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# THE STARTING POINT & VIRTUE IN DEWEY & MACINTYRE'S ETHICS

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“The particularist thrust of Dewey’s moral philosophy is not incompatible with the broad concerns of virtue ethicists.”<sup>1</sup>

---Gregory Fernando Pappas,  
*John Dewey’s Ethics: Democracy as Experience*

“That it does connect *good* with action is the chief virtue of the other seminal moral philosophy of the twentieth century, that of John Dewey.”<sup>2</sup>

---Alasdair MacIntyre,  
*A Short History of Ethics*

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Why choose virtue? Is virtue to be sought as an end, or best utilized as a critical tool applied within experience? I plan to detail how adopting John Dewey’s pragmatic virtue enabled ethics ensures a pluralistic reconstruction of morality where the medical/dental ethicist may advance key elements of MacIntyre’s concept of a practice/tradition but better focus its attention on the critical point of experience; for it is the shared experience wherein is found the balanced moral moment for both the practitioner and the patient.

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<sup>1</sup> Pappas, Gregory Fernando. *John Dewey’s Ethics: Democracy as Experience*. Indiana University Press, 2008, p. 185.

<sup>2</sup> MacIntyre, Alasdair. *A Short History of Ethics, 2<sup>nd</sup>. Ed.* University of Notre Dame Press, 1996, p. 253.

The concept of a *practice* as specifically defined by Alasdair MacIntyre has offered the medical/dental ethicist one very useful way for both defining and contextualizing the many habits and virtues so often cited and used to provide the foundation for professional codes of ethics. MacIntyre states, “Every activity, every enquiry, every practice aims at some good.”<sup>3</sup> MacIntyre’s starting point adopts an Aristotelian and Thomistic conception of the good in which the possession and proper utilization of the virtues provides the individual with the necessary qualities, operative within the framework of a practice/tradition, to attain their personal (individual and social) teleological endpoint.<sup>4</sup>

Dewey, rejects MacIntyre’s traditional metaphysical foundation, and influenced by the radical empiricism of William James offers a reconstructed ethical theory with experience as its practical starting point. All the qualities we characteristically consider moral (virtue, duty, rules etc.) are irreducible elements operative exclusively at the level of experience. Despite this critical difference, both Dewey’s and MacIntyre’s ethical systems are contextual, and both endorse, and skillfully employ, a varied conception of the virtues; such virtues provide excellent stability and guidance for moral action within the traditions of the professions of dentistry and medicine.

In this paper I plan to demonstrate how the differences in MacIntyre’s and Dewey’s starting point influence their respective utilization of the concept of virtue. I intend to show that the balanced combination of intellect and emotion found within John Dewey’s pragmatic process based ethical system makes it an ideal professional medical/dental ethic; an ethic that is focused on experience, not on resolving theoretical conflicts. (ex. - The distinction between means and ends.) Dewey’s ethics, by starting with experience, focuses on what is essentially the key moral practitioner/patient moment, and

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<sup>3</sup> MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue*, 3<sup>rd</sup>. Ed. University of Notre Dame Press, 2007, p.148.

<sup>4</sup> Please note, throughout this paper I will consider this metaphysical end directedness as not being the culmination of inquiry but rather being incorporated into my definition of MacIntyre’s starting point.



Dewey thereby provides an ethic that is secure and defensible from disparaging criticism.

### The Starting Point:

Gregory Fernando Pappas maintains that, “The starting point of inquiry is the most important issue in ethical theory because one understanding of moral notions and of moral experience is conditioned by one’s starting point.”<sup>5</sup>

Alasdair MacIntyre identifies the Aristotelian tradition of the virtues as a tradition of enquiry. MacIntyre notes, “It is characteristic of traditions of enquiry that they claim truth for their central thesis and soundness for their central arguments.”<sup>6</sup> MacIntyre maintains that any

attempt to provide an account of the human good purely in social terms, in terms of practices, traditions, and the narrative unity of human lives... (is) bound to be inadequate until... provided... with a metaphysical grounding. It is only because human beings have an end towards which they are directed by reason of their specific nature, that practices, traditions, and the like are able to function as they do<sup>7</sup>

The utilization of the virtues to enable moral action within the location of a ‘practice’ when anchored and directed to the teleological or end-directed goal of *eudaimon*, or the ultimate good of the individual, provides the context for philosophical inquiry within MacIntyre’s ethical system. The ethical particularism and the narrative aspects of MacIntyre’s modern virtue ethics distinguishes it from the

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<sup>5</sup> Pappas, Gregory Fernando. *John Dewey’s Ethics: Democracy as Experience*. Indiana University Press, 2008, p. 41.

