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TOWARD A JAMESIAN CONSTRUCTIVISM



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INTRODUCTION

In William James's body of work, we find one essay that focuses exclusively on theoretical ethics. Initially a talk delivered to the Yale Philosophical Club in 1891, and later published as part of a collection of essays titled *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" (hereafter MPML) represents James's most direct contribution to moral thought. In this paper I will work to situate his views within the contemporary philosophical landscape.

On the one hand this project is a familiar one; past thinkers don't utilize contemporary terms, and there are often ambiguities that invite competing interpretations. In the case of James, however, the task is made more complicated by unique way that he chooses to frame his inquiry. Put briefly, in MPML James frames his remarks as a response to the following question: how should the moral philosopher theorize about morality, given the values that she holds, and in particular, given her proclivity to theorize? For James, the philosophical impulse is one of many, and the philosopher is characterized by a stronger than average desire to inquire and systematize. I present and explain James's framing of MPML in the first section of this paper, and will appeal to it throughout in order to help explain why James is led to believe that the moral philosopher must approach moral philosophy in the way James suggests.

My ultimate goal is to prove that the approach developed by James is metaethically constructivist. In Section II, I provide a brief discussion of the characteristic features of constructivist positions, and in Section III, I locate those features in James's own account. I then try to solidify my constructivist reading of James by showing how it, coupled with the framing of MPML, can help us to make sense of a notoriously puzzling shift to a discussion of the divine at the end of the essay. There, James makes two claims: 1) that moral progress must wait on theological beliefs, and 2) that the moral philosopher ought to posit the existence of a god as they theorize.

Both are explained by another claim, which is that a belief in a god effectively motivates individuals to live according to their most cherished values. I explain the connection between these three claims and the essay's framing in Section IV. Finally, I briefly compare the constructivisms of James and Sharon Street, with the goal of isolating the unique features of a Jamesian constructivism.

SECTION I. THE FRAMING OF MPML

I will begin by presenting James's remarks on the aim of the moral philosopher. Here is what he has to say:

First of all, what is the position of him who seeks an ethical philosophy? To begin with, he must be distinguished from all those who are satisfied to be ethical sceptics. He *will* not be a sceptic; therefore so far from ethical scepticism being one possible fruit of ethical philosophizing, it can only be regarded as that residual alternative to all philosophy which from the outset menaces every would-be philosopher who may give up the quest discouraged, and renounce his original aim. That aim is to find an account of the moral relations that obtain among things, which will weave them into the unity of a stable system and make of the world what one may call a genuine universe from the ethical point of view. So far as the world resists reduction to the form of unity, so far as ethical propositions seem unstable, so far does the philosopher fail of his ideal. The subject-matter of his study is the ideals he finds existing in the world; the purpose which guides him is this ideal of his own, of getting them into a certain form.¹

For James, moral theories are the products of moral philosophers, and moral philosophers possess a particular aim; that is, to produce a system that can make sense of our moral practices. We should say a bit more, then, about James's understanding of this aim. First, we should note that it's an aim that James thinks excludes the development of a skeptical account, which would only make sense

of our moral practices insofar as it attempts to explain them in the absence of any positive conception of morality. Settling for skepticism, for James, amounts to the philosopher giving up her aim altogether. Next, to further understand the philosopher's aim we can turn to another of James's works titled "The Sentiment of Rationality" (hereafter SOR). There, James says that the characteristic desire of the philosopher is "to attain a conception of the frame of things which shall on the whole be more rational than that somewhat chaotic view which every one by nature carries about with him under his hat."² He then goes on to discuss *what it feels like* to attain a rational conception of the world, along with the kinds of theories that have furnished philosophers with that feeling.

One such way to go about theorizing, James says, is to seek out some principle or fact that can explain a wide variety of phenomena. He calls the passion behind theories of this sort the *passion of simplification*. Here he seems to be referring to theories that establish, for instance, laws of nature: "Who does not feel the charm of thinking that the moon and the apple are, as far as their relation to the earth goes, identical; of knowing respiration and combustion to be one; of understanding that the balloon rises by the same law whereby the stone sinks."³ Laws of gravitation, for example, seem to simplify our understanding of physical bodies; two things as disparate as the moon and an apple become more like one another to the extent that the Earth's gravity acts on both. We can say more generally that theories which aim to simplify also illuminate what seemingly disparate things have in common. When it comes to Newtonian physics, we can point to gravitational laws; when it comes to morality, we can try to point to principles of right.

On the other hand, James thinks that there is a manifestation of the philosopher's aim that runs counter to the passion of simplification. He calls this the *passion for distinguishing*:

[I]t is the impulse to be *acquainted* with the parts rather than to comprehend the whole. Loyalty to clearness and integrity of perception, dislike of blurred outlines, of vague identifications, are its characteristics. It loves to recognize

particulars in their full completeness, and the more of these it can carry the happier it is. It prefers any amount of incoherence, abruptness, and fragmentariness (so long as the literal details of the separate facts are saved) to an abstract way of conceiving things that, while it simplifies them, dissolves away at the same time their concrete fullness. Clearness and simplicity thus set up rival claims, and make a real dilemma for the thinker.⁴

The idea is that theories that simplify ultimately must ignore certain “concrete” features of the objects they hope to explain. Theories of physics, for instance, must acknowledge that purely scientific descriptions of apples and moons fail to represent much of each object (they fail, for instance, to represent *what it’s like* to bite into a crisp apple, or to gaze upon a full moon). To be moved by the passion to distinguish, then, is to care more about fully explaining each particular thing, of capturing each thing’s “concrete fullness,” and so be willing to accept contradictions between explanations as a potential consequence. James goes on to say, rather characteristically I think, that the content of a given philosopher’s theory is an outcome of the balance that philosopher strikes between these two passions, but ultimately argues that the passion for simplification must in the end yield to the passion to distinguish:

The interest of theoretic rationality, the relief of identification, is but one of a thousand human purposes. When others rear their heads, it must pack up its little bundle and retire till its turn recurs. The exaggerated dignity and value that philosophers have claimed for their solutions is thus greatly reduced. The only virtue their theoretic conception need have is simplicity, and a simple conception is an equivalent for the world only so far as the world is simple—the world meanwhile, whatever simplicity it may harbor, being also a mightily complex affair. Enough simplicity remains, however, and enough urgency in our

craving to reach it, to make the theoretic function one of the most invincible of human impulses. The quest of the fewest elements of things is an ideal that some will follow, as long as there are men to think at all.⁵

James's argument boils down to this: practically speaking, knowledge of particulars is most expedient. Insofar as we lose the richness of experience when we think of the world in terms of principles and laws, we lose "the fulness of the truth."⁶ There is certainly much more to unpack here, but I've said enough for the purposes of this paper. For James, the philosopher will need to strike a balance between the passion of simplification and the passion for distinguishing, since he believes that "no system of philosophy can hope to be universally accepted among men which grossly violates either need, or entirely subordinates the one to the other."⁷ My claim is that in MPML James suggests how we ought to strike that balance concerning moral theory. I'll support this claim in the sections that follow, showing in Section IV how the passion for simplification is accounted for by James's proposal of a normative principle. In Section III I'll show how the passion for distinguishing is accounted for in his metaethical preoccupation with human ideals.

With all this in mind, let's refer to the characteristic interest of the philosopher, which is constituted by the passions discussed above, as *the philosophical impulse*. In light of this, we can now ask what it means for James to advise the moral philosopher in the construction of her theory *given the nature of her aim*. What I argue is that framing his paper in this way results in guidance which assumes that the moral philosopher is aware of the limited scope of her solution. In other words, at its core MPML is an essay that claims to answer moral questions from the standpoint of a *self-aware* philosopher, or a philosopher who recognizes her possession of the philosophical impulse and the limits it places on the scope of her solution. A notable upshot of this approach for the *moral* philosopher is that it has direct implications for her theory *insofar as she must grapple with the diverse array of perspectives to be found in the world*. In other words, her passion to simplify will be

checked by the particular individuals who are the source of her inquiry's subject matter. The result is a theory that takes seriously subjective perspectives, and which places an emphasis on developing a system that validates as many ways of living as possible.

That this is a plausible reading is evidenced by how well it harmonizes with another important essay of James's, "A Certain Blindness in Human Beings" (hereafter CB). There, James argues that each of us, by virtue of the unique perspectives that we inhabit, will be in possession of differing, but to some extent equally true, conceptions of what makes life meaningful. This means that our perspectives will also make us blind to sources of meaning accessible from perspectives that differ greatly from our own. The upshot of this fact, James thinks, is this:

[This blindness] is negative in one sense, but positive in another. It absolutely forbids us to be forward in pronouncing on the meaninglessness of forms of existence other than our own; and it commands us to tolerate, respect, and indulge those whom we see harmlessly interested and happy in their own ways, however unintelligible these may be to us. Hands off: neither the whole of truth nor the whole of good is revealed to any single observer, although each observer gains a partial superiority of insight from the peculiar position in which he stands. Even prisons and sick-rooms have their special revelations. It is enough to ask of each of us that he should be faithful to his own opportunities and make the most of his own blessings, without presuming to regulate the rest of the vast field.⁸

We should expect that James's request that each of us be faithful to our own opportunities and blessings, without passing judgment on other ways of living, would extend to those of us who possess a strong philosophical impulse. This would include the moral philosopher, who must somehow stay faithful to her task without

“presuming to regulate the rest of the vast field.” One obvious blunder, then, that the moral philosopher might make is to allow one of her other ideals to guide her philosophizing, and James indicates as much in MPML:

[the philosophical impulse] is thus a factor in ethical philosophy whose legitimate presence must never be overlooked; it is a positive contribution which the philosopher himself necessarily makes to the problem. But it is his only positive contribution. *At the outset of his inquiry he ought to have no other ideals.* Were he interested peculiarly in the triumph of any one kind of good, he would *pro tanto* cease to be a judicial investigator, and become an advocate for some limited element of the case.⁹ (my emphasis)

The dilemma faced by the moral philosopher is that her ideal of producing a moral system requires her to speak on behalf of all of us, who are all inhabiting unique perspectives that are characterized by diverse sets of values. The moral domain, and the project of developing a normative theory in particular, requires the philosopher to make value judgments; to declare this or that to be the highest good; to declare that X is better than Y; and so on. James’s suggestion here is that it is easy for the philosopher to slip up and allow her other ideals to influence these sorts of judgments, and so she should take care to guard against this tendency, lest she unjustly discount some ways of living. Insofar as she is interested in producing a moral system, she can be guided only by the philosophical impulse. Further, she must also understand that this interest of hers is on the same footing as the interests that are moral philosophy’s subject matter, and so must not take her proposed solution to represent the whole truth about moral matters. Still, if we take James’s remarks in CB seriously, the philosopher does have some grounds to say that her solution gets at some truth, some unique way of understanding the moral domain, and so we can think

of James as advising the philosopher on how to best pursue that truth.

In the following sections, I hope that the purpose of MPML's framing will become clearer. At this point, we should recognize that it is important to keep the framing of MPML in mind because it communicates to us James's view concerning the scope of philosophical solutions. That is, it suggests that James's answers to moral questions are the answers of a philosopher who is aware not only of her characteristic impulse, but who also recognizes and accepts the limits of philosophical inquiry. These, in other words, are important metaphilosophical commitments that directly bear on James's judgments about which moral theories are plausible. To be clear, my contribution will not be to vindicate these commitments, but rather to illustrate how they influence the views that appear in MPML. There are two views that emerge in the essay, one metaethical and the other normative. Since my goal is to classify James's metaethical position as constructivist, it will be useful to provide a general, albeit brief, discussion of constructivism in the next section. I will then discuss in detail James's metaethical position, which I suggest we view as a kind of Humean constructivism.

SECTION II. CONSTRUCTIVISM: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

In what follows, I will provide a brief overview of constructivism, with the goal of isolating the key features of a properly metaethical version of the view. We will then be in a position to identify those features in James's account, and to compare it to other influential metaethical constructivist views. What I will show in Section III and IV is that James's account is accurately labeled a Humean constructivism.

Before we start, I want to note that describing constructivist views is a daunting task, and a careful examination of the most influential constructivist positions warrants much more attention than I can give in a paper like this. My hope is that in what follows I can paint a rough but compelling picture of what constructivists are committed to, and that what I say is ultimately compatible with

the finer details of the views that I examine. I encourage the reader, if unsure about the characterization I provide, to dive into the primary materials themselves.¹⁰

I'll begin my characterization of constructivism by following the lead of Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard, and Peter Railton (1992) (here after DGR), who provide a taxonomy of contemporary metaethical views that is based on how theorists understand the continuity of morality with the empirical sciences. They tell us that we can understand this continuity in relation to the notion of objectivity, and the widely shared intuition that moral matters are in some meaningful sense objective. Those theorists who believe that morality is continuous with the sciences claim that if morality is objective, then it's for the same reasons that the natural sciences are objective; facts about what we ought to do are like facts concerning, for example, electrons. On the other hand, there are *discontinuity views*, which seek to show how we can make sense of morality's apparent objectivity without appealing to the sort of objectivity at play in the sciences. Constructivism is a discontinuity view, insofar as its claims to morality's objectivity do not appeal to natural facts, but rather to *moral concerns*. In order to best understand constructivism, then, it's important to pin down the notion of a "moral concern," and we can do so by considering first the work of John Rawls, the lone representative of constructivism in DGR, followed by the work of Christine Korsgaard and Sharon Street.

We should first recognize that Rawls's constructivism is not metaethical in that it aims only to provide us with a standard of justice. In other words, it's best described as a normative view that identifies a standard which ought to govern the interactions between individuals within a democratic state. Nevertheless, it possesses the key features of a constructivist position, and will help to set the stage for understanding the views of Korsgaard, Street, and, ultimately, James. Rawls claims that we can arrive at a standard of justice by considering how a group of hypothetical individuals would reason together in a hypothetical situation termed "the original position." There, the individuals would attempt to agree to a set of principles for living together under conditions of ignorance.¹¹ The original

position, then, provides us with the language to articulate the moral concern from which Rawls's standard of justice arises: the individuals in the original position would agree upon a particular standard of justice because *they are concerned with living together in a way that properly reflects their democratic values*. It is in this sense that the standard is "constructed;" it comes to be as a result of certain hypothetical individuals deliberating well under certain conditions. Put another way, it's tempting to say that *the correct standard just is the one that results from carrying out such a construction procedure*. Hence the common tendency to think that the most appropriate general description of constructivism must include some sort of construction procedure.

It's worth noting, though, as DGR does, that Rawls thinks that appealing to a construction procedure is not necessary. Thinking in terms of the original position, he says, is dispensable:

The idea [of thinking about the original position] is simply to make vivid to ourselves the restrictions that it seems reasonable to impose on arguments for principles of justice, and therefore on these principles themselves...I have emphasized that this original position is purely hypothetical. It is natural to ask why, if this agreement is never entered into, we should take any interest in these principles, moral or otherwise. The answer is that the conditions embodied in the description of the original position *are ones that we do in fact accept*¹²...One way to look at the idea of the original position, therefore, is to see it as an expository device which sums up the meaning of these conditions and helps us to extract their consequences.¹³ (my emphasis)

This opens the door to thinking about constructivism as not necessarily being about what would follow from some procedure, but being more generally about what standards follow from certain sets of commitments. As Street has observed, instead of thinking about constructivist views as being defined by some procedure, we might instead adopt a practical standpoint characterization of the

view, which says that normative facts are entailed by the sets of values that we hold (sets which constitute what Street calls *practical points of view*, or *evaluative points of view*), along with the non-normative facts.¹⁴

Standards of action, in other words, are entailed by the values we hold given the non-normative characteristics of the world we live in. The important point here is that whatever characterization we choose, we should notice that both involve describing on the one hand some relevant evaluative points of view, and on the other the problems faced by individuals occupying those points of view.¹⁵ Concerning Rawls's constructivism, the evaluative point of view in question is constituted by democratic values, and the moral concern that arises for those occupying that point of view is the problem of how to live with one another despite relevant differences. What emerges, whether as a result of following some procedure or simply as a matter of entailment, is a standard of justice.

A constructivist view, then, will have the following characteristic features. First, it will identify some evaluative points of view and the moral concerns that arise from those points of view. Second, it will address those concerns by explaining how some normative standard follows from the identified evaluative points of view. Now, in addition, we should note that views that accomplish these tasks can differ in scope. As noted, a view like Rawls's may be focused on a very particular region of the normative domain (e.g., the domain of justice). These views will take the truth of a certain set of normative claims for granted, and show which standards follow from those claims (in Rawls's account, the claims taken for granted are those that express democratic values). Such a view is noncommittal about what accounts for the truth of the claims taken for granted, and so may be compatible with a number of other metaethical positions. Other constructivist views, which we can call along with Street *thoroughgoing metaethical* views, seek to explain the origin of all normative facts in a constructivist manner. These views will meet a further condition, which is that they will attempt to establish that the standards they identify are *objective* in some sense. James certainly tries to do just this, but while DGR suggests

that constructivist views are essentially discontinuity views, we'll see that James's pragmatism paves the way for a constructivism with a notion of objectivity that is continuous with the sciences. That said, my argument does not hinge on whether James's view is a continuity or discontinuity view. What matters is that he is interested in accounting for the objectivity of characteristically constructivist standards of action. To show this, we will first examine the constructivisms of Korsgaard and Street, since they both seek to be thoroughly metaethical. We can then compare those views to the ideas that we find in MPML.

Christine Korsgaard's constructivism is Kantian, and it's grounded in a moral concern that she believes is shared by all persons. She says that the problem faced by all persons is that they must determine the proper principles for action, and it's one that arises from the evaluative point of view of a being with a will, or, in other words, the point of view of a being who *must* act. For Korsgaard, the relevant standards for action emerge, are *constructed*, as a result of deliberating according to principles of practical reason. These principles are to be understood in a Kantian manner (i.e., the hypothetical and categorical imperatives), and for Korsgaard to deliberate according to them is to unify the self, which allows one to become an agent, or the sort of thing that is capable of human action.¹⁶ Now, for Korsgaard, to unify yourself is to properly prioritize your values in a way that is sensitive to the various descriptions under which you value yourself. You may, for instance, value yourself as a parent, a professor, and a citizen, and you will need to deliberate with the aim of determining what you ought to do in each of those capacities, and how those duties can be fulfilled together (Korsgaard calls such valued descriptions *practical identities*).¹⁷ If you deliberate well, Korsgaard claims, then you will have constructed the standards by which you can be evaluated as a parent, a professor, a citizen, and so on. But in addition, Korsgaard thinks that there is a standard that emerges from an identity under which all persons value themselves as a matter of necessity; the identity of *being a person*. To value yourself as a person is to value yourself as a rational agent, a chooser, and the evidence for the claim

that you must necessarily value yourself in this way is just the moral concern that we cited at the beginning of this discussion. As a person, you must act, you must unify yourself, and so you cannot help but value yourself as a chooser. Put another way, the very fact that you do act, that you do choose, that you *can't help it*, shows that you value your rational agency. To deliberate well in one's capacity as a rational agent, then, will furnish one with a standard that Korsgaard calls the moral law, which is an absolute standard; it applies to all rational agents as such.

