Pragmatism and Pluralism Revisited

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Abstract
In 2005, we published a jointly authored article arguing that pragmatists must reject pluralism. As certain pragmatists describe themselves as pluralists, the essay received its share of criticism; however, no response has succeeded in defeating the essay’s argument. Nonetheless, contemporary classical pragmatists persist in embracing the term. Something’s amiss. In this article, we defend a conclusion that differs importantly from that of the 2005 paper. We will show that pragmatism is consistent with a view that we call modest epistemological pluralism. Thus, pragmatists can be pluralists. However, contemporary classicalists should beware. Our argument shows that pragmatism and pluralism are consistent, not that they are intrinsically allied. More importantly, the modest epistemological pluralism is not the pluralism that contemporary classicalists seem most eager to embrace. The argument proceeds in six steps. First, we dispense with a common but unacceptable conception of pluralism. Second, we identify what pluralism must assert. Third, we distinguish different varieties of pluralism. Fourth, we argue that pragmatists must reject all pluralisms except for what we term modest epistemological pluralism. Fifth, we discuss the prospects for pragmatist-friendly modest epistemological pluralism. Finally, we address the concern that modest epistemological pluralism is not practically distinguishable from monism.

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beware. We argue that pragmatism and pluralism are consistent, not that they are intrinsically allied. Moreover, the pluralism on offer is not the pluralism that contemporary classicalists seem most eager to embrace. That variety of pluralism is indeed inconsistent with pragmatism.

We proceed in six steps. First, we dispense with a common but unacceptable conception of pluralism. Second, we identify what pluralism must assert. Third, we distinguish different varieties of pluralism. Fourth, we argue pragmatists must reject all pluralisms except for what we term modest epistemological pluralism. Fifth, we discuss the prospects for pragmatist-friendly modest epistemological pluralism. Finally, we address the concern that modest epistemological pluralism is not practically distinguishable from monism.

What Pluralism Isn’t

The term pluralism owes much of its popularity to its rhetorical force. It often is shorthand for a family of admirable commitments: anti-dogmatism, open-mindedness, inclusiveness, and so on. To simplify, let’s say that pluralism in this popular sense is not merely the recognition but also the appreciation of the diversity of goods. Notice that popular pluralism has a decidedly second-order flavour; it is not a view about what is good, but rather the view that we should embrace the diversity of goods. Hence, popular pluralism seems to stand above the fray of moral conflict. It therefore appears not only tolerant but also irenic and conciliatory.

Yet, difficulties lurk. One is that popular pluralism is consistent with value monism. There is nothing inconsistent about affirming the positive value of open-mindedness and diversity while also holding that there is but one thing that is ultimately of value. It is hard to imagine a more compelling defence of diversity and open-mindedness than the one found in Mill’s in On Liberty. But Mill is a value monist. Accordingly, popular pluralism is not opposed to monism but only to views that reject inclusiveness, open-mindedness and diversity.

A second difficulty now emerges. Concepts like inclusion, tolerance, open-mindedness and diversity are ideal-dependent. To be inclusive is to include everything that ought to be included; to appreciate diversity is to appreciate the different things that should be appreciated; to be tolerant is to abide all tolerable oppositions; and to have an open mind is to be open to all possibilities that are worthy of consideration. The content of these concepts derives from the normative theory accepted by the person deploying them. Hence, the popular pluralist’s call to appreciate diversity is hollow until she identifies her underlying normative commitments.

We can see how these difficulties arise by considering two broad methodological points of order. The first is that the content of a philosophical view is determined not only by what it asserts to be true but also by which other views it identifies as its primary opposition. Pluralism, after all, is supposed to be an alternative to some opposing view. So the pluralist must assert something that the non-pluralist must deny. If the pluralist says all the same things that non-pluralists say, then pluralism is just a word, not a philosophical view.