<sup>6</sup> MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue*. University of Notre Dame Press, 1981, p. xii.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p. xi.

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more detached, transcendent, and other-worldly concepts of the classical Greek virtue theorists.<sup>8</sup>

Dewey recognized the significance that Darwin's principle of natural selection had in disrupting the foundations of classical philosophical theory. Dewey notes,

If all organic adaptations are due simply to constant variation and elimination of those variations that are harmful...there is no call for a prior intellectual causal force to plan and preordain them.<sup>9</sup>

John Dewey recognized that evolution implies change and Dewey envisioned a new 'pragmatic empiricism' as opposed to 'historical empiricism' as providing a philosophical system that could accommodate change and adapt experience to future action. Adopting a naturalist evolutionary method, Dewey investigated concepts of truth, knowledge, and morality, finding them to be best understood as ongoing *processes* not as fixed *ends*. Concepts must be interpreted within the context of a dynamic world, and concepts of truth, knowledge, and morality rigorously arrived at, must accordingly be subject to revision when warranted. Accordingly, John Dewey offered a radical reconstruction of traditional morality, where duty, the good, and virtue are irreducible independent factors that are all operative, with experience as its starting point.

David Hildebrand notes this "naturalist framework provides an opportunity for epistemology to start examining *knowing* as a process that is practical and cooperative rather than explaining *knowledge* as

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<sup>8</sup> Tress, Daryl. "Medical Ethics and the Best Interests of the Sick Child", in *Bioethics, Ancient Themes in Contemporary Issues*. Ed. by, Kuczewski & Polansky. The MIT Press, 2000, pp. 193-228.

<sup>9</sup> Dewey, John. "The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy" (1909), in *The Essential Dewey, Volume 1, Pragmatism, Education, Democracy*. Indiana University Press, 1998, p. 42.



the final (even divine) product of theoretical reflection.”<sup>10</sup> Hildebrand notes Dewey believed experience to be a field process consisting of immediate and mediated dimensions where “both ‘had’ and ‘known’ experiencing are equally valid objects of inquiry.”<sup>11</sup> This is a critical distinction which acknowledges the important stabilizing influence that formed habits and virtues exert in influencing reflective judgment and thus action. Pappas notes, “Dewey thought that moral experience included virtues, rules, obligations, ends and all other notions posited by moral theorists as exclusively moral.”<sup>12</sup> Dewey’s important distinction was to take the moral situation and not the moral notions as primary.

Attention to the situation provides validity for both the process of philosophical inquiry and the observations made within.<sup>13</sup> Dewey, notes how the presence of context qualitatively values analysis,

When a physician sets out to diagnose a disease he analyzes what is before him by the best technique at command. He does not at the end require another and further act of synthesis. The situation from the first has been one of disease and that situation provides the connection between the particular details analytically detected...But if the physician were to so forget the presence of a human being as a patient, if he were virtually to deny the context, he certainly would have a meaningless heap of atomic particles on hand, and

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<sup>10</sup> Hildebrand, David. *Dewey, A Beginner’s Guide*. Oneworld publications, 2008, p. 51.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 37.

<sup>12</sup> Pappas, Gregory Fernando. *John Dewey’s Ethics: Democracy as Experience*. Indiana University Press, 2008, p. 41.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p. 40. Pappas notes, “Moral judgments...are experienced as acts or assertions that emerge in the context of (and as the result of) a particular qualitative inquiry. The question of their warrant and evaluation cannot be discussed independently of a situation.”



might be led to appeal to some transcendental synthesis to bring them unity....And so in philosophy.<sup>14</sup>

Additionally, Dewey's experiential theory of moral value holds moral inquiry as not only reflective, but foundational. Moral values are not immutable; they are subject to discovery and modification. Hildebrand notes, "The difference between immediate experience and reflective endorsement as set out by Dewey is the difference between 'valuing' something and 'evaluating' it. *Valuing* is immediate – value is felt as present in experience. *Evaluating* is mediate or reflective."<sup>15</sup> Succinctly Hildebrand notes Dewey maintained "a truly moral (or right) act is one which is intelligent ... reasonable...thought good at the moment of action...(and) one which will continue to be thought of as "good" in the most alert and persistent reflection."<sup>16</sup>

