

A RECONSTRUCTION OF JAMES' NORMATIVE ETHICS

TODD LEKAN

INTRODUCTION

William James wrote only one systematic essay on ethics: “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” (hereafter, MPML)¹. That one essay is arguably the best early statement of a pragmatist ethics by any philosopher. It is also highly suggestive, much of its argument structure presupposed as scaffolding the reader must reconstruct. My aim in this paper is to expose what I regard as a key, overlooked, aspect of that scaffolding that makes sense of the relationship between James’ meta-ethics and normative ethics.² James’ meta-ethics is, at first glance subjectivist and pluralist. Values only exist as objects of demands. There is no one object demanded by all sentient beings. Therefore, value pluralism is true—there are as many values as there are demands. His normative ethics is based on an inclusivity principle that enjoins us to maximize the satisfaction of as many demands as possible. This principle coheres with other related claims that James makes about the moral life including the importance of sympathetic tolerance for alien ideals and a fallibilistic humility about what actions, practices, and institutions promote demand satisfaction.³

Nevertheless, James’ ethics faces a deep challenge. The connection between meta-ethical value pluralism and his normative principle is not clear. If value pluralism is true, how does James respond to those who hold intolerant values? A religious fundamentalist, for example, does not simply want a place at the table of plural values. She thinks at least some values should not even through the door. Her ideal demands the destruction of at least some other values. What makes for the best inclusive arrangement of values would, for her, be an arrangement that excluded fraudulent ideals. Scott Aitken and Robert Talisse (A/T hereafter) have offered this as one of three challenges to James’ ethics in their recent paper “Three Challenges to Jamesian Ethics.” A/T do a good job in spotting the gap

between James meta-ethical value pluralism and his normative inclusivity principle. How can James justify the claim that the IP has authority over other ideals?

James raises the question of IP's authority, but his answer is not as clear as it might be. My intention is to fill out his argument with the necessary missing detail. James' answer is *not* that value pluralism *logically entails* the inclusivity principle. James' argument is best read as demonstrating that there is a psychological connection between the sympathetic awareness of value pluralism and IP. In other words, sympathetic awareness of plural and conflicting values tends to lead moral agents to want to adopt something like an inclusivity principle.

I proceed as follows. In section I set out the central pieces of James argument. I clarify a few ambiguities in his presentation, which will help rebut some obvious objections. In section II I review A/T's three challenges to James' ethics. Two of the challenges highlight vividly the question about the relation between meta-ethical pluralism and James' normative ideal. Section III elucidates James' account of moral skepticism and dogmatism so that these concepts can be utilized to demonstrate, in section IV, a reflective procedure I call "Royce's Fork." I claim that the Fork is the best interpretation of the dialectical moves James makes to clarify the relationship between meta-ethical pluralism and his normative ethics. Section V musters ideas from James' psychological writings on the self that help to bolster his ethics.

1) THE CENTRAL PIECES OF JAMES' NORMATIVE ETHICS

There is the one "unconditional commandment" in James' ethics. About it, James writes,

There is but one unconditional commandment, which is that we should seek incessantly, with fear and trembling, so to vote and to act as to bring about the very largest total universe of good which we can see. Abstract rules indeed can help; but they help the less in proportion as our intuitions are more piercing, and or vocation is the stronger the moral life. For every real dilemma is in literal strictness a unique situation; and the exact combination of ideals realized and ideals

disappointed which each decision creates is always a universe without a precedent, and for which no adequate rule exists.⁴

This commandment can be formulated as James' inclusivity principle:

IP: The Inclusivity Principle: We are morally obligated to satisfy as many demands as possible. Or, among our available actions, we should take the one that frustrates the fewest demands.

James intends his ethics to be experimental and fallibilist. He says quite clearly at the outset of MPML that the "main purpose of this paper is to show that there is no such thing possible as an ethical philosophy dogmatically made up in advance." Nevertheless, James does quite clearly believe that moral philosophy can contribute some principles "in advance." After all, IP is itself is such a principle. Presumably, our experimental attitude is needed for determining what, in a particular moral situation, will do the best job in satisfying demands. Moral rules are useful, but an undue focus on them can blind us to the novel features of a moral situation. James emphasizes the fact that each moral situation is *unique*. What it takes to satisfy as many demands as possible requires careful inquiry guided by "piercing intuition." Of the moral philosopher, James says,

"His books upon ethics, therefore, so far as they truly touch the moral life, must more and more ally themselves with literature which is confessedly tentative and suggestive rather than dogmatic—I mean with novels and dramas of the deeper sort, with sermons, with books on statecraft and philanthropy and social and economical reform. Treated in this way ethical treatises may be voluminous and luminous as well; but they can never be *final*, except in their abstractest and vaguest features . . ."⁵

Thus, James can say that IP, as an abstract feature of his ethics, is a kind of final truth. Nevertheless, it is important to adopt a fallible and non-dogmatic about what actions, practices, or institutions will promote the most inclusive arrangement of demand

satisfaction. IP is a formal principle, best understood as a second-order regulative ideal. As a second-order ideal, it is meant to be a guide for moral reflection on the acceptability of various more substantive first-order moral ideals. IP tells us to continuously make sure that the pursuit of our ideals does not infringe on the others' ideals.

