

“THE SENTIMENT OF RATIONALITY”: WILLIAM JAMES AND THE SENTIMENTAL TRADITION

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This paper shows that William James borrowed a rhetorical framework from sentimental prose – both narrative and argumentative – which helped him grapple with novel problems in modern philosophy. The new direction I take to Jamesian studies is to place James into a context – sentimental culture – that can reveal to scholars how sentimental discourse influenced his thought, and how sentimental discourse might vibrate across pragmatism’s genealogy. I pay special attention to the philosophical tradition of moral sentimentalism and the literary tradition of sentimental fiction. Taken together, my efforts should help scholars to look at James anew – as a rhetorical innovator who borrowed narrative and argumentative tropes from the discursive environment available to him.



Traditional histories of pragmatism, such as H.S. Thayer's insightful *Meaning and Action: A Critical History of Pragmatism*, tend to privilege conventional philosophical genres over autobiography or literary fiction, leading to readings of William James that discount the literary and rhetorical features of his writing. Doing this not only minimizes the cultural complexity of James's thought, it also minimizes the influence of literary and rhetorical traditions on his writing. This essay will trace James's connection to the sentimental tradition. My argument brings together two strands of recent scholarship. The first includes those scholars – like Cornel West, Erin McKenna, and Richard Rorty – who address the literary and rhetorical features of James's writing, including his appreciation for irony, regard for the Romantic tradition, use of prophetic modes of expression, and emphasis on process narration (what McKenna characterizes as the “task of utopia”).¹ The second includes scholars like Jerome McGann, Shirley Samuels, and Dana Luciano, who have shown that the sentimental tradition is a de facto philosophical tradition, one governed by sophisticated rhetorical norms that transcend clear discursive divisions between prose, poetry, literature, pulp, philosophy, fiction, and nonfiction.²

My modest contribution here is to argue that James's pragmatism inherited the rhetorical framework of sentimental prose — both argumentative and narrative — and that he brought its formidable resources to bear on novel problems in modern philosophy. My aim isn't so much to view the philosophical as literary, but simply to place James into a specific literary and rhetorical context — the sentimental tradition — to help scholars analyze how sentimental discourse influenced his thought, and how sentimental discourse might vibrate across pragmatism's genealogy. Since a full analysis of James's writing is beyond the scope of this essay, I will focus on those texts most significant to pragmatism's development: *Pragmatism* and its sequel, *The Meaning of Truth*.

I will show that many features that distinguish James's style in these texts can be traced back to influential texts in the sentimental tradition. First, I will outline several key tropes in the writings of the

eighteenth-century moral sentimentalists, Ashton Ashley-Cooper, the 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, and Adam Smith, arguing that they constitute the rhetorical framework of *Pragmatism*. Next, I will explore the common tropes and narrative techniques of sentimental fiction to suggest that James is best understood as the “moderate narrator” of his own philosophical writings. Instead of conflating “William James,” the man, with “William James,” the narrator of his philosophical texts, it is better to recognize the rhetorical skill of William James, the author.

Influence is notoriously hard to establish, but we can be fairly certain that James read the central writers of the sentimental tradition. We know, for instance, that he taught Smith and most likely was familiar with Shaftesbury. James had a copy of Shaftesbury’s text in his library within Houghton Library.³ Given that he retired from Harvard in 1907, the year of the publication of *Pragmatism*, it is likely that he read Shaftesbury prior to its composition. Further, Robert Richardson, in *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism*, writes, “Benjamin Rand, who later did work on Shaftesbury...was James’s reader for Philosophy 2 [Logic and Psychology],” suggesting either that James guided Rand to Shaftesbury, or that Rand made the connection himself in relation to James’s instruction.⁴

The case of Smith is easier. First, Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is listed as having been found, with James’s notes, in his personal library.⁵ Second, in an October 14, 1888 letter to his brother, Henry James, he mentions “Adam Smith” as someone he is reading in preparation for “a big class in ethics” he would be offering.⁶ Lastly, Smith mentions Shaftesbury’s theory of affections in Part VII.II.52 of his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. It is also clear from James’s letters and known reading that the generic conventions and common themes of sentimental writing would have pervaded a large portion of his readerly universe.