Street's constructivism, on the other hand, is Humean, and we can use the distinction between absolute and relative standards to help distinguish it from Korsgaard's. In short, Street does not think that the shared problem that Korsgaard identifies is a real one, and so rejects the idea that there is some moral standard that, as a matter of necessity, applies to all of us. For Street, there is no moral concern that is shared by all of us because there is no value that all evaluative points of view necessarily have in common. Rather, Street thinks that there is a plurality of standards that are to be understood relative to this or that particular evaluative point of view, and the extent to which value-sets overlap is a purely contingent matter. That said, Street does recognize an obvious feature that all evaluative points of view do necessarily have in common, and that is *that they are all constituted by some set of values or other*. Thus, Street turns her attention to understanding exactly what it means for a person to value something, and what standards follow from those values, the judgments the person makes about them, and the non-normative facts. Here is a formal statement of her view:

According to *metaethical constructivism*, the fact that *X* is a reason to *Y* for agent *A* is constituted by the fact that the judgment that *X* is a reason to *Y* (for *A*) withstands scrutiny from the standpoint of *A*'s other judgments about reasons.¹⁸

The moral concern for each of us, then, isn't that we must act, and so must find some universal principle for action. Rather, each of us faces our own unique problem; we must each ensure that our own

judgments about our own reasons withstand scrutiny from the standpoint of the rest of our judgments. Thus, put roughly, standards for action emerge when our values harmonize with one another; when they are rendered consistent and are prioritized. It's important for Street's view, then, that we can come up with a content-neutral characterization of the attitude of valuing (i.e., a characterization that does not assume any substantive claims about values),¹⁹ because to do so would facilitate the entailment of the relevant standards in the same way that the principles of practical reason would on Korsgaard's view. This would further ensure that the standards are objective in the sense that we could be mistaken about their content; to have a certain set of values would entail that we ought to do X, Y, and Z, whether we're aware of those entailments or not.

Street's constructivism, then, has all of the necessary features of a metaethical constructivist position, but in contrast to Korsgaard's, it denies the existence of some standard that applies to all of us as a matter of necessity. Now, if James is a constructivist, then he is a Humean constructivist, and in order to see why this is so, we can now move to an examination of the metaethical views expressed in MPML.

SECTION III. JAMES'S METAETHICS

It should now be clear that if we are to properly classify James as a thoroughgoing metaethical constructivist, it must be the case that his metaethical work seeks to identify some relevant evaluative points of view and the problems that arise from them, and that the standards that emerge from addressing those problems are objective in a manner that does not presuppose mind-independent moral facts. We can show this by revisiting the framing of MPML, and examining James's answers to the questions he takes to be relevant to developing a moral theory. Those questions are, in order: 1) the psychological question, 2) the metaphysical question, and 3) the casuistic question. Question 1 concerns the origin of the subject matter of ethics, question 2 concerns the meanings of our normative terms, and question 3 concerns the principle by which we determine morality's content. I will attend to the first two questions in this

section, since they are recognizably metaethical. What we'll see is that James's answers to these questions will invite compelling comparisons to Humean constructivist views, and, in particular, the views of Street.

Before addressing the first two questions, however, we should briefly consider an important way in which James's pragmatism draws into question DGR's categorization of constructivism as a discontinuity view. James believes that inquiries in both the scientific and moral domains aim at truth in the same way, a view he expresses in the opening passage of MPML:

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. We all help to determine the content of ethical philosophy so far as we contribute to the race's moral life. In other words, there can be no final truth in ethics any more than in physics, until the last man has had his experience and his say. In the one case as in the other, however, the hypotheses which we now make while waiting, and the acts to which they prompt us, are among the indispensable conditions which determine what that 'say' shall be.²⁰

So, while he ultimately puts forward an understanding of morality's objectivity that does not appeal to mind-independent facts, it would be a mistake to say that he believes that this implies that we are to conceive of objectivity in morality and the sciences in fundamentally different ways. This continuity between the two domains is implied by pragmatism's conception of truth, and in MPML in particular, we find an echo of that conception that closely resembles that of another well-known pragmatist, C. S. Peirce. Following Cheryl Misak (2000), we can understand Peirce's conception of truth in the following way: "a true belief is one that would withstand doubt, were we to inquire as far as we fruitfully could on the matter."²¹ In other words, true beliefs are those which would never fall into doubt; acting in accordance with them would

never lead to a recalcitrant experience, thus prompting the need to revise them. James, then, suggests this picture of truth when he says above that “there can be no final truth in ethics any more than in physics, until the last man has had his experience and his say.” Here is Misak’s own impression of James’s views on truth in MPML:

In [MPML] we find a lucid expression of a more objective pragmatist theory of truth, even though that is not its primary topic. James asserts in this essay that “truth supposes a standard outside of the thinker to which he must conform.” He offers us a view of truth on which truth is not what works here and now for an individual thinker. Truth is what works in the long run for a community of thinkers. It is clear that James toggled between a radically subjective pragmatism and a pragmatism of the more objective stripe.²²

There are two important questions that arise at this point. The first has to do with James’s inconsistent views on truth, and how that inconsistency should affect our reading of MPML. For the purposes of this paper, I will attribute to James a Peircean conception of truth, and to be sure, Misak provides us with some strong reasons to think that this is a fair attribution:

We have seen that James at his most careful was concerned to characterize truth as something that was of human value, without making a true belief what this or that human found valuable at this or that time. He is prone to expressing regret that he does not always make this clear. He tries to correct any misunderstanding of his position by arguing that, contrary to his critics, he holds that what is true is “the expedient,” but the expedient “in the long run and on the whole, of course.”²³ That is, James too wants to argue that true beliefs are beliefs which survive because they deserve to survive.²⁴

The second question is more general. It asks about how the pragmatist's conception of truth might be justified, and the answer to it will determine whether James's constructivism is best understood as a discontinuity view. It's the pragmatist's conception of truth, after all, that implies that knowledge in both the moral and scientific domains is acquired via the same process of inquiry, and which accounts for the strong intuition that many have that there are facts in both domains that are objective in the same sense.²⁵

That said, it would take us too far afield to venture into a general discussion of truth here, and so we should simply note that whether James's view is best understood as a continuity or discontinuity view depends on a justification of the Peircean conception of truth introduced above. Luckily, my only goal in this paper is to argue that James is a constructivist, and this characterization, as we'll see, does not hinge on his conception of truth. That said, if the pragmatist's conception of truth is correct, then it follows that a distinctive feature of James's constructivism is that it aims to make sense of morality's apparent objectivity in a manner that is continuous with the sciences.

With those brief remarks out of the way, we can move to discussing James's metaethics. Bringing back to mind this paper's opening quotation, we can observe that James's central metaethical concern is with identifying evaluative points of view that the moral philosopher should draw upon as she develops her theory. Recall, James takes the subject matter of ethics to be the various *ideals* possessed by individuals in the world.²⁶ For James, the moral philosopher must first and foremost attend to what individuals *actually* value, and attempt to incorporate those values into a system that follows properly from the philosophical impulse; "the purpose which guides [the moral philosopher] is this ideal of his own, of getting [the ideals found in the world] into a certain form."²⁷ There are, then, two relevant sets of evaluative points of view from the standpoint of the philosopher: the set of all valuers, and the set containing herself; a person committed to being guided in her project only by the philosophical impulse. What we'll see below is that all parties are saddled with the problem of prioritizing their own

particular set of values, which James thinks results in standards that are objective but relative to each point of view. But in addition, the philosopher is saddled with the problem of determining some absolute standard via the identification of some moral concern that all evaluative points of view have in common. I call the concern that James identifies *the problem of moral motivation*, and I discuss it in Section IV. For now, though, just recognize that James's starting point is very similar to Street's, who says:

The broad intuitive picture driving constructivism may be summarized this way. Pre-philosophically, we are puzzled about what value is. What is it that we are investigating when we think and argue about normative matters? To answer this question, start with what we do understand. Even if we aren't sure what valuing is, we do understand the attitude of *valuing*: the world is full of creatures who value things, after all, and we know the attitude pretty well when we see it...The subject matter of ethics is the subject matter of what follows from within the standpoint of creatures who are already taking this, that, or the other thing to be valuable.²⁸

As we saw in the previous section, Street's constructivism takes as its starting point the notion of *valuing*, and justifies this starting point by pointing out that the act of valuing is easily recognized. Like James, then, Street thinks that the proper metaethical theory begins by considering what individuals *actually* value, and so much of the Humean constructivist project becomes a matter of saying more about the attitude of valuing. As we move now to discuss James's answer to the psychological question, we'll see that it can be read as an attempt to say more about what it means to value, and thus reads as characteristically constructivist.

In addressing the psychological question—the question of how we come to possess our various ideals—James tells us that ideals originate in us in two ways. First, there are ideals that arise from an association with experiences of pleasure and pain, and second, there are ideals which he calls *brain-born*, which arise due to “incidental

complications to our cerebral structure.”²⁹ Concerning the second variety of ideals, James provides us with some examples—“the love of drunkenness...bashfulness, the terror of high places, the tendency to sea-sickness, to faint at the sight of blood, the susceptibility to musical sounds...the emotion of the comical, the passion for poetry, for mathematics, for metaphysics”—but the most decisive for him is the following:

[Consider if] the hypothesis were offered us of a world in which Messrs. Fourier’s and Bellamy’s and Morris’s utopias should all be outdone, and millions kept permanently happy on the one simple condition that a certain lost soul on the far-off edge of things should lead a life of lonely torture, what except a *specific and independent* sort of emotion can it be which would make us immediately feel, even though an impulse arose within us to clutch at the happiness so offered, how hideous a thing would be its enjoyment when deliberately accepted as the fruit of such a bargain?³⁰ (my emphasis)

James thinks that many of us would recoil at the thought that our lives, as replete with pleasure as they might be, are sustained by the suffering of another. If this is the case, James argues, then many of us must care about more than just pleasure, and so what it means to value goes beyond associations with pleasure or pain. Now, while James does not spend time developing a formal characterization of valuing, we can still note how his argument about the possible objects of our values compliments the work of constructivists like Street. That is, if James’s argument is convincing, it sets a condition of adequacy on a formal characterization of valuing: if one’s formal characterization only implies that pleasure can be valued (and pain disvalued), then the characterization is faulty. Indeed, much of James’s preoccupation with the psychological question is aimed at demonstrating the existence of brain-born ideals, or those ideals that have as their objects things other than pleasure, though he says much

more work needs to be done in order to provide an adequate demonstration.³¹ For the purposes of this paper, the key takeaway here is that James's interest in the possible objects of our values displays an interest in understanding the attitude of valuing itself, which we've seen is a core preoccupation of constructivists like Street.

We can now move on to James's answer to the metaphysical question, where we will see manifested a constructivist picture of relative standards of action much like Street's. Recall, to provide an answer to this question is to tell us what our normative terms mean. The picture James provides is rough, but we can divide it into three parts: (1) the world building thought experiment, (2) a diagnosis of the tendency to posit a moral order beyond individual consciousnesses, and (3) a view of how his metaethical position affects the development of a normative theory. The world building thought experiment is the vehicle for the development of the latter two, so let's start there.

In each stage of the world building thought experiment, we are asked to consider a stipulated state of the world and then ask, "What is morality's status in such a world, and given that status, what can we infer about its content?" In the first stage, the world contains no conscious life, in the second stage there exists just one person, in the third only two persons, and finally we are to consider the world as we find it now, as being actually populated by a multitude of persons. In the first stage of the experiment, James reminds us again that the philosophical impulse ought to be the only ideal at play in the philosopher's construction of her theory and, to begin to address (2), claims that a common tendency in theorizing, which we might call an "objectifying tendency," is explained by intruding impulses. He says:

Imagine an absolutely material world, containing only physical and chemical facts, and existing from eternity without a God, without even an interested spectator: would there be any sense in saying of that world that one of its states is better than another? Or if there were two such worlds

possible, would there be any rhyme or reason in calling one good and the other bad,—good or bad positively, I mean, and apart from the fact that one might relate itself better than the other to the philosopher’s private interests? *But we must leave these private interests out of the account*, for the philosopher is a mental fact, and we are asking whether good and evils and obligations exist in physical fact *per se*. Surely there is no *status* for good and evil to exist in, in a purely insentient world.³² (my emphasis)

And later, when James is discussing philosophical work on the meaning of “obligation:”

In our first essays at answering this question, there is an inevitable tendency to slip into an assumption which ordinary men follow when they are disputing with one another about questions of good and bad. They imagine an abstract moral order in which the objective truth resides; and each tries to prove that this pre-existing order is more accurately reflected in his own ideas than in those of his adversary.³³

That James rejects the existence of mind-independent moral facts is clear, but what’s interesting about these passages is that together they suggest that a tendency to adopt a belief in such facts is explained by the non-philosophical impulses of the philosopher. When James speaks of disputes among “ordinary men,” we can presume that he’s talking about those not interested in theory building, or those who will naturally approach moral disputes with a full set of ideals in hand. If we interpret James’s remarks about the first stage of his thought experiment in light of his remarks about such disputes, then it appears that James believes philosophers have mistakenly approached their project in the same way, the result being theories that identify our obligations as being rooted in some pre-existing moral order. This, I think, is why he reiterates the importance of keeping our private interests out of our consideration

of a purely material world. Put in terms of the philosopher's characteristic passions, we can say that a common mistake of the philosopher is allowing a cherished value to serve as a principle of simplification, by imagining it is in some way present in the world prior to individual consciousnesses.³⁴

In the next stage of James's thought experiment, we get the foundations of his view concerning (3), the connection between metaethics and normative theory. In this stage, we are to imagine one person existing in the world, and James says that in such a world "[moral] relations now have their status, in that being's consciousness."³⁵ In such a world, then, the philosopher's project is possible; there now exist ideals with which a philosopher can produce a system. However, James also makes it clear that in this world (which he calls "the moral solitude"), the proper system is that which the lone person would arrange himself. He says that the thinker would confront the problem of his various ideals not all being satisfiable at once, and so would have to make decisions concerning which ought to be prioritized over others, claiming that, "Into whatever equilibrium he may settle...and however he may straighten out his system, it will be a right system; for beyond the facts of his own subjectivity there is nothing moral in the world."³⁶ Here, then, we see two important thoughts that culminate in James's view about the connection between metaethical and normative theory. The first is a product of the framing of MPML; it says that the moral philosopher will have her passion to simplify checked by the particular, actually existing ideals in the world. This in effect satisfies a passion for distinguishing, and is a denial of the idea that the philosopher's moral system can be determined by some a priori principle.³⁷ Thus, and this is the second thought, James suggests that the philosopher's normative theory is constrained by her metaethical commitments. Those commitments say that morality has its status in the consciousnesses of individuals, and so the second stage of his thought experiment shows that this recognition of morality's status entails a recognition of the authority of the lone thinker to determine morality's content independent of some a priori principle.

Now, the picture becomes more complex when additional thinkers are added to the world. In the third stage of the experiment, we are to imagine two thinkers who are able to live out their lives indifferent to each other's ideals and actions. While this setup allows each to prioritize their ideals as they see fit, the philosopher's task is made more complicated. If it's the case that each individual has equal authority in moral matters, then how can the philosopher determine which system is the right one? The issue is further complicated when we move to the next stage and consider the world as it is now, replete with a multitude of thinkers. In such a world, we must determine whether or not it's possible for the philosopher to achieve her goal, and the remainder of MPML is devoted to answering this question. But before discussing that possibility, let's now discuss in detail how James's remarks throughout the world-building thought experiment are characteristically constructivist.

First, we should notice that James's examination of the moral solitude involves the identification of a problem that arises from the lone thinker's evaluative point of view. That problem, recall, is the problem of prioritizing one's ideals, and James explains that the result of solving that problem will be a standard that will govern the lone thinker's actions, and constitute the moral system that the philosopher desires. Further, James suggests in the next stages that we will all be faced with this problem (though it will be unique to each of us insofar as the challenges it presents are determined relative to our own sets of values), by virtue of the fact that we inhabit an evaluative point of view. These problems, recall, are just the problems identified by Street.

Further, James's remarks in the world-building thought experiment firmly establish the idea that if he is a constructivist, then he is a Humean constructivist. This is evidenced by his consideration of the world containing the two indifferent agents:

In such a case we have a world with twice as much of the ethical quality in it as our moral solitude, only it is without ethical unity. The same object is good or bad there, according as you measure it by the view which this one or

that one of the thinkers takes. Nor can you find any possible ground in such a world for saying that one thinker's opinion is more correct than the other's, or that either has the [truer] moral sense.³⁸

Kantian constructivists, again, claim that there would be grounds for deciding between the moral opinions of the two, insofar as the two share a faculty of practical reason. Korsgaard, recall, claims that both thinkers should be able to find common ground through their valuing of their personhood, a value that she thinks is a condition on the ability to value anything at all.³⁹ Such a value, then, would provide a standard that would allow us to decide between the value systems held by each thinker. Since James denies the existence of such a standard, his constructivism must be Humean.

