

Volitional Pragmatism: The Collective Construction of Rules to Live By¹

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I. Introduction

As an economist, I was raised on the milk of prescriptive consequentialism. The theoretical architecture of rational choice, welfare economics, and its applied version—benefit-cost analysis—was offered up as the definitive answer to a wide range of public policy problems. Welfare economics was alleged to offer value-free solutions to value-laden policy debates. Symbolic of this confidence is the claim by Milton Friedman:

[C]urrently in the Western world, and especially in the United States, differences about economic policy among disinterested citizens derive predominantly from different predictions about the economic consequences of taking action—differences that in principle can be eliminated by the progress of positive economics—rather than from fundamental differences in basic values, differences about which men can ultimately only fight. (Friedman 5)

In this famous quote from Friedman, we see an admission—no doubt unintended—that the moral (ethical) content of economics is unavoidable. His instrumentalism allows him to celebrate what he assumes to be value-free analysis—“positive economics”—but in doing so, he acknowledges that there are economic issues over which fighting is inevitable. Indeed, if fighting is the only way to resolve such issues, the evidence suggests that those issues must be “worth fighting over.” Since no one believes fighting to be a constructive social activity, Friedman was eager to show that “objective”—to him, “positive”—economics renders fighting not only old-fashioned, but unnecessary.

A more charming aspect of the above quote is Friedman’s allusion to “disinterested” citizens. One can grant Friedman some limited scope for finding

truly disinterested citizens in a democratic market economy, but there cannot be very many. Perhaps the purposeful recluse in the mountains of northern Idaho is really disinterested. But then perhaps his exile from the market may actually have been fostered by its indifference to him. The recluse is simply reciprocating that indifference. Friedman's appeal to disinterested citizens is difficult to reconcile with his insistence that markets make us free to choose. After all, if one is free to choose—and if a market economy is essential to political freedom as Friedman insists—then it follows that all citizens in a democracy have a clear interest in how markets work, whose interests those markets serve, and who is able to finesse particular markets for their own benefit. Where, it must be asked, are we to find a really “disinterested” citizen in a market economy firmly embedded in a thoroughgoing market culture?

Friedman's manifesto springs from the false promise of welfare economics to become the morally neutral arbiter of what ought to be done. Whatever the problem—GMO foods, climate change, sustainable agriculture, pollution, health policy, food safety—the presumptions of rational choice defined the economic approach to collective thought and action. Economists could study alternative policy choices and report back concerning which choice would maximize social welfare. Economists are sure that economics is the “science of choice.” We rarely consult psychologists or philosophers about that conceit.

But, of course, rational choice has always been intellectually bankrupt—meaning that appeals to welfarist prescriptive consequentialism are therefore incoherent. Prescriptive economics of the consequentialist variety—assertions about efficiency, optimality, socially preferred policies, and Pareto improvements—are central to the modernist project preoccupied with notions of objectivism, rationality, and realism. Pragmatism affirms the intellectual poverty of that holy trinity. Economics is not the science of choice because it cannot be. Economics, properly understood, is limited to clarifying the *consequences* of choice. Can economics be rescued from the epistemological dead end it has created for itself?

I wish to explore the general outlines of an escape from the prescriptive certitude of economics. I will present an alternative epistemological approach, and a theory of action, that trumps welfarism and prescriptive consequentialism. I call my approach *volitional pragmatism* (Bromley, *Sufficient Reason*). Volitional pragmatism rests on five key concepts: (1) the habituated mind, (2) the irritation of surprise and doubt, (3) prospective volition, (4) fixing belief, and (5) truth as settled belief. I will cover each in turn. But first, a brief preliminary stipulation is necessary.

II. Belief

It may be supposed that the most fundamental of human needs concerns food, water, and staying warm. This supposition would be mistaken. The most fundamental human need concerns what to believe. Believing is precedential to eating and drinking (and staying warm) for the simple reason that even the seemingly basic acts of eating and drinking require a concept about surviving and thereby experiencing the future. This attribution of value to the future is what renders survival a conceptual rather than a physical matter. Without the *idea* of the future, and without the attribution of value to the future, eating is not an obvious or compelling activity. Eating requires the will to live.

