

RESPONSE TO TADD RUETENIK  
AND JOHN CAPPS



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**RESPONSE TO CAPPS**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**RESPONSE TO RUETENIK**

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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### NOTES

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