Now, if James's constructivism is Humean, then he should be committed to the existence of a plurality of relative, though nevertheless in some sense objective, standards that arise from particular evaluative points of view. It would be useful, then, to have a clear picture of the sense in which such standards could be both relative and objective. Street provides the following remarks about such standards:

But relativize in what way? There are two main possibilities. One option is to understand the truth of "X is a reason to Y for agent A" as a function of the normative judgements of *the person judging* whether X is a reason to Y for agent A—for example, my normative judgments if I'm the one making the judgement about A's reasons, your judgments if you're the one making the judgement's about A's reasons, and so on. A second option is to understand the truth of "X is a reason to Y for agent A" as a function of the normative judgments of *the person whose reasons are in question*—that is, of A herself. Metaethical constructivism selects the second route. The standards of correctness determining what reasons a person has are understood to be set by *that person's* set of judgments about her reasons.⁴⁰

For Street, the truth or falsity of some normative statement will ultimately be determined by the standards set by a given agent's web of normative commitments (or, rather than webs, what I've been referring to as prioritizations of ideals). Now, importantly, insofar as that web furnishes an agent with standards by which to evaluate future judgments, there is a clear sense in which there can be intelligible disagreements about what she ought to do:

[Even] though *A*'s reasons ultimately depend on what she takes them to be, all of us—including *A* herself—can be mistaken about what those reasons are. This can happen, for example, if we're all unaware of some non-normative fact that, in concert with *A*'s set of values, implies that there is reason for *A* to do *Y*—for instance, to look under the refrigerator for her keys (since unbeknownst to us all, they're there), or to give up trying to be a writer (since unbeknownst to us all, it will bring her nothing but ill health and misery).⁴¹

And so, despite having their source in the agent herself, the standards of evaluation derived from her values are nevertheless objective, not in the sense that they are "out there" in the world, but in the sense that insofar as an agent's set of values entails what she ought to pursue, those entailments could, in principle, be understood by others and not the agent, the agent but not others, or by all parties.⁴² Metaethically, then, what James suggests over the course of the world-building thought experiment seems to harmonize well with this constructivist picture of relative, but nevertheless objective, standards. To see this, let's introduce some additional remarks that James makes about the moral solitude:

In such a universe as that it would of course be absurd to raise the question of whether the solitary thinker's judgements of good and ill are true or not. Truth supposes a standard outside of the thinker to which he must conform; but here the thinker is a sort of divinity, subject to no higher

judge...In such a moral solitude it is clear that there can be no outward obligation, and that the only trouble the god-like thinker is liable to have will be over the consistency of his own several ideals with one another. Some of these will no doubt be more pungent and appealing than the rest, their goodness will have a profounder, more penetrating taste; they will return to haunt him with more obstinate regrets if violated.⁴³

Compare this to the following remarks by Street, concerning a world with just two valuers:

One day, let's suppose, the first two valuing creatures ever were born—remarkably, as it happened, in a fairly sophisticated form. Until that moment, nothing had ever consciously valued anything...As it so happened, the first valued its own survival and nothing else, whereas the second valued its own destruction and nothing else. The first creature, whenever it saw that something would promote its own survival, *enthusiastically* sought to do it, *feeling elation whenever it succeeded and anxiety whenever it didn't*...In an exactly parallel way, the second creature, whenever it saw that something would promote its own destruction, *enthusiastically* sought to do it, *feeling elation whenever it succeeded and anxiety whenever it didn't*...Now for the intuitive thought behind metaethical constructivism: When the first creature judged that its own survival was good, and the second creature judged that its own survival was bad, the first was not recognizing some normative truth that the second was somehow missing...The constructivist intuition about this thought experiment is these two creatures' normative judgments—about the goodness and badness of their own survival, respectively—*were neither true nor false*. There were instead mere instances of valuing, born of chance alone, not properly called correct or incorrect. *No independent standards existed* (nor do any exist now) to give

any sense to the notion of truth or falsity when it comes to these two creatures' values; their normative judgements merely popped into existence in a universe *which until that moment had been utterly devoid of standards*.⁴⁴ (my emphasis)

Street's thought experiment begins with two thinkers, but what she says about each individual is remarkably similar to James's remarks about the lone thinker, remarks which certainly also apply to the agents in James's two-person world. Among the similarities between James and Street are their conceptions of what it's like to get or fail to obtain the objects of one's values (there being "a profounder, more penetrating taste" to one's most cherished goods when obtained, or "feeling elation" upon obtaining such goods; there being "obstinate regrets" or anxiety when failing to obtain such goods) and their judgment that normative claims in the situations that they consider don't have truth values due to the absence of some independent standard.⁴⁵ They differ, however, in this latter judgment insofar as the lack of a truth value for Street depends on the agents' possessing only one value. This is because, for Street, there isn't yet a standard *internal* to the agents; there are no other non-instrumental values that can serve as a basis for evaluation. As soon as she starts imagining a third sort of creature with two values, talk of truth and falsity begins to make sense:

[This creature], let us suppose, valued *two* things non-instrumentally: its own survival and the survival of its offspring. So take this creature's judgment that "My survival is valuable." The constructivist intuition is that with this third creature, talk of truth and falsity with respect to this judgement at least *starts* to get a foothold, because now a further standard is in place to determine correctness—in particular, in this case, the standard set by its own *other* non-instrumental value. If, for example, the third creature's offspring depend on it for sustenance, then its survival is necessary for theirs, and in this sense the third creature is

correct (as judged from the standpoint of its judgement that its offspring's survival is valuable) to judge that its own survival is valuable.⁴⁶

James's lone thinker clearly is a creature like the third considered by Street, and given that their intuitions about such cases are similar on the whole, it does not seem unwarranted to assume that James would accept a correction from Street along the following lines: James is right to think that absent any standard at all it makes little sense to think of normative claims as being true or false, but as soon as we have creatures with several non-instrumental values, it's clear that even though an independent standard still fails to obtain, there are nevertheless internal standards set by those creatures' values. The standards are relative, sure, but they are still objective in the sense that we can intelligibly disagree about what they require.

James, indeed, does not seem to use the term "objective" in the sense above. He says, for instance, that in a world with the multitude of thinkers that "no one 'objective' truth, but only a multitude of 'subjective' opinions, can be found."⁴⁷ Even so, his use of this terminology in this way should not preclude his acceptance of the constructivist commitment that we've been discussing. After all, when he does appeal to objectivity, he speaks of it as coming to be when some standard is realized from the evaluative point of view of some thinker that has the authority to determine which ideals ought, full stop, to be prioritized: "If one ideal judgment be objectively better than another, that betterness must be made flesh by being lodged concretely in some one's actual perception."⁴⁸ Here, then, is an acknowledgment of an objective standard arising from an evaluative standpoint, though the standard is also necessarily *absolute*. This is certainly one way to understand James's conception of objectivity. Henry Jackman, for instance, reads James as endorsing a conception of objectivity that implies absoluteness. On the moral solitude, Jackman says:

For the moral solitude, then, values can be understood as objective in terms of their being part of the optimal set that

comes from bringing all of their demands into equilibrium. The question becomes, then, how this model of the solitary demander can be made to apply more broadly. In particular, it is hard to see how this simple account of objectivity can be preserved when we move from the moral solitude to a situation with multiple demanders.⁴⁹

A constructivist reading of James will deny that he is committed to such a simple account of objectivity, and instead claims that 1) relative to each individual's evaluative point of view, James will acknowledge corresponding objective standards that arise as a result of prioritizing the values constitutive of those points of view, and that 2) concerning the moral philosopher's own evaluative point of view, the only standard that can satisfy the philosophical impulse is one that, while still internal to some thinker, is *absolutely* objective (which is to say, as we'll see below, objective in the sense that it applies to everyone regardless of the particular values they hold). Such a reading of James is powerful because it is not only consistent across the stages of his world-building thought experiment (i.e., we don't lose objectivity as more thinkers are added, but rather, to use James's own words, we merely lose "ethical unity"), it also helps us to make sense of the jarring shift to talk of the divine at the end of the paper.⁵⁰ That is, James thinks the only way in which we can arrive at an absolute standard is if it arises as a solution to some *shared* moral problem, and, as I'll show, James thinks that positing a divine thinker is part of that problem's solution. Let's turn now to that portion of MPML.

SECTION IV. ON THE POSSIBILITY OF THE PHILOSOPHER'S PROJECT IN A DIVERSE WORLD

As we've seen, the satisfaction of the philosophical impulse requires an absolute moral standard. James does locate such a standard in the final pages of MPML, but the manner in which he does so is puzzling. In this section, I show how a constructivist reading of James, along with the framing of MPML, renders James's remarks on the subject much less puzzling. In short, he arrives at his standard

by suggesting that it's a solution to a problem that arises from every evaluative point of view. That problem is *the problem of moral motivation*, and it arises as part of what it means to value anything at all; from a recognition that in order to see one's values realized, they must be conceived of in a way that sustains a motivation to act.

James's remarks concerning the possibility of satisfying the philosophical impulse come in his answer to the casuistic question. To understand these remarks, first recall that when considering the moral solitude, the philosophical impulse commits the philosopher to acknowledging the authority of the lone thinker's system of ideals. That is, in the moral solitude the philosopher's work would be finished—an absolute standard would be manifested—once the lone thinker had her ideals sorted. To put this in terms that will be useful as we move to discuss more heavily populated worlds, a system is decided in the moral solitude when the lone thinker has determined *the prioritization of her demands*. The notion of “demand” is an important one for James, since insofar as our normative terms take their meaning from the consciousnesses of individuals, we are to understand our obligations as being determined by what is actually demanded of us by others.⁵¹ In a world filled with thinkers the problem for the philosopher can be clearly stated: how do we choose between conflicting prioritizations of demands?

James's answer is, broadly speaking, utilitarian. Ideally, the world would be able to meet every demand in a way that rules out any possibility of conflict (which, as James notes, would be quite a fantastic world), but without such a world the next best option is clear. Concerning the potential impossibility of the philosopher's project, James says:

But do we not already see a perfectly definite path of escape which is open to him just because he is a philosopher, and not the champion of one particular ideal? Since everything which is demanded is by that fact a good, must not the guiding principle for ethical philosopher (since all demands conjointly cannot be satisfied in this poor world) be simply

to satisfy at all times *as many demands as we can*? That act must be the best act, accordingly, which makes for the *best whole*, in the sense of awakening the least sum of dissatisfactions.⁵²

Notice first that this principle of inclusivity is presented, yet again, as an implication of the philosophical impulse. James's suggestion is that any other solution would be a reflection of the philosopher's non-philosophical ideals,⁵³ and it is a unifying feature of ideals that can satisfy the passion to simplify. Further, and in harmony with the view that actual persons carry the authority to determine the proper moral system, James claims that the only way to determine the system most inclusive of demands is to look to the ideals that are actually conventionally prioritized. The advice here is based on the empirical claim that the course of social history has trended toward more inclusive ideals, along with the claim that the inclusivity of a given ideal can only be determined via experience.⁵⁴ Remember, for James, the true moral system will be the one which actually obtains, and so the philosopher must await the results of the world's moral experiments:

So far then, and up to date, the casuistic scale in made for the philosopher already far better than he can ever make it for himself. An experiment of the most searching kind has proved that the laws and usages of the land are what yield the maximum of satisfaction to the thinkers taken all together. The presumption in cases of conflict must always be in favor of the conventionally recognized good. The philosopher must be a conservative, and in the construction of his casuistic scale must put the things most in accordance with the customs of the community on top. And yet if he be a true philosopher he must see that there is nothing final in any actually given equilibrium of human ideals, but that, as our present laws and customs have fought and conquered other past ones, so they will in their turn be overthrown by any newly discovered order which will hush up the

complaints that they still give rise to, without producing others still.⁵⁵

What I hope to have clarified at this point is that for James the satisfaction of the philosopher's aim lies largely in the hands of her fellows. It follows then that the philosopher ought to be interested in anything that may speed up or hinder the process, and this is where James's recognition of a shared moral concern enters the picture.

In the above quotation, James remarks that the moral philosopher will remember that there is nothing final about any given conventionally prioritized set of demands. He clarifies this point about finality in the final section of MPML when he says, "The chief of all reasons why concrete ethics cannot be final is that they have to wait on metaphysical and theological beliefs."⁵⁶ The reason why requires an understanding of the distinction between what James calls the "easy-going" and "strenuous" moods, moods that render us more or less capable of responding to what James takes to be an intrinsic feature of our most cherished ideals. He says:

I said some time back that real ethical relations existed in a purely human world. They 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 most imperative ideals on top*. It is the nature of these goods to be cruel to their rivals. Nothing shall avail when weighed in the balance

against them. They call out all the mercilessness in our disposition, and do not easily forgive us if we are so soft-hearted as to shrink from sacrifice in their behalf. The deepest difference, practically, in the moral life of man is the difference between the easy-going and the strenuous mood. When in the easy-going mood the shrinking from present ill is our ruling consideration. The strenuous mood, on the contrary, makes us quite indifferent to present ill, if only the greater ideal be attained.⁵⁷ (my emphasis)

There are two important claims to examine in this passage. The first is that as valuing creatures, when we are motivated to act, we will notice that our values vary in strength, and that the strongest among them (what James calls *imperatives*) will plague us with regret if they go unsatisfied. This intrinsic feature of our strongest desires, then, is what presents each valuer with their own unique problem: in order to avoid the pain that follows from leaving their most cherished ideals unsatisfied, each must *actually live* according to a prioritization of demands that puts those ideals on top. The second claim has to do with the conditions required for experiencing *the motivation* that gives rise to the problem of prioritization. James seems to suggest that in order for that problem to arise, and so be solved, one must maintain motivation to live by their ideals. In other words, we all face the problem of maintaining the strenuous mood:

The capacity for the strenuous mood probably lies slumbering in every man, but it has more difficulty in some than in others in waking up. It needs the wilder passions to arouse it, the big fears, loves, and indignations; or else the deeply penetrating appeal of some one of the higher fidelities, like justice, truth, or freedom. Strong relief is a necessity of its vision; and a world where all the mountains are brought down and all the valleys are exalted is no congenial place for its habitation. This is why in a solitary thinker this mood might slumber on forever without

waking. His various ideals, known to him to be mere preferences of his own, are too nearly of the same denominational value: he can play fast and loose with them at will.⁵⁸

The problem of moral motivation, as I'm calling it, is one that James thinks arises for all of us, though it's solved by some more readily than others. It's the problem of putting oneself in a state to feel the force of those ideals that you most cherish, thus allowing their demands to move you. The solution to this problem, James thinks, has to do with our perception of our ideals; he suggests above that the lone thinker may never enter the strenuous mood if he fails to see his ideals as anything other than mere preferences. If they are just preferences, then they will all appear to be on a par, and so the ideals that would otherwise be most cherished fail to motivate. The solution to the problem, then, is not to conceive of one's values as mere preferences, but rather as representing how the world should be *full stop*. Since for James an absolute moral standard can only exist if it is held within the consciousness of some thinker, he suggests that the strenuous mood is more easily awakened in those who believe that the standards they abide by are realized in something beyond the natural world, namely, a god who shares the ideals they hold most dear.⁵⁹ The philosopher must wait on metaethical and theological beliefs, then, because they often involve elevating ideals that may or may not be the most inclusive. The ideals backed by the strenuous mood are most likely to prevail, and so the experiment will most probably be dominated by those who believe that their ideals are backed by a god.⁶⁰

However, the philosophical impulse is an ideal like any other, and so we shouldn't be surprised by James's claim that the philosopher herself posit a divine thinker:

It would seem too,—and this is my final conclusion,—that the stable and systematic moral universe for which the ethical philosopher asks is fully possible only in a world where there is a divine thinker with all-enveloping demands.

If such a thinker existed, his way of subordinating the demands to one another would be the finally valid casuistic scale; his claims would be the most appealing; his ideal universe would be the most inclusive realizable whole. If he now exists, then actualized in his thought already must be that ethical philosophy which we seek as the pattern which our own must evermore approach. *In the interests of our own ideal of systematically unified moral truth, therefore, we, as would-be philosophers, must postulate a divine thinker, and pray for the victory of the religious cause.* Meanwhile, exactly what the thought of the infinite thinker may be is hidden from us even were we sure of his existence; so that our postulation of him after all *serves only to let loose in us the strenuous mood.*⁶¹ (my emphasis)

Like any other person with respect to their own ideals, the philosopher is most likely to see her own characteristic ideal realized if she can put herself in the strenuous mood. That ideal, remember, can only be satisfied by an absolute standard determined by a principle of inclusivity. She must, then, posit a divine thinker, presume that the most inclusive prioritization of demands exists in its consciousness, and *have faith* that actual prioritizations will naturally progress to more fully embody that of the divine's (that natural progression, presumably, being what James refers to as "the religious cause"). James's claim concerning god really just boils down to this: with god the philosopher is likely to hold out hope that her ideal will be realized. She will continue to attend to social progress, have faith that it will trend in the proper direction, and contribute in the ways that she can. Otherwise, he would say, she may slip into the easy-going mood, become content with skepticism, and therefore renounce her characteristic ideal.

Now, before closing this section, there are some important points to consider concerning the inclusivity of ideals, religious beliefs, and the relationship between the two. Concerning the inclusivity of ideals, it's important to keep in mind that when James talks about the maximally inclusive standard that exists in god's mind, he is

thinking about how inclusive the ideals are with respect to one another. In other words, he is thinking about inclusivity in terms of maximizing possible ways of living, rather than maximizing the number of actual people who would be satisfied by a given standard.⁶² This, specifically, should alleviate worries one might have about the tyranny of the majority. Next, it's important to note that when James speaks about religious beliefs, he is remarkably neutral about their content. Nowhere in MPML does he presuppose anything more than the existence of a god with a mind and who can make demands. This, admittedly, is in tension with the natural thought that one perk of religious outlooks on life is that they can serve to motivate individuals to act according to more inclusive ideals. For instance, religious institutions that emphasize the importance of charitable giving may be able to leverage the strenuous mood in order to prompt their adherents to give money to those in need rather than spend it on things they want but don't strictly speaking need.

We should remember, however, that religious institutions have also leveraged the strenuous mood to encourage morally abhorrent acts, and so James has good reason to consider the role of the strenuous mood in moral life against the backdrop of a religious outlook that is quite sparse. This will become even clearer when we take some time to unpack the importance that James places on allowing each person to run their own moral experiment, or the idea that there can be no truth in ethics "until the last man has had his experience and said his say."⁶³ To begin, consider the following remarks that James makes about religion in another of his works, *Pragmatism*:

Now it would contradict the very spirit of life to say that our minds must be indifferent and neutral in questions like that of the world's salvation. Anyone who pretends to be neutral writes himself down here as a fool and a sham. We all do wish to minimize the insecurity of the universe; we are and ought to be unhappy when we regard it as exposed to every enemy and open to every life-destroying draft. Nevertheless

there are unhappy men who think the salvation of the world impossible. Theirs is the doctrine of pessimism. Optimism in turn would be the doctrine that thinks the world's salvation inevitable. Midway between the two there stands what may be called the doctrine of meliorism...Meliorism treats salvation as neither inevitable nor impossible. It treats it as a possibility, which becomes more and more of a probability the more numerous the actual conditions of salvation become.⁶⁴

The connection between ethical truth and the necessity that we each be given the opportunity to run our own experiment is an implication of the *meliorism* that James expresses above, and to see this, it's important to first understand what James means by "salvation." He makes it clear that there is no particular religious content built into the word ("You may interpret the word 'salvation' in any way you like...") and draws our attention to how the term will be generally understood from any given evaluative point of view. He says, "Take, for example, any one of us in this room with the ideals which he cherishes, and is willing to live and work for. Every such ideal realized will be one moment in the world's salvation."⁶⁵ To make further sense of this claim, we can return to the world building thought experiment.

