RESPONSIBLE OTHER-FASHIONING: COMMENTS ON TODD LEKAN'S *WILLIAM JAMES AND THE MORAL LIFE*

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T odd Lekan's *William James and the Moral Life* offers an important elaboration and defense of James's moral theory. As Lekan notes, it hasn't always been clear that James even *has* a moral theory, given the fact that his discussions of ethics and morality are largely limited to one essay ("The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*) and some scattered comments throughout his other works. In contrast Lekan argues that James does have a moral theory, albeit one that is flexible, pluralistic, and experimental. If the result does not look like a moral *theory* then that's on those who have "inflated pretensions of what theories can accomplish."[1] Another way of putting it is that, for James, moral *inquiry*—the methods by which we resolve moral conflicts—matters more than moral *theory*, at least in the narrow sense of that term.

On Lekan's account, James' moral theory boils down to the following "Regulative Assumptions" and "Regulative Ideals."[2] These provide the contours of a Jamesean moral theory:

> Regulative Assumption 1 (RA-1): There exist "a plurality of meaning-giving ideals and desires."
> RA-2: These ideals and desires "sometimes conflict."
> RA-3: Ethical skepticism is suspended "at the outset of moral inquiry" (14).
> Regulative Ideal 1 (RI-1): The primary goal of moral inquiry is to find an impartial method for resolving *value* conflicts (14).
> RI-2: "The Inclusivity Ideal": "we are morally obligated to satisfy as many demands as possible" and "we are morally obligated to adopt ideals whose realization does not undermine the ideals held by others" (15).
> RI-3: "Moral agents should adopt those metaphysical beliefs which motivate them to strenuously pursue actions necessary for a significant life.…These metaphysical beliefs must pass the will to believe test" (82).
> RI-3*: "Moral agents should adopt those metaphysical beliefs which yield
> *psychological benefits* to themselves" (84).
> RI-4: "Moral agents should respect those agents who must adopt metaphysical beliefs" that motivate action consistent with the Inclusivity Ideal (RI-2) (82).

The result is an approach to ethical decision making that prioritizes pluralism and inclusivity, based on the insight that since we have different moral ideals, and because there is no a priori standard for ranking these ideals, we are obligated to find ways to ensure their—and our own—peaceful coexistence.

This leads Lekan to frame James's theory as an exercise in "responsible self-fashioning" where becoming a moral agent is "an existential decision about the kind of person one aspires to be"—that's the "self-fashioning" part—combined with an embrace of the Inclusivity Ideal (RI-2) mentioned above (the "responsible" part).[3] The process of moral inquiry both shapes who we are while also illuminating our obligations to others.

It's that last bit that I want to focus on here, since it points to a lacuna in James's theory that deserves some attention. As Lekan frames it—and I think he's right—James sees "responsible self-fashioning" in terms of satisfying others' demands and respecting their ideals. That's certainly *part* of a moral life but I don't think it tells the whole story. In addition, a moral life also involves responsible *other*-fashioning where that involves questioning, influencing, and even undermining others' desires and ideals.

Let me explain what I mean. I think the Inclusivity Ideal (RI-2) is just wrong or, at the very least, incomplete.[4] This is because, in many cases, we have a moral responsibility to scrutinize others' desires and ideals *even when these ideals don't undermine the ideals held by others*.[5] The obvious reason for this is that not all desires and ideals are created equal: some desires and ideals just aren't as good as others. This might seem odd to say when we're also assuming that these desires and ideals don't affect other people. But context matters, so if it seems odd to say that some desires and ideals aren't good then I think that's likely because of the perspective *we* bring to this question as philosophers. If my desire is to read, say, lots of William James and my ideal is the sort of careful scholarship that Lekan displays here, it might seem as if I have nothing to say to my colleague who instead desires to read lots of Heidegger and become a Heidegger scholar. That's not *my* ideal but it doesn't really undermine my own and so here the inclusivity ideal seems correct:

if we're departmental colleagues then we shouldn't undermine each other's ability to do the research we love or to teach the courses we think are important.[6] In other words, if we look at a large chunk of the lives *we* lead, especially when we're operating as philosophers, then the inclusivity ideal makes a lot of sense.

