William James Studies
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William James and Moral Objectivity

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William James wrote, “I cannot understand the willingness to act, no matter how we feel, without the belief that acts are really good or bad.” I intend to defend that belief, but I shall first consider briefly the use James made of his claim. He continued, “I cannot understand the belief that an act is bad, without regret at its happening. I cannot understand regret without the admission of real, genuine possibilities in the world. Only *then* is it other than mockery to feel, after we have failed to do our best, that an irreparable opportunity is gone from the universe, the loss of which it must forever mourn.” [1] Though James’ premise asserts that a belief in moral objectivity is indispensable to moral effort, the point of his argument is that indeterminism is indispensable to moral objectivity, but that matters, in this context, only because a belief in moral objectivity is indispensable to moral effort. When James speaks of acts being really good or bad, he has at least the following

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two conditions in mind. (1) An act is really good or bad, if it makes a difference to how the world will be as a result of that act being done or not done. That is, of course, entirely compatible with determinism, and in this sense many things that are not actions —for example, earthquakes —are bad, and we regret that they happen. But when James speaks of regret here, he really means remorse. (2) Ultimately, for James, an act is really good or bad only if the agent has done, or failed to do, his or her best, has made, or failed to make, the maximum moral effort. For James, the latter condition requires that we have free will, that it is up to us whether we make that effort. I want to put that issue aside. In practice, when we engage in moral reflection, whether in daily life or as philosophers, we take it for granted that our sense of making choices, of being responsible for our decisions, is not an illusion.

Psychologically speaking, it is, however, not sufficient to believe that one's action will make a difference, one must also believe that the difference one's action will make *matters*, that the world will be, in however small a way, better if one chooses one way and worse if one chooses another. If one thinks that it does not matter at all, one might as well flip a coin rather than deliberate. If one believes that it matters only in one's own estimation, one succumbs more easily to the temptation not to do what one believes to be one's duty. For one form that temptation can take is just the thought that it is, after all, only one's own 'subjective' judgment that is one's reason for doing what one also feels like NOT doing. One might, for example, say to oneself, "I am much too good-hearted; I always think I ought to do something for others when no one else in my position would think so." Compatibilists as well as indeterminists can agree that, practically speaking, we must take the judgments that guide our conduct to be more than mere feelings on our part, if we are ever to withstand serious temptation. For when we succumb to the temptation NOT to do what we believe to be our duty, we tend to tell ourselves in some way or other that what we fail to do was not really our duty.

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James argued for the view that it is not irrational to believe, as he himself did, in a world in which it is not a foregone conclusion whether one will do one's duty or not. Precisely that we can choose to obey or violate a moral norm gives the norm its point. Conversely, I claim, the norm's objectivity gives the choice its point. James would have agreed; he addressed the question of the objectivity of moral judgments, in particular of moral norms, in "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral

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Life."[2] I don't intend to discuss this complex and very interesting essay in detail; I have done that elsewhere.[3] Here I am interested only in what James has to say about the truth or objectivity of moral judgments.

I

In the very first paragraph of his essay, James tells us that,"ï¿½ there can be no final truth in ethics any more than there can be in physics, until the last man has had his experience and said 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' will be." (141) For an indeterminist like James, the hypotheses we now make and the acts we now do, are not fated, thus neither is the course of future inquiry. Nevertheless, one might hold that experience will inexorably force humanity to one final truth, at least in the physical sciences. Charles Sanders Peirce, James' friend and co-founder of Pragmatism held that view—whether James shared it is debatable. In any case, James tends to be less interested in the Final Truth than in the many truths that make up our present beliefs. Concerning these, James considered it entirely possible that human beings might have developed, quite different systems of concepts to deal with their experiences, and thus that we might have developed quite different scientific theories. 4

