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Saints?

When one of this journal's editors asked me to edit an issue and told me I would select the topic, the idea of dedicating papers to the question of individuals immediately came to mind. Pragmatism has such a social orientation in the current literature that it seems that individuals get left behind. But the question of the nature of individuals, and especially how much of the good life should be left to individual contemplation, has occupied pragmatists at least since Emerson. I have selected and arranged the contributions so that, to me, they speak to each other. And I see no need to offer a traditional preface to the volume in which I tell readers what the authors will tell them in their own words better than I. Instead I offer my own thoughts on the nature of exemplary individuals and on why the question is important in contrasting Dewey and James on religious experience and questions of metaphysics. And although I do not spend any real time in the essay on Emerson and Thoreau, I would align them more with James than Dewey. I tried hard not to use the word 'community' in my essay. Why focus on James? Personally I have always wanted to write something dealing with the *Varieties of Religious Experience*. It was suggested to me by my favorite undergraduate teacher Robert O'Connell in 1969 and I got around to reading it in 1990. It's an especially odd book, the most personal writing of an author inclined to honest expression. Even James expressed embarrassment at the amount of emotion it contained. Once again, thanks to the editors for allowing me to select and arrange these papers. And thanks to the contributors for allowing me to work with them.

There is a sharp contrast between the importance of the individual in the ethics of William James and John Dewey. James is less modern and more religious in the traditional sense than Dewey, more in line with the radical individualism of Emerson and Thoreau. And James' closer approximation to Emerson has consequences for his ethics, philosophy of religion, and metaphysics. Here I focus on the importance of individual personality, psychology, and feelings of significance in exemplary individuals as a means of driving a philosophical wedge between James and Dewey.

Religious Individuals

Consider Dewey's suggestion that the word 'God' mean "the ideal ends that at a given time and place one acknowledges as having authority over his volition and emotion, the values to which one is supremely devoted, as far as these ends, through imagination, take on unity" (Dewey 1934: 56). On the face of it, this is a nice enough definition. But Deweyian ideals are not yet realized and so move an individual beyond imagination into action. And few worthy ideals, if any, are capable of individual realization even by the most impressive politicians. The religious, including religious experience, formerly associated with solitary walks across "a bare commons" is now associated by Dewey with participation in an active relationship devoted to the growth of the ideal within the world. Religious experience is preserved and tapped, just transferred from individual mystical union with the gods of religions, or nature, to association with "normal manifestations that take place at certain rhythmic points in the movement of existence" (Dewey 1934: 31). Dewey opposes

exclusive preoccupation, either by supernaturalism or atheism, with “man in isolation” (Dewey 1934: 57). And Deweyian ideals function independently of the metaphysical existence of these ideals. In other words, an existing god is not needed to give ideals effective force in life and, if anything, belief in the existence of a god to guarantee the eventual existence of ideals would foster a false, and perhaps self-defeating, optimism.

One interesting aspect of Dewey’s view of ideals may go unnoticed, unity. Personal ideals should produce a unity of character as well as a unity of action. Such unity seems clearly at odds with how most of us live our lives, and desire to live them. My interests in the Rolling Stones, model railways, Ferdinand Leger, Knut Hamsun, and baseball have authority over my volitions and emotions but hardly give unity to my life, personality, or values. In instances where conflict of values arise – stay in Gdynia to observe the visit of the pope or drive to Imst to see the Stones – which option was conducive to unity did not even occur to me. And that sort of looseness of fit is certainly common to many people we value in our lives. Dewey’s approach to ideals leans toward lives devoted to social reconstruction, long term cooperative loyalties, the priority of moral ideals, and a search for some sort of unity in the ideals that organize our lives. Dewey allows for a plurality of ideals but not ideals which do not reinforce each other.

The ideals of historical religions, or the mores of cultures if the reader prefers, are not often given in a purely moral framework or function in a way to foster each other. Religions generally involve positivity, the valuing of what lacks an intrinsic moral dimension until elevated by a divine command. And the moral imperatives of a religion do not seek for unity in ideals so much as some sort of full coverage of the activities of life with an emotive tinge. But this sort of religion is not one Dewey can be friendly to because it points toward a divine command theory, there can be no divine command theory without a commander, and a commander undermines the functioning of ideals in life.

I am not concerned in this paper with the nature of an individual so much as to contrast the relative importance of private realization of experiences of value in the constitution of an exemplary life. I do not mean to suggest that Dewey, and his associates, place no value on such private experiences but rather that there is an important difference in emphasis between Dewey and the earlier American philosophers (ordinarily seen as forerunners of pragmatism such as Thoreau and Emerson) and, of course, in William James. And to make this point I will soon turn to turn to James’ discussion of saints. James talked of saints, and Dewey can best be contrasted through his reconstruction of faith and objection to religious individualism.