But let's change the context a little. First, let's think of ourselves less as researchers and more as educators. If a *student* comes to me and expresses their desire to read lots of Heidegger (or James) and wants to go to graduate school to do more of the same at a professional level, then my reaction will be quite different. Of course, I'll be delighted that they seem serious and goal-oriented. And, in a sense, it doesn't really affect *me* what they choose to do with their life, or even the next four to eight years of it. But it's also my responsibility to make sure they embrace these desires and ideals with wide-open eyes, aware of the benefits *and* costs of putting these desires and ideals into practice and, in particular, what the possible opportunity costs might be.

Second and third, let's think less of our professional responsibilities and instead about our responsibilities to family and friends. Some of us who are parents may know the challenge of responding to a child's desire to consume all of YouTube, or to emulate a prominent gamer or online prankster. Again, these ideals and desires may not prevent us from achieving our ideals and goals but, as with our students, it seems we have a moral responsibility to weigh in and possibly even undermine these ideals. Failing to do so would be an abdication of our responsibilities. And it's not just our legal dependents to whom we owe this duty. Depending on the circumstance, we may find we've assumed this responsibility even for those who once had this responsibility for us: consider the case of an aging parent and the decision to move to a retirement community or assisted living. These are difficult decisions precisely because they can involve a deep change in one's self-image and identity, especially if a parent takes pride in their independence and self-sufficiency. And, finally, we bear this responsibility even toward friends and partners who are in roughly our age and demographic bracket: while not treating them the same as we would

a child or an aging parent, we still have a responsibility to pass *some* judgment on their desires and ideals. In fact, in some situations we wouldn't be a true friend or partner if we *didn't* pass judgment, thereby showing a degree of empathy and concern that their ideals are well-considered and their decisions well thought-out. To sum up, I don't think any of this sounds too odd; if it did initially then that's because we may over-emphasize attitudes that work well enough in some settings but not others. (I also agree with the pluralistic thrust of Lekan's reading of James: there's no single one-size-fits-all solution in these situations.)

This points to a not-so-obvious reason why the Inclusivity Ideal is mistaken. This is the fact that we're not always the final authorities on what our ideals are or what they ought to be. This is especially clear today when many of our desires and ideals are, honestly, not really and authentically our own, but rather ideals and desires that are cunningly manufactured and presented so as to be nearly irresistible. As with food engineering, which devises unhealthy treats that exploit our biochemical weaknesses, so too there is conceptual engineering that devises and packages ideas that are equally enticing and equally unhealthy. James is, of course, famous for his writings on free will and determinism but he tended to view this as a metaphysical question, perhaps one that could be resolved through the exercise of one's right or will to believe. The concern, today, is that this isn't so much a metaphysical question as a practical and neurological one, highlighting the ways in which we can be easily and predictably manipulated (see, for example, Dezfouli et al. 2020). Given our susceptibility to such manipulation, we shouldn't assume that our ideals and desires are necessarily, authentically ours—and nor should we assume that inclusivity is *always* an ideal worth pursuing. In fact, given our human susceptibility to this sort of manipulation, this justifies guiding others' choice of desires and ideals as described above. After all, if we don't do it there are plenty of others—marketers, influencers, corporations—who will and already have.

Having said all this, there are certainly some features of James's (and Lekan's) account to which I've failed to do justice. As Lekan

notes, James is interested in those ideals that make a life *genuinely* worth living: on his gloss, this means that we need to consciously *embrace* such ideals and put them "into practice with vigor."[7] This self-conscious and "strenuous" embrace of our ideals is what makes a life *significant*. These are important qualifications: James isn't suggesting that *any* ideal, chosen arbitrarily, deserves respect, and this goes a long way to addressing the concern that not all of our ideals are, in fact, genuinely our own, or would stand up to critical scrutiny.

