

Pragmatic Method and Its Rhetorical Lineage

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1.

“A new name for some old ways of thinking,” William James subtitled his most popular book. With typical diffidence, he did not hesitate to acknowledge that many earlier philosophers were cognizant of and practiced in the pragmatic method. He mentions by name not only Locke, Berkeley, and Hume but also Socrates, “who was adept at it,” and Aristotle, “who used it methodically” (1916, 50). Nor was he alone in his acknowledgement of his predecessors. Charles Sanders Peirce, who invented the method, remarks that “the river of pragmatism” may be easily traced back to antiquity. Socrates, he tells us, “bathed in these waters,” and Aristotle “rejoices when he can find them.” He also mentions Spinoza, Berkeley, Kant, and Comte (1960, 5:11).

But did the American pragmatists fully explore the intellectual provenance of the method that they made the hallmark of their philosophy? They did not, I shall argue. James does not appear to offer any technical analysis of its origins. Peirce does offer some specifics, however. He finds in Aristotle syllogistic analyses of importance, especially his inductive and abductive schemata (see, esp., 1960, 2:475–99, 508–14, or 619–31).¹ John Dewey traces induction and deduction back to “the original Aristotelian doctrines” (1938, 420). Yet despite their erudition, these philosophers do not offer genealogical investigations that are sufficiently extensive, I am sorry to report. Indeed, they all but snub the true ancestor of their method.

Because of this failure, surely excusable in pioneering efforts, the pragmatists have left a legacy that entails an unfortunate consequence. They did not succeed in establishing as general an acceptance for their method as they had wished. We still, even today, remain rather ambivalent about the method, especially its moral applications. One can say, I think, that

most philosophers and most people find the method to be a reasonable procedure to employ in the natural sciences. But do we have the same attitude about applying it in the moral sciences? Hardly. We seem to feel a distinct discomfort about its use for resolving not only ethical problems but social and political ones as well. Who wants to be subject to a lame-brain experiment regarding our way of life? Or our manner of government?²

Why, then, do we hesitate to take advantage of the pragmatic method in moral matters? I submit that we merely seem not to adopt it because we lack an intellectual rationale sufficient to enable us to understand its full scope and import. For our shortsightedness the pragmatists themselves, ironically enough, are largely to blame. They fail to see in its entirety the philosophical roots and ramifications of their method because they do not grasp completely its disciplinary lineage. The plain fact of the matter is that we have been employing the method in moral matters for a very considerable time. But neither philosophers nor practitioners recognize it as we actually use it.

In this essay I wish to show why the experimental method has a scope as wide as that which the pragmatists claim for it, and why this method, as a consequence, has a practical import as great as that which they claim. Only if we place the pragmatic method in its proper intellectual perspective, shall we be able to enhance our understanding of it as well as our use of it. We then shall be more apt to employ it consciously rather than unconsciously and to embrace it wholeheartedly, even in moral matters, rather than halfheartedly, if at all.

What, then, might this proper perspective be? This perspective, I shall argue, is none other than rhetoric! Rhetoric?! Yes, indeed, rhetoric! I must ask you to set aside any prejudice that you may harbor toward this discipline if only to hear out my argument. What I shall show is that the pragmatic method in its essentials is the same as the rhetorical argument by example. We shall find that James especially offers formulae of the pragmatic method and of pragmatic truth useful for this purpose. With his formulae we can see more easily than with more rigorous formulae that these discursive techniques have the same structure. Both techniques are arguments proceeding from particulars through generalities to other particulars.³

My primary purpose, then, is to convince you of the essential similarities between the pragmatic method and the rhetorical argument by example. If I succeed, you shall also be able to see, I hope, why we can use this method both for formulating our practical principles and for making

our practical decisions. Indeed, with it we may bring to bear on our moral quandaries and questions much more experimental evidence than we might have thought. We may evaluate pragmatically examples taken from disciplines seemingly disparate and examine their import for our moral practice.⁴

2.

