

THREE CHALLENGES TO JAMESIAN ETHICS

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Classical pragmatism is committed to the thought that philosophy must be relevant to ordinary life. This commitment is frequently employed critically: to show that some idea is irrelevant to ordinary life is to prove it to be expendable. But the commitment is also constructive: pragmatists must strive to make their positive views relevant. Accordingly, one would expect the classical pragmatists to have fixed their attention on ethics, since this is the area of philosophy most attuned to everyday problems. Although ethics was among Dewey's persistent interests, Peirce wrote almost nothing on the subject, and James wrote very little. But what James did write exerts considerable influence on contemporary pragmatists, many of whom make frequent appeals to the dual components of James's ethics, pluralism and meliorism. In this paper, we will pose three challenges to Jamesian ethics. As James's ethics is unique, we begin with a sketch of his view.

LOCATING JAMES'S ETHICS

James begins from a pragmatic analysis of fundamental normative concepts, contending that "Goodness, badness, and obligation must be *realized* somewhere in order really to exist"; he then asserts that the "only habitat" of these moral properties is "a mind which feels them" (WWJ, 614).¹ Hence moral terms apply to certain *psychological states*. "[T]he words 'good', 'bad', and 'obligation'" refer not to "absolute natures" of acts but instead are "objects of feeling and desire" that "have no foothold or anchorage in Being, apart from the existence of actually living minds" (WWJ, 168).

Consequently, James holds that "nothing can be good or right except so far as some consciousness feels it to be good or thinks it to be right" (WWJ, 616). To say that *x is good* is to report that someone in fact *thinks* it good, or actually *desires* it. The same goes for *obligation*. A

moral obligation arises, James says, only when “some concrete person” actually makes a *claim* or a *demand* that something or other should be done (WWJ, 617). Indeed, “The only possible reason there can be why any phenomenon ought to exist is that such a phenomenon actually is desired” (WWJ, 617).

James concludes that “the essence of good is simply to satisfy demand” (WWJ, 621). Hence he identifies the meaning of moral claims such as, *One ought never to lie*, as expressing a *demand* that one might make always to be told the truth; one makes such a demand on the basis of one’s *desire* to not be lied to. The good is the satisfaction of desire.

Despite appearances, James’s view is not a variety of ethical egoism. The egoist ties moral value to *one’s own interests*, but James recognizes the moral status of *any* demand, even those issued by others. Whereas the egoist identifies the right action in any given context with that action which best furthers the interests of the agent, James acknowledges that “every . . . claim creates in so far forth an obligation” (WWJ, 617). Consequently, on James’s view, the interests of others can be the source of our obligations, regardless of whether it furthers our interest to satisfy them. In this way, James’s ethics involves an *egalitarian* component: *every demand* and *every interest*, no matter whose demand or interest it may be, morally counts. James bids us to satisfy “as many demands as we can” (WWJ, 623). We shall call this injunction to satisfy as many demands as possible James’s *meliorism*.

Meliorism may suggest that James is a utilitarian. Yet he is not. The theory of value underlying James’s ethics is not hedonism. James rejects the central hedonist claim that there is but one intrinsic value; likewise, he rejects the related thesis that all goods are commensurable. To put the matter in a slightly different way, James rejects hedonism for being a *monistic* theory of value, and adopts a view of value called *pluralism*. The pluralist denies that there is a single intrinsic value to which all other values are reducible, and thus denies that there is a common measure by means of which different goods can be rank-ordered. Instead, the pluralist countenances “an exuberant mass of goods with which human nature is in travail,” and holds that “there is hardly a good which we can imagine except as competing for the possession of the same bit of space and time with some other imagined good” (WWJ, 622). Thus the pluralist denies that every moral conflict admits of a single morally optimal resolution. In fact, the pluralist claims that some moral conflicts are such that *no* morally comfortable resolution is possible. There is no third value to which someone may appeal in deciding how to choose

between two competing goods. For the pluralist, *nothing* plays the role that pleasure plays in hedonism; the pluralist contends that there is no *summum bonum* in light of which conflicts can be resolved. Thus moral choice is frequently tragic: we must choose between incommensurable goods, without the guidance of reason or principles, and we inevitably suffer a moral loss. As James explains, “there is always a *pinch* between the ideal and the actual which can only be got through by leaving part of the ideal behind” (WWJ, 621).

FROM PLURALISM TO MELIORISM

It is important to note that James holds that his meliorism is entailed by his pluralism. The claim is that since moral universe is as varied as its inhabitants and their desires, the best moral theory for action is one posited on the acknowledgement of such a variety and difficulty. James’s pluralism is the view that “neither the whole of truth nor the whole of good is revealed to any single observer No one has insight into all the ideals” (WWJ 645). Consequently, we ought to promote as many ideals as possible.

