

PRAGMATIC INTERRUPTION:
HABITS, ENVIRONMENTS, ETHICS

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This essay envisions a habit of revising habits, that is, a habit of openness and transformation. By examining William James's descriptions of habits and his attention to the environments in which habits both function and break down, I offer a particular aesthetic engagement with the "thickness" of the entangled, textured environments in which we find ourselves. My *active* and *mundane* approach to "pragmatic thickness" and "pragmatic interruption" is different from both more *receptive* approaches to thickness and *transcendental* forms of interruption presented in recent Continental philosophy. In the fashion of James and by way of conclusion, I offer two maxims that address the ethical implications of a habit of interruption.



“Nobody sees a flower really . . . We haven’t time, and to see takes time.”

—Georgia O’Keeffe

For William James, change always occurs in the context of continuity. In this essay, I consider changes in habit by addressing the “interruption” that occurs when a belief is called into question, breaks down in practice, or no longer works for specific purposes. Drawing on his psychological knowledge, James understands that the possibility of interrupting habits decreases over time. He is suspicious, moreover, that changing a habit could be as simple as willing oneself to behave differently. My guiding question becomes: (How) Can an individual *habituate* an ability to revise habits, to re-fashion oneself? In other words, could “interruption” itself become a habit? In their focus on interruption and day-to-day practices, these questions place my essay in conversation with the recent scholarship of Megan Craig and Vincent Colapietro. “What one needs,” Craig writes, “is a habit of disrupting fixations—a very peculiar habit in the art of self-interruption and transformation.”¹ My essay responds to, and develops upon, Craig’s call for this peculiar need. Further, with Colapietro, I treat “the everyday practices of human actors” as ethical sites wherein “possibilities for *living otherwise* than we do now lay claim to more than the moral imagination.”² I take this to mean that, more than just an individual’s consideration of her own self-becoming, everyday experiences can bear on the individual such that she becomes committed to re-making, with others, both herself and the historical present.

To address my questions, we need first to define habit. I begin by looking to James’s chapter on habit in the first volume of his 1890 *The Principles of Psychology*. To approach how one can interrupt a habit beyond willing them so, I then look to James’s commentary in his 1892 public lecture, “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings,” in which he suggests that habits change when one’s environment changes—not only geographically, but also in attempts to see from another’s point of view. To bring into further relief the

sense of “pragmatic interruption” I am sketching, I both contrast it to interruption in recent continental philosophy and develop the concept of “pragmatic thickness” (Part 2). In the fashion of James, I conclude by offering two maxims for practicing a habit of interruption, and I describe a concrete instance in which this habit could bear social fruit today.

PART ONE: PLASTICITY, INERTIA, TRAINING

James learned from C. S. Peirce’s claim that a belief is “a habit of action,” and James expanded on this claim in light of his studies of psychology and varying personal experience, e.g. traveling to North Carolina or Brazil. So important is habit, he writes, that we can best understand perception, memory, and reasoning as results and active functions of it. To begin, James compares instinct and habit. While instincts contribute to the formation of habits, they consist of pre-established paths; habits, by contrast, are new and reiterated paths allowed for by the “plasticity” of the organism. Habit, then, indicates plasticity or agility—the individual is not merely determined, and hence actions *matter*. With regard to the central question of this essay, this is a crucial insight: The very existence of habits indicates that new habits can be formed.

For James, habit is material: To define habit, one must work with “fundamental properties of matter.”³ Neurophysiology alters as new pathways of discharge form in the brain. Such a new form then becomes the new habit, set like plaster. “When the structure has yielded, the same inertia becomes a condition of its comparative permanence in the new form, and of the new habits the body then manifests.”⁴ “Inertia” here suggests the importance or weight of habituation. Like other physical matter, my choices, materially formed in pathways, have a tendency to continue unchanged, at rest or in motion, until some external force changes that state. It is from this material basis that James describes the partial yielding of a structure as “plasticity.” Re-habituation, as the formation of new pathways, depends on this material plasticity. Yet the brain is not plastic to all external influences. A pathway does not change just because the temperature gets hotter outside, for instance.⁵ In sum,

habit has a “neutral valence”; it always cuts both ways, as it were, conservative in its repetition and open-ended in its plasticity.⁶ As Megan Craig reiterates, “Habit is a critical part of progression and acclimation, but it is also the source of stubborn anchorage in patterns that diminish one’s capacity for creativity and blind one to alternative possibilities for action.”⁷

James then moves from a physiological account of habits to a discussion of their social, ethical, or practical effects. He writes firstly, “[H]abit simplifies the movements required to achieve a given result, makes them accurate, and diminishes fatigue.”⁸ In this way, habit economizes actions and makes them more efficient. Each morning I lace up my boots almost without effort, without thinking, in practiced, accurate movements. James writes secondly that “*habit diminishes the conscious attention with which our acts are performed.*”⁹ “Diminish” suggests that much attention *was* once required, and this cashes out in experience. Before learning to tie my boots, I needed many attempts to figure out just how the laces form a knot. I had to pause many times, boots still loose. Now, following the “cue” of picking up the laces, before I know it, and with little attention, I have tied my boots—and perhaps I came up with a new way of thinking about care for the soul in the *Alcibiades* as I tied the knot. In this way, I did not have to focus my “higher thought-centre” on the habituated act, for “mere sensation”—lace against hand—“is a sufficient guide.”¹⁰ This also means that merely *starting* is sufficient, in habitual action, to set off a chain that does not require consistent choices and rejections, as is the case in testing out non-habitual chains of action. When patterns of how to tie the knot were not yet “set,” I consistently pulled the laces in different combinations. Now I can step outside of my situation, as it were, to see that my hand began by pulling the laces together, and so on; but in performing the actions themselves, we usually do not notice these precise moments of contact between hand, lace, and boot.

