

# Pragmatism, Pluralism, and the Burdens of Judgment

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**Abstract:** Robert Talisse and Scott Aikin have argued that substantive versions of value pluralism are incompatible with pragmatism, and that all such versions of pluralism must necessarily collapse into versions of strong metaphysical pluralism. They also argue that any strong version of value pluralism is incompatible with pragmatism's meliorist commitment and will block the road of inquiry. I defend the compatibility of a version of value pluralism (the strong epistemic pluralism of John Rawls) with pragmatism, and offer counter-arguments to all of these claims.

**Keywords:** pragmatism, pluralism, burdens of judgment, epistemic pluralism, reasonable pluralism, fact of oppression.

## Introduction

Can pragmatists be pluralists? Those familiar with the papers by Robert Talisse and Scott Aikin on pragmatism and pluralism won't find this question strange. But most others will. To these others the question will feel akin to asking whether pragmatists can be holists, or naturalists, or fallibilists. Pragmatism is something like a family resemblance term, having a handful of elements most commonly used to characterize it. And naturalism, holism, fallibilism, and pluralism are some of the more common theoretical stances associated with pragmatism.<sup>1</sup> That is, when asked whether pragmatists can be pluralists, we are likely to take it to be self-evident that they can be. According to Talisse and Aikin, however, this view is mistaken. They have argued that pragmatists *cannot* consistently be pluralists (Talisse and Aikin 2005a, 2005b, 2015, 2016). At least not of any substantive kind. In this paper I'll be arguing that their view is mistaken, and that their arguments on this matter fail. I'll be advocating an important type of value pluralism we can call "strong epistemic pluralism," and I'll be arguing that it is clearly compatible with pragmatism. The problem, as I see it, is not with Talisse and Aikin's characterization of pragmatism. It is rather with their characterization of strong epistemic pluralism. For that reason, I'll be spending considerably more time explaining and motivating strong epistemic pluralism, and considerably less time on pragmatism. I'll start off by explaining and motivating this sort of pluralism. Then I'll be in a position to explain Talisse

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<sup>1</sup> For special emphasis on the centrality of pluralism to pragmatism see, for example, Bernstein (1989).

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and Aikin's various arguments that pragmatism is not compatible with such a pluralism. This will put me in a position to respond to their arguments.

### **Epistemic Value Pluralism**

The sort of pluralism Talisse and Aikin are concerned with, and the sort of pluralism I'll be focused on here and endorsing is *value pluralism*. Value pluralists take it that deep disagreement about morally important matters are not simply pervasive. Rather, they are inescapable and in some sense a part of the permanent condition of human life.<sup>2</sup> And crucially,

the persistence of deep moral disagreement is not due entirely to human frailty, ignorance, stupidity, or wickedness. Stated positively, all pluralisms agree that there are some value conflicts in which every party to the dispute holds a position that fully accords with the best possible reasons and evidence. (Talisse and Aikin 2005a, 102)

Talisse and Aikin identify two distinct approaches to value pluralism: metaphysical pluralism and epistemic pluralism.<sup>3</sup> These approaches differ in their explanations of why value pluralism is such a pervasive and ineliminable feature of our situation. Metaphysical pluralists take it that value disagreements occur because of the existence of conflicting moral facts. Epistemic pluralists, by contrast, explain value disagreement by reference to epistemic features of our situation.

### **Reasonable Pluralism, the Burdens of Judgment and the Fact of Oppression**

When it comes to epistemic pluralism, Talisse and Aikin hold up John Rawls as the "exemplar of this approach." (Talisse and Aikin 2005a, 102). This is fortuitous, for my purposes, since the strong epistemic pluralism I wish to endorse and to claim is compatible with pragmatism is that of Rawls. Rawls is justly famous for the important work done in his monumental *A Theory of Justice*. There he elaborated and defended a conception of justice he called "Justice as Fairness." (Rawls 1999, xi, *passim*). He also introduced an ideal choice situation: the original position. Agents behind a veil of ignorance select the principles of justice that they would want themselves and their descendants to live under. (Rawls 1999, 10-15). Much of the book is devoted to articulating the principles of justice constituting Justice as Fairness, to explaining the conditions of (and rationale for) the original position, and to arguing that the free and equal people hypothetically situated in the original position would choose these two principles of justice, rather than other principles.

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<sup>2</sup> See Talisse and Aikin (2005a, 102). There Talisse and Aikin describe pluralism, offering relevant quotes from Berlin and Rawls.

<sup>3</sup> Talisse and Aikin shift their terminology somewhat over the span of their papers. In their 2005 papers they use 'ontological pluralism' instead of 'metaphysical pluralism.'

But Rawls also spent a good deal of time (the final third of the book) arguing that the conception of justice he had articulated would be “stable for the right reasons.” (Rawls 1996, xlii). A conception of justice can be said to be stable if it could endure over time in a well ordered society. More specifically, stability can be characterized as that pragmatic virtue of a moral conception such that a well-ordered society tends to be able to foster the sense of justice in its citizens needed for the societal ordering to endure over time and to override inclinations within society which would otherwise prove disruptive to its endurance. (Rawls 1999, 398). A “well-ordered society” is a society in which the principles of justice are enacted in the laws and constitution, and in which all citizens in the society agree on this conception of justice. (Freeman 2007, 484). Rawls argued that Justice as Fairness would have a greater tendency toward stability than other conceptions of justice. And he claimed that this added to the balance of reasons in favor of his conception of justice, making it more reasonable than its competitors.

