

**William James,
Moral Philosophy, and
the Ethical Life**

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Chapter 8

The Moral Life as the Basis for Moral Philosophy

John R. Shook

Few essays by William James have been more misinterpreted, and poorly understood even by fellow pragmatists, than “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life.” Generous commentators and hostile critics alike recount its centrality to James’s ethics. Yet they typically impose ethical views of their own imagination, and assert that James does, or must, affirm them. Worse, these impositions permit James to appear to contradict himself. The charitable apology is dutifully supplied: James is such an impressionistic thinker, and an occasionally disorganized mind. Thus, the commentator feels entitled to supply a layer of ethical philosophy to construct something solid under him. Some singular view expressed by James is selected in order to neatly categorize his ethical theory.

James’s ethics has accordingly been treated as a type of utilitarianism, a virtue ethics, a salvific theism, and so on. But commentators are not able to rest easy after their labors. They are forced to admit how their chosen categorization proves troublesome, due to a statement James makes about morality, or a principle James pronounces about ethics. Commentators then struggle to ascertain why James, or anyone else, thought that his ethical theory is philosophically sound.

At least the main purpose of “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” stands out from the beginning.

The main purpose of this paper is to show that there is no such thing possible as an ethical philosophy dogmatically made up in advance. We all help to determine the content of ethical philosophy so far as we contribute to the race’s moral life. In other words, there can be no final truth in ethics any more than in physics, until the last man has had his experience and said his say. In the one case as in the other, however, the hypotheses which we now make while waiting, and the acts to which they prompt us, are among the indispensable conditions which determine what that “say” shall be. (James 1897: 184; James 1979: 141)¹

Few commentators defend dogmatic ethical philosophizing, so James's primary point has many admirers. However, most of James's essay is more about determining the content of ethical philosophy, and how moral philosophers shall participate in its determination. Commentators mostly find, despite their discrepant interpretations, that James's ethical theory ensures that the moral philosopher's task is hopeless.

IS MORAL PHILOSOPHY HOPELESS?

A survey of pragmatist commentators struggling with "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" includes the following instructive examples.

Abraham Edel decided that there can be no place for rules or principles in morality according to James, so each person must creatively deal with their own moral problems, with nothing more in hand than an injunction to increase human satisfactions insofar as those are grounded in feelings. The moral philosopher appears to be constrained by act utilitarianism. However, James should not be a utilitarian. Edel notices James's appreciation for religious experience's capacity to shape personal character, and his preference that passions take the lead in moral decisions, so Edel aligns James with virtue ethics. That position remains too individualistic and chaotic to satisfy Edel's effort to detect a rounded-out moral system in James, lending the moral philosopher little solid guidance. Edel states that he expects a "philosopher more attentive to the social and historical setting of our ideas" to justify universalistic ideals such as justice. Edel then forages through dozens of James's other writings to gather suggestive excuses for James's reduction of virtue to one's "passionate nature" and his failure to recognize morality's stable social nature (Edel 1993: 6–13).

Edward Madden finds a very different ethics in James's essay. He asserts that James did employ a fundamental rule for morality, a thoroughly utilitarian principle. In Madden's words, that singular rule is "one ought to maximize need satisfaction for all concerned," and he claims that James's commitment to this rule could never be altered by any amount of future experience (Madden 1979: xxxiii). Madden concludes that James only ends up endorsing yet another "parochial" moral system alongside the rest, so a moral philosopher must not imitate James's own example.

Besides this considerable contrast in interpretations between two otherwise able pragmatists, their juxtaposition has a further interesting feature. They both bring up John Dewey. Madden quotes from a letter from Dewey to James, sent soon after the initial publication of "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," in which Dewey expressly agrees with James on desires constituting claims and obligations, and with James's discussion of rules

(Madden 1979: xxxiii). These pointed but brief agreements are sufficient for Madden to judge that Dewey has a similar *a priori* commitment to that same utilitarian principle of James's. As for Edel, he clearly prefers Dewey's more social and historical treatment of morality, but shows little interest in classifying Dewey as a utilitarian.

Other capable pragmatists, and James enthusiasts and admirers all have similarly struggled with James's essay. Two more examples can illustrate this trend.

Gerald Myers would like to classify James as a straightforward utilitarian, but James's refusal to countenance the torture or abandonment of anyone halts Myers in confusion. Myers promptly faults James for the contradiction, adding that James's theory cannot actually guide any moral philosopher trying to fulfill James's injunction to wisely adjudicate among life's ideals. Indeed, "James never tried to be the kind of moral philosopher he described in his essay" (Myers 1986: 400). Myers is not impressed by the role of religion in James's ethics, since the perplexities of moral life get transferred over to the mysteries of mysticism. For James, according to Myers, a person simply turns one's life over to any chosen moral authority and lives according to its wishes to pragmatically fulfill them. While pragmatist in spirit, Myers intimates, that method does not sound like moral philosophy anymore.

Ruth Anna Putnam does not judge that James's ethics devolves into irresponsible wish-fulfillment—moral responsibility must weigh heavily on us all. She can agree with Myers that James expects the moral philosopher to undertake an impossible task, but not because of religion's mysteries. Rather, James's ethics seeks an ultimate coherence among worthy ideals, but no singular coherence resolves their conflicts, as there are too many possible arrangements to humanly consider. At most, a moral philosopher can offer a few advancements in certain ideals that are more inclusive and cause the least loss to other ideals, in order to increase the overall satisfactions of demands (Putnam 1990: 83). However, the project to pursue more inclusive ideals puzzles Putnam, because a commitment to "the most inclusive ideal" strikes her as not only unapproachably perfect, but merely an imported ideal of James's own devising, violating his pledge that the moral philosopher would stay impartial. All the same, Putnam is quite right to point out how James rejected coherence, and similar aesthetic qualities such as harmony, as criteria for converging upon one singular set of finalized ideals.

