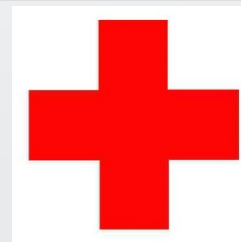


## DEWEY'S PRAGMATISM IN APPLIED ETHICS MALAISE OR CURE?



Post-normal science and its ethical  
aspects, 10-12 May 2010

# 1 Introduction

## Renaissance of Pragmatism in Philosophy and

- **Ethics** Published books on the **renaissance of pragmatism** (Sandbothe 2000; Hetzel/Kertscher/Röllli 2008; Margolis 2010)
- Published books on **pragmatistic ethics** (McGee 2003; Light/Katz 1996; McKenna/Light 2004; Nida Rümelin 2008; Hickman 2003; Keulartz et al.

[...] when a **philosopher »solves«** an **ethical problem** for one, one feels as if one had **asked for a subway token** and been given a **passenger ticket** valid for the first **interplanetary passenger-carrying spaceship** instead. (Putnam 1992, 179)

## Promise of Pragmatism

- **methodological support** to deal with **practical/empirical issues**
- **alternative approaches** to abstract and vague philosophical theories
- **feasible tools** and **convenient models** to solve practical problems
- Aerts 2006; Beekmann et al. 2006; Grimm 2006; Irrgang 2008; Kaiser et al. 2007; Kronen 2008; LaFollette 2007; Miller et al. 2007

# 1 Introduction

## Characteristics of Pragmatistic Ethics

*naturalism* – matches with the scientific world view

*experience as a method* – common experience

*empiricism* – methodological interchange with science

*situational* – contextual thinking in applied ethics

*no vague principles* – using principles as instruments

### Pragmatistic Ethics

*focus on action* – practical problems of individual persons

*pluralistic* – non-monistic opposed to utilitarian or rights ethics

*melioristic approach* – best under practical circumstances

# 1 Introduction

## ... closer look:

- **pragmatic or pragmatistic** (*pragmatic*: a way of dealing with something that is *based on practical considerations* rather than theoretical ones; *pragmatistic*: the philosophical attitude inspired by the *philosophical tradition of American pragmatism*)
- various **understandings of pragmatism** (new, analytic, American, classic, pragmatic)

My hunch is that one of the best ways to get our colleagues in various fields of applied ethics **to adopt more unpragmatic approaches** to their work is to argue that they **should consider becoming pragmatists**. (Light 2002, 89)

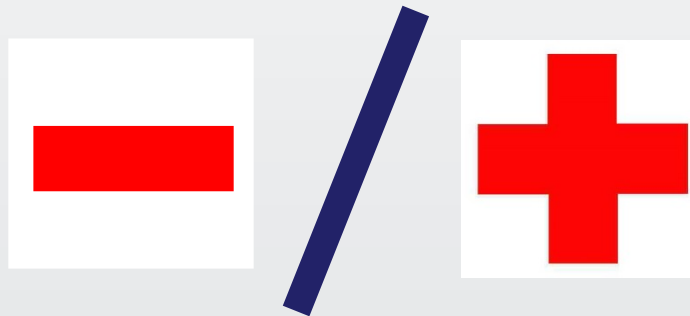
## But, becoming pragmatist means...

... that one has to **take up the mentioned characteristics** and become: **naturalist, empiricist, meliorist, situationalist, pluralist, focus on action, use principles as instruments**, etc.

What if we took up the corner stones of  
pragmatism in applied ethics?

## Pragmatism in Applied Ethics: Diagnosis or Cure?

- sufficient **theoretical resources** to respond critics?
- **premises** of pragmatism **solid basis** of ethical decision making?
- **implications** of pragmatism?



**DEWEY'S PRAGMATISM IN APPLIED ETHICS**  
MALAISE OR CURE?

# 2 Concept and Objectives

## Focus of the

### Project

- **In general:** Can Dewey's pragmatism give guidance in the field of applied ethics?
- **In particular:** Clarify the **(epistemological) role of empirical knowledge** in ethics.

## Why Dewey's

### Pragmatism?

- **Further:** Examine the influence/relation of science on/to ethics
- **increasing societal importance of science** in late 19<sup>th</sup> early 20<sup>th</sup> century
- **humanities** were forced to **clarify their epistemological power**
- Dewey's pragmatism as a starting point: reflect the **influence of science on ethics**

## In Terms of Method...

## 2 Concept and Objectives

### In Terms of Method...

- Dewey worked with great foresight on **science and ethics** (MW 10, MW12, LW1, LW7, LW 12)
- argued for an **empirical ethics** and to learn from science (model: empirical inquiry)
- considering his ideas can lead to better understanding of **empirical knowledge in ethics** and the **interfaces** between **science and ethics**