Much of Rawls’ later work – culminating in his book *Political Liberalism* – can be thought of as centered around the task of redressing what he, in hindsight, saw as the weakness of the showing made in Part III of *A Theory of Justice*. As he came to see it, what he had managed to show in Part III turned out to be of little value, and really failed to contribute to the balance of reasons in favor of Justice as Fairness, because of the unrealistic nature of the idea of “well-orderedness” (Rawls 1996, xix). The idea of the well-ordered society regulated by Justice as Fairness can be seen to be problematic on the later Rawls’ view because he came to recognize and to give a central place in his thinking to what he called “the fact of reasonable pluralism.” It is, claimed Rawls, simply a fact that:

A modern democratic society is characterized not simply by a pluralism of comprehensive religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines but by a pluralism of incompatible yet reasonable comprehensive doctrines ... a plurality of reasonable yet incompatible comprehensive doctrines is the normal result of the exercise of human reason within the framework of the free institutions of a constitutional democratic regime. (Rawls 1996, xviii)

And if that is right, then the idea of a democratic society regulated by Justice as Fairness wherein *everyone* accepts this one doctrine is itself an incoherent idea since it is “inconsistent with realizing its own principles under the best of foreseeable conditions.” (Rawls 1996, xix).

The fact of reasonable pluralism reflects the idea that well-meaning and conscientious individuals, when relying upon reason (and not merely upon prejudice, or tradition, or their own selfish interests, for example), will not, inevitably, arrive at the same conclusions when it comes to philosophical, moral, and/or religious issues. Rather, they will inevitably arrive at different conclusions. And so, within a free social structure allowing for the free exercise of human reason, citizens in general will not hold the same comprehensive view of things.

The main cause of the fact of reasonable pluralism is what Rawls refers to as “the burdens of judgment” (Rawls 1996, 54-55). The fact is, reasoning, when it comes to certain areas – areas which affect our comprehensive views on matters – is a messy business. That’s not to say that we should just give up. It’s just to admit that reasonable people will not always reason in the same way about complex matters. Reasonable people may disagree about which considerations are relevant to a situation, or they may assign different weights to the importance of various relevant considerations. They may disagree because of their differing interpretations of certain concepts, or because of their differing understanding of vague concepts. They may disagree because of competing beliefs or values, or because of the different ways in which they describe or assess complex situations. (Freeman 2007, 465, and Rawls 1996, II, sec. 2).

We can put Rawls’s point by saying that attempts to reach agreement are sometimes burdened by issues (‘Burdening Issues’) on which competing and incompatible ‘Basic Stances’ may be reasonably adopted. Agents adopting differing Basic Stances on Burdening Issues may be led to differing conclusions, without anyone having failed to conduct themselves in accordance with the dictates of reason.<sup>4</sup>

A corollary of the burdens of judgment and the fact of reasonable pluralism is what Rawls refers to as “the fact of oppression.” That is, given these prior facts, the only way it would come about that a shared acceptance of one comprehensive (philosophical, moral, or religious) view could endure over time within a society would be through the oppressive use of state power. Rawls writes:

... a continuing and shared understanding of one comprehensive religious, philosophical, or moral doctrine can be maintained only by the oppressive use of state power. If we think of political society as a community united in affirming one and the same comprehensive doctrine, then the oppressive use of state power is necessary for political community. In the society of the Middle Ages, more or less united in affirming the Catholic faith, the Inquisition was not an accident; its suppression of heresy was needed to preserve that shared religious belief. The same holds, I believe, for any reasonable comprehensive philosophical or moral doctrine, whether religious or nonreligious. A society united on a reasonable form of utilitarianism, or on the reasonable liberalism of Kant or Mill, would likewise require sanctions of state power to remain so. Call this ‘the fact of oppression.’ (Rawls 1996, 37)

So, according to Rawls, human reason is not the sort of faculty that could possibly guarantee – even when used properly – that reasonable people will always converge in the conclusions they come to. And this results in the fact of reasonable pluralism, and in the fact of oppression.

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<sup>4</sup> In this paragraph I’m introducing my own terminology (‘Basic Stances’ and ‘Burdening Issues’) that is not found in Rawls’s own explanations of the Fact of Reasonable Pluralism. While this terminology is new, it is in keeping with Rawls’s own pronouncements on the issue.

A short time after Rawls's *Political Liberalism* was published, Burton Dreben offered an analysis of these issues in Rawls's book. He warned his audience that these views

... will shock you, and should shock anyone who is a well brought up philosopher ... You see, it is really an attack on the traditional view of reason: an attack on the idea that reasonable people can all (or at least sufficient numbers of them) be brought to agree solely through the use of reason on the same philosophical doctrine ... This is something Kant would never have dreamt of saying, nor Mill ... This, I claim, has never been said before in the history of philosophy. It is a totally radical view. (Dreben 2005, 317-319)

Dreben's analysis is important and on-target. However, I'm not entirely onboard with his assessment of the originality of Rawls's views on the matter. Many philosophers have attacked the "traditional view of reason," both before and after Rawls. The most famous and controversial of these assailants is probably Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche's attacks on traditional foundationalist views are perhaps best remembered by the famous line "God is dead." But one must keep in mind that the traditional view of reason falls squarely into Nietzsche's meaning, and is in his line of attack, when he uses that phrase. In any event, Nietzsche may be the most radical of the assailants attacking the idea of a faculty of reason with sufficient power to guarantee convergence, but he is by no means alone. Consider the case of Richard Rorty, who presents the American pragmatist tradition as also attacking the traditional view of reason:

The suggestion that everything we say and do and believe is a matter of fulfilling human needs and interests might seem simply a way of formulating the secularism of the Enlightenment – a way of saying that human beings are on their own, and have no supernatural light to guide them to the Truth. But of course the enlightenment replaced the idea of such supernatural guidance with the idea of a quasi-divine faculty called 'reason.' It is this idea which American pragmatists and post-Nietzschean European philosophers are attacking. (Rorty 1999, xxvii)

Rorty's characterization of the matter helps us see why the sort of epistemic pluralism discussed in this section might appeal to a pragmatist. It is plausible because it strikes one as simply a consequence of giving up on a divinized conception of reason that has become simply unbelievable. That is to say, the strong epistemic pluralism discussed here may appeal to a pragmatist because it strikes us as simply a consequence of naturalism.