Consider, first, the world with the lone thinker. If we understand "salvation" in this world in light of the lone thinker's prioritized set of ideals, then we can say that the thinker brings about the world's salvation whenever she acts according to the standard she has reflectively endorsed. In other words, she will "save" the world if she is capable of bringing her ideals to fruition, and she will fail to save the world if she does not. The same goes for the world with two thinkers, and this is the case even though the world is, as James calls it, a moral dualism. That is, even though each person is capable of living fully independent of the other, and according to their own relative standards, the world, it seems, will remain unsaved as long as some realizable ideals go unrealized. Salvation, in short, depends on each doing their part. Now, these thoughts also have implications

for our own world, which is filled with many thinkers whose lives inevitably bump up against one another. In such a world as our own, our individual “salvations” cannot all be realized at once, and so the question arises, how does one save such a world? Well, first note that if the world *could* accommodate all of our various standards, then to save the world would be for all of us to act in accordance with our own prioritizations of ideals. It would be a world just like the one with two people, only there would be many more individuals with their own responsibilities toward the world’s salvation.⁶⁶ The next best thing is to create a prevailing standard that can accommodate as many ways of living as possible. This, recall, is the standard in the mind of god, whose “ideal universe would be the most inclusive realizable whole.”⁶⁷ And since this standard cannot be known in advance, but only after each is allowed to run their own experiment, we can now really appreciate why James highlights the connection between a religious conception of the world and the strenuous mood independent of any religious content beyond the existence of a god who can make demands. In short, *acquiring the knowledge that the philosopher desires depends on the ability of each to run their own moral experiment*, and so it’s important for each person to be able to access the strenuous mood without necessarily adopting a robustly religious way of life. To make this clear, consider some additional remarks that James makes in *Pragmatism*:

In our world, the wishes of the individual are only one condition [for their realization]. Other individuals are there with other wishes and they must be propitiated first. So Being⁶⁸ grows under all sorts of resistances in this world of many, and, from compromise to compromise, only gets organized gradually into what may be called secondarily rational shape.⁶⁹

The world that has this “secondarily rational shape” is just what James refers to as the best outcome in a world where not all personal standards can thrive, i.e., the world we find ourselves in.⁷⁰ Now, the

idea is that we can only approach this sort of salvation if everyone lives according to the ideals they cherish most, so that the relevant resistances can be felt and the corresponding compromises can be made. And while robustly religious ways of life (i.e., religious ways of living that are informed by particular religious institutions with all of their doctrines) lend legitimate voices to the process, James thinks that we would be mistaken to think that otherwise secular ways of living couldn't take advantage of a rather sparse religious conception of the world, if for no other reason than to bring about the strenuous mood.⁷¹ Remember, one is more likely to prioritize and act according to their ideals when in such a mood, and James's claim is that those actions fuel the process of conflict and compromise that can bring about a prevailing standard that better resembles the maximally inclusive standard the philosopher wishes to know. In order for the philosopher to realize her characteristic ideal, in other words, each person (robustly religious or not) must have their say, and to have one's say is to sort out one's ideals and *act* according to that sorting. The strenuous mood, then, motivates individuals (the moral philosopher included) to prioritize and act; it motivates one to have their say.

Finally, it's important to note that according to James's meliorism, there is no guarantee that each will have their say, and even if each does, we cannot avoid the tragic consequence that some ideals will not be accommodated by the standard that the moral philosopher wishes to know.⁷² It follows, then, that there is no guarantee the philosopher will ever gain the knowledge that she desires. She, like everyone else, must rely on others to do their part:

What we were discussing was the idea of a world growing not integrally but piecemeal by the contributions of its several parts. Take the hypothesis seriously and as a live one. Suppose that the world's author put the case to you before creation, saying: "I am going to make a world not certain to be saved, a world the perfection of which shall be conditional merely, the condition being that each several agent does its own 'level best.' I offer you the chance of

taking part in such a world. Its safety, you see, is unwarranted. It is a real adventure, with real danger, yet it may win through. It is a social scheme of co-operative work genuinely to be done. Will you join the procession? Will you trust yourself and trust the other agents enough to face the risk?"⁷³

And so we can state concisely why James thinks the philosopher should posit a god. Besides providing a mind in which a maximally inclusive standard can reside, the philosopher should see that the satisfaction of her ideal depends on the acts of others, and the strenuous mood effectively drives those actions. She must, then, take seriously any reliable cultivator of that mood (i.e., god), not just because it brings about the mood about in her fellows, but also because it can motivate her to maintain the trust she must have in them. Her project, James thinks, depends on it.

One may still feel puzzled by James's proposals here, but I hope that now this isn't because it's difficult to see where they come from. They are explained by his constructivist intuitions: standards of action must have their source in evaluative points of view, and such standards are understood as solutions to problems that arise from those points of view. As James sees it, from the standpoint of the moral philosopher, there are two sets of evaluative points of view to consider. There is the set of individuals who seek to develop standards that govern their own particular points of view, and there is her own *philosophical* point of view, guided only by the philosophical impulse, which seeks a standard that is absolute. As a constructivist, James thinks that if there is such an absolute standard, it must 1) be derived from an actual evaluative point of view (in particular, the point of view of god) and 2) amount to a solution to some shared moral concern. The shared moral concern that James identifies is the problem of moral motivation, and its solution is a standard that exists within the consciousness of some god. For each individual who believes in some god, they will conceive of that god as sharing their most cherished ideals, thus conceiving of their own prioritization of demands as an absolute standard that can effectively

motivate them to act. For the philosopher, however, the standard realized in god's consciousness will be determined by the principle of inclusivity, since James claims that it's the only principle that the philosopher can appeal to if she hopes to remain completely impartial (impartiality, recall, being a requirement of the philosophical impulse). The upshot of believing in a god for the philosopher is that *she will stay motivated to attend to and help move along moral progress*, since the standard she seeks to know can only be known at the end of moral inquiry; she must have faith that conventionally recognized standards will continue to become more inclusive. If James's assessment of the situation is right, then presumably he believes that the philosopher's turn to faith is epistemically justified; the philosophical impulse is one of her most cherished ideals, and the hypothesis that moral progress will continue toward the most inclusive standard seems from that point of view to be one that she can choose to believe on affective grounds.⁷⁴

SECTION V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I have argued that we understand MPML in light of James's views concerning the moral philosopher's characteristic impulse. The moral philosopher is characterized by an impulse to systematize, and James thinks that she should go about her project aware of this impulse and the limits it places on her ability to provide solutions that aim at an understanding of the world. An implication of this self-aware approach to moral theory, James thinks, is the adoption of a metaethical picture that is recognizably constructivist. That is, he thinks if the philosopher takes her ideal seriously, then she will focus on identifying relevant evaluative points of view, the problems that arise from them, and attempt to show how some objective standards emerge as solutions to those problems. In addition, I've argued that James's constructivist intuitions, along with the framing of MPML, help us make sense of James's puzzling shift to talk of the divine at the end of MPML. James identifies a moral concern that we all share, which I call the problem of moral motivation, and the philosopher's solution to that problem is to posit

a god who holds in their consciousness a maximally inclusive moral standard. This is because a belief in a god awakens in individuals what James calls the “strenuous mood,” or a state in which one is motivated to live by their ideals. It follows from this, first, that the progress toward the true moral system will depend on the ideals backed by such a mood (because James thinks that they are more likely to prevail), and second, that the philosopher herself will be aided in the satisfaction of her own ideal by the strenuous mood. The philosopher, further, must have faith that the conventionally recognized ideals will progress toward manifesting the standard held in god’s consciousness, since the standard she seeks can only be known at the end of moral inquiry, and moral inquiry is a *shared* endeavor.

In closing, we should briefly consider whether or not James’s particular brand of constructivism has any advantages over compelling alternatives. For now, primarily for the sake of space, I will set aside Kantian accounts, and compare James’s views only with Street’s position, since it is well-recognized Humean account. In the work we’ve examined by Street thus far, she focuses on explaining how relative standards arise from within particular evaluative points of view, and I’ve tried to argue that James should more or less be on board with her picture. The only real significant point of comparison, then, would come through an examination of what each thinker takes to be the shared moral concern from which an absolutely objective standard might arise. Luckily, in later work, Street does suggest a problem that is faced by every valuer, which she calls the *problem of attachment and loss*. Here’s her description of the problem:

[The] problem that is necessarily built into the standpoint of any valuer is the problem of a gap, or the potential for a gap, between the world as it as a matter of fact is and the world as the valuer thinks it would be good or desirable for the world to be...the intuitive idea being that to be a valuer is, among other things, to be a being who is attached to the world’s being one way rather than another. To be valuer, in

other words, is to be a being from whom there is always at least a potential divergence between how things are and how one values their being, such that one is subject to loss, or at least the ever-present threat of loss.⁷⁵

An important feature of this problem is that Street expects it will give rise to a purely secular standard, which she calls “The Holy Grail” of secular metaethics.⁷⁶ The holy grail, in other words, would be a standard that can vindicate the strong pre-theoretical intuition many have that morality is both absolute and objective *without* carrying the metaphysical baggage associated with other standards that effectively satisfy the intuition—namely, standards backed by a supernatural entity, or by non-natural moral properties. This is in stark contrast to James, who suggests that the only solution to the problem that he identifies involves positing a god. The difference between them, then, can be concisely stated in the following way: James believes that if the philosopher wants an absolutely objective standard, she can only get it through belief in a god.

I can’t hope to adequately adjudicate between the problems presented by James and Street in the space remaining, but there are a few things worth pointing out. The first is that the problem of motivation seems to be prior to the problem of attachment and loss. That is, if James is right, then it seems as though the problem of attachment and loss cannot arise for a person unless she first finds herself in the mood to live by her ideals. Really seeing, and later attempting to bridge, the gap that Street recognizes requires that an agent be properly motivated; she must be sensitive to the demands of her most cherished ideals so that they may move her to bring about the world that she values. The second is to question whether Street’s proposed problem can yield the sort of solution she hopes for. The solution she suggests, albeit only briefly, is grounded in the religious tradition of Buddhism, and she hopes that the insights she takes from that tradition can be given a secular analytic expression. Those insights include the idea of a “maximally thin, universal point of view” that any one of us can occupy under the proper conditions.⁷⁷ Street suggests that the problem of attachment and loss

is solved by taking up this point of view because it's a problem that cannot coherently arise from that point of view. That is, to take up that point of view is to detach oneself from one's particular ideals by recognizing the inherent similarities between oneself and all other valuers: "This point of view sees itself everywhere and is necessarily compassionate with the lived experience of every being."⁷⁸ To detach oneself in this way is to no longer be concerned with loss.

Whether these insights can truly be given a secular expression remains to be seen, and Street is clear that these are only preliminary thoughts. What's worth highlighting, however, is that her solution seems to be sensitive to the philosophical impulse's requirements of impartiality and inclusivity. That both James and Street offer solutions to their proposed problems that embody these commitments—and that they do so by drawing inspiration from religious traditions—is notable, since if James's problem is truly prior to Street's, and his proposed solution is compelling, then the scales seem tipped toward his brand of constructivism. But again, my goal in this paper has not been to vindicate James's views. Rather, what I have done is make a case for a constructivist reading of James, and if I'm right, then his view will inherit many of the benefits and drawbacks of constructivist positions in general. The full project of determining whether his particular brand of constructivism is compelling (both in comparison to other constructivisms, and to other metaethical views) is a task for another paper.

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NOTES

¹ James, *The Will to Believe*, 141.

² James, *The Will to Believe*, 57.

³ James, *The Will to Believe*, 59.

⁴ James, *The Will to Believe*, 59.

⁵ James, *The Will to Believe*, 62.

⁶ James, *The Will to Believe*, 61.

⁷ James, *The Will to Believe*, 59.

⁸ James, *Talks to Teachers*, 149.

⁹ James, *The Will to Believe*, 142.

¹⁰ See Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice*, Korsgaard’s *The Sources of Normativity and Self-Constitution*, and Street’s “Constructivism about Reasons,” “What is Constructivism in Ethics and Metaethics?” and “Constructivism in Ethics and the Problem of Attachment and Loss.” Encyclopedia entries are also helpful (e.g., Bagnoli’s “Constructivism in Metaethics”), but I’ve found that they often fail to explore many of the important details to be found in the above sources. In particular, secondary sources usually fail to place enough emphasis on how constructivists couch their views in accounts of other kinds. Korsgaard’s constructivism, for instance, arises out of an account of what makes some event a human action (i.e., what’s constitutive of willing), and Street’s is grounded in an account of what is constitutive of judging, or taking something to be a reason. I also avoid directly saying much about these grounding accounts, but this is because my goal isn’t to work out the finer details of constructivist views; it’s to show that several prominent features of constructivist accounts appear in MPML.

¹¹ “Among the essential features of this situation is that no one knows his place in society, his class position or social status, nor does any one know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets

and abilities, his intelligence, strength, and the like. I shall even assume that the parties do not know their conceptions of the good or their special psychological propensities. The principles of justice are chosen behind a veil of ignorance.” See Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 11.

¹² This, to be sure, is a controversial claim. But still, it’s important because it shows us that even for Rawls, constructivism seems to be more about what follows from our actual commitments, and not necessarily what results from carrying out a certain procedure.

¹³ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 16-19.

¹⁴ Street, “What Is Constructivism in Ethics and Metaethics?; “Constructivism in Ethics and the Problem of Attachment and Loss.”

¹⁵ Street, “Constructivism in Ethics and the Problem of Attachment and Loss.”

¹⁶ Again, Korsgaard’s view is ultimately grounded in an account of what makes some event a human action.

¹⁷ From Korsgaard’s *Self-Constitution*, 21. “Such identities are the sources of our reasons, but of course the idea is not just that we decide which ones we want and conform to them. We have many particular practical identities and so we also face the task of uniting them into a coherent whole.”

¹⁸ Street, “Constructivism about Reasons,” 223.

¹⁹ To use Street’s terminology, the characterization must be “purely formal.”

²⁰ James, *The Will to Believe*, 141.

²¹ Peirce, *CP* 6, 485.

²² Misak, *The American Pragmatists*, 71.

²³ James, *The Meaning of Truth*, 4.

²⁴ Misak, *The American Pragmatists*, 100.

²⁵ Here is Misak in *Truth, Morality, and Politics* on the relationship between truth, morality, and the sciences: “If you like, the task before us is to say how objectivity and subjectivity can both be characteristic of our judgments. We are pulled to think that there is truth and objectivity, even if what is objectively true—belief—is a product of our deliberation and investigation. Thus, on

the meta-ethical view of pragmatism, the semantic issue of whether ethical discourse is truth-apt becomes an epistemological issue about whether we can have knowledge in ethics. The question to be answered is whether our ethical beliefs have the same sorts of legitimate aspirations as our beliefs in science, mathematics, and discourse about ordinary, middle-sized objects” (50). Misak goes on to argue how a pragmatic conception of truth accomplishes this task.

²⁶ We can understand ideals generally as attitudes with a world-to-mind direction of fit. That is, ideals, like values or desires, are attitudes that are satisfied (i.e., fulfilled) when the world *fits* them. My desire for coffee, for instance, is satisfied when the world conforms to it; when the world is such that I have coffee. This is in contrast to belief, which is a sort of attitude that is satisfied (i.e., true) when it conforms to the world. See Jackman, “William James on Moral Philosophy and its Regulative Ideals,” 4. I will often use the terms “ideal” and “value” interchangeably.

²⁷ James, *The Will to Believe*, 142.

²⁸ Street, “What is Constructivism in Ethics and Metaethics?” 366-367.

²⁹ James, *The Will to Believe*, 143.

³⁰ James, *The Will to Believe*, 144.

³¹ He mentions this both in MPML, 144, and in *The Principles of Psychology*, 1267-1268.

³² James, *The Will to Believe*, 145.

³³ James, *The Will to Believe*, 148.

³⁴ I think it’s worth drawing attention to the similarities between James’s remarks on this tendency, and the Rawlsian observation that in political debates it is counterproductive to adopt standards of objectivity that suppose mind-independent moral truths. Both James and Rawls believe that we must avoid such standards for practical reasons, though on the face of it those reasons differ. For Rawls, the need to avoid delving into a mind-independent moral order has do with the structure of modern democratic societies; that is, given their structure, the surest way forward to agreement on

principles of justice in a democratic society avoids taking a stand on “deep” philosophical questions:

To secure this agreement, we try, so far as we can, to avoid disputed philosophical, as well as disputed moral and religious, questions. We do this not because these questions are unimportant or regarded with indifference, but because we think them too important and recognize that there is no way to resolve them politically. The only alternative to a principle of toleration is the autocratic use of state power. Thus, justice as fairness deliberately stays on the surface, philosophically speaking. (Rawls, “Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical,” 230)

James also thinks that we should avoid talk of a mind-independent moral order for practical reasons, but these reasons are connected to the philosopher’s desire for a moral system. Thus, one way to conceive of the relationship between James and Rawls has to do with the scope of constructivist solutions to moral problems. Rawls is careful to limit the scope of his constructivism to political questions, while James, if we can consider him a constructivist, is aiming at a broader sort of constructivism. (Street suggests we call a constructivism like Rawls’s *restricted*, insofar as his view is limited to establishing principles of justice in a manner that assumes certain normative commitments. James, on the other hand, seems to address a practical problem that can lead to what Street calls a *thoroughgoing*, or *metaethical* constructivism. See Street, “What is Constructivism in Ethics and Metaethics?,” 367-369). There’s much more to say about this, but for now it suffices to point out that we see in James a call for the same sort of metaphysical modesty that we observe in Rawls, a well-known constructivist. Both are concerned with a practical problem, and both believe that supposing a form of robust realism prevents us from effectivity solving it.

³⁵ James, *The Will to Believe*, 145-146.

³⁶ James, *The Will to Believe*, 146.

³⁷ This is further reinforced by remarks that pop up in James's answer to the casuistic question, where he says, "The various ideals [to be found in the world] have no common character apart from the fact that they are ideals. No single abstract principle can be so used as to yield to the philosopher anything like a scientifically accurate and genuinely useful casuistic scale" (*The Will to Believe*, 153).

³⁸ James, *The Will to Believe*, 146.

³⁹ Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*.

⁴⁰ Street, "Constructivism about Reasons," 224.

⁴¹ Street, "Constructivism about Reasons," 224-225.

⁴² Street has a lot to say about how some of our normative judgments set standards for other normative judgments; in particular, about how to determine which judgments should be evaluated and which should ground those evaluations.

⁴³ James, *The Will to Believe*, 146.

⁴⁴ Street, "Constructivism about Reasons," 221-222.

⁴⁵ James, *The Will to Believe*, 146; Street, "Constructivism about Reasons," 221-222.

⁴⁶ Street, "Constructivism about Reasons," 223.

⁴⁷ James, *The Will to Believe*, 147.

⁴⁸ James, *The Will to Believe*, 147.

⁴⁹ Jackman, "William James on Moral Philosophy and its Regulative Ideals," 4-5.

⁵⁰ James, *The Will to Believe*, 146.

⁵¹ James's definition of obligation: "But the moment we take a steady look at the question, *we see not only that without a claim actually made by some concrete person there can be no obligation, but that there is some obligation where there is a claim.* Claim and obligation are, in fact, coextensive terms; they cover each other exactly" (MPML, 148).

⁵² James, *The Will to Believe*, 155.

⁵³ This is supported by James's talk of past philosophers' "closet-solutions" in relation to the world's experiments with elevating particular ideals: "These experiments are to be judged, not *a priori*, but by actually finding, after the fact of their making, how much

more outcry or how much appeasement comes about. What closet-solutions can possibly anticipate the result of trials made on such a scale? Or what can any superficial theorist's judgment be worth, in a world where every one of hundreds of ideals has its special champion already provided in the shape of some genius expressly born to feel it, and to fight to death [on] its behalf? The pure philosopher can only follow the windings of the spectacle, confident that the line of least resistance will always be towards the richer and the more inclusive arrangement" (MPML, 157), and in passages like the following, where James reflects on the potential tyranny of philosophical solutions over our moral lives: "As a militant, fighting free-handed that the good to which he is sensible may not be submerged and lost from out of life, the philosopher, like every other human being, is in a natural position. But think of Zeno and of Epicurus, think of Calvin and of Paley, think of Kant and Schopenhauer, of Herbert Spencer and John Henry Newman, no longer as one-sided champions of special ideals, but as schoolmasters deciding what all must think,—and what more grotesque topic could a satirist wish for on which to exercise his pen?" (MPML, 154-155).

