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Richard J. Bernstein on Ethics and Philosophy between the Linguistic and the Pragmatic Turn

1. In his compelling article *American Pragmatism: The Conflict of Narratives*, Richard Bernstein quotes a perceptive line by Alasdair MacIntyre that goes

[A] tradition not only embodies the narrative of an argument, but is only recovered by an argumentative retelling of that narrative which will itself be in conflict with other argumentative retellings¹.

Bernstein, in the essay mentioned, works through MacIntyre's passage in order to "engage in the "argumentative retelling" of a metanarrative –literally a narrative about the narratives that we tell ourselves about the history and development of the American pragmatic movement" (55). This task can be articulated in a subplot of ambitions. Bernstein in fact continues by saying that he wants to demonstrate

1. That what we call pragmatism is itself –to use a Kantian turn of phrase– *constituted* by the narratives that we tell about pragmatism.

2. That the history of pragmatism has always –from its "origins" right up to the present– been a conflict of narratives...[T]here are (as a pragmatist might expect) a *plurality* of conflicting narratives.

3. That there is not only a conflict of narratives, but *a fortiori*, a conflict of metanarratives. There are better or worse narratives and metanarratives. And we can give good reasons in support of our claims for what is better. (I take this to be a cardinal principle of any pragmatic narrative).

4. That when future philosophers tell the story of the development of philosophy in America from the late nineteenth century through the twentieth century, they will highlight its thematic continuity far more than is presently acknowledged. They will see a continuous series of explorations and controversies about persistent pragmatic themes².

These statements read as the blueprint of a pragmatist *manifesto*, and Bernstein's latest book *The Pragmatic Turn*³ is indeed all about elaborating on these four points as to achieve his authoritative narrative and metanarrative of the pragmatic turn. However, a closer look at its contents reveals that beyond canvassing a very imaginative account of the pragmatist tradition in its varieties of turns, the book accomplish another collateral, but not less seminal, attainment: namely, an understanding of the companion linguistic turn made by analytic

¹ MacIntyre (1977: 461).

² Bernstein (1995: 55).

³ Hereafter, PT. Whenever otherwise specified, all quotations refer to this work.

philosophy as informed by pragmatism itself⁴. In what follows I shall comment two kindred features of this entanglement of turns by assessing some themes pervading the very dialectic of the book examined. They are, respectively, the understanding of the very nature of philosophical activity between the pragmatic and the linguistic turn, and its bearings for ethics. By advancing his own narrative and metanarrative of the emergence of pragmatism and its relation with some key moments of analytic philosophy, Bernstein depicts a captivating path of inquiry through which investigating such features. Whether the motif of the intertwinement of themes and methods between the pragmatic and the linguistic turn in their characterization of the role and shape of philosophy is explicit in PT, the companion rethinking of the philosophical credentials of ethical thought is partly an explorative projection on the pages of the book that I will carve out from the folds of its argumentative telling.

2. Readers of Bernstein approaching PT will recollect a peculiar flavor which is clearly experienceable while reading *Praxis and Action*, an early book by the author dated back in 1971. What these two works share is a common argumentative dialectics, in which historical considerations about the shape and development of pragmatism and analytic philosophy –among others traditions⁵– are intertwined with the author’s own positions and views on them. If in his other books Bernstein *applies* or *uses* pragmatism –since, as he says, they are “informed by a pragmatic *sensibility*” (29, my italics)– to cope either with specific problems or with non-pragmatist authors and movements, in both *Praxis* and PT Bernstein *works from within* the pragmatic tradition to carve out its theoretical intuitions, placing them at the same time in an enlarged genealogy which includes Kant and Hegel, Wittgenstein and his heirs. The live struggle appreciable in both works that interests me here in spelling out is Bernstein’s deep interrogation about the place and role of pragmatism at the crossroad of such a genealogy, whose close examination will reveal some deep interesting conversations between the linguistic and the pragmatic turn animating it. PT, however, is not *merely* on pragmatism and its accomplishments in these provinces of thought, but rather it is a pragmatist book *itself*, since the method Bernstein employs for such an interrogation is that of looking for “the difference that makes a difference” between the pragmatic and the linguistic register. Bernstein claims that the understanding of their shared framework and background will allow us to appreciate at more depth both their differences and distances.

