

## RESPONSE TO TALISSE AND AIKIN, “THREE CHALLENGES TO JAMESEAN ETHICS”

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Talisse and Aikin claim to have revealed “practical shortcomings of James’s ethics.” They suggest that an inability to repair these shortcomings would give rise to “the troubling possibility” that pragmatism “cannot supply a viable ethics.” But surely nothing so drastic follows. As these authors know well, John Dewey wrote at great length and brilliantly on ethics, and they have said nothing to cast doubt on the viability of Dewey’s, hence of a pragmatist, ethics.

However, I am not prepared to grant that James’ ethics suffers from irreparable defects, although I grant that it is incomplete. But let us take a closer look at the supposed defects as Talisse and Aikin find them in “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life.”<sup>1</sup> James begins that essay by distinguishing three questions: the psychological, the metaphysical and the casuistic question. Talisse and Aikin ignore the first question, but James’s answer to it is important. While James recognizes that many of our values are directly or indirectly based on bodily pains and pleasure, he emphasizes that many are directly felt “moral perceptions” that “deal with directly felt fitnesses between things.” (MPML, 143) Thus confronted by a tyrant’s tyrannical demand, James directly feels that it is vile. Therefore, unless I fail to understand Talisse’s and Aikin’s point, James acknowledges the existence of direct, irreducible moral perceptions, and their first challenge has been met.

The case of Betty Hood is different. I do not believe, and I do not think James believed, that we have an intuitive aversion to stealing. It is a learned response; but James recognized the existence of such responses. One of the tasks of the philosopher, James holds, is to rank order our values or “ideals.” But, he points out, we don’t appreciate the difficulty of the task because “we are born into a society whose ideals are largely ordered already.” (MPML 154) Talisse and Aikin are born into a society that condemns stealing per se. Unlike Talisse and Aikin, I would

say, and I believe James would say, that to point out that Betty Hood is stealing is only the first word but not the last word to be said about this case. That it is the first word meets Talisse's and Aikin's challenge. That it is not the last word is, in my opinion, a further point in favor of James. The last word, or in any case a further word, would question the morality (the justice) of a society in which some are super rich while others are desperately poor.

Talisse and Aikin presented the cases of the tyrant and of Betty Hood as refutations of James's statement, "Everything that is demanded is by that fact a good," (MPML 155) for they hold, quite reasonably that a typical tyrant typically demands a state of affairs that is definitely not good but, as I said already, vile. But the difficulty is only apparent. Aristotle taught us to distinguish between real and apparent goods, and numerous philosophers, including John Dewey and William James, made the same distinction. Thus we might simply say that what the tyrant demands is an apparent good but objectively vile.

But is James entitled to this distinction? Talisse and Aikin think not, for they write, "James's pluralism requires that the fact that someone demands x is sufficient for the good of x. Were James to hold that there is some other requirement that x must meet if it is to be a good, James would be well on his way to a monist theory of value, a theory according to which all goods share some property in common." But this is a mistake. Just as "being demanded" is not the sort of property that makes for value monism, so also "being found good upon reflection from an objective point of view", or "being included in the most inclusive ideal that we can see" is entirely compatible with value pluralism.

James, I admit, does not explicitly introduce the apparent/real distinction. But it is implicit in his discussion of what he calls the metaphysical question. Having pointed out that nothing is good unless some sentient being feels it to be good, he adds that more is required for moral truth, for "truth requires a standard outside the thinker." (MPML 146) Moral objectivity requires at least two thinkers who take an interest in each other. Only then can there be moral conflicts that give rise to a demand for an impartial method of adjudication. That method, according to James, is to seek at all times to "satisfy as many demands as we can." (MPML 155) Obviously, this prescription does not provide an algorithm. How does one count demands? Are all demands equally urgent or weighty? James says, "No." Be that as it may, any moral theory requires intelligence, if it is not to lead to horrendous conclusions. Indeed, I would distrust any philosopher who claimed to have an algorithm for solving moral problems.

Talisse and Aikin claim that James overlooks the fact that, “Some moral commitments involve a rejection of other moral commitments. The most obvious example is ... religious belief.” (p11) I am quite baffled by this “challenge.” Religious belief is not moral commitment. But let us set this aside. Talisse and Aikin then imagine two sects of “Christians” and “Hindus” who engage in religious warfare, each believing to be commanded by their deity to exterminate the other. Alas, history provides ample examples of religious warfare; must we need a fictitious example? Of course, one could read these deities’ demands as exhortations to proselytize rather than as commands to commit mass murder.

In any case, Talisse and Aikin conclude that the case of “religious exclusivism” shows that moral conflicts may concern not merely conflicting demands but “conflicting views of what is morally tolerable.” (12) Thus we disagree on what is good, hence on what should be included in the largest possible universe of good, hence James’ prescription “is nearly vacuous.” (12) In fact, nothing follows concerning the adequacy or inadequacy of a moral philosophy from the fact that combined with false beliefs or a general lack of good will it leads to horrific conclusions or no conclusion at all.

Using James’s notion of the most inclusive ideal, however vague that notion may be, it is easy to see that an ideal according to which these “Christians” and “Hindus” tolerate each other at last minimally is “better” from a Jamesean objective point of view than any ideal that includes ideals of religious warfare.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, Talisse and Aikin maintain that James needs a “substantive conception of toleration ... Such an account would prescribe that we ought to tolerate certain others even when it frustrates our own ideals to do so.” In the preface to *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life’s Ideals*, James states pluralism as follows. “According to that philosophy the truth is too great for any one actual mind ... to know the whole of it. The facts and worths of life need many cognizers to take them in.” James continues, “The practical consequence of such a philosophy is the well-known democratic respect for the sacredness of individuality — is, at any rate, the outward tolerance of whatever is not itself intolerant.”<sup>3</sup> In the same preface James uses his defense of toleration as the basis of his objection to the war in the Philippines. I mention this last fact only to point out that James’s defense of toleration is far from empty. Of course, just because there are limits to toleration, and because tolerance may be a

matter of public policy or of individual commitment, one would welcome a theory of toleration. I see no reason why such a theory could not be developed within James's ethics.

I conclude that the challenges of Talisse and Aikin have been met. What underlies those challenges is their failure to see that while anything demanded is subjectively good, only what is included in the most inclusive ideal we can see is objectively good. Here it may be worthwhile reminding ourselves that moral judgments are, as all our judgments, fallible.

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### **NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" in William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1979, pp 141-162. All references to this essay will be given in the text as "MPML ..."

<sup>2</sup> For more on moral objectivity see my "William James and Moral Objectivity", this journal, vol. 1.

<sup>3</sup> William James, *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals* (Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 4