

PRAGMATISM,
REASON, &
NORMS
A REALISTIC ASSESSMENT

Edited by
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Editor's Introduction

The essays published here are presented in critical appreciation of Frederick L. Will's penetrating philosophical work. In his foreword to Will's *Pragmatism and Realism*, Alasdair MacIntyre contends that Will's work is "one of the more remarkable achievements of twentieth-century North American philosophy" and that philosophy can prosper only by taking Will's "splendid" work with "great seriousness."¹ Each contributor to this collection spontaneously realized that the only proper honor to Will is to contribute to the on-going discussion of central philosophical issues. These essays may be read independently of Will's views. Yet each of them also casts light on the character and significance of his philosophy. In introducing the essays I shall, naturally enough, highlight the bearing they have on his views. I begin with a sketch of Will's work and development and then turn to the essays presented here.

Frederick L. Will (b. 1909) trained at Cornell and began his philosophical career a devoted follower of Hume, convinced that in both style and in substance Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* was the epitome of philosophy. He devoted several decades to dissolving the problem of induction through ordinary language analysis. Some of his essays from that period are widely anthologized. In the mid-1960s Will's thought took a profound and highly illuminating pragmatic turn. He criticized the presuppositions of the problem of induction and, by drawing on resources in history and philosophy of science, in ethics, and in law, and on the work of Hegel, Peirce, Dewey, and the later Wittgenstein, he developed a penetrating pragmatic analysis of reason, justification, and knowledge. The basis of Will's pragmatic turn sets the stage for the issues investigated in the essays presented here.

In 1964 Will completed a book-length manuscript that proposed a definitive solution to the problem of induction. His solution relied on what he called "principles of factual reasoning." Like Peirce's "leading principles of inference"

¹ Will 1997, ix, xii.

or Ryle's "inference tickets," such principles formulate supposed factual relations among events or objects, such that the occurrence or observation of one would reliably warrant inferring the occurrence or observation of the other. In the manuscript Will contended that such principles are constantly generated, assessed, and revised in the course of our ordinary and specialized (technical or scientific) affairs, always in conjunction with other such principles.

During final revisions he realized that his solution was inadequate on two main counts. First, the inductive skeptic could grant those contentions while denying that they had anything to do with genuine, philosophically legitimate justification. Given the essentially Cartesian terms in which the problem of induction is formulated, admissible premises cannot be justified on the basis of other "principles of factual reasoning," and they must be "analytic" or necessary truths, because the justification of synthetic principles is precisely what Hume's problem challenges.² Second, treating inferential reasoning in terms of "principles of factual reasoning" inherits the basic foundationalist model of knowledge as charting our inferential way from one basic experience to another.

Hume's problem of induction and its foundationalist presuppositions required instead radical critique and replacement. This involved going far beyond Will's earlier argument, that Hume's problem of induction is incoherent. It is incoherent because eliminating all unjustified synthetic principles from the solution to the problem also eliminates all "the considerations necessary for understanding what the inference is about, and thus for grasping not only the scope and significance but, therewith, the very meaning of the inductive conclusion that is supposed to be in question."³ To take only one example, to strip Newton's famous inductive generalization which ascribed mass and gravity to all planets of every "synthetic" proposition,⁴ would leave one bereft of any principles for understanding Newton's problem as part of an astronomical investigation of planetary motions relying on data collected with a variety of observational instruments.

Will's critique of foundationalism and the problems of induction it generates began with his 1969 presidential address to the Western (now Central) Division of the American Philosophical Association, "Thoughts and Things."⁵

² Will discusses Goodman's "riddle" of induction in Will 1988, 117–18.

³ Will 1959, 371.

⁴ Newton 1934, Rule 3.

⁵ Will 1997, ch. 1.

His full critique was delivered in *Induction and Justification*.⁶ Part One of that book placed the problem of induction in the context of foundationalist models of knowledge. Part Two examined the main root of foundationalist models of justification, the regress argument, and argued that neither the alleged sensory foundations of human knowledge nor the various analytic, postulational, or inductive principles for justifying nonfoundational beliefs met the requirements of the skeptical model of knowledge underlying the regress argument. Part Three sketched an alternative, social and pragmatic account of knowledge and justification, which he developed in a series of articles.