The second point of order is that when a view makes a normative prescription, it is subject to the philosophical standards that typically apply to prescriptive claims. We have said that at first blush pluralism looks like a purely second-order view, a view about normative claims, rather than a normative prescription in its own right. Again, one of the
main attractions of pluralism is precisely its meta-normative air. However, pluralists frequently wield their view as if it prescribes tolerance, open-mindedness and diversity. Consequently, pluralism is not strictly second-order; it makes prescriptions and thus must be examined just as one would examine any other normative view. Hence, the pluralist incurs two closely related tasks.

First, the pluralist must identify what it is that we must be tolerant of and what contributes to the requisite kind of diversity. This requires that the pluralist not only have a second-order view about values, but a first-order view about what is to be valued. Second, the pluralist must explain why one ought to be tolerant or why diversity is valuable. The trouble is that when the pluralist undertakes these tasks, she relinquishes the second-order ground of making statements only about value and must begin making first-order claims about what is of value; minimally, she must explain why tolerance and diversity are morally preferable to their opposites. Hence, the popular pluralist must descend from the second-order and affirm normative commitments at the first-order, thereby acquiring the philosophical chores that such commitments beget.

In short, if it is to avoid vacuity, popular pluralism must affirm some conception of the value of the tolerance and diversity it prescribes. But once the popular pluralist does that, her view becomes another first-order conception of what is valuable; pluralism thus loses its second-order character and enters the moral fray. Yet, its second-order appearance seemed to be popular pluralism’s main advantage. Consequently, popular pluralism is either vacuous or unstable. If pluralism is to be a philosophical view worth considering, it must say more than what is contained in the popular version; it must be articulated as a philosophical doctrine.

**What Pluralism Must Assert**

One way to get a grip on what philosophical pluralism must assert is to look to its primary philosophical opposition. Pluralism’s main opponent is *monism.*

Monism is the view that all valuable things are either instances of the one thing that is ultimately valuable or instruments towards attaining or producing instances or quantities of that one thing. To borrow Ronald Dworkin’s (2011) slogan, monism is the view that ‘value is one big thing’ (p. 1). Thus, monism is not the claim that everyone should be the same, or that there is but one way in which all should live. The monist need not deny the rich diversity of good things; she asserts only that goodness is to be explained by reference to some one thing that is of ultimate value.

Think again of Mill. He holds that ‘utility’ is ‘the ultimate appeal on all ethical questions’ (Mill, 1978: 10), but then explains that as ‘progressive beings’ (p. 10) we produce the most utility when we each ‘[pursue] our own good in our own way’ (p. 12). There is the one ultimate value, but it can be realised in a variety of ways. Monism hence is not a one-size-fits-all conception of value; it says that value is one-thing-that-comes-in-many-sizes.

Recall our first point of order. In order to avoid vacuity, pluralism must make a distinctive claim that monists must deny. Now, the distinctive component of monism is the view that all goods are *commensurable.* On the utilitarian version, this means that for any two goods, it must be the case that one is better than the other, or else they are equally valuable. Of course, it is open to utilitarians (and other monists) to hold that with regard to certain pairs of values, informational and other limitations will make it impossible to discover the relative worth of the options. Even in such cases, monists must hold that
either one is better than the other, or else they are equally valuable. Commensurability follows from monism: If value is one big thing, then differences among good things are always differences of degree and never of kind. That’s the sine qua non of monism.

This helps us to see that pluralism is not simply the claim that many things are valuable. Pluralism holds that goods are irreducibly many, that there are differences in kind among values and that some goods are incommensurable with others. Pluralism, then, is the view that there could be two goods that are not equally valuable, where neither is better than the other.

One immediate implication of pluralism is that there could be conflicts among values that do not admit of a uniquely rational resolution. When goods are incommensurable, there is no answer concerning which one trumps; thus, when one must choose between them, there is no uniquely rational moral perspective from which one could decide which is best. Pluralism holds that moral theory runs out, and we sometimes confront tragic choices.

We now have a clear view of philosophical pluralism. It is fundamentally the rejection of commensurabilism, the monist’s central contention. Put positively, pluralism is the claim that some goods are incommensurable with others.

