

RESPONSIBLE POLITICAL-
FASHIONING:
COMMENTS ON TODD LEKAN'S
*WILLIAM JAMES AND THE MORAL
LIFE*



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In an apt phrase, Todd Lekan says that “philosophical writing should display rather than erase traces of the author.”¹ It is in this spirit that I write this analysis of *William James and the Moral Life: Responsible Self-Fashioning*. Lekan’s work not only provides a plausible interpretation of moral philosophy in the spirit of James, but it also prompts us to interact with this philosophy by considering various examples of contemporary problematic situations. The goal of the moral philosopher, as Lekan shows, is not to be moral, but rather to facilitate healthy moral deliberation. “The social moral philosopher,” says Lekan, “seeks to create an inclusive moral order through expansion of sympathetic concern among those committed to different ideals.”² In this sense Lekan’s work is a reflection of the idea of radical inclusivity that is becoming increasingly common.

I will argue that this inclusive moral order is more complicated than we might imagine, and the results of this kind of moral deliberation can be surprising and perhaps unnerving. Nonetheless, I think this is appropriate for the radical nature of James’s philosophy. I proceed by bringing up three contemporary examples where Lekan’s elaboration of James’s moral philosophy would produce, as I see it, results that are both philosophically interesting and morally helpful in the process of social/political deliberation. The first example is Lekan’s and the last two are mine, displaying my own constitutional bias for promoting radical and/or controversial positions.

ANIMALS AND PEOPLE WITH COGNITIVE DISABILITIES

A vegetarian and animal-ethics philosopher, Lekan presents a controversy arising from consideration of the argument regarding cognitively disabled humans and animals. “With quite different aims than oppressive denigration,” says Lekan, “animal ethics philosophers compare cognitively disabled humans to animals.” They do this “to show that animals should be accorded greater moral

value.” Lekan notes that the use of the cognitively disabled in animal rights arguments “has troubled disability advocates who argue that, however well intentioned, animal advocates are bolstering the very same sorts of prejudices that have marginalized the cognitively disabled.”³

Lekan’s mediation of this dispute is admirable, and, as a vegetarian, I admire his patience in engaging with it. Eva Kittay, for example, has what Lekan refers to as a “visceral” reaction to comparisons of cognitively disabled people with animals, due in large part to being the mother of a cognitively disabled person.⁴ For example, when an animal ethics philosopher says, as Lekan does, that “some cognitively disabled humans are less self-conscious and cognitively/emotionally developed than adult baboons,” Kittay might be offended at the comparison.⁵ Personally, I do not share that offense, and would imagine that if I did have a cognitively/emotionally underdeveloped child I would not see a problem in using them in a thought experiment. As Lekan notes, other critics go so far as to say that “the disabled are being exploited insofar as they are used in arguments against speciesism, yet reap no benefits from their philosophical labor.”⁶ As a communist sympathizer, I myself might have a visceral reaction to what I perceive as a misuse of the word “labor,” but I should instead consider the larger point, namely that there might be something wrong with using the cognitively disabled in arguments that benefit other species. And yet it is difficult to see how a philosopher would proceed without making such comparisons. Lekan, for example, says that “a turtle’s life might have significance for us, but not to itself. To be sure, it cares about what happens to it, and it might make inferences about perilous and desirable outcomes in its environment.” But, he continues, in a manner that might be taken also to refer to people with severe mental disabilities, the turtle “does not reflectively derive meaning from its life.”⁷

But my imagination is limited. I am a father rather than a mother, and not part of any historically marginalized group. For me, the subject is summed up rationally with Lekan’s statement that “the worry that animal rights advocates even unintentionally denigrate

the cognitively disabled by comparing them to nonhuman animals depends on the prior denigration of nonhuman animals.”⁸ The objection is just a form of speciesism. Lekan’s point, however, is that Kittay is introducing the concept of relationships “as a corrective to the moral blindness of philosophers who accept the individual moral properties assumption upon which the argument from marginal cases relies.”⁹ It is here that Lekan, as a responsible moral philosopher, finds value in the claim.

