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*William James's Pragmatism: Ethics and The Individualism of Others*

In his popular lecture “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings” (1899), William James considers the lack of awareness that we often have toward the insights of other people. “There is no point of view absolutely public and universal,” he says, and “even prisons and sick-rooms have their special revelations”. While every observer “gains a partial superiority of insight from the peculiar position in which he stands,” the stubborn fact, according to James, is that “neither the whole of truth nor the whole of good, is revealed to any single observer” (1899: 149). Later, James referred to this lecture as the essay upon which his “whole individualistic philosophy is based”<sup>1</sup>. As it turns out, James’s concern for the perspectives of others is actually the very essence of his famous method of truth – and the basis for most of the rest of his pragmatic philosophy.

Each of us, says James, is singular and limited, and none of us can possibly account for all truth. “Truth is too great for any one actual mind”<sup>2</sup>. We are dependent on “many cognizers,” he says, when we talk about “the facts and worths of life” (Perry 1935, 2: 266). Implicit in this observation is not only James’s respect for the revelations of others but also his recognition of our limitations.

Believing that no one person has access to all truths, James stresses our ignorance and, at the same time, recognizes our access to the unique truths of others. In another lecture, one for college students called “What Makes Life Significant” (1900), James advises us to “be faithful” to our opportunities to learn from other people, for this is where our truths are to be found, in our experiences with others. And if we fear that we are not very successful in understanding other people, James replies that we should rely on a stance of Socratic ignorance. He asks, can we not recognize our inadequacy, and thus be more wary in our judgments? “If we cannot gain much positive insight into one another, cannot we at least use our sense of our own blindness to make us more cautious in going over the dark places?” Again, James asks, “Cannot we escape some of those hideous ancestral intolerances and cruelties, and positive reversals of the truth?” (1899: 151).

In all these remarks, James is making an important connection between truth and his respect for the viewpoints of others while insisting on our awareness of our ignorance. We may not be able to see all, but we can know that we are unseeing. We can realize our own limitations, and we can rely on a certain intersubjective reciprocity. And this reciprocity then becomes, in his view, the basis of further opinions about what is true and what isn’t. Our acknowledgement of the perspectives of others is thus crucial for James – if we are to increase our understanding.

For James, this same approach to truth applies not only to assertions in the scientific and empirical worlds but also to assertions in ethics. Ethics requires that different claims be

<sup>1</sup> James made this remark in a letter to Mrs. Glendower Evans in 1899. In a letter to another friend, he writes, “Those who have done me the honor of reading my volume of philosophic essays will recognize that I mean the pluralistic or individualistic philosophy” (Perry 1935, 2: 265-66). I take James to mean that the pluralism of the world is really about the plurality of individuals that we encounter in our experiences.

<sup>2</sup> See James’s preface of *Talks To Teachers* (1899), in reference to his essay, “On A Certain Blindness in Human Beings,” 4 (also quoted in Perry 1935, 2: 266).

heard and that different obligations be met. In a lecture, "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," (delivered to the Yale Philosophical Club in 1891), James is explicit:

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* (italics added) (1897: 141).

But if James was to maintain that there could be "no final truth in ethics any more than in physics," he would also need to present an epistemological theory that would sustain his steady respect for the vision and experience of others – and "Pragmatism" was to be his answer<sup>3</sup>.

### *I. Pragmatism And Amelioration*

In the series of lectures offered in *Pragmatism* (1907; collected from talks delivered in 1906-07), James criticizes the epistemological notion that neutrality and objectivity are possible in any absolute sense and argues that meaningfulness is itself always contextual. According to James, pragmatism as a method does not pronounce judgments of truth and falsity; rather, it is a matter of praxis – of doing and ordering.

In an early letter for the *Nation* entitled "The Teaching of Philosophy in Our Colleges" (1876), James explains that pragmatism is no more than "the habit of always seeing an alternative, if not taking the usual for granted; [...] of imagining foreign states of mind" (LWJ 1935, I: 190)<sup>4</sup>. In the same article, James says that the value of his philosophy lies in a "wider openness of mind, a more flexible way of thinking" (190). And in his essay "What Pragmatism Means," he writes, "Pragmatism is willing to take anything, to follow either logic or the senses, and to count the humblest and most personal experiences" (1907b: 44). James concludes with the remark that pragmatism is fundamentally "democratic." James makes clear that he is concerned with the opinions of others, understood in light of pragmatism's maxim that there is no final truth.