**Varieties of Pluralism**

Pluralisms can be distinguished according to their different interpretations of incommensurability. Two broad categories suggest themselves: metaphysical and epistemological. Loosely put, in explaining incommensurability, metaphysical pluralists appeal to what values are, whereas epistemological pluralists appeal to what we know about values.

Isaiah Berlin promoted a metaphysical pluralism. He regarded values as quasi-Platonic objects vying for instantiation in our lives, but without a unifying Form of the Good. We also count William James as a metaphysical pluralist. James held that the good is the satisfaction of desire, yet he denied the homogeneity of desires. Hence, there is incommensurability: one’s desire for A can be different in kind from one’s desire for B.

Epistemological pluralism claims that some values are incommensurable with others because we are unable to commensurate them. Epistemological pluralism comes in two grades: strong and modest. The strong grade treats incommensurability as intrinsic; our epistemic powers, even in full development, are not sufficient to commensurate all goods. Hence, strong epistemological pluralism is a form of scepticism concerning the rational resolvability of value conflict (perhaps derived by way of cynical induction or from the fact of peer disagreement). The modest variant claims that given the current state of moral knowledge, we are unable to commensurate all goods. The modest view says only that we currently know of no means of reasonably resolving all value conflict. On both epistemological views, the moral explananda outstrip our moral theories, and so our moral knowledge is incomplete. The views differ on the question of whether this is a permanent feature of moral epistemology. The strong view says yes, the modest view does not.

Two further points deserve emphasis. First, strong epistemological pluralism is consistent with metaphysical pluralism. In fact, a value pluralist is likely to embrace the strong epistemological view, holding that value ontology explains the intrinsic indeterminacy of certain conflicts. Indeed, the two may support each other: Metaphysical pluralism explains the epistemic indeterminacy, and the epistemic indeterminacy serves as evidence for the heterogeneous value ontology.
Second, modest epistemological pluralists must be quietists about the metaphysics of value. They must not reject the claims of the metaphysical pluralist, but rather merely decline to accept them. Similarly, the modest epistemological view refuses the core of strong epistemological pluralism; again, the modesty of the view consists in its quietism on the deeper epistemological and metaphysical issues. Yet, modesty is not evasion; the modest epistemological pluralist asserts that moral knowledge is not yet sufficiently developed to warrant bolder claims about the nature and epistemology of value. Epistemological modesty means that one does not speak to things about which one does not have sufficient grounds.

**Pluralism and Pragmatism**

Any statement of what pragmatism is will be controversial. Hopefully, it will not invite too much trouble to say that pragmatism is a naturalism that takes human practices of inquiry to be fundamental. Charles Peirce of course proposed as the first rule of philosophy the maxim ‘do not block the way of inquiry’; subsequent pragmatists have followed suit in ways too complicated to rehearse here. Typically, the focus on practices leads to other recognisably pragmatist commitments, including fallibilism, experimentalism, collective problem-solving and ontological parsimony.

Pragmatists obviously must reject metaphysical pluralism. This is clearest in the case of Berlin’s quasi-Platonist ontology. Yet, pragmatists must also reject Jamesian pluralism. William James’ view presupposes a phenomenalism that is as metaphysically objectionable as quasi-Platonism. More importantly, James’ phenomenalism renders moral inquiry impossible. This is evident once we understand that morality is in certain respects a shared human project. If, as James (1977) alleges, the only thing that can be good is the satisfaction of desire (p. 621), and desires are states of individual minds, then it is no wonder that James (1977) is silent when it comes to collective moral problems. He advises each to satisfy as many desires as possible, including those of others (James, 1977: 623). However, a world with 20 desires satisfied cannot be better than a world with only 10 desires satisfied, unless a world in which more desires are satisfied is a world in which there is more good. But the central premise of James’ (1977) pluralism is that desires are heterogeneous states with ‘no common character’ (p. 621); thus, the satisfaction of a greater number of desires does not cause there to be a greater quantity of good, only more goods. More good in the world is surely better than less good; but what is the value of there being more goods? So James’ prescription seems unmotivated. Indeed, it seems James cannot make any prescription concerning others.