It is in this context that Bernstein challenges us to revise our representation of the alleged gulf between pragmatism and analytic philosophy, and question our ways of talking about it. Bernstein is engaged in debunking a varieties of myths that took credit inside the “familiar story”⁶, according to which analytic philosophy displaced pragmatism marginalizing and relegating it to “the dustbin of history” (12), contributing in a major way to its re-

⁴ Bernstein points out that, beyond analytic philosophy, “[t]he phrase “the linguistic turn” has been used to characterize Habermas’s theory of communicative action and discourse theory of ethics, Heidegger’s late philosophy, Gadamer’s ontological hermeneutics, Derrida’s deconstruction, and Foucault’s discourse theory” (p. 126). Here I will concentrate exclusively on the linguistic turn made by analytic philosophy, both because in PT it occupies a place of prominence, and also because otherwise the already crawling stage of figures would be irremediably overcrowded.

⁵ Bernstein’s attainments are even wider, since during his intellectual biography he did not only waived together a number of impressive themes and questions from both the pragmatic and the analytic traditions in order to show their entanglement, but also from the so-called continental philosophy and its profusion of voices –with also some insightful incursions into Marxism and psychoanalysis. In all these fields he contributed in a major way to establish a new canon of studies.

⁶ See Bernstein 1992 and 2006 for a presentation and an assessment of such a privileged narrative.

writing. The two main argumentative retelling of the mythical view could be labeled as the “incompatibility recount” and the “improving recount” respectively. While according to the first recount analytic philosophy replaced pragmatism due to its improper fixation on experience as together the proper stage and the main object of philosophical discussion, according to the second recount analytic philosophy denounced the pragmatists for their immaturity in the understanding of the proper method of philosophical analysis, mispending in this way the valuable insights they had about the principle animating it. In *Praxis* Bernstein questions this second major strand of the myth according to which there would not be a neat *divide* between pragmatism and analytic philosophy, but rather an *advancement* of views through an improvement of method (Bernstein 1971: 168). Bernstein’s 1971 diagnosis of the die-hardness of this version of the myth is still valid now in 2011, and thus a strategy for its displacement yet urgent. In fact, this “improving recount” is based on the flawed assumption “still thought by many philosophers” that what the pragmatists sketched was a *doctrine* whose epistemological and verificationist soul kept the imagination of logical empiricists, who framed it in what they thought was the proper theoretical apparatus that could enhance the good insights expressed in it. We can challenge the improving recount as a misunderstanding by showing how pragmatism never defended any “verificationist doctrine” of the type vindicated by logical empiricists. As Bernstein shows us⁷, pragmatism was in fact very critical of the central assumptions of logical empiricism, and, moreover, the sea changes *internal* to the analytic registers can be read as a progressive re-discovery of the main themes and intuitions of the pragmatic turn, which, however, far from being pictured as a doctrine whose main contribution was the defense of a verificationist criterion of meaning, is now praised as a *method* for doing philosophy. We cannot make sense of the bearings of pragmatism on analytic philosophy if we fail to appreciate the developments internal to the latter movement, whose shape was that of a “revolutionary change in the very paradigm of description and explanation” in which “new ways of observing, describing, and explaining arose”⁸. There was in fact a “spirit of reductionism” haunting the heydays of early analytic philosophy that had been displaced by a more attentive and resourceful understanding of the linguistic turn. Pragmatism, that constituted the main philosophical event that preceded the linguistic turn, criticized a number of dichotomies that were central to the early analytic philosophers, as the science/philosophy or the analytic/synthetic dichotomies, opening the way for a much more informed understanding of the potentials of the linguistic turn itself.