James believes that a radically new kind of empiricism is required, and he realizes that rationalists will probably find it unattractive. The rationalists want to discover absolute principles and eternal truths, and they will probably find his pragmatism ignoble and coarse – or so he suspects. James remarks,

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<sup>3</sup> In a paper on "How to Make Your Ideas Clear," contributed to the *Popular Science Monthly* in 1878, Charles Sanders Pierce first used the word "pragmatism" to designate a principle put forward by him as a rule for guiding the scientist and the mathematician. The Principle is that the meaning of any conception in the mind is the practical effect it will have in action: "consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearing, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object." 132. The rule remained unnoticed for 20 years until James took it up in the address he delivered at the Philosophical Union at the University of California at Berkeley in 1898. *Pragmatism* was not published until 1907 but even before that both in the *Principles of Psychology* (1890) and *Will to Believe* (1897) there are clear indications of a pragmatic view of both philosophical and psychological issues. James's public adherence to pragmatism is sometimes dated from his 1898 Berkeley address "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results." Other sources for *Pragmatism* were lectures given at Wellesley College in 1905 and at the Lowell Institute and Columbia University in 1906 and 1907. Since most of James's *Pragmatism* and most of his other published works arose from his popular lectures, James did not offer detailed argument, much to his own regret. See Perry 1935, 2: 583.

<sup>4</sup> For the article in full, cf. *Nation*, Sept. 21, 1876 (XXIII).

To rationalists this describes a tramp and vagrant world, adrift in space, with neither elephant nor tortoise to plant the sole of its foot upon. [...] Such a world would not be *respectable*, philosophically. It is a trunk without a tag, a dog without a collar, in the eyes of most professors of philosophy (125).

James argues that for a “devotee to abstract and eternal principles” (135), the world of the rationalist is “perfect, finished” whereas for the pragmatists “all is process” – unfinished but filled with possibility” (127). In his essay “Pragmatism and Humanism,” James characterizes the rationalists as holding that “in the absolute world, where all that is *not* is from eternity impossible, and all that *is* is necessary, the category of possibility has no application.” By contrast, James insists that “possibilities obtain in our world”. He argues that in the world of pragmatism “crimes and horrors are regrettable,” but in the “totalized world” of the rationalists, “regret obtains not, for the existence of ill in the temporal order is the very condition of the perfection of the eternal order (127-28).

In fact, James finds himself attacking both rationalists *and* empiricists, especially when he thinks about religion. In his talk, “Pragmatism and Religion,” he remarks, “The whole clash of rationalistic and empiricist religion is [...] over the validity of possibility” (135). The empiricist, as the “skeptical” scientist, doesn’t allow for possibility either – since the empiricist’s view of the world is “materialistic” and “fatalistic” (12-13).

According to James, neither rationalism nor empiricism allows for possibility. But more importantly, neither the rationalists nor the empiricists seem to recognize that the experiences of other people are central to forming one’s own experience, whether the subject of our experience is scientific or ethical.

James breaks with the empiricist model of knowledge according to which we simply look out, like spectators, and see how the world is and collect the facts. And he also breaks with the idealist model of subsuming sense data under a priori categories<sup>5</sup>. James presents a rather technical critique of idealism and empiricism, but there is also more at stake morally for James than a straightforward refutation of these two systems<sup>6</sup>.

James is particularly concerned that philosophy should recognize the central importance of making the world better. In an interview with the *New York Times*, published on November 3, 1907 (the same year that *Pragmatism* appeared), James emphasizes the moralism that underlies the pragmatic theory of truth: “Our minds are not here simply to copy a reality that is already complete [...] In point of fact, the *use* of most of our thinking is to help us to *change* the world” (Perry 1935, 2: 479).

James agrees, of course, that we must know “*what* we have to change,” and that we have to be realistic and honest in our assessment of how the world is. “Theoretic truth must at all times come before practical application.” Nevertheless, theoretic truth, for the pragmatist, remains “irrelevant unless it fits the [...] purpose in hand”. James sees the use of our “practical faculties” as an attempt “to get the world into a better shape, and all with a good conscience” (479).

<sup>5</sup> Idealism, the philosophy which originates with Kant and was later developed in Germany by Fichte, Hegel, Schelling, and Schopenhauer, was acquiring popularity in the United States (through the writings of Josiah Royce, among others).