As they favour metaphysical parsimony, the epistemological pluralisms should appeal to the pragmatist. However, the strong epistemological view is objectionable in that it affirms that certain limitations on human inquiry are insurmountable on the grounds that we have thus far been unable to surmount them. This is surely a block to inquiry of the kind that Peirce railed against.

Furthermore, the strong epistemological pluralist must distinguish between value conflicts that cannot be resolved, given our current resources, and those that are intrinsically irresoluble. And that distinction requires the strong epistemological pluralist to go beyond talking about moral epistemology and say something about the values themselves. Consequently, strong epistemological pluralism depends on metaphysical pluralism. To draw the knot, pragmatists can’t be metaphysical pluralists, and one can be a strong
epistemic pluralist only if one is also a metaphysical pluralist; therefore, pragmatists can’t be strong epistemological pluralists.

This leaves modest epistemological pluralism. Note that it is indeed a pluralism because it does not affirm what monism must: All goods are commensurable. Monism contends that this is a conceptual truth; commensurability is a necessary condition for being a good. Modest epistemological pluralism rejects this insofar as it affirms that there is no contradiction in claiming that A and B are both goods, although incommensurable. But the modest epistemological pluralist can say little beyond this. His claim is that our moral knowledge is underdeveloped and that this calls for further inquiry, even with respect to cases that seem intractable. Yet, the modest epistemological pluralist also recognises the possibility that inquiry could lead us to adopt a more robust form of pluralism or even a version of monism. Accordingly, the modest epistemological view is clearly consistent with any version of pragmatism rooted in human practices of inquiry. It is moreover metaphysically parsimonious and also a comfortable fit with fallibilism, experimentalism, and the application of collective intelligence to shared problems.

Therefore, pragmatists can be pluralists after all. However, pragmatists need not embrace pluralism. Moreover, there is nothing in modest epistemological pluralism that is distinctively pragmatist. This latter point will no doubt sour contemporary classicalists who think of pluralism as a uniquely pragmatist insight. In any case, our aim has been to argue that pluralism more robust than the modest epistemological variety is unavailable to the pragmatist.

**Elaborating Modest Epistemological Pluralism**

It has long been an ambition of pluralists to devise an entailment from pluralism to attractive social norms such as toleration, open-mindedness, inclusion, and so on. The ambition is doomed from the start: One cannot derive a conclusion about what is valuable from a thesis about what values are. Any attempt to forge the entailment will commit an is/ought error. Nonetheless, we contend that although the prized entailment cannot be forged, modest epistemological pluralism provides a basis for adopting such commitments that other pluralisms cannot quite muster.

Modest epistemological pluralism holds that our moral knowledge is incomplete, and for all we know it could be completed with further inquiry. It therefore holds open the possibility of moral progress. Hence, modest epistemological pluralism has a conative component; in inquiry, we strive for something we are not sure can be realised. And this striving is fuelled by the realisation that we currently do not have adequate knowledge. Although it does not require it, modest epistemological pluralism engenders a kind of epistemic humility that rides alongside its exhortation for further inquiry. And this humility is a natural cognitive counterpart to social and moral commitments to familiar understandings of toleration, open-mindedness, diversity, inclusion, and the rest. That is, modest epistemic pluralism gives us a reason to adopt these norms.

The connection between epistemic humility and the norms of toleration and open dialogue is not difficult to see. If one is epistemically humble, one’s humility is compromised by acknowledging a constellation of facts about one’s cognitive life:

I am fallible. I am cognitively dependent. I must rely on others to be reliable in providing me with information. I do not have all the facts. My assessment of the connections between pieces of information is fallible. Many others rationally and sincerely disagree with me on many things.
In the midst of dialogue, I can correct the errors of others, and they, my errors. I may be wrong about many things, and dialogue with others is an excellent means of making the requisite corrections …

Given cognitive dependence, widespread disagreement and fallibility, a sound policy would be for people to share information, to weigh reasons together, and to maintain open dialogue amidst disagreement. Furthermore, given the fact that much information gathering should be performed under uncompromised circumstances, we should allow others broad latitude to conduct their experiments in living. And finally, dialogue between views must be as open as dialectically possible, allowing challenges and new considerations from all quarters. We want to live as best we can, and that requires knowing something about value, nature and human life. In order to know these things, we must live together in an open society.