Embracing the Dark Side

Susan Wolf’s definition of a moral saint and her delineation of two types of saints in common sense will be helpful here. A moral saint is as morally good as possible. Loving saints and rational saints differ in primary motivation. The Loving Saint is motivated by happiness in acting for others while the Rational Saint acts according to duty based in intellectual principle. Wolf objects to pursuing moral perfection as a “model of personal well being”. One reason is that moral virtues crowd out the non moral ones and fosters a barren life. Saints are not known for wit. And they may be found working in soup kitchens but are rarely gourmet cooks. Besides crowding out non moral ideals, stifling the development of

non moral talents, moral saints also do not inspire us. And when they do inspire us it tends to be for some non moral idiosyncratic characteristic (Wolf 1982: 419-423).

There are deeper reasons for devaluing moral saints. Wolf points out that the lack of a well rounded personality is an objection that could be brought against anyone devoted to an ideal, moral or non moral. The problem with the moral saint is that morality is seen as a higher order ideal, higher than say devotion to soccer or art. This prioritizing of the moral leads many to suspect that loving saints lack appreciation for things with non moral value and that rational saints have the appreciation but are afraid to indulge. And, of course, lack of appreciation for the pleasures in life and fear of such pleasures make the saintly life less than ideal. Wolf remarks, "The way in which morality, unlike other possible goals, is apt to dominate is particularly disturbing, for it seems to require either the lack or the denial of the existence of an identifiable, personal self" (Wolf 1982: 424).

In addition to this lack of a self, the moral saint is suspect because of conflict with our judgment of the value of others. Most admirable people are not saints. Of course, the temptation is to say that they are admirable for non moral reasons. But our judgment says they are admirable for pursuing a life in which moral value is not dominant. Saints also are suspect for having one thought too many too often. What they value and act on is informed by a moral ideal and not primarily by appreciation of natural value. And finally, the defender of moral saints who tries to limit moral obligation to make room in life for other non moral ideals will find herself devising artificial limits to moral obligation given the moral saint's prioritizing of moral value (Wolf 1982: 433-434)

Individuals who are as morally good as possible do not provoke admiration and imitation because there are non moral virtues which are overwhelmed by moral ideals. The dominance of the moral produces individuals whose lives are perceived as not worth living by others, and even if we admire such individuals we do not wish to reproduce them. For instance, I would not want to raise a child who approximated to the life of Mother Theresa because I would never see the child. Moral saints lack a breadth of character and so strike us as boring. And they make weak companions because they either do not value the same things as we do or value the same things for different, more moral, reasons. And, if these saints turn philosophical, they become unnatural companions because their values move them outside the unreflected life to the reflected one. The parent who finds himself playing sports with a child in order to contribute to the greatest good or fulfill a duty is an unfortunate person.

So, whatever an exemplary life is, it will not be able to accommodate the goal of being as moral as possible. This, I think, was Wolf's main point and can be accommodated by James' ethics, but not Dewey's. The exemplary individual may lack unity with society, unity among moral ideals, unity among moral and non moral ideals, and unity of personality. In short, such an individual is prone to whims. Emerson claimed, "[...] the only right is what is after my own constitution; the only wrong what is against it". But Emerson quickly adds the problematic side constraint – "Your goodness must have some edge to it, else it is none. The doctrine of hatred must be preached, as the counteraction of the doctrine of love, when that pules and whines". When reminded of his moral duty to "put all poor men in good situations" Emerson responds, "Are they my poor?" He rejects being virtuous as a moral penance. "I do not wish to expiate, but to live. My life is for itself and not for a spectacle". And inconsistency is celebrated with the admonition to speak your mind today and not be ashamed to openly contradict yourself the next day (Emerson 1841: 179-182).

Emerson's model of an exemplary life rejects the dominance of moral values. It locates the source of value, and its hierarchy, in the individual. Of course, we are tempted to see the individual as a social construct but Emerson was from a different tradition, one embracing particular individual revelation and his sense of beauty is a half secularized version of Edwards' predetermined sense of the heart. Even if the individual is largely constructed by social conditions, fate in Emerson's terms, the felt quality of values intensifies in non conforming to inherited values. At the least, Emerson rejects the notion that what a person spontaneously values needs to be justified by or modified to fit social norms.