Here I would like to add—James does not make this point, and I do not claim that he would agree or disagree with it—that the kinds of scientific questions we ask, the kinds of research we pursue, thus the hypotheses we examine and the theories we develop are determined by our interests, or in present day circumstances, more precisely by where the interests of scientists intersect with the interests of those who provide the funding for research projects. I do not, of course, deny the existence and value of pure science. The human interest in knowing for the sake of knowing, in pursuing disinterested research, is precious in itself and, as everyone should know, although funding agencies sometimes forget it, without progress in pure science, progress in applied science will soon come to a halt. Finally, as Hilary Putnam has pointed out repeatedly, what theories we take seriously depends, in part, on such cognitive values as simplicity and elegance, as well as more generally on what we take to be reasonable. This dependence of the truth, even in physics, on 5

human ingenuity and human interest, will make, even in physics, a difference to the final truth, or, as I would prefer to say, to what our descendants will in the future take to be the best theories.	
Here some philosophers will object that objectivity requires that the truth be radically independent of what human beings think and do. And since physics is our paradigm of objectivity, my account of physics must be incorrect. And they would even question James' more limited claim that we might have developed an alternative equally adequate conceptual system. In contrast, these philosophers may well accept the parallel claims James makes with respect to ethics. He claims that whatever the point of morality may be—whatever the goal that it is to enable us to reach more successfully, as medicine is to enable us to live longer and healthier lives—both our conception of that goal and the manner in which we shall attempt to realize it will depend on what human beings now take to be that goal and what they now take to be their duties in its service. Just as future scientific theories depend not only on today's successful research but also on today's failures, so future conceptions of the moral life will depend not only on our moral victories but also on our moral defeats.	6
Philosophers who accept this characterization of the future of our moral conceptions but not the analogous claims with respect to physics, will use it as a basis for one or another form of non-cognitivism. James' task and mine will be to argue (in section II) that this dependence on human thought and action is as unavoidable in physics as it is in ethics, and (in section III) that it is as compatible with objectivity in the case of ethics as it is in the case of physics.	7
II	
Let us, temporarily, turn to the situation in present day philosophy. In "Pragmatism and Nonscientific Knowledge"[4] Hilary Putnam has pointed out that no meaning can be given to the idea of knowledge independent of what human beings think and do. I would put it this way: The only kind of knowledge we can have is human knowledge, which is, whatever other conditions it has to satisfy, something human beings think, hence NOT something independent of what human	8

beings think and do. Moreover, the subject matter of this knowledge is also on the whole and in many details causally dependent on what human beings believe and do. Since we and our actions and the effects of our actions are all part of reality, they are part of what objective statements are about.

Considering another claim made by some philosophers, namely, that the truth of objective statements is independent of actual or possible warranted assertibility, Hilary Putnam points out that, given this notion of objectivity, statements about particulars that can be perceived by human beings fail to be objective. For, given the appropriate conditions, true statements about perceivable particulars will be warrantedly assertible. Apparently, philosophers who make the claims just criticized do not mean that objective statements need to be conceptually independent from human practices and beliefs. What then does "independence" mean? 9

For an answer let us turn to a philosopher who seems to be willing to accept the consequences of Hilary Putnam's argument. Bernard Williams is prepared to say that facts concerning human beings and facts concerning particulars that can be perceived by human beings are not entirely objective. His notion of the "absolute conception" of the world includes, he says, the concepts of physics but not *green*, and probably not *grass*. "It will be a conception consisting of non-perspectival materials available to any adequate investigator, of whatever constitution, and it will also help to explain to us, though not necessarily to those alien investigators, such things as our capacity to grasp that conception."[5] 10

If anything is non-perspectival, the fundamental concepts of physics are non-perspectival. The absolute conception, whatever else it might contain (how does it help to explains our capacity to grasp it?), will contain the fundamental laws of physics. That might explain why physics, understood as a compendium of the most fundamental laws of nature, is taken as the paradigm of objectivity. I do not object to taking physics as *a* paradigm of objectivity provided we recognize both that it is not the only paradigm and that physics is not a compendium of the laws of nature, whatever that may be. Physics is, at any given time, a compendium of what is at that time our (best) knowledge of the laws of nature. But our knowledge, I need not remind you, is a subset of what 11