Dewey's ethics avoids monocausal theories of moral judgment, together with, as Hildebrand notes, recognizing "there is no categorical difference between a means and an end."<sup>17</sup> Dewey wrote, "Means and ends are two names for the same reality."<sup>18</sup> When individuals choose their means, pragmatically, those means become temporarily ends –in –view. Dewey asserted,

It is self-contradictory to suppose that when a fulfillment possesses immediate value, its means of attainment do not. The person to whom the cessation of a tooth-ache has value, by that very fact finds value in going to a dentist, or in whatever else is means of fulfillment. For fulfillment is as relative to means as

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<sup>14</sup> Dewey, John. "Context and Thought" (1931), in *The Essential Dewey, Volume 1, Pragmatism, Education, Democracy*. Indiana University Press, 1998, p. 208.

<sup>15</sup>Hildebrand, David. *Dewey, A Beginner's Guide*, Oneworld, 2008, p. 80.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p. 81

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p. 82.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 82.



means are to realization. Means-consequences constitute a single undivided situation.<sup>19</sup>

Hildebrand explains that in rejecting the ethical notion of “absolute ends-in-themselves, Dewey insists that theorists take a practical starting point. For ethics, this means surrendering the idea that key ethical concepts (value, good, right, virtue, etc.) have *any* anchor in a fixed and final reality, transcendent of human experience.”<sup>20</sup> The starting point is experience, and Dewey maintained within experience growth itself is the only moral end. The process of growth, not fixed final goals, is the moral criterion central to Dewey’s ethics.

### The Virtues:

MacIntyre recognized that the definition of what constitutes a virtue has been determined by historical context. In an attempt to sort through rival claims and present a more compelling account, MacIntyre arrives at a theory where the logical development of concept of virtue always requires the acceptance three features, which include: a background account of a ‘practice’, the adoption of a narrative order of a single human life, and a moral tradition. MacIntyre offers a specific definition of a ‘practice’ and writes,

By a ‘practice’ I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which the goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve

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<sup>19</sup> Dewey, John. Existence, Value and Criticism, From Experience and Nature (1925), in *The Essential Dewey, Volume 1, Pragmatism, Education, Democracy*. Indiana University Press, 1998, p. 85.

<sup>20</sup> Hildebrand, David. *Dewey, A Beginner’s Guide*. Oneworld, 2008, p. 83.

excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.<sup>21</sup>

Practices have histories, and initiation into a practice requires the acceptance of the “standards of excellence and obedience to rules.”<sup>22</sup> Practices also are attentive to the achievement of goods. MacIntyre here makes an important distinction, he defines external goods as characteristically objects of competition which when acquired always become some individual’s property. MacIntyre finds “Internal goods are indeed the outcome of the competition to excel, but it is characteristic of them that their achievement is a good for the whole community who participate in the practice.”<sup>23</sup>

MacIntyre defines a virtue as “an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods.”<sup>24</sup> Virtues therefore are to be understood as those dispositions which allow us to sustain practices, or here better stated as our households, community groups, and professions, in which we have membership. A practice evolves over time and is incorporate into a living tradition which is a “historically extended, socially embodied argument...precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition.”<sup>25</sup>

MacIntyre, therefore, presents an attractive concept of virtue which demonstrates an attention to the ‘good’ believed necessary to satisfy the needs of both the individual and his community. It is a philosophy which is not inconsistent with both Richard Rorty’s concern for solidarity and many of the finest democratic ideals of Dewey’s process metaphysics.

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<sup>21</sup> MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., p. 187.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* p. 190.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* p. 190-191.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* p. 187, p. 191.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* p. 222.



Rorty recognized MacIntyre as among the ‘Anglo-American moral philosophers’ who have turned away from the “basic Kantian assumption that moral deliberation must necessarily take the form of deduction from general preferably “nonempirical” principles.”<sup>26</sup> For Rorty moral progress was to be found in enhancing human solidarity. Rorty cautions, “that solidarity is not (to be) thought of as recognition of a core self, the human essence...rather, it is thought of as the ability to see...tradition differences...as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation.”<sup>27</sup>

Pappas, in his *John Dewey’s Ethics*, offers an evaluative statement noting,

Moral philosophers like Alasdair MacIntyre have suggested that the relevant contexts for the understanding of moral terms are the moral vocabularies operative in large social and historical structures and practices. But an inquiry about moral life that begins with and comes back to shared and cohesive “moral languages’ or a “network of shared moral laws” is not committed to an experiential starting point.<sup>28</sup>

Dewey’s situation ethics permits a balanced concern for both individual and collective interests in the context of the moral problem. Subjectivism and intuitionism are avoided by attention to the concern of communal interests in shared moral problems. Additionally, contextualism does not imply absolute particularism because as Pappas notes, “lessons from previous experience are part of one’s present situational resources because we inherit and learn the appropriate response to situations from the evolving practices and institutions in which we participate.”<sup>29</sup> We develop principles, which are best

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<sup>26</sup> Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*. Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 193.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* p. 192.

