls's many critics have pointed out, it is hardly evident that *any* ethical or political principles are justifiable to *everyone* (cf. Rydenfelt 2013; 2019b). Again, the problem of pluralism persists: disagreement may arise concerning any issue, including the political principles of justice themselves. The problem of pluralism persists as long as a consensus among citizens is taken to be the (only) source for the kind of

ethical and political principles which can be used as the foundation of the society and its public, political order.

#### **4. Pragmatism and pluralism**

I have argued that the problem of pluralism persists as long as we, in the absence of another source for ethical justification or validity, take a consensus to be the source for the acceptability or justifiability for relying on certain ethical values or standards in social, including educational contexts. Any consensus achieved or imaginable is threatened by the potential variety of ethical views that may develop within our societies. I will now turn to suggest that the classical source of pluralism in contemporary philosophy, philosophical pragmatism, can offer us an alternative perspective from which pluralism does not appear as merely problematic; indeed, I will propose that pluralism can be viewed as having its own, epistemic benefits.

Pluralism, for the pragmatists, did not originally mean an approach to moral or more broadly cultural diversity. William James (1908) used the word to characterize his ontological stance setting against the various forms of absolute idealism as well as mechanistic materialism of his contemporaries. But the key upshot of ontological pluralism, for James, was ethical. Absolute idealism and materialism alike sided with moral skepticism in failing to leave room for real improvement. Pluralism was the ontological basis of James's meliorism: the belief that maintains that the world is neither the best possible (or "ready-made") nor too evil to resist improvement, or – as John Dewey approvingly put it – that "the specific conditions which exist at one moment, be they comparatively bad or comparatively good, in any event may be bettered" (MW 12:181-2 [1920]). Already in the

second generation of pragmatists, however, the notion of pluralism was used to refer to social and societal conditions. *Cultural* pluralism was a term popularized by James's student Horace Kallen (1915), who argued against the ideal of cultural uniformity (or "Americanization") and maintained that cultural diversity was compatible with national pride (cf. Bernstein 2015). Since that time, pragmatists have often been proponents of ethical and political pluralism, advocating the view that cultural and ethical plurality is acceptable or, *a fortiori*, beneficial to our societies.

However, even within the pragmatist tradition, pluralism has become something of a contentious topic. In their provokingly titled article, "Why Pragmatists Cannot Be Pluralists" (2005), Scott Aikin and Robert B. Talisse argue that pragmatists, long affiliated with pluralist views, should instead adopt a monistic view of ethics. In order to make this argument, Aikin and Talisse distinguish three forms of pluralism. According to *deep* pluralism, the conflicts between values cannot be resolved, as they are "built into the very fabric of moral reality" (2005, 103). By contrast, a *shallow* pluralist prescribes tolerance in the face of ethical conflicts which cannot be rationally adjudicated. Lastly, *modus vivendi* pluralism views society as the venue of negotiation and occasional compromise between groups and individuals with conflicting values. Talisse and Aikin argue that pragmatists cannot be deep pluralists. Pragmatists, committed to scientific inquiry, cannot rule out the very possibility of finding a resolution or satisfactory response to some conflict in values; to do so would be to block the path of inquiry, while *modus vivendi* pluralism is an inherently unstable view. Finally, Talisse and Aikin maintain that shallow pluralism is not pluralism enough. The shallow pluralist, by their account, recognizes and tolerates ethical disagreements as well as the fact that these disagreements cannot be adjudicated or resolved by current means. But

such a view, according to Talisse and Aikin, is compatible with monism: it does not imply that the disagreement is permanently intractable.

Talisse and Aikin are surely correct in maintaining that pragmatists cannot be “deep” pluralists, in their sense. Pluralism, in this sense, includes the commitment that the conflict between values is a permanent state of affairs. But this is a very strong commitment which appears to be difficult to defend. In particular, it fits uneasily with the pragmatist views of inquiry and its possibilities. Critical of a hard dichotomy between descriptive and normative questions, pragmatists – beginning with Peirce – argued that normative issues can be the subjects and topics of scientific inquiry (cf. Rydenfelt 2015; *forthcoming*). Peirce proposed a line of inquiry which he called *normative science* composed of aesthetics, ethics and logic. Dewey, in turn, suggested that matters of ethics and social policy should be subjected to experimental study which he called social inquiry (Rydenfelt 2020). Such lines of inquiry would not get going, if we assume that all or most conflicts between values are permanently intractable.

