

COMMENT ON TALISSE AND AIKIN

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William James begins his “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” with this striking claim:

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.¹

What does James mean when he says that ethics cannot be done “dogmatically”? What does this stop him from doing and what does it let him do? What is the analogy here between ethics and physics? I think that if we answer these questions, we will understand how James would respond to Talisse and Aikin’s critique.

Talisse and Aikin first point out counterexamples to James’s “metaphysical” definition of “good” as simply whatever is desired or demanded. They observe that tyranny and theft seem morally objectionable independently of all experienced demands and objections. James offered a “pluralistic” ethical theory according to which good things share no common essential feature other than being desired, which is to say that their “essence” is not a matter of what they are or have in themselves; and James’s “meliorism,” or the idea that ethical thinkers should strive to satisfy the biggest possible sum of desires, follows from his pluralism. But in fact, Talisse and Aikin say, a tyrant’s tyranny or a thief’s theft is evidently just *bad*, however many desires may get satisfied by it.

James, however, has not simply overlooked the possibility that certain things might seem to be good or bad independently of our claims. In fact, he specifically considers this possibility when he observes that

there is an inevitable tendency to slip into an assumption which ordinary men follow when they are disputing with one another about questions of good and bad. 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.²

According to James, there is no claim without an obligation and vice versa, so:

Our ordinary attitude of regarding ourselves as subject to an overarching system of moral relations, true "in themselves," is therefore either an out-and-out superstition, or else it must be treated as a merely provisional abstraction from that real Thinker in whose actual demand upon us to think as he does our obligation must be ultimately based.³

The closest we could possibly come to a world containing a morality independent of desires would be a world containing God and eternal claims that we respected because they were made by the ultimate Alpha Male. (Alpha and Omega, we might say.) But if there is no divine command morality, there can be no transcendent moral truth. Assuming otherwise amounts to "out-and-out superstition."

How do we know that claims and obligations go together this way? That is, what makes James's own understanding of good non-superstitious? James says that "the moment we take a steady look at the question, *we see*" that claims and goods go together.⁴ In a way reminiscent of his admirer and critic Ludwig Wittgenstein, James advises us to "look and see," or to put aside some of our preconceptions and just have a close *look* at the way moral obligation really works in the world.⁵ If we do, either we will see that claims and obligations actually always do accompany each other or we can move along to the next philosophical theory.⁶ This is not empirical research or social science; no questionnaires were handed out, no spreadsheets filled in. But James's undogmatic, non-superstitious observation is like physics and unlike traditional rationalistic moral theorizing in that it is subject to refutation by future observations. As usual, to find the right or true thing to say, James looks to our future in experience, to a *terminus ad quem*, rather than to any starting point in fixed principles known to reason, or a *terminus a quo*.⁷

And when he directs us his readers to pay attention to our changing experiences, James implicitly challenges us to compare our observations, categorizations, and imaginings to his. His picture of moral situations may help us make sense of our own experiences—or we may end up trying to discredit his picture by recounting contrary experiences or dreaming up plausible alternative scenarios.

Instead of announcing what must be true whatever future experiences we may have, James offers an empirical, observational account of what goodness and badness are “essentially.” He explains where these things come from in the observable world and how they actually work in our lives. But though this is an explanation of the essence of good, we can challenge James’s naturalistic picture without doing what people usually have to do in metaphysics, namely, make their own contrary unfounded assertions about what is universal and necessary. Instead, all we have to do is to observe the world and find a concrete case of good without a claim or a claim without good.

But aren’t Talisse and Aikin playing James’s game and answering his challenge with their contrary thought experiments? Not really. James has anticipated their criticism; he has already asked how we can really assess badness apart from any concrete satisfactions or dissatisfactions. Why isn’t the attempt to make such an assessment a display of superstitious preconceptions? What kind of thing is this claim-transcendent badness? Where did it come from and how did it get here? James complains explicitly (and in his usual gorgeous prose) that:

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 . . . how can such an inorganic abstract character of imperativeness, additional to the imperativeness which is in the concrete claim itself, *exist*?⁸

Despite our longstanding bad habit of assuming that Platonic or noumenal who-knows-whats can validate or invalidate our claims, there is evidently nothing capable of either creating or

annihilating a good or an obligation apart from those observable claims. Thus, if Talisse and Aikin really want to meet James's challenge, they have the burden of explaining just how it is that their ostensible cases of claim-transcendent ethical validity came into existence and stayed there, not to mention how they knew about those validities in the first place.

Of course, Talisse and Aikin can try to shift the burden of proof back to James. It is, they may say, no more evident that claims produce goodness than it is that the badness of theft or tyranny is just *there* in certain circumstances. "Look and see, yourself," they might shoot back. "It *appears* that theft and tyranny are transcendentally bad things. Prove that they aren't!" But this response would miss James's point. I can feel my own desires, and I can tell with my senses when someone else wants something—or that some animal does, since James lets animals' desires count, too.⁹ And if I look carefully I can see that this is how I do, in fact, find out both what the beings around me want and what I ought to do. Even supposing that God is out there creating obligations by making claims, my only hope of figuring out what I ought to do lies in my observation of the world and my experiences in it. But how do I tell that something is good *no matter what anyone, or anything, wants?* And how does this goodness work, anyway? Where is it coming from? Moreover, even if I *can* somehow pay attention to it, why *should* I? What claim does it make or have on *my* desires, and how does it make that claim? A transcendent good that nobody wants might as well not be good at all, as James sees things: "the only force of appeal to us, which either a living God or an abstract ideal order can wield, is found in the 'everlasting ruby vaults' of our own human hearts, as they happen to beat responsive and not irresponsive to the claim."¹⁰

