For William James (1842–1910), all philosophical problems were ultimately ethical. In *Pragmatism* (1907), James invoked the logical theory of his friend Charles Peirce to argue that the “meaning” of any belief consisted solely in “what conduct it is fitted to produce.” There was “no difference in abstract truth,” he elaborated, “that doesn’t express itself in a difference in concrete fact and in conduct consequent upon that fact, imposed on somebody, somehow, somewhere, and somewhen.” Indeed, James concluded that truth was not just reflected in the consequences of conduct but shaped by them: “Truth is *made*,” he wrote, “just as health, wealth, and strength are made, in the course of experience.” This major thesis of *Pragmatism* distilled a career spent describing an unfinished world, in which human thoughts and actions made differences for which thinkers and actors were responsible. As early as 1878, James insisted that beliefs imply action to advance goals, creating effects valued in light of those goals. The mind, he reiterated in his 1890 masterpiece *The Principles of Psychology*, is a “fighter for ends,” and thinking, a “moral act.” Later, in “The Will to Believe” (1896), James argued that when evidence is inconclusive, belief might create conditions in which hypotheses could be verified and potential goods realized—or lost. That frank (if often overlooked) assessment of the moral risks as well as rewards of intellectual life echoed James’s most explicitly ethical work, “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life”

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(1891), where he asserted that when choosing what to believe, it is “simply our total character and personal genius that are on trial; and if we invoke any so-called philosophy, our choice and use of that also are but revelations of our personal aptitude or incapacity for moral life.”

In short, James, as John Dewey elegized in 1910, “was everywhere and always the moralist.” Yet for much of the twentieth century critics deemed James’s philosophy ethically vacuous, a warrant for moral solipsism. In 1909, Bertrand Russell criticized James for privileging belief over suspension of judgment, and thus encouraging people to live in private moral universes rather than seek objective grounding for common values. Today, some intellectual historians continue to echo Russell and likeminded contemporaries, judging ethical pragmatism tantamount to moral relativism, even moral apathy. Others, acknowledging James’s impassioned pronouncements on lynching, industrial conflict, imperialist expansion, and other public moral issues, have interpreted them as expressing a particularly cosmopolitan but otherwise unremarkable American liberalism, rather than a coherent moral philosophy.

These criticisms are unfounded, but understandable. They reflect a gen-

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2 James, “Remarks on Spencer’s Definition of Mind as Correspondence” (1878), Collected Essays and Reviews, ed. Ralph Barton Perry (New York: Longmans, Green, 1920); idem, The Principles of Psychology, 2 vols. (New York: H. Holt, 1890), 1: 141, 2: 566; idem, “The Will to Believe” (1896), The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy (New York: Longmans, Green, 1897); idem, “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” (1891), ibid., 214.


eral antipathy toward James’s broader conceptions of knowledge, truth, and experience, and frustration with his unorthodox mode of philosophizing. In *Pragmatism*, James followed Peirce in arguing that beliefs are not copies of reality, but “rules for action” resembling the probabilistic predictions guiding scientific inquiry. James, however, extended Peirce’s argument, claiming there is no static reality that beliefs can once-for-all describe. A self-proclaimed “radical empiricist,” James held that the universe is pluralistic, and the only reality accessible to human minds is constantly changing—not least through the ceaseless flux of human consciousness, a fact as natural and consequential as any other.6 This blurring of subject-object distinctions scandalized contemporaries. It also underpinned James’s equally scandalous claim that ideas not only demonstrate their meaning through conduct, but derive both meaning and value from their origins and verification in human activity. To ask what is true in such a world was to ask which ideas, moral or otherwise, allow people to navigate it successfully—which “carry us prosperously from any one part of our experience to any other part”—and which do not.7 Because of these commitments James never made hard distinctions between ethics and other branches of inquiry, or defined his ethics as a separable component of his philosophy easily analyzed on its own terms. Meanwhile, his further refusal to dislodge theory from practice has frustrated those conceiving ethics as a logically and temporally consistent program of conduct. Instead, James insisted that ethical principles emerge organically from individuals’ collective experience in deciding moral questions, prompting James scholar Gerald Meyers to deny that a valid definition of “ethics” could embrace such an unsystematic approach.8


Over the past three decades, amidst what Richard Bernstein lately termed philosophy’s “pragmatic turn,” numerous scholars have followed Dewey in challenging such views. Bernstein, Bernard Brennan, John Roth, James Kloppenberg, Hilary Putnam, Ruth Anna Putnam, Charlene Haddock Siegfried, Colin Koopman, and others have demonstrated the logic behind James’s rejection of fixed principles of conduct by examining his ethics and his broader accounts of knowledge, truth, and experience holistically, as James conceived them. These efforts have emphasized what Bernstein calls the “ethical consequences” of James’s pragmatism: the justification of hoping for a better world, for instance, which Koopman attributes to James’s radical historicism; or the recognition of sympathy, nurture, and other traditionally feminine values as worthy of the noblest men, for which feminist pragmatists like Siegfried credit James despite his Victorian penchant for equating “manliness” with “virtue.” Yet there is still no sufficiently complete rendering of James’s moral philosophy, and several of its major aspects remain unsatisfactorily explained. Roth, for instance, thought James’s basic understanding of the good as satisfaction of “demand” threatened to reduce his ethics to the arithmetic utilitarianism he explicitly rejected. In contrast, Kloppenberg and others have identified a deontological, Kantian strain in James’s ethics, despite its consequentialist thrust (and James’s denials). Finally, numerous scholars have concluded that faith in a higher authority was (or must be) the lynchpin of James’s ethics, despite his slippery views on religion. Indeed, since David Hollinger and Henry Levinson redirected attention to James’s abiding interest in reli-

gion in the early 1980s, distinctions between his irrefutable openness to
God’s existence and his indemonstrable belief in it have become scarce.13