James had explicitly demoted the aesthetic in his 1890 work, *The Principles of Psychology*. A section classifying lower and higher stages of thinking starts from sensation and the perception of things, proceeds to reasoning about objects, and reaches its sophisticated stages in aesthetic appreciation and then ethical decision. Associationist psychology and its empiricism is duly criticized throughout his psychological and philosophical writings.

Jeremy Bentham's hedonism falls far short. Not even John Stuart Mill's empiricism fully accounts for complex forms of thinking, moral sensibilities, and higher values, which all depend on the brain's own creative relational processes, processes developed under social circumstances somewhat unique to each person. At higher stages, these mental processes allow for thoughtful creativity. Therefore, James's ranking is based on the degree of conscious selection and deliberate choice infused into each stage's mode of experience.

Ascending, still higher, we reach the plane of Ethics, where choice reigns notoriously supreme. An act has no ethical quality whatever unless it be chosen out of several all equally possible. To sustain the arguments for the good course and keep them ever before us, to stifle our longing for more flowery ways, to keep the foot unflinchingly on the arduous path, these are characteristic ethical energies. But more than these; for these but deal with the means of compassing interests already felt by the man to be supreme. The ethical energy *par excellence* has to go farther and choose which *interest* out of several, equally coercive, shall become supreme. The issue here is of the utmost pregnancy, for it decides a man's entire career. When he debates . . . his choice really lies between one of several equally possible future Characters. What he shall *become* is fixed by the conduct of this moment. . . . [I]n these critical ethical moments, what consciously *seems* to be in question is the complexion of the character itself. The problem with the man is less what act he shall now choose to do, than what being he shall now resolve to become. (James 1890: I. 287–8)

James would never trust aesthetics in the ethical realm, because our prejudiced eye is too quick to pass judgment on lives very different from our own. In his essay "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," he relates his encounter with backwoods life in mountainous North Carolina. Describing his dismay at the ugly squalor of settler life, he writes,

The forest had been destroyed; and what had 'improved' it out of existence was hideous, a sort of ulcer, without a single element of artificial grace to make up for the loss of Nature's beauty. . . . No modern person ought to be willing to live a day in such a state of rudimentariness and denudation. Then I said to the mountaineer who was driving me, "What sort of people are they who have to make these new clearings?" "All of us," he replied. "Why, we ain't happy here, unless we are getting one of these coves under cultivation." I instantly felt that I had been losing the whole inward significance of the situation. Because to me the clearings spoke of naught but denudation, I thought that to those whose sturdy arms and obedient axes had made them they could tell no other story. But, when *they* looked on the hideous stumps, what they thought of was personal victory. The chips, the girdled trees, and the vile split rails spoke of honest sweat, persistent toil and final reward. The cabin was a warrant of safety for self and wife and babes. In short, 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 pæan of duty, struggle, and success. I had been as blind to the peculiar ideality of their conditions as they certainly would also have been to the ideality of mine, had they had a peep at my strange indoor academic ways of life at Cambridge. (James 1899: 8–9)

Our aesthetic feelings and judgments cannot do justice to the ideals pursued in the lives of others. In general, for James, the worthiness of ideals cannot be fairly tested by any aesthetic criteria. Imposing one's preferred aesthetic criteria amounts to the imposition of a partial perspective on life. A philosophical imposition of some familiar aesthetic criteria in turn amounts to resorting to setting an *a priori* standard. As far as James could see, only the truly unfamiliar, the uncharted territory of fresh experience from an original course of action, could guarantee that nothing *a priori* or necessary is determining matters. Determinism is incompatible with the moral life of accomplishing real good, as James argues in "The Dilemma of Determinism," for even a little good makes its own positive contribution to the growth of reality. We genuinely create when we choose ethically (James 1897: 170–5; James 1979: 132–135). For James, the ethical choice is the freest choice, and vice versa.

It appears that the moral philosopher must be closely acquainted with the necessity of freely making choices about the most important matters in life. In fact, James expects moral philosophers to forge most decisive choices impacting us all. Can that burden really be shouldered?

THE MORAL PHILOSOPHER'S ROLE

The moral philosopher seeks an ethical philosophy: "find an account of the moral relations that obtain among things, which will weave them into the unity of a stable system, and make of the world what one may call a genuine universe from the ethical point of view" (James 1897: 184–5; James 1979: 141). Having abjured *a priori* systematizing, James restricts the moral philosopher's inquiry to moral matters already in the world, including the philosopher's own search for that ideal unity to an ethical world. "The subject matter of his study is the ideals he finds existing in the world; the purpose which guides him is this ideal of his own, of getting them into a certain form. This ideal . . . is a positive contribution which the philosopher himself necessarily makes to the problem. But it is his only positive contribution. At the outset of his inquiry he ought to have no other ideals" (James 1897: 185; James 1979: 142).

In order to definitively banish those ethical necessities and *a priori* moral frameworks, James must ground morality and ethical ideals in the concrete

moral life of sentient beings, with no exceptions allowed. All moral rules and principles, up to the highest ideals a society may revere, have their ultimate basis in the actual claims and corresponding obligations of real people, somewhere and somewhen.

James accordingly places extremely rigorous demands on a moral philosopher. Imposing an *a priori* system for morality must be avoided, so abstract reasonings based on intuitive principles or fine sensibilities aroused by aesthetic characteristics cannot play decisive roles. Yet ethical ideals are needed. Moral philosophers suggest them. They are mere hypotheticals, however. A moral philosopher's own ideal(s) count no more and no less than any others until their worth is evident, and their worth must be tested by the future course of human welfare. Before we discuss the nature of that testing, James's requirement of impartiality needs clarification.