Consider how one’s cognitive aims would be frustrated were open society norms to fail. Imagine yourself living in a society where no one is allowed to question certain ideas. You may find yourself holding firmly to those enforced ideas, but you would see your own beliefs as formed by social pressure rather than by evidence. Or imagine yourself living in a society where information is strictly controlled so that certain ‘dangerous ideas’ can never receive any articulation or support; you may indeed reject the dangerous ideas, but still you would worry that the wool is being pulled over your eyes. Epistemic humility and a companion that we might call earnestness – the desire to believe the truth and follow the best reasons – dovetail with the norms of tolerance, diversity and dialogue.10 Modest epistemic pluralism does have a normative payoff, but, importantly, this is because of its modest epistemic component, not its pluralism.

By contrast, the other varieties of pluralism cannot offer positive reasons to adopt such norms. There is no reason why metaphysical pluralism would provide a motivation for toleration. The fact that value-objects are irreducibly many could just as plausibly underwrite a Schmittean commitment to authoritarianism (Schmitt, 1976). The strong epistemological view says that we are irremediably stuck with value conflicts. Again, this view offers comfort to the authoritarian, who could conclude that when values clash, one should simply eliminate the conflict by eliminating one of the opposed values.

Of course, this is not to say that proponents of the other pluralisms are precluded from appreciating the values of open-mindedness, diversity and inclusion. The point rather is that since their pluralism is fully compatible with authoritarianism, it cannot be the source of these commitments. To repeat, modest epistemological pluralism certainly does not entail that we must be tolerant, inclusive, and open-minded appreciators of diversity. But, as a call for inquiry, it does contain a need for certain cognitive attitudes – including epistemic humility and earnestness – that encourage the adoption of attractive social commitments. It provides not an entailment, but an inducement.

The Difference: Prospects for Pragmatist Pluralism

We have argued that modest epistemic pluralism is a form of pluralism because it declines to affirm what monism must affirm; modest epistemic pluralism ‘passively rejects’ the sine qua non of monism (Price, 2011: 258). To repeat, the modest epistemic pluralist holds that some value conflicts resist a single rational resolution because they involve goods that we do not know how to commensurate, but she remains quietist with regard to both the ontology of value and the permanence of the epistemic indeterminacy. The
monist, by contrast, must see the inability to identify a single rational resolution to a value conflict as a kind of failure that is remediable, at least in principle.

Now, the challenge for the pragmatist who adopts modest epistemological pluralism is to identify some practical upshot of pluralism, for pragmatism holds that unless some such upshot could be identified, the difference between (modest epistemological) pluralism and monism makes no difference.

To heighten this challenge, consider again Mill’s On Liberty. To repeat, Mill is a monist about value, and in On Liberty, Mill proposes norms of dialogue, tolerance and inquiry. These are precisely the kinds of norms proposed by the modest epistemic pluralist. Adopting a Jamesian tone, one may ask, what practical difference is there between modest epistemological pluralism and monism? We believe there is at least one key difference.

The difference we have in mind concerns the possibility of tragic conflicts. A tragic conflict is one in which one does something wrong no matter what one does. Low-stakes cases of tragedy are common, as when one must tell a lie in order to keep a promise. High-stakes cases are thankfully less common, but no less easy to imagine. (Consider the conundrum presented in Sophie’s Choice.) Importantly, what makes these cases tragic is not only that one cannot avoid wrongdoing but also that there seems to be no single and rational way to rank order the conflicting values; no matter what one does, one commits a wrong, and yet there’s no way to determine which wrong is the lesser.

Moral experience leads us to the view that there are indeed tragic conflicts. Yet monist views must deny that any value conflict has a tragic structure. Commensurabilism entails that for any value conflict, there is always a best thing to do. Again, for the monist, it is a conceptual truth that tragedy is merely apparent, emerging from our limitations, and not a feature of the moral life as such.