With the future driving actions in the present, believing becomes the predicate for all action. What should I eat? What should I drink? How might I stay warm? From this, one may further suppose that believing is an individual enterprise. This supposition, too, would be mistaken.

As social beings we tend toward, indeed we are defined by, social beliefs. The essence of socialization is precisely the stabilization of beliefs. And stabilized beliefs define for us what is normal, natural, correct, right. It could not be otherwise. And from this spare beginning, one can begin to make out the ground beneath the social arrangements—the institutions—that define our very being as social creatures.²

I now turn to the specifics of volitional pragmatism.

III. The Habituated Mind

Charles Sanders Peirce argued that the mind tends to take habits. Habits include laws, dispositions, beliefs, and “stopping rules.” Habituation is the key *normalizing power* in mind, in society, and in nature. Evolution is a continuum of overlapping disturbances, adjustments, and habits. Focusing on human systems, evolution must be understood as a continuous process of doubt, inquiry, and gradual settling down to a new “fixed belief.” Thorstein Veblen suggested that

[t]he economic life history of the individual is a cumulative process of adaptation of means to ends that cumulatively change as the process goes on, both the agent and his environment being at any point the outcome of the past process. His methods of life today are enforced upon him by his habits of life carried over from yesterday and by the circumstances left as the mechanical residue of the life of yesterday. (Veblen 74–75)

John R. Commons, with Veblen a founder of institutional economics, talked of the “instituted personality.” Commons reminded us that the formulation of a “workable solution” to any emergent problematic situation is inseparable from these customary practices to which all individuals have become accustomed. The habituated mind comes to see current practices, current choices, and current actions as normal, right, and correct. With habituation a dominant aspect of the human thought process, the obvious question becomes—How is social change possible? Peirce grounded change in “the irritation of surprise and doubt.”

IV. The Irritation of Surprise and Doubt

John Dewey talked of life as if one walked into a movie that had been going for some period. He said: “While the content of knowledge is what has happened, what is taken as finished and hence settled and sure, the reference of knowledge is future or prospective. For knowledge furnishes the means of understanding or giving meaning to what is still going on and what is to be done” (Dewey, *Democracy and Education* 341).

For Dewey, a habit is a peculiar combination of the *will* and the *environment*. Notice that this tends to make habits contingent. The Deweyan environment is both organic and transactional; habits are jointly enacted into experience by customary transactions of the actors and particular environmental features. The environment comprises the contingent circumstances in which the will, particular actions, and agency are constituted. Dewey writes: “Habits incorporate an environment within themselves. They are adjustments *of* the environment, not merely *to* it” (*Human Nature and Conduct* 38; emphasis in original). In other words, “We are the habit” (*Human Nature and Conduct* 24).

The habituated mind serves us well as we engage in routine activities. Habits are, after all, decision heuristics that regularize our life. Habits economize on thought. However, serious thought only starts when particular circumstances and events are encountered and we find ourselves in need of an explanation. Human action is animated by surprise and doubt. Peirce insisted that “the action of thought is excited by the irritation of doubt, and ceases when belief is attained; so that the production of belief is the sole function of thought” (Peirce, 1957, 36).

Why is that tree in my garden dying? Why am I feeling dizzy? Why did that airplane crash? Why is my car sputtering? Why did that spacecraft disintegrate on re-entering the earth’s atmosphere?

Thought is a diagnostic undertaking, and this brings us to abduction. Peirce also called it the *method of hypothesis*. Abduction is inference to the best explanation. Many scientists imagine that induction and deduction constitute (and exhaust) our ways of fixing belief. But abduction offers valuable insights and prospects to those who are seriously interested in discovering the reasons for particular events. An abductive argument is of the form:

The surprising fact, C, is observed:
But if A were true, C would be a matter of course,
Hence, there is reason to suspect A is true.