<sup>6</sup> In his preface of James’s *Pragmatism*, H.S. Thayer also sees pragmatism as driven by an ethical impetus: “The moral import of pragmatism is evident on every page of James’s book”. He adds, “Knowledge, faith, practical needs of adaptation to and remolding of the world, human temperaments and the philosophies they engender are each and all recognized and interpreted from his fundamental view of the purposive and moral character of all human action and experience”, (1907b: xxv).

James goes so far as to speak of "saving the world". Believing that we all "wish to minimize the insecurity of the universe," James thinks that "we are and ought to be unhappy when we regard it as exposed to every enemy and open to every life-destroying draft" (1907b: 137). James says there are "concretely grounded" conditions for "the salvation of the world". He asks, "What does it pragmatically mean to say that this [the salvation of the world] is possible?" He answers, it means "that some of the conditions of the world's deliverance do actually exist". For James "it would contradict the very spirit of life to say that our minds must be indifferent and neutral in questions like that of the world's salvation". Indeed, says James, "anyone who pretends to be neutral writes himself down here as a fool and a sham" (136-37).

When speaking to his audience of college students, James also asks them to acknowledge their own personal ideals that they are "willing to live and work for". Each "such ideal realized," James declares, "will be one moment in the world's salvation". Our particular ideals are not "bare abstract possibilities," he says, but "*live* possibilities". And we are "their live champions". If given the chance, our ideals may become "actual things". James asks, "Does our act then *create* the world's salvation so far as it makes room for itself?" And he adds, "Here I take the bull by the horns, and in spite of the whole crew of rationalists and monists, [...] ask *why not?*" (137-38)<sup>7</sup>.

James admits that there are, nevertheless, "unhappy men who think the salvation of the world impossible; theirs is the doctrine known as pessimism". Optimism, on the other hand, is "the doctrine that thinks the world's salvation inevitable" (137). Promoting a mean between the extremes, James envisions "salvation as neither necessary nor impossible. It treats it as a possibility, which becomes more of a probability the more numerous the actual conditions of salvation become." James thinks it "clear that pragmatism must incline towards meliorism" (137).

These sentiments of James make it apparent that pragmatism is not so much about scientific truths as it is about ethical truths. Our experience in the world shows us that ethical disputes cannot be settled by a simple appeal to the "moral truth". The world lends itself to many conflicting interpretations: political, economic, religious, and cultural; if we are to have any access to truth (and importantly, for James, amelioration), then we require experience with the many interpretations of others.

One can see, then, why James thinks that idealism misrepresents the way we actually have our experiences. For James, idealists assume the existence of an absolute, certain moral truth. And James doubts the existence of any such explanatory principle, whether it be an Absolute Mind or a doctrine of innate ideas. There is, for James, no ultimate certainty, no "Truth" out there to be won.

James's intermediate position between rationalism and empiricism leads him to a method of truth that promotes the relation between the self and others. His critique is centered on his belief that, without an understanding and evaluation of the outlook of others, there can be neither truth nor knowledge<sup>8</sup>. There is no truth until each of us has "had his experience and each his say".

<sup>7</sup> For James, there are events – incited by ideas and emotions such love, anger or despair – that inspire us to go beyond the everyday. These exceptional struggles generate great inner power, courage, and risk and can make a life meaningful. See "The Energies of Man" (1906), a lecture in a series that James delivered from 1885-1899 to college students – generally at schools for women – on education and its purposes (1982: 129-146).

<sup>8</sup> See James's views on "claims" and "obligations" in his lecture, "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" (1897).

## II. Temperament

In the opening chapter of *Pragmatism*, "The Present Dilemma in Philosophy," James sets forth an opposition between the rationalists like Hegel and the empiricists such as J. S. Mill or Herbert Spencer. James analyzes these schools in terms of temperament – "tender-minded" for the rationalists, "tough-minded" for the empiricists. The rationalists, says James, are intellectualistic, idealistic, optimistic, religious, "freewillist," monistic, and dogmatic. The empiricists are sensationalistic, materialistic, pessimistic, irreligious, fatalistic, pluralistic, and skeptical (13). James advertises pragmatism as an intermediate ground between the two – though, as we might expect, he leans toward the open, pluralistic worldview of the tough-minded (129).

