

CHAPTER TWO

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PRAGMATIC RESOURCES FOR BIOTECHNOLOGY

It was with considerable pleasure that I read the essay entitled “Ethics in a Technological Culture: A Proposal for a Pragmatist Approach”, co-authored by the organizers of the conference on “Bioethics and Pragmatism” (see Introduction). Their essay seemed to me to accomplish several important tasks, not the least of which was its call for a new vocabulary - one that would be designed to help answer the question of “how to live” in our changing technological landscape. I can only applaud their observation that the customary philosophical and ethical vocabulary is not properly equipped to formulate an appropriate answer to this question.

Since the title of this conference was “Bioethics and Pragmatism”, I feel compelled to offer a disclaimer right up front. I harbor no illusion about being able to pass muster as authoritative in the field denoted by the first half of the title. But I have in fact had the opportunity to consider some of the implications of the core doctrines of pragmatism, especially those advanced by John Dewey, and more particularly as those implications have a bearing on our technological culture. It is to these matters of “infrastructure” that I will devote most of what I have to say.

1. FOUNDATIONS IN THE SKY AND IN THE EARTH

It is at this late date hardly news to anyone acquainted with the work of the classical pragmatists that they noisily rejected Cartesian and other types of foundationalism. This means also that they rejected the idea that there are transcendent truths of the type to which philosophers from Plato to Frege and beyond have eagerly claimed access. No less suspect, in their view, are the putatively revealed truths to which devotees of most of the world’s religions tend to appeal as a last, and sometimes even a first, resort.

This of course does not mean that pragmatism is anti-religious or that a practicing pragmatist cannot also be a practicing Lutheran, or Roman Catholic, or Muslim, or Jew. A college student named Ruby M. York raised this very matter in a letter she wrote to Dewey in May 1948. She asked him to respond to a claim made

by one of her professors, namely, that "Pragmatists deny the existence of God" (York to Dewey, #18690). Dewey's reply was that the statement attributed to her professor was "absurd". "Pragmatism", he wrote, "is concerned with testing of statements and beliefs - it has nothing to do with the existence (of God)" (Dewey to York, #18691).

But if pragmatism has nothing to do with the existence of God, it *does* have to do with experimental tests of what is claimed to follow from religious belief, including what is claimed to follow from belief in the existence of God. The laws of most western democracies are at least covertly pragmatic in this sense; for example, when they deny the right of parents to withhold critically needed medical treatment from their children on the basis of religious conviction.

And pushed further, pragmatism *does* have something to say about the current debates about research and development in biotechnology. This is not to say that the body of methods conveniently termed *the* pragmatic method can provide an answer in each case, no matter how difficult that case may be. It does, however, have something to say about the methods that are utilized to arrive at decisions in such matters. The claim here is that the core methods of pragmatism, because of their intimate relationship with those that have proven successful in the technosciences, offer the best means so far developed to determine what we are to do in response to conflicting values.

It is also important to note that if pragmatism rejects foundations in the sky, it also rejects foundations in the ground. I have argued elsewhere (Hickman, 1999: 29-66) that attempts by some environmental philosophers to locate intrinsic value in nature, for example, to attribute intrinsic rights to non-human animals or even rivers or stands of trees, are merely the obverse of the supernatural and transcendental programs that I have just described. Such attempts to claim that what is valuable is primary and originary, totally apart from the constructive activities of human beings, suffers from the same type of *a priorism* that tends to vitiate arguments based on revelation or transcendental deductions.

Dewey did not deny that there were intrinsic values, but he did deny that they were intrinsic prior to being determined to be so by the cognitive activities of human beings. In his view, something valued as "intrinsic" is just what "*occupies a particular place in life; it serves its own end, which cannot be supplied by a substitute. There is no question of comparative value, and hence none of valuation*" (italics added) (Dewey, 1980: MW.9.247-248). He understood that things that are valued as intrinsic may sometimes come into conflict with other things that are also valued as intrinsic. Moreover, what one person or group holds as an intrinsic value may be held as instrumental for another person or group. There is no *a priori* manner in which such conflicts can be settled. Where there is choice, deliberation is called for.

Dewey's position on these issues is in fact very similar to one advanced almost a century later by J. Baird Callicott, who has distinguished between the *source* of value and the *locus* of value. The *source* of value, or *valuation*, is human consciousness. The *locus* of value may well be in trees, rivers, or animal species. To situate the *source* of value in a realm of nature apart from human consideration,

however, would be to make the mistake of the realists. And to situate the *locus* of value within human consciousness would be to make the mistake of the idealists. Callicott thus expresses a view that is very close to Dewey's instrumentalism when he writes that "something may be valuable only because someone values it, but may also be valued for itself, not the sake of any subjective experience ... it may afford the valuer" (Callicott, 1988: 142).

As I indicated before, it is by now old news that the pragmatists were anti-foundationalists. So why do I seem willing to belabor this point about foundations in the sky and in the earth? Simply put, this point remains pertinent because foundationalism, even at this late date, appears to play such an important role in popular debates concerning biotechnology. Wendell Berry, for example, who claims to find foundations in *both* earth and sky, has, at least according to the jacket of his latest book articulated a vision "as important as any in contemporary American letters" (Berry, 2001).

2. IF LIFE IS A MIRACLE

Berry once again advances broad brush and awkwardly vague warnings about the advances of the technosciences in general and some aspects of biotechnology in particular. His orientation is clear: life is a miracle that should not be tampered with, and we know this truth because it has been revealed to us directly. "Some would say", he writes, "(and I am one of them) that we can live fully only by making ourselves as answerable to the claims of eternity as to those of time" (Berry, 2001: 8).

On one side, there is a temptation to feel a bit embarrassed for Berry, who does not seem to have received the news that the old Enlightenment view of science, with its mechanical world, its quest for certainty, its various attempts at reduction, and its notion that there are a finite number of problems to be solved - that such a concept of science is long since out of fashion. On the other side, one is somewhat amazed: Berry receives Guggenheim fellowships and sells loads of books. It is probably safe to conclude that the majority of his many readers find his tandem foundationalism very much to their liking.

Berry is, of course, not the only person claiming the authority of such foundations. In a commentary published in *L'Osservatore Romano*, a Vatican newspaper, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, director of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, explained that "the clear, declarative/assertive tone of a magisterial document aims at communicating to the faithful that one is not dealing with opinionable arguments or disputed questions, but with the truth" (Stanley, 2001: A9). This statement would presumably apply to the foundational claim made by the Vatican that human life begins at the moment at which ovum and sperm are united, a claim which serves as the basis for the Vatican's opposition to stem cell research, among other types of biomedical research.

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