But how could the pragmatic method have any similarities of significance to an argument merely rhetorical? The one method would appear to be a time-tested procedure, but the other a frivolous, if not pernicious, slight-of-hand. To address this reservation, I would like to begin with a defense of the rhetorical art and with a demonstration that this discipline is indeed worthy of our philosophical attention. We shall see that rhetorical examples can yield propositions that may well serve us as principles of conduct.

I suggest that we have recourse to Aristotle and his theory of rhetoric. Other rhetorical theories might also serve our purpose. But the Aristotelian concept of example especially brings out the salient fact that the pragmatic method and the exemplary method both incorporate essentially the same inductive and deductive components. Because it has these two components, an argument of this kind would also appear to hold some promise of enabling us to formulate and to test our moral principles.

One might not think initially that a rhetorical example could yield a general principle of any kind. An example might seem to take us not to a general conclusion but only to a particular one. Aristotle argues literally that example proceeds neither “as a part to a whole, nor as a whole to a part, nor as one whole to another, but as one part to another.” With the terms part and whole, he refers to a genus and its species. We have an example, he explains, “when both parts fall under the same genus and the one is better known than the other” (1926, 1357b27–30).

To illustrate his concept, he uses a political example. His example does show how we prove one particular by another. One might show, he explains, that Dionysius wishes to establish a tyranny because he is asking for a bodyguard. To prove that he does, one could cite other leaders known to have become tyrants after asking for a bodyguard and obtaining one. Pisistratus did so and so did Theagenes (1357b30–33).⁵

But I would now ask you to note that this argument by example makes use of a general hypothesis. Its hypothesis is in fact a moral one concerned with political science. The example proves its particular by means of a general proposition. Aristotle asserts that known and unknown particulars all fall under one genus. He even specifies the genus for us. The instances fall under a general proposition that someone who wishes to be a tyrant is someone who asks for a bodyguard (1357b35–36).

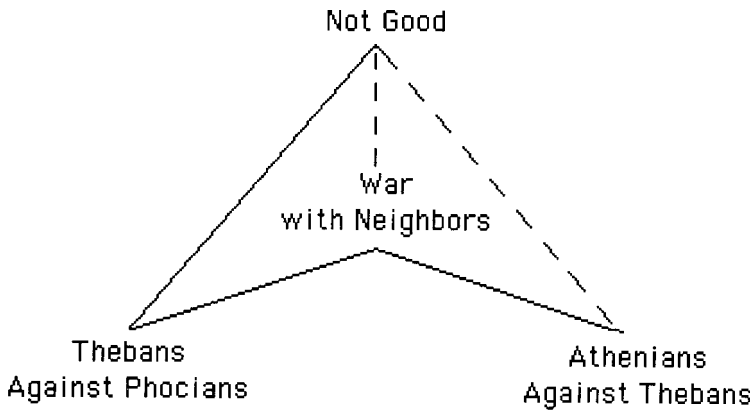
If they fall under it, we might ask, would not the known particulars in an argument by example prove the general proposition? The answer is, they do. Aristotle explicitly so argues in his logic. “An example,” he states more technically, “is when a major term is shown to belong to a middle term by means of a term similar to the third term,” which would be the minor term (1938, 68b38–39). In other words, an example proves a general proposition by means of a known particular similar to an unknown particular.

But how does it do so? We must know, he continues, that “the middle term belongs to the third term, and that the first also belongs to the term similar to the minor term” (68a39–40). Though he does not say so, we must also know that the middle term applies to the term similar to the minor. What he is stating is that both the middle and the major terms apply to the known instances, but that only the middle term applies to the unknown instance. Pisistratus and Theagenes both asked for a bodyguard and became a tyrant, but Dionysius so far has only asked for a bodyguard.