Hence James writes, thirdly, what is habitual is that to which “we are *usually inattentive.*”¹¹ Yet he clearly says that habits are more than unconscious because they “immediately call our attention if they go *wrong.*”¹² As I consider Alcibiades’s destructive

ambition, I am not attending to my knot, but when the right bunny ear of the shoelace does not hold, I begin to attend again to my boots, forgetting about Socrates teaching Alcibiades that care for his soul is in fact beneficial for political engagement. As I habituate myself to tying my boots, I not only get better—move more fluidly, less attentively—at tying them, but I also get better at sensing when I am going to tie an uneven or weak knot. This improvement, however, regards only the particular purposes of the task at hand; we should not confuse individual efficiency with social amelioration. As aforementioned, James notes that habit has a strong inertia, such that its practice “end[s] by fashioning a man completely over again, as to most of the possibilities of his conduct.”¹³ We can see this in the retired Marine who still wakes up before sunrise each day. For this reason, writ social, habit is society’s “most precious conservative agent.”¹⁴ Out of habit—itsself knotted with economic desperation, generational loyalties, an identification with a certain lifestyle, and so on—the miner walks each morning back down into the mine, notwithstanding the chemicals he inhales without fail during his grueling shift. Out of habit, the taxi driver passes by the country club with clients from the airport, thinking *that* is not a place for her—as it never has been.

Sensitive to these social circumscriptions while returning to the individual, we each have to “fight out the battle of life upon the lines of our nurture or our early choice.”¹⁵ Our ability to change habits decreases over time; the weight of habits adds up to more than I can push against easily. Here again, James invokes the metaphor of plaster: My professional character sets by age thirty, my personal character by twenty. The inertia, or weight, of habit is “[a]n invisible law, as strong as gravitation,” that keeps the individual “within his orbit.”¹⁶ Hence a pedagogical suggestion, namely, to work with, and not against, the nervous system—an ally and not an enemy. James suggests starting early with useful habits and guarding ourselves against inefficient, unhelpful, and indecisive habits. In the face of such inertia and sedimentation, the question becomes if one can—and if so how to—re-fashion oneself, especially as one ages.¹⁷ Our habits condition us, but they do not determine us, and changing these

habits involves not only our own material plasticity but also that of our environment. Changing habits is a problem in practice because the environment in which one finds oneself is not static or fixed but dynamic and plastic. That is, the pragmatic need for plasticity is actively responding to its changing environment.

James begins by looking to the will: First, we must “*launch ourselves*” with great motivation and position ourselves in settings that will support this launch.¹⁸ If I want to begin to paint pine trees in watercolor, I need to acquire paints and brushes, take more of my lunches outside near the nature preserve adjacent to my campus, tell a friend about my desire so that she might invite me to a nearby state park on the weekends, and commit to painting pine trees each Sunday morning. All of these actions “give [my] new beginning . . . a momentum.”¹⁹ Second, I must not break with the momentum until my watercolor painting has, in fact, become a habit, for before that point, I have not reached the repetitions that my nervous system needs to “set” differently. In this way, I “train” myself in habituation just as a distance runner trains to complete a marathon. Part of my success will depend on how I frame my task. Too rigorous or demanding and I fail from the beginning. I need to know myself well enough to pose an achievable end-in-view. Third, I must act on my resolution as soon as possible. If I vow to paint at least on Saturdays, and I make this vow on Friday night, then *this* Saturday I should begin, and better even if I set out to the supply store for paints, brushes, and canvas tonight. Here James comments on an important point: Habits are not just cognitive, but behavioral. “It is not in the moment of their forming, but in the moment of their producing *motor effects*, that resolves and aspirations communicate the new ‘set’ to the brain.”²⁰ That is, I form a new habit not in thinking about it but in doing it; I learn to paint pine trees by painting them. Maxims, sentiments, and intentions—with respect to practice—are subordinate to actions. The importance of taking up an opportunity to *act* also reveals the severity of its inverse, namely, allowing a resolve not to be acted upon, which “works so as positively to hinder future resolutions and emotions from taking the normal path of discharge.”²¹ If I do not paint *this* Saturday, it will make it more

difficult to paint *next* Saturday, having begun to habituate the pattern of resolving to act, but not acting.