### **Epistemic Pluralism and Metaphysical Pluralism**

Talisse and Aikin argue that strong epistemic pluralism – the sort of pluralism I just laid out and endorsed in section 3 – is incompatible with pragmatism.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>I take it that because the Rawlsian pluralism I just described includes the claim that reasonable pluralism is a permanent feature of our situation (i.e., it makes a modal claim: "it is

They offer two main arguments. First, they claim that the strong epistemic pluralist must embrace metaphysical pluralism, and that metaphysical pluralism is incompatible with pragmatism. (Talisse and Aikin, 2016, 21-22). And second, they argue that strong epistemic pluralism conflicts with pragmatism's "meliorist commitment" and blocks the road of inquiry, and is thus incompatible with what they label 'inquiry pragmatism.' (Talisse and Aikin, 2005a, 106).

Let's consider the first of these arguments. Talisse and Aikin claim that the strong epistemic pluralist must embrace metaphysical pluralism. This is likely to strike the reader as a *prima facie* strange claim. After all, one might expect that a strong epistemic pluralist, believing as he does that our epistemic powers have their limits, might adopt a modesty about metaphysics. This is precisely what Talisse and Aikin assert with regard to their favored variety of pluralism, modest epistemic pluralism.<sup>6</sup> They write:

... modest epistemological pluralists must be quietists about the metaphysics of value. They must not reject the claims of the metaphysical pluralist, but rather merely decline to accept them. (Talisse and Aikin, 2016, 21)

What Talisse and Aikin say here is fairly uncontroversial. However, one would think that if the modest epistemic pluralist, being cognizant of our cognitive limitations, would need to adopt a modest quietistic stance regarding metaphysics, then a strong epistemic pluralist, whose reservations about our cognitive limitations are even more pronounced, would have an even greater incentive to remain silent about metaphysics. But Talisse and Aikin, rather uncharitably, do not present the strong epistemic pluralist that way. Rather, they claim that strong epistemic pluralism and metaphysical pluralism are likely to go hand in hand, because metaphysical pluralists are likely to want to adopt strong epistemic pluralism.

... a value pluralist is likely to embrace the strong epistemological view, holding that value ontology explains the intrinsic indeterminacy of certain conflicts. Indeed, the two may support each other: Metaphysical pluralism explains the epistemic indeterminacy, and the epistemic indeterminacy serves as evidence for the heterogeneous value ontology. (Talisse and Aikin, 2016, 20)

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impossible without the use of oppressive state power...") and because it is epistemically motivated, it clearly qualifies as a version of strong epistemic pluralism. It would not do to say that strong epistemic pluralism is defined narrowly so as to exclude Rawlsian pluralism. And it would greatly undermine the strength of what they purport to show if the pluralism of John Rawls – the exemplar of epistemic pluralism – were excluded by stipulation from consideration when Talisse and Aikin attempt to show that pragmatism and strong epistemic pluralism are incompatible. Because of the modal ideas packed into "the fact of oppression" Rawlsian epistemic pluralism is too strong to count as a version of modest epistemic pluralism.

<sup>6</sup> While Talisse and Aikin take modest epistemic pluralism to be compatible with pragmatism, they don't really take it to be a substantive enough version of pluralism to be counted as a true sort of value pluralism.

Whether or not someone antecedently committed to metaphysical pluralism might think that embracing strong epistemic pluralism was a good idea, the fact remains that someone who was antecedently attracted to strong epistemic pluralists would have all the incentive they need to disavow metaphysics (their reasons amount to all the same reasons the modest epistemic pluralist had).

However, going even further than their claim that strong epistemic pluralism and metaphysical pluralism are likely to go hand-in-hand, Talisse and Aikin argue that the strong epistemic pluralist *must* adopt metaphysical pluralism. They must engage with metaphysics and must embrace metaphysical dualism, say Talisse and Aikin, because they must explain why some disputes are only unresolvable given our current resources, while other disputes are unresolvable in principle. Giving such an explanation, they insist, requires talking about the metaphysics of value. Thus, they claim, strong epistemic pluralism depends upon metaphysical pluralism, and hence is incompatible with pragmatism.

... the strong epistemological pluralist must distinguish between value conflicts that cannot be resolved given our current resources, and those that are intrinsically irresolvable. And that distinction requires the strong epistemological pluralist to go beyond talking about moral epistemology and say something about the values themselves. Consequently, strong epistemological pluralism depends on metaphysical pluralism. To draw the knot: Pragmatists can't be metaphysical pluralists, and one can be a strong epistemic pluralist only if one is also a metaphysical pluralist; therefore, pragmatists can't be strong epistemological pluralists. (Talisse and Aikin, 2016, 21)

In the next section I'll offer four responses to this argument. Each of these, I claim, is a cogent response, and the cogency of any one of these responses would be sufficient to defeat Talisse and Aikin's first argument.

### **Epistemic Pluralism and Metaphysical Pluralism: Four Responses**

To begin, we can note that, with all due respect to Talisse and Aikin, the claim that the strong epistemic pluralist must affirm this distinction, and must engage in a metaphysically robust explanation of it, is simply mistaken.