TROPES FROM MORAL SENTIMENTALISM

Shaftesbury has gained increasing attention from scholars studying the development of 18th and 19th-century moral sentimentalism.

Elizabeth Eger has pointed out the importance of his writing to the Bluestocking Circle, a constellation of mostly female authors who exerted an enormous influence on the development of transatlantic cultures of sensibility and sentiment.⁷ Lawrence Klein has advanced new analyses of Shaftesbury's philosophical complexity, suggesting that his "philosophy of politeness" crystallized a discourse that would remain important in Anglophone writing for over a century, including specific constructions of the terms taste, virtue, adjustment, publicity, character, and politeness that usefully blur boundaries between ethics and aesthetics.⁸ In particular, Klein suggests that Shaftesbury, like James, bemoaned the detachment of philosophy from active life and desired "that philosophy should make people effective participants in the world."⁹

Shaftesbury, attempting to side-step the issues of free will and determinism, argues that virtue consists in arranging one's passions "so that they shall not clash with his environs."¹⁰ Fitting one's sentiments to externally-derived standards becomes the goal of cultivation. Each of these terms rests, in turn, on the notion that humans are social creatures and that the categories of good and evil – but not the propensity to act in accordance with either – are to a certain extent inborn properties of human nature. As Klein observes:

For Shaftesbury, the affections were only the foundations of human morality. Human morality, though it arose in the feelings, was a phenomenon of consciousness and rationality as well. While humans were naturally sociable and naturally capable of virtue, they were not, to speak precisely, naturally good or virtuous. Virtue required training and work, for virtue was not merely an affective disposition, but affection raised to a conscious principle in the rational agent by reflection on affection and the sorts of actions endorsed by affection.¹¹

A few features of Shaftesbury's thought become important in our consideration of James. The first is the figure of virtue he

constructs. Shaftesbury's trope of virtue is simultaneously public and private. It proceeds – to use a metaphor – from the wellspring of the affections to a terminus determined by public manners down a stream of action. The fitness of one's affections and the politeness of one's actions are subject to judgment, an evaluative instrument determined both by public norms and in public performance. The visibility, as it were, of one's conduct provides for the adjustment of that conduct, and the adjustment of conduct requires, in turn, the cultivation of one's affections. Or, to use Shaftesbury's words:

There is no creature, according to what has been already proved, who must not of necessity be ill in some degree by having any affection or aversion in a stronger degree than is suitable to his own private good or that of the system to which he is joined. For in either case the affection is ill and vicious.¹²

Put differently, Shaftesbury makes a distinction between private interest and public interest, but insists that the former is subordinate to the latter, and that each requires the proportional adjustment of affection to the particular context of one's "actual life."¹³

Before considering the connection between Smith and James, it is important to establish that Shaftesbury's construction of the figure of virtue persists in James's writing. Doing so requires a brief consideration of "Lecture IV: Pragmatism's Conception of Truth" in *Pragmatism*. There, James constructs true belief as virtuous belief – what is true is good in the way of belief – and suggests that the only determinant of truth is the "cash-value" of a belief, or its utility to the one who believes it.¹⁴ Digging a bit deeper, he writes:

"The true," to put it very briefly, is only the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as "the right" is only the expedient in the way of our behaving. Expedient in almost any fashion; and expedient in the long run and on the whole of course; for what meets expediently all the experience in sight won't

necessarily meet all farther experiences equally satisfactorily. Experience, as we know, has ways of boiling over, and making us correct our present formulas.¹⁵

He later clarifies that by “farther experiences” he means the future, and that the true is a purely “regulative postulate” meant to guide the processes of action tied to belief.¹⁶

James has taken the rhetorical structure of Shaftesbury’s trope of virtue and transposed it onto his trope of truths (by which he means “good beliefs”). “Verification” – not simply by the individual but by the individual “in conversation” – takes the place of Shaftesbury’s “environs.”¹⁷ Action, adjustment, and cultivation retain their meaning from Shaftesbury’s construction. The “affections” become the “beliefs.”¹⁸ So, in Shaftesbury’s moral sentimentalism, the affections lead to action judged according to outcomes in a context determined by public manners, and reason adjusts the affections to fit actions to those manners. In James’s pragmatism, beliefs lead to action judged according to outcomes in a context determined by public values, and reason adjusts the beliefs to fit actions to those values. Both suggest that private and public interests pertain to the cultivation of affections/beliefs, and that private interests are subordinate to – though distinct from – the systems in which they are embedded. The purpose of philosophy in each instance is to perfect the process of cultivation and help individuals act effectively in the world.