Like in his discussion of inertia, here James points to the ethical consequences of not acting on resolve or emotion. We see this in the theater-goer, filled with sadness at the poverty depicted in the play, but having little concern for the theatre-student valet, who will make sure the former's Lexus is warm and at the ready when she emerges from the show. A remedy: "[N]ever to suffer one's self to have an emotion at a concert, without expressing it afterward in *some* active way."²² The expression could be small, even a larger tip or a sincere greeting; the point is to begin, here and now, concretely in action.

James suggests, fourthly—and as “a final practical maxim”—to keep effort alive through daily “*gratuitous exercise . . .* be systematically ascetic or heroic in little unnecessary points, do every day or two something for no other reason than that you would rather not do it.”²³ Here we see how the development of just one habit is related to a more general comportment. A certain priming of the organism contributes to habit-formation. If I aim to paint trees on Saturday, then, to have the effort required to launch myself into that re-habitation, I should roast local vegetables on Thursday evenings, a more complicated and time-consuming effort than boiling processed spaghetti.²⁴ These day-to-day tasks are my “training” for harder activities. “Training” also invokes the importance of resistance, opposition, and struggle in daily living. Certain forms of resistance do not limit but in fact make possible change in the individual. There is a future-oriented value in “concentrated attention, energetic volition, and self-denial in unnecessary things.”²⁵ That is, they present *opportunities* for growth. I will note here—especially for those sympathetic to asceticism, as I am—that by “self-denial” James does not mean some kind of *withdrawal* from the world, e.g. an expensive meditation retreat in a far-off location. Instead, he is envisioning a different *engagement* with the world from where I am now, setting out with my current habits and in my current place. Avoiding a nightly trip to get frozen custard with a friend, a dietary and budgetary point of weakness for me, is different from avoiding food.

This recalls why James considers Aristotle a pragmatist: The mean to be found, in Aristotle's *Ethics*, is always *relative to the individual*.

In sum, we might now reflect on what resources James offers in regard to my initial question: How can one form a habit of forming new habits? He suggests that some conditions of habit-formation are found in will, in attention and effort, and that we can develop these conditions through difficult, unnecessary, and often unwanted exercise or "training." And yet, through his psychological sensibilities, he understands that just as being acted upon externally and called into doubt once is not enough to habituate interruption, so too is willing new habits insufficient for self-transformation. As Craig explains, "Sheer effort, strength, and will are not enough to ensure one *retains* a sense of openness to life."²⁶ In positing the will's insufficiency with respect to causing *lasting* self-transformation, I gain some distance from Colin Koopman's recent reading of James, which claims that "'willful rehabilitation' could also be usefully described as 'self-transformation.'"²⁷ It is precisely this distance between the two terms that I want to emphasize, for the environments in which one finds oneself also condition the move from will to transformation.

To consider further the external forces that act against the inertia of habit, and with a particular view toward *retaining* fruits of rehabilitation, in Part 2 I will develop a concept of "pragmatic interruption" that occurs in the "thickness" of this world—in everyday contexts that bear differently on different subject-positions. While my focus is specifically on the habits of an individual, I will also attend to the social conditions that allow for, or hinder, an individual's ability to engage in a habit of re-vision habit. Indeed, one's habits are always irreducibly social, formed within the *ethos* in which one finds oneself. My contention is that the re-vision that interruption necessitates, that the irritation that doubt inspires, can *open* the individual to different ways of living, and that these openings to alternative ways of engaging the world resonate with what Craig calls "the *ethical significance* of attending to multiple meanings in multiple forms."²⁸ On my reading, such openings are fostered by efforts of aesthetic, embodied

engagements, and one is more likely to retain such a sense of openness when certain environmental features are set. Below, I read “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings” in order to suggest that James’s response to this “certain blindness” is radically and deeply sensual and embodied.²⁹ Addressing this blindness—this limitation—points to alternative possibilities for ethics, in turn.

PART TWO: INEFFICIENCY, THICKNESS, ENGAGEMENTS

Attending to affect, James begins “On a Certain Blindness” with an anthropological description: “Our judgments concerning the worth of things, big or little, depend on the *feelings* the things arouse in us.”³⁰ Indeed, I ascribe the most value to whatever arouses the most feeling *in me*. In this way, prioritizing my own sentiments, I am insensitive to what inspires feelings in others. James then states explicitly his topic of investigation: “[T]he blindness in human beings, of which this discourse will treat, is the blindness with which we are all afflicted in regard to the feelings of creatures and people different from ourselves.”³¹ That is, we are practical and limited beings, so we feel intensely the importance of our own duties.³² Consequently, our opinions fall prey to stupidity at best and injustice at worst, and our judgments are false “so far as they presume to decide in an absolute way on the value of other persons’ conditions or ideals.”³³ Indeed, James criticizes his titular metaphor of vision while employing it: “The spectator’s judgment is sure to miss the root of the matter, and to possess no truth.”³⁴

