



Sarin Marchetti*

Trygve Throntveit, (2014), *William James and the Quest for an Ethical Republic*, London & New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 232 p.

Because of his unwavering commitment to fight disciplinary and mental closure, William James is an author who has invited scholars from the most disparate fields to review aspects of his eclectic and far-reaching body of work. Not only philosophers, psychologists, historians of medicine and religion, but also artists, political theorists, and social activists have productively engaged James's rich and variegated writings with the goal to reconstructing seminal portions of our intellectual, cultural, and political history as well to foreseeing viable options for the intellectual, cultural, and political challenges awaiting us in the future presents. What makes Throntveit's volume a valuable addition to such enlightened literature is its successful attempt to engage James at the under-explored "boundaries" (to use Francesca Bordogna's apt and catchy expression) of ethics and politics, provocatively dislodging a number of assumptions – mostly advocated by those readers unimpressed with, or unsympathetic to, James's effort to draw novel infra-disciplinary relations and envisage novel intra-disciplinary assumptions – governing our current compartmental thinking in such areas. Rather than trying to force James in any of the (often quite narrow) contemporary philosophical categories purportedly justifying the jungle of curricula, labels, and headings featuring our academic formation, scholarly work, and job market, driven at and voted to the hyper-specialization and hyper-comparimentalization of thinking and research, the author conveys us the full breadth and scale of James's ecumenical yet extremely precise ethical-political investigations.

Throntveit's exercise in interpretative dynamicity and theoretical pluralism gets manifested in the very title of his work: the book in fact investigates James's *quest* (rather than a treatise or theory) for an *ethical republic* (a concept whose contours are promiscuously shared by morality and politics). Rather than as a treatise or theory on some confined and discrete subject matter whose confines are well-known and agreed upon in advance by the inquirers, James's moral and political thought is depicted and assessed as a pursuit of, and journey in, a field with ambiguous contours and hidden potentialities to be playfully explored. This imaginative hermeneutical angle is reflected in the very organization and style of the book, which looks less as a closed and definitive assessment of James's views and more as an open-ended exploration of some overlooked motives featuring his writings. Enriched by a wealth of bibliographical documentation – the author has a solid grip on James's unpublished materials and manuscripts, which he puts in productive dialogue with most well known pages of his work –, the book will be both a superb introduction to James's practical philosophy for newcomers as well as an indispensable guide for more seasoned readers of his oeuvre. Throntveit's work joins a fortunate trend of studies currently engaged in a re-assessment and re-evaluation of James's ethical investigations against the background of his wider philosophical views and intellectual persona – an ensemble comprising

* Univerity College Dublin [sarin.marchetti@ucd.ie].

not only intellectual historians (alongside Throntveit, one might list Paul Croce and James Campbell) and philosophers (e.g. Sergio Franzese and Colin Koopman), but also political scientists (Kennan Ferguson and Alex Livingston) and scholars of religion (Michael Slater and Jeremy Carrette).

The volume comprises a short introduction plus five chapters on, respectively, James's elaboration of his pragmatism against the background of his complex family ties and shifting cultural milieu (Chapter 1); his earlier and later ethical-religious incursions, adjustments, and revisions (Chapter 2); his conception of the "ethical republic" as articulated in his most canonical ethical writings from the 1890's (Chapter 3); James's public personae and presence in the social and political debates of his time, an aspect often downplayed in the secondary literature (Chapter 4); and his intellectual legacy and fortune in the twentieth and now twentieth-first century, with a particular emphasis on the American scene (Chapter 5). What is most appreciable about the volume is the balance between theoretical and historical details: nearly every insight, twist or turn in James's intellectual work is backed up with an informed reconstruction of the wider personal relations and conditions informing it. This is done in the belief that a thinker such as James simply cannot be understood without not so much reading his philosophy *alongside with* his biography, but rather without reading his philosophy *within* his biography (and the other way around). Throntveit is particularly effective in rendering a picture of James as a moral thinker deeply engaged in moral questions and whose life was literary articulated by recurring moral concerns: his moral thought was for the sake of his ethical mind and socio-political will, and his ordinary practical dilemmas delved deep into his intellectual investigations.