<sup>28</sup> Pappas, Gregory Fernando. *John Dewey’s Ethics: Democracy as Experience*. Indiana University Press, 2008, p. 41.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* p. 41.

understood as instrumentalities, not fixed maxims, which provide stability in directing action in similar (unique and not exact) moral situations, and their validity depend on their usefulness within that context; by themselves these principles lack normative force. The need for continual reflection and modification/evolution of these principles offers insight into the creative/artistic dimension of Dewey's process ethics.

Pappas posits, "We cannot overestimate the importance of the qualitative in Dewey's ethics."<sup>30</sup> The sense of progress in action to resolve a moral problem is a pervasive quality. Pappas notes,

Instead of looking for criteria and final solutions, ethics should be concerned with method, that is, with how we can become better prepared to obtain qualitative guidance in making good decisions in the difficult and complex situations that we confront. Since certain habits and dispositions are our main tools, as well as the most controllable factors we have, we can hope for amelioration by encouraging certain virtues. Philosophical inquiry into the possible conditions for improvement is, not the search for a set of habits that will solve all our problems...rather the task is to find those which offer some reliability for achieving a better life.<sup>31</sup>

Indeed for Dewey, hope and the tools for amelioration reside in the process.

Habits constitute the most stable element in a moral situation they provide a ready background which is adaptable to the contexts particular needs. Pappas considers, "The most important learning a person accomplishes in a situation is not amassing information, but the

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<sup>30</sup> Pappas, Gregory Fernando. *John Dewey's Ethics: Democracy as Experience*. Indiana University Press, 2008, p. 151.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* p. 155.



cultivation of habits which are going to affect the quality of future situations.”<sup>32</sup> Pappas writes, “For Dewey, openness, courage, sensitivity, conscientiousness, and sympathy are virtues.”<sup>33</sup> The flexible nature of Dewey’s process, and the belief that moral experience involves “reaching forward into the unknown,”<sup>34</sup> places a premium on the virtues of openness and courage. Sympathy has a significant place in moral deliberation and Dewey maintained that “Sympathy, in short, is the general principle of moral knowledge...because it furnishes the most reliable and efficacious *intellectual* standpoint. It supplies the tool, *par excellence*, for analyzing and resolving complex cases.”<sup>35</sup> Such virtues require a certain balance and unity of character which has three elements: “the intellectual, the affectional-imaginative, and the volitional.”<sup>36</sup> Intellectual habits must go beyond factual knowledge to judgment, or “the power to perceive the bearings of what is known.”<sup>37</sup> The volitional is the executive ability to regulate one’s environment and incorporates self-control, initiative, courage, and efficiency. The affective, as evident in sympathy, openness and sensitivity “is central to an adequate account of moral inquiry and of a good moral character.”<sup>38</sup>

Pappas’s enumeration of pragmatic virtues offers one key element of moral experience; it is not a list of traits antecedent to the situation. Pappas, succinctly notes, “Ideals are part of the means available in the process of ameliorating a situation. Virtues are habits operative in and integral to situations, not means to abstract notions of human flourishing.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Pappas, Gregory Fernando. *John Dewey’s Ethics: Democracy as Experience*. Indiana University Press, 2008, p. 189.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* p. 187.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* p. 190.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* p. 199.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* p. 201.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* p. 202.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* p. 204.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* p. 42.

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Discussion and Conclusion:

Let us now evaluate a medical-ethical problem. Consider the problematic situation that a surgeon encounters when faced with the medical or dental patient presenting for treatment with a painful abscess which requires drainage. The quantitative and qualitative assessment of the problem is always somewhat indeterminate as an abscess may spontaneously drain or progress with or without treatment to life-threatening dimensions. The surgeon cannot immediately expertly assess all the characteristics of the problem: the extent of the infection, the resistance of the host, the virulence of the bacteria, the ability of the patient to pay for care, and the ultimate correct course of treatment of the infection are to some degree undetermined at the moment the patient presents for treatment. Let us for purposes of this exercise assume that the surgeon is on hospital emergency call, and is thereby by institutional rules responsible for care of this patient; and additionally understand that the surgeon possesses the requisite skill and facility to properly address this emergency.