we think. I conclude that what we now take to be the best scientific opinion and what we will take to be that opinion in the future depends not only on what the universe is like but on what we are like, what thoughts we have, what questions we ask, and how we interpret the answers that our experiments provide.	
To forestall possible misunderstandings, I want to make quite clear that the arguments against Williams are my arguments against a philosopher writing in the late twentieth century. My thinking is influenced by James, but I do not ascribe these arguments to him. Moreover, although Williams is clearly influenced by C.S. Peirce, Peirce, in my opinion, avoids the mistakes Williams makes. Thus my arguments are not arguments against Peirce. [6] Finally, nothing in my argument depends on accepting or rejecting Peirce's robust realism with respect to laws of nature, nor on the extent of James' agreement or disagreement with this.[7]	12
The objectivity of physical science rests not on a radical independence from human thought and action but, on the one hand, on the crucial role played by experience, by the interactions of human beings with the world, in anchoring the web of theory, and on the other hand, on the manner in which science is conducted, viz. that scientists are ever ready to revise their theories in the light of new and inassimilable experience and that science is a democratically structured cooperative enterprise. Both the democratization of inquiry and fallibilism are regulative ideals. Science is objective to the extent that it realizes these ideals and because it rests on experience. But what underwrites the objectivity of ethics? Where do our values come from?	13
III	14
James replies, and here he seems to play right into the hands of non-cognitivists, that in a world without minds, without minded beings, there are no values. It would not make sense to say concerning a world that could be completely described by physics and chemistry alone that one of its states was better than another. "The moment one sentient being, however, is made a part of the universe, " James writes, "there is a chance for goods and evils really to exist." Things are good if that being thinks that they are good, but it would be "absurd to raise the question	15

whether the solitary thinker's judgments 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. Let us call the supposed universe which he inhabits a *moral solitude.*"(146).

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Next, James considers a world with many sentient beings that are, however, indifferent to one another. This is a world, he writes, "in which individual minds are the measure of all things, in which no one 'objective' truth, but only a multitude of 'subjective' opinions can be found." Concerning such a world James writes, "Not only is there no single point of view within it from which the values of things can be unequivocally judged, but there is not even a demand for such a point of viewï¿½" (147). Objectivity, a "standard outside the thinker" will arise only if there is a demand for it. And such a demand will arise only if the sentient beings in the universe, rather than being indifferent to one another, respond to one another's demands. James writes, "Wherever [actually living] minds exist, with judgments of good and ill, and demands upon one another, there is an ethical world in its essential features. Were all other things, gods and men and starry heavens blotted out from this universe, and were there left but one rock with two loving souls upon it, that rock would have as thoroughly moral a constitution as any possible world which the eternities and immensities could harborï¿½ There would be real good things and real bad things in the universe; there would be obligations, claims, and expectations; obediences, refusals, and disappointments; compunctions and longings for harmony to come again, and inward peace of conscience when it was restored; there would, in short, be a moral life, whose active energy would have no limit but the intensity of interest in each other with which the hero and heroine might be endowed." (150)

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This is both immensely appealing and extremely mysterious. It is immensely appealing because it explains in one stroke not only our collective need for an objective morality but also our individual motivation to live by that morality. But to say this is to rush to conclusions that have not yet been established. Consider these questions:

> *(a) How does the mere fact that some of us, perhaps most of us, care to a greater or lesser extent for some others produce a moral life?*
>
> *(b) How does that same fact introduce a demand for an objective standpoint, and how is that demand met?*

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The answers to these questions, to the extent that one can answer them, are based, for James, on one crucial observation. He asserts, " ï¿½ without a claim actually made by some concrete person there can be no obligation, but there is some obligation wherever there is a claim. Claim and obligation are, in fact, coextensive terms; they cover each other exactly."(148) Now, at first blush this seems false. Is it not possible for someone who takes absolutely no interest in other human beings to have desires? Might such a person not desire rain or sunshine, to be healthy or to be dead? But who would have the corresponding obligations? I believe that James' answer must be that though such a person has desires, they are not addressed to anyone, hence they are not claims. However, James himself does not seem to have considered this case; in fact, he slides too easily from desires to demands to obligations, as when he writes, "Any desire is imperative to the extent of its amount; it *makes* itself valid by the fact that it exists at all. 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. But the fact that such personal demands as these impose small obligations does not keep the large obligations from being personal demands." (149) I am not at all sure that small desires are desires put forth by insignificant persons, even Queen Victoria had small as well as large desires. And clearly, as James well knew at other moments even in the same essay, insignificant persons can have desires that make demands on the whole world, consider, for example, demands for food by the victims of famine. In fact, James's use of the expression "insignificant person" is unfortunate; he must have meant to say, "persons who seem to us to be insignificant."[8] For, on the one hand, the Pragmatist insistence on the democratization of inquiry entails