Response 1: Active Rejection. A strong epistemic pluralist could actively reject the distinction Talisse and Aikin claim that they must accept and explain. A response along this line would claim that there is no principled distinction between cases where we cannot reach agreement because our current resources are inadequate and those that are intrinsically irresolvable. To resolve a dispute is simply to reach agreement. To reach a state such that all individuals considering the question agree on an answer. Given that, the strong epistemic pluralist (again, of the sort I portrayed in section 3) is *not* committed to the idea (and ought to deny, I claim) that there are any disputes that are intrinsically

irresolvable. Accepting the Burdens of Judgment does not entail that there are any issues such that it could not be the case that the individuals considering it come to an agreement. If agreement is reached, that indicates that those considering the issue agreed in the Basic Stances they adopted on the Burdening Issues. The *possibility of agreement* in Basic Stances on the Burdening Issues is *not* something that the proponent of the Burdens of Judgment denies. What he insists on, however, is the *possibility of non-agreement* on the Basic Stances. And, he claims, this possibility is enough to undermine any hope that we might come to widespread agreement when it comes to comprehensive conceptions.

For any of the complex cases where the Burdens of Judgment apply, strong epistemic pluralists can affirm that resolution is possible, if the discussants happen to agree on the Basic Stances. But it is also possible, for any such issue, that the issue will remain unresolved – that agreement will not be reached – because the disputants take up differing Basic Stances. So there is no special class of issues that are irresolvable in principle, and hence no need to distinguish this class of issues from some other class of issues.<sup>7</sup>

In the face of this re-description of the matter, Talisse and Aikin could go on to press their objection by claiming that the strong epistemic pluralist needs to distinguish between those cases where the Burdens of Judgment apply (those cases where we'll be fortunate if we can get participants to come to an agreement, and where, if no such widespread agreement is possible, those who disagree will not necessarily be countable as irrational), and other 'standard' cases where the Burdens of Judgment don't apply (cases where there is good reason to hope that we'll be able to secure lasting and widespread agreement, and where if we cannot we'll know it is attributable to someone being unreasonable).

But the strong epistemic pluralist could respond to this reformulated challenge in the same way: active rejection. That is, the strong epistemic pluralist might deny that there is a difference in kind between such cases. Any topic might be affected by the Burdens of Judgment. Any issue might have Burdening Issues that make differing Basic Stances possible. Or, to phrase the response in another way, the Strong Epistemic Pluralist might assert that there is no particular kind of issue that is in-principle immune to the agreement-eroding effects of the Burdens of Judgment, and so might actively reject the claim that an explanation of the distinction is required.

This line of response may seem radical on first considering it. But I believe that it's the considered position any pragmatist should adopt. We can make this

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<sup>7</sup> It would be a mistake to read Rawls's views on the fact of reasonable pluralism, the burdens of judgment, and the fact of oppression as claiming that there is some special class of disputes that is irresolvable in principle. Rawls makes no such claim, and there is no reason one should saddle him with such a view. Indeed, see Rawls (2001, 36), where he denies that he is making a claim about the special status of values, and instead emphasizes that the burdens of judgment are difficulties arising "with all kinds of judgment."

line of response more palatable by a simple reminder that as good pragmatists we ought to be holists. Let's remind ourselves briefly of Quine's holism, and the rejection of the analytic-synthetic distinction. Quine's holism entails that any belief may be held true in the face of recalcitrant experience, and conversely that any belief may be revised or rejected – even simple mathematical truths or basic laws of logic (Quine 1951, 39-40). Of course, when we first consider Quine's holism these conclusions seem pretty radical. And we don't see people engaging in this sort of radical revision all that much in practice. But for holists there is no class of propositions that are in-principle immune to the sorts of adjustments Quine has in mind. There may be propositions, like '2+3=5' for example, that we don't see people revising all that much. For a Quinean holist this isn't because those are in some separate class of propositions partitioned off from the rest – ones that are immune to revision in-principle. And if we were to try to say more about why it is that these don't get revised all that much, we surely wouldn't begin (at least not if we are holists and pragmatists) with the assertion that there is some special kind that is in-principle immune to the adjustments Quine focused on.

Now what I'm hoping my reader will see, of course, is that these basic holistic lessons apply straightforwardly to the strong epistemic pluralist picture I'm endorsing. If we're holists, once we accept Rawls's idea of the Burdens of Judgment, we'll realize that any judgment is potentially subject to them. And if we find that in certain domains (say, mathematics or engineering) we don't find the sort of trenchant disagreement one might have expected given the applicability of the Burdens of Judgment to those domains, we'll realize that this really isn't very significant. It doesn't mean we shouldn't understand this matter holistically. We don't need to admit that there is any class of subjects that is immune in-principle to the effects of the Burdens of Judgment, and so we don't need to explain the distinction between two classes of topics by reference to metaphysics.

If the argument I've just given is right, Talisse and Aikin are mistaken in thinking that strong epistemic pluralists must embrace metaphysical pluralism. And so they are wrong in claiming that pragmatists cannot be strong epistemic pluralists.

Response 2: Passive Rejection. The response we just reviewed involved the strong epistemic pluralist actively rejecting the question pressed upon them by Talisse and Aikin. A more subtle response would avoid actively rejecting the question, and instead would merely decline to accept the question. That is, the pragmatist who wished to embrace strong epistemic pluralism might passively reject the demand for an explanation of the distinction Talisse and Aikin have in mind. A model for this sort of response is found in the work of Huw Price, from whom the term 'passive rejection' is drawn.

Price deploys this maneuver as a part of an attempt to explain semantic properties by reference to the attributions of semantic properties. This sort of

project faces a challenge in the form of the following pesky question: do attributions of semantic properties themselves have semantic properties? Any answer the theorist should give to this question threatens to saddle him with baggage he would rather not take on.