Two of James's statements about testing ideals appear to conflict. James requires impartial testing, to rule out prejudiced testing. Impartiality in ethics usually means that abstract individuals, not actual people, are subject to moral norms, so that everyone is equally under a moral duty to comply no matter who a person happens to be in real life. However, James additionally requires that the tests of ideals be grounded only in the actual demands of real people. This triad of statements may be inconsistent with each other:

1. James: "The entire undertaking of the philosopher obliges him to seek an impartial test" (James 1897: 199; James 1979: 151).
2. Definition: An impartial test would never prioritize particular people, regarding them at most as abstractly generic individuals.
3. James: "That test, however, must be incarnated in the demand of some actually existent person" (James 1897: 199; James 1979: 151–2).

How can a test be impartial if particular people and their personal demands constitute both the tested ideal (for people must propose ideals) and the means of confirming that ideal (for ideals should satisfy demands)? It is clear that James does expect every ideal to arise from some group commitment, or at least some individual's commitment, to its worth. Ideals must not float freely apart from the real demands of real people. And it seems just as clear that James expects a moral philosopher to test ideals in the same manner, no matter whose ideals they happen to be—even one's own.

If these three statements are truly inconsistent, the reasonable resolution calls for rejecting one of them. The ethical skeptic admits that ethical impartiality is a fine standard but unattainable, so 1 is denied: a plurality of subjective moral viewpoints remains forever irreconcilable. The act utilitarian rejects 2, instead requiring that an impartial test simply include all actual people, so that all demands are fairly taken into account. The ethical apriorist

denies 3, expecting that an idealized ethical system is valid universally, since it is designed for all individuals regardless of who they actually happen to be. As for James, he saw no inconsistency here.

To understand why James may be correct, consider the ethical apriorists. James depicts them like this: “They imagine an abstract moral order in which the objective truth resides; and each tries to prove that this pre-existing order is more accurately reflected in his own ideas than in those of his adversary. It is because one disputant is backed by this overarching abstract order that we think the other should submit” (James 1897: 194; James 1979: 148). Ethical apriorists effectively rely on a quasi-deductive argument that has much in common with abduction. The following schematic argument captures a typical procedure:

4. The entire moral life of the world can be confirmed as stably and coherently real.
5. Only if this set S of ethical principles is valid, would 4 be correct.
6. Therefore, S must be valid.

James’s point made against the ethical apriorists is this: an ethical apriorist is able to imaginatively perceive that hoped-for stable and coherent moral world only by viewing it through that principled framework S, and then that perception of the hoped-for world is taken to be a complete confirmation of S. In effect, presuming S creates the desired perception of the world as already perfected, and that perfect world is simultaneously “evidence” of the prior validity of S. The logical invalidity of this procedure is apparent. The “evidence” cannot be sufficiently independent from the imposed framework, and any number of complex frameworks could accomplish that same sort of “verification.” Little confidence can be assigned to premise 5, because of the term “only”—it is too convenient that the perfect moral world is visible “only” through S’s framework, and it is not the case that *only* S will serve in that capacity. Rival ethical apriorists would not be able to confirm a coherent moral world by way of each other’s systems. Each apriorist interprets the actual world’s moral matters through a preferred framework, so a rival’s treasured moral exemplars seem to be poor evidence, and vice versa. Onlookers have their own intuitions and sympathies too, and no one could possibly be impartial.

The problem with ethical apriorism for James lies not with allowing a presumed ethical ideal to help create the evidence counting in its favor. James’s own ethical theory requires that constructive feature, as we shall explore. Rather, ethical apriorism rashly tries to perfectly comprehend the entire moral world all at once, and forever. An ethical apriorist attempts to anticipate far too much about the moral life, now and eternally. Yet the breadth and

extent of present and future moral experience across one species like us, or many sentient species, must radically exceed any philosopher's grasp. At an extreme, an ethicist might attempt to imagine the moral viewpoint of a deity. James doesn't object to that effort, but a moral philosopher is only entitled to hope that one's favored ideal enjoys divine favor—no moral philosopher will be ascertaining God's fuller ethical vision.

All the same, the philosophical quest for that fuller ethical vision is the only alternative to skepticism:

Yet the philosopher, just because he is a philosopher, adds his own peculiar ideal to the confusion (with which if he were willing to be a sceptic he would be passably content), and insists that over all these individual opinions there is a *system of truth* which he can discover if he only takes sufficient pains (James 1897: 198–9; James 1979: 151).

The skeptic can rest content with a moral cacophony. The moral philosopher must search for ethical systematization.

It is no objection against James that his preferred type of moral philosopher is driven to seek more cohesive systems of finer ideals, by revising prior established ideals with a personal contribution. This revisionary process, guided by a visionary end, is depicted by James as a magnified and more public version of what occurs inside anyone's mental processes as creative thought makes its decisive contribution to the system of knowledge possessed by one's mind. That analogy between intellectual learning and moral creativity is suggestive. However, the crucial difference between personal knowledge and public knowledge lies in the great consequences for society if its ideals are adjusted and increased by one. James cannot be talking merely about personal ethics, but social ethics as well.

SOCIAL ETHICS

There are few philosophers so capable of personalizing morality as James. It all starts with individual sentient beings: "Surely there is no *status* for good and evil to exist in, in a purely insentient world" (James 1897: 190; James 1979: 145). The moral life is grounded in obligations of one to another, and those obligations arise for no other reason than that individuals have needs, express their values, and demand claims upon their satisfaction. The relation between obligation and claim is as close as possible, emphasized with James's own italics: "*not only that without a claim actually made by some concrete person there can be no obligation, but that there is some obligation wherever there is a claim*" (James 1897: 194; James 1979: 148).

James's argument for this stance rests on the inconceivability of the alternative: that something beyond the realm of life has a rightful veto preventing a sincere claim from arousing any obligation. James does not deny that many claims should not be obliged, but that evaluation must itself be based on some other obligations arising from claims. "Which obligations are to be morally genuine?" is a question to be answered by looking to the features of obligations and those making claims, not by looking to anything transcendent apart from the life world of obligations.