Smith provides James two figures lacking in Shaftesbury’s philosophy. The first is the figure of sentiment as a circuit linking experience, sensibility, and reason, a figure without which the explanation of “interior life” provided by James would be incomplete. The second is the dialectical construction of the tropes of duty and utility that allow James to construct his infamous “pragmatic test” of truth: its “cash-value in experiential terms.”¹⁹

Like Shaftesbury, Smith – as a moral philosopher and rhetorician – has received renewed attention. Stephen J. McKenna, in his *Adam Smith: The Rhetoric of Propriety*, connects Smith to the

classical rhetorical tradition and to the earlier philosophizing of Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, and Hume. McKenna writes that “Smith’s deployment of propriety in rhetoric and ethics was fully in accord with philosophical issues already well framed in the classical rhetorical tradition.”²⁰ He goes on to argue, building on previous notions circulated by Barbara Warnick, that “rhetorical propriety is fundamental for sympathy,”²¹ and that rhetorical propriety can be defined as “a rhetorical consensus between moral agents, one of whom is the principal or dative of sentiment, the other of whom is a spectator.”²² McKenna rightly interprets Smith’s theory of sentiment and sympathy as itself a rhetorical frame, one governed by the interaction between the spectator and the object of his concern.

As will become evident in my section on sentimental literature, James’s rhetorical purpose is different from Smith’s. Smith largely refrains from epistemologizing (to borrow Rorty’s phrase), while James re-frames epistemology as a rhetorical act, one that can only be understood in a narrative context. Nonetheless, James shares with Smith both a rich store of classical rhetorical education upon which to draw and a preoccupation with the sentimental circuit governing spectator and subject.

Following McKenna’s lead, what we must do, however, is properly articulate the trope of the sentimental circuit that Smith constructs. In my argument, this circuit is what in turn provides the particular rhetorical features of duty and utility in *Theory of Moral Sentiments* that allow James to develop his “pragmatist theory of truth.” Interestingly, Smith presents the central piece of his theory of sentiment through a brief narrative:

We see or think about a man being tortured on the rack; we think of ourselves enduring all the same torments, entering into his body (so to speak) and becoming in a way the same person as he is. In this manner we form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something that somewhat resembles them, though it is less intense. When his agonies are

brought home to us in this way, when we have adopted them and made them our own, they start to affect us and we then tremble and shudder at the thought of what he feels. Just as being in pain or distress of any kind arouses the most excessive sorrow, so conceiving or imagining being in pain or distress arouses some degree of the same emotion, the degree being large or small depending on how lively or dull the conception is.²³

Here, Smith outlines the four steps that lead to the creation of a sentiment. During an experience, an individual has immediate reactions to sensory information, a process he refers to as “sensibility.”²⁴ Sensibility leads one to imagine oneself in the place of the feeling subject, a kind of mirroring process Smith refers to as “sympathy.”²⁵ While engaged in sympathetic imagination, one then engages in a moral evaluation of the other’s experience. Based on one’s moral evaluation, one then develops a moral response, which Smith sometimes refers to as an “affection,” elsewhere as an “attitude.”²⁶ The outcome of this process – sensibility, sympathy, evaluation, and attitude – is a sentiment, which itself becomes a combination of a feeling, a belief, a commitment, and a moral disposition. Once secured, sentiments can then be cultivated, both by solidifying the sentiment through repeated engagement of it, and by seeking out related sentiments. Or, as Smith puts it: “So my thesis is that our fellow-feeling for the misery of others comes from our imaginatively changing places with the sufferer, thereby coming to conceive what he feels or even to feel what he feels.”²⁷ The concept of sentiment, rightly understood, is perhaps Smith’s most important contribution to sentimental literature and to James’s pragmatism. In its sophisticated form, it provides the basis for an entire literary aesthetic, social project, educational theory, and conception of philosophy.