that every human being be considered significant. And, on the other hand, James ably and passionately defends the significance of every human being in "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings" and "What Makes a Life Significant."[9]	
We live neither in a moral solitude, nor in a moral multiverse, i.e. a universe of beings that are totally disinterested in one another. However, we also do not live in a world of ideally benevolent creatures; thus when A makes a demand of B, B may refuse to recognize the obligation. Now that, by itself, does not undermine anything James says, for the obligation created by A's demand may well be overridden by other more stringent obligations incumbent upon B. Or, again, B may consider A's demand to be outrageous, reject it peremptorily. This too may be a part of the moral life. What is not part of the moral life, if James is right, is this: B does not even acknowledge that A has made a demand, or, to put it another way, B does not acknowledge that A is the type of entity that makes demands. B does not acknowledge A as a member of the moral community. Some people have this attitude toward animals of all kinds; most of us have it toward some animals. Some people, alas, have it toward some other human beings. Racism, anti-Semitism, intense tribalisms of all kinds produce wholesale an inability to recognize the humanity of the other. We have seen and continue to see all too often the horrifying effects of this.	19
I take it then that the answer to my first question—how does the fact that most of us care for some others produce a moral life?—is that people who acknowledge each other's existence as human beings will make claims upon each other and experience these claims as imposing obligations, and that just is to form a moral community, and to live in such a community just is to live a moral life. In other words, there can be a moral life only where people recognize each other as fellow members of a moral community, and wherever there is such recognition, there is a moral community. Two souls that love each other are an easily imagined but also highly idealized example of what it is to recognize another as a member of the moral community. Perhaps "love" is the perfect word for this recognition, but I think, rather, that the word "love" should be reserved for perfect recognition, at any rate in the sense of "love" in which we are to love our neighbors as ourselves.	20
Let us probe James' answer a bit more deeply. The question "what makes a moral life possible?" is open to two readings. It might mean: What must the world	21

be like for morality to be possible, or it might mean what must people feel in order to be motivated to be moral. Consider the first interpretation. We saw earlier that for James one necessary condition for morality is indeterminism, although many philosophers attempt to show that determinism is compatible with moral responsibility. But we are now interested in a second condition. The opposite of a moral solitude is simply a world in which people have relations to one another, they need not in any sense love each other.[10] People who interact with one another both cooperatively and competitively may not care for each other, but they will care, if they are at all rational, to establish norms that will regulate competition and make cooperation fruitful. In such a world morality is possible, indeed it is what rationality requires. We know all too well, however, that if the sole motivation for abiding by the norms is one's own self-interest, or some other strong ego-centric feelings, then problems of compliance abound, ranging from the problem of the freeloader to the resort to violence when the norms do not appear to favor one's cause. James does not envisage such a Hobbesian world, and thus we are lead to the second interpretation of the question "what makes a moral life possible?" namely, what will make us do our duty no matter how we feel? James' answer is that what moves us to do our duty, if we are so moved, is simply the fact that we recognize it to be our duty, and that, James says, means that we recognize someone's demands as establishing an obligation. But now, inevitably, there will be conflicting demands made, and thus we face conflicting obligations. That conflict gives rise to the demand for an objective standpoint. So we have answered the first part of our second question, namely, how does the mere fact that some of us care for some others produce a demand for an objective standpoint? The mere fact that some of us recognize the demands of others as imposing duties on us gives rise to the need for a point of view from which conflicts of duties can be bindingly adjudicated.[11] We must now turn to the second part of the second question: how is that demand met?