We inveterately think that something which we call the "validity" of the claim is what gives to it its obligatory character, and that this validity is something outside of the claim's mere existence as a matter of fact. It rains down upon the claim, we think, from some sublime dimension of being, which the moral law inhabits, much as upon the steel of the compass-needle the influence of the Pole rains down from out of the starry heavens. But again, how can such an inorganic abstract character of imperativeness, additional to the imperativeness which is in the concrete claim itself, *exist*? Take any demand however slight, which any creature, however weak, may make. Ought it not, for its own sake, to be satisfied? If not, prove why not. The only possible kind of proof you could adduce would be the exhibition of another creature who should make a demand that ran the other way. The only possible reason there can be why any phenomenon ought to exist is that such a phenomenon actually is desired. Any desire is imperative to the extent of its amount; it *makes* itself valid by the fact that it exists at all. (James 1897: 195; James 1979: 148–9)

The moral life begins and ends with creatures sentient enough to make and recognize obligations upon each other.

Wherever such minds exist, with judgments of good and ill, and demands upon one another, there is an ethical world in its essential features. . . . [W]hile they lived, there would be real good things and real bad things in the universe; there would be obligations, claims, and expectations; obediences, refusals, and disappointments; compunctions, and longings for harmony to come again, and inward peace of conscience when it was restored; there would, in short, be a moral life, whose active energy would have no limit but the intensity of interest in each other with which the hero and heroine might be endowed. . . . Whether a God exist, or whether no God exist, in yon blue heaven above us bent, we form at any rate an ethical republic here below. (James 1897: 197–8; James 1979: 150)

James speaks of our "ethical republic" only in the most generic manner. Each deserves the equality to be able to create obligations, but the matter of which obligations shall morally prevail is a separate issue. He sees how all the world's societies, past and present, are far from civically unified. Human society in general since its origins has been a constant scene of experimentation

as peoples fought for moral ideals and suffered the consequences, of victory as well as defeat. Moral ideals for James are basically social norms regulating legitimate obligations—which are most obligatory, which are optional, and which are beneath notice. Each society is perfectly capable of discovering for itself, over long experience, how well its moral ideals can sustain the good of the whole. This is a utilitarian perspective on social ethics, but no moral philosophy need be involved. The long brutal march of cultural development—“an experiment of the most searching kind” (James 1897: 206; James 1979: 156) as James puts it—eventually tests innumerable moral ideals and their combinations. By the time any philosophers show up to lend their commentary, societies can appear to have been designed by some singular mind, for their sets of important moral ideals are at least somewhat coherent and stable enough to permit ordinary life to carry on. History is the first teacher of philosophy, and existing culture is the second.

The course of history is nothing but the story of men’s struggles from generation to generation to find the more and more inclusive order. *Invent some manner* of realizing your own ideals which will also satisfy the alien demands—that and that only is the path of peace! Following this path, society has shaken itself into one sort of relative equilibrium after another by a series of social discoveries quite analogous to those of science. Polyandry and polygamy and slavery, private warfare and liberty to kill, judicial torture and arbitrary royal power have slowly succumbed to actually aroused complaints; and though someone’s ideals are unquestionably the worse off for each improvement, yet a vastly greater total number of them find shelter in our civilized society than in the older savage ways. So far then, and up to date, the casuistic scale is made for the philosopher already far better than he can ever make it for himself. An experiment of the most searching kind has proved that the laws and usages of the land are what yield the maximum of satisfaction to the thinkers taken all together. (James 1897: 205–6; James 1979: 155–6)

Do not be ready to imagine that James regards existing cultures with much satisfaction, however. Respect is appropriate, but not philosophical satisfaction. Within cultures and between cultures, the most bewildering variety to morality persists.

The wars of the flesh and the spirit in each man, the concupiscences of different individuals pursuing the same unshareable material or social prizes, the ideals which contrast so according to races, circumstances, temperaments, philosophical beliefs, etc.—all form a maze of apparently inextricable confusion with no obvious Ariadne’s thread to lead one out. (James 1897: 198; James 1979: 151)

That variety persists at the philosophical level of reflection concerned with better ethics for all humanity.

Various essences of good have thus been found and proposed as bases of the ethical system. Thus, to be a mean between two extremes; to be recognized by a special intuitive faculty; to make the agent happy for the moment; to make others as well as him happy in the long run; to add to his perfection or dignity; to harm no one; to follow from reason or flow from universal law; to be in accordance with the will of God; to promote the survival of the human species on this planet—are so many tests, each of which has been maintained by somebody to constitute the essence of all good things or actions so far as they are good. No one of the measures that have been actually proposed has, however, given general satisfaction. (James 1897: 200; James 1979: 152)

What is the philosopher of ethics to do? The ethical apriorist is tempted to dictate what must be judged as good and right, to be able to regulate what is truly good and right everywhere. Again, James forbids it.

All one's slumbering revolutionary instincts waken at the thought of any single moralist wielding such powers of life and death. Better chaos forever than an order based on any closet philosopher's rule, even though he were the most enlightened possible member of his tribe. No! if the philosopher is to keep his judicial position, he must never become of the parties to the fray. (James 1897: 204; James 1979: 155)

All the same, a moral philosopher advocating one or another moral ideal, appealing to its preservations of goods and expansion of more goods, has James's blessing:

As a militant, fighting free-handed that the goods to which he is sensible may not be submerged and lost from out of life, the philosopher, like every other human being, is in a natural position. (James 1897: 204; James 1979: 154)

The moral philosopher's role is to experimentally struggle for the better ethical system of ideals, but only component by component, not by dogmatically systematizing the entirety of the moral life. Each moral philosopher can only pursue one's own moral agenda, and from that perspective, this effort must appear to be just a lone individual's attempt to bring moral respect to disrespected obligations. However, from a broader perspective, one moral agenda is in fact nothing less than a creative readjustment of an entire system of moral ideals all deserving considerable respect.