An important move Smith makes is to evaluate sentiments on fundamentally consequentialist grounds. He writes that “The sentiment or affection of the heart that leads to some action can be

considered in two different relations: (1) in relation to the cause that arouses it, or the motive that gives rise to it; (2) in relation to the end that it proposes, or the effect that it tends to produce.”²⁸ Put differently, he thinks that sentiments should be praised or criticized based on either the cause or effect of the sentiment in question. He means that a sentiment could be deemed defective if it were either out of proportion with the experience that provoked it, as when one criticizes someone for reacting too emotionally to a jingle, or if the sentiment leads to harmful or merely inefficient outcomes, as when a response to a charity advertisement leads someone to donate half their rent money to a dubious cause. As Smith clarifies: “The propriety or impropriety...of the consequent action consists in the suitability or unsuitability, the proportion or disproportion, that the affection seems to bear to the cause or object that arouses it. The merit or demerit of the action, the qualities by which it is entitled to reward or deserving of punishment, consists in the beneficial or harmful nature of the effects that the affection aims at or tends to produce.”²⁹ Of importance to our later discussion of James, Smith frames the evaluation of sentiments not on some intrinsic property of a sentiment, nor to what extent a sentiment “corresponds” to reality, nor to how “coherent” a sentiment is with other sentiments, but with regard to its appropriateness in adapting the individual to a stream of experience.

For Smith, one of sentiment’s primary values is in reinforcing ethical duty, but also in civilizing and perfecting duty, turning it from a cold process of rational rule-following into a warm process of fellow-feeling. The notion that there are different forms of rationality, and that some integrate logic and feeling, is central to James’s critique of Western philosophy, and to the ways in which he appeals to his audiences. Smith suggests that “a person’s regard for those general rules of conduct is his sense of duty, a driver of the greatest importance in human life, and the only driver that most people have to direct their actions.”³⁰ Far from thinking of this as an adequate state of affairs, Smith rejoins:

All the graceful and admired actions to which the benevolent affections would prompt us ought to be based as much on the passions themselves as on any concern with general rules of conduct. A benefactor will think he has been poorly repaid if the beneficiary, in acknowledging the help he has been given, is acting merely from a cold sense of duty, with no affection toward the benefactor personally.³¹

Here, Smith argues that part of moral evaluation of an act depends on the balance of sentiments driving the act. That a beneficiary should acknowledge the help of a benefactor is taken as a clear duty, but duty alone would be inappropriate to the beneficiary's moral obligations. He or she is also obliged to feel in proportion to their duty, proportion previously defined in relation to the cause of the sentiment (what the benefactor did) and the outcome of the sentiment (the reaction it would elicit from the benefactor). The notion of "appropriateness" in relation to sentiments – as they attach to duty – is perhaps Smith's second most important contribution to pragmatism.

The trope of utility, the third and final connection between Smith's theory of sentiments and James's pragmatism that I will consider, is also a fitting bridge between Smith and James in my larger argument. Smith writes, "Everyone who has thought hard about what constitutes the nature of beauty has seen that one of its principal sources is utility...The fitness of any system or machine to produce the end for which it was intended confers a certain rightness and beauty on the whole thing, making it a pleasure to think about – and this is so obvious that nobody has overlooked it."³² Here, utility is garnered as an integral component of beauty; further, it is defined primarily as the "fitting" of motives and consequences. Smith doesn't go quite so far as arguing that beauty is truth, and truth is beauty. He does suggest, however, that the sentiments of beauty and utility might bear a family resemblance. Smith continues:

Why is utility so pleasing? This has been answered by Hume. According to him, a thing's utility pleases its owner by continually suggesting to him the pleasure or convenience that it is fitted to promote. Every time he looks at it he is reminded of this pleasure, so that the object in question becomes a source of continual satisfaction and enjoyment. The spectator's sympathy leads him to have the sentiments of the owner, making him view the object in that same agreeable light.³³