In a sea of interesting insights and elegant interpretative choices, I would like to pick out and highlight three particularly original and useful items: the characterization of James's close relationship with his father, the account of James's understanding of the relationship between ethics and religion, and the presentation of James's voice as an engaged citizen of the pragmatist ethical republic. For what regards the first aspect, in chapter one Throntveit does a great job in flashing out James's unbroken wrestling with his father's religious-moral outlook, which would eventually shape his own views on why and how the spiritual and the ethical life should communicate or rather part ways. If there are to date a number of fine works investigating James's intricate bond with his old man, Throntveit's stands out not because it gives us new details about such conflicting yet passionate bond but rather because it rearranges what we know already in a congenial way, showing for example how many of James's reservations about the uncritical identification of ethics and religion can be brought back to the resistance of his father's subjugation of the moral life to the holy one.

This feature is then showed at work, in chapter two, in the very helpful discussion of James's prolonged interest in religion in the context of his ethical investigations, which represents the second aspect of the book I would de like to stress. As against those interpreters who read James as variously claiming that the moral life simply could not be led independently from the religious one, that moral beliefs should wait on religious faith, or that meaningful willful action should be backed up by

metaphysical-religious considerations, the author reads James (both in “The Will to Believe” and in *Varieties of Religious Experience*) as an author surely interested in making room for religious appeals and in showing the many short-circuits between religious considerations and ethical ones, yet resisting to ground (or, given the context, to incardinate) morality on some religious anthropology or metaphysics we ought to respect. I find this move as necessary as liberating, since James is still too-often recounted as an author driven by some sacred zeal and on a mission to rescue over-beliefs as features and constituents of the world rather than of our possible pragmatic stance toward it, despite the textual evidence of the contrary – that is the several instances in which James claimed to be blessed by no religious faith and that his respect for religion and defense of the right to believe is motivated by religion being one of the things we *do with* ourselves, focusing in fact on religious *practices* (which can grow or shrink in meaning accordingly to their place in our lives) rather than on religious doctrines – which are true or false independently from our ways of taking them in. This is obviously a nagging quarrel, and despite being in disagreement with some of Throntveit’s views on the matter (for example his emphasis on James’s alleged “moralism” or on religion’s chief “auxiliary” role as being that of fostering the moral life), I think that his voice outside the choir is most valuable.

Finally, for what regards the third aspect of the volume I’d like to emphasize, the author does a fine job in offering us a lesser known facet of James: namely, his first-hand socio-political involvement in the problems and discussions of his time. Sadly enough, even those works addressing James’s socio-political aspect of his moral thought scarcely mention this important side of his pragmatism, and the author displays in full his acquaintance with the intellectual history of America at the turn of the century, to which James contributed in no small portion. What is particularly insightful is the relation drawn between James’s quasi-methodological refutation of “bigness” and “greatness” (as against the “molecular moral forces that work from individual to individual”) with the identification of James’s most positive “pragmatist polity” to be found in some of his writings and addresses for the wider public. One of the open questions of James’s scholarship is in fact how to square his several admonitions to look for particular solutions in pragmatism’s open-ended analyses and diagnoses (suggesting rather to draw them ourselves in our practical life) and his several answers to the most pressing socio-political quests of his time. Throntveit suggests to read such answers as the possible outcomes of those analyses and diagnoses with which we readers have to experiment ourselves, thus testing their validity in deed. If thus for James the chief socio-political challenge is “the problem of individual or minority interests at odds with more powerful or popular agendas” (110-1) – admittedly a problem still with us despite the radically different shape it took in a globalized environment alien from James’s –, than in reading the ingredients of James’s democratic republicanism (consisting in the nurturing of the ethical virtues of experimentalism, historical wisdom and empathy as “practiced in the context of power relations and the institutions that regulate them” (111)), we are called up to test the viability and fittingness of this project in the world we live in. In this context, the author suggests, taking a look at the historical feasibility and success of such option

tells us a lot about its philosophical strength: to give the reader but one example, James's campaign to widen one's (nation's) ethical-political imagination is related by Throntveit to his strenuous resistance to the expansionist policy of the Cleveland, McKinley, and Roosevelt administrations, showing the difference in their respective understanding of what would count as an ethically permissible expansion of the moral energy at the heart of our individual and collective life.