These criticisms are of the utmost importance to the refusal of the first strand of the mythical view – what we have called “the incompatibility recount” – which is addressed and dismissed in chapter 6 of PT on *Experience after the Linguistic Turn*. In this key chapter of the book Bernstein explicitly tackles the intertwining of the pragmatic and the linguistic registers on the central feature of philosophy’s relationship with experience and language, showing how the two share some seminal views about the stance philosophers should take on these concepts (126-9). This time the attack on pragmatism was partly joined by a friendly fire. In fact it came from the pragmatic province of Rorty’s reconstruction of the

⁷ In *Praxis* Bernstein dedicates a section to *A Metaphilosophical Interlude* (250-60) in which he tackles the main passages of the linguistic turn in analytic philosophy in order to show its complex internal articulation. In a later section (298-303) the author says that there is an important lesson for analytic philosophy to be learned from the pragmatists, a lesson about “their emphasis on inquiry as a self-corrective practice, their insistence on fallibilism, and their suspicion of ontological, epistemological, and even linguistic dichotomies” (298). If properly understood, this lesson has as one of its major outcomes the delegitimization of the appropriation of pragmatism by logical empiricism and of their companion use of the linguistic turn.

⁸ Bernstein 1971: 251.

linguistic turn as the philosophical passage from the concern for the concept of experience to that of language⁹. Bernstein is critical of the way Rorty recommends the abandonment of the notion of experience altogether from the pragmatist agenda, with his companion invocation of a new stage of linguistic pragmatism which would take the best from the linguistic (the idea of changes of vocabularies) and the pragmatic turn (its anti-representationalism). Bernstein contends that we should rethink the linguistic and the pragmatic turn as each supporting the other in its peculiar difficulties, without postulating divides or alternations. In fact, an attentive look to what the authors in both traditions are trying to do –for example, with the concepts of experience and language (ch. 6 PT) or with those of truth and objectivity (ch. 5 PT)– will reveal the temptations and the shortcomings that could haunt both registers. Bernstein shows us both how “an enriched pragmatism can integrate the linguistic turn” (129), and how “philosophers, starting from the most diverse orientations and without being directly influenced by the classical pragmatists, have been articulating insights and developing theses that are not only congenial with a pragmatic orientation but also *refine* its philosophical import” (15). The kind of conversation, which at moments turns out to be a whirl of *refinements*, between pragmatism and analytic philosophy is thus to be portrayed not as a progressive adjustment of “doctrines” imposed from the outside, but rather as a mutual virtuous *emulation* of intents about the way philosophical reflection itself should be understood and practiced.

Notwithstanding a discrete but incessant work that has been done in dismantling the “familiar story” of the analytic-pragmatic divide, still the official records of the debate are vitiated by certain unimaginative reconstructions and evaluations of their intertwinement. However, the more Bernstein in his works had challenged these two recounts of the official narrative of their alleged divide, the more a subtler metanarrative of their conversations has gained authority. In PT the author works through the lines of the alleged divide of pragmatism and analytic philosophy, his strategy being that of showing by means of textual and contextual evidences how the two kept a conversation going between the respective barricades. Bernstein writes

The standard philosophical conventions that divide philosophy into such “schools” as pragmatism, analytic philosophy and Continental philosophy obscures [their] common pragmatic themes. Once these ideological blinders are removed, the philosophical investigations of the classical pragmatists, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein take on a fresh and more exciting character. If we bracket the standard and misleading philosophical classification and *look* at what these philosophers are actually saying and doing, then a very different panorama emerges. We discover commonalities in what pragmatists, Wittgenstein and Heidegger are all reacting against, in their critique of traditional epistemology and metaphysics, and especially in the sea change in philosophical orientation that they seek to bring out¹⁰.

⁹ For his classical reconstruction of the shape of the linguistic turn, see Rorty 1967. It is noteworthy to notice how Rorty, even after the deep conversation he established with pragmatism and pragmatists, keeps tracing a categorical divide between experience and language (see Rorty 1992), the sort of divide Bernstein is suggesting us to get rid of. For a compelling discussion of Rorty on this passage, see Koopman 2007.