### Working Hypothesis

Against the background of an investigation into the **premises and implications of Dewey's pragmatism**, the question will be answered in what respects his pragmatistic methodology can help to **deal with empirical facts in applied ethics**. In particular, the **epistemological role of empirical knowledge in ethical reasoning** will be reflected. Thereby, the project will contribute to an increased **awareness** of the **methodological potentials and limitations of American pragmatism** and especially to clarify the **significance of scientific insights in applied ethics**

# 3 Methodology and Work Plan

## Five Topics

- The influence of the increasing societal **significance of science** on **Dewey's understanding of ethics** around 1900 and the **current debate on »naturalizing ethics«** (3.1).
  - **Dewey's ethical naturalism** and **naturalism in applied ethics** (3.2).
  - The **concept of experience** in Dewey's theory and the **function of empirical knowledge in applied ethics** (3.3).
  - **Dewey's experimental inquiry** as a methodological **model** to inquire into ethical problems (3.4).
  - **Ethics as social practice in Dewey's** pragmatism and the **significance of institutionalised ethics** (3.5).
- **develop and examine** Dewey's corresponding arguments
  - formulate Dewey's ideas with regard to his **commentators**
  - **utilize the results** to analyse pragmatism's potential and limits in applied ethics



# 3.1 Societal Significance of Science and Naturalizing Ethics

## Historical

### Context

- »Is the relevant knowledge for societal orientation provided by the sciences or by the humanities?« (Hegselmann 2002)
- **Physics**: 19th and 20th century; **Life sciences**: 20th and 21st century
- neuro sciences, stem cell research, genetics, animal-welfare science etc. **not only raise** new ethical questions but also **claim to give insight into central concepts** of philosophy (thought, free will, human life, etc.)

## Naturalizing

### Ethics

The goal of naturalized ethics is to show that **norms are natural**, and that they **arise from and are justified by purely natural processes**. (Casebeer 2003, 843)

## Dewey's

response...

# 3.1 Societal Significance of Science and Naturalizing Ethics

Dewey's

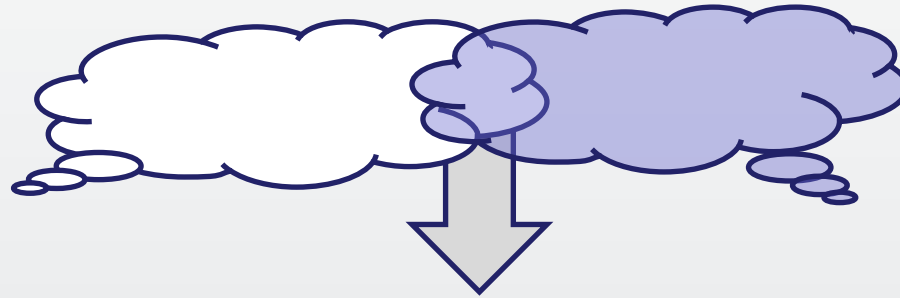
response...

- positive attitude towards science
- »**Make philosophy more empirical!**« (LW1, LW4, LW7, LW12, ...)

for

instance

...



Therefore: Dewey's **key problems and answers** to the increasing influence of science on ethics will be examined and utilized in context of applied ethics.

# 3.2 Dewey's Ethical Naturalism and Naturalism in Applied Ethics

## Dewey's

- **Naturalism** influenced by Darwin's *Origin of Species* and understanding of science
- characterize »naturalism« in Dewey's pragmatism (Hickman 1996; 2002; Miller 2000; 2007; Racine 2008)

**naturalism**

(metaethical position)