Always concerned that philosophy be grounded, perspectival, “owned,” James gives the example of his own visit to a rural “cove” in North Carolina.³⁵ On his initial view, he sees the cove as a disaster, and he believes that the rural landscape should be preserved. “The beauties and commodities gained by the centuries are sacred . . . No modern person ought to be willing to live a day in such a state of rudimentariness and denudation.”³⁶ He takes a moment, however, to reflect on his own “blindness” and hence on what he might see from the perspective of those living there. “[W]hen *they* looked on the hideous stumps, what they thought of was personal victory . . . the clearing, which to me was a mere ugly

picture on the retina, was to them a symbol redolent with moral memories and sang a very paean of duty, struggle, and success.”³⁷

Thus, James de-centers himself. He acknowledges that he is as “blind” to the reality—in its full density and (practical) meaning—of the cove-dwellers as they would be to his university life at Harvard. Two implications follow. First, James grounds the significance of life not on an *a priori* hierarchical set of standards, but on individual and perspectival feeling. “Wherever a process of life communicates an eagerness to him who lives it, there the life becomes genuinely significant.”³⁸ Second, James writes that it is living according to “some specialized vocation” that contributes to one’s blindness in the first place, such that one features a “deadness toward all but one particular kind of joy”—this is the price we pay for being emotional, perspectival, indeed “practical creatures.”³⁹ That is, he levies a critique at thinking that is too instrumental or specialized, that attains its ends efficiently without considering other paths to joy. In this criticism of the always applied, professional person, he sketches a way for habits to change. It takes the character of a dreamer, philosopher, poet, or artist for “the hard externality” of specialization and efficiency to “give way . . . Then the whole scheme of our customary values gets confounded, then our self is riven and its narrow interests fly to pieces, then a new centre and a new perspective must be found.”⁴⁰

Here James provides a way, different from being acted upon by an external force, to challenge the inertia of habit, namely, to live passionately, like a dreamer. This is to act less like the financier on the highway only to reach the *telos* of capital accumulation and more like Whitman letting the everyday seep into him as he rides the streetcar in a manner autotelic—not to get somewhere, but to engage others and the world as the joyful activity itself. Thus the action of interrupting the specialized and hence limited way of living—the “faith in a fact” that “can help create the fact” or habit—could be a move toward un-specialization and loving.⁴¹ “The passion of love will shake one like an explosion, or some act will awaken a remorseful compunction that hangs like a cloud over all one’s later day.”⁴² Indeed, if we are able, with Whitman, to see “the submerged

and inner life of things around us,” then “we open ourselves to radical interruption and displacement.”⁴³ Through an attention to the “thickness” of the world, this world in which I am immersed and entangled with others, my perspective shifts.

What I am calling “pragmatic thickness” comes into further relief when we compare it with the thickness that recent Continental philosophy conceptualizes. Writing about “interpretive methods of phenomenology,” Walter Brueggemann “consider[s] these acts of interpretation under the rubric ‘dwelling in the thickness’ as an approach that refuses settlement and watches with attentiveness for interruption.”⁴⁴ In contrast to this phenomenological interruption, I am arguing that pragmatic interruption, while refusing settlement or fixity, is less an approach of “dwelling” and more an approach of engaging, acting, or moving—less watching with attentiveness and more an attending or effort that invites or effectuates an interruption. In its emphasis on here-and-now immanence and local context, and perhaps especially in its claims to continuity (in addition to change) and consequential action (in addition to watchfulness or reception), pragmatic interruption steps away from interruption in Continental thought, seen for instance in Levinas’s transcendental “Other” coming from “on high” or Badiou’s “event” that is a “break” from what was knowledgeable in the prevailing situation.⁴⁵ That is, I suggest that the emergent becomings-within-continuity of pragmatic interruption present an ethical comportment or fashion different from that which results from the more transcendent coming-and-breaking of some phenomenological interruption. Moreover, there is a democratic ring to the pragmatic interruption I am reading with James, achieved through an attentive and active response to mundane thickness. Although James cites poets as his examples for living passionately and perceptively, most any person could live in this way. (There is a larger question of social distribution of energies at play here; the democratic principle remains worth emphasizing.) John Lachs explains, “[W]e don’t have to be artists to see the marvelous riches of the world; attention to details is enough . . . a receptive *and* energetic appreciation of what surrounds us.”⁴⁶

A way of life that attends to the everyday, “the near, the low, the common,”⁴⁷ in its full thickness and granularity, is

an occupation which will change the usual standards of human value in the twinkling of an eye, giving to foolishness a place ahead of power, and laying low in a minute the distinctions which it takes a hard-working conventional man a lifetime to build up.⁴⁸

The instantaneity of “the twinkling of an eye” or “laying low in a minute” suggests a quick change in perspective but not in habit. How James outlines “occupation” indicates his point: Beyond just a job, “occupation” suggests a way of living or occupying one’s time—in other words, it suggests the habits one has fashioned over time. Such engagement changes standards because it dissolves the distinctions of the conventional man. It shifts the questions. If the conventional man asks, “What will you *do* with your degree from art school?” (as if making art was not itself a “doing”), the dreamer, perceptive of meaning in life, would ask: “How are you growing in your studies?” The questions of a dreamer thus dissolve or “lay low” conventional dualisms, for, to the question “What did you feel in really looking at that azalea flower?” the answer “I was successful,” does not make sense.