Abduction allows us to deploy specific known relations and particular assumptions to formulate propositions (testable hypotheses) with the intent of *explaining* those particular events. If your car will not start on a cold morning, abduction is the process your mechanic will deploy in quest of a *reason*. If you have a fever, abduction is the process your doctor will deploy as she ponders the *reason* for your fever. If you are a forensic pathologist, you ponder the cadaver in quest of the *reason* for death. The purpose of abduction is the *production of belief*. And a belief is that upon which we are prepared to act.

V. Prospective Volition

The third conceptual issue here is that of considering the future and influencing how that future will unfold for us. But this requires a reconsideration of choice. Standard choice theory asks us to consider the future in terms of the present. Prospective volition asks us to consider the present in terms of the future. But it is a very different future from how it is treated by most economists—and perhaps others.

I will discuss prospective volition from the perspective of the individual, and then of the collective—city councils, courts of law, and parliaments.

A. Individual Action

As we know from Richard Rorty, pragmatists deny that the human mind is a mirror of nature. There is no singular reality out there to be reported on. Instead, our individual comprehensions of the settings and circumstances within which we are situated are limited to our *impressions* of the world around us. Obviously, different individuals formulate and hold *different* impressions. There are, to be sure, objects and events “out there” in the world, but there are no universal and objectively “true” descriptions of the objects and events in that world—there are only impressions. Claims of “truth” about

the world around us are a property of *statements about* that world. Truth is not a property of objects and events. Rather, truth is a property of *statements about objects and events*. Individuals do not discuss (and argue about) objects and events—they discuss and argue about statements about, and descriptions of, objects and events. It is said that “seeing is believing.” Pragmatists insist that “believing is seeing.” All impressions of the world are contingent.

As sapient beings, each of us apprehends settings and circumstances within which we are situated, but especially as we move through new settings and circumstances. These apprehended phenomena become our *impressions* of those settings and circumstances. Such impressions are just that—acquired sensory signals (signs) as we contemplate our situatedness in a particular constellation of settings and circumstances. These impressions are the raw material of our understanding of our situatedness, but they are of little value until they have been transformed into coherent stories that we can express to ourselves—and to others.

When we re-describe these impressions to ourselves, and when we relate them to others, these re-descriptions constitute our *expressions* about the world around us. To a certain extent this idea accords well with Damasio’s “autobiographical self.” Perhaps it is Habermasian *Lebenswelt*. *These expressions form the mental stage on which we live*. This stage constitutes our individually perceived and individually constructed “reality.” And that is all there is to say about it. It will not be your “reality,” nor will it be my “reality.” This particular reality “belongs to” the individual who created it. We might say that this particular reality is constitutive of the individual to whom it belongs. It is both contingent and constitutive.

As above, surprise triggers mental processes that confront settled habits of mind and induces us to form abductive syllogisms. Individual thought and action is abductively informed and animated. Surprise confounds our settled belief—our habits of mind—and brings about thought. And the sole purpose of thought is to remove doubt—to fix belief.

As we form abductive syllogisms about our constructed situatedness, we are at the same time negotiating our situatedness in the panoply of those impressions. From the conjunction of these impressions and inferences about the world being experienced, and our place in that world—and from the *meanings* we then attribute to these impressions, inferences, and situatedness—we abductively construct plausible inferences about the need to act, and about the best actions to take in the light of the abductive belief just formulated. This brings us to G. L. S. Shackle’s concept of *created imaginings*. Shackle insisted that:

[o]utcomes of available actions are not ascertained but created. We are not speaking . . . of the objective recorded outcomes of actions which have been performed. Those actions are not “available.” An action which can still be chosen or rejected has no objective outcome. The only kind of outcome which it can have exists in the imagination of the decision-maker. (Shackle 143)