To explain his analysis, Aristotle uses another example taken from history. He supposes that the Athenians are trying to decide whether they ought to fight against the Thebans. The Thebans are their neighbors, and so the Athenians, when deliberating, might consider other wars against neighbors. Aristotle assumes that the Thebans fought a war against the Phocians. The outcome of this war is known to have been bad. The Thebans did not find that to fight against their neighbors was in their interest. The Athenians, accordingly, would do well to conclude that to fight against the Thebans, because they are neighbors, would not be in their interest either (69a2–7).

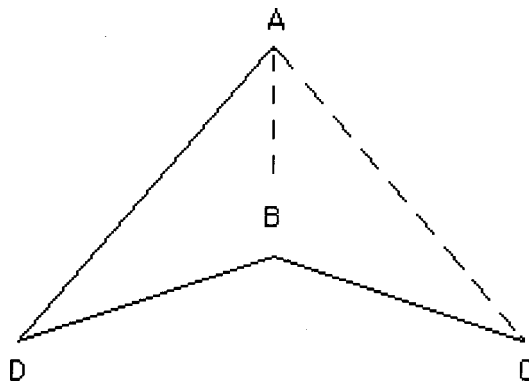
The Athenians would no doubt find that more examples would lend their general proposition more strength and hence would strengthen their conclusion (see 69a11–13). If they still remain skeptical, they would also have the option of verifying their conclusion with a declaration of war and an attack on their neighbor. They would have to be both skeptical and rash, perhaps.

We may represent this course of thought with a diagram shaped like an arrowhead:



The solid lines on the left of the diagram indicate what we know about the previous instances, and the dotted line in the center indicates a major premise or generalization based on the known instances. This side of our diagram thus constitutes an inductive argument. The solid line at the bottom right of the diagram indicates what we know about the new instance. This line demarks a minor premise for a deductive argument. The dotted line on the very right of the diagram indicates what we deduce about the new instance. Our inference thus rests on the major premise in the center and the minor premise on the right.

We also may represent the inference schematically:



In this diagram A represents not good, B stands for war against neighbors, C for Athenians against Thebans, and D for Thebans against Phocians (68b41–69a2). The solid lines represent what we know about the Theban war and the proposed Athenian war, the dotted lines what we conclude about wars against neighbors in general and the proposed conflict in particular (see 69a7–11). The similarity between the past conflict and the proposed one is the property of being a war against a neighbor. The similarity inferred from the past conflict is the property of being bad.

A rhetorical example thus allows us to make an inference from known particulars through a generalization to an unknown particular. But could a general hypothesis, such as this political one, admittedly not terribly abstract, serve as a principle of action? I believe that we could act on a generalization of this sort. At the very least, we could use this proposition as a prudential principle, could we not?⁶

3.

You are now willing, I hope, to entertain the idea that a rhetorical argument by example can be a respectable method which includes both inductive and deductive components. We must now ask, Does the pragmatic method resemble the rhetorical argument by example? A proposed analogy between this method and this rhetorical argument may not at first seem entirely tenable. We most frequently think of the pragmatic method as a way of testing a general hypothesis than as a way of establishing one. This method especially allows us to evaluate an hypothesis by examining its practical consequences.

The pragmatic method might appear to offer, to put the matter in more Aristotelian terms, merely a procedure for moving from a general proposition to a particular one. But we must not forget to ask, How do we arrive at the generalization that we wish to test? Clearly, the pragmatists also argue that we can use their method to establish a generalization by arguing from particulars. They themselves do not always emphasize this aspect of the method, but we cannot deny that the method has an inductive aspect. We might even see that it can yield a moral hypothesis.

William James himself would appear to be a source of our more limited view of the method. The pragmatic method, he tells us, attempts “to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences.” To

test a concept, he explains, we need only ask what practical difference it would make if this notion rather than that were true. If there are no practical differences, any question about alternative concepts and their truth is moot. A question can be real only if differences in conception lead to differences in practice (1916, 45–46).