In a second book, Will extended his critique of foundationalism by criticizing the deductivist model of justification on which it rests; hence his title, *Beyond Deduction*. On the deductivist model of justification, norms are treated as kinds of templates (mental, physical, or otherwise) of performance, resident in agents, which determine unilaterally what kinds of thought or action accords with them. This view has led to multiple perplexities; the most important concern evaluating, justifying, and rectifying such unilaterally determining entities. Sometimes one can appeal to other, supervening norms; but the need to terminate the regressive procedure typically leads to appeals to dubious “foundations,” to conventions, or to sheer prejudice. In addition to this negative case against deductivism, Will showed both that it is possible, and how one can, while reasoning about some specific problem (whether moral, legal, scientific, or technical), revise one’s original principles and concepts—one’s understanding of the nature of both the problem and its solution—in the course of solving it. On this basis, Will showed that a pragmatic, social account of knowledge can be reconciled with realism, the idea that things have characteristics regardless of what we say or think about them.

Will has investigated very broad, fundamental issues about human reason and its objects. His views about rationality, justification, and knowledge are very distinctive and have both direct and indirect implications for many areas of current philosophical debate. Many of these implications are developed or at least touched upon in his own writings.⁷ Several more are developed in the following essays.

A central theme in pragmatism is that thought is rooted in action, theoretical reason is based in practical reason. The essays below divide roughly into two parts following this theme. The first six essays concern epistemology; the last

⁶ Will 1974.

⁷ A detailed summary of Will’s views is given in my introduction to Will 1997.

seven essays concern moral and social philosophy. The first essay in each group is brief and highlights some key issues in pragmatic accounts of knowledge and morality, respectively. These first essays are then followed by extended essays on specific issues concerning knowledge and the guidance of action.

A perennial issue about pragmatism is its relation to realism. In “Perspectives on Pragmatism,” Nicholas Rescher initiates the first group of essays by stressing a point too often overlooked in current discussions, namely, that some versions of pragmatism—primarily those which offer a pragmatic theory of *justification*—are consistent with realism. Rescher joins Peirce and C. I. Lewis in the realist camp of pragmatists, and queries whether Will sides with them or with the “postmodern” antirealist camp of neo-pragmatists.

Two key points in Will’s defense of a realist pragmatism about knowledge are the dependence of human thought on the things and events around us and the exposure of a widespread non sequitur which rejects pragmatism if “knowledge by acquaintance” is possible, or rejects realism if it is impossible. In “Transcendental Reflections on Pragmatic Realism,” Kenneth R. Westphal shows that, in very similar ways, both Kant’s and Carnap’s rejections of realism shatter on Will’s anti-Cartesian point that our thoughts depend for their very possibility on the things and events around us, and that the non sequitur Will identifies is still pervasive and influential.

A pragmatic realism about knowledge requires a middle ground between concept-free perceptual knowledge by acquaintance and “conceptualism,” which reduces perception or perceptual knowledge to its conceptual components or propositional content. This middle ground is developed by William P. Alston in “Perception and Conception.” Alston’s criticism of conceptualism is especially vigorous, and it avoids the pitfall of propositional knowledge by acquaintance.

Pragmatism provides a social account of knowledge. One important element in a social account of knowledge concerns the role of testimony in human knowledge and the principles governing our assessment of the testimony of others. In “How to Teach a Wise Man,” Michael Root develops a modified Humean account of principles of testimony.

One of the central themes in Will’s pragmatism is that there is more, far more, to a norm than any explicit formulation we may give it. This view runs contrary to one prominent trend of analytic philosophy that tries to account for rational principles in terms of precise and explicit formulae. In “Presuppositions of Inference,” Marcus G. Singer explores several kinds of presuppositions

involved even in explicit logical deduction—presuppositions that cannot be explicated and set among the explicit formulae comprised in formal deductions.