How might the person of convention cultivate the temperament of attending to the thickness of the world or respond to the experience of having their distinctions (e.g. successful/ unsuccessful) “laid low”? This is especially a challenge given that the professional classes, educated and cultured, “are trained to seek . . . the exquisite exclusively” such that they are “stuffed with abstract conceptions” and hence “grow stone-blind and insensible to life’s more elementary and general goods and joys.”⁴⁹ Robert Frost illustrates poignantly this insensibility: Not sensing or feeling becomes a habit such that a family cannot even mourn the loss of their young son; they merely return to their practices that make them successful. Death cannot be a foundation, cannot be built on, instrumentally: “No more to build on there. And they, since they / Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.”⁵⁰

James suggests a response to the blindness of the highly educated: “The remedy under such conditions is to descend to a more profound and primitive level.”⁵¹ By this he means a more full-bodied engagement, “seeing, smelling, tasting, sleeping, and daring.”⁵² This could also mean traveling widely, living in a way that breaks with one’s class, or painting with wider brushes—any “forms of interaction,” Craig expands, “that may thrust one outside of one’s comfort zone and disrupt one’s habitual patterns of looking and listening.”⁵³ Against the criticism that pragmatism features a one-sided, future-oriented focus on efficiency, I want to suggest that we can extend James’s “remedy” to a consideration of pace, or how quickly one moves in the world. To see and to sense, as opposed to living “blind” and insensibly, one must take one’s time. Against the inertia of previously formed beliefs, it takes time to change a habit of action. It takes time to learn to see a flower, really. Craig continues: “A culture built upon an idealization of speed and a single vision of success loses touch with less rigid and measurable possibilities for flourishing . . . forgetting the labors inherent in genuine thought.”⁵⁴ The consequences of this blindness are both social and epistemological. Just as exposure to others is limited in the workday drive, so too is attuning “to alternative means of communication, including bodily gesture, glances, nonlinear prose, painting, music, and poetry,” which one cannot develop when one is oriented toward “thin” personal and professional goals, as opposed to the thick sense of life that moves so vibrantly before one’s body.⁵⁵

James concludes both negatively and positively, cautioning us against equating something we find unintelligible with something meaningless, and urging that we “be faithful to [our] opportunities . . . without presuming to regulate the rest of the vast field” of experience.⁵⁶ This is to say that meaning and knowledge are perspectival, and thus James’s conclusion acknowledges social position. It moves to pluralism: a tolerance of difference and recognition of multiple meanings. Richard Bernstein comments that James’s is “an engaged pluralism,” not “flabby or sentimental,” but instead calling “for critical engagement with other points of view

and with other visions”; it demands “that we reach out to the points of contact where we can critically engage with each other.”⁵⁷ Craig adds, further, that this “emotional engagement” that is “fundamental to ethical attentiveness, to an expanding field of values and significance,” works in conjunction with James’s emphasis on action: “that emotion must be *exercised* rather than exorcised, for only in expanding the heart and honing a whole-bodied capacity for feeling does one stand any chance of expanding one’s mind.”⁵⁸

James throws the task—what I have described, following Bernstein and Craig, as moving toward a pluralistic, emotional engagement with others—back on the individual: To the greatest extent possible, avoid judging or managing or comprehending or otherwise “regulating” the lives of others. If this is a “seeing” in response to “blindness,” it is a sight that always locates itself. Perhaps if one spent the time it takes to compare others to one’s own standard instead in the common activity of co-perceiving and engaging in the thickness of a shared situation, one would be able to change one’s own habits away from convention and “success”—those “ballasts of equilibrium” in which one is comfortable.⁵⁹ Perhaps it is the drive to compare others to what one is right now that renders oneself static, lifeless, unable to unfold and change and grow. If I am walking to a morning meeting with my boots nicely tied, and I see a loafer with a ripped shirt and consider him unfashionable (always in reference to my own fashion as the standard), then I limit my own re-fashioning. To change my own habit, I could begin by refusing to regulate the habits of another. I can start to re-fashion my habits when I see differences not in comparison to me, but as other opportunities, modes of engagement, and in this sense, invitations.⁶⁰

In these discussions of practice, it is important to note that James presents two kinds of “blindness”: (1) a blindness inherent in humans, given that attention is always selective and therefore always “blind” to certain experiences, and (2) a “certain” blindness that results from self-referential and specialized habituation that fails to “see” the world from the perspective of others. My failure, in this second sense, also limits my own experience and vision. It is

a way of “rendering the world smaller and less vibrant,” such that, in response, “widening the scope of [my] emotions” would be a kind of engagement that “deepens [my] sense of reality.”⁶¹ This widening and deepening fosters an ethical responsibility to others and to a shared world when said responsibility is not individualistically claimed but verified among others, amidst the thickness. To attend sensually to the thickness of the world we find ourselves in, and which we are constantly re-making while re-making ourselves, is not just a way of facing the fact that life could be meaningless, but it is also to confront, as John Kaag puts it, “the ever-present chance to be largely responsible for its worth.”⁶² “Life is always worth living,” James writes, “if one have such responsive sensibilities.”⁶³ “The appropriate response to our existential situation is not, at least for James, utter despair or suicide,” Kaag continues, “but rather the repeated, ardent, yearning attempt to make good on life’s tenuous possibilities. And the possibilities are out there, often in the most unlikely places.”⁶⁴