⁵⁴ "On the whole, then, we must conclude that no philosophy of ethics is possible in the old-fashioned sense of the term. Everywhere the ethical philosopher must wait on facts. The thinkers who create the ideals come he knows not whence, their sensibilities are evolved he knows not how; and the question as to which of two conflicting ideals will give the best universe then and there, can be answered by him only through the aid of the experience of other men" (*The Will to Believe*, 158).

⁵⁵ James, *The Will to Believe*, 156.

⁵⁶ James, *The Will to Believe*, 159.

⁵⁷ James, *The Will to Believe*, 159-160.

⁵⁸ James, *The Will to Believe*, 160.

⁵⁹ Slater, in "Ethical Naturalism and Religious Belief," writes that James's recognition of the problem of moral motivation, and its divine solution, is one of the most compelling features of MPML.

⁶⁰ “All through history, in the periodical conflicts of puritanism with the don’t-care temper, we see the antagonism of the strenuous and genial moods, and the contrast between the ethics of infinite and mysterious obligation from on high, and the satisfaction of merely finite need...Every sort of energy and endurance, of courage and capacity for handling life’s evils, is set free in those who have religious faith. For this reason the strenuous type of character will on the battle-field of human history always outwear the easy-going-type, and religion will drive irreligion to the wall” (James, *The Will to Believe*, 161).

⁶¹ James, *The Will to Believe*, 161.

⁶² Recall above his remarks concerning the rather fantastic world, where somehow all of us would be capable of pursuing our ideals without needing to worry about interfering with one another.

⁶³ James, *The Will to Believe*, 141.

⁶⁴ James, *Pragmatism*, 137.

⁶⁵ James, *Pragmatism*, 137.

⁶⁶ Such a world, again, would be quite fantastic. It would be a world where we could somehow all coexist without needing to compromise any of the values that we hold as a result of needing to accommodate others.

⁶⁷ James, *The Will to Believe*, 161.

⁶⁸ In this context, we can understand the growth of “Being” as the development of an actually prevailing standard that more closely resembles the maximally inclusive standard in god’s mind.

⁶⁹ James, *Pragmatism*, 139.

⁷⁰ He speaks in terms of secondary “rationality” here in order to contrast his view with those who are inclined to accept the existence of an Absolute. If there was an Absolute, then the world would be fully rational insofar as every ideal would be realized (since all is subsumed in the Absolute, and the world is just as the Absolute wishes it to be).

⁷¹ “The capacity of the strenuous mood lies so deep down among our natural human possibilities that even if there were no metaphysical or traditional grounds for believing in a God, men would postulate one simply as a pretext for living hard, and getting

out of the game of existence its keenest possibilities of zest.”
(James, *The Will to Believe*, 161).

⁷² “Some part of the ideal must be butchered, and [the philosopher] needs to know which part. It is a tragic situation, and no mere speculative conundrum, with which he has to deal” (*The Will to Believe*, 154).

⁷³ James, *Pragmatism*, 139.

⁷⁴ See *The Will to Believe*.

⁷⁵ Street, “Constructivism in Ethics and the Problem of Attachment and Loss,” 180.

⁷⁶ Street, “Constructivism in Ethics and the Problem of Attachment and Loss,” 165.

⁷⁷ Street suggests mindfulness meditation as the main means by which to get there.

⁷⁸ Street, “Constructivism in Ethics and the Problem of Attachment and Loss,” 186-187.

OVERVIEW OF *WILLIAM JAMES*
AND THE MORAL LIFE:
RESPONSIBLE SELF-FASHIONING



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My book argues that “responsible self-fashioning” is the framework that unifies James’s ethical writings. The “self-fashioning” part of this account is contained in James’s defense of what he calls a “significant life,” which requires the strenuous pursuit of ideals. I argue that James offers ethical constraints on self-fashioning, hence the “responsible” part of the view. Building on value pluralism these ethical constraints involve tolerance, a commitment to creating an inclusive moral order, and ongoing personal efforts to overcome moral blindness. I claim that the defense and elaboration of responsible self-fashioning is articulated by James via the distinct, but related, perspectives of the existential and moral philosophers. Since, for James, philosophies always express total life outlooks grounded in temperaments, I emphasize these as two distinct types of philosophers’ perspectives who conduct two kinds of moral inquiry. The social moral philosopher’s inquiry is guided by the quest to create an inclusive moral order in which value conflict is addressed, in part, through efforts to expand sympathetic concern for the ideals of others. The existential moral philosopher’s inquiry helps individuals adopt hope grounding beliefs that bolster meaning giving commitments, especially in the face of evil and suffering. These perspectives balance each other. The social moral philosopher’s commitment to tolerance and value pluralism recommends a nondogmatic approach towards the meaning giving commitments of others with whom one does not share beliefs.

Focusing on James’s “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” Chapter One sets out the social moral philosopher’s perspective which aims to articulate the basic regulative assumptions on moral inquiry. Rejecting the moral skeptic’s demand for a demonstration that moral agents ought to care about others, James’s moral philosophy begins with the assumption that people have limited sympathy for like-minded others. The goal of moral inquiry is to use a wide range of disciplinary resources—social science, psychology, literature, art—to overcome moral blindness to others in order to build inclusive, democratic communities.

Some of James's ethical writings treat existential topics such as how to forge a significant life in a world where traditional meaning-giving religious or metaphysical beliefs have fallen into doubt. Chapter Two examines James's account of significant living, which involves two integrated elements: commitment to ideals and strenuous actions. I argue that significant living is a major element of responsible self-fashioning, but it does not constitute its entirety because lives may be significant yet morally unresponsive to others.

Chapter Three examines James's account of the moral self which nicely balances social and biological aspects. The social account is developed in works like the *Principles of Psychology* and *Varieties of Religious Experience*. For James, a self's identity depends on its ability to take the point of view of real or imagined others. This relational self is contingent and always in flux. While the self is socially shaped, James's Darwinian naturalism also acknowledges certain innate, "brain-born" structures that give rise to moral attitudes.¹ James argues that these structures help to explain bold moral innovations and strong moral commitment in the face of social resistance. Since the brain-born moral attitudes that James discusses clearly have deontological content, I argue that it is best not to interpret James's normative ethics as utilitarian or purely consequentialist. His theory is better read as a moral pluralism, parsing a variety of qualitatively distinct values, some of which have deontic content.

The connection between James's will to believe doctrine and his ethics is the subject of Chapter Four. James's account of rationality acknowledges a plurality of theoretical and practical values that reflect basic human interests in ordering and shaping the world. Different individuals with different temperaments will adopt different metaphysical or religious beliefs that satisfy these aspirations. Since the truth values of the metaphysical beliefs in question are not readily determinable, James argues that it is permissible to appeal to aesthetic, practical, and moral considerations in order to decide whether to adopt them. It appears that James is arguing that the veracity of beliefs is a function of whether they provide satisfactions to believers. I claim that James

does not adopt that stance, but rather argues that when the evidence cannot settle the truth of a belief, we are permitted to adopt it for the sake of its benefits to test its truth. The issues that motivate consideration of such metaphysical beliefs are not idle intellectual matters. James challenges his audience to examine how well their metaphysical beliefs respond to the reality of evil and suffering.

The book concludes by demonstrating the power of James's ethics by extending it to the cases of cognitively disabled humans and nonhuman animals. I argue that Jamesian moral agents have strong obligations to nonrational conscious subjects given their commitment to create a more inclusive order that accommodates diverse demands. It also enjoins moral agents to overcome moral blindness to alien perspectives. Using the framework developed throughout the book, I sketch a pragmatist account of wellbeing in terms of an individual's ability to exercise its unique capacities for rich and valuable experiences. Pragmatic individualism holds that it is an individual's actual capacities and not membership in some particular group that explain its wellbeing. Because the capacities and the goals that contribute to individual wellbeing are socially shared this individualism is not atomistic. Pragmatic individualism acknowledges the distinctive ways that individuals matter depending on their unique relational circumstances.

NOTES

¹ James thinks some moral attitudes are on par with other perceptions, feelings, and judgments that are arguably caused by innate features of the brain that have evolved through natural selection. These include matters of aesthetics and logic. He discusses these innate structures in the chapter "Necessary Truths" in the *Principles of Psychology*.

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



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Todd 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.

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



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In an apt phrase, Todd Lekan says that “philosophical writing should display rather than erase traces of the author.”¹ It is in this spirit that I write this analysis of *William James and the Moral Life: Responsible Self-Fashioning*. Lekan’s work not only provides a plausible interpretation of moral philosophy in the spirit of James, but it also prompts us to interact with this philosophy by considering various examples of contemporary problematic situations. The goal of the moral philosopher, as Lekan shows, is not to be moral, but rather to facilitate healthy moral deliberation. “The social moral philosopher,” says Lekan, “seeks to create an inclusive moral order through expansion of sympathetic concern among those committed to different ideals.”² In this sense Lekan’s work is a reflection of the idea of radical inclusivity that is becoming increasingly common.

I will argue that this inclusive moral order is more complicated than we might imagine, and the results of this kind of moral deliberation can be surprising and perhaps unnerving. Nonetheless, I think this is appropriate for the radical nature of James’s philosophy. I proceed by bringing up three contemporary examples where Lekan’s elaboration of James’s moral philosophy would produce, as I see it, results that are both philosophically interesting and morally helpful in the process of social/political deliberation. The first example is Lekan’s and the last two are mine, displaying my own constitutional bias for promoting radical and/or controversial positions.

ANIMALS AND PEOPLE WITH COGNITIVE DISABILITIES

A vegetarian and animal-ethics philosopher, Lekan presents a controversy arising from consideration of the argument regarding cognitively disabled humans and animals. “With quite different aims than oppressive denigration,” says Lekan, “animal ethics philosophers compare cognitively disabled humans to animals.” They do this “to show that animals should be accorded greater moral

value.” Lekan notes that the use of the cognitively disabled in animal rights arguments “has troubled disability advocates who argue that, however well intentioned, animal advocates are bolstering the very same sorts of prejudices that have marginalized the cognitively disabled.”³

Lekan’s mediation of this dispute is admirable, and, as a vegetarian, I admire his patience in engaging with it. Eva Kittay, for example, has what Lekan refers to as a “visceral” reaction to comparisons of cognitively disabled people with animals, due in large part to being the mother of a cognitively disabled person.⁴ For example, when an animal ethics philosopher says, as Lekan does, that “some cognitively disabled humans are less self-conscious and cognitively/emotionally developed than adult baboons,” Kittay might be offended at the comparison.⁵ Personally, I do not share that offense, and would imagine that if I did have a cognitively/emotionally underdeveloped child I would not see a problem in using them in a thought experiment. As Lekan notes, other critics go so far as to say that “the disabled are being exploited insofar as they are used in arguments against speciesism, yet reap no benefits from their philosophical labor.”⁶ As a communist sympathizer, I myself might have a visceral reaction to what I perceive as a misuse of the word “labor,” but I should instead consider the larger point, namely that there might be something wrong with using the cognitively disabled in arguments that benefit other species. And yet it is difficult to see how a philosopher would proceed without making such comparisons. Lekan, for example, says that “a turtle’s life might have significance for us, but not to itself. To be sure, it cares about what happens to it, and it might make inferences about perilous and desirable outcomes in its environment.” But, he continues, in a manner that might be taken also to refer to people with severe mental disabilities, the turtle “does not reflectively derive meaning from its life.”⁷

But my imagination is limited. I am a father rather than a mother, and not part of any historically marginalized group. For me, the subject is summed up rationally with Lekan’s statement that “the worry that animal rights advocates even unintentionally denigrate

the cognitively disabled by comparing them to nonhuman animals depends on the prior denigration of nonhuman animals.”⁸ The objection is just a form of speciesism. Lekan’s point, however, is that Kittay is introducing the concept of relationships “as a corrective to the moral blindness of philosophers who accept the individual moral properties assumption upon which the argument from marginal cases relies.”⁹ It is here that Lekan, as a responsible moral philosopher, finds value in the claim.

It is possible that animals and disabled people are both valued. Lekan proposes two interesting and useful terms here: centripetal sympathy, which involves “apprehending the view of others with whom one shares ideals;” and centrifugal sympathy, which works to “delineate the limits of the self through contrast.”¹⁰ If we have to choose between experimenting on one or the other, however, it becomes more complicated. The relationship of humans to other humans is set against the relationship of humans to animals, and, personally, I find it difficult to argue on behalf of any relationship between humans and animals that can be more important than a relationship between humans and humans. The moral philosopher, however, should look for a way of maximizing desires here, and the answer might be found in considering how we got to the point of needing such experiments to begin with. Do we overvalue human longevity? For example, it would be difficult but not impossible to find people whose desire is that human beings—including members of their family and they themselves—do not wish to prolong life as much as they do. Or do we look for medical solutions to environmental problems that are more difficult to solve? Perhaps the voices of pharmaceutical companies are too large and the voices of nutritionists are too small. This is why I think Lekan’s work is best understood as implying that the moral philosopher does best when working with competing desires to synthesize views, producing radical and creative answers, rather than simply listening to claims, acknowledging the desires behind them, and making merely compromising solutions.

U.S. SCHOOL SHOOTINGS

Yet if we are to take James, and Lekan's improvement of James seriously, we have to consider the demands of everyone. And these demands are not impersonal ideas, but are almost like personal wills, that is, spirits. Lekan's term for this is very apt: they are "irreducibly second-person obligations."¹¹ Accordingly, I want to argue that Lekan's Demand Obligation Thesis (DOT) requires that we see the good spiritedness in everyone, including school shooters, who are nevertheless beings from whom goods originate, according to Lekan's Sentiogenic Thesis (ST).

If—as Lekan believes, from his responsible reading of James—the Essence of Good (EG) is to satisfy demands, we fail in the good if we immediately dismiss demands that are uncomfortable, even profoundly so. Lekan delineates the situation by referring, for example, to his Regulatory Assumption-2, which says that the "plurality of values gives rise to potential conflicts." One type of conflict results from a social structure's limited resources and time which make it impossible to fully accommodate every ideal. Another type of conflict arises when moral ideals build rejection of other ideals into their very contents, which is tantamount to judging those alternative ideals to be "evil" or "false."¹²

I am not entirely convinced of the reality of the first conflict, since it depends on the idea that moral deliberation has to be considered as restricted by limited resources. Although we might—very wisely—set a time limit on a faculty meeting, we do not have to set a limit on sympathy.

However, the second of these conflicts is of greater interest here. According to the DOT, we are obligated to see each demand as a considerable thing. James admits, as what perhaps might be seen as a throwaway line, that "some desires, truly enough, are small desires; they are put forward by insignificant persons, and we customarily make light of the obligations which they bring." James continues by saying that nevertheless "the fact that such personal demands as these impose small obligations does not keep the largest obligations from being personal demands."¹³ His point is that both small and large demands are fundamentally personal in nature, and

not merely something that comes through access to an objective reality. But the assumption seems to be that some people are insignificant a priori.

In the case of school shootings, there is a considerably large group of people who believe school shootings are bad and should not happen. This group is quite large, and comprises everyone except the shooters. Most notably, this includes those who favor stricter gun laws as well as those who oppose stricter gun control. Now in the moral philosopher's role as facilitator in the maximization of desires, they should be welcoming of the proposal that, for example, schools be made into places with one heavily restricted entrance. This would do a lot toward preventing the possibility of a shooting (at least one within the school) while not negating the desires of those who really want to have their guns. This includes the school shooters themselves, for whom the only desire that is thwarted is the desire to kill students, a desire which is, according to James, something that is still of real value in the universe. If so, however, its value is that of allowing us to see how much we have slipped into a culture of violence, and one not just limited to violence within the country, but rather to the international violence of the U.S. military. The desire of the shooter, which is an eminently authentic desire in that it is expressed in action despite great risk, is in this sense a small but not insignificant desire. Still, as Lekan notes, "given a finite life, some values will have to be sacrificed."¹⁴

It is here that we might invoke James's thought experiment involving the lonely soul tortured on the edge of the universe for the genuine good of all. Lekan says, uncontroversially, that James "assumes most of us who contemplate this example will experience revulsion or disgust," not, to be sure, to the extent that we would necessarily stop the torture.¹⁵ To me this indicates a conflict we have with our brain-born compulsion to sacrifice. In the case of the school shooter, however, we have an interestingly similar situation, but inverted. We like, it seems to me, the idea of sacrificing the shooter. How genuine, after all, is our hatred of the shooter, when so many enjoy shooting people in video games? Is not there some kind of

sick jealousy for the shooter? Do people themselves feel the urge to kill whenever they see someone perform in reality what they have assured themselves is completely morally permissible virtually?

Now there will possibly arise another desire, perhaps to some extent shared by all non-school shooters. This is the desire not to live in a world in which schools, to a large extent, are treated like prisons. And there is also a certain type of radical who tolerates the idea of schools functioning like prisons because they want problematic situations not so much adjusted to, but rather drawn out to their revolutionary *reductio ad absurdum*. When we see that our children are on permanent lockdown, we might then see that the solution is not just in the liberal's common-sense gun legislation, but in the radical's desire to dismantle the military-industrial complex, which, more than anything else, sets a tone of violence both within and outside of the United States.

THE WAR IN UKRAINE

Lekan's *William James and the Moral Life: Responsible Self-Fashioning* lacks only an even more detailed engagement with contemporary issues. It includes insights that help us understand, for example, human-animal and human-human relationships in more than merely ethical terms, but also in terms of existential meaning. I would like to include, however, a pressing issue that is political more than personal, and has to do with international relationships, that is, relationships among countries. The question here is not so much whether one can muster the existential strength to fight against the evils of the world, but first, to have the moral courage to investigate whether that which we consider evil is truly so.

In the case of the war in Ukraine, for example, there seems to be little consideration of all possible perspectives, and especially neglected among these is that of Russia and Vladimir Putin. When such considerations arise, there seems to be an immediate attempt to minimize the demands of Russia or Putin, or worse, imagine that they are based on evil desires. Lekan is aware of this possibility, and writes that "gross distortions of ideals may be just as bad or even worse than sheer ignorance of another's eager devotion to an ideal."

He then gives the example of colonizers demonizing native religion rather than merely denying that it is religion.¹⁶ Something similar applies to politics. Gross distortions of ideals lead to the assumption among many in the United States and Western Europe that Putin is either irrational or evil. Just before the war began, former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton suggested on U.S. media outlet MSNBC that some of Putin's aides should get "close enough" to him and see his increasingly "erratic behavior" and then "do something about it." Yet whatever one thinks of Putin and Russia, they are not necessarily acting in a way that is objectively irrational, but only are acting in a way to which many in the United States, whether intentionally or not, are blind. The seeming implication—that assassination was the only option—belies a lack of moral consideration.¹⁷

Perhaps more disappointing was the belief that the whole world is against Putin. Indeed a litany of European countries expressed their opposition to Russia. But the liberal democracies of Western Europe are not the whole world. The voices of Africa, Asia, and South America were considered simply too insignificant to be taken seriously. The fact that these countries are largely neutral about the war is itself a voice to be considered. It could be that they are waiting and hoping for a world with the kind of "tolerant pluralism" that Lekan sees James committed to.¹⁸ The idea that this war, for better or worse, could be done in the name of creating what Russian apologists call a multipolar world, is not readily available for the consideration of a U.S. citizen. There are indeed strenuous ideals in other parts of the world, and responsible self-fashioning—whether of individuals or of countries—is a requirement for us all.