Comparing the rationalists to the "tender-foot Bostonians" and the empiricists to the "Rocky Mountain toughs," James thinks that philosophical leanings are actually matters of personal temperament. Earlier in an essay "The Sentiment of Rationality" (1879), James underscores the difference between the two outlooks: "Idealism will be chosen by a man of one emotional constitution, materialism by another". Idealism offers a closeness with the universe, the feeling of "I am all". Others, by contrast, find in idealism "a narrow, close, sick-room air," leaving out an element of danger, contingency and wildness – "the rough, harsh, sea-wave, north-wind element" (1897: 75). Both the intimacy of the rationalist and the wildness of the empiricist answer to propensities, passions, and powers in human beings. The materialist desires "to escape personality, to revel in the action of forces that have no respect for our ego, to let the tides flow, even though they flow over us"<sup>9</sup> (76).

A "great religious difference," says James, exists "between the men who insist that the [world] *must and shall be*, and those who are content with the belief that the world *may be*, saved" (1907b: 135). In fact, James tends to identify religion with the "sick-minded" and moralism with the "healthy-minded." The healthy-minded can deal with insecurity (141). These temperaments, as "two types of religion," are in sharp contrast. Yet a person could also fluctuate, "healthy-minded" on one day and "sick-souled" on the next. James writes,

[...] it is impossible not to see a temperamental difference at work in the choice of sides. The rationalist mind, radically taken, is of a doctrinaire and authoritative complexion: the phrase 'must be' is ever on its lips. The bellyband of its universe must be tight. A radical pragmatist on the other hand is a happy-go-lucky anarchistic sort of creature. If he had to live in a tub like Diogenes he wouldn't mind at all if the hoops were loose and the staves let in the sun (124).

"On the one side the universe is absolutely secure," says James, and "on the other it is still pursuing its adventures" (123). For James, the absolutist scheme appeals to the tender-minded, the pluralistic scheme to the tough (140). Nevertheless, James adds, all this playful talk of adventure and life in a barrel is not simply a "happy-go-lucky" adventure. James thinks more is at risk morally. The absolutist view leads to dogmatism.

On moral grounds alone, if we are mere spectators with the circumspect vision of the absolutist, we may judge others falsely because we impose on them our own standards. In

<sup>9</sup> James further explains, "You see how differently people take things. The world we live in exists diffused and distributed, in the form of an indefinitely numerous lot of *eaches*, coherent in all sorts of ways and degrees; and the tough-minded are perfectly willing to keep them at that valuation. They can *stand* that kind of world, their temper being well adapted to its insecurity. Not so the tender-minded party. They must back the world we find ourselves born into by 'another and a better' world in which the eaches form an All and the All a One that logically presupposes, co-implicates, and secures each *each* without exception" (1907b: 126-127).

his talk "What Makes Life Significant" (1900), James warns: "No one has insight into all the ideals [...]. No one should presume to judge them off-hand. The pretension to dogmatize about them in each other is the root of most human injustices and cruelties, and the trait in human character most likely to make the angels weep" (1899: 150).

The problem, for James, is not that a logical explanation of ethical or scientific truth cannot be produced but that any given situation admits of *too many* adequate explanations. The pragmatist is one who both holds to the "scientific loyalty to facts" and to the "old confidence in human values and the resultant spontaneity whether of the religious or romantic type" (1907b: 17).

Although James stresses that our passions, interests, beliefs, and prejudices are involved in science, just as they are in everything else, this does not mean that there are no standards, or that there is no evidence, or that we should not exercise special caution in affirming scientific conclusions. James is not proposing a relativistic world; he advocates neither a doctrine of caprice nor a denigration of all things rational, and he does not mean that we just create, or make up, our own truth; these are common misinterpretations of James<sup>10</sup>.

Nevertheless, James emphasizes that there is no such thing as "pure" reason or "pure" logic – unimpassioned and uninterested – by which we can assess things. "One misunderstanding of pragmatism," says James, is to suppose that it "scorns every rationalistic notion as so much jabber and gesticulation, that it loves intellectual anarchy as such and prefers a sort of wolf-world absolutely unpenit and wild and without a master or a collar to any philosophic classroom product, whatsoever" (128).