But the objection is easily side-stepped. We simply need to distinguish between (i) denying (in one's theoretical voice) that ascriptions of semantic properties have semantic properties; and (ii) saying nothing (in one's theoretical voice) about whether ascriptions of semantic properties have semantic properties – i.e., simply employing different theoretical vocabulary, in saying what one wants to say about such ascriptions. A deflationist cannot consistently do (i), but can consistently do (ii). Let's call (i) active rejection and (ii) passive rejection of the theoretical claim that ascriptions of semantic properties have semantic properties. (Like passive aggression, then, passive rejection involves strategic silence.) (Price 2009, 116)

A pragmatist who was inclined to accept strong epistemic pluralism could opt for passive rejection of the demand to explain the distinction Talisse and Aikin are focused upon. Instead of active denial, they could opt for strategic silence. As we've already noted, strong epistemic pluralists have all the reason they need to want to avoid metaphysics, and instead to adopt a modest and quietistic stance toward it. A pragmatist committed to avoiding metaphysics, but also embracing strong epistemic pluralism might worry that if they were to answer the question posed by Talisse and Aikin (how do you account for this distinction?) they might have to lapse into metaphysics.<sup>8</sup> And worrying about this matter, they might opt for passive rejection instead. Instead of answering the question, they remain strategically silent, and get on to more important business (that is, they get on to talking, in their theoretical voice, about whatever it is they do think they can explain given their commitments).

It's hard to anticipate what Talisse and Aikin might say in response to this. However, I find it hard to see how they could reject my claim that it is an open possibility for a pragmatist to respond to their question with passive rejection. Huw Price himself is widely (and rightly) regarded to be a prominent contemporary pragmatist (see, for example, Misak 2013, 248). And the passive rejection strategy for avoiding pesky questions that risk pulling us into metaphysics is endorsed by a number of pragmatist philosophers. Notably, passive rejection (or something that "bears a close resemblance" to it) is endorsed by Talisse and Aikin, who think it a fine strategy to employ when it is being used in defense of modest epistemic pluralism, the variety of pluralism that they favor (see Talisse and Aikin 2016, 25, note 5).

Response 3: Active Acceptance. Our discussion of passive rejection points the way for further responses. The first two responses we've looked at reject (either

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<sup>8</sup> Of course, I think they would be wrong to worry so much about this, as the previous subsection should make clear.

actively or passively) the need to give an account of the distinction Talisse and Aikin emphasize. The next two will be responses that take their challenge to be one deserving of an answer.

All pragmatists think it important to emphasize human practices if we are to adequately explain and understand some of the sorts of things that others in the philosophical tradition have thought we could describe and understand on their own, without reference to human practices. Huw Price's deflationism (touched on earlier) is an excellent example of such an attempt: the attempt to explain semantic properties (truth, meaning, reference, etc.) by reference to our practices of attributing such semantic properties (Price 2009). Robert Brandom is another example of a pragmatist who embraces what he calls a "social pragmatist strategic commitment." Brandom adopts an explanatory strategy of explaining what he wants to explain (for example, "conceptual content") by reference to our practices (Brandom 2000, 1-4). The thing that bears emphasis is that one with a social pragmatist strategic commitment to explanation does not explain whatever it is that he or she is attempting to explain by reference to ontology or metaphysics.

So let us now imagine a pragmatist with this sort of social pragmatist explanatory strategic commitment. And imagine that she also embraces strong epistemic pluralism. Whatever she has to explain, her strategy is to attempt to explain it by reference to our social practices (and never by positing that it is some metaphysical difference that explains things). She reasons like this: whenever there is a distinction between important things or kinds, this will always show up as a difference in social practice. If one wants to understand or explain such a distinction, the way to proceed is to focus on our social practices. Now along come Talisse and Aikin. They press on her the following request for an explanation: what explains the difference between those issues or cases where the Burdens of Judgment prevent us from resolving matters and those issues or cases where this doesn't happen.

It is perfectly possible that our pragmatist might accept this challenge. She might think that the question Talisse and Aikin pose is a great question: One crying out for an explanation – an explanation that she is prepared to give. And that she is prepared to give in the same ontologically modest, metaphysically stripped-down manner that she answers every other request for explanation.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> As my comments in the previous subsection should make clear, I think that if she is prepared to answer Talisse and Aikin's question, she should do so accompanied by an insistence that she's not attempting to explain the nature of some supposed special class of cases which are immune or susceptible to the effects of the Burdens of Judgment. If she were to claim that then she wouldn't count as a very good holist, and so not a very good pragmatist either, by my lights. I think that it is perfectly fair to admit that she might wish to offer a social/linguistic explanation for why we see agreement in some cases, and don't in others. But such an explanation does not force one to renounce holism any more than offering an explanation of why someone trenchantly hangs onto  $2+3=5$  forces would force Quine to renounce his holism.

Talissee and Aikin insist at this point that answering this question requires that one lapse into doing metaphysics, and that one embrace metaphysical pluralism. But couldn't our pragmatist at this point respond that it is the differences in social practices surrounding the different issues that accounts for the difference? Wouldn't it be possible for our pragmatist to begin taking up examples of such cases, and launching into detailed explanations of the social practices surrounding them? Talissee and Aikin's suggestion that the pragmatist who attempts to answer must embrace metaphysical pluralism seems like bare insistence that a social pragmatist strategy to answering that question just could not succeed, that anyone attempting to answer the question must come to recognize the futility of such an effort, and that they must then adopt a metaphysical explanation of the issue.

To put matters in a slightly different way: A pragmatist might actively accept the challenge Talissee and Aikin present. They might accept the need to explain the difference between cases where the Burdens of Judgment prevent us from resolving matters and those issues or cases where this doesn't happen. And they might explain it by offering an account of the ways in which the social practices surrounding those issues differ. The pragmatist we've been imagining could accompany her explanation with a re-affirmation of holism, and with the assertion that the difference is not a matter of a metaphysical difference in kinds – it is merely a difference of social practices. Of course, if she were more modest she might think it wiser to remain a quietist about metaphysics entirely. The difference, she would then contend, is to be explained entirely in terms of differences in social practice, and metaphysics is to be left to the metaphysicians.