¹⁰ Bernstein 2010: 22. This statement echoes Rorty’s programmatic statement according to which “What I am trying to show is that the closer one brings pragmatism to the writings of Wittgenstein and those influenced by him, the more they shed light on each other” (Rorty 1961: 198-9). It is noteworthy to notice how in this early paper, by arguing about the Peirce-Wittgenstein entanglement of views, Rorty tries to bridge the gap between the linguistic and the pragmatic turn on the very topic of language, that is going to become a factor of differentiation between the two registers in those later writings where Rorty will mark a divide between *classical* and *linguistic*

Bernstein's metanarrative proceeds in the narrow steep path running between the incompatibility and the improving recount. This subtler argumentative retelling aims at removing the unquestioned assumptions animating the received view of the analytic-pragmatic divide, accomplishing in this way the precious task of highlighting common paths of inquiry. One major consequence of Bernstein's examination of the entanglement of the linguistic and the pragmatic turn consists in the exhibition of their internal complexities: far from being regarded as monolithic events, these movements should be read *themselves* as constituted by a variety of *turns*. It makes sense to speak about an *intertwinement* between the pragmatic and the analytic turn because there is an internal connection that interests their respective developments and characterized their dialogues.

3. Among the many paths through which Bernstein has explored these conversations, one of the most interesting is the one about the nature of philosophical reflection itself. Bernstein suggests us to picture both the pragmatic and the linguistic turn as *revolutions* in the way philosophers understood their own intellectual activity. What in fact characterizes them is their common aim of renovating the philosophical landscape in which they rose. Their nature is innovatory, revolutionary, *critique*. However, not always such turns have been understood this way by their own advocates. In the final pages of *Praxis* Bernstein mounted a critic to some early stages of the linguistic turn, and in particular to the way in which logical empiricists portrayed the role and shape of philosophical activity. He showed how they were held captive by the very same foundationalist temptations that they were resisting in idealism and British empiricism, temptations that pragmatism pictured as unwelcome assumptions of the way we represent ourselves philosophical reflection to be like. In PT the theme of how pragmatism informed the linguistic turn heads in the discussion of the central problems of objectivity, the nature of experience, and the facts/values entanglement, where Bernstein encourages us to rethink the very issue of the way we *look at* those issues after the pragmatic *refinement* of the linguistic turn. The critiques that Bernstein addresses to the way logical empiricists understood these questionings, and the companion praise for pragmatists' way of handling them, aims at showing how a *better*—that is, from a pragmatic point of view, a *more attentive*—understanding of the potentialities of the linguistic turn can benefit from the teaching of the classical pragmatists. Thus, surprisingly enough, it could be said that a more perceptive version of the “improving recount” informs the relationship between the two turns: in fact the passage from the understanding of the linguistic turn by logical empiricists to the one by ordinary language philosophers (and, more specifically, by Wittgenstein and his heirs¹¹) is marked according to Bernstein by a pragmatic vein that might be described as progress.

According to the author, both pragmatists and analytic philosophers after Wittgenstein share an aversion toward a certain frame of mind, which in another compelling work he has

pragmatists. I guess that this element of tension in Rorty's own metanarrative represent one aspect of a wider attitude that Bernstein is denouncing when he writes that “Rorty suffered from the “God has failed” syndrome” that brought him “to introduce a whole battery of facile distinctions that tended to obscure more than they illuminated” (214-5) —being that of language/experience one of them.

¹¹ Bernstein states that “every major post-Wittgensteinian philosopher who has identified with the pragmatic tradition has been attracted to and influenced by the later Wittgenstein. All of them read Wittgenstein as sharing a great deal of pragmatism and as advancing the sophistication of pragmatic themes after the linguistic turn” (21). Bernstein, however, speaking of those analytic philosophers who made the linguistic turn (many of which were, as noticed, influenced by Wittgenstein) adds that “the more carefully one examines what [they] mean by language and the linguistic turn, the more difficult is to speak even about family resemblance” (126).

