Pragmatist Value Inquiry

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This essay concerns relationships among value experience, value inquiry, and value theory. Five stages of value experience are distinguished, comprising a narrative of the attempt to enhance certain kinds of experience. A multi-level model of value inquiry is presented, beginning with improvement of immediate situations and moving to meta-level inquiry. Six pragmatist methods for conducting value inquiry are explained, which culminate in informed judgments of preference among qualitative experiences.

1. Experience, Inquiry and Theory

One way to understand pragmatism is with reference to three interrelated terms: experience, inquiry, and theory. In this essay I will use these terms to discuss pragmatist value theory. I will outline a pragmatist account of value experience, describe a number of methods of value inquiry, and review some important points of pragmatist value theory. I begin with a very brief discussion of the three terms and how they relate to one another.

The handiest pragmatist definition of experience is John Dewey’s terse phrase, “doing and undergoing.” Experience is the interaction of a living thing with its world, and particular experiences like falling in love and suffering illness are episodes of such interaction. Experience is interactive because it is purposive: there are things we want out of experience, ranging from the mundane to the lofty. And it is with respect to our purposes that experience is relatively stable or problematic. Most of what we experience undergoes change, but only change that is relevant to our purposes is experienced as problematic – as “shock” or “unease,” to use Charles Peirce’s words. Pragmatists use words like stability, equilibrium, unity and consummation to describe episodes of experience in which habits of interaction run relatively smoothly and more or less fulfill the purposes of the constituent agents. Problematic experience – in which we encounter new obstacles to old purposes or evolve new purposes not easily fulfilled – prompt us to inquire.

Inquiry, for pragmatists, is a special case of experience – of doing and undergoing – in which we try to resolve what has become problematic.
Methods of inquiry must be as particular as the problems or opportunities they address, though it is often helpful to analyze them in categories like investigation and experimentation. In its broadest sense, inquiry as problem solving or advantage taking is practiced by all living things, and the result of a successful episode of inquiry is an adapted mode of interaction that either makes it possible, in time, to return to the formerly enjoyed mode, or that constitutes in itself a new, improved equilibrium.

Intelligent interaction with one’s given circumstances I will call understanding, meaning that much understanding is somatic and sub-conscious: the way infants learn to hold their heads up; the way we correct our balance on a bicycle. As pragmatists use the term, intelligence is not limited to mental states or functions. However, much of human experience and understanding is conceptual and linguistic. For pragmatists, conceptual understanding is not (necessarily) a glimpse of the way things are apart from our purposes, but a hypothetical construal of how things are that suggests how best to interact with them, in order to achieve our purposes – to get the most out of experience. Theory is simply conceptual understanding that results from such interested inquiry. Theory is a tool for intelligent doing and undergoing, and is justified by how well it works to affect the many kinds of experience we value.

I may illustrate the interrelationship of the three terms with a description of my late interest in learning about wine, which has introduced me to a puzzlement of facts, theories, and aesthetic commitments. For the novice, the variety of color, of aroma, of texture, of flavor, and of price that characterize the lived experience of wine can be quite bewildering. My bewilderment did not, however, prevent me from forming initial preferences, which have altered as I have learned more. I inquire by talking to friends and wine store proprietors, and by reading. I collect facts about grapes, soil, climate and age, and theories about methods for growing, processing, storing, decanting, serving and tasting. I practice to discriminate more subtle qualities of color, aroma, texture and flavor. And I experiment: I apply what I’ve learned to my own buying, storing, serving and drinking of wine. One point of my experimenting is to test my understanding of what I’ve learned. Another is to test the efficacy of the facts, theories and skills I’ve acquired. But my ultimate purpose is to better enjoy wines, for themselves and with different kinds of food and at various occasions. For the most part, this is happening. I’m getting better at finding wine that compliments a particular food, sets a particular mood, and is itself pleasurable to the eye, nose, and palate – not in any trans-cultural sense, but in ways I’ve been educated to expect and enjoy.

2. Value Experience

In this section I outline a pragmatist scheme of value experience. The scheme consists of five stages, though my distinction of stages is heuristic: the order among them is meant to be logical but not necessarily chronological.