

REPLIES TO OUR CRITICS

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We thank the editors of *William James Studies* for this opportunity to exchange arguments with our distinguished and capable commentators. We also thank Professors Harvey Cormier, Richard Gale, and Ruth-Anna Putnam for taking the time to work up their responses.

Before we turn to our replies, we would like to highlight the core commitments of our original paper. Our objective is to evaluate James's stated ethical theory in terms of his hortatory conception of philosophy; according to James, a philosophical position is to be evaluated according to its relevance to life. This pragmatist methodological injunction is one we take seriously in our own work. We argue that James's ethical theory fails along three of these lines of relevance. First, we raise the cases of a tyrant and Betty Hood to show that James's ethics has no principled way of tracking what we take as two uncontroversial moral judgments: (i) it would be wrong to act as a tyrant, even if one's subjects desired it; and (ii) stealing, regardless of whom it is from or whether they will suffer from the loss, is at least *prima facie* wrong. Our second point is that what we've called James's meliorism is an insufficient response to the problem of pluralism. It is worth emphasizing here that pluralism is simply the thesis that goods are not mutually instantiable due to the non-infinite nature of our resources; pluralism is rather the claim that some goods conflict *inherently* with other goods. And so James's meliorism runs against the pluralist commitment according to which valuing and promoting certain goods requires us to neglect or suppress certain other goods. In fact, according to pluralism, certain goods are such that to recognize them as goods is to deny that other goods are good. Pluralism, in short, is the view that it's a conceptual truth that, when it comes to values, you can't have it all. In fact, Jamesian pluralism is stronger than this. It is the view that, when it comes to values, you can't even *conceive* it all; some genuine values must escape your purview, some genuine values must be regarded by you as non-values, moral blindness is inescapable. Accordingly, if pluralism is true, then one cannot be a Jamesian meliorist, for meliorism would require one to vacate one's

own values. Third, and finally, we argue that norms of toleration run counter to the James's stated version of pluralism. At best, if James's stated ethical views are right, then tolerance's norms governs only those who desire tolerance. But surely, if tolerance's norms must bear on people, it must be those who are not inclined toward them.

These, we think, are not abstract, detached, or merely academic philosophical quandaries; they are rather dilemmas that will arise when one tries to live a life according to James's ethical theory. In fact, a good deal of the cases we've presented have been abstracted from real-life discussions about taxation, political consent, voting rights, choosing where to live, and religious life. Again, it is in the pragmatist spirit of developing an ethics that passes the test of lives that we pose these challenges. So let us begin.

THREE RESPONSES TO PROFESSOR CORMIER

1. Professor Cormier has charged that we are "not really" answering James's challenge. Let's review what the challenge is. James has made a heavy metaphysical claim, namely that: *All and only desires ground moral obligation*. As a pragmatist, James holds that evidence for or against this view will derive from the function of judgment in experience. We have provided a few counter-examples with man-on-the-street judgments of the tyrant, Betty Hood, and the problem of religious tolerance. As far as we can see, we're playing James's game.

Cormier contends that we have "not really" answered the challenge because we have inserted a "superstitious" metaphysics-- specifically a divine command theory of obligation-- into the mix. Please. Note, first, the false dilemma: One must either be a Jamesian or some whacked out metaphysician/theologian. We will leave aside for now the fact that there are several naturalistic and non-theological accounts of morality that are viable and not Jamesian. The important thing to notice is that, according to Cormier, the matter concerning the pragmatic viability of James's ethics is to be settled by way of a puke test at the metaethical level. But *this* is to change the Jamesian game, for Cormier holds that *metaethical* commitments, and not first-order moral experience, are what matters. The Jamesian must hold that Cormier has gotten things backwards.

This is perhaps most apparent in the way Cormier addresses the counter-examples we raise. Rather than accepting the judgments we contend are well-considered and settled or

denying them, Cormier simply attempts to impugn the metaphysics he thinks underlies them. This breaks the rules of Jamesian pragmatism: First-order judgments should not fly or fall according to their apparent metaphysical underpinnings, but rather according to how well they are supported by experience. Nothing Cormier says addresses our challenge, which, to be clear, is that James's moral theory cannot adequately capture some central and intuitively sound everyday moral judgments. Cormier may have defended James's view to his own satisfaction, but it is clear he's done enough damage to its pragmatic core to ensure that it is no longer recognizably Jamesian.