To make his definition clearer, we might consider what may well be its most famous example. This example concerns a human being and a squirrel. An inquisitive person knows that there is a squirrel clinging to a tree trunk, and he is trying to get sight of the squirrel by going around the tree. But as he goes around the tree, the squirrel goes as quickly around its trunk in the opposite direction. The result is that this individual can get only an occasional glimpse of the bright eye of his quarry.

This predicament presents a problem, which James refers to, tongue in cheek no doubt, as metaphysical. The problem is, Does the person go around the squirrel or not? Clearly, the fellow goes around the tree, and the squirrel clings to the tree. But has the person gone around the squirrel? The solution that James offers in illustration of his method turns on what one practically means by “going around.” If one means by this concept to go from the north of the squirrel to the east, to the south, to the west, and to the north of it again, then the person clearly goes around the squirrel. But if one means to be in front of the animal, and then to be to the right of, in back of, to the left of, and in front of it again, then the person does not go around this agile antagonist, for the squirrel constantly keeps its belly turned toward the person.

What this example illustrates is that the meaning of an hypothesis depends on its practical implications. “To go around” is in this case ambiguous. It may mean to take four positions relative to the location of an object, or it may as well mean to take four positions relative to the sides of an object. Any dispute about the concept thus turns on what the consequences of it are for practice, and any resolution turns on the same practical consequences (43–44).

James also puts his point in more general terms. Any difference in abstract truth, he asserts, must express itself “in a difference in concrete fact and in conduct consequent upon that fact, imposed on somebody, somehow, somewhere, and sometime” (49–50). He concentrates on going from hypotheses to consequences because his wish is to use the pragmatic method to resolve intransigent philosophical controversies. You would be astonished, he says, to see how philosophical disputes collapse when subject to the pragmatic method (49–50). And what he does is truly astonishing.

We see, then, that the pragmatic method obviously evaluates an hypothesis by its implications for practice. But one might naturally ask, Where do these hypotheses come from? With his definition of the method, James places an emphasis on the deductive part of the experimental method only, though he does not always make his emphasis explicit. And his work he devotes primarily to using the pragmatic method to descend from hypotheses to their consequences.

But a crucial clue to seeing better how much the pragmatic method resembles the rhetorical method of example with both inductive and deductive aspects we find in the pragmatic concept of truth. James himself provides a statement of his concept of truth sufficiently clear for our purposes. Consider what he says about a thought. His fullest characterization of its general nature is that a true thought is a way of binding up one moment of our experience with other moments of experience. In his own words, truth is “*a leading that is worth while.*” A particular of experience, he explains, “inspires us with a thought that is true,” and we may guide ourselves with this thought to other particulars of experience and make a connection advantageous for us (1916, 204–5, emphasis in original).

He illustrates this concept of truth with a less famous example of a cowpath. If we are lost and hungry in a forest, our discovery of a cowpath may be our salvation. Our recognition of the cowpath for what it is can lead us in our thoughts to the concept of a dairy farm at the far end of it. Our hypothesis about a cowpath can thus lead us in our action from our bewildered experience in the woods to an experience of cozy comfort in a farmhouse (202–4). If we follow the path and see the farmhouse come into view, we then verify our hypothesis and soon enjoy its practical consequences and their advantages (206).

James does concede that this statement about his general concept of truth is somewhat “vague.” But he avers that the statement is nonetheless “essential” (204–5). What I take to be essential about it is the connection of some particulars of experience with other particulars by means of a true thought. What I wish to show is that this inference through a true thought characterizes an inference by means of a general hypothesis established with an argument by example. The consequences of this resemblance for practical thought are not insignificant.