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NOTES

¹ Todd Lekan, *William James and the Moral Life: Responsible Self-Fashioning*, 1.

² Lekan, *Williams James*, 2.

³ Lekan, *William James*, 115.

⁴ Lekan, *William James*, 116.

⁵ Lekan, *William James*, 117.

⁶ Lekan, *William James*, 120.

⁷ Lekan, *William James*, 49.

⁸ Lekan, *William James*, 121.

⁹ Lekan, *William James*, 120.

¹⁰ Lekan, *William James*, 58.

¹¹ Lekan, *William James*, 21.

¹² Lekan, *William James*, 13.

¹³ William James, *The Will to Believe*, 195.

¹⁴ Lekan, *William James*, 95.

¹⁵ Lekan, *William James*, 68.

¹⁶ Lekan, *William James*, 59.

¹⁷ “They Need to Stop Him: Clinton Calls of Putin Aides to Act for the Good of Russia.” MSNBC. March 1, 2022. <https://www.msnbc.com/rachel-maddow/watch/-they-need-to-stop-him-clinton-calls-on-putin-aides-to-act-for-the-good-of-russia-134283845527>.

¹⁸ Lekan, *William James*, 82.

RESPONSE TO TADD RUETENIK AND JOHN CAPPS



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RESPONSE TO CAPPS

I am grateful for John Capps's and Tadd Ruetenik's responses to my book. They have given me pause to think through some further consequences of James's ethics, particularly in connection to his Inclusivity Ideal. Both philosophers raise questions about the viability and interpretation of this ideal.

Let's start with Capps's analysis. He considers a possible serious omission in James's ethics connected to what I call the "Inclusivity Ideal." The Inclusivity Ideal says two things:

1. We are morally obligated to satisfy as many demands as possible.
2. Among the available ideals we might choose, we are morally obligated to adopt ideals whose realization does not undermine the ideals held by others.

In the book I argue for a broad reading whereby moral agents must be responsive to the desires of sentient beings (particularly non-rational beings) as well as the demands that rational beings make for others to respect their commitments to the first-order ideals that give their lives significance. I regard the wide scope of James's Inclusivity Ideal as a virtue of this account. The Inclusivity Ideal, as I understand it, is a second-order ideal that governs moral agents' pursuits of their first-order ideals. In brief, this second-order ideal constrains moral agents in two ways. First, they are obligated to satisfy as many demands as possible. Second, one's first-order ideals must not undermine others' ideals. Capps's objection has two related parts that apply to the second feature of the Inclusivity Ideal. Here is my formulation:

1. The Inclusivity Ideal does not support an obligation to challenge others to reconsider their faulty ideals, especially in those instances in which the ideals do not harm others but rather diminish the lives of those committed to them.
2. We have good reason to believe that our desires can be manipulated. To draw on a Marxist phrase, they could be the products of a false consciousness. So, James's ethics disregards the value of autonomous choice or at least is naive about how autonomous we really are.

It is important to separate these two objections by looking at some cases. Jacob might autonomously adopt an ideal that organizes his life around his cats. No mere cat fancier, Jacob is consumed by cat activities: grooming them, dressing them up, and playing with them. Assume that his desire to follow the cat ideal is not the product of manipulation or false consciousness. He has reflectively considered other possible ideals like devoting his life to art or spending time with family members in need. Capps wants to say that of course we should feel a responsibility, maybe even an obligation, to criticize Jacob, urging him to see how shallow his life really is.

Or consider Elsie, who adopts an ideal that appears noble in many respects but is the product of subtle manipulation. She is devoted to a Christian congregation, spending her summers going on mission trips to Haiti to help poor people. Elsie's commitment to this Christian ideal is the product of years of subtle manipulation by her family and local community. Her interest in science and nature at an early age was discouraged. Her lifelong friend Kathy—who is not a member of Elsie's Christian community—might feel an obligation to help Elsie come to see that the unconscious motives sustaining the commitment to Christian self-service are more about fear of disappointing her family than a passionate commitment to an autonomously chosen ideal. The value of autonomy would be Kathy's reason for criticizing Elsie. The altruism of Elsie's ideal is morally superior to the shallow ideals of Ben, whose commitment to athleticism is the product of years of subtle manipulation by media images of ideal maleness, or Sarah, whose fixation on living the life of a marketer arises from years of manipulative messages about the importance of material success focused on buying and consuming. Nevertheless, all three—Elsie, Ben, and Sarah—do not freely adopt their ideals. As Capps puts it, “we shouldn't assume that our desires and ideals are necessarily, authentically ours.”¹ Even though their lives do not harm others, they should be subjected to critical assessments.

Responsible self-fashioning is my organizing notion for James's ethics and value theory. Capps is arguing how many lives might count as “responsible” in the Jamesian sense of “consistent with the

Inclusivity Ideal” but nevertheless revolve around a kind of self-fashioning that should be discouraged. I must acknowledge that my emphasis (and probably James’s too) is more about an agent engaging in self-criticism, particularly about blindness to other forms of life, than it is about criticizing others for their flawed, if morally innocuous ideals. Even though I do argue that James’s ethical republic is a robust space for moral agents to challenge each other, that challenge is primarily focused on the need to overcome one’s blindness to others. So, Capps’s point could be pressed home here. James’s ethics does not seem to support an independent obligation for moral agents to challenge empty and manipulated ideals. Read this way, Capps’s criticism is that the “responsibility” part of James’s ethics is simply too narrow.

I call attention to a moment in my book where I raise a similar concern about James’s ethics. In *Pragmatism* James examines the debate between “spiritualism” and “materialism” in terms of the consequences of each position on the future fate of moral ideals.² James suggests that the debate is idle when framed as a dispute about the universe’s origin; however, as a debate pertaining to the future fate of moral ideals these metaphysical accounts predict distinctly different consequences. Spiritualism predicts that those ideals will endure even after we have perished, perhaps because they are supported by the helping influences of a god or other divine beings. James is well aware that not all people care about such long run prospects such as the future fate of ideals. He imagines an objector who chides the metaphysical spiritualist for being so focused on concerns beyond the immediate exigencies of a single lifetime. Offering what seems like pure *ad hominem*, James asserts that such objectors are simply shallow people.

Taking a page from the will to believe doctrine, James must of course grant that not all people will find a metaphysical hypothesis like spiritualism appealing. As such, we must grant a certain degree of tolerance to those who don’t share our metaphysical concerns. Maybe James’s mockery of the here and now materialist is, while not barred by such tolerance, in poor taste. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to assume that what a person finds living at any given time

is fixed forever. Indeed, James's theory of the self as a relational construction which is always more or less in flux helps us to vividly see this. For James, selves are composed of plural, and sometimes conflicting, identities. These identities are largely constituted by social relations, especially those imagined perspectives of others who share one's ideals and values.³ While these familiar perspectives stabilize a self's identity, alien perspectives can destabilize identity. The experience of awakening to another's ideals has the potential for destabilization which sometimes can lead to new ideals or at least a sharper grasp of the limits of one's ideals. I argue in the book that overcoming blindness to others' ideals is continuous with the process of overcoming blindness to aspects of oneself. While the Inclusivity Ideal serves primarily as a second-order regulative ideal constraining intersubjective relations it could, with some justice, be extended to the intrasubjective relations of one's various actual and potential selves. Read this way, James's position reasonably holds that we have obligations to strive to create inclusive selves as much as we have obligations to create inclusive communities. Nothing in James's position forbids a person from challenging another person to consider their blindness to features of their actual or potential selves. Perhaps such reconsideration will make formerly cold ideals living or, alternatively, cool one's fixation on ideals one currently finds living.

Still, Capps's objection could be reformulated like this. The obligation to overcome blindness built into James's ethics is primarily a duty to oneself. It is not obvious that James has the resources to ground a duty to help others overcome blindness. To be sure, the duty to help others may flow from morally salient features of relationships like "being a friend" or roles like "being a parent." Furthermore, since relationships and roles are typically components of the ideals that give one's life significance, the duty to help others overcome blindness is made even stronger. While these clarifications may take some of the sting out of Capps's objection, do they inoculate James's ethics from it altogether? Capps could respond by saying that this response simply shows that sometimes there are agent relative reasons to criticize others for their shallow

or manipulated ideals. Don't we want to endorse the stronger claim that there is an agent neutral reason that requires anyone to help others overcome their blindness, irrespective of special obligations that accrue in virtue of roles or relations, like being a friend or being a parent?

I think that James's account of significant living does offer grounds for criticism of the manipulated cases such as Elsie's; however, it is less obvious that it can handle the case of non-manipulated choices of apparently shallow ideals. To see this, let's talk briefly about James's account of significant living. As Capps himself observes, this account requires that ideals must be reflectively endorsed (what James calls "intellectually conceived") and married to strenuous actions. Although he does not develop in detail what he calls "intellectually conceived" ideals I think it is safe to say that the account would entail that commitments to ideals that result from manipulation would be condemned on the grounds that a person's endorsement was the product of invisible causes that, if known, would prompt reassessment of the commitments. But what of Jacob whose pet cat ideals are reflectively endorsed and perhaps even strenuously pursued with passionate zeal? Is Capps right that James's account has no resources for condemning such ideals? One might try to lean on the idea of reflective endorsement here—does Jacob really reflectively endorse this ideal? Has he really thought through live alternatives such as living the life of an artist, or service to family members in need? I am skeptical that the notion of "reflective endorsement" can bear the burden of this response. So, I won't take it.

I think this is a point where the Jamesian might well just have to dig in, embracing the libertarian and anti-perfectionist streak in James's moral outlook. Perhaps the price of an inclusive ethical republic is the existence of banal ideals. And maybe we should be less judgmental about what counts as banal. For example, sometimes people have quite different aesthetic experiences in response to musical performances. Let me share a personal instance of this kind of case. Although not so much a Deadhead as to say that Grateful Dead music is the ideal that gives my life significance, I do

love it. I, like many others, experience heights of bliss during a particularly excellent jam such that I feel lucky to exist in a universe where that can happen. Yet I am fully aware that many other people hear the same thing as a meandering directionless pattern of noodling noise. One must acknowledge that the objects of one's own most passionate commitments can leave others cold. This ineliminable subjective element is captured well in James's comparison of commitments to ideals with being in love:

No one has insight into all the ideals. No one should presume to judge them off-hand. The pretension to dogmatize about them in each other is the root of most human injustices, and the trait in human character most likely to make the angels weep. Every Jack sees in his own particular Jill charms and perfections to the enchantment which we stolid onlookers are stone-cold. And which has the superior view of the absolute truth, he or we? Which has the more vital insight into the nature of Jill's existence as a fact? Is he in excess, being in this matter a maniac? or we in defect, being victims of pathological anesthesia as regards Jill's magical importance?"⁴

James's answer is that because "Jack realizes Jill concretely" we onlookers ought to offer some deference to Jack's grasp of Jill's significance. Such deference is arguably one mark of moral maturity. It is a willingness to acknowledge that one's cherished ideals may ring hollow to others. This attitude, in turn, requires the ability to overcome blindness to others' ideals, not necessarily in the sense that one can realize them concretely in full sympathy, but rather in the sense that one knows that others experience passionate commitment to their ideals in much the same way that one does to one's own. The ideals that some consider worthless trash might be cherished jewels for others. Or as Grateful Dead lyricist Robert Hunter puts it in a song, "one man gathers what another man spills."

RESPONSE TO RUETENIK

Tadd Ruetenik applies my interpretation of James's Inclusivity Ideal to three examples, the first of which is a discussion of cognitively disabled humans and animals which I treat in Chapter Five of my book. Ruetenik's reflections on the examples of school shootings in the United States and the war in Ukraine afford us with some interesting and provocative implications of James's ethics. I take Ruetenik's central contention to be that these examples show that James's social moral philosopher's goal can be framed in much more radical ways than what might seem to be the case upon a cursory reading. The social moral philosopher's commitment to mediating value conflicts can take the form of proposing radical changes in the values themselves, rather than being simply a modest effort to help parties in a conflict find ways to simply live and let live. As he puts it:

I think that Lekan's work is best understood as implying that the moral philosopher does best when working with competing desires to synthesize views to produce radical and creative answers rather than simply listening to claims, acknowledging the desires behind them, and making merely compromising solutions.⁵

Given that Ruetenik's summary and evaluation of my treatment of the standoff between animal ethics advocates and disability rights advocates develops well the claims I was aiming to make in the book, I will focus on the case of school shootings. Ruetenik makes what seems like a *reductio* against James's position when he says that it requires at least a consideration that "the desire of the shooter, which is an eminently authentic desire in that it is expressed in action despite great risk, is in this sense a small but not insignificant desire."⁶

Now, Ruetenik points to an important distinction germane to James's Inclusivity Ideal. In one sense, the moral philosopher's efforts to responds to conflicting demands with the goal of creating an inclusive ethical republic might simply involve mere "verbal

consideration of a demand.” This gesture might seem empty or even inauthentic. After all, one might satisfy oneself that a demand has been “considered” by just registering it and then rather quickly moving on to solutions that tread over the demand or ignore it. Now surely responsible self-fashioning requires more than mere acknowledgment. It requires a sympathetic response to an address made by, or on behalf of, some concrete sentient being. The moral philosopher’s quest to create an inclusive solution to conflicting demands is conducted, in part, through continuous efforts to overcome blindness, especially to those alien ideals (a point I just stressed in response to Capps).

Does this mean that we need to sympathize with—as in feel some sense of emotional connection with—a school shooter’s demand to kill people with guns? Most people would be revolted by that thought. Therefore, one might take Jamesian consideration of demands to mean that moral agents very briefly consider them sympathetically only to dismiss the destructive demands that obviously violate the Inclusivity Ideal. Ruetenik makes an interesting observation in connection with James’s discussion of our brain-born reactions to certain things that strike most people as inherently wicked, for example, to the thought experiment of a person being tortured to death to save humanity. Our efforts to imagine—perhaps sympathetically—the shooter’s perspective might provoke a reaction of wishing to “sacrifice the shooter.” In other words, many might have brain-born moral attitudes to inflict harsh retribution on violent murderers. Note that the “we” here could range the gamut from gun rights defenders opposed to gun regulations that reduce access to firearms—particularly assault rifles—and those who want to reduce school shootings by tighter restrictions on gun ownership. James’s moral philosophers, as I argue in the book, are not judges who stand outside the various moral ideals of the ethical republic. Rather, they are situated inside the ethical republic with their own commitments to ideals and values. “Moral philosopher” does not simply denote the class of professional philosophers; rather, it is a function that could be played by anyone in the ethical republic. To be sure, not everyone

making claims or demands will or can play that role. Nevertheless, it is crucial that those who do strive to play the moral philosopher's role make clear to themselves and others the value perspectives that they occupy.

With these points in mind, Ruetenik's challenge is to ask whether the Inclusivity Ideal can require quite radical solutions to value conflicts? Or does it foster a more moderate compromising strategy of getting as many extant demands satisfied as possible with minimal disruption of the social order? Pragmatism often bills itself as a middle way between extremes such as optimism and pessimism or conservative and revolutionary. It seeks to develop action plans that harmonize conflicting values but in ways that sometimes do require changing habits, practices, and institutions. One worry is that the Inclusivity Ideal itself appears too open-ended to offer guidance about what kind of social reconstruction is necessary to resolve the dispute over how to handle school gun violence. One might think that secure doors, surveillance devices, and armed guards would be an action plan that satisfies both the demands of gun owners to keep their guns and the demands to protect children. This approach is the status quo and Ruetenik is right to indicate that it overlooks another demand that might arise. As he puts it:

Now there will possibly arise another desire, perhaps to some extent shared by all non-shooter people. This is the desire not to live in a world in which schools, to a large extent, are treated like prisons. And there is also a certain type of radical who tolerates the idea of schools seeming like prisons because they tend to desire that problematic situations be not so much adjusted to, but rather drawn out to their revolutionary *reductio ad absurdum*.⁷

Now, the Inclusivity Ideal itself underdetermines which proposal to support, but I don't regard that as a defect. After all James famously states that "there is no such thing possible as an ethical philosophy made up in advance."⁸ Moral philosophy comes into being only after communities have hammered out moral ideals over

long histories. And even after Jamesian pragmatist moral philosophy begins the work of seeking an inclusive ethical republic, James cautions that “abstract rules indeed can help, but they help the less in proportion as our intuitions are more piercing.”⁹ Moral philosophy’s “books upon ethics” must, James says, “ally themselves with a literature which is confessedly tentative and suggestive rather than dogmatic.”¹⁰

Given these precautions, James’s moral theoretic apparatus including its central Inclusivity Ideal would indeed undermine a resolution to a moral problem like school shooting. What Ruetenik’s response shows, however, is that James’s pragmatist moral philosophy is compatible with, and may even encourage, radical solutions. The question is how much radicalism does James’s pragmatist ethics allow? I want to offer a few concluding thoughts on this question by drawing on James’s will to believe doctrine. I want to pose Ruetenik’s concern as a question for pragmatist ethics generally: “can a pragmatist moral philosophy accommodate, even encourage, radical moral belief given its commitment to a fallibilist epistemology and value pluralism?” A “yes” answer seems like an effort to square circles in part because it seems like radicals must hold their moral beliefs in a non-fallible absolutist manner and that they must embrace a moral monism.

Consider first fallibilism. In “The Will to Believe,” James examines the conditions under which it is permissible to adopt metaphysical, moral, and religious beliefs, which have life-changing consequences. In the book, I call decisions about these matters existential deliberations. Such deliberations result from decisions to adopt existential commitments. Such commitments typically involve adopting ideals that give life significance. Existential commitments are “double-barreled,” in the sense that they are as much about whom one wants to be as they are about how one wants the world to be. The fact that existential commitments deeply express and shape the self is part of the reason decisions about them are momentous.¹¹ Commitments to marriage, religion, social justice, and the like tend to permanently alter one’s life. Of course, as a fallibilist, James claims one can be deeply wrong about

these commitments. Marriages can end in disaster, religious faith can wither, and fiery passion for moral commitment can burn out.

Existential commitments are also forced, which means that a neutral stance of abstention is in many cases practically the same as outright rejection. For example, Ralph might hold off on a decision to join a monastic order, thinking that his abstention is not the same as definitive rejection. And maybe for a while he is right about this. James is not advocating for impulsive decision-making. Ralph should carefully assess evidence showing how likely it is that his decision will be a success. But at some point, he has to decide without sufficient evidence. James's claim is not just that opportunities will pass Ralph by should he remain neutral too long. He also observes that Ralph's prior belief in some valued outcome is necessary to create that outcome's reality. James shows that for a range of cases—such as those involving social cooperation—believing “ahead of the evidence” in the success of some cause is necessary to make that success happen. In the case of friendship, he writes, “a previous faith on my part in your liking's existence is in such cases what makes your liking come. But if I stand aloof, and refuse to budge an inch until I have objective evidence, until you shall have done something apt...ten to one your liking never comes.”¹² James might exaggerate when he goes on to say that the “desire for a certain kind of truth here brings about that special truth's existence.” But he is correct that the confidence that a relationship will work is one important causal condition for it to work. Cautiously awaiting proof undermines the very possibility in question, and is really no different, practically, than deciding against.