His assertion that goodness must have an edge is problematic because it points in so many directions. Perhaps it merely means that values must not be motivated by conformity; I would rather think that he knew human personality is a complex of inconsistent motivations which contribute in alteration and tension to producing exemplary individuals. The other quotes point away from the dominance of moral values making the self a home for a variety of values. And the approval of inconsistency further recognizes that unity of personality is overrated. I titled this section "embracing the darkside" because I take Emerson's recognition of the edge as acknowledgement that it is neither possible nor desirable to remove the wealth of values in human personality. Of course it reminds us of his remark that he hoped his natural values did not come from the devil. But it is more important to see him as valuing individuals for their preservation of the wild. With Emerson in mind, his rejection of moral, psychological, and value unity, it is time to turn to James.

James on Ethics and God

James' characterization of the psychology of saints is that spiritual emotions are the habitual centre of personal energy (James 1982: 271). Individuality is rooted in the "differing susceptibilities of emotional excitement, and in the different impulses and inhibitions these bring in their train" (James 1982: 261). James holds that when emotions reach a level of excitability they overcome all obstacles. His saint, like the loving saint, is all about motivation. But the motivation is not so much toward happiness as to "break something". The strenuous life, and the life of the saint is a strenuous one, is characterized by earnestness – living with energy even if it brings pain. The saint lives from this religious centre which makes her immune to other values in pursuit of the ideal life (James 1982: 267).

But what is the ideal life, the life of a saint? One aspect James emphasizes is that the religious life is private, it involves feelings experienced by concrete individuals. The experiences and conduct of saints are the same across religions, which means that the theological beliefs of respective religions are irrelevant to saints. By experiences James means the occasions of religious experience and also the heightened sense of purpose and beauty felt by religious individuals. By conduct he means the exercise of virtues such as poverty and asceticism. Both experience and conduct are discussed at length in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*. And some of his descriptions of historical saints are enjoyable, for instance, pointing out that Saint Theresa was more energetic in expression than in feeling (James 1982: 347).

James and Dewey share a distinction of religion from the religious, but James preserves the ties of religious experience to individual salvation. The worth of a so called saint's life appears retrospectively to depend on currently accepted views of god (James 1982: 354). "Today, rightly or wrongly, helpfulness in general human affairs is [...] deemed an essen-

tial element of worth in character; and to be of some public or private use is also reckoned as a species of divine service” (James 1982: 354). But the essence of saintliness is in passions which are channeled in different direction in different social contexts. “Taking refuge in monasteries was as much an idol of the tribe in the middle ages, as bearing a hand in the world’s work is today” (James 1982: 371).

James includes three beliefs among the essential aspects of a religious life: that a spiritual universe exists, that humans have a natural purpose to find unity with that spiritual universe, and that prayer is efficacious. Those who live religiously experience a “zest” of life, a sense of security, a life at peace with others, and an enchantment with ordinary life (James 1982: 505). “We and God have business with each other; and in opening ourselves to his influence our deepest destiny is fulfilled” (James 1982: 516-517). Given his reflections on the shortcomings of historical saints like Theresa and his acceptance that what counts as saintly behavior is largely a matter relative to a particular social context we are justified in wondering just what would count as a saintly life. And James answers in terms of felt feelings primarily.

This is where the loving saint and rational saint contrast can help us. Each of these is an intellectual formulation of different aspects of the common sense notion of someone who is as moral as possible. As intellectual formulations they look, from the common sense point of view, to suffer from one too many beliefs. These saints are moral for a reason. And once the reason is formulated then they are left with no non arbitrary means of limiting the dominance of moral ideals over other ideals. The spontaneous saint may lack moral merit from the intellectual point of view, and be boring from the common sense point of view, but at least that person lives as one person among others.

In “Is Life Worth Living?” published in 1895 James selected Walt Whitman as his example of temperamental optimism and then remarks, “Some men seem launched upon the world even from their birth with souls as incapable of happiness as Walt Whitman’s was of gloom [...]” (James 2000: 219-221). If Whitman’s optimism could be seen as religious then he could serve as an example of the common sense saint. And in some historical periods he could be seen that way though not in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century where saints must be of some use to society. But James was concerned more with the pessimist in this essay and presents pessimism as a religious disease which “consists in nothing but a religious demand to which there comes no normal religious reply. [...] The nightmare view of life has plenty of organic sources; but its great reflective source has at all times been the contradiction between the phenomena of nature and the craving of the heart to believe that behind nature there is a spirit whose expression nature is” (James 2000: 225). James recognizes various naturalistic responses that make life worth living including Whitman’s temperamental optimism, idle curiosity, the satisfaction gained from imposing a degree of justice on a non moral world. But his preferred solution is the exercise of the will to believe in a spiritual realm which, he thinks, generates a higher optimism than the temperamental one of people like Whitman. So, then which of the more reflective saints, the utilitarian leaning loving or the Kantian leaning rational, does James select as the exemplar of a superior individual living a worthwhile life?