We can see the similarity more clearly if we dispel some of the vagueness found in James’s statement of his concept of truth. Let us pause for a moment and ask ourselves, What happens when we become curious about an object? We may be inspired with a true thought, James says. But can we

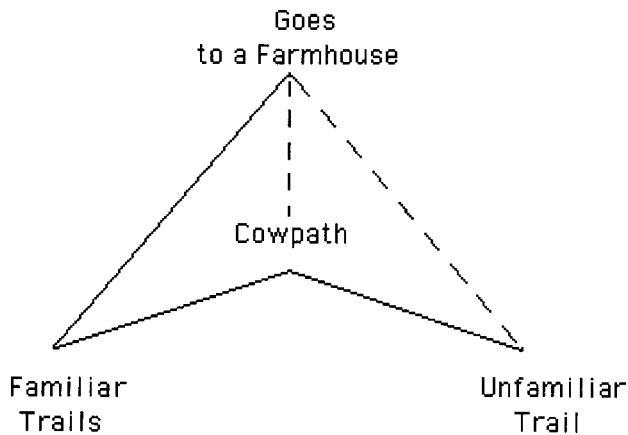
say more about this moment of inspiration? I submit that we cast about in our mind for similar objects, and that we try to use their qualities to understand the object under scrutiny. That is, we use particulars that are better known to us in our attempt to understand a particular less well known. If we find no resemblances to familiar objects, we must enlist the experience of others or give up the attempt. At least, for the time being.⁷

These known similar objects that we seek out in our attempt to understand an unknown object are none other than rhetorical examples. The resemblances that we see between familiar objects and an unfamiliar object suggest other resemblances that we do not yet find in the object of our interest but might characterize our object more fully. Take James's cowpath again. The initial impressions of this object in the forest call to mind similar impressions gleaned from past forays in the woods. It is well worn; it meanders along; it has large, visible hoof prints; and so on. These similarities may in turn inspire us with other impressions that we recall about the previous paths but are not as yet known about this path. Namely, that these paths all have led to a dairy farm with a farmhouse. For the tenderfoot, however, there would be no such inspiration.

What these more familiar objects provide, then, are middle and major terms for a practical syllogism. In this example, the perceived properties of the cowpath, taken together, are the middle term. The trait of leading to a farm is the major term. The inductive syllogism is: Those trails led to a farm; those trails were cowpaths; therefore, cowpaths lead to a farm. The deductive syllogism is: This trail is a cowpath; cowpaths lead to a farm; therefore, this trail leads to a farm.

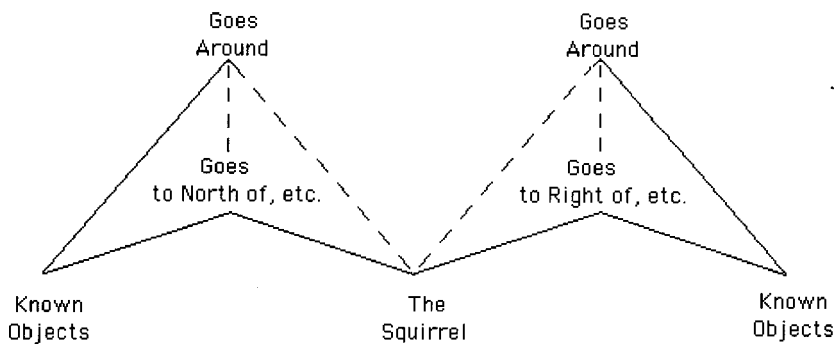
The major premise, that cowpaths lead to a farm, is the hypothesis of our argument. We verify this proposition by recalling other cowpaths that we have encountered or simply by following out the present one. At least, the pragmatists would call a premise of this sort an hypothesis. The rhetoricians, I admit, seldom, if ever, refer to their major premises as hypotheses. But they are political creatures, and they thrive in situations calling for action. And so they do not unexpectedly put forth their premises as timeworn truths, though on occasion they may refer to them as moral principles.

We might schematize James's cowpath example:



We may analyze the diagram in terms of a practical train of thought which is both inductive and deductive. The major premise the dotted line in the center indicates. We establish this premise inductively with instances having properties indicated by the solid lines on the left. The solid line on the right indicates the minor premise. And the dotted line on the right our deductive conclusion.