What is James' argument for IP? In rough, IP is James' answers to moral philosophy's primary task: finding an impartial method for adjudicating conflicts amongst values and ideals.⁶ It looks like James' argument for IP occurs at the culmination of the meta-ethical section of MPML. In that section James offers two theses that he seems to think make it reasonable to accept IP:

EG: The Essence of Good: Whatever satisfies a demand is a good.

DOT: Demand-Obligation Thesis: Some sentient being' S demanding F is necessary and sufficient to generate an obligation for satisfying S's demand for F.

Since people demand many different kinds of goods, EG implies value pluralism. The pursuit of these different goods frequently leads to conflict. Given finite lives, resources, and opportunities, it is not always possible to conjointly realize them. Pluralism and conflict are enduring features of moral life. James' ethics thus accepts two further claims as fundamental facts about moral life:

Pluralism (P): People are committed to a plurality of moral ideals. These provide the terms in which questions about good and bad, right and wrong can be answered.

Conflict (C): Ideals frequently provide contradictory answers to value questions, and subsequently give rise to potential and real conflict.

Does James offer any reasons for accepting EG and DOT? His first move in support of both theses is to motivate the intuition that moral concepts like "good" and "obligation" exist only in a world of sentient beings with desires. James asserts that a world without sentient beings would be a world in which such value terms such as good and bad could not apply. It makes no sense to say that a world with 20 rocks is better than a world with 10, or that a world with no rocks is a bad world. The only sense it makes to say that some

state of affairs is “good” is to say that some sentient being desires that state of affairs. Further, “obligations” are only possible if some sentient being makes demands. But James goes further, claiming that there is a moral obligation to satisfy every desire (DOT). Consider this passage, “. . . (W)ithout a claim actually made by some concrete person there can be no obligation, but that there is some obligation wherever there is a claim. Claim and obligation are, in fact, coextensive terms; they cover each other exactly.”⁷

Although he could be clearer about it, James suggests that the concept of “obligation” only arises when there are conflicts between goods. There are no obligations in a world where demands are automatically satisfied, say in some hedonist utopia. It is only when demands become thwarted that claims are made, and obligations created. I’ll say a bit more about DOT later. Let’s look at EG in more detail.

It is one thing to say that there would be no goods without sentient beings that care about the way the world goes. It is quite another thing to say that *the essence* of the good is to satisfy demand. James’ own argument for EG seems to be that it is “the most universal principle.” He seems to think that other proposals suffer from either being too narrow in or scope or too vague. For example, a principle that says, “do no harm” is not relevant to every moral situation. He is also critical of principles such as “obey God’s will” on the grounds that they are too vague.⁸ He needs a moral value that is general enough to capture something common to all moral ideals. He asserts that “the most universal principle (is) that *the essence of good is simply to satisfy demand*.”⁹ Is EG itself a value, independent of anyone’s demands? No. EG is proposed in the context of the moral philosopher’s demand for an impartial method for adjudicating conflicting goods.¹⁰

Moral philosophers seeking a normative method demand a definition of the good.

In sum, James’ normative ethics amounts to the following moves:

- 1) Everything that is demanded is a good (EG).
- 2) Some demands conflict with others (P and C).
- 3) There is a moral obligation to satisfy every demand (DOT).
- 4) There exists a conflict among moral obligations (DOT and C).
- 5) The moral philosopher demands an impartial method for determining which obligations should be satisfied.

6) IP satisfies the philosopher's demand.

The connection between EG, DOT and IP is reasonable enough. After all if everything demanded is a good, and we are obligated to satisfy demands, what else would our supreme moral obligation be but to satisfy as many demands as possible?

Let's assume that James is correct in asserting that EG is the most universal account of "the good." Let's assume that although not logically entailed by them, IP is a reasonable ideal to adopt once we accept EG and DOT. Still, one might reasonably ask why we ought to scorn an ideal for its *vagueness* and *narrowness*? Is James able to do nothing other than dogmatically affirm his penchant for "universality" and dogmatically reject those ideals that give little or no priority to universality? If the ultimate basis for IP is nothing other than a moral philosopher's demand for a normative method, why should that demand be given any authority over others, especially those who reject it? How can Jamesian moral philosophers offer any authoritative ideal, when many reject their goal of finding some non-sectarian impartial procedure for resolving conflicts among demands?

I believe that this last question takes us to the heart of James' ethics. Although, he might have been clearer about it, James is cognizant that this is *the* fundamental question for any moral philosophy that seeks to offer an impartial method for resolving real moral conflicts, while resting on a meta-ethics that eschews any objective moral truth beyond the demands of sentient beings. I will return to this question in section IV, after sharpening the potentially fatal criticisms to which James might fall prey if he cannot adequately address it.

I conclude the presentation of the essential elements of James normative ethics by considering two problems pertaining to DOT. First, as many commentators have pointed out, it seems wildly implausible to say that every demand generates an actual moral obligation that it be fulfilled. The second problem is that James is unclear about what it is that generates obligations. Is it a mere desire or is it a claim articulated in language?