characterized as “a Cartesian Anxiety”¹². Both movements aimed at a rethinking of the role and shape of philosophy, rescuing it from the shoals of foundationalism with its metaphysical, religious, epistemological and moral shortcomings¹³, and make it suitable again for “the critical role [of] guiding our conduct, enriching our everyday experience, and furthering creative democracy” (x). In rethinking the role and shape of philosophical reflection, Bernstein argues, these movements prompt us to challenge the *expectations* we have from it, since such an anxiety, before being philosophical, is a personal anxiety about what we want philosophy to be like. In the wake of the best teachings of James and Wittgenstein, Bernstein argues that, more often than we are ready to admit or even recognize, philosophical anxieties are driven by (or, indeed, are nothing but) personal attitudes, visions and cravings that we are inclined to petrify into philosophical stances. More than once in PT Bernstein recalls James’ insight that “the history of philosophy is to a great extent that of a certain clash of human temperaments”¹⁴, and Wittgenstein’s sharp observation that we ought to recognize how in certain philosophical discussions “a *picture* held us captive”¹⁵. Both thinkers understood philosophy as a cure for intellectual and personal temptations to transcend our human condition, which we must silence by means of conceptual clarification. This can take a variety of forms, as for example the rescue of our ways of portraying and talking about our concepts and their meaning from intellectualistic constraints by showing their “use” or “cash value” in our discourses and practices. According to this therapeutic-cum-pragmatic conception of philosophical reflection, by investigating the ways in which we conceptualize, describe and problematize our experiences and practices, we can arrive at a better understanding of them and even revise our very grasp of the philosophical techniques that we employ to address their difficulties.

Bernstein exhorts us to think about the pragmatic and the linguistic turn in philosophy as *methods* for challenging our ways of thinking, and thus a method *for doing* philosophy. When in fact read as the advancement of philosophical *theories*, both turns fall into the foundational pitfalls against which they waive their criticisms. Bernstein takes the major contribution of both the pragmatic and the linguistic turn as that of debunking *mythical pictures* such as that of “the Given” or of “Truth with the capital T” by means of an attentive description of their *sources of temptations*. According to this characterization, philosophy is an activity whose aim is that of exhorting us to challenge received thoughts and uncontested philosophical assumptions, as well as to rethink the *relationship* we have with our own truths and principles. The pragmatic and the linguistic turn that pragmatism and analytic philosophy respectively made can be fruitfully described as reactions to frames of mind that relegated philosophical thought into an ivory tower of systems of knowledge and presuppositions, severing in this way philosophy from the ordinary. James’ invocation of “the lower, the nitty-gritty” that articulate our visions¹⁶ and Wittgenstein’s recounting of the ordinary and our human practices as the “bedrock” against which “[our] spade is turned”¹⁷ calls for a contiguity between philosophical reflection and the ordinary life it should account that is easily forget by those who portrays philosophy as the advancement of theories¹⁸. Bernstein notices in both turns a movement that could be described as a passage from

¹² Bernstein 1985: 16.

¹³ See Bernstein 1985: 19.

¹⁴ James 1907: 11.

¹⁵ Wittgenstein 1953: § 115.

¹⁶ See James 1907: 11; James 1907: 31-2.

¹⁷ Wittgenstein 1953: § 217. See also Wittgenstein 1953: §109; Wittgenstein 1937: § 86.3.

¹⁸ See James 1897b: 204; James 1879a: 75-6.

the explanation by means of reduction to the description by means of distinction and clarification¹⁹. Philosophy should aim at the clarification of our ways of making sense of things and their difficulties, resisting the temptation of regulating such understandings from the above of their exercise. Philosophical explanations should leave the way to the description of our practices of knowledge, judgment and action, so that they can speak with their own distinctive voice without being suffocated into theories having no respect for their individual character.

4. This way of characterizing the methods of philosophical activity has immediate bearings for ethics, and in PT Bernstein gives us some advices about how to conceive moral thought *after* the linguistic and the pragmatic turn. Bernstein's ethical incursions in PT are not systematic, but rather they *pervade* the text and are mostly appreciable in his examination of James' pluralism in ch. 2, in the discussion of Putnam's views about the fact/value entanglement in ch. 7, and also in the critique of Habermas' (more-Kantian-than-pragmatist) categorical distinction between ethics and morality in ch. 8. Here I would like to briefly explore them in a direction made hospitable by the conception of philosophy presented in the previous section.