But it was precisely because James abjured closed moral systems,
insisted on qualitative distinctions among demands, considered particular
ideas and acts the subject of moral judgments, and entertained but did not
assume the existence of a supernatural authority, that he succeeded in articu-
lat ing a pragmatist ethics—one reflecting the genetic conception of truth
and radical-empiricist view of experience he thought modern science, com-
mon sense, and the variety of human ideals dictated. This method for integ-
rating belief and action in a dynamic environment was an ethics in the
most fundamental sense: a practical guide to conduct proceeding from an
apprehension of the good.

James never attached any label to that guide, but he captured its
nature in an arresting metaphor that expresses his ethics in terms of its
purpose: an “ethical republic.” This phrase from “The Moral Philosopher
and the Moral Life” aptly characterizes both the subject and predicate of
ethical inquiry as James understood it. His ethics was not a fixed program,
but an ideal of private and public interests converging—an ideal derived
from experience, yet suggesting at every moment the terms and conse-
quences of its own realization. In James’s view, it was an empirical fact
that all individuals have unique ideals, requiring cooperation or acquies-
cence from other individuals for realization. Consequently all individuals
impose obligations upon others—obligations that, hypothetically, are all
valid, since every ego making claims recognizes that other egos experience
their own claims as similarly imperative. The practical validity of ideals,
however, could only be established in the course of moral life, as their
consequences were judged by the community. In short, while an ethical
republic was a dependable fact of experience, the ethical republic of each

13 Bernard P. Brennan, The Ethics of William James (New York: Bookman Associates,
1961), esp. chapter III; Kloppenberg, Uncertain Victory, 127–28; Hilary Putnam (with
Face, ed. James Conant (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 217–31,
esp. 218; George Cotkin, William James, Public Philosopher (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins
University Press, 1990), esp. chapter 5; David A. Hollinger, “William James and the
inson, The Religious Investigations of William James (Chapel Hill: University of North
Carolina Press, 1981). A provocative argument that James was “a deeply religious per-
son” is Ruth Anna Putnam, “Varieties of Experience and Pluralities of Perspective,” in
William James and The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Centenary Celebration, ed.
day depended upon its members’ interventions and interactions in it. The
purpose of ethics was to help people reflect upon, test, and revise their
freely embraced ideals to accord with the republican reality of moral life,
while also helping them alter that reality to accommodate as many ideals
as possible. For these reasons, some of the next generation’s foremost
champions of progressive social politics embraced James’s vision, making
his ethical republic their model for a nation constantly perfecting unity by
encouraging each member to act, in W. E. B. Du Bois’s words, as “a co-
worker in the kingdom of culture.”

This broad outline of James’s ethical republic will keep the big picture
clear as its elements are analyzed below. Such study should refine our
understanding of an icon of modern intellectual history while also recovering
intellectual tools of value today, as struggles to establish the ethical
bases of diverse polities continue worldwide. James conceived ethics and
ethical reasoning as synonymous: asserting that all moral commitments rest
on subjective, interpersonal “agreements” rather than objective, impersonal
“proof,” James believed the sole principle of ethics is discussion to deter-
mine relations of “authority” and “submission” among specific claims,
while the sole purpose of moral philosophy is to make such discussion as
widely satisfactory and respectful of personal freedom as possible. In con-
trast to both contract theorists and communitarians, James believed prin-
ciples of justice are always described through lenses of contingent experience,
yet insisted people can, with effort, peer through the lenses of others—
though the view is never exactly the same. Like Jürgen Habermas, James
emphasized the coeval character of personal freedom and public good, the
frequently implacable idols of the West’s liberal and republican traditions.
Yet James confronted the fallibility of deliberation more squarely than
Habermas, at times resembling modern-day libertarians in his jealous
regard for individual autonomy, yet frequently insisting on the community’s
right to overrule minority sentiment when deliberation fails and action can-
not be postponed. In brief, the relevance of James’s discursive ethics for
societies committed to orderly change under democratic-republican institu-

recent overview of James’s influence on American social thought is James T. Kloppenberg,
“James’s Pragmatism and American Culture, 1907–2007,” in 100 Years of Pragmatism:
William James’s Revolutionary Philosophy, ed. John J. Stuhr (Bloomington: Indiana Uni-
versity Press, 2010), 7–40.

University (James Papers), Series II, item 4427.
term of the universe he perceived is reflected more clearly than ever in the experience of groups and individuals drawn into increasingly closer contact with one another, and thus with alien moral universes—strange systems that might elicit greater sympathy, even acquire an eerie familiarity, when viewed through the prism of pragmatism.