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Here, even more than up to this point, I must admit that my exegesis has little direct support in the text. At this point in the essay, James says, in effect, the following. Here we are in a world in which people share a number of values (he calls them ideals) but where there is no agreement about many others. It is also a world in which not all ideals can be realized, nor all demands satisfied. As philosophers, James holds, we are obliged to believe that there is a best order of

our obligations, or of our ideals (he says both) and that "there is a truth to be ascertained." However, James believes to have established that "that truth cannot be a self-proclaiming set of laws, or an abstract 'moral reason,' but can exist only in act, or in the shape of an opinion of some thinker really to be found." (151) Clearly, no one person's opinion, nor even the consensus of any number of people, will do. One person would simply dogmatize, and James prefers moral chaos to that. A consensus, on the other hand, is represented at any given time in any given place by what John Dewey was to call customary morality. James is quite willing to grant that customary morality has the presumption of correctness in its favor, just as our favored current physical theory has the analogous presumption in its favor. But in both cases the presumption is defeasible, as progress in science on the one hand and moral change on the other demonstrate. James is looking for a criterion by which to judge actual moral judgments by how they work out in practice. And he believes to have found it; he believes that it follows quite simply from the fact that everything demanded is a good that we should try to satisfy as many demands as possible. Or, as he also says, those ideals must be written highest which "prevail at the least cost." (155) All this is quite enigmatic, and this is not the place to try to unpack it. I tried to do that in as sympathetic a manner as I could in the essays mentioned in note 3.	
Here I shall be less generous. I want to point out that James does not offer any guidelines for weighing demands against each other, although he speaks of weaker and stronger demands. Neither does James tell us how to compare ideals, or how to count claims. James urges us to maximize something (the number of demands met) or to minimize something (the number of ideals frustrated), but since he holds that there is no common denominator to which goods, or demands, or ideals, can be reduced—and I think he is right about that—James leaves us with exhortations rather than an account of "the standard outside the thinker" that is required for truth.	**23**
Nevertheless I believe, and here I am frankly speculating, that, on the basis of James' insistence that the moral universe requires mutuality, we can construct a kind of answer to the second question. We may, for example, recall Kant's explanation that treating others as ends is to make their ends our own. Treating others' demands as imposing an obligation on me seems to me something very	**24**

much like, if not identical with, treating others as ends. If I make your ends my own and you make my ends your own, then we now have the same ends and we can come to a reasoned agreement on how to prioritize these ends, which need to be sacrificed for which others, and how to go about achieving those ends that survive the pruning. This may sound easy, but in practice it is an ideal toward which we strive, and should strive, but which we never wholly achieve. Nevertheless, we may borrow from political philosophy the idea that, as I said above, it is in our interest to establish norms, call them norms of justice, that will regulate our cooperation and our competition. If so, we can also envisage, for example in the manner of John Rawls,[12] rules of procedure that will enable us to sit down and reason together in order to arrive at these norms. I don't wish to push this too hard, however. I merely want to adapt the Rawlsian idea of the original position to the search for an objective point of view. I am suggesting that whenever, given a problem of conflicting moral or political demands, people sit down and reason together to find a solution fair to all parties, there you find moral objectivity. James was very much aware of the fact that as we include more and more people in the circle of those with whom we are willing to reason, and to whose reasons we are willing to listen, we make moral progress. (We may make even further progress if we include other sentient beings in the moral community. I shall not explore that possible development here). Given this understanding, we can now give another interpretation to James' assertion that the final word in ethics must await the last man's say. It is not, absurdly, that the last surviving human being will be the ultimate moral authority, it is rather this. The opinion which emerges from our moral and social experiments and our discussions will not even have a chance to be final, in the sense that subsequent experience will not force us to revise it, unless every last human being is acknowledged to be a member of the moral community and has been given the opportunity to participate on equal terms in the moral conversation. Of course, in the real world, even if we could establish a humanity wide moral democracy, and even if that moral democracy were to achieve consensus, no consensus would be final. The world keeps changing, new opportunities for human flourishing and new obstacles, new problems, will arise; new answers will have to be explored.

IV

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After a long and roundabout route we seem to be forced to conclude that, for James, the standard outside the thinker that truth in ethics requires is the opinion arrived at by fair discussion among all interested parties, meaning, ultimately, all of humanity. This conclusion needs to be modified. First, I seem to ascribe to James either a Rawlsian or Scanlonian contractualism or a Habermasian discourse ethics. I don't intend to do that—the text under consideration does not provide a sufficient basis for such an ascription. Neither do his writings on ethics in his later works. While I am suggesting that contractualism or discourse ethics provides one interpretation of the Jamesean appeal to people taking an interest in each other, acknowledging the validity of each other's claims, I believe that something less formal, more grounded in our actual lives, is closer to James' own thinking. Secondly, the discussion so far suggests that there is a single correct answer to every moral question, but that view is incompatible with James' passionate defense of pluralism and tolerance. I need to interrupt this discussion of "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" to correct the erroneous impression I may have created.