But, still. A feature that James seems to downplay is that leading a significant life involves more than doing what one personally finds meaningful. This is Susan Wolf's point in *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*: that leading a meaningful life requires a combination of personal fulfillment and a commitment to "something the value of which has its source outside the subject."[8] Wolf agrees with James that many people lead unfulfilling lives, spending their time engaged in tasks that leave them feeling cold. (Some of these tasks may be very noble and praiseworthy.) But it's not enough *merely* to follow one's passions: after all, people find fulfillment in any number of things, and some of these (Wolf's examples include pot-smoking, excessive devotion to one's pets, and doing Sudokus) might themselves be expressions of unacknowledged quiet desperation. In addition, we need *objective* sources of meaning in our lives and this generally comes from making commitments to causes that are larger than ourselves. Wolf calls this the "fitting fulfillment" view and our lives are more likely to be meaningful when these two sources of meaning are aligned: that is, when we find personal fulfillment in objectively valuable commitments, which are often commitments to *other people*.

Again, I'm not sure that James or Lekan would disagree, and it's possible that this comes down to a question of emphasis: on either what Lekan calls the "existential" or the "social-moral."[9] Lekan is certainly right that it is "misleading" to read James as "offering an individualist moral philosophy that ignores the social aspects of self and identity."[10] I agree that James has a "relational account of the self as socially shaped through a process of taking the point of view

of others."[11] But even this places the emphasis on the individual and *their* agency: *individuals* take the social point of view. What is missing, or under-emphasized, is how the self is socially shaped through *others'* actions or, viewed from the other direction, how *we* shape others—sometimes for ill, certainly, but also sometimes for good.

William James and the Moral Life is an important book. It makes a compelling case for James as a rigorous moral theorist, one who describes the conditions of moral behavior with his characteristic humaneness, subtlety, and finesse. It also makes a compelling case for Lekan as an astute interpreter of James's work: he concedes at one point "that what I am saying here is more about what James *should* say, consistent with what he *does* say."[12] I agree that "responsible self-fashioning" is a central theme in James's work, but regret the absence of responsible *other-* fashioning. This gap in James' general approach creates an unfortunate vacuum, for surely this shaping will take place and, as shapers ourselves, this is an area where we'd benefit from James's acute insights.

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NOTES

[1] Todd Lekan, *Williams James and the Moral Life: Responsible Self-Fashioning*, 12.

[2] Lekan defines regulative assumptions as "taken-for-granted norms that are tacitly accepted by not consciously used in inquiries" while regulative ideals "offer normative guidance, tending to be values consciously used as analytic tools in inquiries" (12).

[3] Lekan, *William James*, 29.

[4] It's possible that my objection is not so much with the Inclusivity Ideal but farther upstream, with one of the theses Lekan cites in its support. For example, there is the "Demand Obligation Thesis" (DOT): "some sentient being S demanding F is necessary and sufficient to generate a prima facie obligation for satisfying S's demand for F" (16). I'm skeptical because people demand all sorts of things and I'm not sure they necessarily generate prima facie obligations. But I think the Inclusivity Ideal is sufficiently interesting and plausible on its own that it doesn't stand or fall with the DOT.

[5] Obviously there's undermining and then there's undermining. In one sense ideals can conflict with each other in virtue of being incompatible: e.g., one person's ideal of living independently off the land may conflict with another person's ideal of living in a cosmopolitan metropolis (a scenario James considers in "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," 60). Even though one person can't pursue both ideals there's no reason different people can't. Call this "indirect conflict." In another sense ideals can conflict when one prevents the pursuit of the other (call this "direct conflict"). For example, my ideal of contemplative tranquility may conflict with the neighbor kid's ideal of learning all the drum parts to every Metallica song. I take it that when the inclusivity ideal refers to "undermining" another person's ideals it has such direct conflict in mind.

[6] Of course, it's a little more complicated than this: since we also

have responsibilities to our students, our colleagues and our curriculum, it's conceivable that my devotion to teaching American Philosophy might mean that other classes don't get taught, or that others are stuck teaching them, and that's not fair. (But in this case my ideals would directly undermine the ideals held by others.)

[7] Lekan, *William James*, 41-42.
[8] Wolf, *Meaning in Life*, 20.
[9] Lekan, *William James*, 10.
[10] Lekan, *William James*, 63.
[11] Lekan, *William James*, 57.
[12] Lekan, *William James*, 71.