THE ORIGINS AND MEANING OF MORAL IDEAS

The ethical republic’s most striking feature was the fluidity of its customs. James began “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” by stating that “there is no such thing possible as an ethical philosophy dogmatically made up in advance.”16 James recognized the need to apply tested intellectual tools to the solution of moral dilemmas, but believed that tool set must constitute a method rather than a code of conduct: a general, revisable procedure for making moral judgments in a world that does not stand on formalities. In a fluid, “pluralistic universe,” where concepts are functional more than descriptive, this unity of theory and praxis promises to reconcile freedom and obligation in ongoing action, even though the flux of experience precludes certainty about the rightness or consequences of moral decisions. Indeed, though the plasticity of reality presents new and frustrating “enigmas” each moment, it also reveals the universe as potentially “self-reparative through us, as getting its disconnections remedied in part by our behavior.”17

“Ethics,” for James, signified a method for remedying the universe’s moral “disconnections,” by resolving clashes among moral claims. James’s method required answering what he called “the psychological question”: understanding the origins of the moral ideas populating people’s minds, and what that etiology reveals about the source of moral authority. Moral ideas, in James’s view, are mentally generated, freely entertained, freely pursued or rejected conceptions of the good—a species of the “ideal and inward relations” of consciousness he first described in Principles of Psychology.18 In James’s opinion, neither of the ethical traditions dominant in his day shared his etiology of moral ideas. The neo-Kantians, and idealists generally, propounded a deontological ethics, according to which all truly

16 James, “Moral Philosopher,” Will to Believe, 184.
18 James, Principles 2: 639.
moral ideas derive from a transcendent obligation to treat other people as ends in themselves. From this perspective no specific intention or consequence, but only the dutiful will, is good. By contrast, the utilitarian tradition of Jeremy Bentham, James and John Stuart Mill, and Herbert Spencer propounded a teleological ethics to which consequences are basic. Moral ideas arise ultimately from physiological drives for sensual pleasure, and moral acts are those that maximize pleasure for as many people as possible. James denigrated Kant as a purveyor of “ponderous artificialities” whose transcendental morality ignored the countless concrete situations in which equally good wills crashed. Utilitarianism received equally stinging criticism. James considered it an “apology for selfishness,” and empirically false to boot: history, psychology, and everyday experience taught that humans could be “quite indifferent to present ill, if only the greater ideal be attained.” Briefly, James thought utilitarians ignored the existence, and Kantians the significance, of the personally unique ideas that shaped what most people recognized as their moral lives.

A radical empiricist, however, could not ignore what he considered facts of experience as real as any stone or sunrise. As James argued in “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” the mysterious ideas the other schools ignored were moral philosophy’s primary subjects. Significantly, these ideas were autochthonous: “Their only habitat can be a mind which feels them.” Physical facts doubtless affected the mind, and James praised utilitarians (faintly) for clarifying the hedonistic origins of many human interests. Nevertheless, it was “impossible to explain all our sentiments and preferences in this simple way.” Invoking Darwin’s theory of spontaneous variation, James asserted that the “passion for poetry, for mathematics, [or] for metaphysics” originated not in sensual pleasures but “incidental complications to our cerebral structure,” and that “a vast number of our moral perceptions also are certainly of this secondary and brain-born kind.” Far from adaptations to our physical environment, these moral ideas “deal with directly felt fitnesses between things, and often fly in the teeth of all the prepossessions of habit and presumptions of utility.” James was repeating an argument from Principles of Psychology, where he contended that neither “habitual experiences” nor “public opinion” could explain our moral principles “in toto.” Indeed, in the flux of experience, familiar princi-

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pleas are often unavailing: “The most characteristically moral judgments,” James averred, “. . . are in unprecedented cases and lonely emergencies, where no popular rhetorical maxims can avail, and the hidden oracle alone can speak.”

Lest the “hidden oracle” be mistaken for anything grander than the particular mind from which it speaks, James made clear that no universal, transcendent, or divine principle is necessary to explain our moral ideas. Even the principle of serving God, whether or not God himself furnishes the idea, is meaningful only when an individual consciousness experiences it as good, and follows it in specific circumstances. All similar principles, whatever their provenance, likewise become good (or evil) only in consciousness; while, conversely, good and evil exist wherever consciousness exists. Finally, just as the moral content of the universe originates in the consciousness of specific persons, its “moral character” is “created by certain relations amongst persons,” relations themselves “created by the wills of the persons.” In short, ethics is a human affair. “Were all other things, gods and men and starry heavens, blotted out from this universe, and were there left but one rock with two loving souls upon it, that rock would have as thoroughly moral a constitution as any possible world which the eternities and immensities could harbor,” James wrote. In his view, “so far as the visible facts go, [we] are just like the inhabitants of such a rock,” and “ethics have as genuine and real a foothold in a universe where the highest consciousness is human, as in a universe where there is a God as well. Whether a God exist, or whether no God exist . . . we form at any rate an ethical republic here below.”