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The opening sentence of the "The Moral Philosopher and The Moral Life" by insisting that "the last man" must be allowed to "have his experience and say his say" points out *inter alia* that both in physics and in ethics we are fallible; hence we can never know that a belief of ours in either ethics or physics will not be successfully challenged in the future. In physics, fallibilism was fully accepted even in James' day and continues to be so. In ethics, on the other hand, both dogmatism and skepticism flourished then and do so now. Yet it is surely evident that people who believe that they have the final truth in ethics cause far more harm than anyone might who would proclaim to have the final truth in physics. James rejected moral skepticism out of hand; he responded to dogmatism with a sustained defense of tolerance for a variety of ethical views, as long those views were not themselves intolerant.[13]

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The sort of moral pluralism I have described must not be confused with moral relativism. Michele Moody-Adams' brilliant discussion of the failures of what she, following Bernard Williams, calls the relativism of distance makes clear how a commitment to that view makes it equally impossible to account for the persistence of chattel slavery in the United States for decades after its abolition in the British

Empire, and to explain its ultimate abolition.[17] Relativism disables us not only intellectually but also morally. By providing a fig leaf of intellectual respectability for moral laziness, it weakens our resolve to oppose inhumane practices in other cultures, for example, female circumcision, even when we know that certain members of that very culture are desperately trying to abolish the practice. [18]

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In contrast, precisely because moral pluralists are willing to learn from other ways of life, they are also prepared to criticize those ways of life just as they are prepared to criticize their own. This willingness already implies that pluralists do not think of cultures as separated by impenetrable borders. Pluralists are not committed to saying that all ways of life are equally good, nor even that all ways of life are good. Some ways of life are atrocious, others have elements that are horrendous, and no way of life is as good as it might be. But what then happens to the idea of a "final truth" in ethics? I have already suggested that the reference to the last man's experience and say may be interpreted precisely in the spirit of pluralism as saying that in the search for the consensus that is to serve as our standard "outside the thinker" we must be sure to listen to all voices. Here I can imagine someone asking whether we must listen to the voices of the torturer, the lynch mob, the Nazi as well as the voices of their victims. While I am fully sensible of the temptation to say, "no, of course not", I want to argue against giving in to it. We need to know what makes one human being unable or unwilling to see and respect the humanity of another in order to learn to guard against any similar tendencies in ourselves. I said above that we will reject some claims made on us out of hand, and I distinguished that from not hearing the claim. Just so, we should hear the claims of the torturers but, of course, reject them out of hand.

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Pluralism does not, I trust it is needless to say, commit one to holding that there are no points of agreement even among people of good will. In fact, the idea of the final opinion, reinterpreted as the idea of a possible uncoerced agreement in ethics, is an important regulative ideal. It is an ideal that encourages us to seek agreement, to continue talking, to avoid needless provocation, to deeply distrust demands to use force. I am not prepared to say that the use of force is never justified, but the regulative ideal of moral agreement will place enormous moral hurdles in the path of such a justification. I have been told that the philosopher Roderick Firth held that the use of force was justified only if one was SURE that using force would cause less harm than refraining from it. Finally, it is important to see that searching

for moral agreement is not searching for a single way of life; it is rather searching for social arrangements that leave room for a variety of ways of human flourishing.

