

COMMENTS ON “THREE CHALLENGES TO JAMESIAN ETHICS”

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After correcting some inaccuracies in the exposition of James’s ethics by Talisse and Aikin, an attempt will be made to find responses to their three objections to his ethics.

EXPOSITION

They characterize James’s ethics as being both melioristic and pluralistic. The former attribution is patently false and the latter misleadingly inaccurate.

Meliorism. James holds that “the good is the satisfaction of desire” and, thus, everyone has a prima facie obligation to see to it that any desire gets satisfied, regardless of whose desire it is and what it is a desire for. It is only a prima facie obligation because it could have a defeater in which satisfying this desire results in many other desires going unsatisfied. Our duty is to maximize desire-satisfaction over desire-dissatisfaction.

The authors call James’s “injunction to satisfy as many demands as possible” James’s *meliorism*. It is clear that this is not what James meant by “meliorism.” In the final lecture of *Pragmatism*, he defines “meliorism” as the doctrine that, in contrast with pessimism and optimism, “treats salvation as neither inevitable nor impossible. It treats it as a possibility, which becomes more and more of a probability the more numerous the actual conditions of salvation become.” In opposition to the Talisse-Aikin account, this definition of “meliorism” does not specify any moral obligation, as is clear from the fact that James adds that “You may interpret the word ‘salvation’ in any way you like.” James’s meliorism, like pessimism and optimism, is in the business of predicting the future course of things with respect to the salvation of the world, good winning out over evil in the long run, the realization of some ideal state, and the like.

There is, however, a connection between James’s moral imperative to maximize desire-satisfaction over desire-dissatisfaction, which enjoins us to lead “the morally strenuous life,” and meliorism; but it is not a semantic, only a psychologically mediated connection. It is one thing to recognize a moral imperative and another to obey it. James thought that most people were so

psychologically constituted that they would lead the morally strenuous life only if they believed meliorism. A belief in either pessimism or optimism, for most people, would not sufficiently psych them up to do so: for, if it is inevitable that things will turn out badly, there is no point in trying to make things otherwise; and, if it is already guaranteed that the world will be saved, there is no need for us to put our shoulder to the wheel to bring this about. Meliorism says that it is possible for the ideal moral order to be realized, but this possibility will be actualized only if the requisite effort is made by both us humans and other forces within nature.

Pluralism. The authors assert that James's ethics is pluralistic in that it countenances a multiplicity of different goods, unlike monistic theories, such as utilitarianism, that recognize only a single good that is to be maximized. James's claim that "the good is the satisfaction of desire" and that we are to "act so as to satisfy as many demands as possible," to quote the authors, plainly speaks for a monistic theory of ethics. To be sure, there is a plurality of different objects of desire, but it isn't the object of a desire that is good but only the satisfaction of the desire for it. A curious feature of this theory is that the satisfaction of a desire is good even if it is satisfied by something other than the object of desire. For example, if my desire for Hawaiian punch is, unbeknownst to me, satisfied by a drink of Kool-Aid, this does not diminish the goodness of this desire being satisfied.¹

THREE OBJECTIONS

The three objections that the authors make to James's ethics are not undercut by mistakes that have been pointed out in their exposition; since they apply equally well to my corrected version and theirs. Their first objection is the most powerful one and will be considered last.

Their second objection is that there are some desires that require that the desires of others go unsatisfied. They give the example of a desire based on belief in an exclusivist religious creed, such as traditional Islam and Christianity, that requires a believer to see to it that nonbelievers fare badly and thus that their desires go unsatisfied. A believer in an exclusivist creed, obviously, rejects James's injunction to always act so as to maximize desire-satisfaction over desire-dissatisfaction. Their third objection is directed against the attempt to ward off this objection by restricting the injunction to always act so as to maximize desire-satisfaction to desires that are not themselves intolerant. James has no account of tolerance based on maximizing desire-satisfaction and thus he must recognize some good other than that of

maximizing desire-satisfaction. If James's ethics can meet the second objection, there is no need for James to respond to the third objection since he does not have to incorporate a duty to be tolerant within his ethics. And it will now be shown that he can meet this objection.

He can do so by employing an expanded version of his will-to-believe doctrine. This doctrine says that we are morally *permitted* to believe an evidentially undecidable proposition if doing so will have better overall consequences than would be realized if we were not to have believed it. The expanded version says that we are morally *prohibited* from believing an evidentially undecidable proposition if the overall consequences of doing so are worse than if we were not to have believed it. Given that almost all of the evils in the world today result from exclusivist religious beliefs, we are morally forbidden from having such beliefs, unless there is strong evidence that these beliefs are true. And, James would argue, as he does in Chapter VIII of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, that there is inadequate evidence for them. If this Jamesian way of meeting the second objection works, there is no need for him to appeal to tolerance, thereby escaping the third objection.