Consider the first problem. It seems obvious that we have plenty of desires that we judge should not be satisfied. I might have a desire to cheat on my income taxes but hardly think that anyone has an obligation to satisfy that desire. Alternatively, it seems that there are plenty of cases in which we do not have a desire that we ought to have. I may not want

to help people in need, but still have an obligation to do so. I think it will be best to read DOT as talking about *prima-facie* obligations, that is, “all things being equal,” we should satisfy demands. Read this way, James can easily acknowledge that many demands should not be satisfied because the obligations they generate are outweighed by other more important demands.¹¹

The second problem with DOT is an ambiguity in terminology. James slides between at least three terms: desire, demand, and claim. The text does not speak unambiguously in favor of one rendering over another. Read one way, DOT would point to a utilitarian ethic that holds we are obligated to satisfy *desires*. Presumably all sentient beings would be fit candidates for moral obligation, on this interpretation. If we read DOT as applying to *claims*, then it is more plausibly about promoting moral ideals held by rational beings. This would make James’ ethics less likely to be a simple species of utilitarianism because at least some of the claims made sentient beings will be moral ideals that involve non-utilitarian values such as justice. I think it is best to give an expansive reading of what generates obligations for James. The term “demand” seems suitable for this purpose. Consider the range of states that might be called “demands: a cat’s hunger, a baby’s desire for a toy, a child’s desire to take up musical instrument, a woman’s judgment that she should become a lawyer, a family’s decision to move to a new country, and a man’s demand for the rights of his oppressed culture. This expansive reading of the sources of moral obligation fits well with the pluralistic emphasis in James’ philosophy. With these clarifications in place, we can turn to the A/T’s objections to James’ ethics.

II) THE AIKEN/TALISSE OBJECTIONS TO JAMES’ ETHICS

A/T offer three arguments against Jamesian ethics. The first is that James’ reduction of the “good” to an “object of demand” cannot accommodate the obvious fact that many demands are immoral. The second is that James’ pluralism is naïve. It assumes that all moral conflict arises from “practical” limitations on our capacity to conjointly realize all values. This assumption completely ignores the fact that some moral conflict arises from the fact that some values entail the rejection of others. The third objection follows on the heels of the second. We need a principle of toleration that says: “we should tolerate those who hold ideals that we do not even recognize as ideals.” This principle of

toleration would have to exist outside of the existing economy of desires and demands. But, according to James, there is no such thing as a demand independent desire. Therefore, James is barred from acceptance of the very principle that would help make sense of IP. The third objection, thus, is that James' ethics requires a principle inconsistent with the value pluralism that is a central plank of his moral theory. The second objection leads directly to the third, so they can be treated of a piece.

The first objection can be met fairly easily. The example that A/T use to make their point is Betty Hood who robs only from the really rich. They write, "Betty's activities therefore help to satisfy the demands of the poor and they do nothing to frustrate the demands of the super rich. It seems, then, that James could have no objection to Betty's activities; in fact, James might have to take the view that Betty's actions are morally right, and possibly obligatory."¹² A/T go on to claim that "Betty Hood's activities are morally wrong simply because they are instances of stealing. We might insist that the wrongness of stealing is independent of the calculation of the cost of stealing in the economy of demands."¹³ Indeed, A/T might insist on this point, and in doing so they are following commonsense moral commitments. Presumably the "commonsense" commitment is that stealing is wrong independently of whether more overall good comes from stealing. Obviously, these commonsense moral commitments are deontological in nature. Can James accommodate them?

The first thing to note is that both James and A/T run the risk of begging the question against each other on this example. James' meta-ethics denies the existence of "abstract moral truths." The claim that x is wrong because it is an instance of some moral property such as "being an act of stealing" is an example of such an abstract moral truth. Absent further argument, the score is A/T 0, James 0. The second thing to note is that James does in fact parse commonsense deontological commitments in his ethics (although perhaps unlike some commonsense belief, James holds that such deontic principles are expressions of demands, not abstract truths). In the section of his essay treating the "psychological" question, he clearly states that some moral attitudes are innate or "brain born." These attitudes tend to express deontological commitments such as the judgment that it is wrong to save lives or promote happiness at the expense of one individual life. James gives the example of a kind of devil's bargain in which a utopia could be realized

only on the condition that “lost soul on the far-off edge of things should lead a life of lonely torture. . .” He thinks it is clear that this bargain would be experienced by many, if not most, as “hideous.” The repulsion experienced upon the contemplation of this example expresses a deontological attitude. Finally, at least some of the first-order demands adjudicated by IP would have deontological content.¹⁴ James could consistently argue that some moral agents would respond to the Betty Hood example with condemnation. No doubt, the existence of ideals with deontological content considerably complicates the application of the IP to the conflict of ideals. My point, for now, is that James’ ethics has a place for deontological considerations.