Another central theme in pragmatism, highlighted and developed by Will, is that the norms of thought and action do not descend to us from a Platonic heaven by rational insight. Norms are culturally and historically developed, and they are embodied by and in agents who are educated in particular traditions. On pragmatic principles, education is a central aspect of our collective cognitive and practical abilities and resources. In “Education as Norm Acquisition,” Thomas F. Green presents a compelling analysis of the moral character—broadly construed—of education and its philosophical centrality to the analysis of reason and action.

A longstanding concern about pragmatic accounts of moral or political norms is that pragmatism appears to subordinate the right to the useful, the effective, or the expedient. In “On the Later Philosophy of Frederick L. Will,” Marcus Singer raises this concern in connection with Will’s views. Singer’s begins the second group of essays, each of which responds to this concern, either directly or indirectly.

Will’s pragmatic account of reason and justification is based on considerations in common sense, science, mathematics, morality, and law. Although Will has not written on ethics, in “Frederick L. Will on Morality” William H. Hay argues that Will’s nondeductive account of reason provides rich resources for both describing and assessing moralities, both in theory and in practice.

One of Will’s clues to the nondeductive character of much legitimate and legitimating reason is the frequent and often somewhat embarrassed recourse to intuitionism in ethics, even among philosophers of an otherwise rationalist persuasion. In “Moral Intuitions and Philosophical Method,” Martin Perlmutter amplifies Will’s critique by arguing that our moral intuitions do not behave in the well-ordered ways by which alone they could perform the role assigned to them recently by much prominent moral theory and argument.

Will criticizes the strictly deductive view of justification in part because it generates a regress to ultimate master norms, the status and justification of which are highly problematic. One example of these problems is provided by “legal realism,” which rests the authority of legal norms on the decisions actually rendered by courts of law. In “Two Problems in Hans Kelsen’s Legal Philosophy,” Stanley L. Paulson complements Will’s critique of legal realism by showing how Kelsen’s theory of “legal fictions” also fails to resolve the problem of justifying ultimate legal norms.

One of the most original features of Will's account of norms is his distinction—and integration—of the explicit and implicit aspects of norms. He contends that any norm has an explicit or “manifest” aspect in terms of which we conceive of and can formulate that norm. However, the manifest aspect of a norm is only an aspect; any norm also has implicit or “latent” aspects. These latent aspects are crucial to the guiding function of norms, both in terms of how they relate to specific contexts of action and how they relate to and function with other norms in those contexts and in related contexts. The manifest and latent aspects of norms are explored by James Wallace in “The Spirit of the Enterprise.” Wallace makes a case for the existence and importance of the latent aspects of norms by examining a range of examples, both ordinary and technical, and scientific as well as political.

The deductive model of rationality and justification is so pervasive that it can be difficult to understand an expressly nondeductive model like Will's, and it can be especially difficult to appreciate the kind of guidance and basis for assessing norms and practices it provides. This difficulty is addressed by James E. Tiles in “Rationality Beyond Deduction: A Guide for the Perplexed and the Disappointed.” Tiles contends that Will's nondeductive model of rationality can indeed provide genuine guidance and grounds for assessing norms and practices. In this regard Tiles also emphasizes very important respects in which Will's philosophy extends classical American pragmatism.

Pragmatic accounts of norms and justification are contextualist and may appear to undermine traditional claims about the universality of our most basic norms. In “Reasons in a World of Practices: A Reconstruction of Frederick L. Will's Theory of Normative Governance,” Matthias Kettner argues that Will's emphasis on the concreteness of norms is correct and salutary, but that his opposition to abstractness leads him needlessly to downplay reflective modes of governing norms and to reject important aspects of the universality of reasons. Drawing on semiotics, pragmatic speech-act theory, and discursive theory of democracy, Kettner argues that Will's pragmatic stress on the contextual nature of norms is consistent with the methodological centrality of reflective governance and with significant generalizability of justifying reasons.

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