The first objection is that we ordinarily recognize goods other than desire-satisfaction, namely deontological moral truths and imperatives. The latter are prior in the order of explanation and justification to desire-satisfaction. Paraphrasing Plato's *Euthyphro*, they pose the question whether deontological goods, such as truthfulness and justice, are good because we desire them or we desire them because they are good, it being obvious to them that the latter is the case. Furthermore, deontological rules and principles trump desire-satisfaction in at least some if not all moral decisions. As will be seen, the authors seem to argue for the stronger "all" thesis but the weaker "some" thesis will suffice to undercut James's ethics.

All monistic maximizing ethical theories, such as James's, face apparent counter-examples in which what will maximize whatever the theory says should be maximized violates some deontological principle or obligation. James considers just such a case, that of the "lost soul" who is endlessly tortured so that everyone else can have all of their desires satisfied, thus violating the Kantian deontological prohibition against using one person as a mere means to promote the interests of others. James's response is that we have a brain-born Kantian moral intuition and thus desire that no one be sacrificed so as to promote the interests of others in having their desires satisfied. Thus, the Kantian deontological moral intuition gets factored into

our moral choices but only as something that everyone desires to be obeyed rather than as an objective moral truth.

Unfortunately, human nature is not as benevolent as James naively takes it to be, for we have desires that common sense takes to be immoral on deontological grounds, such as sadistic and selfish desires. This serves as a defeater for James's moral maxim that we have a *prima facie* duty to see to it that these desires get satisfied. One possible strategy is for James to treat these deontological principles as rules that we adopt because by doing so we maximize desire-satisfaction in the long run. This would require altering James's text since, unlike rule utilitarians, he was willing to allow exceptions to these rules when doing so would maximize desire-satisfaction; however, even if James were to allow no exception, the Aikin-Talissee objection based on the order of explanation or justification still applies, since this rule version of James's ethics still does not recognize the fundamentality of deontological moral truth in explaining and justifying our acting in accordance with these rules. We obey the rules because we recognize them as objective moral truths, not because we maximize desire-satisfaction in the long run.

How might James respond to this? One response is to challenge our common sense moral beliefs because they do not measure up to his empiricistic and nominalistic requirements, something which he did with respect to truth, reference, and knowledge. These objective moral truths would be Platonic type entities – abstract propositions ala Frege, Bolzano, and Brentano – and, like Dewey, he couldn't get himself to believe in such weird entities and heaped rhetorical scorn upon them. Rhetorical scorn, however, is a bad substitute for an argument. And, given how deep-seated our common sense deontological intuitions are, a good argument is needed.²

Here is yet another Jamesian strategy for warding off the Aikin-Talissee objection. The first step is to argue that as a contingent empirical matter of fact we make the same moral choices whether we accept a Jamesian or Kantian metaethical theory. This is because the actual world is that the very same moral choices that maximize desire-satisfaction in the long run also fit our deontological moral intuitions. Of course, there are merely possible world in which there isn't this happy coincidence, world in which rival metaethical theories make for different concrete moral choices. But James's analysis of ethical terms, like all of his analyses, is restricted to the actual world, thereby precluding counter-examples that are counter-factual. A good example is

his anti-common sense analysis of truth in terms of what will have the best overall consequences for believers.

This way around the Aikin-Talissee objection could aptly be called the “To Hell with Metaethical Theory” strategy. James could say, to quote the opening sentence in their paper, that his “pragmatism is committed to the thought that philosophy must be relevant to ordinary life.” Because the world is the way it is, there is no practical difference in the behavior of people who accept different metaethical theories, thereby qualifying these rival theories as differences that make no difference. This strategy reorients the argument between James and the authors, it now being focused on what counts as a *practical* difference.

I fear that for James to win this argument he must work with an unacceptably truncated concept of what counts as *practical*. In agreement, no doubt, with Aikin and Talisse, I believe that how people explain and justify their moral actions is of great practical importance and thus I think James should revise his theory so as to make room for unabashed deontological truths. His basic moral obligation now is to promote as much good as possible, with both desire-satisfaction and obeying deontological moral truths counting as good. This is a truly pluralistic theory. It is a tragic fact of our moral life that we do not have any effective decision-procedure for mediating clashes between deontological requirements and maximizing desire-satisfaction. Neither serves as a trump card over the other in every situation, although in the majority of cases one clearly trumps the other. The authors seem to give too exalted a status to deontological principles so that they always trump maximizing des-satisfaction. Their example of Robin Hood’s sister, who robs from the super rich in a way that they do not detect, thereby satisfying the desires of the poor who benefit from the stolen loot without any desires of the super rich going unsatisfied is an example of this. With a slight change in their example we can make it into a counter-example that deontological principles, such as the prohibition against stealing, always trump consideration of maximizing desire-satisfaction. The benefits of her thievery now are not just poor but in a dire situation in which they will not be able to survive without these benefits.

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NOTES

¹ There is a host of exegetical problems with James's ethics. For all the gory details see my *The Divided Self of William James* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

² It is interesting to note that James himself did not adhere to his anti-Platonism in ethics; for he recognized at least one objective deontological moral obligation – that we have a prima facie obligation to see to it that any desire gets satisfied, which is something that we do not make true by making demands or having desires. In his writings later than the 1891 "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" he frequently appealed to deontological moral truths.