How do things stand with the pacifist radical anti-gun abolitionist who regards her moral beliefs as basic components of an existential commitment, which she holds in a Jamesian way? For one thing, she will apply provisionality to all beliefs, including bedrock moral beliefs. Of course, such in-principle provisionality does not give one a reason for doubting any belief (serious or trivial) because the sheer fact that one might be wrong is not a positive reason for doubt. Beyond this general point about fallibility, however, people with

existential commitments need to sustain passionate conviction. James argues that admirable commitment to epistemic provisionality should not cool passions for existential commitments. Doing so risks assuming the neutral stance that practically undermines beliefs and actions necessary for realizing ideals. Is passionate commitment compatible with the fallible meliorism of James's moral philosophy? Meliorism presumes the validity of an ideal, but acknowledges its reality is only more or less probable. Anti-meliorist optimists, in contrast, believe in metaphysical guarantees for the realization of their favored ideals. To be sure, many moral radicals derive solace and strength from such guarantees; however, there is every reason to suppose that moral radicals can be meliorist pragmatists. Such meliorist radicals may derive extra moral energy from the conviction that cherished ideals depend on their actions.

It is one thing to adopt a meliorist attitude towards the possible realization of one's favored ideals, but quite another to cooperate with those who do not share one's values. Won't the existentially committed regard compromise with those who do not share their values as a compromise of fundamental commitment? In other words, just how tolerantly pluralist can such a pragmatist radical really be?

Take the anti-pragmatist radical moralist who tends to look at moral causes as either ill begotten or righteous and who also tends to sort people in similar terms. An anti-pragmatist pacifist gun abolitionist will regard most compromise, even with those somewhat sympathetic to their causes, as a compromise of fundamental values. Moreover, those who reject their cause outright will be regarded as irredeemably wicked or possibly just hopelessly ignorant. What of the pragmatist radical pacifist gun abolitionist? They have a deep appreciation of the ways in which existential commitments provide the frameworks for interpreting moral problems. This perspectival awareness affords them with opportunities to see the ways in which the other's vantage point may be related to their own with greater and lesser degrees of intimacy. Just as the Darwinian anti-essentialist pragmatist sees nature as

objects that differ through variations of degree, the Jamesian moralist sees the moral world as a continuum of moral identities bearing family resemblances. They come to see the value in collaborating with those with whom they only partially agree. Relative to the longest-run context of deepest beliefs, such collaboration might be evaluated as morally wrong. However, relative to more immediate contexts, they might well be doing the right thing. Since pragmatists relativize moral judgments in relation to contexts, this result need not indicate damning self-contradiction. In other words, while the long-term goal might be dismantling the military state, short term compromises with those who reject that goal are indeed possible: for example, working to ban assault weapons.

While James's ethics is not offered by him in anything like a systematic fashion, these comments from Capps and Ruetenik demonstrate a few of many fertile topics of moral inquiry that grow out of what he wrote. Among the most urgent of these are questions about the limits of tolerance for apparently shallow values or downright dangerous ones. Additionally, James's ethics points to intriguing possibilities of combining moral dispositions that might seem irrevocably at odds: the tentative, tolerant attitude of empirical pragmatism and the passionate, faithful attitude of the moral radical.

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NOTES

- ¹ Capps, 64.
- ² William James, *Pragmatism*, 52-56.
- ³ See James, *Principles of Psychology*, 281-282, for discussion of the social and relational aspects of the self.
- ⁴ James, *Will to Believe*, 150-151.
- ⁵ Ruetenik, 71.
- ⁶ Ruetenik, 73.
- ⁷ Ruetenik, 74.
- ⁸ James, *The Will to Believe*, 141.
- ⁹ James, *The Will to Believe*, 158.
- ¹⁰ James, *The Will to Believe*, 159.
- ¹¹ James, *The Will to Believe*, 15.
- ¹² James, *The Will to Believe*, 28.

Review of Emma K. Sutton, *William James, MD: Philosopher, Psychologist, Physician*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023. 261 pp. ISBN 9780226828961. \$30.00.

Most William James biographers follow the evolution of his thought chronologically. Emma Sutton has taken another approach by examining how the illness/health axis that so profoundly affected James's personal life motivated and organized much of his intellectual life as well. Having drawn upon 9,400 letters written either by or to James, his unpublished notebooks, diaries, and reading lists, she concludes that James came to regard himself as an invalid throughout his life, and his responses to those challenges accounts for key elements of his philosophy. He broadly shared complaints about his persistent debilitating back pain, eye ailments, constipation, insomnia, headaches, and flu. His sufferings repeatedly drove him to European baths and desperate remedies including electrotherapy, lymph injections, testicular elixirs and, telepathic seances. To add to this litany, serious depression, neurasthenia, and melancholia recurrently usurped his energies and compromised his well-being. Yet, as a philosopher, he suffered not in vain:

James's melancholy opened up questions about the relationship between the mind and body; his pain was presented and probed as a form of metaphysical evil; the crippling nature of his back condition was positioned as an ethical threat to his ability to contribute to society; this combined burden of invalidism represented a moral embargo on fatherhood with its risk of passing on a sickly inheritance; and, throughout his life, he prized religious faith, first and foremost, as a stimulus or tonic

for those struggling with illness and infirmity. Wherever you look, James's corpus is riddled with disease.¹

Peering through that lens of infirmity, his philosophy assumes new contours and, in some respects, great depths.

Much of our knowledge of how James placed himself in this medical milieu derives from advice he offered in public lectures and popular articles, later collected in his *Talks to Teachers and Students*. As a public intellectual, he lectured widely and Sutton appropriately reminds us that although Dr. James never practiced medicine in the traditional sense, throughout his life he remained, at heart, "a public physician" and a popular one at that.²

Placing James's health struggles in the narrative spotlight, Sutton diagnoses his thought organized by different social and scientific frameworks, e.g., hygiene, religion, politics. Each offers a particular vantage to appreciate how numerous sicknesses oriented his thinking about various philosophical and psychological matters. He had no consistent model or theme to tie together the interplay of his personal experience of disease, but the topical approach allows Sutton to describe the diversity of James's maladies and the various preventive and curative advice (and practices) he drew upon to form different kinds of explanation. He thus cited well-trodden clinical diagnoses (e.g., inflamed tissues, nervous exhaustion), as well as more novel emotional notions of "bad habits," "buried emotions," pathological "fixed ideas," which were then coupled to debilitating personality traits (e.g., weaknesses, lax self-discipline, and a "divided self"). In order to assess James's understanding of his various illnesses, Sutton provides a broad survey of the state of medical practice during the last third of the nineteenth century. First, she situates James's views from the vantage of orthodox pathophysiological clinical opinion and psychiatric speculation. And then she highlights his endorsement of telepathic phenomena and a medley of nonconformist spiritualist practices. In other words, he wore bifocal spectacles to depict both physiological and emotional suffering.

James's expansive views were no more clearly illustrated than by his endorsement of a religious point of view. The eclipse of his early positivism has been well documented by others and as he transitioned from the science of psychology to the metaphysics of the mind, he increasingly acknowledged the authority of a domain lying beyond scientific inquiry. His sympathies for the therapeutic potential of mystical inquiry and the therapeutic pursuit for marshaling the "subconscious" threatened his professional legitimacy among the academic elite. James made no amends and forthrightly asserted his belief in the reality of what lay beyond objective analysis.

Irrespective of which school of clinical acumen James pursued, each eventually found expression in his epistemological, ethical, and metaphysical views. Sutton's genealogical strategy connects James's enunciations about his most personal experiences to his philosophical thought. For instance, in the early 1880s, although his debilitating back pains were no longer prevalent, James developed what had become a new condition, neurasthenia, a form of lassitude attributed to nervous exhaustion putatively initiated by the fatiguing pace of modern life. His temperamental affinities for novel hygienic principles guided his various comments about general health, alcohol consumption, and, most importantly, the key discussion of habit (*Principles of Psychology*, chapter 4). He argued that bad habits could both explain disease and, through deliberate correction, reverse the offensive behavior and the corresponding malady. These included not only repeated deleterious actions leading to physical ailments but also accounted for mental derangements that could lead to "insanity." And not surprisingly, James explicitly presented his theory of emotions as a hygienic tool.³ Reminiscent of his own decision to believe in free will, James advocated the exercise of self-control to regulate emotion and thereby mental hygiene. His attention to clinical diagnosis, medical therapeutics, clinical and social understandings of disease seeks a moral position that leads well beyond the physical or scientific perspective of a physician. Here, and elsewhere, ethics frames his view of illness.

Three overarching themes shape *William James, MD*. First, in dissecting James's opinions and commitments, Sutton follows the pathways of his own suffering—both their sources and effects—to show how his philosophy originates in the subjective stratum, and she refreshingly declares the logic of her undertaking:

My account of James is an avowedly emotional one. He himself made the case that philosophical systems owe their existence, in part, to “the desire for a solid outward warrant for our emotional ends.” This observation was part of a stronger claim, moreover. James was convinced of the “ubiquitousness of emotional interests in the mind’s operations,” and several of his writings explicitly challenge the traditional assumption that thinking and feeling may be treated separately. His own emotional motives and reactions, which he regularly acknowledged, would seem then to be a valid and important area of interest for anyone seeking to understand James on his own terms.⁴

James would have cheered her on. After all, he himself emphasized the role of the personal in the philosopher's craft. Indeed, for James, 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.”⁵ That admission he couched in terms of what he called, “temperament,” and asserted how subjective needs guided analytical thought.⁶ Indeed, if philosophy is a way of life, then the personal must claim its rightful place. And in that recognition James insists on how temperament frames one's metaphysical beliefs which then leads to the character of one's moral agency that finally either helps or hinders awareness of, and response to, human evil and suffering.⁷

Sutton emphasizes two key aspects of how James regarded clinical suffering. First, philosophy for him was a thoroughly moral affair and Sutton emphasizes that his own suffering and response to it underlay his ethical sensitivities. And second, disease, whether

physical or psychiatric, were manifestations of evil, which he believed was constitutive to reality.

This belief in the ubiquity of evil coupled to an acute self-awareness then leads directly to Sutton's second major theme. She explores the various ways James treated his illnesses and, in that analysis, how his physicianship enacted his views of moral agency. Sutton explicates this aspect of his thinking by putting the problem of evil at the heart of James's deliberations. For him, the experience of illness was an expression of *evil*. Indeed, suffering and evil were inseparable for him. In the *Varieties of Religious Experience* evil is described as "a genuine portion of reality" (James 1987a, 136) and in numerous places throughout his corpus, the "obstinate presence of evil" is featured (e.g., "Rationality, Activity and Faith" [1882]; "The Dilemma of Determinism" [1884]; *A Pluralistic Universe* [1908]; *Pragmatism* [1907]; and the unfinished *Some Problems of Philosophy*). Two philosophical doors then opened.

First, for James, pain reveals evil and those who suffer thereby have access to deeper Truths, for evil facts "may after all be the best key to life's significance, and possibly the only openers of our eyes to the deepest levels of truth."⁸ In other words, the vector of evil → suffering was extended to evil → suffering → Truth. As Sutton observes, "ill health and suffering assumed...some sort of epistemological rite of passage. From this perspective it is only through affliction, and the accompanying pain, that we gain access to the 'deepest levels of truth.'"⁹ Note, James remained firmly within the philosophical discourse; theism makes no appearance in his musings.

As Sutton emphasizes, James regarded suffering as the manifestation of evil and the moral imperative was to thwart its effects:

It seems to me that all a man has to depend on in this world, is in the last resort, mere brute power of resistance. I can't bring myself as so many men seem able to, to blink the evil out of sight, and gloss it over. It's as real as the good, and if it is denied,

good must be denied too. It must be accepted and hated and resisted while there's breath in our bodies.¹⁰

Simply, if evil → pain, then the success of overcoming his infirmities represented an ethical endeavor with momentous implications for how James would conduct his life. After all, his suffering had initiated a moral crisis that ranged to questions about whether he was fit to have a family and how he would become a useful member of society. He took such challenges as deeply consequential and considered them central to the development of his character:

From James's perspective, his physical capacity to work was inseparable from matters of respect and honor and, ultimately, his ethical philosophy. However, this focus on practical achievement was to become, as time went on, untenable to James. When illness made all activity and even the future possibility of useful work seem impossible, his utilitarian ideals came under fire.¹¹

Upon graduating from medical school in 1869, James endured a major existential watershed that extended into the early 1870s, when the intransigence of back pain led to severe depression and a preoccupation with suicide saturated his letters and diary entries. It is in this context that James declared his famous *philosophical* decision to exercise free will.

According to Ralph Barton Perry and often repeated, James found solace in Renouvier's philosophy that inspired a philosophical rationale for exercising free will. However, Sutton notes that this interpretation does not account for how James regarded himself as an invalid and how his preoccupation with the evils of pain and illness played key roles in his own deliberations. He placed the issue of evil in the debate about *determinism* that characterized an unambiguous universe in which everything we find within it, including experiences of evil, are inevitable and unavoidable. James, on the other hand, opted for an indeterministic cosmos, one

in which chance and free will operated. This would be the foundation of his own ethics.¹² In this latter depiction (views fully developed in his mature philosophy), the doctrine of free will represented the possibility that the future may hold less evil than the present. When placed in the medical context, his deliberate choice for a free fate offered him the chance to heal. This seminal metaphysical inflection not only directed James in dealing with his personal infirmities, but it proved to be the critical step launching him on his later philosophical development centered around pluralism and pragmatism.

Sutton offers deepened insight of how James's conclusion concerning the freedom of the will was inextricable from his complex views of evil's manifestations in disease and the moral response to that ever-present challenge. This third organizing theme of *William James, MD* closely follows the other two by highlighting James's conception of "medicine as a radically moral endeavor."¹³ Beyond the obvious ethical judgments implicit in care, the physician guided by a human-centered and human-valued ethos, could not ignore the emotional, spiritual, and complex psychology of those suffering illness. He recognized that medical knowledge could not solely be confined to scientific analysis, and in consideration of a holistic orientation "all kinds of health, bodily mental and moral are essentially the same, so that one can go at them from any point."¹⁴

James's public endorsement of unorthodox healers led to vitriolic attack by the medical establishment. The issue came to a boil in 1898 when he testified before the Massachusetts legislature that was then considering whether to register a host of unorthodox healers in the Board of Registration in Medicine. These included "spiritualists, electricians, osteopaths, metaphysicians, magnetic healers, spiritual healers, botanic physicians, and hydropathists."¹⁵ James certainly was not anti-science, but he leveled three criticisms against his orthodox colleagues: 1) the complacency of current orthodox practitioners regarding the sorry state of their knowledge reflected an arrogant disregard for the failures of current practice; 2) clinical approaches that ignored what later became the psycho-social complement to allopatric diagnosis and treatment overlooked the

multi-dimensional realities of disease; and 3) restricting health care to a narrow spectrum of practitioners confined to a materialistic basis of disease impaired the pursuit of knowledge and inappropriately restricted the freedom to pursue alternative therapies based on other philosophies.

James found himself in a skirmish of a much larger struggle between those advocating a scientific research-based medicine against older traditions. The course of American medical education and the legitimization of medical practitioners formally began shortly after James's Boston appearance. In 1907, the American Medical Association issued a report critical of medical practitioners who had not attended institutions based on a scientific curriculum. With skillful political lobbying, by World War I, approximately only 50% of the schools in operation in 1904 remained, and student enrollment fell from 4,400 to 2,500.¹⁶ James had been sailing into ill winds.

His was but a minor skirmish in a war of legitimacy that eventually deposed what in our own era is now viewed as "complementary medicine." Despite the undoubted successes of scientific medicine, non-allopatric therapies remained a fixture in the public's search for therapies that might offer results unobtainable with conventional methods (Tauber 2002). Despite his respect for science and the medicine it spawned, James's pluralism demanded acknowledgment of possible alternatives and for him the ultimate arbiter was pragmatic results. And more to the point of Sutton's thesis, suffering for James represented a moral challenge and nothing less than an ethical approach guided by human need was required to address *dis*-ease of whatever nature. Thus, the abiding importance of James's testimony is his insistence that medicine is fundamentally a moral pursuit in which the science and technology are in the employ of that mandate. A century later, that message is even more compelling than when first proclaimed.¹⁷

I readily admit that this summary of *William James, MD* fails to account for the richness of this study in considering so much of the Jamesian corpus from a fresh perspective. James's views of the afterlife, the conceits of medicine and science, critiques of the

normative and capitalism, the pluralistic approach to mental health, religion, public health, etc. assume new contours when Sutton maps the category of evil onto illness within James's worldview.

However, before concluding, the meta-message of Sutton's portrait must be highlighted, namely, how James practiced philosophy as a therapy. He returned to the ancient view that training for wisdom was a way of life. More than a type of moral conduct, it was a mode of existing-in-the-world and thus a way of transforming the whole of the individual's life. As Pierre Hadot writes, for the Greeks, philosophy "brought peace of mind (*ataraxia*), inner freedom (*autarkeia*), and a cosmic consciousness. First and foremost, philosophy presented itself as a therapeutic, intended to cure mankind's anguish."¹⁸

Philosophy as therapy followed no formulae and certainly no prescription. In the Greek and Roman period, all schools viewed philosophy as integral to one's life. James evoked the same ethos inasmuch as the *philosophical* significance of suffering accompanied him to the point that he "was as capable of starting a metaphysical discussion about...constipation as he was about Kant."¹⁹ He thus demonstrated the salient distinction between *discourse about* philosophy and *philosophy itself*. For the ancients, Hadot argues,

the parts of philosophy – physics, ethics, and logic – were not part of philosophy, but rather parts of philosophical *discourse*....But philosophy itself – that is the philosophical way of life – is no longer a theory divided into parts, but a unitary act which consists in *living* logic, physics, and ethics. In this case, we no longer study logical theory – that is the theory of speaking and thinking well – we simply think and speak well. We no longer engage in theory about the physical world, but we contemplate the cosmos. We no longer theorize about moral action, but we act in a correct and just way.²⁰

In sum, James found his own equilibrium through philosophy, not in discourse but in practice. His temperament might account for the

optimism of “Be not afraid of life. Believe that life *is* worth living, and your belief will help create the fact,”²¹ but the ways in which he overcame the despair and melancholy that contested his pronouncement was through philosophical exercise. Sutton’s portrait reveals how James therapeutic philosophy remained true to his original identification as a physician and how he invoked medicine’s ancient calling to weave the many threads of his inquiries into a unique tapestry. James’s self-therapy is the underlying lesson of this original historical account, a superb story of philosophy in action and a reminder that much of James’s enduring relevance resides in his example of leading a philosophical life.