Having surveyed some of its themes and highlights, in the remaining of this review I shall briefly voice a few concerns I have with selected reconstructive nuances of Throntveit's book. Despite my disagreement with the author is at times not so small, still I indulge in no rhetoric in saying that the book is a must-read for James's scholars as well as for those intrigued by his revolutionary philosophical method and agenda. I myself have learned a great deal about James and ethics despite the reservations I will voice in the below in the hope of opening up a new, productive front in James's scholarship and in ethical thinking more widely.

A first doubt I have with Throntveit's reconstruction hinges on his particular characterization of the ethical quality of pragmatism. Despite applauding his reproach of those "narrow" accounts of James's moral thought down focusing exclusively on his "explicitly ethical writings," Throntveit's "holistic analysis" seems to me still affected by the very attempt of narrowing the scope of James's moral thought down to the ideas expressed in such writings, only backing them up with a larger body of works, adding in this way more details to what is however agreed to be James's core ethical concern. That is, it seems to me that Throntveit's operation to widen the list of morally relevant texts beyond the customary three or four usually taken into considerations by James's friends and foes alike – surely a laudable operation in itself, both historiographically and philosophically – is however not moved by an attempt to radically revise the picture we have of his moral thought (and thus of what moral philosophy as a whole is about), but rather by the goal to show how such picture can be extended to ever further areas of concern – social and political thought being the main targets. The author disagrees in fact with the orthodox reading of James as an individualist utilitarian thinker because such reading is blind to a whole different set of considerations (the "necessary components of a nonutilitarian pragmatist ethics") present in other less trodden writings, showing his openness to endorse all sorts of moral principles, utilitarian or not, as long as they fit the needs of the problematic situation we find ourselves in. For Throntveit, not differently from what the vast majority of James's scholars and readers have claimed in various ways, James's chief moral problem would have been that of assessing conflicting preferences both in our individual and in our collective life, and his answer, articulated (hence appreciable) not only in his canonical ethical texts but rather in the wider archipelago of his psychological, epistemological, metaphysical, and religious writings, would be that of endowing us with rich descriptions of the variety of considerations at stake in such decisions. Now this invitation is no doubt part of what James is doing in these texts, and yet if we focus on this aspect only we would be blind to several other related movements (hence partial to the revolutionary character of James's work) such as his stress that moral problems often concern impediments in our visions and attitude

rather than mere shortage of resoluteness in action. And if this is the case, then his overall conception of what ethics is *about* will inevitably shift, moving away from a complex casuistry involving moral unity and consistency, where the ethical challenge comes from the coherence of one's actions with one's ideals, and resembling more an ethics of self-fashioning and transformation, where the ethical challenge is that of imagining ever new possibilities for self-expression.

This shift has consequences for the way in which we read James's metaphilosophical and moral investigations alike as instruments for ameliorating the moral life. Once agreed that James is not offering us philosophical solutions to ordinary problems, hence philosophical foundations of our ordinary practices – and here I once again happily agree with the author's heterodox reading resisting those interpretation of James the moral philosopher as some sort of moral theorist dispensing ethical prescriptions for our conducts – I part ways with Throntveit in thinking that this different picture of what moral thought is and does should however still be concerned (or, I would say, obsessed) with the actions and policies of individuals in their singularity or collectivity, claiming rather how this shift opens up the way to a more radical understanding of ethics revolving around the key notions of *self-conduct* – where both the reflexive prefix and its object do mark a tremendous difference from the mere reference to actions and their consequences, disclosing at the very same time a far more interesting understanding of pragmatism as a philosophy not so much concerned with the consequence of thought on action (rightly liable to the accusation of instrumentalism) but rather with the consequences of thought on the way we conduct ourselves midst problematic practical situations. To put it in a nutshell, it is only when we see James as concerned with the moral significance of the conduct *of* the self *on* the self, that is with the manifold considerations which enter in the representation and transformation of what we do with ourselves, rather than simply with the consequences of our thoughts in action, that we are able to appreciate James's dissatisfaction with the narrow picture of ethics as the justification and implementation of principles and rules of behavior voiced all over his work – both in his “explicit” and most known moral writings such as “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” and “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings”, and in his “implicit” and less known ones such as his earlier writings on psychology and his later ones on truth.