To illustrate this point, James tells of his experience of squatters’ cabins in North Carolina. He paints a scene of “unmitigated squalor,” with the forest destroyed by girdled trees, zizags of fences, and ramshackle cabins plastered with mud. At first, he sees it as “hideous, a sort of ulcer Ugly, indeed, seemed the life of the squatter” (WWJ, 630-1). However, he later finds that he had overlooked the goods internal to that life and that landscape. “When *they* looked on the hideous stumps, what they thought of was personal victory [T]he clearing . . . was to them a symbol redolent with moral memories and sang a very pean of duty, struggle, and success” (WWJ, 631). He concludes that given our limited purview, we have “a certain blindness” (WWJ, 629) which prevents us from seeing the goods that constitute others’ lives. What we must recognize is that the moral universe is composed by “an exuberant mass of goods,” that do not fit together into a coherent system of value.

Consequently, perfect moral decisions-- moral decisions in which there is no moral remainder, no good left abandoned-- are impossible. No life or even situation can instantiate all the goods. There is not enough time, space, or resources for them all. We must then live our life in the face of a moral uncertainty of what answers are proper in the face of moral conflict. What is called for is a life of “sweat and effort,” “struggle,” a life that is lived bravely in the face of

this uncertainty (WWJ, 627). James calls this *the strenuous mood*. Despite the uncertainty, moral commitment is inevitable-- we cannot opt out of our lives. Our actions and valuing contribute to the moral universe, and we have a responsibility to the goods we value to contribute to the world in ways that promote them.

James's ethics, then, stands between moral pessimism, the view that since there are no absolute goods, it is all worthless, and moral optimism, the view that there are absolute goods not only worth living for, but ones that demand assent from all. James provides the middle ground, because he takes the moral universe still to be under construction, and consequently, one where the goods we strive for are not yet realized. As the fate of the moral universe is still being worked out, we must strive to preserve as many of the goods in it as we can.

THREE CHALLENGES

We now present three challenges to James's ethics. First, consider the view that "everything which is demanded is by that fact a good" (WWJ, 623). James arrives at this view by way of his claim that to call something good is to say that someone in fact demands it. But it simply does not follow from the premise that "nothing can be good or right except so far as some consciousness feels it to be good or thinks it to be right" (WWJ, 616) that "everything which is demanded is by that fact a good" (WWJ, 623). We can grant that whatever is good is good because someone in fact desires it without thereby committing to the claim that whatever anyone in fact desires is *ipso facto* a good. The former does not entail the latter.

Perhaps James simply means to assert both that (a) *if x is good, then it is demanded* and (b) *if x is demanded, then it is good*. We can understand why James is keen to assert the latter: 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 toward providing a *monist* theory of value, a theory according to which all goods share some property in common. But recall that this is exactly what the pluralist denies. According to the pluralist, *all that is required for x to be a good is simply that x satisfy a demand*. James adds that "The demand may be for anything under the sun" because the ideals on the basis of which we issue demands have "no common character apart from the fact that they are ideals" (WWJ, 621).

Yet it seems obvious that some demands should not be met. The demands of the tyrant are a clear example. James could argue that the demand of the tyrant ought not be satisfied because the tyrant's demand is *too costly* given the overall economy of demands in the world. Indeed, James asserts that "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" (WWJ, 623). Hence James could reply that in order to realize the tyrant's ideal we would have to sacrifice too many other ideals; hence it is permissible to leave the tyrant dissatisfied. But this reply misses the point. One could insist that the reason why we may justifiably dismiss the tyrant's demands is not that they conflict with other, more easily realized demands, but rather because the tyrant makes demands that it would be *immoral* to meet.

Consider a different kind of case. Imagine Robin Hood's more discerning sister, Betty Hood. Whereas Robin steals from the rich and gives to the poor, Betty steals only from the *super rich* and gives to the poor. Let us stipulate that someone is *super rich* only if one could be the victim of Betty's thievery without sustaining any dissatisfaction. That is, Betty steals only from those who are so rich that they will not notice the loss. Betty's activities therefore help to satisfy the demands of the poor and they do nothing to frustrate the demands of the super rich. It seems, then, that James could have no objection to Betty's activities; in fact, James might have to take view that Betty's actions are morally right, and possibly obligatory.