This is not to say James’s ethics excludes belief in God. That belief was too real for too many to be ignored, and to the extent that its projected consequences were experienced by believers, there was evidence supporting it. Thus one prominent scholar’s conclusion that James “rejects a supernatural moral order presided over by a theistic God” overstates the case; it is the necessity and certainty, not the existence or promise, of a theistic moral order that James rejects. But equally unsustainable is the counter-claim that James thought “attempts to develop ethical theories independent of God” were “doomed to end in sterility and frustration.”

20 James, “Moral Philosopher,” Will to Believe, 190, 186–87; idem, Principles 2: 672.
22 James, The Varieties of Religious Experience (New York: Longmans, Green, 1902), is James’s classic statement of this pseudo-apologetic.
writings, especially, reveal his far more complex position. In 1904 he argued that the only practical meaning of belief in God is to affirm that today’s world could be better in future, and that actions taken now will matter for that future. If the world were complete, it would make no difference if it was the product of bare material forces or divine consciousness, for it would remain forever the same. Only if “God” means that our choices represent real alternatives and will be judged as producing genuine goods or evils could theism be a meaningful alternative to materialism. But employing the same logic in Pragmatism, James rejected an omnipotent God presiding over a world destined for salvation, for then, too, the world would be closed and our actions inconsequential. Not only would that evacuate the meaning of God for James, it would compel denial of our own experiences of choice and change—“our turning-places, where we seem to make ourselves and grow”—even though these “are the parts of the world to which we are closest” and “of which our knowledge is most intimate and complete.” Thus, James wrote in 1909, a consistent pragmatist and radical empiricist must assume that “God is not the absolute,” but a “being in time . . . working out a history just like ourselves.” Indeed, the only theisms “worthy of our attention” were the pantheists’ notions of an “indwelling divine.” This implies a God working “like ourselves” because in and through ourselves—or rather, as ourselves.24

This is hardly an argument that God is necessary for a genuinely moral world. Rather, it is a hypothesis of superhuman meliorism—a hypothesis attractive to James, yet frequently trivialized by his insistence that humans do their own saving. Pluralism, James explained in 1910, “makes the world’s salvation depend upon the energizing of its several parts, among which we are.” As early as 1890 James concluded that our selective attention to a mere fraction of what enters our consciousness is enough to affirm free will on psychological grounds, and to consider our “energizing” efforts real causes for celebration or regret. True, James later classed free will with “God” and other “religious doctrines,” but he did not mean these were inextricable. Rather, he was reiterating that neither God nor free will has practical significance unless it affirms the “religious” hypothesis as he formulated it: “the possibility that things may be better.” Defined thus, religion is a rather dark night falling on a wide field of philosophical cows.

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whose common trait is not affirmation of God but rejection of determinism. Our personal experience of free will, paired with our empirical observation of change and imaginative projection of its forms, permits our taking seriously the urge to resist and reshape our world. “Our spirit,” James wrote, “shut within this courtyard of sense-experience, is always saying to the intellect upon the tower: ‘Watchman, tell us of the night, if it aught of promise bear,’ and the intellect gives it then these terms of promise.”25 Certainly, that farther-seeing intellect—what James once called the “wider self through which saving experiences come”—might be a divine thinker. But it might also be “a larger and more godlike self,” one amidst “a collection of such selves” continually emerging from the shifting informational penum-brae and spontaneous variations of finite minds. Regardless, there is no qualitative distinction between “the MORE” offering salvation and the selves seeking it. The God of a pluralistic universe, James wrote in Pragmatism, is “but one helper, primus inter pares, in the midst of all the shapers of the great world’s fate.”26

For James, then, our moral life is largely our own creation; and in the only world knowable to humans it is ultimately ours to judge. Yet James’s trope of an “ethical republic” suggests not only the freedom but the constraints and responsibilities of moral life. First, as with all ideas, there are limits to what the will can do with them. The hypothetical goods moral ideas represent cannot always be realized. Crucially, however, the will’s freedom is preserved under these constraints. “Will” describes “a relation between the mind and its ideas” that does not necessarily culminate in rearrangements of external experience; volition, James wrote, “is a psychic or moral fact pure and simple, and is absolutely completed when the stable state of the idea is there.”27 Second, and here uniquely, moral ideas weld freedom to responsibility. The programs of action they suggest have an imperative cast; they are not just hypotheses about what could be, but about what ought to be, and what we ought to do. If that “ought” exists already, the imperative is to keep attending to and enjoying it. But since morality has no basis in a static external order, the “higher, more penetrating” moral ideas typically present themselves as “probable causes of future experience, factors to which the environment and the lessons it has so far taught us must learn to bend.”28

26 James, Varieties, 413, 400; idem, Pragmatism, 298.
27 James, Principles II, 559–60.
28 James, “Moral Philosopher,” Will to Believe, 189.
Ethics, for James, is the process of deciding which of these free yet imperative moral ideas—or better ideals, given their prospective nature—should be channeled into action, and how. For a pragmatist, a key to this process is clarifying the meaning and probable consequences of ideals before committing to their realization. That requires clarifying the meaning of “good” itself, or answering what James called moral philosophy’s “metaphysical question.” Applying what he later termed the “pragmatic method” to that question in “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” James determined that in any scenario, involving any number of moral beings, the consequence of conceiving something as good is to lay an obligation upon someone to realize it, even if that someone is only the conceiver of that good. Moreover, James argued that all obligations correspond to concrete, personal demands that certain circumstances obtain over others; contrary to Kantian formulas, there can be no obligation to abstract principles divorced from specific consequences. From a pragmatist perspective, therefore, “we see not only 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.” This dictum answered James’s metaphysical question, for if goods had no existence—or meaning—beyond the demands they made upon living minds, then demand and obligation to the good were “coextensive.” In other words, James declared, “the essence of good is simply to satisfy demand”—demand not just for pleasure, but “anything under the sun.” The origins and meaning of moral ideas, therefore, were inextricable, enmeshed in the individual minds comprising the ethical republic. Accordingly, equality of opportunity was a motto of the republic: if all moral ideas are subjective and imperative, all deserve translation into whatever action best meets the demand they create.