This is visible in the way in which Throntveit speaks about the three Jamesian virtues of the ethical republic, that is the virtues that an ethical citizen should nurture in order to successfully meet the challenges of the pluralist society s/he (inevitably) lives in. The experimental “willingness to reflect critically on our values and change them,” the historical wisdom given by the “awareness of the practical needs and contingent factors that had driven the ethical experiments in the past,” and the emphatic “recognition that others' value were facts of experience against which our own must be tested” are for Throntveit's James to be implemented for the sake of ameliorating the moral life, relieving it from practical conflict and misunderstanding. The focus is once again on the consequences of one's actions with respects to the collectivity, and action itself is conceived as some sort of neutral, effortless device of thought (of ideals and values, in the specific case). Contrary to this interpretation, and indeed in line with

the way in which the author cashes out the details of the three ethical virtues (102-8), I suggest to read James as primarily interested on how we shape and transform ourselves in conduct, that is how the conducts expressive of our mobile sense of selfhood can touch, or fail to, the lives and conducts of others. Seen this way, one's actions are revealing of who we are and how we might be otherwise, and the very capacity to acknowledge and register what is needed from us in a certain situation (e.g. the suffering of my fellow beings or the tragic sense of injustice attached to some socio-political configurations) is a function of our readiness to imagining us conducting ourselves otherwise.

What I find missing in Throntveit's James is then the crucial emphasis on the effects of critical, reflective thinking on the self's ongoing challenging of her own subjectivity in conduct (a subjectivity always shaped by the alterity of the others and of one's further selves alike), which is simply overlooked if we present the self's and other's values and desires as given to us and simply in need to be registered and added to the casuistry calculus. According to my radical James, we *do experience them* in the sense that we *make them in* experience while remaking ourselves rather than finding them in experience hence adjusting our actions accordingly –for James (and Dewey, in this respect) experience is always *Erfahrung* rather than merely *Erlebnis*. If this is so, then the empathetic historical experimentalist attitude rightly emphasized by Throntveit is thus a practical goal moved by the appreciation of the responsibility attached to one's way of conducting oneself rather than a demand normatively attached to the reality of things independently from our recognition of their demandingness and willingness to submit to it. The author works with a somewhat mechanistic and instrumentalist conception of human agency, whose goal is to fulfill one's subjective desires and square them with the intersubjective/objectivite demands posed by others (see. e.g. 2, 86), rather than with a perfectionist one, aimed at attaining a better relationships with oneself and others, hence attaining better versions of ourselves with others, through the monitoring of the ways in which we conduct ourselves in community and encounter the other in conduct.

James wrote at a time in which academic writing was ideally thought of as a constitutive part of the intellectual upbringing of learned citizens rather than as a literary genre appealing for a few elected spirits versed in abstract speculation only, and strived to present pragmatism as a philosophical sensibility best equipped to talk to the ordinary life (not to a rarified version of it) and address real problems (rather than "paper" ones) without renouncing argumentative rigor and inventiveness – reprising in this way the best teachings and accomplishments of the venerable understanding and practice of philosophy as a reflective way of life. In the case of his philosophical investigations of ethics and the moral life, James's work looks less like a technical treatise or theory dispensing more-or-less viable ready-made solutions and more like an invitation to perform ourselves the hard task of self-questioning accompanied by a set of reflective tools hopefully helping us performing such seminal task. We should rediscover this ideal and lesson, and try to implement it in our current philosophical and ethical debates. Throntveit's book helps us immensely to do exactly that, giving us a lead to fruitfully unpack James's work and put it back together for the sake of

the contemporary world we live in and life of the mind we lead as a response to its challenges. Our James differ in the measure in which he believes that such operation can be pursued by leaving the action-principles centered model of modern and contemporary moral philosophy intact while I suggest that we go back to a conception of philosophy and of ethics as the art of self-fashioning animating selected moments of antiquity, and reprised by James and others (both within and outside pragmatism) at the fringes of modernity.