Can this be correct? The fact that Betty steals from people who will not miss the money and then gives that money to the needy seems morally irrelevant. Betty Hood's activities are morally wrong *simply because they are instances of stealing*. We might insist that the wrongness of stealing is independent of the calculation of the *cost* of stealing in the economy of demands.

There is a lot more to say. However, it is clear that there are certain commonsense moral commitments that James cannot accommodate. We tend to think that tyranny and theft are wrong regardless of the costs of satisfying the demands of the tyrant and thief. We tend to think that certain demands are *in themselves* immoral, because we tend to think that certain moral claims are valid independently of who demands what.

Our second challenge targets the claim that we should "act so as to bring about the very largest total universe of good which we can see" (WWJ, 626). As we have seen, pluralism entails that *x*, *y*, and *z* could all be goods without having anything in common other than that each is desired by some person. It follows that the "largest total universe of good" is the

universe in which the greatest number of demands is met. Hence the core prescription of James's ethics: act so as to satisfy as many demands as possible. Indeed, James advises us to "invent some manner of realizing your own ideals which will also satisfy the alien demands" (WWJ, 623).

This overlooks the fact that certain kinds of ideals are such that to hold them is necessarily to judge certain other ideals to be immoral and thus unworthy of realization. Not all moral conflict is due to an overall lack of resources or a general inability to accommodate everyone. Some conflict is due to the fact that some moral commitments involve a *rejection* of other moral commitments. The most obvious example of this kind of commitment is religious belief. Certain forms of religious belief are such that their proponents must see those who hold different religious commitments as not simply committed to a different ideal, but as committed to an ideal that is mistaken, dangerous, ignorant, or evil. For example, certain forms of Christianity hold that Hindus are not simply following a different religion, but rather are pursuing a *false* religion. To adopt this form of Christianity is necessarily to judge the Hindu ideal to be *idolatrous* since it does not recognize the divinity of Jesus. To say, with James, to this kind of Christian that she should try to practice her Christianity in a way 'which will also satisfy' (WWJ, 623) the Hindu demands is to say to the Christian that she must regard the Hindu ideal as an ideal *worthy* of accommodation. But this is precisely what she *cannot* do; to regard the Hindu demand as worth satisfying is to commit blasphemy, and thus to violate her own ideal. James's case of recognizing the goods of other lives works in squatters example because (i) he and the squatters are not competing for the same resources (it is easy to be tolerant of squalor, so long as it is not upwind), and (ii) the life of the Academic and the Squatter are not *exclusive* of each other.

Religious exclusivism shows when we are dealing with certain kinds of moral conflict, we are confronted not just with conflicting demands, but with conflicting views of what is morally tolerable. James bids us to act so as to bring about "the very largest total universe of goods" (WWJ, 626). But we are often divided precisely over the question of which states of affairs should count as good; thus the injunction to bring about the largest total is nearly vacuous. Our Christian believes that a world in which no Hindu demands are satisfied is a world with more goods in it than a world in which the Hindu ideal flourishes. Our Christian, then, should act so as to bring about a *reduction* in the number of Hindus. Perhaps there are certain Hindus

who hold that Christianity is a wrong-headed ideal. Following James, we should say that the radical Hindus have good reason to act so as to bring about a reduction in the number of Christians in the world. Both the fundamentalist Christians and the radical Hindus seem to be acting in accordance with the meliorist prescription, but the result is war between the conflicting parties. It is difficult to see how this makes for a better world.

Our final challenge focuses on pluralism. Recall that the pluralist wants to deny that there is a uniform essence of *good*. According to the pluralist, any good thing is good only in that someone desires it. Yet it seems clear that some of our desires entail desires that others' desires *not* be met. What is needed to prevent a state of war of the sort mentioned above is a substantive conception of toleration, one which prescribes that we ought to tolerate some of those who embrace ideals that are not merely *different from* our own, but are, from our point of view, not *moral* ideals at all. Such an account would prescribe that we ought to tolerate certain others even when it frustrates our own ideals to do so. But this kind of account of the value of toleration would have to identify the value of toleration *outside* of the existing economy of desires and demands. As we have seen, James is committed to the thesis that *there is no such thing* as a good that is not in fact demanded by some person. Accordingly, he cannot supply the kind account of toleration that is called for.

We take these three challenges to highlight *practical* shortcomings of James's ethics. Accordingly, they are the kind of challenge that pragmatists should take seriously. If they cannot be met, pragmatists may have to face the troubling possibility that their philosophical program cannot supply a viable ethics.

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NOTES

¹Citations to James's work will be keyed to *The Writings of William James*, John J. McDermott, ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1977), and will employ the abbreviation "WWJ."