Expressions are stories we tell ourselves about our *present* situatedness. Created imaginings are stories we tell ourselves about possible *future* situatedness. Notice that the essential function of expressions is to constitute (to construct) the mental stage onto which we might then project our imaginings of future outcomes to see how they will “play out.” The central idea here is our created imaginings projected onto the stage of our emergent expressions. It is here that we formulate the reasons that will come to provide the grounds for choosing among the array of plausible created imaginings. Individual choice and action is a contest between expressions and imaginings. This deliberation consists in checking these imaginings against our expressions of the present, and of the imagined futures. We act when we find a feasible created imagining that satisfies expectations about situated outcomes in the future. To follow Joseph Raz, our deliberations concern the quest for what seem to be the *best reasons to hold a particular belief*. And, of course, we also act when we reject all created imaginings (perhaps because they seem infeasible) and stick with our current action trajectory. To choose to do nothing is still a choice.

B. Joint Action

My primary interest lies with concerted action involving more than one individual. The difficulty here should be obvious. The foremost burden in joint action is the necessity to deal with a multitude of *contending expressions*. It is in the nature of being individuals that we necessarily formulate and hold individualized expressions of the world around us—we are different autobiographical selves. Of course, most of us will agree that lamps are lamps, but the more pertinent issues go beyond this superficial identification of what the object appears to be. Is that lamp an antique? Does that lamp give enough light for reading? Why does that lamp tilt? Did that lamp cost as much as it would appear? How can he afford such a fine lamp? Is that lampshade dirty, or is that its “real” color? Why would he have such an outrageous lamp in an otherwise tasteful room?

Notice the constituents of expressions in this string of questions—antique, light, tilt, income, cost, ambiguous lampshade, outrageous, and tasteful. We see

that a lamp is not merely a lamp. Instead, a lamp is a series of effects to differentially situated observers. Consider the Peircean pragmatic maxim: “Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object” (Peirce, 1998, 135).

That is, the meaning of an object *to us* is nothing but the sum of its perceived effects *on (for) us*. We create our expressions by collecting, sorting, and re-describing to ourselves the sum of our impressions of the effects of the subjects of our apprehended senses. Beauty is not a property inherent in certain objects—the thing in itself. Rather, beauty is an effect produced by some objects (but not by other objects). Of course, this produced effect will strike different individuals quite differently. Similarly, different individuals will ask themselves quite different questions about that lamp. It is in this sense that the lamp will comprise quite different expressions to different people. Is a lamp just a lamp?

The obvious difficulty in joint action is that everyone else is doing the same thing, although to quite different effect. It follows that each of us will apprehend a slightly different situatedness and thus each of us will have quite distinct expressions about the world “as it is” and about our place in that world. In joint action, this means that there is not a single stage (expression) upon which our quite independent and disparate created imaginings are to be projected. Instead, there are as many “stages” as there are participants in the community whose task it is to ascertain but a single course of action for the future. And here, recall that the pertinent “community” could be a parliament, legislative committee, board of directors, faculty committee, chamber of judges, jury, family, or a village council. This implies that there is an equally plentiful number of created imaginings being projected onto the multiple stages by those holding quite distinct expressions. Collective action forces all participants to agree on the many aspects (effects) of the lamp.

We see that the central challenge in collective action is for the pertinent decision group(s) to *work out* a reconciliation of the multitude of expressions and imaginings about the future. Notice that the issue here is not one of discovering the “right” expression out of the multitude of contending expressions. Nor is the issue to discover the “right” created imagining *to fit* the “right” expression. There is no “right” anything. The central task is to focus on the various reasons for the disparate expressions, and for the disparate imaginings. Progress in such difficult matters is to be found in reasoned debate. Pragmatists put the matter as *the asking for and giving of reasons*. To quote Hans Joas:

In pragmatism, precisely because it considers all psychical operations in the light of their functionality for action, it becomes impossible to hold the position that the setting of an end is an act of consciousness per se that occurs outside of contexts of action. Rather, the setting of an end can only be the result of reflection on resistances met by conduct that is oriented in a number of different ways. . . . [A]ction is teleological only in a diffuse fashion. Even our perception is shaped by our capacities and the possibilities for action. (Joas 21)