### III. The Method of Truth

Despite his various criticisms of empiricism, James still sees pragmatism as fitting within an empiricist tradition (hence his dedication of *Pragmatism* to J.S. Mill)<sup>11</sup>. Yet James presents it at first not as a theory of knowledge but as a method. Pragmatism, says James, "has no dogmas and no doctrines save its method," and the method is characterized as "*the attitude of looking away from first things, principles, 'categories,' supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts*" (32)<sup>12</sup>.

In this respect, pragmatism is the method of modern experimental science, and the idea of truth that follows from it is functional and always approximate. New truth, says James, "marries old opinion to new fact so as ever to show a minimum of jolt, a maximum of continuity. We hold a theory true just in proportion to its success in solving this 'problem of

<sup>10</sup> See Putnam 1995: 24: "Some critics even read James – against repeated statements to the contrary, explicit and implicit, in his writing – as holding that if the consequences of believing that p are good for *you*, then p is 'true for you.' Let me say once and for all that James never said the notion of 'true for me' or 'true for you.'" Importantly, Putnam adds, "Truth, he insists, is a notion which presupposes a community."

<sup>11</sup> The dedication reads, "To the Memory of John Stuart Mill from whom I first learned the pragmatic openness of mind and whom my fancy likes to picture as our leader."

<sup>12</sup> James's method of resolving disputes and the theory of meaning are explained in a simple story about whether a man chasing a squirrel around a tree goes around the squirrel too. James suggests that a verbal dispute over whether or not the person "goes round" the squirrel can best be resolved by asking disputants about the practical bearing of each alternative. Taking meaning as the conceivable effects of a practical kind the object may involve, James states, the pragmatist philosopher finds that two "practical" meanings of "go around" are in use: either the man goes North, East, South, and West of the squirrel, or he faces first the squirrel's head, then one of his sides, then his tail, then his other side. James resolves the problem: "make the distinction and there is no occasion for any farther dispute". James notes, "[A pragmatist] turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad *a priori* reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins" (1907b: 31).

maxima and minima". Nonetheless, James cautions, "success in solving this problem is eminently a matter of approximation" (35).

In another lecture from the *Pragmatism* series, "Pragmatism's Conception of Truth," James even challenges some of the ways in which we talk about truth.

It never occurs to most of us even later that the question 'what is *the* truth?' is no real question (being irrelative to all conditions) and that the whole notion of *the* truth is an abstraction from the fact of truths in the plural, a mere useful summarizing phrase like *the* Latin Language or *the* Law (115-16).

Truth is an attribute of ideas rather than of reality, and truth attaches to ideas in proportion as these prove "useful." Pragmatism is an attempt to explain how the mind ascertains truth: "'*The true, ' to put it very briefly, is only the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as 'the right' is only the expedient in the way of our behaving*" (106)<sup>13</sup>. "Truth for us," says James, "is simply a collective name for verification processes," and "Truth is *made*, just as health, wealth and strength are made, in the course of experience" (104). "All our truths," says James, "are beliefs about 'Reality'" (117).

James says, "Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events. Its verity *is* in fact an event, a process: the process namely of its verifying itself, its *verification*. Its validity is the process of its *valid-ation*" (97)<sup>14</sup>. Also, according to James, truth is a "species of the good"; truths are goods because we can "ride" on them into the future without being unpleasantly surprised (103).

In James's view, then, truths are "*made*" in the course of human experience. Nevertheless, most truths live on a sort of "credit system," meaning that we rely on other people for their verification. We can't verify every truth for ourselves. We could try to verify each one, but we would never succeed. We take most of them on credit and must trust the verifications claimed by others as much as we do our own. And these beliefs then form a vast architecture, says James, so that "beliefs verified concretely by *somebody* are the posts of the whole superstructure" (100).

James calls our trust in the beliefs of others a kind of faith. Our beliefs in molecules and in democracy (to make use of two of James's examples) are not based on our own reasoning alone, and certainly not on anything that we could call "pure reason," but on our faith that others have verified that such things exist. "Our faith is faith in someone else's faith" (1897, 19).

#### IV. Pragmatism and Humanism

James notes the similarity between his humanistic picture – in which the world is knowable by us because we help form it – and the epistemological account of Kant. Nevertheless, there is an important difference. James's position is more empirical. James is not attached to a pre-constituted set of categories. Instead, he finds his categories as he finds the

<sup>13</sup> Also see James's preface to *The Meaning of Truth: A Sequel to "Pragmatism"* (1809). For many of his readers, truth identified with the expedient, was objectionable. James attempted to respond to these criticisms, especially in *The Meaning of Truth*; his responses did little to persuade the critics, however, since most of them were unaware of his radical empiricism.