Here, Smith introduces the idea that sentiments are contagious, and that sympathetic imagination always already includes sympathizing with another's sentiments. To ape his famous description of the person on the rack, we might say that when we see a person admiring an object, we imagine what we might feel by admiring that same object. We then cultivate sentiments toward that object, or objects of that type. Once this occurs, we might then find pleasure in considering an object fitted to its purpose even in the absence of the owner or designer of the object in question. As Smith writes, "An artifact's being skillfully designed so as to be suitable for some purpose is often valued more than is the purpose itself; exact adjustment of the means for attaining some convenience or pleasure is often valued more highly than the convenience or pleasure itself, though they would seem to be the sole source of the artifact's merit."³⁴ The utility of objects per se becomes compelling to us even if we don't ever intend to use an object for its purpose. One might make an analogy here to James's conception of beliefs and the process of agreement, by which one exposed to a belief well-fitted to its ends – having plentiful "cash-value" – might consider the belief beautiful even without adopting it.

To connect my discussion of Smith back to my primary argument, I would like to point out how Smith's tropes of sentiment, duty, action, and utility (some of which have overlap with Shaftesbury's) help James construct his "pragmatic theory of truth" and persuade his reader to adopt positive attitudes toward it. In the

opening paragraphs of “Lecture VI: Pragmatic Conception of Truth,” from *Pragmatism*, James writes, “Let me begin by reminding you of the fact that the possession of true thoughts means everywhere the possession of invaluable instruments of action; and that our duty to gain truth, so far from being a blank command from out of the blue, or a ‘stunt’ self-imposed by our intellect, can account for itself by excellent practical reasons.”³⁵ First, James defines “true thoughts” as “instruments of action.” Second, he states that individuals have a duty to gain truth, not as a vapid social norm, but for reasons that matter in practice.

He continues, “The importance to human life of having true beliefs about matters of fact is a thing too notorious. We live in a world of realities that can be infinitely useful or infinitely harmful. Ideas that tell us which of them to expect count as the true ideas in all this primary sphere of verification, and the pursuit of such ideas is a primary human duty. The possession of truth, so far from being here an end in itself, is only a preliminary means towards other vital satisfactions.”³⁶ Third, James creates an evaluative scheme for true beliefs, differentiating between utility and harm. Fourth, truth is re-positioned not as an end in itself, but as a cause of action, the consequences of which might be useful or harmful. He continues, “If I am lost in the woods and starved, and find what looks like a cow-path, it is of the utmost importance that I should think of a human habitation at the end of it, for if I do so and follow it, I save myself. The true thought is useful here because the house which is its object is useful.”³⁷ Through his anecdote, James reinforces the four points I covered above: truths are to James like sentiments are to Smith, and one should evaluate them based on how well they fit motives to consequences.

James then extends the Smithian trope of truths-as-sentiments to those truths that do not seem immediately useful: “The practical value of true ideas is thus primarily derived from the practical importance of their objects to us. Their objects are, indeed, not important at all times. I may on another occasion have no use for the house; and then my idea of it, however verifiable, will be practically irrelevant, and had better remain latent.”³⁸ Truths, like sentiments,

can be cultivated, and one has a duty to cultivate them. This duty is not – as it is in Smith’s theory – created by social conditions, but by the notion of “survival” borrowed from contemporary evolutionary theories. A truth can also, like sentiments can for Smith, be deployed in appropriate or inappropriate proportion, depending on the context in which the truth becomes useful or “activated.” James continues to one of his more frequently quoted lines: “You can say of it then either that ‘it is useful because it is true’ or that ‘it is true because it is useful.’ Both these phrases mean exactly the same thing, namely that here is an idea that gets fulfilled and can be verified. True is the name for whatever idea starts the verification-process, useful is the name for its completed function in experience.”³⁹ Here, James borrows the figuration of “truth-as-process” from Smith’s “sentiment-as-process.” A sentiment, once held, initiates the sentimental circuit, and it closes it. A true belief, once held, initiates a practice, and the evaluation of that practice by the lights of the true belief closes it.