We see here recognition of the many *images of action*, and we see that the *setting of ends outside of the context of action is psychologically impossible*. That is, the prior specification of created imaginings is impossible until those who must act are in a position (a context) to act. For collective choice (public policy) being *in the context of action* means being surrounded by others with divergent expressions, yet resolutely on the way to formulating their own unique and divergent created imaginings. Because joint action must ultimately result in but a single choice (coordinated and coincident action), contending expressions are inevitably confronted by contending created imaginings. Small wonder that collective action—public policy—is so difficult. The participants in that process bring differing expressions about the *status quo ante*, and quite different created imaginings about the prospects for the future.

VI. Fixing Belief

Peirce's conception of truth is quite straightforward: "The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate, is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real. That is the way that I would explain reality" (Peirce, 1934, 405).

The issue here concerns how individuals and groups of individuals—say, a legislature, a court of law, a faculty, or a village council—can reach a decision about what would be better to do. When individuals or collective bodies set out to make a choice, others may be consulted in an effort to see what they believe to be the case. We care what others think—whether experts in a particular epistemic community, or friends and colleagues. When we ask for the views of others, we will receive back specific empirical claims. They are empirical because they will relate our mental processes to the world out there.

When we consult the experts—"Let us see what the science says"—we must be concerned with the provenance, veracity, and coherence of official assertions as judged by the shared standards of disciplinary practices from

which they spring. That is, are these claims internally legitimate? But sapient adults also bring their own mental processes—their habits of mind—to the task. This second component concerns the coherence and pertinence of scientific claims (assertions) as determined by the standards of the community whose decisions and actions they presume to inform and to judge. That is, do scientists bring *justified* assertions to the arena of public choice? We have here two core principles of volitional pragmatism—*warranted belief* and *valuable belief*.

A. *Warranted Belief*

Warranted assertions arise from settled belief emanating from a community of individuals thought to have special epistemic sanction to study, carry out research, and then pronounce on particular matters. Such communities are scientific disciplines. The social purpose of epistemic communities is to tell the rest of us what we ought to believe about specific issues. Epistemic communities produce warranted belief.

The term *warranted belief* (*warranted assertions*) is a Deweyan benediction bestowed by the disciplinary community out of which particular warranted assertions emerge. The entire community of disciplinary practitioners stands as the arbiters of assertions emanating from a particular subset of its disciplinary adherents. Volitional pragmatism accords the status of warranted assertion only to the settled belief of a community of scholars (an epistemic community). When a discipline speaks with clear consensus on a particular matter, the rest of us would be well advised to regard these claims as constituting warranted assertions. On the contrary, when that disciplinary consensus is absent, or once existed but is now beginning to dissipate, those associated assertions lose their warrantability.

However, even if a class of warranted assertions exists and serves to define the best scientific evidence of particular events or phenomena, individuals in society are under no obligation to stop what they are doing and fall in line behind the prevailing scientific consensus.

This brings me to the concept of valuable belief.

B. *Valuable Belief*

Valuable belief (or a valuable assertion) is a warranted assertion that can be justified to an audience of attentive sapient agents intent on a particular action. A valuable belief is one upon which I am now prepared to act.

Volitional pragmatism holds that the term *valuable belief* is a benediction—a judgment—that can only be conferred by those who are the intended audience for specific assertions or truth claims directed to them. The implication here is

that audiences in a democracy are entitled to insist that particular authoritarian assertions (including the “authoritative” assertions from particular epistemic communities) be justified to them.

The *internal* acceptance of a theory rests on the warrantability of its axioms, assumptions, prescriptions, predictions, and explanations. Internal acceptance implies that a particular discipline has reached a working consensus about a constellation of concepts, relations, and their implications. This working consensus is the necessary and sufficient condition for what I call *warranted belief*. This evolved and sustained scientific agreement is internal to the discipline, and as such, this agreement can be said to represent, at this time, the *settled deliberations* of a particular epistemic community with respect to the specific issue under consideration. In practical terms, the members of the discipline speak with one voice about particular matters under consideration. For the rest of us, we would be well advised to take a discipline’s claims and assertions seriously. If cosmologists offer a warranted theory—a fixed belief—about the behavior of the planets, it is prudent for the rest of us to accept this account until a better one comes along. But volitional pragmatism insists that this cannot be a requirement.