THE CASUISTIC CONUNDRUM

Confidently as James stated it, his conclusion regarding the meaning of the good presents an obvious difficulty in attaining it: demand cannot always be satisfied. Consequently, scholars have characterized James’s ethics as tragic, and James might have agreed. “The abstract best would be that all
goods should be realized,” he told his students in the late 1880s. “That is physically impossible, for many of them exclude each other.” Even a lone sentient being could have conflicting ideals, he noted in “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life”; introduce a second, third, or millionth thinker, and competing moral metrics exacerbate the conflict. Indeed, James himself deemed the question of demand “most tragically practical,” for “the actually possible in this world is vastly narrower than all that is demanded.” Any answer to what he termed “the casuistic question” in ethics promised to confirm rather than avert this tragedy, for the very need of a “scale of subordination” prioritizing our divergent demands—a casuistic scale—proved that with every moral choice, “part of the ideal must be butchered.”

James wrestled with this difficulty while accepting its intractability. In discussing “Aesthetic and Moral Principles” in *The Principles of Psychology*, he argued that our native radical empiricism encourages us to see other people’s ideals as facts with the same measure of reality and basis in desire as our own, and that these perceived similarities prompt concern for a common good in which all might share—an argument inspired by British ethicist Henry Sidgwick’s “ethics of rational benevolence.” Nevertheless, James recognized that such groping toward rational benevolence will never yield a firm grasp of the one true good. Any conflict between our personal demands and sense of benevolence requires an individual or social sacrifice, however small, to resolve it; thus it is a “mere postulate of rationality” that “individual and universal good are one.” Kloppenberg has described this “irreconcilable conflict” between individual and society as the signal tragedy of James’s ethics, which only a religious appeal could avert.

Yet James did not appeal for divinely inspired certainty about the relations between self and society, or even the self’s own conflicting demands. The very notion of such certainty contradicts the flux of experience and power of choice (for good or ill) that he believed makes people free. Instead of invoking a divine mind to resolve life’s dilemmas, James appealed to what he described in *Principles of Psychology* as the “heroic mind”: the “pure inward willingness to face the world” that characterizes “the masters and the lords of life.” James’s whole philosophy affirmed that reason fails of many truths until active belief intervenes; accordingly, in his ethics, the

criterion of rational benevolence is fulfilled by the supra-rational “strenuous mood.”

There is no “visible” thinker with knowledge of a universally valid casuistic scale, James wrote in “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life.” As he privately noted, “backing your own opinion by a God can’t determine what sort of an opinion it ought to be. All that a god does is to make us sure that there is an objective good;—He doesn’t tell us what it is.” This would be unproblematic except that many of us, in James’s opinion, want a god precisely in order “to make us good against those other fellows.” Still, James saw even such selfish desires to identify and align with the good as versions, however perverse, of the perennial ideal of a system harmonizing all ideals, a system discoverable if only “sufficient pains” were taken. James believed the prevalence and persistence of that meta-ideal should inspire us to “throw our own spontaneous ideals, even the dearest, impartially in with that total mass of ideals which are fairly to be judged.” It should impel us to risk a collective experiment to determine which ideals are most compatible and which must be discarded, and to adopt as the “guiding principle” of our moral lives the duty “to satisfy at all times as many demands as we can.” Appealing to the strenuous mood, this demand principle affirms the creative power and altruistic potential that James consistently juxtaposed in his renderings of the individual in society. In “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” he enjoined, “Invent some manner of realizing your own ideals which will also satisfy the alien demands, . . . that only is the path of peace!”

Sacrifice is thus the price of fullest freedom in the ethical republic. But James’s exhortation to satisfy the most demands possible creates another problem, at least for a philosopher frequently accused of criminal subjectivism. The phrasing of his injunction implies that the end of moral reasoning and action is to satisfy the greatest number of qualitatively equal demands, as if every ideal were equally good. James’s very next passage reinforces this impression. The “best act,” he wrote, “makes for the best whole, in the sense of awakening the least sum of dissatisfactions.” The casuistic scale must prioritize ideals “by whose realization the least possible number of

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33 James, Principles 2: 679.
34 James, “Moral Philosopher,” Will to Believe, 199; idem, “Ethics—notes” (n.d.), James Papers, Series II, item 4428.
35 James, “Moral Philosopher,” Will to Believe, 205. James discussed the strenuous mood’s prevalence among both imperious and selfless types in idem, “Notes on Ethics, 1899–1901,” James Papers, Series II, item 4508.
other ideals are destroyed. Since victory and defeat there must be,” he con-
cluded, “the victory to be philosophically prayed for is that of the more
inclusive side,—of the side which even in the hour of triumph will to some
degree do justice to the ideals in which the vanquished party’s interests
lay.”36 Here, ideals clash like armies seeking victory with honor, sparing
what foes they can and absorbing tractable survivors as full citizens of their
empire. The highest ethical reasoning is quantitative, pursuing “the least
sum of dissatisfactions”; the highest ideals destroy the least “number” of
others. Despite James’s martial imagery, it seems it is not so much strenuos-
ity as arithmetic facility that the moral life requires.