As a consequence, personal ethics is social ethics for James. In the course of ordinary moral life, the wisest course is the safest course, because of the

vast accumulation of human wisdom embodied in traditional customs and norms. James notes, “The presumption in cases of conflict must always be in favor of the conventionally recognized good” (James 1897: 206; James 1979: 156). Social conflict is manageable, in many cases, because established social structures and institutions carry their due weight. James would never suppose that mere conventionality is all there is to morality, however. He does not reduce morality to what has survived from the past, no matter how venerable and sensible, nor does he equate customary morals with worthy ideals sought by ethics. Most of the past should not stay unchanged forever, even if it cannot all be changed at once. What can be changed now has to preserve the worth of the past. That is why James must warn against radicalism: “The philosopher must be a conservative, and in the construction of his casuistic scale must put the things most in accordance with the customs of the community on top” (James 1897: 206; James 1979: 156). Custom is not king, but established moral norms, and especially high ideals, should be subsumed into a revised ethical system if at all possible.

As James pronounces his ultimate standard for judging ideals, it is supposed to sound like a conservative standard.

[T]hose ideals must be written highest which *prevail at the least cost*, or by whose realization the least possible number of other ideals are destroyed. Since victory and defeat there must be, the victory to be philosophically prayed for is that of the more inclusive side—of the side which even in the hour of triumph will to some degree do justice to the ideals in which the vanquished party’s interests lay. The course of history is nothing but the story of men’s struggles from generation to generation to find the more and more inclusive order. *Invent some manner* of realizing your own ideals which will also satisfy the alien demands—that and that only is the path of peace! (James 1897: 205; James 1979: 155)

Ethics cannot resort to demonizing the opposition as “alien” and it must not quickly resort to conflict. Revolutionaries may find that war comes to them, but their ethics must be more constructive than destructive. The moral philosopher (in the guise of a thinker, literary author, holy figure, or statesman) is essential to the partial and ongoing improvement to a society’s social ethics.

Every now and then, however, someone is born with the right to be original, and his revolutionary thought or action may bear prosperous fruit. He may replace old “laws of nature” by better ones; he may, by breaking old moral rules in a certain place, bring in a total condition of things more ideal than would have followed had the rules been kept. (James 1897: 208; James 1979: 157–8)

Although each moral philosopher has their own more inclusive ethical vision to support their particular moral agenda, somehow the actual trials and results of all of their efforts forged together can direct society toward a worthier ethical system that none of the participants quite anticipated. Above it all, a philosopher aloof from this ethical drama can perceive an unsteady yet inexorable trend:

The pure philosopher can only follow the windings of the spectacle, confident that the line of least resistance will always be towards the richer and the more inclusive arrangement, and that by one tack after another some approach to the kingdom of heaven is incessantly made. (James 1897: 208; James 1979: 157)

THE ETHICAL IMPERATIVE

It bears repeating that James's moral philosopher is under an injunction to advance ideals collectively, as well as individually: "those ideals must be written highest which *prevail at the least cost*, or by whose realization the least possible number of other ideals are destroyed" (James 1897: 205; James 1979: 155). Advancing a new ideal with righteous zeal comes with the job of moral philosopher, but the systematic nature of moral ideals must not be overlooked.

When we think of principled moral ideals, our thoughts turn to singular declarations of profound right, or terrible wrong. It may not occur to us that ideals in action are woven together in mutually supportive or antagonistic patterns which help make up even broader networks of social norms tracing back into the deep history of a culture or even a civilization. Those vast networks of social norms exist to serve the collective good. In James's ethics, the good is more fundamental than the right:

There is but one unconditional commandment, which is that we should seek incessantly, with fear and trembling, so to vote and to act as to bring about the very largest total universe of good which we can see. (James 1897: 209; James 1979: 158)

Established rules can be reliable guides for most of the moral life, but no rule is more important than all the people whose goods are at stake. The moral philosopher may advocate for an ideal principle, but the worth of that ideal must ultimately point to actual goods at risk, both present and future, and answer to those goods.

He knows that he must vote always for the richer universe, for the good which seems most organizable, most fit to enter to complex combinations, most apt to be a member of a more inclusive whole. But which particular universe this is he cannot know for certain in advance; he only knows that if he makes a bad mistake the cries of the wounded will soon inform him of the fact. (James 1897: 210; James 1979: 158)

Despite appearances, this aim of moral philosophy is no ordinary utilitarianism, if it is utilitarian in any sense. James sets aside theories content to point out psychological origins for ideas of good and bad, and hedonism and act utilitarianism are nonstarters for James. Conceiving of demands and obligations as specifiable and static matters, ready for measuring and aggregating, is not compatible with James's portrait of the creative mind or the dynamic society. What will be good won't necessarily look like what has been good. Utilitarianism relies on recognized goods; James cannot. Fortunately, there are more varieties of consequentialism than utilitarianism.

While established norms and moral ideals serve fairly identifiable goods, the goods produced by a novel ideal will not be so easily identified in advance. Although James insists that the future good is the true test of creative moral philosophy, he does not say that a philosopher has to accurately specify which goods will become available in all their concrete manifestations. An ideal such as political freedom surely creates vast goods as well as harms, but no one could ever delineate what they all will be, before political freedom is introduced into a country. Fortunately, no moral philosopher need take up that task, a task which must be hypothetical and experimental rather than procedural and calculable. In James's ethics, to borrow a phrase from philosophy of science, the context of hypothesis is one thing, while the context of justification is another. That distinction prevails for any truly experimental inquiry. As James says, "ethical science is just like physical science, and instead of being deducible all at once from abstract principles, must simply bide its time, and be ready to revise its conclusions from day to day." Even well-confirmed hypotheses may be held accountable by more accumulated evidence.