CONCLUSION: TOWARD PRAGMATIC INTERRUPTION

How might one realize “the ethical significance of attending to multiple meanings in multiple forms?”⁶⁵ In response to this question, I propose two maxims. Before my proposals, however, let me own up to my writing by posing a question of audience: On whom am I calling to re-fashion their habits? Like James in “On a Certain Blindness,” I take myself to be writing primarily about the lives of the formally educated and conventionally successful. Because the thick environments in which we live are skewed oppressively, it is precisely these individuals who must take more responsibility for their habits. And if, as Fanon says, “[y]ou are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich,” then I am talking about a certain habituation of whiteness.⁶⁶ Making a point to white readers, George Yancy gives a helpful example: White people could seek out everyday situations in which their own racism “ambushes” them.⁶⁷ What I see as at stake in this essay is as follows: An interrogation of a habituation of whiteness, understood normatively, is required. The habituation of whiteness walls itself in

and shores itself up. By contrast, as Fanon writes, “[i]n the man of color there is a constant effort to run away from his own individuality, to annihilate his own presence.”⁶⁸ If the maxims of my own writing can make any claim to ethics today, they must avoid any development of said “constant effort” and instead reverse the pathologization in “the effort . . . to scrutinize the self,” and by extension, what counts as success, what is affirmed as convention, and what is understood as a good or healthy environment, such that it is the “successful” who are put under scrutiny.⁶⁹

That said, my first maxim is: *Start with, and re-fashion, myself.* I should not begin the interactions I choose, and those in which I find myself, by presuming I can determine what is meaningful in the life of another. I can begin, instead, by training myself to attend to the more profound and primitive level of my own senses, on the ground, and out there in the unexpected places of richness that have been in front of me all along. I take this to be Emerson’s suggestion in his poem “Art”: “Hid in gleaming piles of stone; / On the city’s paved street . . . / Human sense doth overfill.”⁷⁰

Depending on my temperament, on my morning walk, I might consider how a leaf spins when it falls off an oak tree; not used to working with my hands, I could collaborate with local farmers, thereby sensing the soil present—and what harms and nourishes it—near the town in which I live; perhaps I would take time away from the screens that dominate my daily life so as to really listen to the everyday concerns of members of my kin.

Just as it is crucial to understand that James is calling for an embodied, sensual engagement, so too is it important to feel that this change in action is not a suspension of who I am but an engagement that departs (in both senses of this term) from my particular perspective. Here I recall Peirce’s critique of Cartesian skepticism. Peirce writes that one “sets out,” and can only set out, from “the very state of mind in which you actually find yourself . . . a state in which you are laden with an immense mass of cognition already formed, of which you cannot divest yourself.”⁷¹ I think a change of heart can also only set out from this point of departure. I cannot divest myself of who I am, a bundle of already formed habits of action. *And, I*

could engage differently, setting out in a slightly different direction, an incremental, and perhaps initially indiscernible, departure. If this is a negative moment, it is also a moment for growth: I am excited at the possibility of becoming, of becoming differently. This motion in different directions is part of what Craig calls “James’s pluriverse,” a place of “decentered subjectivity” in which, with others, “subjects remake themselves and are remade in light of new experiences.”⁷² *Pace* Hegel, for instance, this conception implies that changes in self are not necessarily oppositional and thus in need of overcoming; instead, they are differences that flow from one to another, like the water of a stream, to use a metaphor James frequently invokes. It seems to me, to employ a different metaphor, that a flower in bloom could be different from, *and* not against or in contradiction to, the seed it once was. Indeed, the bloom of a flower is part of a process of growth. My first maxim has focused on a kind of willed action. It might be noted that the activities I suggested, like really seeing a flower, take time that some do not have, given their need to work multiple jobs or otherwise support those around them. This raises a question about *how*, *under what social conditions*, or *in what environments* one could work to remake oneself and one’s *ethos*. My second maxim will consider more carefully the context in which such doing, suffering, and creating occurs.

The second maxim is: *Travel passionately*. I do not mean travel in the sense of the tourist who uses his American Express card to secure a stay at the Marriott in Guadalajara, speaks English throughout his time in Mexico, wakes up at 7:00 a.m. sharp (as the workday dictates), and so on. That is a kind of travel that never leaves home. Conversely, there is a kind of staying home that is traveling—engaging the local from where one sets out—in the sense I intend. I mean to suggest the root meaning of “travel,” not only the “journey” of the French *travail*, but also the “toil, labor, or painful effort.” That is, to travel in this way is difficult, a continual effort to engage with other visions. It is to place myself in different contexts or conditions—different conversations—such that my current habits of action are challenged, no longer working with ease or efficiency. Passion here suggests being shaken not by a God or an “event” so

much as being moved mundanely to live more lovingly and varyingly in that very world, less in a grand gesture of transcendence, more enmeshed with others in the banal situation of the bus, classroom, DMV line, or walking on a paved street in the city where I find myself.