With their first objection dispensed, we can turn to the second and third challenges. The complaint, recall, is that James has no way of responding to the intolerant fundamentalist. Some moral conflict arises because resources do not allow the conjoint realization of incommensurable ideals. However, another kind of moral conflict “is due to the fact that some moral commitments involve a *rejection* of other moral commitments.”¹⁵ In other words, “we are confronted not just with conflicting demands, but with conflicting views about what is morally tolerable.”¹⁶ There are two ways of framing this objection. The first is that the IP is empty. It allows virtually any arrangement to count as an inclusive good. As A/T point out, we are “often divided precisely over the question of which states of affairs should count as good.”¹⁷ They claim that absent some further, more substantive account of the good, IP is “vacuous.”¹⁸ IP might be interpreted more substantively as ruling out intolerant demands (surely James means a more substantive interpretation). We can now hone the objection as follows: IP seems in tension with the meta-ethical value pluralism meant to give it support. After all, what gives a substantive ideal of toleration priority over other intolerant ideal if all demands have equal status? Recall the central moves in James’ argument:

- 1) Everything that is demanded is a good (EG).
- 2) Some demands conflict with others (P and C).
- 3) There is a prima-facie moral obligation to satisfy every demand (DOT).
- 4) There exists a conflict among moral obligations (DOT and C).

- 5) The moral philosopher demands an impartial method for determining which obligations should be satisfied.
- 6) IP satisfies the philosopher's demand.

It should be clear by now that the suppressed premise is that the "philosopher's demand ought to be satisfied, even at the expense of other demands that conflict with it." This is necessary to get to the conclusion that "IP ought to govern our choice of first order ideals." A/T's fundamentalist can always ask, "Why should I respect *that* demand? I hardly share it!"

James' moral philosopher is thus faced with what seems like an insurmountable dilemma. On the one hand, she can regard her own favored ideal of IP dogmatically as an expression of her particular demand. But then, how can this ideal claim any authority for those who reject it? A dogmatic proposal can be met with a dogmatic refusal. On the other hand, the moral philosopher can conclude that there is no overarching moral truth. She can regard any ideal of her own as simply one among many. But such skepticism is to give up the enterprise of normative ethics, as James understands it. James is quite aware of this dilemma and, in fact, it is central to the dialectical structure of the essay. He asks, "But how then can we as philosophers ever find a test; how avoid complete moral skepticism on the one hand, and on the other escape bringing a wayward personal standard of our own along with us, on which we simply pin our faith."¹⁹

So, James asks the right question, but does he have a coherent answer? I think he does, but it only becomes apparent only after some careful reconstruction of his account of skepticism and dogmatism. In the next section, I will supply such reconstruction by linking James' account to Josiah Royce's approach to moral skepticism, dogmatism, and what Royce calls the "moral insight." (Royce's moral insight is very close to James' IP). Royce develops this argument in the chapter entitled "The Moral Insight" from *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy*. Whether or not James is explicitly drawing on Royce, I think the argument strategy I shall reconstruct makes sense of what is implicit in James. In honor of that fact, I'm going to call the strategy "Royce's Fork."²⁰ Royce's Fork is an account of why IP would appear attractive to moral agents who undertake a certain kind of reflection on the plurality of conflicting demands. Agents who engage in this reflection will find that

skepticism and dogmatism are unstable second-order attitudes to take towards the pluralism of demands. Such agents will prefer IP as the best way to attain an honest and stable second-order attitude to take towards first-order moral ideals. To be clear, Royce's Fork is not a rational demonstration that pluralism entails IP. It is not one abstract moral truth entailing another. Rather, Royce's Fork is meant to show that once agents engage in a certain kind of reflection, they will come to adopt IP. This is a psychological account of what second-order attitude one will adopt in response to real skeptical doubt about one's first-order moral attitudes. Once moral agents adopt this second-order attitude, they will find intolerant ideals to be "wrong" or "false."

Nevertheless, it is true that a person cannot be proven wrong if she does not undertake a Royce Fork style reflection, or if she does not, for whatever reason, find IP attractive after undertaking such a reflection. Whether this is somehow damning to James' ethics is far from clear. I'll say something briefly about that at the end of this paper. Let's now turn to a closer analysis of the dialectic of skepticism and dogmatism that constitutes Royce's Fork.

III) MORAL SOLITUDE

Royce's Fork has three prongs: dogmatism, skepticism, and the perspective of the moral philosopher as defined by a commitment to IP. The Fork shows how a certain kind of moral skepticism involves a degree of sympathetic identification with alien ideals that provides the hook by which to motivate agents to accept IP. Royce's Fork is not a logical disjunction of the form: P, Q, or R; neither P nor Q, therefore R. Rather, it lays out the core psychological elements of three second-order moral attitudes. Once these elements are laid bare, IP will likely become more compelling or attractive, given that moral agents have an interest in exercising moral agency in a self-aware and sympathetic fashion. Thus, the answer to our central question, "why should I accept the demands of the moral philosopher?" James answers, "Because this is the perspective you want to adopt when you engage deep reflection on moral skepticism." In order to understand the particular way James' moral theory makes use of Royce's Fork we have to explore, briefly, his conception of moral skepticism. His conception of moral solitude is key for understanding both

dogmatism and skepticism. James' discussion of "moral solitude" is abbreviated, packing into it at least three types of solitude that must be distinguished.