It is possible that animals and disabled people are both valued. Lekan proposes two interesting and useful terms here: centripetal sympathy, which involves “apprehending the view of others with whom one shares ideals;” and centrifugal sympathy, which works to “delineate the limits of the self through contrast.”¹⁰ If we have to choose between experimenting on one or the other, however, it becomes more complicated. The relationship of humans to other humans is set against the relationship of humans to animals, and, personally, I find it difficult to argue on behalf of any relationship between humans and animals that can be more important than a relationship between humans and humans. The moral philosopher, however, should look for a way of maximizing desires here, and the answer might be found in considering how we got to the point of needing such experiments to begin with. Do we overvalue human longevity? For example, it would be difficult but not impossible to find people whose desire is that human beings—including members of their family and they themselves—do not wish to prolong life as much as they do. Or do we look for medical solutions to environmental problems that are more difficult to solve? Perhaps the voices of pharmaceutical companies are too large and the voices of nutritionists are too small. This is why I think Lekan’s work is best understood as implying that the moral philosopher does best when working with competing desires to synthesize views, producing radical and creative answers, rather than simply listening to claims, acknowledging the desires behind them, and making merely compromising solutions.

U.S. SCHOOL SHOOTINGS

Yet if we are to take James, and Lekan's improvement of James seriously, we have to consider the demands of everyone. And these demands are not impersonal ideas, but are almost like personal wills, that is, spirits. Lekan's term for this is very apt: they are "irreducibly second-person obligations."¹¹ Accordingly, I want to argue that Lekan's Demand Obligation Thesis (DOT) requires that we see the good spiritedness in everyone, including school shooters, who are nevertheless beings from whom goods originate, according to Lekan's Sentiogenic Thesis (ST).

If—as Lekan believes, from his responsible reading of James—the Essence of Good (EG) is to satisfy demands, we fail in the good if we immediately dismiss demands that are uncomfortable, even profoundly so. Lekan delineates the situation by referring, for example, to his Regulatory Assumption-2, which says that the "plurality of values gives rise to potential conflicts." One type of conflict results from a social structure's limited resources and time which make it impossible to fully accommodate every ideal. Another type of conflict arises when moral ideals build rejection of other ideals into their very contents, which is tantamount to judging those alternative ideals to be "evil" or "false."¹²

I am not entirely convinced of the reality of the first conflict, since it depends on the idea that moral deliberation has to be considered as restricted by limited resources. Although we might—very wisely—set a time limit on a faculty meeting, we do not have to set a limit on sympathy.

However, the second of these conflicts is of greater interest here. According to the DOT, we are obligated to see each demand as a considerable thing. James admits, as what perhaps might be seen as a throwaway line, that "some desires, truly enough, are small desires; they are put forward by insignificant persons, and we customarily make light of the obligations which they bring." James continues by saying that nevertheless "the fact that such personal demands as these impose small obligations does not keep the largest obligations from being personal demands."¹³ His point is that both small and large demands are fundamentally personal in nature, and

not merely something that comes through access to an objective reality. But the assumption seems to be that some people are insignificant a priori.

In the case of school shootings, there is a considerably large group of people who believe school shootings are bad and should not happen. This group is quite large, and comprises everyone except the shooters. Most notably, this includes those who favor stricter gun laws as well as those who oppose stricter gun control. Now in the moral philosopher's role as facilitator in the maximization of desires, they should be welcoming of the proposal that, for example, schools be made into places with one heavily restricted entrance. This would do a lot toward preventing the possibility of a shooting (at least one within the school) while not negating the desires of those who really want to have their guns. This includes the school shooters themselves, for whom the only desire that is thwarted is the desire to kill students, a desire which is, according to James, something that is still of real value in the universe. If so, however, its value is that of allowing us to see how much we have slipped into a culture of violence, and one not just limited to violence within the country, but rather to the international violence of the U.S. military. 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. Still, as Lekan notes, "given a finite life, some values will have to be sacrificed."¹⁴

It is here that we might invoke James's thought experiment involving the lonely soul tortured on the edge of the universe for the genuine good of all. Lekan says, uncontroversially, that James "assumes most of us who contemplate this example will experience revulsion or disgust," not, to be sure, to the extent that we would necessarily stop the torture.¹⁵ To me this indicates a conflict we have with our brain-born compulsion to sacrifice. In the case of the school shooter, however, we have an interestingly similar situation, but inverted. We like, it seems to me, the idea of sacrificing the shooter. How genuine, after all, is our hatred of the shooter, when so many enjoy shooting people in video games? Is not there some kind of

sick jealousy for the shooter? Do people themselves feel the urge to kill whenever they see someone perform in reality what they have assured themselves is completely morally permissible virtually?