red: »good« identified with natural properties

non-red: »good« is a natural property *sui generis*

natural properties constitute effects, called »good«

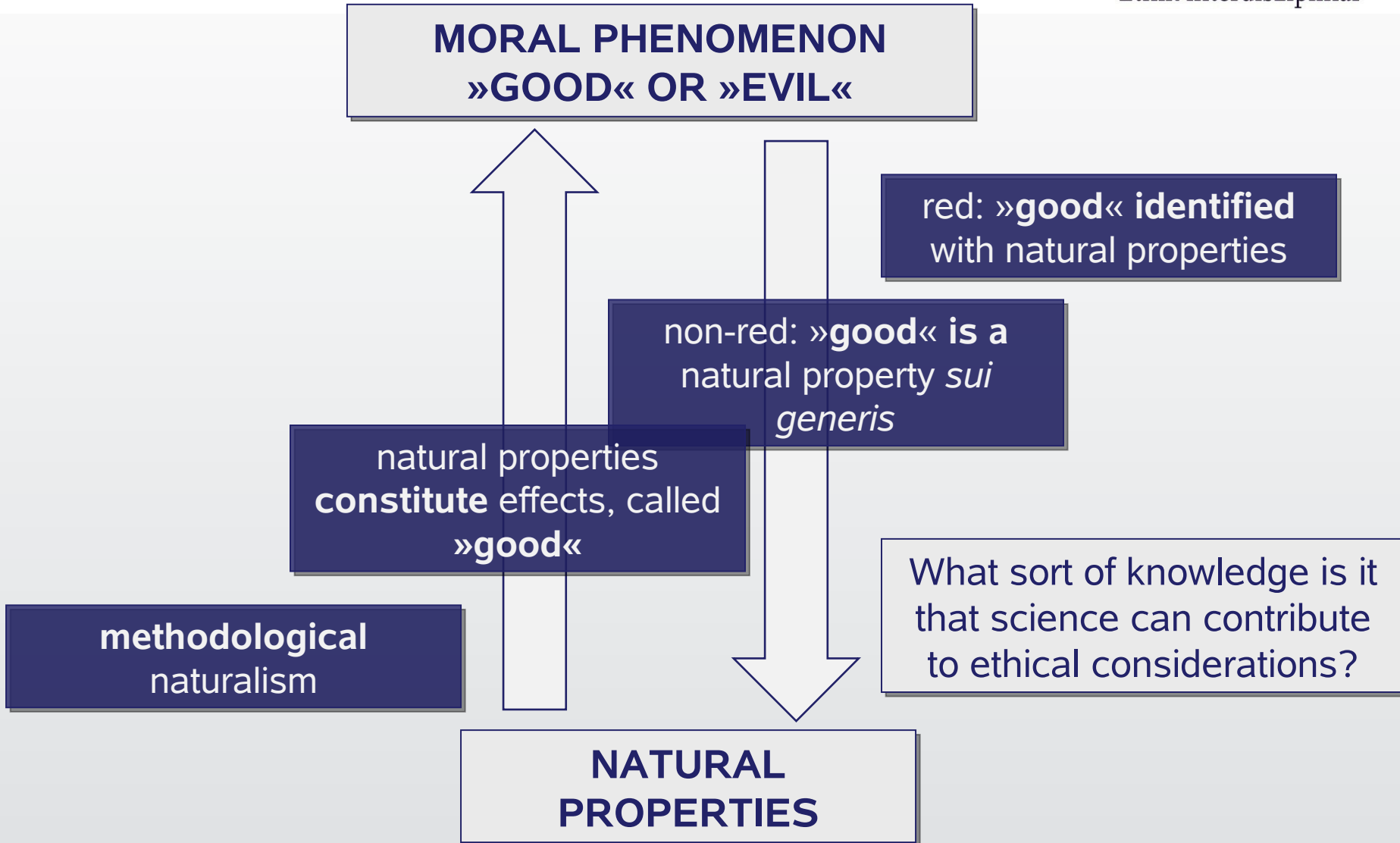
What theory of naturalism is Dewey's pragmatism in line with?

Is there a corresponding naturalism implicit in applied ethics?

**methodological naturalism**

Better understanding of the contributions of empirical science in applied ethics.

## 3.2 Dewey's Ethical Naturalism and Naturalism in Applied Ethics



## 3.3 Experience as Method and Empirical Ethics

### Experience in Pragmatism

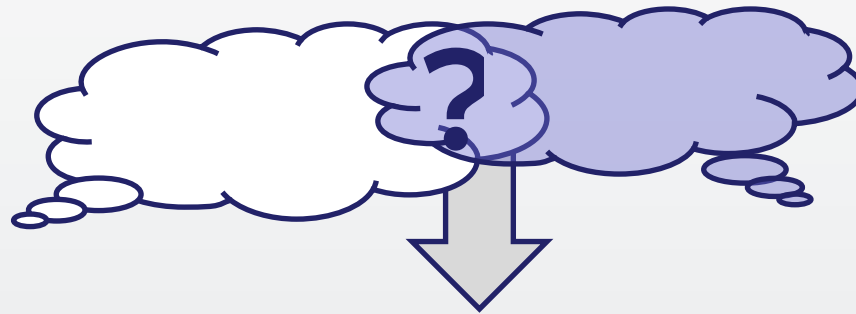
- **science** is understood in terms of **empirical science**
- experience has a **crucial function** in science (falsification, warranted hypothesis)
- aim: examine the **methodological role of experience** in Dewey's ethics (LW1, LW12, Pappas 2008, Caspary 2003)

### Experience in Applied Ethics and Empirical Ethics

- How can empirical knowledge influence ethical decision making?
- »**naturalistic fallacy**« (Engels 1993; 2008; Köchy 2008a; 2008b; Daele 2008)
- »**fact/value dichotomy**« (Dewey LW13; Putnam 1992; 2004)
- »**empirical ethics**« (Borry/Schotsmans/Dierickx 2004a; 2004b; 2005; Brendel 2003; Casterlé et al. 2004; Herrera 2008; Levitt 2004; Molewijk 2004; Molewijk et al. 2004; Racine 2008; Reiter-Theil 2004; Sheer/Widdershoven 2004; Solbakk 2004).