James holds that there would be no moral distinctions of good and bad, or right and wrong in a universe with only one sentient being. He then claims that if we introduced two or more such sentient beings we would have what he calls a "moral dualism" not a "moral universe." James uses terms like "moral universe," "ethical unity" or simply "truth" but hardly clarifies these. He compares the pluralism of thinkers, indifferent to each other's ends, to the "antique skeptics" who said that "Individual minds are the measures of all things, and in which non one 'objective' truth, but only a multitude of 'subjective' opinions, can be found."²¹

Moral solitaries unaware of each other's ends could live blissful subjective lives dedicated to their personal goals. Let's call this the *solitude of ignorance*. The solitude of ignorance cannot sustain dogmatic or skeptical second-order attitudes. For example, an isolated tribe, completely unaware of any other values or ideals, would not cultivate a dogmatic, righteous attitude towards their own values. Further, it is not likely members would have occasion to become skeptical about values in general. Skepticism and dogmatism arise only when people care about competing values.

Consider a second sort of moral solitude—call it the *solitude of apathy*. A tribe that becomes aware of, but simply does not care about, alien values lives in the solitude of apathy. Such a tribe would neither be dogmatic nor skeptical because it does not regard these ideals as in competition. Dogmatism and skepticism readily arise from real or potential conflicts over the resources required to pursue favored ideal. This is the first type of moral conflict that A/T distinguishes from the conflict between intolerant values. Perhaps A/T diminish the extent to which dogmatism arises more from resource conflicts than it does from intolerant moral beliefs *as such*. For example, the intolerance that leads to the attacks of 9/11 is not best explained by the simple fact that "they hate our values" (an explanation that the Bush administration continually offered). Rather, as some pointed out, part of the explanation had to do with outrage about American military presence in the Gulf—particularly the existence of bases on the soil of Saudi Arabia. Such explanations, of course, are not justifications.

We might describe the solitude of ignorance and apathy as kinds of moral skepticism--what James calls "moral dualisms." After all, these groups do not live in a shared moral world. But really, this is a skepticism formulated from *our point of view*—detached from their lives. Such detached skepticism must be distinguished from the live moral attitudes groups take towards each other when they care about each other's ideals.

Live moral dogmatism and skepticism arise among those who are *bothered* by moral conflicts. Such dogmatists and skeptics live in the *solitude of aversion*. Both the skeptic and the dogmatist reject the idea that there is, to use James' phrase, any "system of moral truth" that could adjudicate the conflict of values. The dogmatist reacts with willful dismissal of all alien ideals, imposing her own. The skeptic reacts to the plural values with a troubled aversion to the imposition of any ideal. Unlike those who live in the solitude of ignorance or apathy, both the skeptic and the dogmatist care about the clash of ideals. The dogmatist scorns alien ideals, championing her own, whereas the skeptic is averse to the rule of any single ideal.

The recalcitrant dogmatist, who either is incapable or unwilling to sympathetically identify with alien demands, cannot move to any further insight. From the perspective of James' moral philosopher, such a dogmatist does not require some argument appealing to an abstract moral truth, which she erroneously denies. All that can be done is to try to engender sympathy in such a person—to cause her to feel for others. Let's turn now to Royce's Fork in order to see how the solitude of aversion gives rise to the moral philosopher's perspective.

IV) ROYCE'S FORK

Royce makes a reasonable hypothesis that, at least in many cases; the difference between a skeptic and dogmatist is that former has a high degree of sympathy for various ideals whereas the latter suffers a sympathy deficit. The skeptic's sympathetic identification with competing ideals is the hook that pulls her to the third prong of Royce's Fork—James' IP.

Royce asserts that the agent who vividly reflects on the conflict of ideals will come to internalize both ideals.²² She will, at least momentarily, identify with them and, to some degree, desire that they be realized. This leads to a provisional skeptical state. Royce

asserts that, "this skepticism expresses an indifference that we feel when we contemplate two opposing aims in such a way as momentarily to share them both."²³

Royce claims that this type of skepticism "is itself the result of an act, namely, of the act by which we seek to realize in ourselves opposing aims at the same time."²⁴ No doubt Royce's claim is too strong here. Royce moves hastily from the claim that *vivid representation of an ideal* carries with it a *desire* for its realization. Royce's argument is informed by a volitional account of consciousness and mental states. Following Bain, Royce and the pragmatists like Peirce and James, think of beliefs as dispositions to act. Royce and James also seem to think that acts of consciousness involve some kind of motor discharge. We need not detain ourselves with a prolonged discussion of this account of mind in order to properly assess the argument for the moral insight. Royce is on to something.

Instead of claiming that agents arrive at skepticism only after *seeking to realize* opposing aims, Royce might simply assert that skepticism arises in agents when they *sympathetically identify* with opposing aims. It is enough for his argument to assert that a modicum of sympathetic awareness of conflicting ideals is a psychological requirement for an agent to entertain moral skepticism. Thus, Royce's idea can be pressed into a more modest suggestion: sympathetic identification with alien ideals tends to naturally engender the ambivalence that constitutes moral skepticism. Royce makes the further point that once such skepticism takes hold; it is likely that one will come to adopt some principle of harmony. That is, it is likely that one will adopt, as a second-order moral attitude, a principle like James' IP. Thus, the third prong of Royce's fork shoots off, so to speak, from the skeptical prong in the following steps: First, agents cultivate a sympathetic awareness of conflicting values. The result tends to be an appreciation of the blindness of human beings to one another's values. This leads, secondly, to a skeptical ambivalence towards plural and conflicting values. This skepticism is, Royce suggests, an unstable attitude that tends to lead to the desire for as much harmony as possible between the plural and conflicting values. The third step channels this desire for harmony into a demand for a second-order ideal, IP. This demand defines the second-order attitude of the moral philosopher.