Yet in the same essay James contradicted this reading. “Every end of
desire that presents itself,” he asserted, “appears exclusive of some other
end of desire.” If so, attempts to preserve the “most” ideals are futile: the
number of ideals saved will always equal the number lost. Moreover, James
stated that if all goods contain “a common essence, then the amount of
this essence involved in any one good would show its rank in the scale
of goodness.”37 “Demand,” of course, was the “common essence” James
identified, and while he never adequately explained his demand principle,
it clearly was not the number of demands, but the amount of demand that
he thought mattered most to our moral calculations. And some ideals car-
ried more demand than others. If, for instance, “utopia” for millions
required “that a certain lost soul on the far-off edge of things should lead a
life of lonely torture,” would not the souls offered salvation feel “a spec-
cific and independent” revulsion toward the bargain? That singular, “spec-
cific” ideal of justice clearly trumps each of the incalculable individual
demands that perpetual pleasure for humanity would satisfy, while the sin-
gular dissatisfaction resulting from one man’s sacrifice might even outweigh
the aggregate satisfaction the bargain promised. Further undermining
quantitative readings of James’s demand principle was his argument for the
ethical status quo as the best initial guide to resolving moral conflicts: The
consent routinely given the status quo, he asserted, reflects its historical
efficacy in yielding “the maximum of satisfaction to the thinkers taken alto-
gether”—thinkers, not demands. The “best system” does not accommodate
the most ideals, but the most people holding ideals; people who, as the
example of the lone sufferer at the edge of utopia illustrates, want their few,
highest demands satisfied before their more numerous trifling ones. When

36 James, “Moral Philosopher,” Will to Believe, 205.
37 Ibid., 202, 200.
James prayed “victory” for “the most inclusive side,” it was people, not ideals, on whose behalf he pleaded.38

Thus John Roth was correct to conclude that James’s ethics required “qualitative distinctions” among demands to avoid condoning injustices. He was also right to suggest that “freedom” and “unity” were the supreme goods by which others must be calibrated. These conclusions are logically implied by James’s appeal to the strenuous mood, which, to maximize freedom across the community, elevates the ideal of moral organization over all others, and hence privileges ideals most congenial to organization. Yet while Roth claimed that the cornerstone goods of freedom and unity needed to be “built in” to James’s ethics from the outset, it seems more Jamesian to view their special status as emerging from, not antecedent to, the dynamics of the myriad, qualitatively distinct demands James located in immediate experience.39 Indeed, by insisting on the importance of freedom and unity despite rejecting static schemes and a priori absolutes, James maintained the centrality of satisfying an ethical republic of living, growing, social people rather than disembodied demands. Concomitantly, the importance to moral life of freedom, unity, flexibility, and lived experience also informed James’s proposed method of organizing the ethical republic: democracy.

Rather than a specific institutional complex, democracy, for James, signified a cultural commitment to communal inquiry, dependent on each individual’s faith that “common people can work out their salvation well enough together if left free to try.” Though James once called this faith the “American religion,” it was not the “civil religion” scholars have identified as the homogenizing emulsifier of nineteenth-century American culture. James’s humanist blend of individualism, solidarism, and pluralism paid no homage to his nation’s dominant political or cultural institutions, which he often castigated.40 James believed personal moral authority could only be

38 James rejected John Stuart Mill’s superficially similar utilitarianism of higher and lower pleasures as inconsistent, claiming it encouraged strenuous types to ignore the “consequential pain” caused by “overriding” the high pleasures of those with different casuistic scales. He admired Mill’s effort enough, however, to dedicate Pragmatism to his memory (James, “Ethics—Notes,” James Papers; idem, Pragmatism, v., 37–38).

39 For Roth’s argument that supreme goods were crucial to James’s ethics yet missing from them, see Roth, Freedom and the Moral Life, 67ff.

exercised effectively through ongoing, deliberative discourse, in which freedom and the unity that enhances it are accepted by all participants as the supreme ideals of their moral commonwealth—supreme because their realization maximizes satisfaction generally. Freedom and unity are related dialectically in moral life: free inquiry into the ideals shaping our social environment helps us understand the relations among them, make choices complementing the choices of others, and thereby encourage the community’s interest in our own satisfaction, all of which reveals newer and better means of achieving our goals and exercising our capacities. Thus, James wrote in 1910, the individualist “utopia” cherished by critics of egalitarian reform would, ironically, best be approximated by “some sort of a socialistic equilibrium”—a system of mutually beneficial but provisional compromises, sensitive to imbalances of autonomy among citizens and capable of correcting them. In short, moral growth requires the same mix of pragmatic inquiry, creative experimentation, and social verification that James thought all personal and communal development requires, and it is equally open-ended. “We all help to determine the content of ethical philosophy so far as we contribute to the race’s moral life,” James asserted. “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.”

