

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

NOTES

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