Thus the patient with the abscess (morally problematic situation) demands action from the surgeon (moral agent). The agent's first choice is one demanding a decision on whether or not to act to try to cure the patient; if the surgeon decides to act in favor of the patient, a subsequent decision must be made on whether or not it is necessary to drain the abscess. Attention to institutional rules stipulates that the surgeon has the duty to act in favor of the patient. However the rules cannot dictate whether the surgeon actually acts out of a primary concern for character or duty/action. The surgeon acting out of a primary concern for character or virtue can accept that even a painful means (Incision and drainage of the abscess) is acceptable in attempting to obtain the desired end. Alternatively, a surgeon acting out of a compliance with institutional rules may be correct in acting out of a primary concern for profit so long as the surgeon complies with both institutional and professional rules and standards.



MacIntyre maintains “There is no such thing as ‘behavior’ to be identified prior to and independently of intentions.”<sup>40</sup> MacIntyre’s insistence that the qualitative identification of any agent’s particular action must involve placing “agent’s intention ...in causal and temporal order with reference to their role in his or her history; and...their role in the history of the setting or settings to which they belong,”<sup>41</sup> is consistent with his insistence on the use of the narrative in his ethical method. Thus the surgeon, even if motivated to act out of a concern for character/virtue, must order his/her behavior to comply with both the standards of their practice/tradition as well as adherence to personal qualitative standards where the virtues guide action in properly selecting the correct means to his/her teleological end. The means - end distinction is operative throughout this selection process. The surgeon attending to the emergency patient thereby confronts dualisms which Dewey believed should be dissolved by more properly locating inquiry’s starting point in experience.

Dewey maintained that moral action does not entail a need for a ‘transcendental’ synthesis; rather action requires focused attention to the immediate moral situation. The ethical process demands primary attention to the care of the patient with the abscess. Within this morally problematic situation there is room for a plurality of factors. Pappas notes, “The moral agent who is aesthetically engaged in present moral reconstruction has a direct personal identification with the conduct that is required of her in a situation. To attend to and try to ameliorate the moral difficulties...is the interest of a moral agent qua moral agent. This includes having a concern for good, duty, or virtue.”<sup>42</sup>

Dewey’s method calls for a unity of the moral self and its action. Pappas agrees with MacIntyre that “moral conduct is an expression of intention.”<sup>43</sup> However, Dewey would insist that a genuine interest in morality requires that “the interest of the self must

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<sup>40</sup> MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue*, 3<sup>rd</sup>. Ed. p. 208.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. p. 208.

<sup>42</sup> Pappas, Gregory Fernando. *John Dewey’s Ethics: Democracy as Experience*. Indiana University Press, 2008, p. 210.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. p. 142.



also be authentic in the sense of not being the result of blindly adopting or following a moral tradition.”<sup>44</sup> Moral conduct demonstrates an acquired character developed by a combination of intellect and emotion. Pappas notes, “the ideal moral self is... intelligent in the sense of having the habits of critical reflection necessary to effect a working connection between what is inherited and what is new.”<sup>45</sup> Indeed, there is an enhanced commitment to the moral truths of one’s tradition when these truths are arrived at through personal critical inquiry; and correspondingly the surgeon develops an enhanced appreciation that her or his character is best defined by their action.

Pappas exposes the beauty of Dewey’s ethical system and its superiority as a resource for medical/dental ethics. Pappas notes,

Our native impulses and acts “are not actuated by conscious regard for either one’s own good or that of others. They are rather direct responses to situations”...this more direct or natural interest makes for a better moral life than one in which individuals have to consider in their daily activities whether or not it is for the good of others that they are acting. Dewey maintained, “the scholar, artist, physician...is interested in the work itself; such objective interest is a condition of mental and moral health.”<sup>46</sup>

Dewey’s situational ethics privileges the process of meliorating the moral problem. Dewey’s method is as sensitive and applicable to society’s collective health care concerns as it is to a selective practitioner/patient moment. Within our example, the surgeon understands that a unity of character, including an attention to the good and virtues such as openness and sympathy, demands proper action on

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<sup>44</sup> Pappas, Gregory Fernando. *John Dewey’s Ethics: Democracy as Experience*. Indiana University Press, 2008, p. 211.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* p. 211.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* p. 212.



behalf of the patient; pragmatically, the surgeon understands that this does not guarantee a cure.

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