## 3.3 Experience as Method and Empirical Ethics

How can **normatively influential empirical knowledge** be characterised in epistemological terms?



**empirical facts in ethical consideration**

**empirical facts**

**Answer to the question: What sort of empirical knowledge are we looking for in applied ethics?**

## 3.4 Experimental Ethics as a Method in Applied Ethics

### Dewey's Reconstruction in Philosophy

- methodology of empirical science should guide the reconstruction
- Can **experimental methodology** be sensibly applied to **applied ethics**?

YES, IT  
CAN!

i) **Problematic Situation**: interruption of the previously untroubled behavior

ii) **Institution of a Problem**: location and definition of the problem

iii) **Determination of a Problem-Solution**: suggestion of hypothetical solutions

iv) **Reasoning**: considering bearings and adjustment of hypothetical solutions

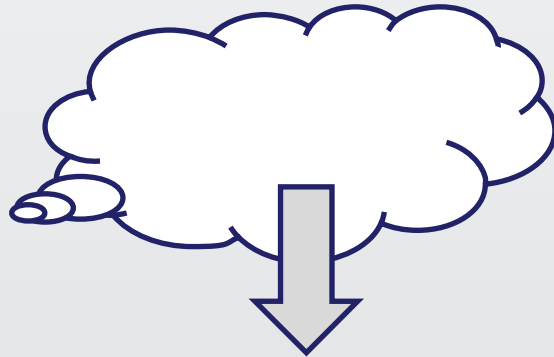
v) **Testing the Hypothesis by Action**: act according to hypothetical solution

THE PATTERN OF  
INQUIRY! (LW12)

## 3.4 Experimental Ethics as a Method in Applied Ethics

How is the concept of »**experimental ethics**« understood in the literature and which **advantages** can be gained in **contrast to traditional methodologies in applied ethics**?

- experiment connects the **theoretical with the empirical/practical**
- using moral **principles as instruments** in moral inquiry (status of principles)
- examine a **morally problematic situation** (scope of the method)
- **practical solutions**: Who carries the responsibility in case they fail?





## 3.5 Ethics as Social Practice and the Role of Ethicists

### Dewey's Democratic Ideal

- **solve** practical ethical **problems**
- philosophy as a **social practice** of all people concerned (Habermas 1992; Apel 1988)
- paradigmatically: **discourse ethics**
- **Dewey's understanding of ethics as social practice** will be examined

### »Institutionalized Ethics« and the Democratic Ideal

- Do bioethics **commissions hijack public debate** (false appearance of consensus)? (Moreno 1996)
- Can **institutionalized ethical deliberation of experts** substitute social practice? (Ott 2008; Huppenbauer/Bernadi 2003)
- Can institutionalized ethics be **considered democratic** (understanding of ethics)?
- **experts in ethics?** (moral epistemology: science/humanities: 3.1-3.4)

# 3.5 Ethics as Social Practice and the Role of Ethicists

What can we learn from pragmatism in order to **organize ethical committees better?**



## The Project Will...

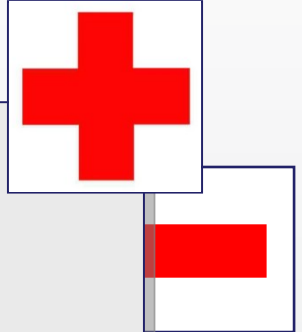
- examine the **premises and corner posts of Dewey's pragmatism**
- utilize these insights to **contribute to the methodological self-assurance of applied ethics**
- **open new ways** of considering the role and **function of science** and the **integration of empirical knowledge in ethics**
- clarify the **potentials and limitations of Dewey's pragmatism** in applied

The **incorporation of pragmatism into the methodological repertoire** of applied ethics is in need of **self-reflective reconsiderations** of premises and implications. This project will contribute to the discussion in what respects **pragmatism can provide a solid basis** for the efforts of applied ethicists to **solve practical ethical problems** with the help of science.

**In other words:** The project will answer the question whether Dewey's pragmatism in applied ethics is a **diagnosis of malaise or cure.**



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MALAISE OR CURE?

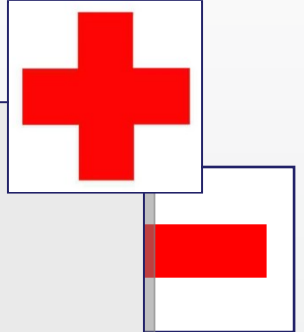


**THANKS' FOR YOUR  
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