These experiments are to be judged, not *a priori*, but by actually finding, after the fact of their making, how much more outcry or how much appeasement comes about. What closet solutions can possibly anticipate the result of trials made on such a scale? Or what can any superficial theorist's judgment be worth, in a world where every one of hundreds of ideals has its special champion already provided in the shape of some genius expressly born to feel it, and to fight to death in its behalf? (James 1897: 207–8; James 1979: 157)

Long-held ethical ideals must similarly face reevaluation, no matter how many have championed them, but only when accumulated experience

dictates. James is proposing moral experimentalism.² A new ideal, no matter how urgently needed, must be integrated alongside as many established ideals as possible. The moral philosopher accordingly envisions a worthier ethical system which hopefully will increase the future's goods. If a society undergoes modification toward that ethical system, the consequences will gradually become apparent, so reevaluation awaits. A fresh generation of moral philosophers will be energized by the emergent need for further ethical revision, and the cycle continues.

These two ethical contexts, of vision followed by revision, are not strictly independent, since they are only distinguishable phases of ethical thought over time. The abiding burden of ethical thought is that it must help create hoped-for goods which, when realized, won't be exactly as envisioned, and may not prove sufficiently satisfactory. James offers no hope that swift convergence on a single ethical system is coming. Quite the opposite. No matter how many goods are created by each revisionary system, more possibilities for further novel goods emerge too, and the inadequacies of ideals are exposed yet again. However, we must not fault ideals themselves, since they make those future goods possible. Yet no ideal is finalized until all moral life comes to a halt.

We all help to determine the content of ethical philosophy so far as we contribute to the race's moral life. In other words, there can be no final truth in ethics any more than in physics, until the last man has had his experience and said his say. In the one case as in the other, however, the hypotheses which we now make while waiting, and the acts to which they prompt us, are among the indispensable conditions which determine what that "say" shall be. (James 1897: 184; James 1979: 141)

Ethical apriorists understand this all too well—they must engineer their preferred system to fit some selected mode of moral life which must not fundamentally change. Static ideals suit static societies. That is not conservatism, but petrification. A "passion" for absolute certainty, displayed by the "absolutely certified philosophies" that James scolds in "The Sentiment of Rationality" exhibits but one aspect of rationality, and not a very practical one at that (James 1897: 90–1; James 1979: 76). The absolutist, tragically disappointed by the world, is left with moral skepticism's "anaesthesia" while the moralist has abundant "energy" for acting on creeds to prove them true (James 1897: 87; James 1979: 87).

James leaves the moral life wide open to plurality, novelty, vitality, and creativity, for as far into the future as moral creatures have a future. Following James's guidance, moral philosophers must always be (a) regretting how contemporary ideals leave many goods impoverished and (b) envisioning a finer system of compelling ideals, while (c) submitting that system to the test

of future consequences and (d) confessing that no one could know the finest or final possible system of ideals.

This guidance cannot amount to utilitarianism's pursuit of the greatest good for the greatest number. No moral philosopher can presume to actually craft a novel arrangement of ideals by calculating in advance just how specifiable greater goods will be measurably increased over some definite number of people. James does not conflate the context of hypothesis with the context of justification. The moral philosophers envisioning a finer system of ideals are rarely in a position to initially know why inherited ideals fall short, or to finally assess the outcomes of their reformations.

The thinkers who create the ideals come he knows not whence, their sensibilities are evolved he knows not how; and the question as to which of two conflicting ideals will give the best universe then and there, can be answered by him only through the aid of the experience of other men. (James 1897: 208–9; James 1979: 158)

James rightly depicts ethical reformations as longer-term projects, in which reforming ethicists play a crucial yet limited role. These moral philosophers do not even have to work together to carefully estimate potential outcomes to ethical reformations, as far as James indicates. James does not rule out teamwork in ethics, but there is nothing about biological or cultural forces that produces just the right social movement at the right time. Ethical creativity is ultimately individualized in James's hands. His account depicts the moral philosopher as a pioneering figure, akin to the "Great Man" described in "Great Men and Their Environment" whose independent initiative can alter the course of history (James 1897: 231–2; James 1979: 173–174). Pioneers in the realm of ethics explore ambiguous and treacherous territory: moral philosophers must simultaneously respect high ideals and regret how many of those same ideals are not just inadequate but responsible for tragic loss.³

Moral philosophers could take collective action based on forged consensus, all the same, if their prioritized ideals coincide. Allies needn't be scarce. There's nothing inherently special about the honorific title of "moral philosopher" anyway. Its job description can be fulfilled within a variety of careers interested in the general good and public service.

His function is in fact indistinguishable from that of the best kind of statesman at the present day. His books upon ethics, therefore, so far as they truly touch the moral life, must more and more ally themselves with a literature which is confessedly tentative and suggestive rather than dogmatic—I mean with novels and dramas of the deeper sort, with sermons, with books on statecraft and philanthropy and social and economical reform. (James 1897: 210; James 1979: 159)

Coalitions of concerned activists mobilized by the same ideal surely make a large impact on society, and perhaps the greatest difference to social reform movements. All the same, there is nothing about James's ethical imperatives to increase human goods and readjust ideals in a manner that requires consensus or the avoidance of conflict among individuals or coalitions.⁴ Indeed, James leads the reader to expect that those supreme visions of moral philosophers, even of the same era and culture, would not always coincide. He even appears to revel in the pluralistic way that every reformer advancing a new ideal may be met by equal and opposite reformers arising to defend established ideals and offer alternative plans. James's ethical theory itself does not require that the moral thinkers of each generation should agree on the greatest social ills and opportunities of their time. His creative injunction to boldly confront social problems with a novel ideal cannot guarantee that kind of agreement. His conservative injunction to minimize damage to established ideals compels no such agreement either, and it cannot provide any unique formula. James never lends the impression that moral philosophy as a whole is basically about a singular path forward toward an evident ethical future. That impression is advanced by James's opposition, admirers of ethical apriorism.