In particular, some warranted beliefs might be received by the larger society with justifiable skepticism. If lawyers reveal to us the legalistic erudition and sparkling wisdom of particular judicial decisions, we are under no obligation to consider the decisions as correct, fair, or pertinent. If the received wisdom in psychology is that some categories of former prison inmates are not dangerous under particular circumstances, citizens may be excused for feeling anxiety if one or more such persons are seen in their immediate neighborhood hanging about a children’s playground. And if the world association of plant geneticists issues a proclamation declaring that genetically modified corn is, to the best of their knowledge, really quite safe, many people will not be easily persuaded by this news, and they may choose to remain opposed to such genetic manipulation. Discerning adults are not easily persuaded that the absence of proof of harm is the same as proof of the absence of harm. Nor should they be.

The point here is that if psychologists, lawyers, or geneticists get it wrong, many of us will be affected in ways that we might find unacceptable. And so we see that the allegedly reassuring agreement of a community of disciplinary adherents—earnestly engaged in what Thomas Kuhn would call “normal science”—is not sufficient reason for the rest of us to stop what we are doing and instantly reformulate our belief about certain matters. After all, the citizenry has seen disciplinary claims revised with some regularity in the past—especially is this so in matters of diet, smoking, exercise, investment

strategies, and particular medicines. Einstein used to joke that “that fellow Einstein is always changing his mind.”

The warranted belief of a community of disciplinary adherents is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the immediate acquiescence of the rest of us. Indeed, our acquiescence in their fixed belief and associated warranted assertions must rest on a separate set of arguments and reasons from those to which the discipline alone is privileged. Lacking this, disciplinary practitioners are not entitled to expect the rest of us to accept their particular assertions—even if they are deemed warranted by the discipline from which they spring. The pertinence of this for public policy is obvious. Peirce reminded us that “Belief does not make us act at once, but puts us into such a condition that we shall behave in some certain way, when the occasion arises. Doubt has not the least such active effect, but stimulates us to inquiry until it is destroyed” (Peirce, 1992, 114).

VII. Truth as Settled Belief

Stephen Shapin points out that “one may say that truth is a matter of collective judgment and that it is stabilized by the collective actions which use it as a standard for judging other claims” (6).

Wittgenstein insisted that we can only *really* know that which it makes sense to doubt. His famous challenge to G. E. Moore—who claimed that he “knew” he had two hands because he could observe them—captures this point. Wittgenstein also said that true knowledge has been attained when it is no longer reasonable to doubt specific claims. Notice the difference between seeing (observing) and deep diagnostics. Only if it makes good sense to investigate something, motivated by doubt and surprise, will we be able to say that we know or understand it. And once our investigations have settled our belief, it is no longer reasonable to doubt what we have produced. The troublesome part comes when groups of individuals in the legislature or a jury chamber announce a decision—one predicated on the collation of widely divergent views of the world. How might we describe that synthesis? What benediction is best suited? This emergent decision has but one pertinent property—its *acceptance* by those charged with formulating a course forward.

What, precisely, is signified by that acceptance? Would we say that the process—and the many participants—generated a decision that no one wanted? This is doubtful. Would we be right to discredit particular collective decisions because these decisions represented a “compromise”? A more honest description is that the decision represented the “consensus” of the body charged with reaching a decision in this particular matter. And what exactly

is meant here by *consensus*? The pragmatist would suggest that this word is simply another way of saying that the decision seemed, to all (most?) participants, to be the *best thing to do under the circumstances*. They worked it out. Is this but another way of saying that this particular act seemed, at the moment, the *right* thing to do? If this action is the “best” and it is “right,” then what is left for us to say about it? Pragmatists would suggest, without irony, that we might as well bestow the ultimate benediction on the decision. On the way to doing that, the pragmatist might well regard the decision as evidence of the emergence of settled belief about what ought to be done. Recall that truth is not a property of objects and events in our situatedness. Truth is, instead, a property of propositions and claims about the objects and events in that situatedness. We have, in other words, the emergence of a collective commitment to a way forward—the truth content of which is no longer in doubt.