James extends the analogy between his theory of truth and Smith’s theory of sentiments: “But in this world, just as certain foods are not only agreeable to our taste, but good for our teeth, our stomach, and our tissues; so certain ideas are not only agreeable to think about, or agreeable as supporting other ideas that we are fond of, but they are also helpful in life’s practical struggles.”⁴⁰ Our sentiments toward truths function like our sentiments toward objects, and for the same reasons. Our affections for certain ideas are not of a radically different type from our affections for foods, relationships, or works of art. Insofar as a belief is useful in at least one context, then it will be appropriate in that context, one will have a duty to store it up, and one will be praised for activating it in proper proportion (as was true in Shaftesbury).

TROPES FROM SENTIMENTAL LITERATURE

While James takes many of his rhetorical moves from moral sentimentalism, his style relies more heavily on narration than do the dense treatises of Shaftesbury and Smith. In particular, James

makes frequent use of free indirect discourse⁴¹ in his anecdotes, the effect of which is what Wayne Booth calls the creation of “sympathy through control of inside views.”⁴² Unlike his figures of virtue and truth-as-process, James’s narrative techniques more closely match those found in sentimental novels. Through his narrative technique, he constructs a motif of authentic feeling that in turn constructs his own philosophical persona as “William James, the moderate narrator.”

The first major trope James borrows from sentimental literature is the motif of authentic feeling. As Aaron Ritzenberg has pointed out, despite the attention sentimental literature gives feeling, deciphering which feelings are genuine, and which false, is often difficult.⁴³ Ultimately, however, part of the purpose of a sentimental novel is to reveal to the reader which characters are authentic, and which aren’t. For example, in Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*, honesty – as in Laurie’s “honest eyes”⁴⁴ – is a virtue admired independent of the feelings in question. While the Professor in Alcott’s story has “warmth, intimacy, and a tender capacity for expressing his affection—the feminine attributes Alcott admired and hoped men could acquire in a rational, feminist world,” it is noted that his beliefs, “while beautiful and true,” simply “wouldn’t pay.”⁴⁵ Yet, Jo, in her disgust at being forced, for financial reasons, to incorporate a superficial moralism into her children’s stories, implies that such affections are irrelevant if they’re not honest work.

Such motifs are ubiquitous throughout sentimental writing. As Bruce Burgett suggests, “the heart” is the “universal and pre-political point of affective identification” troped as “authentic feeling.”⁴⁶ Authentic feeling, in this sense, is to be contrasted with the manipulations of rakes and the crass ideology of many suitors in sentimental fiction. Indeed, as any reader of sentimental fiction knows, determining which heart is good, and which bad, is the primary thrust of every romantic plot, and a key to the moral universe of each novel.

Throughout his philosophical writings, James makes use of the motif of authentic feeling – with its related tropes of “heart,” “soul,” “sickness,” “health,” “good,” and “bad” – including when he insists

that only the “cash-value” of philosophical conceptions “for our actual experience” should be counted for or against such conceptions.⁴⁷ Eschewing entirely a purely speculative mode in philosophy, he instead insists that motivations and virtues of those engaged in philosophical discourse communities matter. Finding a philosopher or philosophy to follow is, in this regard, much like deciphering the virtues of a lover’s heart in sentimental fiction. More importantly, James adapts the motif of authentic feeling into the motif of authentic *belief*, thereby constructing one of pragmatism’s most well-known tests: whether or not a believer does, in fact, act on a belief is the final test of his having the belief in the first place. In other words, those who say they believe something in the hypothetical space of a philosophical discussion but then do not act in accordance with that belief receive special derision in James, who does not use the charge as a pure *tu quoque* objection, but instead as a measure of which objections can be said to inhere in practice and which only in conversation.