James's squirrel example is amenable to a similar schema in a more complex variation. This schema has two middle terms:



With this diagram we have two major premises, and we are left to decide which is the best under the circumstances. Our decision turns on which middle term applies and which does not.⁸

4.

What I have argued, then, is that rhetorical argument by example is in its essentials the pragmatic method. You agree, I hope, that we may schematize both methods in the very same way. Either method contains an inductive phase and a deductive phase. They both guide our inferences from known particulars through a general hypothesis to a particular as yet unknown.

But what is “the cash value” of our analysis? a good pragmatist would ask. Why should anyone be inclined to take an interest in this intellectual archeology, curious though it may be? I would venture to assert that our analysis shows why the experimental method is especially applicable to moral matters, and why we may use this method to formulate moral principles and to make practical decisions. When we see it as an exemplary method, we can see more clearly that the pragmatic method applies to a rather wide range of intellectual discourse.

Let us return to our Peripatetic. Aristotle recognizes examples of three kinds. An example may be a history, a fable, or a parable, he tells us (1926, 1393a28–31). These kinds differ from one another with respect to the particulars used to support an hypothesis. An historical example is an actual past event. We might want to establish the general hypothesis that those who take Egypt will attempt to take Greece, if we wish to show that the Greeks ought to prepare for a war with the Persian King. To establish this generalization, we could point out that Darius took Egypt and then attacked Greece, and that Xerxes did too (1393a31–1393b4).⁹

A fable is a fictitious example. Aristotle cites an Aesopian fable about a fox and a hedgehog. A hedgehog offered to help a fox rid itself of its fleas. But the fox refused, saying that its fleas were full and drew little blood, but that new fleas would be hungry and drain more blood. The moral of this tale—its hypothesis—is that a creature whose desire is sated is less likely to cause harm than a creature spurred on by desire. And so its conclusion is that an established tyrant who has enriched himself would not cause more harm, but that a new tyrant who would be greedy might well inflict new harm (1393b22–1394a1).¹⁰

A parable is a Socratic argument, Aristotle tells us. An example of this sort would appear to resemble a dialectical induction (see 1938, 69a16–19). To prove that officials chosen by lot are not necessarily competent, one may argue that athletes chosen by lot need not be the best competitors, nor need sailors chosen by lot be the best helmsmen (1926, 1393b4–8). The hypothesis gleaned from these particulars would be that to select an individual by chance is not to choose the most capable person for a job.¹¹

Rhetorical examples, then, because they are of these kinds, enable us to see more clearly how expansive our use of the experimental method actually is. We not only can but we in fact do use the method rather broadly in our search for evidence to establish moral hypotheses and to apply our hypotheses to moral matters. Indeed, these kinds suggest that we can seek out our evidence in an interdisciplinary fashion from the traditional disciplines of history, poetry, and philosophy.

They further suggest that we might formulate our principles out of materials generated by our different intellectual faculties. We need not restrict our evidence for moral experiments to what we remember to have happened in history, though the future does resemble the past (Aristotle 1926, 1394a6–8). We may also consider what we imagine might happen, and imagined possibilities, especially in literature, are a fecund source of innovation. And we may take into account conceptual similarities existing between different intellectual fields, such as politics and athletics.¹²

5.

We see, then, that the pragmatic method is essentially the same as the rhetorical method of example. With my analysis, I have shown that both methods take our thought from familiar particulars through a generalization to an unfamiliar particular. We see further that rhetorical theory provides an intellectual perspective explaining why the experimental method has the broad scope that the pragmatists claim for it. Rhetorical theory shows especially why we can employ the experimental method when formulating principles for our conduct or making practical decisions.¹³

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Notes

1. Indeed, Peirce urges that “every serious student of logic who can pick out easy Greek” read both the *Prior* and the *Posterior Analytics*. So great is his admiration, he actually asserts that we cannot understand what is said to us “in the streets” without studying these treatises (1960, 2:445, n. 1). For more on this topic, I would recommend Hilpinen (2000–2001).