The capacity to sympathetically identify with others is, of course, a matter of degree, dependent on both training and temperament. But it is enough, for James' purposes, that a modest degree of sympathetic awareness can motivate the second-order attitude defined by IP.²⁵ Once this attitude is adopted, agents will want to cultivate the habit of sympathetic identification. They will become sensitive to the moral blindness in themselves and others, and continually seek to overcome such blindness.

It should be clear now that James' answer to the question "why should the moral philosopher's demands be respected?" does not rely on some further moral principle or rational demonstration. In this respect, IP is normatively primitive. To any further skeptical doubts about IP, all that James can say is something like this: "I can tell you that should you reflect on the diversity of values with sympathetic awareness you will come to see the attraction of such a principle." The reflective process that leads to IP is thus partly constitutive of the moral philosopher's perspective as such. It is a second-order perspective potentially available to all moral agents. This fact about IP neutralizes the worry that some special group—the moral philosophers—are dogmatically setting themselves up as authorities over the rest of us.

When A/T's hypothetical fundamentalist says that it is better to have a universe in which Muslim ideals are destroyed, rather than harmoniously accommodated, the Jamesian reply is to find ways to get this fundamentalist to sympathetically identify with the hated Muslim.²⁶ James does not try to show that a fundamentalist is wrong by appealing to any abstract moral truth. He does not, for example, attempt to show fundamentalists are wrong because they are inconsistent when they do not respect the relevantly similar interests of others. A fundamentalist can always hunker down and assert that the supposed similar interest—religious devotion, for example—is not really all that similar because devotion to false values is not true religion. Nor does James' ethics appeal to some normative account of human nature that builds into it values like tolerance or respect such that those who fail to cultivate such values fail to be "fully human." Such accounts assume abstract moral truths about "human nature," and James rejects all abstract moral truth. Nor is his account best read as some sort of ideal observer theory that would say we should choose those ideals or values that would be chosen by an ideal observer (or by us were we be to ideally situated). James' moral philosophers might seem to be the functional equivalent of

an “ideal observer” but such appearances are misleading. James’ moral philosophers do desire harmony among conflicting ideals. However, James is not saying that there is an objective obligation to perform those actions that would be approved by an ideally situated moral philosopher. Nor is he arguing that we have an objective obligation to seek to attain the perspective of the moral philosopher. As I have suggested his argument is *if* we undertake to reflect on moral life by way of Royce’s fork, we *will* come to adopt the perspective of the moral philosopher. But James can offer no further normative reason for why we *ought* to reflect on moral life in this particular way.

V) SOME PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT FOR IP

I want to conclude in this section by showing that certain plausible psychological facts about the nature of the self and intra-subjective conflict could be mustered by James to make IP even more compelling. In short, James can argue that IP fits well with a psychologically realistic portrayal of moral selfhood. IP will then be compelling for those agents who want to lead moral lives that are based on a deep self-understanding of the conditions of their agency. To be sure, not all agents will have desires for deep self-understanding. Again, James does not try to rationally demonstrate the obligation to have such desires.

Consider intra-subjective conflicts. Even the most committed fundamentalist is familiar with the experience of not knowing which of her demands to satisfy. She might recall that there was a time, for example, when she was not devotee. She can remember that her acceptance of a fundamentalist way of life involved rejecting other possible selves she might have become, be these other possible religious selves or non-religious selves. As James points out in “Will to Believe,” some options are completely dead to individuals, but in most normal human lives there are a range of selves one might become. Even after, the fundamentalist has chosen to be devoted to say, a certain radical version of Hinduism, there are still choices about how to be such a Hindu. “Should I be the kind of Hindu that murders on behalf of her ideal, or should I reject the path of violence?” Conflicting demands arise even in those moral agents who are devoted with purity of heart to one ideal. Intra-subjective conflict gives rise to questions about obligations in a way similar to inter-subjective conflict. James makes this point in MPML, although he obscures this by first

suggesting that the moral solitary who experienced conflicts of demands would have no “outward obligation” and that his only trouble will “be over the consistency of his own several ideals with one another.”²⁷ However, later he clearly tempers this claim by asserting that “ethical relations” would exist even in moral solitude. Ethical relations “would exist even in what we called a moral solitude if the thinker had various ideals which took hold of him in turn. His self one day would make demands on his self of another; and some of the demands might be urgent and tyrannical, while others were gentle and easily put aside. We call the tyrannical demands imperatives. If we ignore these we do not hear the last of it. The good, which we have wounded, returns to plague us with interminable crops of consequential damages, compunctions, and regrets. Obligation can thus exist inside a single thinker’s consciousness; and perfect peace can abide with him only so far as he lives according to some sort of a casuistic scale which keeps his more imperative goods on top.”²⁸ In other word, conflicts between demands are possible even in solitudes of ignorance, apathy, or aversion when individuals experience internal conflict among various demands. This experience of conflict gives rise to the questions about which demands should or should not be satisfied.