2. Let's return to the false dichotomy that lies at the core of Cormier's response. Even if we were to accept Cormier's view that in moral theory one must either be a Jamesian or a divine command theorist, Cormier's argument does not yet yield a successful defense of Jamesian ethics. Cormier has erected no account of how James's meta-ethics could accommodate the judgments in the Betty Hood and the tyrant cases. Remember: the dilemma Cormier poses is that if there are moral norms, then they are either Jamesian or they are superstitious-metaphysical. Cormier has insisted that they are not superstitious; but he has not produced a defense of the Jamesian view because he has not given any reason to think that moral skepticism is unacceptable. In fact, we're inclined to think that if the only two theories of obligation are the Jamesian and the divine command view, and Cormier is correct to dismiss the latter, but cannot show how the former can accommodate our commonsense judgments in the tyrant and Betty Hood cases, then we should adopt some version of moral skepticism. Put otherwise, if there's no viable theory of moral obligation that can endorse the commonsense judgments in the cases we described, then it seems likely that there are no moral properties or predicates at all. And so a form of skepticism would follow. The lesson: don't hang your defense on a false dilemma.

3. Finally, allow us to further clarify the structure of our argument so that there can be a framework for fruitful discussion. James's account places a biconditional between demands and obligations: *X is obligated iff X is demanded*. He further contends that the satisfaction of every and any felt demand is its own *sui generis* good. From this, James holds that we are obligated to try to satisfy as many demands as we can.

Our first concern is with the claim that every desire generates an obligation. The desires of tyrants seem to be counter-examples. If this example seems unconvincing, consider the desires of those who enjoy being cruel, or those who enjoy humiliating others. Are we prepared

to say that we have obligations to help those who enjoy being cruel and humiliating to satisfy their desires? Our second concern is with the claim that desires are necessary for obligations. We raised the case of religious tolerance in response. In a world where no one desires to be religiously tolerant, it still seems that people nevertheless have an obligation to be. In fact, we might say that the obligation to be tolerant is *meaningless* unless it holds in cases where one does not have the corresponding desire. Finally, we raised the example of Betty Hood as a counter-example to the Jamesian requirement that we satisfy the most desires we can. It seems that one should say that Betty's theft would be wrong, even by stealing Betty helped to satisfy a great number of desires.

Now, we do not see how these relatively perfunctory first-order ethical judgments entail the superstitious metaphysics that Cormier imputes to them, but no matter. They are judgments we and many of the people we talk to and must negotiate social life with share. If Cormier's James, in defense of the metaphysical dogmas, feels no need to acknowledge these judgments or those who share them, well, so much the worse for this Jamesianism and its defenders.

TWO RESPONSES TO PROFESSOR GALE

1. Professor Gale first challenges our use of some of James's terminology. Gale rightly corrects our use of the term *meliorism*. We grant that James's stated version of meliorism is entirely *descriptive* while our use of the term is *prescriptive*. However, as Gale goes on to concede, the descriptive view is psychologically tied to the prescriptions we lay out. James may have used the term *meliorism* as strictly descriptive; however, the commitment we identify in our paper as meliorism is indeed a commitment that James adopts. And that's what matters.

The force of Gale's point against our use of the term *pluralism* depends on what one understands by *the satisfaction of desire*. Gale's holds that one's desire for Hawaiian Punch can be satisfied with Kool Aid; he concludes from this that only the satisfaction matters. We are unsure. It certainly makes sense to say that when Gale orders a Coke in a restaurant and is asked by a waitress whether Pepsi is O.K., he is not being presented with nonsense. The two colas are virtually indistinguishable when poured over ice, and moreover, very little hangs on that negligible difference. But desiring a Coke is different from merely desiring a cola. Insofar as our desires sometimes have this uniquely distinguishing *de dicto* element, the reduction to

satisfaction (regardless of the distinguishability of the objects) is insufficient. If our Coke example seems insufficient, consider the desire for *a kiss from my sweetheart*. Surely in this case, the specificity of the object matters.