Can we therefore call this decision “the truth” concerning the best way forward? We can certainly refer to it as a *truth claim*. That is, this decision and the action it entails are claimed by the participants in the decision to be a *good thing* to do. Because truth is a property of propositions and statements, the claim that this act is (or seems to be) the best thing to do under the present circumstances constitutes a statement *about* something. It is a proposition with truthful content. Truth is the compliment we pay to our settled deliberations.

VIII. Implications for the Collective Construction of Belief

As an economist, I am concerned with the ground upon which individual and collective choice rests. Public policy is the culmination of that two-sided challenge. In my work, I insist that human choice and action are properly characterized as *prospective volition*—the human will in action, looking to the future, trying to determine how that future ought to unfold. As this process evolves, individuals (and groups of individuals) bring contending expressions and imaginings to the task of choice and action. Individuals (and groups) do not know precisely what they want until they are able to work out what they seem able to have. Surprise motivates action. This process of working out plausible futures entails the consideration of plausible imaginings in conjunction with existing expressions about current and future situatedness. Group action is more complicated than individual action because it requires reconciliation of disparate and contending individual expressions and imaginings until a consensus emerges—the properties of which are that this consensus

is regarded as (1) feasible, and (2) the best thing to do at this particular time. This process can be thought of as an exercise in pleading, resistance, persuasion, cautious acquiescence, and eventual emergence of a consensus.

The two properties of that consensus—*feasible* and *best at this time*—represent judgments reached by those individuals who are responsible for collective action. Notice that this judgment is something that can only emerge as individuals and groups contend with the need to reconcile disparate expressions and disparate created imaginings. The first step in this process of working out an emergent consensus is necessarily confined to legislators, administrators, and judges. In a democracy, the second step is to *justify* this agreement to the political community whose individual actions will be restrained, liberated, and expanded. In the absence of this justification, collective action will lack legitimacy. This justification to the larger political community necessarily entails the *giving of reasons* for the decision reached. The process of giving reasons must be carefully crafted so that the reasons given match as closely as possible the *asking for reasons* that is expected from the political community to whom the collective action is directed (Brandom). This activity is properly thought of as *justification in the service of emergent consent*.

This theory of choice (and action) obviously stands in contrast to the deterministic and linear model that characterizes standard rational choice theory. Given the criticism of rational choice theory (Bowles; Field; Rabin; Satz and Ferejohn), and the failure of coherence in consequentialist welfarism, it cannot be said that there still is settled belief in the broader discipline of economics about individual and collective choice. Pragmatists insist that disciplinary belief that fails to satisfy minimal coherence standards from within that particular epistemic community cannot be the source of credible or compelling truth claims emanating from that discipline and subsequently directed at the larger community. Pragmatists further insist that, even if the proffered truth claims are deemed coherent by the discipline from which they spring, the projection of those truth claims into social choice situations is always tentative and contingent unless and until there is widespread acceptance on the part of those to whom the truth claims are directed. Sapient individuals retain the authority to reject—for their own reasons—the truth claims from any source. The status of *valuable belief* is a property bestowed upon assertions and claims by those to whom such assertions are directed. Valuable belief is not a property that can be claimed for disciplinary truths by those who produce that belief and advance correlated assertions. All that the producers of such “truth claims” can justifiably assert is that this particular belief enjoys wide agreement within the epistemic community out of which it arises. Even then, *warranted belief* is

a benediction bestowed by the wider members of a discipline, not simply by those responsible for producing those assertions.