Response 4: Passive Acceptance. My account of the “active acceptance” response has one serious shortcoming: it was completely lacking in details about the social practices that might be offered to explain the difference between cases or issues that Talissee and Aikin claim must be explained. Talissee and Aikin are in effect claiming that if there really were such a distinction, it could only be accounted for by referencing a metaphysical difference. The strategy I've just reviewed imagined one committed to a social pragmatist explanatory program, who insisted that, on the contrary, it could be explained by reference to social practices alone – without thinking that the differences in cases were attributable to some metaphysically robust distinction of kinds. But when pressed, I didn't deliver the goods. That is, I didn't actually explain things. This brings me to the final response I want to consider: passive acceptance.

The passive acceptance response is similar to the active acceptance response in that it accepts the question as posed. It takes it that the question Talissee and Aikin ask (how do you explain this distinction?) is an interesting one, and one calling for an answer. But unlike the active acceptance response, the passive acceptance response would admit that they do not have an answer to that question at present. The passive acceptance response is thus similar to the

passive rejection response, in that no explanation in our theoretical voice is offered.

Again, let us imagine a pragmatist with a social pragmatist explanatory commitment. Being a strong epistemic pluralist, our pragmatist also thinks that quietism and the eschewing of metaphysics is called for. This pragmatist is committed to giving explanations of important philosophical concepts, distinctions, and kinds in terms of social practices, and never by reference to metaphysics. Then along come Talisse and Aikin, pressing their interesting question. Our pragmatist thinks things over, and admits that he has no current answer to this question. Again, Talisse and Aikin proceed as though anyone pressed with this question would either have to embrace metaphysical pluralism in an attempt to answer it, or else give up on strong epistemic pluralism. But that's hardly the case. A strong epistemic pluralist with a social pragmatist explanatory commitment is not simply forced to give up on their program and to abandon their strategic commitments simply because someone points out that there is an outstanding question that needs to be answered. That's precisely not how progress in research programs happens. Instead, research programs progress by identifying outstanding questions that haven't yet been answered, and working hard progressing toward answers to them. This involves identifying promising and interesting problems, and steering new practitioners (new graduate students) toward them. It is par for the course for any research program to have a number of outstanding questions and problems, waiting to be resolved. Rejecting the research program and its most basic commitments is only rational when an alternative research program seems all things considered to be doing a better job of answering questions, and seems more likely to keep doing a good job in the future.<sup>10</sup> But the day of metaphysics, our pragmatist might reason, is done. Metaphysics is a degenerating research program if ever there was one.<sup>11</sup> So giving up our explanatory commitments and our pragmatist program is unwarranted. Even if we have no current answer to Talisse and Aikin's question. *Pace* Talisse and Aikin, taking seriously the question they pose does not force an abandonment of our pragmatist commitments, even if we find that we cannot now offer the explanation we would like to.

We can draw together our conclusion regarding Talisse and Aikin's first major criticism: They are simply mistaken in thinking that a strong epistemic pluralist must embrace metaphysical pluralism. The distinction they insist must be recognized and explained need not be recognized and admitted at all. And even if a distinction between particular cases is recognized and admitted, it need

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<sup>10</sup> My discussion of the logic of research programs is inspired by Kuhn, Feyerabend, and especially Lakatos. For the conditions under which rejecting a research program might be reasonable, see Lakatos (1970, 116-119).

<sup>11</sup> Of course, not everyone would agree with my imagined pragmatist on this point. Analytic metaphysics has made much of a comeback over the past decades. For a discussion of this trend, see Williamson (2004, 11).

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not be explained. And even if it is explained, it need not be explained by reference to metaphysics. And if we are to explain it without reference to metaphysics, we need not do so now.

### **The Road of Inquiry and Pragmatism's Meliorist Commitment**

In addition to their argument that strong epistemic pluralists must embrace metaphysical pluralism, Talisse and Aikin urge that strong epistemic pluralism is incompatible with a deep motivational or programmatic aspect of pragmatism. They formulate this criticism in a couple of different ways: first, they claim that strong epistemic pluralism is incompatible with pragmatism because it blocks the road of inquiry. And second, they claim that strong epistemic pluralism is incompatible with the broadly meliorist commitment that any pragmatist worth the name must embrace.

Let's start with the claim that strong epistemic pluralism blocks the road of inquiry. Talisse and Aikin do not focus heavily on this issue in their 2016 paper. In it they merely claim that "the strong epistemological view is objectionable in that it affirms that certain limitations on human inquiry are insurmountable ... This is surely a block to inquiry of the kind that Peirce railed against." (Talisse and Aikin 2016, 21). Elsewhere they remind the reader that Peirce had suggested this maxim ("do not block the road of inquiry") as the "first rule of philosophy" (Talisse and Aikin 2016, 21).

They elaborate upon the "blocking the road of inquiry" objection more fully in their 2005 paper (Talisse and Aikin 2005a, 107-109). However, in this earlier paper, Talisse and Aikin did not include strong epistemic pluralism amongst the varieties of pluralism they consider. They consider epistemic pluralism in general, and they contrast it with metaphysical pluralism. They also consider what they call "deep pluralism" and they contrast it with "shallow pluralism." Deep pluralism holds that incommensurability is in some sense a permanent feature of our situation – thus deep pluralism is in a sense equivalent to strong pluralism. Shallow pluralism, by contrast, takes it that while there certainly are issues where we can't resolve things, it leaves open the possibility that this may be a temporary state of affairs – thus shallow pluralism is in a sense akin to modest pluralism. While this is only a rough characterization, in (2005a) Talisse and Aikin more or less take it that the distinction between epistemic pluralists and metaphysical pluralist and that between shallow pluralists and deep pluralists more or less map onto one another. Deep pluralism results from embracing metaphysical pluralism, and shallow pluralism results from embracing epistemic pluralism.<sup>12</sup> They do not consider a deep form of epistemic pluralism (the strong epistemic pluralism that is the focus of my paper). I suspect that this is no mere oversight on their part, but that the

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<sup>12</sup> Naturally I'm leaving out much additional detail, including *modus vivendi* pluralism.

taxonomy they offered resulted from the underlying assumption (which they go on in their 2016 paper to articulate and defend) that any form of deep pluralism must be in the end a form of metaphysical pluralism.