Thus, if we want to argue with James the pluralist and meliorist, we have to do more than point to examples of goods and obligations that seem to transcend all claims. Talisse and Aikin actually do somewhat more than this; they also point out that some conflicting claims by their nature cannot be reconciled, especially claims that other claims should not be made—the competing claims of religious exclusivists, for example. James can be read as counseling all-out war among such persons. But I think this is a misunderstanding of what James means when he enjoins satisfaction of the largest possible set of demands. As we follow this injunction, we may have to leave unsatisfied both members of any given pair of incompatible demands—if only because claims, and thus obligations, involving the avoidance of all-out wars will figure somewhere in our calculations. Talisse and Aikin think that we need "a substantive conception

of toleration” that can come in from outside the economy of real claims and regulate the struggle among them; but, once again, where can such an abstract moral reality come from, and how and why will it motivate us? James thinks that moral life is just that, *life*, or a process of feeling, activity, and growth. Desires lead to activities that lead to experiences that lead to new desires, and “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.”¹¹ The appeal to permanent moral *things* outside all this organic activity “changes a growing, elastic, and continuous life into a superstitious system of relics and dead bones.”¹²

This struggle does need internal regulation; James allows that “It is the nature of these [more imperative] goods to be cruel to their rivals. . . . They call out all the mercilessness in our disposition, and do not easily forgive us if we are so soft-hearted as to shrink from sacrifice in their behalf.”¹³ But this is mainly a warning that we will be cruel to *ourselves* as we try to satisfy our most imperative moral obligations. As for cruelty to others, the philosopher “knows that if he makes a bad mistake the cries of the wounded will soon inform him of the fact. In all this [he] is just like the rest of us non-philosophers, so far as we are just and sympathetic instinctively. . . .”¹⁴ And we *are* just and sympathetic instinctively. We are less wonderful things as well, but we can count on the better angels of our nature to do battle with the worse ones.¹⁵ We can, and we do, because we have no choice.

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NOTES

¹ William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (1897; reprint, New York: Dover, 1956), p. 184. Hereafter cited as *WB*.

² *WB*, p. 194.

³ *WB*, p. 194.

⁴ *WB*, p. 194. Italics in original.

⁵ From Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967), sec. 66:

Consider for example the proceedings that we call "games". I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all?—Don't say: "There *must* be something common, or they would not be called 'games' "—but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all. —For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don't think, but look!

Wittgenstein wants us to give up the idea that one abstract essence is shared by all games. One might argue that James is doing something similar when he tries to get us to give up the idea that some abstract moral order underlies all our moral practices.

⁶ *This* idea does not sound very Wittgensteinian, however. Wittgenstein insists at sec. 109 that he is not doing anything hypothetical, scientific, or theoretical in the *Investigations*:

It was true to say that our considerations could not be scientific ones. It was not of any possible interest to us to find out empirically that, contrary to our preconceived ideas, it is possible to think such-and-such—whatever that may mean. (The conception of thought as a gaseous medium.) And we may not advance any kind of theory. There must not be anything hypothetical in our considerations. . . . These are, of course, not empirical problems; they are solved, rather, by looking into the workings of our language, and that in such a way as to make us recognize those workings: in despite of an urge to misunderstand them.

Wittgenstein's conceptions of science, hypothesis, and preconception may be so different from James's that the two might not have a conflict here, but it is, to say the least, hard to be sure.

A good source for the comparison between James and Wittgenstein generally is Russell Goodman, *Wittgenstein and William James* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁷ In "The Will to Believe" (*WB*, p. 17), James points out that:

when as empiricists we give up the doctrine of objective certitude, we do not thereby give up the quest or hope of truth itself. We still pin our faith on its existence, and still believe that we gain an ever better position towards it by systematically continuing to roll up experiences and think. Our great difference from the scholastic lies in the way we face. The strength of his system lies in the principles, the origin, the *terminus a quo* of his thought; for us the strength is in the outcome, the upshot, the *terminus ad quem*. Not where it comes from but what it leads to is to decide. It matters not to an empiricist from what quarter an hypothesis may come to him: he may have acquired it by fair means or by foul; passion may have whispered or accident suggested it; but if the total drift of thinking continues to confirm it, that is what he means by its being true.

What James calls “empiricism” here he goes on to call “pragmatism” later.

⁸ *WB*, p. 195.

⁹ James discusses the best imaginable world from an ethical standpoint, and his description takes animal “claims” into account:

[That world] would need not only a space, but a time, "of *n*-dimensions," to include all the acts and experiences incompatible with one another here below, which would then go on in conjunction—such as spending our money, yet growing rich; taking our holiday, yet getting ahead with our work; shooting and fishing, yet doing no hurt to the beasts; gaining no end of experience, yet keeping our youthful freshness of heart; and the like. (*WB*, p. 202)

¹⁰ *WB*, p. 196.

¹¹ *WB*, p. 208.

¹² *WB*, p. 209.

¹³ *WB*, p. 211.

¹⁴ *WB*, p. 210.

¹⁵ In the first section of “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” James takes up “the psychological question” in ethics, the question concerning where our ethical judgments come from as a psychological matter. James rejects the traditional associationism at the bottom of utilitarian thinking, and he argues that certain ideas of “fitness” and “justice” are “brain-born,” or are instinctive by-products

of brain evolution. Because of this kind of adaptation, “The nobler thing *tastes* better, and that is all we can say.” (WB, p. 187)