VIRTUES OF THE ETHICAL REPUBLIC

By its very nature, then, James’s deliberative ethics resists codification. Yet strenuously embracing the uncertainty that affords freedom was, if not an iron rule, a cardinal virtue for James. Moreover, James emphasized three other virtues that empowered such strenuous ethical republicanism: experimentalism, historical wisdom, and empathy.

Regarding experimentalism, James believed exerting one’s moral imagination in novel directions could realize goods habitually ignored, or suggest goods conceivable only in contexts of regret and failure. “Which lives most,” he asked in an unpublished note, “this orderly man whose life runs on oiled rails of propriety, who never does ill or makes a mistake or has a regret, or a pang, because on every occasion the right action presents itself to his mind and he simply does it; or the passionate, tumultuous blunderer, whose whole life is an alternation of rapturous excitement, and horrible

41 James, “The Moral Equivalent of War” (1910), Memories and Studies, ed. H. James, 286; idem, “Moral Philosopher,” Will to Believe, 210, 184.
repentance and longing for the ruined good?” Ethical experimentation causes conflict, but also spurs moral discourse and tests, refines, or displaces conventional means of maximizing freedom. Though impossible to predict, the good ultimately to be achieved by humanity’s collective “say” depends on experimentation, for both our “hypotheses” and “the acts to which they prompt us” are “indispensable conditions which determine what that ‘say’ shall be.” The process of articulating, testing, and deliberating over moral hypotheses and their consequences, then, constitutes both the ethical ideal and the program of its realization.42

This running experiment could be chaotic. According to James, however, historical awareness of the practical needs and contingent factors driving it in the past could supply wisdom to discipline innovation without discouraging it. James consistently emphasized the counterbalance of conservative and radical elements in pragmatism, and his ethics discloses the same dialectic.43 Over generations, societies perform “an experiment of the most searching kind,” and each day’s initial casuistic scale should put “customs of the community on top.” Certainly, some people are “born with a right to be original”—or at least a penchant for it—and at any time, deeply rooted as society’s norms might be, “revolutionary thought or action may bear prosperous fruit.” Still, such fruit is harvested “only through the aid of the experience of other men,” and its value determined the same way. James offered this organic account of social change as early as 1880, when he explained the relationship between “Great Men and Their Environment” in Darwinian terms, with human intelligence the major selective pressure. The innovative socio-political perspectives of “great men,” he argued, are spontaneous variations of social thought, which the community’s aggregate judgments either allow to propagate or reject as maladapted to its needs. Even highly original ideas for change take effective form only after widespread social testing, against current exigencies with roots in historical processes and contemporary values that are historically conditioned. Thus, while moral innovators are crucial to social development, history and the society it shapes provide resources from which all experimenters draw, and impose constraints under which they operate.44

42 James, quoted in Perry, Thought and Character 2: 258; idem, “Moral Philosopher,” Will to Believe, 184.
43 E.g. James, Pragmatism, 59–62, 77–78.
44 James, “Moral Philosopher,” Will to Believe, 206, 208–9; idem, “Great Men and Their Environment” (1880), ibid., 216–54. Contrast Meyers, who attributes “predefined aims” to James’s ethical experiment, and thus concludes that its “alleged sciencelike progress” would be destroyed rather than advanced by the endless “checks” of individuals. Meyers, William James, 398–99.
Finally, the virtue of empathy, a form of emotional, radical empiricism, helps ensure that the strenuosity of individuals redounds to the health of the republic. Our often paltry interest in others’ feelings, James wrote in “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings” (1898), severely handicaps the quest for more unified moral knowledge and the enhanced freedom it brings. In moral conflicts, judgments made in ignorance of others’ feelings are “sure to miss the root of the matter” and “possess no truth.” Yet even the “common practical man,” devoted to his personal affairs, occasionally experiences a “gleam of insight” into “the vast world of inner life” beyond his own. At such instances “the whole scheme of our customary values gets confounded” and “a new center and a new perspective must be found.” James saw this inescapable, periodic reevaluation of moral priorities as evidence that we should search out alien ideals, to help realize the potentially greater goods waiting upon our creative inquiry. Rather than shirking our “practical” duties to our own ideals, seeking meaning in the ideals of others enriches our personal moral worlds.

To free his readers for this task, James urged them to adopt a radical-empiricist approach to moral life: to reflect critically on the “abstract conceptions” defining their habitual values, and “tolerate, respect, and indulge” other people “harmlessly interested and happy in their own ways.” The call for an actively cultivated empathy in “On a Certain Blindness” was thus paired somewhat incongruously with an injunction to leave others alone; to pursue our own ideals “without presuming to regulate the rest of the vast field.” Yet the keyword above is “harmlessly”: tolerance rightly understood is a means of maximizing freedom, not a euphemism for ignoring consequences. James affirmed the critical nature of the tolerance he espoused in his preface to Talks to Teachers (1899), in which “On a Certain Blindness” was republished. Declaring that the essay’s purpose was to encourage “democratic respect for the sacredness of individuality,” he immediately defined such respect as “tolerance of whatever is not itself intolerant.” Though the empathy tolerance fosters often reveals overlaps among values, empathy cannot always resolve conflicts. In such cases, James told his students, “all wills which are not organizable, and which avowedly go against the whole,” must be sacrificed.