In their 2005 paper, Talisse and Aikin offer a number of criticisms of deep pluralism. Most of these can be set aside, as they are really objections to metaphysical pluralism. But they also criticize deep pluralism for blocking the road of inquiry. And the criticisms they offer should apply equally well to strong epistemic pluralism. In their 2005 paper they describe what they call “inquiry pragmatism,” a style of pragmatism which can be characterized by its commitment to a research program of conflict resolution. An inquiry pragmatist takes it that our current inability to reach agreement on questions of value reflects the fact that we do not currently have criteria for judgment which when correctly applied would resolve the conflicts. Their recommended course of action is a program of experimentation, of innovation, of casting about for possible answers and putting them to the test. (Talisse and Aikin 2005a, 106). So why do they take it that this approach is incompatible with deep pluralism?

First, inquiry pragmatism is inconsistent with the strong modal aspects of deep pluralism, according to which certain value conflicts are *of necessity* inevitable, interminable, and unadjudicable. Such an attitude, the inquiry pragmatist will object, is simply a block on the road of inquiry. The deep pluralist prescription against even *trying* theories that promise to overcome or adjudicate conflicts is a positive hindrance to inquiry. Any theory that impedes or discourages further inquiry barricades the advance toward truth and is an unpardonable offense in reasoning (1.135). ... Second, deep pluralism fails to take any of the competing conceptions of the good as experiments or incomplete or open to revision and correction. Instead, each conflicting viewpoint gets treated as static and perfect. But such an attitude is anti-fallibilist and anti-experimentalist. (Talisse and Aikin 2005a, 108-109)

As I'll explain, I think that Talisse and Aikin are off-target in the claims and conclusions they articulate in this passage. But before I make good on that claim, let me get the other main formulation of this criticism out on the table. Strong epistemic pluralism, Talisse and Aikin contend, is incompatible with the broadly meliorist commitment that any pragmatist worth the name must embrace.

Our argument in ‘Why Pragmatists Cannot Be Pluralists’ can be stated succinctly. Any view that deserves to be called pragmatist is broadly meliorist in that it aims at the resolution of conflicts by means of methods that can be plausibly held to be intelligent, rational, open, and non-violent ... pragmatic practice presumes that (1) conflicts are resolvable by intelligent means, and (2) it is better to resolve conflicts intelligently than to let them stand. ... all pluralists deny (1) or (2) or both. Our conclusion is that pragmatists cannot be pluralists. (Talisse and Aikin 2005b, 145)

With these two formulations on the table, let us proceed. I claimed above that the claims and conclusions Talisse and Aikin set forth connected with the ‘blocking the road of inquiry’ formulation of this criticism were failures. Let’s

return to that, and let's begin with the claim that deep pluralism offers a "prescription against even trying theories that promise to overcome or adjudicate conflicts." Here Talisse and Aikin attribute an attitude that not every deep pluralist needs to endorse. A strong epistemic pluralist, for example, certainly need not offer any such prescription against trying theories that promise to overcome or adjudicate conflicts. There is nothing about strong epistemic pluralism (at least not the Rawlsian version I've been defending in this paper) that would or should encourage us not to try to adjudicate or resolve conflicts. For, after all, the strong epistemic pluralist does not claim that every conflict or disagreement is irresolvable – nor even that every conflict about value is irresolvable. They do not claim that the burdens of judgment mean that every disagreement is irresolvable. They only claim that some disagreements about value are irresolvable on account of the burdens of judgment. And they also do not claim that we are always (or even often) in a position to know which disagreements are irresolvable. That is to say, they need not claim that we can always recognize when a conflict we may be presented with is due to differing Basic Stances being adopted on Burdening Issues. And since they don't need to make any such claims, this leaves it perfectly open for a pragmatist who adopted strong epistemic pluralism to retain his or her meliorist commitment, and to recommend as a course of action that we continue to persevere to resolve conflicts whenever we encounter them. So if we have something to say that we think could potentially help resolve a conflict, we should say it. If we have a theory to offer, we should offer it. If we have reasons to give, we should give them. There is nothing about strong epistemic pluralism that presents a barrier to inquiry.

Talisse and Aikin also claim that strong epistemic pluralism is anti-fallibilist. But again, this criticism is off-target when considering the sort of strong epistemic pluralism I've defended herein. This criticism seems to suppose that the strong epistemic pluralist must always be motivated by something like "framework relativism." I can certainly sympathize with their being on-guard against conclusions reached from adopting such a static view of our thinking. But the Rawlsian strong epistemic pluralism I've been defending herein is not motivated by such a view. Rather, it is motivated by a naturalistic rejection of a divinized conception of reason, and by the subsequent sense that Rawls is on-target in articulating his claims about reasonable pluralism, the burdens of judgment, and the fact of oppression. Accepting that the power of reason has its limits when it comes to rationally adjudicating disagreements on complex issues does not provide a reason to be an anti-fallibilist, or to think that people can't make mistakes or change their minds.