Again, who can afford to travel in this way, or who has the time needed to see a flower really? Bills are due, kin must be cared for, and life is enough of a struggle with one's current set of habits intact. What personal or social resources do people need to travel thus? How can people conduct this travel, given the hold of habits and customs? Social arrangements and environments could be more conducive to the habit of re-habitation: Beyond the individual choice not to contribute to the gentrification of a neighborhood or to belong to a certain country club, social policy that eliminates redlining and other discriminatory lending, as well as gender- or sexuality-based discrimination generally, is needed. Both individual and structural or environmental considerations can foster engagement with those I see as different from me, an important step toward the ethical significance of attending to pluralistic meanings.

Let me close with an example at the intersection of habituation and environment. In Minnesota, where I am from, a system of skyways connects sixty-nine blocks of downtown Minneapolis. While most Minnesotans take these skyways as a natural response to the cold winter weather, the city constructed them, in fact, in order to raise property values; real estate developers were concerned that flight to the suburbs would decrease demand for downtown spaces. Today, these skyways allow wealthy employees to drive to work from suburban neighborhoods (where they pay taxes, and hence that have up-to-date public schools), park underground or in a private ramp, and walk indoors largely among other corporate employees. I have long marveled at the stylish, polished shoes of these professionals, especially in the winter months, given the snow-covered streets outside. Such footwear exists only because these professionals quite literally never have to touch the ground. The design of the urban architecture ensures it would be unnecessary and inefficient to descend—indeed deign—to the more profound, cold,

elemental, and external level below. Here we recall that Whitman's location for poetic insight was the streetcar, a form of public transportation. Not only the individual choice to take the bus and walk outside, but also the environmental decision to eliminate the skyway system, or to barricade skyways every two or three blocks, as the architect Jan Gehl has suggested, would militate against the social hierarchies—with some literally moving above others—the skyways promote.⁷³ The more vital, ground-level street life would be conducive to passionate travel. Daily contacts with difference, in the thickness of urban life—multiple languages, fashions, kinship units, and ways of moving through space—as well as the natural varieties of experience that a climate-controlled space disallows—the wind against my face, the door I hold open so that another can enter the warm space before me, the city employee tending to the sidewalk planters I must step around—all are part of contexts conducive to an interruption in my experience, a space in which my habits might break down, and that, if I am listening really, suggest to me an alternative habituation.

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NOTES

¹ Craig, "Habit," 176.

² Colapietro, "Customary Reflection and Innovative Habits," 170.

³ James, *The Principles*, 109.

⁴ James, 110.

⁵ Cf. Aristotle's presentation of the soul as "wax," as impressionable; some experiences imprint the soul with marks of differing depths and shallowness. Particularly painful or joyful experiences carve deeper impressions, as it were, thus limiting future plasticity. Thanks to Megan Craig for guiding me to this insight.

⁶ Craig, "Habit," 175.

⁷ Craig, *Levinas and James*, 107.

⁸ James, *The Principles*, 117.

⁹ James, 119.

¹⁰ James, 120.

¹¹ James, 123.

¹² James, 123.

¹³ James, 125.

¹⁴ James, 125. Because the inertia of habit is socially circumscribing, what is partially at stake in this essay is a way to loosen the ties that habit tightens on individuals so that they stay in their place, or so that they take

on or stay within prescribed, procrustean roles. In regard to habits on the level of society, if customs are, as Dewey says, “widespread uniformities of habit,” then the pragmatic project includes addressing those social habits by turning not only to individuals but also to institutions and environments (Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 43). As Michael Sullivan explains, “Rather than being controlled by habit and custom, we must strive toward the intelligent control of habit. This involves criticizing current institutions and finding ways to reconstruct them” (Sullivan, *Legal Pragmatism*, 57). Thus, the pragmatic project, in the case of the individual and the institution, is both negative and positive, critical and reconstructive.

¹⁵ James, *The Principles*, 125.

¹⁶ James, 126.

¹⁷ Charlene Haddock Seigfried notes that these ages, for James, are not gender neutral: James thought by twenty the habits of women were essentially fixed, while those of men were still developing (Seigfried, “The Feminine-Mystical Threat,” 50.)

¹⁸ James, *The Principles*, 127. Certain energy is required for this “launch.” Given that energies are distributed differently across societies, that there are structural injustices that affect daily comportments, a democratic and not simply individualistic consideration of launching would require an attention to equality—in terms of shelter, safety, food security, and so on.

¹⁹ James, *The Principles*, 127.

²⁰ James, 128.

²¹ James, 129.

²² James, 129-130.

²³ James, 129-130.

²⁴ There is a New England puritanism at play here; the Harvard professor’s habit-reforming cold shower presupposes a habituation of warm showers. As I will elaborate upon later in the essay, this is an ethics directed at those whose agency is socially supported more than those whose agency is socially diminished, threatened, suffocated.