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NOTES

- ¹ Sutton 2023, 5.
- ² Sutton 2023, 9.
- ³ Sutton 2023, 70, quoting James, *Gospel* 1992a, 825-26.
- ⁴ Sutton 2023, 8.
- ⁵ James, *Pragmatism* 1987a [1907], 487.
- ⁶ James, *Pragmatism* 1987a [1907], 488–89.
- ⁷ Lekan 2022, 106-107; see also Pihlström 2018.
- ⁸ James, *Varieties* 1987b, 136.
- ⁹ Sutton 2023, 156.
- ¹⁰ Sutton 2023, 21 quoting a letter to Henry James, May 7, 1870.
- ¹¹ Sutton 2023, 25.
- ¹² Lekan 2022, 9.
- ¹³ Sutton 2023, 173.

¹⁴ Sutton 2023, quoting James's letter to Sarah Wyman Whitman, Sept. 18, 1902.

¹⁵ Sutton 2023, 157.

¹⁶ Starr 1990.

¹⁷ Tauber, 2002.

¹⁸ Hadot 1995, 265-6.

¹⁹ Sutton, 6.

²⁰ Hadot 1995, 266-7.

²¹ James, *Will to Believe* 1992b [1896], 503.

Review of Robert D. Richardson, *Three Roads Back: How Emerson, Thoreau, and William James Responded to the Greatest Losses of Their Lives* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), 108 pp. \$ 22.95.

Robert Richardson was the author of three important and wide-ranging biographies of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and William James. He passed away in 2020. *Three Roads Back* is his final book. It seeks to elucidate how Emerson, Thoreau, and James coped with tragic personal losses at the beginning of their respective careers. The book tells a story that centers on the idea of resilience and on how the loss of a loved one can lead to a new form of creativity and a new way of thinking. However, the author not only depicts how Emerson, Thoreau, and James responded to devastating events, he also intends to explain how their reactions were crucial for the development of American literature and philosophy. Like his previous biographies, *Three Roads Back* combines intellectual history, philosophy, and literary studies in order to illuminate the multilayered complexity of American thought from the American Renaissance to the beginning of the twentieth century. This is not the birth of American literature and philosophy, but rather the period in which it becomes obvious that the characteristics of modern American thought will profoundly differ from those typical of European thinking.

Three Roads Back is a small book. It consists of three parts. The first part focuses on Emerson and consists of five brief chapters. The second part discusses Thoreau's version of resilience and consists of eight brief chapters, whereas the third part, showing how James successfully dealt with loss and grief, consists of five chapters. The book closes with a brief postscript.

In his preface, Richardson underscores that in his opinion Emerson, Thoreau, and James's examples of resilience "count

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among their lasting contributions to modern life” (xvii). In this final book, Richardson still performs the task of the biographer. Interpreting their texts, analyzing their philosophical positions, or discussing their place in the American intellectual tradition is not sufficient for him. Richardson contends that we do not only have to read what Emerson, Thoreau, and James wrote, but we also have to “look at how they lived their lives. This is the biggest contribution of the biographical approach, which focuses our attention on how they lived their own lives as well as on the continuing value of what they wrote” (xviii). For his purpose, as Richardson maintains, it is important to regard these three intellectuals whose work he seeks to explain “as fellow human beings, facing losses and troubles much like ours” (xviii). The method he applies is, as he puts it, “documentary biography” (xix), meaning that he mostly uses journal entries and letters in order to demonstrate how Emerson, Thoreau, and James coped with tragic events and losses. According to Richardson, this documentary method is supposed “to facilitate a personal, even a sympathetic, connection – rather than a detached, critical, or judgmental connection – between the reader and the subject” (xix).

The first part of Richardson’s book discusses Emerson. In 1831, when the latter was 27, his nineteen-year-old wife Ellen died of tuberculosis. Experiencing an overwhelming grief and plunged into apathy for almost two years, Emerson eventually managed to exhibit an idiosyncratic intellectual and physical resilience. As the author argues, this process begins with Emerson developing his idiosyncratic Christian faith: “Emerson left formal, inherited, traditional Christianity in 1832 and never returned” (8). Losing his Unitarian faith and strongly reacting against formal and dogmatic Christianity, Emerson finds comfort in nature and develops his understanding of experience and truth. His final conversion, the author proposes, takes place in July 1833. Visiting the Jardin des Plantes in Paris, a famous botanical garden, Emerson connects with life in a radically new manner: “In Emerson’s moment of connection with the natural world in the Jardin des Plantes, the force of life entirely

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overpowers the feeling of loss and despair he had so recently plumbed” (14). Because of his new appreciation of the significance of nature, Emerson is capable of developing new conceptions of individuality, self-reliance, and redemption. As Richardson puts it: “Regeneration, not through Christ but through Nature, is the great theme of Emerson’s life, and it came to him as a response to the death of his young wife Ellen. Emerson uses the language of redemption, regeneration, and revelation – terms for what we now call resilience” (27).

Like his friend Emerson, Thoreau finds solace and redemption in nature. In January 1842, the latter’s brother John died at the age of 27. In his seemingly insurmountable grief, Thoreau spent many hours talking with Emerson (and no one else). Most of his time, however, he spent in nature, striving to learn its language, as it were. Finally appreciating the implications of the notion that while individuals die, nature lives on, Thoreau, Richardson argues, is capable of using the deaths of his brother and of Emerson’s son Waldo in order to emotionally connect “him more solidly than ever with nature, with the rivers, the fields, and the forest” (42). The author advances the idea that the real turning point for Thoreau was “the turn from seeing the world made up of irreplaceable individuals to seeing it as a huge whole of which everything and everyone is just a tiny piece” (43). Like Emerson, Thoreau understood that death is a necessary part of life, and that we can use our grief and utter devastation in order to change our thought and project ourselves into the future. As the author correctly points out, however, Thoreau went further by developing “an anti-anthropomorphic, nature-centered vision of how things are” (61). This combination of a radically new conception of subjectivity and an ecological worldview would, of course, culminate in *Walden, or, Life in the Woods*.

In his intellectual biography of William James, *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism*, Richardson uses the first part (“Growing up ZigZag”) to describe the young James.¹

He was difficult, disoriented, fickle, as brooding as too many European intellectuals, and often sick. Richardson also uses one

chapter to tell his readers about the death of Minny Temple. The latter was James's cousin, and her death devastated him. She died of tuberculosis in March 1870, when she was 24. Her death is also central to the part that discusses James's conversion and resilience in Richardson's new book. A few weeks after Minny's death, the young James, already a truly troubled man, experienced a panic attack and had a horrific vision, a revelation that he wrote about in his journal and that he would later use in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*. One evening, "a horrible fear of [his] own existence" (85) fell upon him. He felt defenseless and painfully exposed to the insecurity of life. According to Richardson, "Minny's death set the terms in which William described the attack as an 'experience' that 'had a religious bearing'" (87). In order to understand Richardson's argument, it is crucial to note that only a few weeks after his cousin's death and his terrible vision, James, after reading Renouvier, writes in his journal about his firm decision to believe in free will. This also signifies, as the author correctly maintains, that "James already understands the immense power of action – acting – as well as the power of habit" (88). The author uses the same journal entry to direct attention to what he thinks is James's main insight: "This conclusion – that life, meaning what is real and what is good, exists in the 'self-governing resistance of the ego to the world' – is the central insight, the pivotal moment of William James's life" (89). This Emersonian, and Nietzschean, insight plays an important role for the development of pragmatism, and particularly for an appreciation of the relationship between Romanticism and pragmatism. James's central insight arrived in the wake of Minny Temple's death. However, Richardson writes that the "reason for the resilience shown here is not clear. What is clear is that William either already had or quickly acquired the resilience needed to get out of the long, depressed state of mind [...]" (92).

Richardson is in perfect command of his material, creating a montage of letters and journal entries that brings his readers closer to the lives of Emerson, Thoreau, and James. As the author intended, after having read his book one does think of these American intellectuals as "fellow human beings" (xviii). As readers, we are tempted to agree with Richardson when he

advances the argument that “the resilience we sometimes feel in ourselves is in truth a universal law or force, discernable anywhere one looks. Resilience is part of the nature of things” (97). As I have said, *Three Roads Back* is a small book, and because of the author’s chosen method of documentary biography at least half of his book consists of quotations. In his previous three biographies, Richardson showed that he was an elegant stylist. Because of his method in this book, his writing only occasionally shows former elegance. Too often he just uses a few sentences to link two quotations. One would have preferred if in his final book Richardson had given his position somewhat more contour and had accentuated his writing style and its significance for the task of composing intellectual biographies.

A decidedly more important shortcoming of this book is that the author never discusses or mentions that the narrative that he tells in his book also has to be regarded as an important part of the prehistory of pragmatism, and particularly of the endeavor to elucidate to what degree pragmatism is a form of humanism. Resilience, as the author demonstrates in his chapter on James, is intimately linked to “the immense power of action—acting” (88). In other words, Emerson, Thoreau, and James’s notions of resilience have to do with humans’ contingent actions in a historical world that is not yet postmetaphysical, but whose metaphysical foundations have begun to crumble. The story that Richardson tells in his book can be useful to one seeking to appreciate that only pragmatism as humanism can teach the full implications and consequences of the idea that humans have no duty to anything nonhuman and that the only way for them to get beyond their current practices is to creatively imagine better and more useful practices.

Three Roads Back tells a narrative about how three American intellectuals coped with devastating losses and tragedies. However, I think one should also see this narrative in a broader framework by realizing its significance for the modern antifoundationalist and humanist story of progress and emancipation. This story, from Vico, the Romantics, Nietzsche, James, and F.C.S. Schiller to Dewey and Rorty, shows that instead of trying to converge to the antecedently real and true and being adequate to the real, the human subject ought to

understand the far-reaching meaning of the development from finding to making. The idea, and the act, of finding implies that one sees the world as a conversational partner; the latter offers one candidates for belief and it eventually confirms whether those beliefs or sentences correspond to reality. In other words, the act of finding is metaphysical insofar as it forces one to differentiate between the way the world is and the way we describe it. By contrast, the modern antifoundationalist story of progress strives to show that the act of making, the creativity of action, is all we have and need. Instead of asking ourselves whether there are truths out there that we still have to find or discover, we would ask whether it would not be more stimulating to invent new ways of speaking and acting. In a de-divinized and postmetaphysical culture, as particularly Rorty showed, the act of making is intimately tied to the power of the imagination.

The pragmatist and humanist story of progress and emancipation focuses on the contingent development of humans as natural and historical creatures and as creative self-fashioners under particular enviroing conditions. In his book, Richardson does the same, but he refrains from drawing attention to the significance of the prehistory of pragmatism for an appreciation of the complexity of modern American thought. Undoubtedly, this was not his primary concern, but I wish he would have used the opportunity to discuss this important question in a conclusion. In spite of these shortcomings, however, there are passages in Richardson's book that demonstrate why one has to count him among the most important authors of intellectual biographies in the US.

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¹ Robert D. Richardson, *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007).

RELATED SCHOLARLY PUBLICATIONS ON WILLIAM JAMES

August 2023-April 2024



In recognition of the fact that James scholars are publishing articles in other academic journals, the editors believe that it is important to keep our readers informed of the diversity within James scholarship by drawing attention to relevant publications outside of WJS. This section of the journal aims to provide articles that address the life, work, and influence of James's thought. If you have recently published a peer-reviewed article on James or have noticed an omission from this list, please contact our Periodicals Editor, Jordan Williamson at periodicals@williamjamesstudies.org and we will include it at the next opportunity.



Berkovich, Rotem, and Nachshon Meiran. "Pleasant Emotional Feelings Follow One of the most Basic Psychophysical Laws (Weber's Law) as most Sensations do." *Emotion (Washington, D.C.)*, vol. 23, no. 5, 2023, pp. 1213-1223.

Emotion episodes may include a conscious aspect of the emotion, namely being aware of our own emotional experience. Despite explosion in research over previous years, it remains unclear how emotions reach awareness and become feelings. Already in 1884, William James argued that emotional feelings resemble ordinary sensations in this respect. Here, using a novel model-based ratio scale of emotion intensity, we provide one of the strongest pieces of evidence supporting James' perceptual theory by showing that emotion awareness obeys one of the most fundamental laws of perception, Weber's law. According to this law, stimulus encoding accuracy decreases with intensity. In this work, we asked participants to provide binary pleasant-versus-unpleasant reports of their experience when watching normed emotion-eliciting pictures (NAPS; Marchewka et al., 2014). The results validate our model's measure of emotion intensity by showing its monotonous relation to picture norms. Most importantly, they show, for the first time, that in humans, pleasant emotion experiences follow Weber's classical psychophysical law-indicating decreased encoding precision with increasing pleasantness. This result supports James' theory, suggesting that (pleasant) emotions reach awareness just as ordinary sensations do.

Braaksma, Ymko. "Taking Pragmatism Seriously enough: Toward a Deeper Understanding of the British Debate Over Pragmatism, Ca. 1900–1910." *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 85, no. 1, 2024, pp. 65-86.

Classical pragmatism has often been branded as being primarily a new theory of truth. Using F.C.S. Schiller's response to an article written by F.H. Bradley, I show that, in fact, a certain theory of thought is the essential point of pragmatism according to Schiller as well as John Dewey and William James. I go on to argue that without taking this theory of thought into account we cannot properly understand the British reception of classical pragmatism in the early 1900s. I illustrate the significance of this contention by criticizing the responses to pragmatism given by Bertrand Russell and G.E. Moore.

Dadaian, Anna. "Jung and James." *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*, 2023.

This paper draws parallels between William James' thought and Carl Gustav Jung's work in *Psychological Types*, showing that both provided epistemologies that strived to redefine the notion of scientific objectivity to incorporate the realm of psychological experience. Jung generally admired James' pragmatism and his pluralistic vision. He shared James' idea that philosophical (and, therefore, epistemological) positions were ultimately expressions of certain psychological attitudes, which meant that a psychological typology could be used to account for the "personal equations" of philosophers, scientists, and psychologists in particular. It will be shown that Jung borrowed from James the idea of a psychological typology as an epistemological method, which he believed would ensure a more complete understanding of scientific objectivity. Parallels will then be drawn between Jung's notion of the "problem of opposites" and James' concept of the "divided self," both of which were resolved through religion. Crucially, for both Jung and James, expanding the borders of science to include psychology also meant incorporating religious experience. Finally, this paper argues that Jung's epistemological project in *Psychological Types* effectively expanded on James'

pragmatism by synthesising various elements of James's thought – pluralism, the personal equation, typology, and the divided self – into one epistemological framework. Jung's work thus provides an important case study for the history of pragmatism.

Hackett, J. E. "Radical Empiricism as Naturalistic Phenomenology Vs. Non-Naturalistic Phenomenology of Max Scheler." *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, vol. 37, no. 4, 2023, pp. 503-544.

In this article, the author wishes to defend a naturalistic version of phenomenology rooted in and expropriated from William James's radical empiricism against Max Scheler's non-naturalistic phenomenology. By drawing from Jack Reynolds's arguments for a minimal phenomenology, the author posits that radical empiricism is a middle way between the misguided self-sufficiency of transcendental phenomenology and the misguided self-sufficiency of ontological naturalism. The orthodox reading of Scheler as a dualist is found problematic, and in outlining four propositions characteristic of Scheler's positions, the author motivates resources from Jamesian thought to argue for the superiority of a naturalistic phenomenology.

Houston, Sam. "The "Metaphysical Monster" and Muslim Theology: William James, Sherman Jackson, and the Problem of Black Suffering." *American Journal of Islam & Society (Online)*, vol. 40, no. 3-4, 2023, pp. 6-40.

By placing Blackamerican Muslim theologian Sherman A. Jackson's work, especially his *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering*, in conversation with the work of American pragmatist William James, I explore the pragmatic dimensions of Islamic thought through an examination of Jackson's account of classical Islamic theology put forward in response to the problem of Black suffering. In doing so, I argue that Jackson's account both parallels and challenges a Jamesian account of

religion. It parallels James in that it speaks of the “practical effectiveness” of the “web of beliefs” constituting Islamic doctrines of God in inculcating certain habits of seeing and acting in the world that best deal with the challenges of “black experience”; however, in this process, the category of “experience” itself and its role in the verification of belief is thoroughly interrogated. In his critical engagement with Black philosopher of religion William R. Jones, Jackson exposes the uncritical role played by “experience” in Jones’ thought, a charge which will be made of James as well. In making this argument about Jackson, I hope to provide an example of a Muslim theologian who makes explicit the pragmatic dimensions of religious doctrine, demonstrating that thick theological discourse can be practical.

Kiverstein, Julian, and Giuseppe Flavio Artese. "The Experience of Affordances in an Intersubjective World." *Topoi*, 2023.

Rizzo, Mario J. "The Antipaternalist Psychology of William James." *Behavioural Public Policy*, 2023.

Schmidt, Bettina E., and Kate Stockly. "The Fruits of Spiritual Experiences during the Pandemic: COVID-19 and the Effects of Non-Ordinary Experiences." *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society (Online)*, vol. 23, no. 8, 2023, pp. 1-29.

This paper presents new research about spiritual experiences during the COVID -19 pandemic. The aim is to discuss the impact of spiritual experiences on people’s lives and relationships. Building upon William James’ four features of the “fruits” of religious experience as a conceptual frame, the paper presents data from two surveys in which participants narrated spiritual experiences and reflected on the impacts of those experiences. We start with a short presentation of James’ ideas

about the fruits of religious experience. The next section outlines four themes that have emerged from the narratives of spiritual experiences during the pandemic: impacts on people's relationships with their religious communities, shifts in one's subjective sense of spiritual connection and intuition, encounters with spiritual figures and near-death experiences, and interpretations of COVID -19 as a spiritual contagion. The final section broadens the discussion from the impact of specific spiritual experiences to include spiritual responses to the pandemic more generally, leading to a discussion of the experiences within the wider debate in fruits of religious experience.

Thomas, Emily. "The Specious Present in English Philosophy 1749-1785: Theories and Experiments in Hartley, Priestley, Tucker, and Watson." *Philosophers' Imprint*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2023.

Drawing on the 1870s-1880s work of Shadworth Hodgson and Robert Kelly, William James famously characterised the specious present as 'the short duration of which we are immediately and incessantly sensible'. Literature on the pre-history of late nineteenth century specious present theories clusters around the work of John Locke and Thomas Reid, and I argue it is incomplete. The pre-history is missing an interconnected group of English philosophers writing on the present between 1749 and 1785: David Hartley, Joseph Priestley, Abraham Tucker, and William Watson. With William Herschel, Watson even conducted experiments to determine the limits of human temporal perception. These thinkers do not appear in the specious present literature, or broader historical surveys of temporal consciousness. Yet this paper shows that they all produced important work on our experience of the present, variously defending theses that can be found in subsequent specious present theories. It argues their texts reward study, and may have influenced later theorists; contextualises the

nineteenth century theories of James and others; and pushes back the start date of the 'standard history' of micro time by over half a century.