Talisse and Aikin claim that "strong epistemic pluralism is a form of scepticism regarding the rational resolvability of conflict." (Talisse and Aikin 2016, 20). But describing things in this manner is rather unfair. Doing so is much akin to saying that someone who claims that no individual can ever know what

all human beings everywhere in the world are thinking counts as embracing a form of skepticism about other minds. Believing that no individual can do this doesn't count as being skeptical in any sense that should raise our hackles as pragmatists. It is rather the dismissal of an unrealistic aspiration that strikes us as implausible once we decide to be naturalists and to rule out the possibility of supernatural assistance. Similarly, the strong epistemic pluralist is indeed skeptical about the possibility that disputes can be resolved on the basis of reason to such an exhaustive degree that an entire society could ever come to convergence in their comprehensive conceptions (so as to rule out the fact of reasonable pluralism and the fact of oppression). So the strong epistemic pluralist is skeptical about the possibility of comprehensive society-wide convergence in overall outlook, in the same sense in which she is skeptical about gods, ghosts and witches. And this is not a sense that conflicts with pragmatism.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, let's turn back to the two practical commitments of pragmatism that Talisse and Aikin highlight:

(1) conflicts are resolvable by intelligent means, and (2) it is better to resolve conflicts intelligently than to let them stand.

Anyone with a meliorist commitment is bound to think that (2) is right. It's better to resolve disagreements when you can, and if one is going to try to resolve disagreements it's certainly better to resolve them intelligently and in open, honest, and non-violent ways. There is no reason a strong epistemic pluralist should reject (2). And further, there is no reason at all for them to reject (1), so long as (1) is not interpreted in an extreme way. (1), again, says that conflicts are resolvable by intelligent means. It is important to notice that the quantifier is missing from (1). As it is stated, (1) is ambiguous between two possible ways of reading it. If (1) claims that some or even many or most disagreements are resolvable by intelligent means, then it is something a strong epistemic pluralist could accept. It is only if (1) is read as saying that all cases of disagreement are potentially rationally adjudicable that the strong epistemic pluralist must reject it. Accepting the burdens of judgment and the fact of reasonable pluralism means accepting that disagreements will not be rationally adjudicable if they are traceable back to different reasonable basic stances taken on burdening issues. If that's the case, it may be that each side to the conflict is being equally reasonable. But if Talisse and Aikin mean (1) to be read as a

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<sup>13</sup> Talisse and Aikin sometimes proceed as though the only principled reason a thinker could have for embracing the modal claim (that I take to be definitive of deep/strong versions of pluralism) – the claim that reasonable disagreement is a permanent and unavoidable feature of the human condition – would be if the thinker held a metaphysical view about some class of value facts. I hold, on the contrary, that a pragmatist thinker can be motivated to accept the modal claim simply by embracing what Rawls calls the burdens of judgment and the fact of oppression. And that these two ideas are easy for pragmatists to feel we should accept because they seem to follow from embracing a naturalistic conception of human reason.

universal claim about disagreements, it is a quite strong and controversial thesis, and not one that anyone needs to admit. So understood, it is certainly not something a pragmatist needs to believe. As I've explained above, having a meliorist commitment certainly does not necessitate believing (1) in the strong or universal sense.

A pragmatist defender of the universal reading of (1) might invoke Peirce at this point.

... it is unphilosophical to suppose that, with regard to any given question (which has any clear meaning), investigation would not bring forth a solution of it, if it were carried far enough. (Peirce 1878, IV)

However, if we are to invoke Peirce here, we must keep in mind that he does not think we should *believe* or *assert* everything that we might need to *suppose* (Peirce 1932, 2.66). It is a familiar Kantian idea that there might be certain transcendental conditions for the possibility of knowledge of certain sorts. In the hands of pragmatists however (and here I'll focus on Peirce), this realization takes on a subdued and modest character.<sup>14</sup> Rather than showing us necessary truths, this realization (that there are dependencies for certain cognitive activities) helps us to recognize the existence of *regulative assumptions* – that certain assumptions are indispensable for our practices. So even if it were the case that pragmatist practice presupposes that any and every dispute is resolvable (the strong version of (1)), this would only give us reason to take the strong version of (1) to be a regulative assumption needed given our practical interests. It would not give us reason to believe the strong version of (1) to be true. Adopting a strong version of (1) as a strategic supposition or regulative assumption is perfectly compatible with our believing it to be false. A strong epistemic pluralist can believe that a strong version of (1) is false, while admitting that in our practice (when engaged in inquiry) “we must be guided by the rule of hope” (Peirce 1932, 1.405) and should act as though a strong version of (1) were true.

## Conclusion

I've been arguing that Talisse and Aikin are mistaken in claiming that pragmatists can't be strong epistemic pluralists. The root of the problem, I think, is that they have been insufficiently imaginative. Talisse and Aikin are not themselves attracted to deep pluralism, and I think they have been unable to imagine any real pragmatist that could be. Consider again their discussion of why a pragmatist cannot be a deep pluralist: because a deep pluralist, they say, is anti-fallibilist, and anti-experimentalist, and takes our worldviews to be static, perfect, and complete, rather than as experiments open to correction or revision (Talisse and Aikin 2005a, 108-109). But of course if you're imagining someone

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<sup>14</sup> See Misak (2013), 52.

who thinks like *that*, you aren't doing a good job of imagining what a pragmatist who was also a deep pluralist would think. A pragmatist who is a strong epistemic pluralist doesn't think any of those things. The strong epistemic pluralist is simply persuaded by Rawls's idea of the Burdens of Judgment, and by the naturalistic (Nietzschean) idea that Reason is not some quasi-divine light that can bring us all through to the Truth if only we use it correctly. They are not attracted to strong epistemic pluralism because our thinking about things is somehow perfect, static, or fixed by a framework. Indeed, matters are quite the reverse: things are often so messy, complex, vague, and open to interpretation that many conflicting Basic Stances are possible – none of which are dictated by basic standards of reason.

But none of this means that we cannot try to reach agreement when value conflicts arise. Of course we can try. For all we know we may be able to reach an agreement – for any value conflict we come across. Strong epistemic pluralism *does not* claim otherwise. It only insists on the *possibility* that we might not be able to reach an agreement, even while all the parties to the dispute remain reasonable.

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