James’ influential account of the consciousness of the self in his *Principles of Psychology* provides psychological support for his conception of intra-subjective conflict. James asserts “The same brain may subserve many conscious selves, either alternate or coexisting. . .”²⁹ James gives detailed psychological descriptions of a variety of phenomena that support the idea that brains can give rise to many conscious selves. These include the phenomena of insane delusions, alternating personalities, and possessions.³⁰ These many selves do not always co-exist peacefully. James’ account of this “rivalry and conflict of the different selves” is particularly relevant for the focus, in his ethics, on plural and conflicting values. James distinguishes three types of self: material, social, and spiritual, as well as what he calls the “pure ego.”³¹ In this discussion, selves are defined in terms of the objects that interest them. At times, we are forced to choose between cultivating one possible self and destroying others. James writes “I am often confronted by the necessity of standing by one of my empirical selves and relinquishing the rest.”³² James’ discussion of the conflict of selves parallels nicely his discussion of the “self of one day making demands on the self of another day” in the MPML.

Finally, consider James' analysis of religious conversion, which suggests the self now attained is always in some degree of tension with other possible selves just outside the margins of consciousness. In the chapter entitled "Conversion" James makes a claim very similar to the *Psychology's* idea that a person is made of many selves only he more explicitly identifies the different selves with different aims or values. He writes,

. . . a man's ideas, aims, and objects form diverse internal groups and systems, relatively independent of one another. Each 'aim' which he follows awakens a certain specific kind of interested excitement, and gathers a certain group of ideas together in subordination to its associates; and if the aims and excitements are distinct in kind, their groups may have little in common.³³

James goes on to note that the dominant aims that define the self tend to change over time. This is sometimes so gradual that we take no notice. However, from time to time the change is so dramatic that we describe it as a complete transformation. Religious conversion often follows that pattern. James develops a rich field theory of consciousness in order to account for conversion experiences. According to this theory, our consciousness contains an "extra-marginal" fringe "outside of the primary consciousness altogether."³⁴ James maintains that some exceptional individuals have a wider access to this extra-marginal domain. They are more prone to "incursions" from this field in the form of radical transformations of personality, such as is present in religious conversion.³⁵

If James is right, at any given time a person is made of many selves. Some of these selves may grow dominant and destroy the others such that these are no longer "living options"—real possibilities. But it is rarely, if ever, possible for consciousness to seize on just one self and its dominant interest. There are always potential selves peering in from the extra-marginal fringe of consciousness. In some cases, these potential selves burst through the fringe, transforming us into new people.

Still, one might doubt ethical relevance of these psychological observations. Is it so bad that when I convert to Islam, after being raised Christian, I have "killed the Christian self?" Or, I have also eliminated the possibility of becoming a Buddhist self? How can those selves complain? The Buddhist self never existed. The former Christian self is no

longer definitive of me. The demands of that self cease to exist, so how can we say there is some sort of tragic frustration of them? Or, more directly, what is so tragic about destroying those selves that hate other people or engage in compulsive lying? Surely some selves should be destroyed or never be given the opportunity to see the light of day?

These questions miss the point, which is not that we have a moral obligation to realize every potential self, nor that all possible selves are of equal worth. The point is rather that appreciation of these psychological facts about human selfhood reflects an honest self-understanding. Moreover, an agent with such honest self-understanding is less likely to take a dogmatic attitude towards conflicting first-order ideals because she appreciates the fact that her own ideals are contingent—they might have been otherwise.

Thus, the person who believes that the self they have attained is the only possible self they might have been has a psychologically distorted self-conception. Even if one believes that the actual self is the only desirable self, one ought to acknowledge that it could have been otherwise. Such honest acknowledgment might engender an appreciation of the tragedy built into the choice of one self over others. These possible selves might return from the dead, in moments of honest reflection, to haunt the self that has destroyed them. The self I might have been—a religious Muslim instead of a religious Hindu—would be much like the selves that I now regard as “other.” These are the sorts of sympathetic, humble attitudes connected to a commitment to IP.

Let’s be clear. These Jamesian psychological reflections do not logically entail IP, nor will they always compel moral agents to adopt the second-order attitude defined by IP. However, the psychological reflections do form a coherent account of how IP fits together with a plausible account of agency. Royce’s Fork, James’ account of the self, and IP form a cluster of mutually supporting conceptions of moral agency and judgment. I suggest that they nicely fit together into what some moral philosophers call a “reflective equilibrium.”

Once one has adopted IP as a second-order regulative ideal, one seeks strategies of harmony and accommodation among conflicting first-order ideals. Those who have adopted IP will reject dogmatic ideals, that is, those ideals whose conception of moral agency involves the outright rejection of other first-order moral ideals. They will cultivate a certain pragmatic ideal of character that emphasizes the virtues of sympathy and fallibilism.