If philosophy has to be understood as a method for assessing our ways of thinking by means of the description of the practices in which they are embedded, than moral reflection should be thought as the clarification of the moral facts as they are experienced in our ordinary practices. This alternative understanding of ethics is critical of those projects picturing moral thought as the advancement of moral theories. In discussing the ethical dimension of James' pluralism, Bernstein aims at silencing these alternative projects by showing their inadequacy in accounting for the character of our moral experiencing and addressing its difficulties. Bernstein reads James as one author who avoided the two extremes of "ultimate fixed foundations and foundationless relativism" by developing a conception of pluralism that makes justice to the way in which we *arrive at* experiencing the world. Such a conception expresses our very *stance* toward experience when we take it at face value without trying to force it under a general and thus misleading label. Bernstein writes

James was fully aware that the type of pluralism that he professed was offensive to many philosophers. He speaks about a deep philosophical impulse that wants something more orderly, more clear-cut, and more systematic. In this respect, James would have found a great ally in the later Wittgenstein, who also sought to cure philosophers of the craving for definitive order...Pluralism, in contrast to dogmatic monism, does not deny unity, but directs us to ask what kind of unity we are talking about –to look and see just how much unity we really discover and what kind of unity we mean²⁰.

Bernstein notices how James' characterization of pluralism is immediately pertinent for the way he conceives moral thought, since it invites us to *look and see* those very experiencing that articulate our moral life from the inside of its very exercise. In his moral writings James argues against those who are driven by the deep philosophical impulse to avoid ambiguity and seek clear-cut distinctions in morality taking refuge in moral principles regu-

¹⁹ Russell Goodman also made this point in his compelling study on Wittgenstein and James where he writes that "[t]here is a parallel movement of thought, or of method, pervading James's *Principles* and Wittgenstein's *Investigations*: a movement from the *explanatory* to the *descriptive*...[W]ittgenstein found not only fundamental errors in James but examples of *how to proceed in philosophy* [my italics], despite the fact that the two writers stand in distinct traditions of philosophy (Goodman 2002: 85-8).

²⁰ Bernstein 2010: 59.

lating one's conduct. Bernstein comments James' pragmatic conception of moral philosophy by saying that it "*calls for a critical engagement with other points of view and other visions...[C]ontrary to the picture of relativism that speaks of incommensurable frameworks and paradigms, James's pluralism demands that we reach out to the point of contact where we can critically engage with each other*" (62, my italics). Moral reflection should consist in a descriptive exercise, in which we challenge those frames of mind that impede us to have a genuine grasp on the moral life, such as the craving for philosophical theories about the good or the right with their unimaginative way of portraying moral disagreement.

Another illustration of the philosophical movement from explanation to description in ethics is the refutation of the artificial dichotomies that have been sometimes erected to fundamental principles of ethical theory, such as the one between facts and values. Bernstein works with Putnam in presenting the lesson of method which pragmatism has to teach us interested in thinking about the questions surrounding the alleged dichotomy. The way in which Bernstein exhorts us to rethink the fact/value dichotomy is that of *looking at* the varieties of contexts in which we *feel* compelled to claim it, and *notice* how each time we variously make reference to *different kinds of values* and *different kinds of facts*. We should be "philosophically sensitive" as to distinguish cognitive, ethical, political, and even procedural values, as well as to distinguish cognitive, ethical, political and even procedural facts. This recognition should warn us that the alleged dichotomy, far from a monolithic conception about the very constituents of the world, is better to be understood as the *expression* of the varieties of encounters we can have *with* the world. According to Bernstein, by describing such encounters together with the responses and the accounts we are prone to give, it will emerge how the dichotomy *itself* is functional to serve specific philosophical or personal purposes. Such a conception, far from dismissing it, invites us to re-describe the dichotomy in a way that resists its petrification into a crystallized divide. Bernstein observes that while "making distinctions (even if changing and open-ended) is important for specific philosophical purposes, [it] can be disastrous when functional distinctions are reified into rigid dichotomies (as the logical positivists reified the analytic-synthetic distinction)" (155). The task of philosophy is that of depicting the variety of forms that the dichotomy can take and of uses we make of it in order to assess their validity and shortcomings, resisting the temptation of mistaking our *use* of such a dichotomy with its *necessity*. Philosophical activity conducted in the mood of the pragmatic-cum-linguistic turn aims at clarifying all these different uses, suggesting the difficulties that we encounter when we try to reduce them to a unique model of explanation. This has major outcomes in moral philosophy since it undermines all those accounts of the moral life that are vitiated by foundational anxieties about the shape it should have and the principles that should animate it.