In summary, James has supplied his answers to the psychological, metaphysical, and casuistic questions of moral philosophy, so that "the philosopher may settle the true order of human obligations." But this true order can only emerge in the lives of moral creatures in the indefinitely long run, after all the trials of the moral life have been undergone and evaluated. This would have served as James's concluding statement to "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life":

And yet if he be a true philosopher he must see that there is nothing final in any actually given equilibrium of human ideals, but that, as our present laws and customs have fought and conquered other past ones, so they will in their turn be overthrown by any newly discovered order which will hush up the complaints that they still give rise to, without producing others louder still. . . . And although a man always risks much when he breaks away from established rules and strives to realize a larger ideal whole than they permit, yet the philosopher must allow that it is at all times open to anyone to make the experiment, provided he fear not to stake his life and character upon the throw. (James 1897: 206; James 1979: 156)

The ethical apriorist has been refuted: no final system of ethical ideals can be permanently settled by mortals in advance.

James's essay could have halted at section four with this argumentative success. Section five reveals his fuller agenda for moral philosophy.

THE DIVINE INFLUENCE

Besides his creative and conservative injunctions for ethics, James adds a constructive injunction. Finer ethical ideals, and more comprehensive systems of ideals to accommodate them, will control the moral life into the indefinite future only if they are primarily constructed by philosophically-minded thinkers who are also minding God. In the final section, James argues for this injunction: “the stable and systematic moral universe for which the ethical philosopher asks is fully possible only in a world where there is a divine thinker with all-enveloping demands” (James 1897: 213–4; James 1979: 161).

James does not credit God for either the moral life, the ethical republic, or the advancement of ideals. We are psychologically capable of instigating claims and understanding the meaning of obligatory claims on their respective goods, and deeper thinkers among us can promote the better life through advocating finer ideals. Again, James makes no argument for God based on the actuality of the moral life or the possibility of ethical progress. He instead raises a fourth question alongside the initial three questions.

“The religion of humanity” affords a basis for ethics as well as theism does. Whether the purely human system can gratify the philosopher’s demand as well as the other is a different question, which we ourselves must answer ere we close. (James 1897: 198; James 1979: 150)

James’s answer to this additional question is “No.” Ethics in the abstract does not depend on a prior affirmation of God, but ethical progress in the real world could: “The chief of all the reasons why concrete ethics cannot be final is that they have to wait on metaphysical and theological beliefs” (James 1897: 210; James 1979: 159). Moral philosophy cannot overlook the practical question of how best to realize finer ideals for humanity. Religion, for James, adequately answers that question. However, theology will not be arriving to rescue morality. There is continuity between moral philosophy and theology, but it renders theism dependent on the moral life, not the other way around.

James provides three interwoven arguments in section five for his judgment that moral philosophy should align with theism: an inductive argument grounded in moral psychology, a deductive argument based on the metaphysics of ethics, and an abductive argument about the efficacy of casuistic ethics.

Induction from moral psychology: Ethical progress usually depends on strong moral energies of those motivated by a conviction that their ideals are divinely sanctioned, so moral philosophers pursuing ethical progress probably think that their ideals are divinely sanctioned.

Deduction from metaphysical ethics: God's moral demands lend an infinite perspective to the significance of any formulated ideal; ideals of infinite significance awaken strong moral energies needed for ethical progress; therefore, God's moral demands are necessary for ethical progress.

Abduction from casuistic ethics: Our improving ethical systems would enjoy progressive coherence and convergence if God's supreme obligations ground the finest ethical system, and we must seek coherent and convergent ethical systems, so God's supreme obligations should guide us in our ethical progress.

None of these arguments for God's involvement in ethics could ever prove that God exists. At their highest plausibility, they are all compatible with God not actually existing. Furthermore, taken together, they cannot even demonstrate that every moral philosopher must affirm God while doing ethics. As matters were left at the end of section four, moral philosophy can be disorganized, discordant, and undeified. If moral philosophers (and similar kinds of reformers) were not held responsible for actually advancing ethical causes on behalf of ideals, that's where matters could be left. All the same, James conceives of the moral philosopher as a social reformer obligated to a higher calling.

James does not believe that the moral philosopher is sufficiently motivated to social action by merely considering the finite goods for finite creatures. He expects moral philosophers to design better ideals for the sake of human welfare, but he does not really expect them, or anyone else, to make supreme sacrifices simply for the sake of humanity's future.

Many of us . . . would openly laugh at the very idea of the strenuous mood being awakened in us by those claims of remote posterity which constitute the last appeal of the religion of humanity. We do not love these men of the future keenly enough; and we love them perhaps the less the more we hear of their evolutionized perfection, their high average longevity and education, their freedom from war and crime, their relative immunity from pain and zymotic disease, and all their other negative superiorities. This is all too finite, we say; we see too well the vacuum beyond. It lacks the note of infinitude and mystery, and may all be dealt with in the don't-care mood. No need of agonizing ourselves or making others agonize for these good creatures just at present. (James 1897: 212; James 1979: 160)

No ethics by and for humanity alone could provoke the high moral energies and strenuous ethical quests necessary for serious struggles on behalf of ideals. Nothing human is worth sacrificing for the merely human, in James's view. Even the perfectible super-human could not be enough. No matter how advanced any species becomes, it is still confronted by potential ruin for this life and the final void after life. No natural religion could ever satisfy the

moral hope that it all must participate in some ultimate meaning, as James argues in “Is Life Worth Living?” A religion of humanity or nature leaves us in a “moral multiverse” of despair (James 1897: 43–4; James 1979: 42–43). Without hope placed in a higher perfect purpose, a person’s life cannot be heroic and one’s unredeemed suffering is “a sort of hell” (James 1897: 58; James 1979: 53).