<sup>14</sup> Also quoted in James 1809: 2-3.

material they organize: experimentally and experientially with others<sup>15</sup>. According to James,

Our rights, wrongs, prohibitions, penalties, words, forms, idioms, beliefs, are so many new creations that add themselves as fast as history proceeds. Far from being antecedent principles that animate the process, law, language, truth are but abstract names for its results (1907b: 116).

James emphasizes that, in our relation with “fixed elements of reality,” we still have “a certain freedom in our dealings with them.” There is no denying, of course, that sensations are beyond our control, but “[that] *which* we attend to, note, and make emphatic in our conclusions depends on our own interests; and [...] as we lay the emphasis here or there, quite different formulations of truth result.” James underscores that what we say about reality “depends on the perspective into which we throw it” (118). Sensations and relations, in themselves, tell us nothing. “We have to speak for them” (118).

Interests or values guide our knowledge, and since the reality of objects cannot be known prior to experience, truth claims can be justified only as the fulfillment of conditions that are experimentally determined. James describes our experience as given, yet we also exercise choice: “Even in the field of sensation, our minds exert a certain arbitrary choice. By our inclusions and omissions we trace the field’s extent; by our emphasis we mark its foreground and its background; by our order we read it in this direction or in that”. And James regards the process as creative. “We receive the block of marble, but we carve the statue ourselves” (119).

The “*first* part of reality [...] is the flux of our sensations”. Sensations are “neither true nor false; they simply *are*”. The second part of reality “is the *relations* that obtain between sensations or between their copies in our minds”. And the third part of reality “is the *previous truths* of which every new inquiry takes account” (117-18). Although, we do not receive our sensations as coming “without the human touch,” this part of experience “has immediately to become humanized in the sense of being squared, assimilated or in some way adapted, to the humanized mass already there” (119).

According to James, we receive sensations or “percepts” constantly, yet the sensations are always in relation to “previous truths” or past “concepts”. There are new facts that “men add to the matter of reality by the acts of their own lives,” as well a “whole third part of reality which I have called ‘previous truths’”. James adds, “Every hour brings its new percepts, its own facts of sensation and relation, to be truly taken account of; but the whole of our *past* dealings with such facts is already funded in the previous truths” (119).

Each individual has his or her own experience, past and present, involved in the act of subjective interpretation; pure objectivity and neutrality are impossible in James’s view: “We shuffle our perceptions of intrinsic relation and arrange them just as freely”. “The whole,” says James, “is flagrantly man-made”.

James offers a simple example. “Waterloo,” he says, “spells a ‘victory’ for an Englishman; for a Frenchman it spells a ‘defeat’. So for an optimist philosopher the universe spells victory, for a pessimist, defeat” (118). “Human motives sharpen all our questions,” and “human satisfactions lurk in all our answers, all our formulas have a human twist.”

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<sup>15</sup> James says that “between categories fulminated before nature began, and categories gradually forming themselves in nature’s presence, the whole chasm between rationalism and empiricism yawns”. According to James, “Our rights, wrongs, prohibitions, penalties, words, forms, idioms, beliefs, are so many new creations that add themselves as fast as history proceeds. Far from being antecedent principles that animate the process, law, language, truth are but abstract names for its results” (1907b: 116).

James sees reality as “plastic,” and he insists that what we have to say about it has been “peptonized and cooked for our consumption” by previous human thought (119-20).

As we encounter “fresh experience,” the beliefs of our ancestors and ourselves “determine what we notice; what we notice determines what we do; what we do again determines what we experience.” Hence, while there is a “sensible flux, what is *true of it* seems from first to last to be largely a matter of our own creation” (122).

James also appreciates the possibility of a new experience to create an entire revolution within one's worldview:

Now life abounds in [new experiences], and sometimes they are such critical and revolutionary experiences that they change a man's whole scale of values and system of ideas. In such cases, the old order of his habits will be ruptured; and if the new motives are lasting, new habits will be formed, and build up in him a new and regenerate 'nature' (1899: 53)<sup>16</sup>.

Nevertheless, for “pluralistic pragmatism,” truth “grows up inside of all the finite experiences. They lean on each other, but the whole of them, if such a whole there be, leans on nothing. All ‘homes’ are in finite experience; finite experience as such is homeless”. There exists “nothing outside of the flux” upon which we can secure ourselves (1907b: 125).