2. Though not exactly a pragmatist, Nagel is a contemporary philosopher who actually does recommend “normative hypotheses.” But he denies that we have any general method for choosing among them (1986, 154).

3. Peirce does mention argument by example when he discusses, of all things, the historiography of the *Prior Analytics*. But he devotes his attention to Aristotle’s analyses of induction and abduction and dismisses example as no more than “a modification of induction proper” (1960, 7:249). He thus neglects to explore this argument in its rhetoric context.

4. I deny only that the pragmatists were able to explain completely why one can employ their method beyond the natural sciences. I do not deny that they themselves made adroit use of the method in the moral sciences. Dewey was perhaps the most wide-ranging in establishing and applying his hypotheses. Consider not only his ethical theory but his political and aesthetic theories as well.

5. A bodyguard in ancient times was not a personal bodyguard but a military detachment not unlike a sizable police force—an institution with which contemporary tyrants are well acquainted.

6. Nagel observes that in searching for generality we take “the particular case as an example” and that we form “hypotheses about what general truth it is an example of.” Though he invokes its concept, he unfortunately neglects to explore any rhetorical theory of example (1986, 152).

7. Actually, John Dewey gives some consideration to this process. But he fails to offer a formal analysis or to connect his analysis with rhetoric (1933, e.g., chaps. 6 and 7).

8. Incidentally, we may also account for Peirce’s concept of abduction with the Aristotelian analysis of rhetorical example. Bybee has in fact shown that the Aristotelian theory of example can accommodate abduction, though he does not offer a schematic analysis (1991, esp. 292–96). But we can now see what the schema for a rhetorical abduction would be. Abduction assumes that we know the major term to belong to the new minor, and that we hypothesize the middle to belong to the new minor (see Peirce 1960, 7:249–50). To use Aristotle’s example, if he is a tyrant, Dionysius must have asked for and been given a bodyguard.

9. Legal scholars take historical examples quite seriously. Examples of this sort they call precedents, which are the engines of case law. Levi, for example, explicitly asserts that “legal reasoning is reasoning by example” or “reasoning from case to case.” Reasoning of this kind, he explains, involves three steps: “similarity is seen between cases; next the rule of law inherent in the first case is announced; then the rule of law is made applicable to the second case.” He even cites Aristotle’s logic (1949, 1–2 and n. 2). McDowell makes an attempt to historicize our values. But, unfortunately, he merely views general moral propositions as a tradition handed down from the past. He argues that our ethical outlook is the result of our upbringing, and we can only reflect on and refine infinitely the details of our outlook. But he makes no attempt, as far as I can tell, to seek support for or refutation of traditional values in the particulars of experience. Indeed, he argues that we cannot reconstruct ethical demands from natural materials, though we may take independent facts into account if relevant (1994, e.g. 80–82).

10. Without discussing rhetoric, Nussbaum argues for the importance of literary examples. She observes that sympathy for characters in novels can lead us to take them seriously as examples of individuals who may face difficult social situations. But our sympathy for them we must temper with past precedents and general principles, she explains (1995, esp. chap. 3).

11. With his desire to systematize our traditional values, McDowell all but offers parables of this sort. But he is more a dialectician than a rhetorician, though he would no doubt deny

it. He in effect takes our moral standpoint and values to be quasi-eternal because we cannot reconstruct them out of any natural descriptions (1994, 79–80).

12. What MacIntyre calls a narrative I would thus call an argument by example. I can agree with him that an example enables us to make sense of our actions. We ought to set up a secret police force if we wish to be a tyrant, for example. But MacIntyre does not appear, either, to require that our examples ultimately have reference in experience to our percepts (1984, 211–16).

13. I hereby express my gratitude to an anonymous referee for this journal whose comments helped me clarify the thesis of my essay.

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