We see that prescriptive welfarism applied to public policy fails the pragmatist's conditions on both counts. First, welfare economics fails the test of coherence within economics; that is, Paretian economists do not bring warranted belief when they prescribe welfaristic claims to problems of collective action. Second, the truth claims about "optimal" or "socially preferred" policies are usually ignored by those to whom they are directed. These truth claims are ignored, I suggest, because decision makers find themselves either dubious or, if not dubious, quite unable to offer sufficient justifications to the broader citizenry to whom they are ultimately accountable. Decision makers know that citizens demand justifications based on grounds that matter to them—and few citizens are waiting to be told that particular policies are Pareto optimal, or that they can be proven to be socially preferred by the application of potential compensation tests. To most listeners, this strategy fails the test of sufficient reason.

This does not mean that economic concepts and relations cannot provide valuable information to the process of working out what seems best to do (at this particular time) about specific problematic situations. But it does mean that economists must remain silent concerning what is best to do on the authority of Paretian concepts alone. And it means that economists must resist the temptation to criticize decisions for being irrational, inefficient, non-optimal, or socially inferior to other more "welfare enhancing" policies.

Volitional pragmatism insists that public policy cannot legitimately be held hostage to the prescriptive truth claims imposed on it by economists (or those from any other discipline). Volitional pragmatism employs *abduction* to uncover the reasons for particular policy choices. When we find reasons for choices, we will be on our way to the development of a theory of collective action and institutional change. That theory will require explicit recognition of the concepts of impressions, expressions, and created imaginings. That theory will also require recognition that joint action in the policy arena entails the working out of contending expressions and created imaginings. It will require recognition that human agents cannot possibly articulate coherent and salient wants in isolation from the specific context of choice in which they learn about those wants as they learn about what they can have. Outside of this context, expressions of wants are mere cheap talk.

Public policy seeks to modify individual domains of choice by restraining, liberating, and expanding the opportunities and capacities of each of us to engage in particular activities. Policy is not some alien "intervention" into

the otherwise wondrous “free market” of such appeal to some writers. Indeed, what some are pleased to call “the market” is simply the constructed artifact of prior collective action. Policy is nothing but a word we apply to a continual process of re-defining—reconstructing—new realms of individual and group action. Public policy has been unnecessarily mystified by virtue of its having been embedded in the fictional logic of rational choice. If we could but see policy as a word that describes the incessant human quest for contending with surprise in the human condition, we would see that policy is not at all mysterious. Policy is simply choice and action in which groups of individuals work out what seems better, at the moment, to do. We do not need welfare economists telling us which of those plausible futures is socially preferred. We will figure that out for ourselves as we go about figuring out how to reconcile our contending expressions and contending created imaginings. Volitional pragmatism helps by reassuring us that it is perfectly acceptable—it is quite “natural”—to be confused about what seems better to want and to do. Confusion and surprise are the starting points of working out what seems better, at the moment, to do.

Volitional pragmatism forces us to confront the Myth of the Other. In the beginning, God was there to define for us what was good and right to do. Modernism pushed God aside and High Philosophy quickly stepped in to provide guidance. Philosophy became our new Other. When philosophers became justifiably uneasy with this burden, the task was eagerly taken up in the middle of the twentieth century by welfare economists. Volitional pragmatism suggests that we have now outgrown our need for external truth rules to tell us what is the better thing to do. The Myth of the Other is precisely concerned with the idea that tough choices cannot usefully be turned over to God, or to philosophers, or to welfare economists. There is no Other—there is only us. And volitional pragmatism entails the working through of what we think we want by learning about what we seem able to have. Only then will we take responsibility for our decisions. When we have settled our deliberations, we will anoint those settled thoughts with the ultimate benediction—it seemed the best thing to do at this time. And we shall be happy with that decision . . . until the next surprise.

NOTES

1. Presented as the Coss Lecture at the meeting of the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy, Denver, March 7, 2014.

2. This is taken from the Prelude to my 2006 book *Sufficient Reason: Volitional Pragmatism and the Meaning of Economic Institutions* (1).

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