The answer, based on the 1891 “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” has to be neither. There James argues that there can be no ethical theory in advance of the last person expressing a value preference. What James offers is a combination of an intuitionist view with a divine command theory. His combination accommodates his view that there can be a

naturalistic ethics and also allows him to present a divine command theory based in expression of value preferences. His view is that in the absence of sentient creatures there is no value in one natural state of the world over another. But the existence of one sentient creature creates preferences and so value. A world with one sentient creature is a moral solitude in which values are generated in a godlike fashion. The only value conflicts such a person would be faced with perhaps would be generated by a desire for some sort of consistency in values.

The position is intuitionist in two sense: values are generated via preferences arising naturally in the individual and some of these preferences are not generated by natural states such as utility. James' example is the sense of honor (James 2000: 244). A world with many sentient creatures will generate value conflicts and James offers criticisms of a variety of ethical theories that have been advanced as candidates for the one ethics. It is not essential to my paper to rehearse these criticisms here. It is enough to point out that for James wherever there is a claim there is an obligation. "[...] *we see not that without a claim actually made by some concrete person there can be no obligation, but that there is some obligation wherever there is a claim*" (James 2000: 249, italics in original). Given James' love of dogs we should take claim in an extended sense not requiring language. He remarks, "Take any demand, however slight, which any creature, however weak, may make. Ought it not, for its own sole sake, to be satisfied? If not, prove why not" (James 2000: 249). James is not shifting the burden of proof here because he thinks he has already pointed out the shortcomings of rival ethical theories and left opponents only with an option to express a preference.

One approach James takes to resolving conflicts of preferences is to say that we ought to satisfy as many demands as possible. This allows for an ethics without god, although it is second best to his religious view. It also is unstable because James thinks of ethics as "life answering to life" and if there is no response to a demand there is no principled argument available to generate a response. Admittedly James urges tolerance toward values we do not share; but "hands off" is not the same thing as working actively to satisfy such demands. This lack of emotive pull in naturalistic ethics, what James called the religion of humanity, comes to the forefront out when he considers the claims of remote posterity. "We do not love these men of the future keenly enough; and we love them perhaps the less the more we hear of their evolutionized perfection" (James 2000: 261).

It is no surprise that given the relativity James attaches to the notion of a saint that he also thinks there is nothing final in any "actually given hierarchy of ideals" (James 2000: 257). And so James' ethics looks like a lake in which many demands swim around with no priority attached to their satisfaction except that given by those sentient creatures on shore. And there is no priority given to a cooperative satisfaction or cooperative effort. What he does remark is that if some preferences were given divine backing those would not be more worthy but rather strike the responsive person as more worthy. James' argument for the religious approach to life is ultimately psychological: [...] in a merely human world without a God, the appeal to our moral energy falls short of its maximal stimulating power. [...] When, however, we believe that a God is there, and that he is one of the claimants, the infinite perspective opens out. [...] The more imperative ideals now begin to speak with an altogether new objectivity and significance [...]" (James 2000: 261).

James' assertion of the superiority of a divine command approach will strike advocates of "the religion of humanity" as reactionary at best. And perhaps he is empirically incorrect

about the effect of religious belief on the psychological life of believers. But, philosophically, I think we can now see clearly the chasm separating the Dewey strand in the pragmatic tradition from that culminating in James. James places the source and selection of values more firmly in the self than in community. And the existence of a god that conveys a degree of optimism about efforts to conform the world to a person's values make a major difference to James. And when values are selected for priority in life they are selected on the basis of a perceived ordering from another individual. And the values selected must convey a personal religious experience to each person. And, finally, given the relativity of values to each person or sentient creature, the person who is the source of the value hierarchy in James' ethics must accommodate a wealth of conflicting values. This person must be some sort of divine Walt Whitman quoted at length in the 1899 "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings" who enjoys the spectacle of life riding the trolley on Broadway from 23rd Street to Bowling Green or loafing on the corner (James 2000: 278).

So Who Would Be a Jamesian Saint?

James tells us that differences in those aspects of human life connected to social class do not matter in God's eye. "Thus are men's lives leveled up as well as leveled down, -- leveled up in their common inner meaning, leveled down in their outer gloriousness and show" (James 2000: 292). The significant life is more local, more about paying the mortgage than ending global warming for James. What it requires is that each person organize a portion of life around an ideal conceived intellectually. That ideal needs to be novel for that person and needs to be pursued strenuously (James 2000: 299-300). And, for James, the least important of the three aspects of the significant life is intellectual formulation of the ideal. It seems like, for James, production of a life of religious feeling and conduct that involves strenuous effort is more important than the ideal selected.

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