Now there will possibly arise another desire, perhaps to some extent shared by all non-school shooters. 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 functioning like prisons because they want problematic situations not so much adjusted to, but rather drawn out to their revolutionary *reductio ad absurdum*. When we see that our children are on permanent lockdown, we might then see that the solution is not just in the liberal's common-sense gun legislation, but in the radical's desire to dismantle the military-industrial complex, which, more than anything else, sets a tone of violence both within and outside of the United States.

THE WAR IN UKRAINE

Lekan's *William James and the Moral Life: Responsible Self-Fashioning* lacks only an even more detailed engagement with contemporary issues. It includes insights that help us understand, for example, human-animal and human-human relationships in more than merely ethical terms, but also in terms of existential meaning. I would like to include, however, a pressing issue that is political more than personal, and has to do with international relationships, that is, relationships among countries. The question here is not so much whether one can muster the existential strength to fight against the evils of the world, but first, to have the moral courage to investigate whether that which we consider evil is truly so.

In the case of the war in Ukraine, for example, there seems to be little consideration of all possible perspectives, and especially neglected among these is that of Russia and Vladimir Putin. When such considerations arise, there seems to be an immediate attempt to minimize the demands of Russia or Putin, or worse, imagine that they are based on evil desires. Lekan is aware of this possibility, and writes that "gross distortions of ideals may be just as bad or even worse than sheer ignorance of another's eager devotion to an ideal."

He then gives the example of colonizers demonizing native religion rather than merely denying that it is religion.¹⁶ Something similar applies to politics. Gross distortions of ideals lead to the assumption among many in the United States and Western Europe that Putin is either irrational or evil. Just before the war began, former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton suggested on U.S. media outlet MSNBC that some of Putin's aides should get "close enough" to him and see his increasingly "erratic behavior" and then "do something about it." Yet whatever one thinks of Putin and Russia, they are not necessarily acting in a way that is objectively irrational, but only are acting in a way to which many in the United States, whether intentionally or not, are blind. The seeming implication—that assassination was the only option—belies a lack of moral consideration.¹⁷

Perhaps more disappointing was the belief that the whole world is against Putin. Indeed a litany of European countries expressed their opposition to Russia. But the liberal democracies of Western Europe are not the whole world. The voices of Africa, Asia, and South America were considered simply too insignificant to be taken seriously. The fact that these countries are largely neutral about the war is itself a voice to be considered. It could be that they are waiting and hoping for a world with the kind of "tolerant pluralism" that Lekan sees James committed to.¹⁸ The idea that this war, for better or worse, could be done in the name of creating what Russian apologists call a multipolar world, is not readily available for the consideration of a U.S. citizen. There are indeed strenuous ideals in other parts of the world, and responsible self-fashioning—whether of individuals or of countries—is a requirement for us all.

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NOTES

¹ Todd Lekan, *William James and the Moral Life: Responsible Self-Fashioning*, 1.

² Lekan, *Williams James*, 2.

³ Lekan, *William James*, 115.

⁴ Lekan, *William James*, 116.

⁵ Lekan, *William James*, 117.

⁶ Lekan, *William James*, 120.

⁷ Lekan, *William James*, 49.

⁸ Lekan, *William James*, 121.

⁹ Lekan, *William James*, 120.

¹⁰ Lekan, *William James*, 58.

¹¹ Lekan, *William James*, 21.

¹² Lekan, *William James*, 13.

¹³ William James, *The Will to Believe*, 195.

¹⁴ Lekan, *William James*, 95.

¹⁵ Lekan, *William James*, 68.

¹⁶ Lekan, *William James*, 59.

¹⁷ “They Need to Stop Him: Clinton Calls of Putin Aides to Act for the Good of Russia.” MSNBC. March 1, 2022. <https://www.msnbc.com/rachel-maddow/watch/-they-need-to-stop-him-clinton-calls-on-putin-aides-to-act-for-the-good-of-russia-134283845527>.

¹⁸ Lekan, *William James*, 82.