However, the only alternative Talisse and Aikin argue is left for the pragmatist is the “shallow” version. It is true that this form of pluralism is compatible with a kind of monism about ethical truth: that there may be one correct view about this or that ethical issue. But it does not follow that pluralism of this kind has bite. Talisse and Aikin’s view of “shallow” pluralism takes a decidedly individualistic shape. The pluralist will merely prescribe tolerance towards others and their life choices: “those of us pursuing the good life ought not interfere with the experiments in living others perform”, they write, “just as scientists do not (or ought not) interfere with the experiments of their peers and competitors” (2005, 107). However, in construing “shallow” pluralism as mere tolerance towards the “life experiments” of others, Talisse and Aikin miss much of its social and societal relevance. Recognizing

ethical disagreements as a fact of life in one's society, but also acknowledging one's own limits in resolving such disagreements points to much more than just the initial attitude of tolerance towards those who maintain views incompatible with one's own; it also entails that one is prepared to attempt to justify one's views to various others, and also revise one's own views in light of compelling arguments and justifications by them. To use Talisse and Aikin's own analogy: with experimental scientists, divergence of opinion between inquirers points towards problems to be solved and arguments and evidence for and against to be presented. We not only refrain from interfering in the experiments of others, in the sense of preventing them (at least without good ethical reason); when our opinions differ, we attempt to find out who is mistaken as a community of inquirers.

Indeed, when combined with the pragmatist idea that ethical issues may and should be subjected to scientific inquiry, "shallow" pluralism turns out to be not at all shallow, but a potent view of how ethical conflict should be addressed. By the pragmatist account, inquiry begins with doubt, or what Dewey called a problematic situation: some of our beliefs are called into question, and inquiry is required to appease this doubt by attaining a new conception or belief. Science is this process made deliberate: the scientist deliberately attempts to revise and test theories and hypothesis, including ones already (but provisionally) accepted. Such revision extends to the methods and standards of inquiry itself: far from *a priori* certainties, our views of justifying our views, criteria for better and worse theories and procedures are themselves the fallible and revisable results of the scientific practice. The epistemic benefits of pluralism in light of this view are numerous. Pluralism – in its "shallow" version – entails that we do not take ethical conflict to be (necessarily) hopelessly intractable, but nevertheless acknowledge our limited capacity in addressing it, making necessary the consideration of the conflicting opinions of others. As such, pluralism has

doubtless epistemic benefits for the revision and improvement of ethical opinion (cf. Holma 2012). Conflicts of opinion instigate *doubt* concerning one's own ethical views; they necessitate producing explicit *justifications* of one's position, and the scrutiny of the justifications of others; and, in this way, enable the *revision* of one's views.

## **5. Conclusion: ethical pluralism and education**

The problem of pluralism we set out with was one concerning the acceptability of values in education: when and how can we, under conditions of conflicting ethical opinions and standards, rely on some of our ethical views in educational contexts? One main line of response to the problem, I argued, maintains that teaching and education may be founded on values and standards widely shared on our society. This response, I pointed out, attempts to manage plurality by curtailing it: by arguing that *some* views are acceptable to everyone. From the pragmatist point of view, however, no such argument is needed. Indeed, for the pragmatist, pluralism appears less as a problem and more as an important catalyst for doubt, justification and revision of ethical opinion – for ethical inquiry. As opposed to the attempts of deriving some ethical and political views which everyone would rely on, the pragmatist points towards the possibility of revision and improvement of our ethical views, and the role that conflicts of opinion have in such revision and improvement.

However, it remains to be asked what the pragmatist stance would translate into within educational practice. What and whose values can we rely on, and how? As Peirce often reminds us, inquiry cannot begin with universal doubt. In this, the pragmatist stance has an affinity with the consensus-oriented view: we must begin with what we have – the values and standards we currently subscribe to. Ethical conflict and diversity of opinion is to be



taken as pointing towards the possibility of doubting one's views, and the need to provide justification for them; the need to critically evaluate arguments and standards that can be presented for and against our ethical opinions. In this, the pragmatist version has an affinity to the ideal of critical thinking: as opposed to simply teaching particular ethical views, we are to engage in the process of justification and revision. However, the pragmatist view recognizes the fact that our standards of justification, argumentation, evidence, and the like, may themselves be subject to conflict and revision.

Put to practice, the pragmatist idea of pluralism, then, does not entail that ethical issues are hopelessly intractable, or that we must – in the absence of ethical inquiry – rely simply on the views commonly accepted in our society. Quite the contrary, it maintains that revision and improvement of ethical views is possible by way of inquiry. Nevertheless, the pragmatist view of pluralism is not limited to mere tolerance of the conflicting opinions of others; precisely because the pragmatist takes improvement to be possible, conflicts are not just something to be tolerated, but, rather, provide opportunities for inquiry. Pragmatist pluralism prescribes a “scientific” attitude – openness for revision, fallibility and need for constant justification – towards ethical opinion in any social circumstances, including educational contexts.

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