The second trope James picks up from sentimental fiction – and perhaps his most effective form of persuasion – is the trope of the moderate narrator. As Margaret Cohen points out, sentimental narrators most often speak in “spare and understated fashion,” signifying their good sense, propriety, and by extension, their virtue.⁴⁸ A sample from the opening of Chapter 2 of *Sense and Sensibility* should suffice to illustrate the point, in this instance accentuated through Jane Austen’s characteristic use of free indirect discourse:

Mrs. John Dashwood did not at all approve of what her husband intended to do for his sisters. To take three thousand pounds from the fortune of their dear little boy would be impoverishing him to the most dreadful degree. She begged him to think again on the subject. How could he answer it to himself to rob his child, and his only child too, of so large a sum? And what possible claim could the Miss Dashwoods, who were related to him only by half blood, which

she considered as no relationship at all, have on his generosity to so large an amount.⁴⁹

Here, the narrator's tone is both what allows Austen to gain the reader's trust and what allows the narrator to function effectively as a vehicle of morals and manners, guiding the neophyte (more to be said on this below) into a proper love match.

Important points need to be made here. First is that moderation is itself, of course, a virtue in sentimental fiction. It is not, as many have pointed out, more important than authentic feeling or a fitting degree of affection. Nonetheless, sentimental novels tend to punish characters who are either too effusive or not effusive enough, as the occasion dictates. Propriety, not a set level of enthusiasm, is what governs the narrator's discrimination of fine feeling. Yet, as sometimes occurs in plots, overwhelming feeling is itself sometimes appropriate: at the death of child, for instance, or the rescue of an estranged young woman. Yet, immoderation is *never* proper for the narrator, whose ethos depends entirely on being perceived by the reader as a perfect arbiter of taste and decorum.

To be more direct: James leverages the generic convention of the moderate narrator widely consumed by his own readers by characterizing philosophical schools other than pragmatism as either too enthusiastic or too morbid, too hard-headed or tender-minded, too particular or too general. *Pragmatism*, by way of its master narrator (James), promises the reader not so much truth in any given matter, but appropriate belief. That is to say: belief fitted to the very bourgeois discourse community for which he writes.

Nevertheless, James does not offer his reader his own position – that of the Austenite narrator, secure in her station as elder and guide; instead, he offers the reader the position of (pragmatist) neophyte, the final trope he borrows from the sentimental tradition that we have time to consider in this essay. Just as, for Jane Tompkins, the sentimental novel insists that a young woman must learn to “control her passions on her own”⁵¹ if she is to enter maturity, James dramatizes philosophizing as the process by which the uninitiated “amateurs” to which he is speaking must learn to

control the equally dangerous passions of distinguishing and simplifying, lest they be led to ruin by either unrestrained empiricist or rationalist dogmatisms.⁵²

As I stated to in the introductory section, the purpose of this essay is to outline James's borrowing of tropes from the sentimental tradition, both from philosophers of moral sentimentalism and authors of sentimental literature. One way to simplify my project is to develop a genealogy of the phrase "the sentiment of rationality" that appears in James's *The Will to Believe*. While they are clearly close-knit, I will now somewhat shift course and cap my discussion by turning to the sentiment of rationality.

In "The Sentiment of Rationality," James constructs "philosophizing" as itself a narrative at the level of the individual philosopher, characterizing it as the process of moving from a state of confusion or uncertainty to a state of orderliness and fluidity. In particular, the sentiment of rationality is how a philosopher knows that he or she has, in Rorty's phrasing, gotten things to hang together in a sufficient way. The philosopher is then characterized as one who is particularly sensitive to the sentiment of rationality, making him or her analogous to Percy Bysshe Shelley's poet (whose superiority of feeling grants special power)⁵³ or Lydia Sigourney's sentimental traveler (whose superiority of empathy grants special power).⁵⁴ But, James tells his reader, the philosopher has so far been like Plato's winged stallions, improperly restrained in their intellectual passions. An overdeveloped passion for distinguishing or simplifying has driven most philosophy, and what is required is an appropriate moderation of the passions.

In short, James casts the pragmatist – this time synonymous with the moderate narrator himself – as the charioteer bridling each passion toward a virtuous end. In this way, the pragmatist narrator garners trust from the reader for the more abstract flights that proceed. The particular journey the reader is to take: a tour of great philosophies judged by aesthetic principles and all but one (pragmatism) found lacking. As James puts it, "No system of philosophy can hope to be universally accepted among men which grossly violates either of the two great aesthetic needs of our logical

nature, the need of unity or the need of clearness, or entirely subordinates the one to the other.”⁵⁵ James recasts philosophical judgment as the cultivation of the sentiment of rationality in relation to a pragmatist standard of unity and clearness. The issue – borrowing again from Shaftesbury – is one of the fitness of our taste to public standards.