V

It is time to return to James' concern with actions being really good or bad. By answering the question, what makes a moral life possible, James answered one question he set himself, namely, the question of the meaning of terms like "good" and "right." He called this the metaphysical question, that is, he wanted to know what the terms "good" and "right" refer to. He answered, if I read him correctly, that they have meaning only in the context of a moral life. And for James, that may be as much as can be said. For there are many kinds of goods, even many kinds of moral goods. James praises the intuitionists for that insight, for resisting the reductionism of classical Utilitarianism. 30

His account of the moral life explained also how actions could be "really good or bad," for it was meant to establish the standard "outside the thinker" that is required for truth or objectivity. I have suggested that he found that standard in whatever results from cooperative moral inquiry. 31

Now someone might object that this is not a standard outside the thinker, that many thinkers, even the whole of humanity thinking, does not get us away from thinking, that is, from subjectivity. We encountered the analogous objection earlier with respect to physics. We answered then, as we must now, that there is no such thing as human knowledge without human thinking. In our earlier discussion I acknowledged that metaphysical realists insist that there are facts that are radically independent of human thinking, and I suggested that perhaps the laws of nature would fit that bill, although of course not our knowledge of those laws. Now, similarly, some philosophers have held that there are moral facts that are radically independent from what any human being may think; just as in the physics case, however, even if it were so, that would not make our knowledge of these facts independent of human thinking. Moreover, in the moral case, no candidates for radically independent moral facts come easily to mind. James concludes his search for the meaning (that is, the referents) of moral terms thus. "They mean no absolute natures, independent of personal support. They are objects of feeling and desire, 32

which have no foothold or anchorage in Being, apart from the existence of actual living minds." (p. 150).

But now another objection may be raised against the account of moral objectivity given so far. We saw, in the physics case, that the content of our best theories depended in part on cognitive and even moral value judgments made in the course of inquiry. The total web of our beliefs includes both descriptions of facts and value judgments, but the objection runs, the physical theory itself is not about values and the whole web of beliefs is anchored in experience, that is, in observation of facts. In the case of moral judgments, or a moral theory, not only does the process of inquiry include the making of value judgments, but the outcome of the inquiry —the moral theory or moral judgment —is itself about values. Moreover, continues the objection, there is nothing that corresponds in the moral case to experience in the physics case. To respond to this objection, one must tell a long story, a story about the perception of values. I have tried to tell that story elsewhere.[19] To fully defend the objectivity of moral judgments, James' account in the early essay that has been the focus of my attention must be supplemented both by James' later writings and by Dewey's much more detailed studies. I can only gesture here at one way one might proceed.	33
Consider this problem. Your friend has just undergone some rather unpleasant but not life-threatening surgery. You say to yourself that she would be cheered by a visit, and you conclude that you ought to go. But you really don't feel like going out again; you've had a hard day. Perhaps there is a compromise solution —you might talk to your friend on the telephone. You won't know, you can't know, whether you made the right choice until you've actually acted on it. Or perhaps, in this situation, one shouldn't speak of the right choice; it's rather a matter of a good choice. So, you go to visit your friend and you find her depressed, and you see her cheer up as your visit prolongs itself. Or, you go to visit your friend, and you find her surrounded by her mother, her sister, her fiancï¿½. Whatever made you think she would be lonely? What's more all they can talk about is your friend's upcoming wedding. You feel like a fool for coming out, and you leave quickly.	34
I use this example, trivial as it may seem, because it suggests another way in which a moral judgment can itself be evaluated, another way in which there is a standard outside the thinker. You had to decide what to do about your friend; you	35

couldn't discuss it with her. Well, of course, in retrospect, in the second scenario, you would have been better off if you had called her and asked her whether she wanted a visit. But in the first scenario that would not have been the thing to do; being already depressed, your friend might have understood you to say, "I don't want to visit you," which might well have been worse than just not visiting. In retrospect we say that, in the first scenario, what you did was good. Not that, in the second scenario, what you did was wrong, but it wasn't a good thing to do. Your solution to your first problem —to visit or not to visit —led you into a new problem —how to leave this happy bunch of people gracefully. You might have learned something from this experience, namely, to think more carefully about the whole situation in which your problem is embedded. I am trying to illustrate here how one might apply a Deweyan process of inquiry to a personal moral problem. For Dewey, what he called growth and I am inclined to call human flourishing tended to function as an important end-in-view. I am suggesting how, in my second scenario, you might grow as a result of your embarrassing experience.	
There is more to the moral life, I am suggesting, than moral judgment, there is action. Indeed, action is the point of many (not all) moral judgments. Action and experience are the two ways in which he web of our beliefs and our value judgments is anchored in the world. Experience is an interaction between us and the world, though at times the world's action appears to overwhelm ours, and conversely, every action is an experience, though the effect on the world may be vastly more important than the experience is for the agent.	**36**
Let us return, then, once more to James. The standard outside the thinker, whether it be for descriptions of fact or for value judgments—and, following John Dewey, I have argued more than once that no clear line can be drawn between those —is complex: it is made up of all of human experience as interpreted by human beings as the result of cooperative inquiry.	**37**
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Notes

[1] William James, “The Dilemma of Determinism” in his *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press, l979), 135.