Nevertheless, the decision to adopt this sort of character, however motivated by Royce's fork and James' psychological reflections on the self, is in the strictest sense itself a demand that has no abstract validity to it beyond the fact that moral agents find it attractive. Is this damning? It all depends on what one expects from philosophy. If one expects that moral philosophy will somehow rationally demonstrate the existence of a demand-independent obligation to accept IP, then James' ethics falls short. Presumably, this is the expectation that philosophers like A/T foist on James' philosophy. However, James would be the first to acknowledge the limits of rational concepts in all areas of philosophical inquiry, especially the moral.³⁶

To return to the central question, "why should I accept the moral philosopher's demand?" James answers: "because you are the moral philosopher with this demand. You may not think of yourself as a moral philosopher but that may because you think of philosophy as separate from moral living." James would go on to say that in its broadest sense philosophy is "not a technical matter; it is our more or less dumb sense of what life honestly and deeply means. It is only partly got from books; it is our individual way of just seeing and feeling the total push and pressure of the cosmos."³⁷ James is not naïve. There are people whose individual way of "seeing and feeling" the moral universe involves hateful dismissal of the ideals of others. But their problem is not one that can be solved by "technical matters" set out in books. Their problem is a poverty of sympathy, the roots of which are biological, familial, social, and political.

Muskingum University
tmlekan@yahoo.com

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NOTES

¹James (1979).

²James divides philosophical ethics into three kinds of inquiry: the psychological, metaphysical, and casuist. The first concerns moral psychology, in particular, the question of whether or not some moral beliefs are innate. The second concerns the meanings of moral terms, what we today would call meta-ethics. The third is about the criterion of right and wrong action, or what we would call “normative ethics.”

³James' pluralistic ideal seems to fit well with the liberal tradition of the likes of John Stuart Mill who claimed that liberty was a vital good, in part, because it is conducive for "experiments in living" that help humanity learn what makes for the most happiness.

⁴MPML, p. 158.

⁵MPML, 159.

⁶Although James would agree with much moral philosophy since the twentieth-century that meta-ethics as the study of the status of moral statements is conceptually distinct from normative ethics as the theory about the correct standards of right and wrong, he stresses that overarching goal of all ethical theory is normative. This goal is to find a "system" that impartially orders conflict moral obligations.

⁷MPML, p. 148.

⁸MPML, p. 152.

⁹James (1979), p. 153

¹⁰Although James' meta-normative account of "good" is, in a sense, anti-realist, it does not follow that he must offer a subjectivist account of all the various values that are objects of demands. That is to say James account does not imply that when I make a demand to protect non-human nature my moral belief is that this is worth protecting for the reason that protecting it would satisfy my demand.

¹¹This might help make plausible the claim that demands are sufficient for obligation, but what about the claim that they are necessary? James has to say that judgments of the form "he should have a desire that he does not" are really expressions of someone's desire, presumably, the person making the judgment.

¹²Aiken/Talissee, p. 9.

¹³Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁴Cooper (2002) develops this reading of James, in opposition to Gale (1999) who reads James a desire-satisfaction utilitarian.

¹⁵Aiken/Talissee, p. 11.

¹⁶Ibid. p. 12.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹MPML, p. 151.

²⁰In his 1889-1890 course notes for “Philosophy 4—Recent English Contributions to Theistic Ethics” James explicitly mentions Royce’s moral insight. There he says that Royce’s moral insight is the answer to the question of the best method for resolving moral conflict. I take this to be some evidence that Royce influences James in the way he sets up the basic problem of philosophical ethics. The solution to the question of which test of right and wrong we should adopt is “by Royce’s ‘moral insight’—consider every good as a real good, and *keep as many as we can*. That act is the best act, *which makes for the best whole*, the best whole being that which prevails at least cost, in which the vanquished goods are least completely annulled.” James (1988), p. 185.

²¹MPML, p. 147.

²²For an excellent presentation of Royce’s argument strategy, that has influenced my discussion here, see Fuss (1965) chapter two.

²³Royce (1885), p. 133.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 134.

²⁵James does not make an explicit link between his normative ethical inclusivity principle and his observations about the need to overcome blindness to alien ways of life in his essay “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings” in James (1983). But he does think that appreciation for alien ways of life will lead agents to value respect and tolerance.

²⁶Rorty (1998) makes a similar argument in his “Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality.”

²⁷MPML, p. 146.

²⁸MPML, p. 1509.

²⁹James (1981), p. 279.

³⁰See James (1981) pp. 352-378.

³¹See James (1981) pp. 280-314.

³²See James (1981) p. 295.

³³James (1985), p. 160.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 190.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 191.

³⁶A/T’s last two challenges would count as a decisive refutation only if moral philosophers need what James’ moral philosopher does not even want, namely, a demand-

independent standpoint by which to criticize intolerant demands. Whether such a standpoint is necessary or possible for moral theory is itself a difficult and complex question. It should be noted, at the outset, that such neutrality is, in some sense, rejected by much contemporary moral and political theory. John Rawls' later theory of justice, for example, explicitly claims that the liberal ideals that guide his theory of justice are relative to a certain moral and political tradition. At the very least, James is in good company with a great deal of moral and political philosophy in the last one hundred or so years.

³⁷James (1975), p. 9.