On the whole, James presents a world without essence, without an Absolute Truth, without a break between the self and the world. Offering a voluntaristic epistemology, James attempts to marry the self to the world in a way that avoids idealism: “We carve out everything just as we carve out constellations, to suit our human purposes” (122). Yet James, as indicated earlier, *does* recognize “resisting factors in every experience of truth-making,” including not only our present sensations and experiences but the whole body of our prior beliefs – “a whole third part of reality.” James argues neither that we create our truths out of nothing nor that truth is entirely independent of humanity: “You see how naturally one comes to the humanistic principle: you can't weed out the human contribution” (122)<sup>17</sup>.

#### V. Pragmatism and Ethics

Truth has a function, says James, in the life of human beings – namely, to prepare them for successful action – and beliefs that best fulfill that function are the ones most deserving to be called true. Yet they can't be much more than that, James says, since “Experience, as we know, has ways of *boiling over*, and making us correct our present formulas” (106). We exchange, lend and borrow ideas through social intercourse. We are indebted to our social order and, importantly, to each other. No one person creates a new science or a new ethic *ex nihilo*.

Yet how does one decide among different ethical demands when the ethical demands conflict? Does one just impose one's personal standards? Will an abstract principle be the answer? For James, no philosophy of ethics in the old, a priori sense is possible. In his lecture “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” James says we must “wait on the facts,”

<sup>16</sup> The essay, “The Laws of Habit,” was first published in the *Popular Science Monthly* (Feb 1887).

<sup>17</sup> James continues, “Our nouns and adjectives are all humanized heirlooms, and in the theories we build them into, the inner order and arrangement is wholly dictated by human considerations, intellectual consistency being one of them [...] Mathematics and logic themselves are fermenting with human rearrangements; physics, astronomy and biology follow massive cues of preference”.

and we must always be ready to revise our theories. According to James, "ethical science is just like physical science, and instead of being deducible all at once from abstract principles, [it] must simply bide its time, and be ready to revise its conclusions from day to day". We arrive at moral foundations by a kind of "experiment," James holds, but there is nothing final in the results. He writes:

[...] as our present laws and customs have fought and conquered other past ones, so they will in their turn be overthrown by any newly discovered order which will hush up the complaints that they still give rise to, without producing others louder still (1897: 156-57).

In order to hear the claims of others and to engage in moral reflection, we need to have experiences with others. And, according to James, we need to recognize that life is often "tragic" and "no mere speculative conundrum" (1907b: 154).

The philosopher Charlene Seigfried expresses this aspect of James's outlook well: "Concern for the point of view of others," she writes, "is as central to knowledge claims as it is to ethical claims" (1977: 93)<sup>18</sup>. According to Seigfried, James's pluralistic conception of truth offers "every person a unique and irreplaceable angle of vision because she or he is differently situated and has a varied ensemble of needs and desires and a characteristic temperament". Thus, every person "will see and organize the world uniquely and the knowledge gathered by the human community will be more comprehensive and valuable to the extent that it takes account of this rich variety of resources" (92)<sup>19</sup>.

Knowledge is essentially cooperative in James's view, though he admits that perhaps our understanding of the universe is actually quite inaccurate. "We may be in the universe as dogs and cats are in our libraries, seeing the books and hearing the conversation, but having no inkling of the meaning of it all" (1907a: 140).

We only have access to our own horizon and we rely on the individualism of others to fill in the blanks. If one can't turn to an absolute, to a grand rational spirit that unifies the world as a whole, and if one can't depend on a solipsistic self engaged in a skeptical stance, then one can only rely on oneself *and* one's neighbor.

Even in youth, James held this view. "*Every thing* we know and are," James wrote to his life-long friend, Tom Ward, when he was still in his twenties, "is through men. We have no revelation but through man". James added, "Every thought you now have and every act and intention owes its complexion to the acts of your dead and living brothers" (Skrupskelis 1995, 4: 249).

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<sup>18</sup> Seigfried adds, "An act of living sympathy with the motives and intentions by which persons make sense of their world gives insight into the creative spontaneity by which human beings create stability in a world of progress."

<sup>19</sup> "Therefore," explains Seigfried, "it is necessary to understand the point of others to understand and evaluate the basis of their claims" (94).

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