2. Professor Gale has rightly recognized that our counter-examples proceed from a series of intuitions that are more-or-less deontological. First, he proposes that James's ethics can accommodate these "brain-born Kantian moral intuitions" in the form of a pragmatic version of rule utilitarianism. This, he concedes, "would require altering James's text." He then considers whether our counter-examples, given that they are counterfactual, bear any relevance to James's ethics in the real world of practical life. But this strategy, he concedes, works only "with an unacceptably truncated concept of what counts as practical." Gale then closes by noting that, properly modified, our Betty Hood example counts against deontology, too. So, according to Gale, every moral theory founders on some case or other. The consequence, he holds, is pluralism. Thus James is vindicated.

We agree with Professor Gale's observations that Jamesians can either accommodate our cases by revising James's ethics or they can avoid our cases by making pragmatism altogether too austere. In fact, we might as well just accept this as the dilemma our paper poses. However, Gale's conclusion that pluralism is the proper conclusion to draw from our cases is hasty and imprecise. James himself is no a rule utilitarian; nor is he any kind of Kantian. It seems to us that both the rule utilitarian and the Kantian can address our cases in a more plausible way than the Jamesian, but we need not present an argument for that view here. What's important is that even if we grant to Gale his premise that no moral theory can adequately address all the relevant cases, the proper conclusion is moral skepticism, not pluralism.

THREE RESPONSES TO PUTNAM

1. We must confess that we are unsure how Professor Putnam's first argument is intended to run. Her claim seems to be that because James's psychology of human judgment is based on moral perceptions, our first challenge is defused. In our tyrant example, the agents may positively want the tyrant to be a tyrant. To be sure, this thought is far-fetched, but that it would be wrong for a tyrant to dominate a willing populace still seems a moral commonplace. Putnam holds that James, when confronted with tyrants and a tyrannical demand, "feels it is vile," and

thereby holds that there are “irreducible moral perceptions.” This is supposed to meet our challenge. But the problem we’ve raised is not that James can’t acknowledge these moral judgments, but rather that they cannot fit into James’s system of moral value. Again, tyranny is a moral evil regardless of the psychology of the tyrant, the populace, or even those who judge the circumstances. That is, surely it is incorrect to say: *it is wrong for the tyrant to dominate all those willing people, because I, the observer, don’t feel right about it*. The evil of tyranny does not derive from the fact that it offends those who observe it.

2. We are pleased to see that Professor Putnam has taken on the challenge of addressing the Betty Hood case and arguing that, on a Jamesian view, Betty’s actions would be permissible, or even morally right. We believe that if Jamesian ethics is to be salvaged, one must proceed along the lines Professor Putnam suggests. Every moral theory has bullets to bite. Jamesians gain no ground by denying this; they would do better to show that they have the teeth for moral philosophy.

However, note that Putnam’s reply depends on a distinction between real and apparent goods. Recall that James’s moral theory is a form of value phenomenalism. Again, on the Jamesian view, desired goods *are* real goods, and real goods are desired, because *desiring x makes x a good*. That these goods require coordination and that there may be real or apparent conflicts between goods does not bear on whether those goods are goods. Given that they are desired, they are goods. Insofar as Putnam’s response employs a distinction between real goods and merely apparent ones, she abandons James’s phenomenalism. It seems to us, then, that she has redacted the vital core of the Jamesian program. On the view Putnam suggests, the source of value lies in something other than the valuing.

3. Finally, we are grateful to Professor Putnam for referencing James’s note on the value of toleration. This shows that James indeed was committed to a substantive norm of tolerance. Given what we know about James the man, we are not surprised to find that he so highly valued tolerance. However, that James was a vehement advocate of toleration in his life does not show that toleration plays an organizing or central role in his moral philosophy. Our question is how toleration fits within James’s moral philosophy. We’ve argued that Jamesian pluralism entails that James’s ethics cannot support a muscular commitment to tolerance. But such a commitment to tolerance is what is required in order to avoid the problems that arise when contending parties desire (as part of their own good) the *loss* or *elimination* of the other’s good. That James himself

valued toleration perhaps is evidence that one can be a Jamesian and be committed to tolerance. But the problem is that James's moral philosophy does not have the resources to argue that one *must* be tolerant.

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