As modest epistemological pluralists decline to assert commensurabilism, they needn’t explain away the moral experience of tragedy in that way. They can affirm the conceptual possibility of tragic conflict. Accordingly, they can admit the broader conceptual possibility that our moral lives are irreparably vulnerable to circumstances of inescapable wrongdoing. This somewhat bleak, quasi-existentialist possibility is left open by modest epistemological pluralism, whereas monists must not only deny this possibility but also hold that it is conceptually incoherent. Recall that the monist holds that if something is a value, then it must be a harmonious complement to every other value.

We have formulated the key difference between modest epistemological pluralism and monism as turning on a conceptual matter. This might strike some pragmatists as too thin a difference to make a practical difference. But conceptual issues can have practical payoffs, and we think this one does. Given what has been said, one can see that modest epistemological pluralism requires less revision of ordinary moral experience than monism involves. When it comes to moral experience, saving the appearances counts as a practical payoff. Furthermore, unlike monism, modest epistemological pluralism does not begin from a conception of what value must look like in the final analysis; it thereby provides a kind of safeguard against false unities and syntheses among seemingly disparate values. But perhaps most important of all, in admitting the conceptual possibility of situations that are irremediably morally tragic, modest epistemological pluralism seems a positive inducement towards (although it does not entail) not only the epistemic modesty and earnestness discussed above but also a measure of moral gentleness, generosity, consideration and forgiveness in the face of the moral struggles of others.
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Notes
1. The essay was published with critical replies from Michael Eldridge (2005), Cheryl Misak (2005), Henry Jackman (2005), and Michael Sullivan and John Lysaker (2005). We replied to these essays in Talisse and Aikin (2005b). In the time following the original exchange, other critical replies have surfaced. See, for example, Ralston (2008), Rondel (2008), Rogers (2009), Koopman (2009), and Dueck (2014).
2. ‘Contemporary classical pragmatist’ is meant to designate those who associate their philosophical views and ambitions with the so-called ‘classical’ pragmatists rather than with the mid-century pragmatisms of, for example, Lewis, Goodman, Hook, and Quine; the neo-pragmatisms of Rorty, Putnam, and Posner; and the new-pragmatism of Misak, Haack, Brandom, and Price. Such classifications are of course contestable, but the contemporary classical idiom is marked by the centrality reaffirming the importance of classical pragmatism, an intellectual legacy they allege has been marginalised or discarded.
3. Much hay has been made about this point in response to Talisse and Aikin (2005a), as it seems clear that James can be interpreted as a metaphysical pluralist, as can many other pragmatists. We can concede that many pragmatists have been (or can be interpreted as) pluralists without evacuating our original position, as our argument is not that pragmatists have not been or are not pluralists. Rather, our claim is that the strong versions of pluralism are inconsistent with pragmatism. That pragmatists have been inconsistent isn’t up for debate, and the regular reminder of it as a matter of historical display makes no philosophical headway. For a development of this point, see Aikin and Talisse (2011a: 6; 2011b: 33–34). That this point has not been appreciated is clear in the replies from Eldridge (2005), Sullivan and Lysaker (2005), Ralston (2008), and Putnam (2011). Again, it’s not that pragmatists have not been pluralists, but whether they can consistently be pluralists.
4. This is Richard Gale’s (2005, 2010, 2011) interpretation of pragmatist ethics. For replies to Gale on this point, see Aikin and Talisse (2011b) and Aikin (2014).
5. We cannot discuss the matter here, but our conception of quietism bears a close resemblance with Huw Price’s (2011) view of passive rejection (p. 258).
6. See our introduction to The Pragmatism Reader (Talisse and Aikin, 2011: 4–5) for an account of how differences of emphasis on these two foci yield diverse research programmes.
7. See our case for this in Talisse and Aikin (2005a: 108).
8. For a more complete case against the Jamesian pluralist ethical programme, see Aikin and Talisse (2011a).
9. On this, see Talisse (2010).
10. For a more complete development of this line of argument from epistemic commitments to open society norms, see Talisse (2007, 2009) and Aikin and Talisse (2014).

References


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