What more reliably arouses strenuous moral effort is the tragic fate of lost goods held in supreme esteem by an infinite being. James ultimately cannot be a utilitarian because no amount of finite goods reasonably justifies ethical struggles. “All through history, in the periodical conflicts of puritanism with the don’t-care temper, we see the antagonism of the strenuous and genial moods, and the contrast between the ethics of infinite and mysterious obligation from on high, and those of prudence and the satisfaction of merely finite need” (James 1897: 213; James 1979: 161). James stands firmly on the side of an ethics of the infinite in order to stand for any finite ethical progress.

The potential for our ethical future is conducted by the hypothetical role of God. James repeatedly states that hypothetical status for God.

It would seem, too—and this is my final conclusion—that the stable and systematic moral universe for which the ethical philosopher asks is fully possible only in a world where there is a divine thinker with all-enveloping demands. If such a thinker existed, his way of subordinating the demands to one another would be the finally valid casuistic scale; his claims would be the most appealing; his ideal universe would be the most inclusive realizable whole. If he now exists, then actualized in his thought already must be that ethical philosophy which we seek as the pattern which our own must evermore approach. In the interest of our own ideal of systematically unified moral truth, therefore, we, as would-be philosophers, must postulate a divine thinker, and pray for the victory of the religious cause. (James 1897: 213–4; James 1979: 161)

God is ultimately a practical *ethical* postulate. God is not a premise for ordinary moral life, nor a presupposition for fortunate ethical advances. Those lower levels of morality do not require God or belief in God. But the higher level of ethics, where one must struggle and sacrifice for real social change in the name of ideals, does require fidelity to God.

Fidelity to God and God’s ideals is not grounded in knowledge of God: “exactly what the thought of the infinite thinker may be is hidden from us even were we sure of his existence; so that our postulation of him after all serves only to let loose in us the strenuous mood” (James 1897: 214; James 1979: 161). James repeatedly says that religion will never yield more knowledge of God than science ever could—the philosophical question is instead whether one is entitled to adopt a faithful agnosticism instead of a skeptical agnosticism. Nowhere does James urge a straightforward pragmatic argument

for the existence of God. That would be too mundane and expediently prudent. Even in “The Will to Believe,” James does not argue that we should believe in God in order to preserve what we have and secure it from risk for all time. Quite the opposite! We should place faith in God in order to put our lives at risk and sacrifice what we have without any certainties about the future. That kind of faith only makes sense if we seek out a relationship with the supremely real. James appeals to our good will, as any relationship must begin with some trust rather than suspicion, so that we may inaugurate and maintain beneficial relationships (James 1897: 25–28; James 1979: 29–32). But those relationships are not designed for our comforts, now or in the future. Indeed, it is the religious person, not the skeptic or the naturalist, who will authentically encounter evil and know evil personally. There is no pragmatic argument for the existence of God in James’s writings.

James is offering a pragmatic argument for the existence of moral philosophers. There would be such worthy reformers, *if* they were guided by God. Ultimately, James wants us to believe in God because he wants us to believe in *ourselves*. That ultimate ethical imperative—Commit to the strenuous moral life!—firmly rests on those three pillars of psychology, metaphysics, and casuistry.

First, human psychology:

The capacity of the strenuous mood lies so deep down among our natural human possibilities that even if there were no metaphysical or traditional grounds for believing in a God, men would postulate one simply as a pretext for living hard, and getting out of the game of existence its keenest possibilities of zest. (James 1897: 213; James 1979: 161)

Second, visionary metaphysics:

Our attitude towards concrete evils is entirely different in a world where we believe there are none but finite demanders, from what it is in one where we joyously face tragedy for an infinite demanders’ sake. Every sort of energy and endurance, of courage and capacity for handling life’s evils, is set free in those who have religious faith. (James 1897: 213; James 1979: 161)

Third, effective casuistry:

For this reason, the strenuous type of character will on the battle-field of human history always outwear the easy-going type, and religion will drive irreligion to the wall. (James 1897: 213; James 1979: 161)

These three pillars are not erected to simply support a confession of faith in God, but primarily to support a conviction of faith in one’s self. That faith

is a universal faith, freely available to anyone: “the philosopher must allow that it is at all times open to anyone to make the experiment, provided he fear not to stake his life and character upon the throw” (James 1897: 206; James 1979: 156). Some fearless moral philosophers, guided by divine visions, can become what James calls “religious saints” in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. That book’s expectations for religious saints and justifications for their role in ethical progress flow seamlessly from James’s arguments in “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” (Shook 2013).

Few among us will prove to be religious saints, of course, but we can still play vital participatory roles in advancing moral progress. Living the moral life is the grand experiment of life, and the greatest risk of life. How shall we answer that call?

[W]hen this challenge comes to us, it is simply our total character and personal genius that are on trial; and if we invoke any so-called philosophy, our choice and use of that also are but revelations of our personal aptitude or incapacity for moral life. (James 1897: 214; James 1979: 162)

God is never on trial—it is only we who are ever on trial. James’s fundamental question is a perennial challenge. Shall we be moral, and commit to the moral life?

NOTES

1. Surprisingly few James scholars have recognized the significance of a posteriori experimentalism for his moral philosophy. A recent exception is Sergio Franzese (2008: 40–43).

2. Moral revolutions are the hardest on revolutionaries themselves; see Sarin Marchetti (2015: 102–111).

3. Most commentators, mesmerized by their own imposition of utilitarianism on James’s ethics, entirely miss this feature to James’s “ethical republic.” Trygve Throntveit does not (2014: 92–108).

4. Michael Slater, of the numerous commentators on James’s ethics which he helpfully surveys, more plausibly explicates that continuity (2009: 86–94).

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