²⁵ James, *The Principles*, 129-130.

²⁶ Craig, *Levinas and James*, 109. Emphasis mine.

²⁷ Koopman, “The Will,” 500. This distance granted, I have learned from Koopman’s connection of habits to ethics in James: “Self-

transformation, for James, is an ethics for conducting ourselves in the midst of uncertainty, chance, risk, and indeterminacy. These are, one might presume, the situations where morality matters most” (Koopman, 508).

²⁸ Craig, *Levinas and James*, 93. Emphasis mine.

²⁹ James has said that whereas modern philosophy is a philosophy of the eye, pragmatism is a philosophy of the hand: It follows that truth and meaning, for example, are not found but made, not seen but built.

³⁰ James, “On a Certain Blindness,” 132.

³¹ James, 132. Of course, this language of “blindness” is rightly called into question by thinkers of (dis)ability today.

³² James, 132.

³³ James, 132. Richard Bernstein elaborates on the consequences of our “blindness” beyond interactions between two individuals: “There are much more threatening instances of this phenomenon when we come face to face with religious, ethnic, racial, and gender intolerance” (Bernstein, *The Pragmatic Turn*, 62).

³⁴ James, “On a Certain Blindness,” 133.

³⁵ James, *The Principles*, 220.

³⁶ James, “On a Certain Blindness,” 134.

³⁷ James, 134.

³⁸ James, 134.

³⁹ James, 138.

⁴⁰ James, 138.

⁴¹ James, “The Will to Believe,” 29. It is remarkable how James’s written style—vague, impressionistic, and passionate—performs this insight.

⁴² James, “On a Certain Blindness,” 139.

⁴³ Craig, *Levinas and James*, 94.

⁴⁴ Brueggemann, “Response: Dwelling in the Thickness,” 179.

⁴⁵ See Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*; Badiou, *Being and Event*.

⁴⁶ Lachs, “Human Blindness.” In a world of instrumental reason, there are social consequences to living more passionately, including that one becomes less legible or intelligible to others. Indeed, for James there is a correlation between having insight and being deemed socially “worthless”; such an insightful individual could be a prophet but not “a worldly success” (James, “On a Certain Blindness,” 141).

⁴⁷ Emerson, “The American Scholar,” 68.

⁴⁸ James, “On a Certain Blindness,” 141.

⁴⁹ James, 146.

⁵⁰ Frost, “Out, Out.”

⁵¹ James, “On a Certain Blindness,” 146.

⁵² James, 146.

⁵³ Craig, “Habit,” 170. That is, there is not yet an explicit politics to the ethical habituation I am describing.

⁵⁴ Craig, 173.

⁵⁵ Craig, 173.

⁵⁶ James, “On a Certain Blindness,” 149.

⁵⁷ Bernstein, *Pragmatic Turn*, 62. This is not to say that each group has a static position or sense of meaning. Bernstein continues, “James was especially insightful about the dangers of reification—the dangers of thinking that groups have fixed identities. He was acutely aware of how identities change, develop, and mutate in the course of history. He was never sentimental about blindly celebrating differences. He was just as concerned with searching for commonalities that can bind us together” (Bernstein, 69).

⁵⁸ Craig, *Levinas and James*, 109.

⁵⁹ Craig, 107.

⁶⁰ To frame a habit of forming new habits as a habit of re-fashioning is to allow for differences that “need not necessarily be understood as disagreements and disputes and discords” (Stuhr, *Pragmatic Fashions*, 42). “Fashion,” suggesting both what and how a way of living is expressed, is different from “style,” which suggests just the what (not the how) and the form (not the content or substance) (Stuhr, 36). “Fashion,” then, like “experience,” is what John Dewey will call “double-barreled,” including both what is experienced and how it is experienced.

⁶¹ Craig, *Levinas and James*, 94, 106.

⁶² Kaag, *American Philosophy*, 8-9. In regard to taking up James’s fashion in writing, it is worth noting that Kaag performs this commentary not in an exegetical essay but in a personal novel. This is in line with Mary Oliver’s observation: “Writing is neither vibrant life nor docile artifact but a text that puts all its money on the hope of suggestion. *Come with me into a field of sunflowers* is a better line than anything you will find here, and the sunflowers themselves far more wonderful than any words about

them” (Oliver, *Upstream*, 22). For me, this means that writing, as a sign or a gesture, is more effective when more affective, more inviting when more personal, as Oliver’s invitation (and James’s emphasis on thought being owned) shows. Lived actions will likely inspire more than words. This essay is likely not as persuasive as a friend’s voice.

⁶³ James, “On a Certain Blindness,” 146.

⁶⁴ Kaag, *American Philosophy*, 9.

⁶⁵ Kaag, 93.

⁶⁶ Fanon, *Wretched*, 5.

⁶⁷ Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, 229.

⁶⁸ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 43.

⁶⁹ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 43, 181.

⁷⁰ Emerson, *Essays & Lectures*, 429.

⁷¹ Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, 336.

⁷² Craig, “Habit,” 183.

⁷³ Berg, “Urban Designers.”