[2] William James, “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” in *The Will to Believe*. Page references to this essay will hereafter be given in the text.

[3] “The Moral Life of a Pragmatist” in Owen Flanagan and Amelie Rorty (eds.) *Identity, Character, and Morality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, l990), 67-89; “Some of Life’s Ideals” in Ruth Anna Putnam (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to William James* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, l997), 282-299.

[4] Hilary Putnam, “Pragmatism and Nonscientific Knowledge” in James Conant and Urszula Zeglen (eds) *Hilary Putnam: Pragmatism and Realism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 14-24.

[5] Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, l985), 140.

[6] Specifically, Peirce distinguishes between beliefs whose objects are the laws of nature (an important part of the final opinion) and reality, the object of the final opinion, which includes the laws of nature understood not as mere Humean regularities but as real universals. The distinction between truth (a property of beliefs) and reality is clear in this remark. “The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate, is what we mean by the truth, and the object of this opinion is what we mean by the real.” “How to Make Our Ideas Clear” in Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, l935), vol V, ï¿½ 407-8)

[7] Not only do limitations of space prohibit an examination of this issue, it is not germane to my topic. I mention it only in response to a concern of one of the anonymous reviewers for this journal.

[8] I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for this journal for this reading of the phrase.

[9] In William James*, Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals* (Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1983).

[10] I owe this point to Graham Bird although it is not his point. He argues that the alternatives to a moral universe based on love or sympathy are manifold, that our own world, for example, is one in which we are keenly, but not necessarily sympathetically, aware of competition. Hence we need a criterion or standard to settle disputes. See Graham H. Bird, "Moral Philosophy and the Development of Morality" in *The Cambridge Companion to William James*, 263

[11] My argument in this section parallels James' answer to what he calls the metaphysical question, namely, what the words "good" and "bad" and "obligation" mean, that is, what they refer to. It also parallels accounts of the moral development of the child such as that given by Piaget. James' influence on Piaget by way of his friend Thï¿½odore Flournoy has recently been demonstrated by Michel Ferrari and Carol M. Okamoto in "Moral development as the personal education of feeling and reason: from James to Piaget" in *Journal of Moral Education*, vol. 32, No. 4 (2003): 341-354. Nevertheless one should be clear that James's account here is not a bit of developmental psychology.

[12] See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, l971) and *Political Liberalism*, (New York and Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, l993).

[13] See in particular his essays "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings" and "What makes a Life Significant" in his *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals* (Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1983).

[14] Nelson Goodman, *Ways of World Making* (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Co., l978).

[15] Rodger Kamenetz, *The Jew in the Lotus* (San Francisco: HarperCollins Paperback Edition, l995), 135.

[16] See William James, *Essays, Comments and Reviews* (Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press, l987), 81-86, 154-169, and 173-176.

[17] Michele Moody-Adams, *Fieldwork in Familiar Places: Morality, Culture and Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press, l997), 98. Moody-Adams argues that moral realists, relativists and anti-theorists like Richard Rorty all fail to account for the persistence of slavery in the New World; that persistence, she argues, should be attributed to "a widespread and morally culpable capacity to ignore willingly the suffering of human beings."

[18] For a more detailed and careful discussion of this example, see Michele Moody-Adams, *Fieldwork in Familiar Place*s, chapter 5. In particular, I agree with her warning, "In many cases, in fact, a refusal to contemplate internal criticism of some cultural tradition will make one not a respecter of culture but simply an agent — however unwitting —of traditional oppression and abuse." (214).

[19] "Perceiving Facts and Values." *Philosophy,* vol. 73, No.283 (l998): 5-19

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