The phrase “the sentiment of rationality” now appears in a proper genealogy. It emerges as an adaptation of two significant threads of intellectual culture prior to the twentieth century: moral sentimentalism from Shaftesbury and Smith and sentimental literature from Austen to Alcott. Clearly, the philosophical purposes to which James puts the trope of the sentiment of rationality add a great deal to the sentimental tradition. Pragmatism, in many ways, is the adaptation of sentimentalism to late modernity, a pluralistic counter-point to the positivistic, idealistic, and materialistic philosophies that regained prominence during the World Wars.

I have shown that James borrows the motif of authentic feeling and the motif of the moderate narrator from sentimental fiction. Further, I have shown that James borrows the tropes of virtue, politeness, action, sentiment, duty, and utility from moral philosophers like Shaftesbury and Smith. Together, the rhetorical resources James draws on don’t just make his arguments sophisticated and pleasurable; they also suggest how one might revisit scholarly efforts to understand 18th- and 19th-century culture more broadly. The literary qualities of his philosophy help us understand how generic divisions between analytical prose and literary language often underwrite deep assumptions about rationality, feeling, and argument. More importantly, perhaps, is the insight that *how* James wrote tells us as much about his desire to root false dichotomies between reason and feeling out of Western discourse as *what* he wrote.

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NOTES

¹ West, *American Evasion of Philosophy*; Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*; McKenna, *The Task of Utopia*.

² McGann, *Poetics of Sensibility*; Samuels, *The Culture of Sentiment*; Luciano, *Arranging Grief*.

³ Kowalski, *Guide to William James's Reading*, 273.

⁴ Richardson, *William James*, 284-285.

⁵ Kowalski, *Guide to William James's Reading*, 276.

⁶ James, *The Letters*, 283.

⁷ Eger, *Bluestockings*, 4.

⁸ Klein, *Culture of Politeness*, 109.

⁹ Klein, *Characteristics*, viii.

¹⁰ Chisholm, *Encyclopdia Britannica*, 765.

¹¹ Klein, *Culture of Politeness*, 56.

¹² Klein, *Characteristics*, 190.

¹³ James, *The Meaning of Truth*, v.

¹⁴ James, *Pragmatism*, 46.

¹⁵ James, *Meaning of Truth*, vii.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 240.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, vii.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 219.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, v.

²⁰ McKenna, *Adam Smith*, 26.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 102.

²² *Ibid.*, 116

²³ Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 11.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

- ²⁶ Ibid., 97.
²⁷ Ibid., 12.
²⁸ Ibid., 78.
²⁹ Ibid.
³⁰ Ibid., 86
³¹ Ibid.
³² Ibid., 218.
³³ Ibid.
³⁴ Ibid.
³⁵ James, *Pragmatism*, 97.
³⁶ Ibid.
³⁷ Ibid.
³⁸ Ibid., 98.
³⁹ Ibid.
⁴⁰ Ibid., 42.
⁴¹ An entry for Austen's *Emma* appears in *A Guide to William James's Reading*, showing that James quoted from it in *The Principles of Psychology*.
⁴² Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 245.
⁴³ Ritzenberg, *The Sentimental Touch*, 2-7.
⁴⁴ Alcott, *Little Women*, 87.
⁴⁵ Elbert, *A Hunger for Home*, 216.
⁴⁶ Burgett, *Sentimental Bodies*, 17.
⁴⁷ James, *Pragmatism*, 46.
⁴⁸ Cohen, *The Sentimental Education*, 64.
⁴⁹ Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, 9.
⁵¹ Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, 165.
⁵² James, *Pragmatism*, 15.
⁵³ Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, 90.
⁵⁴ Sigourney, *Pleasant Memories*, 17.
⁵⁵ James, *The Will to Believe*, 66.