A final incursion into moral philosophy is made by Bernstein in his chapter of criticism on Habermas' Kantian pragmatism. Despite his resourceful interpretation of both the linguistic and the pragmatic turn, Habermas is criticized by Bernstein for his Kantian heritage regarding the sharp distinction between theoretical and practical philosophy according to which "the task of theoretical philosophy is to provide an adequate account of truth, and the task of practical philosophy, an adequate account of normative rightness and, especially, moral norms" (180). It is in the discussion of this divide that Bernstein sketches an alternative way of conceiving the task of moral and practical philosophy. Following Kant Habermas traces an internal divide inside practical philosophy between ethics and morality, the first having to do with one's particular (personal or group) orientation while the second with those norms applying to everyone as a human being. Bernstein argues that *this* is the kind of divide that pragmatists question, since if we *look* at the practices animating our or-

dinary lives, we do not find any clear-cut divide of the sort Habermas, after Kant, is arguing for. Such a distinction should be thought itself as the result of *our* ways of responding to such situations, since even what we call universalistic principles have shifting contours. Bernstein writes

Habermas is right to point out that there are more particularistic moral views and more universal validity claims in every living ethical orientation, but it is misleading to speak of “ethical world-view” as particularistic and “the moral point of view” as universalistic, and to contrast “a universalistic morality of justice” with “a particularistic ethics of the good life”. Here one would like Habermas to be more pragmatic and recognize that our values and norms forms a dynamic shifting continuum...Furthermore, we need to recognize just how open-ended “universalistic” moral claims are. It is not just that there are learning processes about what count as universal moral norms –a point Habermas emphasizes. But in the course of history, unanticipated consequences and structural transformations require radical rethinking of the very meaning of morality, responsibility, and justice²¹.

What is notable in this quotation is Bernstein’s idea of the *rethinking* the very meaning of what *morality altogether* should look like. Once acknowledged that our moral distinctions and evaluations are a function of the place they occupy in our ordinary practices of morality, moral reflection should abandon the pretence to draw categorical distinctions and look at the ways in which we understand and speak about the varieties of considerations that are at stake in our ordinary moral experiencing. Bernstein asks us to look for the difference that makes a difference in order to assess the very nature of a moral norm or of an ethical value. Following Dewey, he asks “When we have to decide “moral”, “ethical”, or “merely pragmatic” issues, do we really engage in different *types* of practical deliberations?” (197), and answers that such questionings exhorts us to revise our way of understanding and living with such concepts.

5. These considerations about the very nature of ethics are the best evidence of the philosophical method we have sketched in the previous section, since they form an impressive battery of critiques to the way of thinking moral thought as the advancement of philosophical requirements and theories on the moral life. What Bernstein –following James, Wittgenstein, Putnam, and (the pragmatist side of) Habermas– is calling for is a more resourceful method for understanding the point and shape of what morality should look like. Talking about the losses and drawbacks of subscribing a certain philosophical position, Bernstein, in a mood recalling the first chapter of James’s pragmatism, beware of “the shrinkage of what we consider to be a legitimate topic of philosophical investigation” (141)²². We can adapt this insightful advice in the discourse about the method that an adequate treatment of moral reflection should take. From the scanty examples we have extracted from the dialectic of PT it emerges a very interesting picture of moral thought as an exhortative activity in which we are called for the development of an ethical *sensibility* in order to contrast the shrinkage of *moral* experiences affecting ethics when it is conceived as the advancement of moral theories. In ethics, as in philosophy altogether, we should abandon any foundationalist pretense by challenging our own *expectations* about how its shape

²¹ Bernstein 2010: 195-6.

²² It is noteworthy to notice that the author here refers precisely to those “analytically trained philosophers” who uncritically took the pragmatic turn as to narrow the field of questionings worth debating, neglecting in this way entire spheres of experience like that of religious experience –and, we add, jeopardizing the possibility of a proper treatment of ethical experiences, too.

should be like. According to the reading we've sketched, in PT Bernstein showed us some paths along which to proceed in dismantling foundationalist projects in ethics as well as in philosophy *after* the pragmatic and the linguist turn.

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