45 James, “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings” (1898), Talks to Teachers on Psychology; and to Students on Some of Life’s Ideals (New York: Longmans, Green, 1899), 230–31.
46 Ibid., 240–45, esp. 241.
47 Ibid., 257, 264; James, Preface, Talks to Teachers, v; idem, “Ethics Course, 1888–89,” James Papers.
Even mild critics have missed James’s hard-headed acceptance of deliberation’s limits, contrasting, for instance, the alleged moral apathy of pragmatism with the courage of conviction behind the North’s prosecution of the Civil War. Yet that conflict inspired James’s most eloquent defense of strenuous morality: his 1897 eulogy of Col. Robert Gould Shaw and the all-black Massachusetts Fifty-fourth regiment, whose sacrifices he thought exemplified citizens’ duty to decide for themselves when the forms of democracy fail the ideal. Shaw and his soldiers had no formula for making that decision, nor do we; as James cautioned, “Democracy is still upon its trial.” Instead, James asserted, democracy’s survival hinges on two assiduously cultivated habits of “civic courage”: “disciplined good temper” toward those adhering to democratic processes, and “fierce and merciless resentment” toward those subverting them when the outcome confounds their wishes. Yet, crucially, these remain habits, not precise formulas; any specific decision to maximize freedom by resisting its seemingly narrower forms entails great risk, with no certainty of righteousness or reward. Rather, James insisted, “it is at all times open to any one to make the experiment, provided he fear not to stake his life and character upon the throw.”

The centrality of both communal inquiry and existential courage to James’s ethics reflects its fundamental characteristics, humanism and fallibilism. James considered strenuous ethics widely achievable, and increased moral unity eternally possible. Despite frequently suggesting that belief in God best inured one against life’s trials, he considered religion an outlet for what “probably lies slumbering in every man.” Ultimately, religion affirmed James’s pragmatic theory of human knowledge, declaring an “unseen world” of future possibilities, “in its relation to which the true significance of our present mundane life consists.” Moreover, what faith declared, the history of science demonstrated: present knowledge is imperfect, greater knowledge awaits, and the needs, efforts, and “spiritual forces” of humans, conversing with thinkers past and present, reveal and affect this “larger world.”

That world is most complete when emerging from the sacred yet uncertain exercise of “mental freedom” characterizing what James termed “the intellectual republic,” and its moral shape is enhanced by the same tolerant yet critical discourse—the most scientific method yet invented for reconciling individual and common good.

49 James, “Moral Philosopher,” ibid., 210–15, esp. 211.
50 James, “Is Life Worth Living?” (1896), ibid., 51, 54–56.
“active faiths of individuals . . . freely expressing themselves in life, are the experimental tests by which they are verified, and the only means by which their truth or falsehood can be wrought out,” James wrote in the preface to The Will to Believe. The moral knowledge that brings freedom depends equally for its creation upon individual assertion and social assent; therefore all “ought to live in publicity, vying with each other.”

Yet concluding that James believed in humanity’s capacity for “progress” in any absolute sense would be mistaken. Instead, James’s ethical humanism highlights his refusal to resolve in theory tensions that persist in experience. Change is ever-present, and the best changes bring society into “some newer and better equilibrium” reflecting the input of all. Still, such changes make no “genuine vital difference” to moral life, because life’s “meaning” is change itself: “the marriage, namely, of some unhabitual ideal, however special, with some fidelity, courage, and endurance; with some man’s or woman’s pains.” These marriages succeed with the sanction of experience, but their consummation produces new ideals; and “with each new ideal that comes into life, the chance for a life based on some old ideal will vanish.”

For James, then, freedom is enhanced when particular conflicts between inner ideals and external experience are resolved. But freedom must end if conflict itself disappears, especially the conflict between individual and society that, managed deliberatively, creates opportunities for mutual growth. “Republicanism,” James wrote in his early thirties, “is of course the political corollary of free-will [sic] in philosophy,” and James never relinquished that belief in the irreducible sociality of freedom. In the ethical republic, submitting one’s judgments to the scrutiny of a community, itself shaped by that very act of exchange, is a feat of self-definition; a declaration of independence from outmoded orders and unexamined assumptions.

GIVING JAMES HIS SAY

Considering James’s belief that freedom, wisdom, and virtue are realized through participation in society’s running discussion of its goals, it seems

51 James, “Will to Believe,” ibid., 30; idem, Preface, ibid., xii.
likely that his invocation by modern moral and political philosophers would have honored him, while the variety and even divergence of outlooks among them would not have bothered him much. Still, recovering James’s original ideas can advance the contemporary conversation about pragmatism and its importance to twenty-first-century political life beyond the positions of its major participants. There are no more influential theorists of pragmatist political ethics than Richard Rorty and Jürgen Habermas, for instance, yet their very different pragmatisms both seem less suited to modern conditions than James’s century-old version.

Rorty took James’s fallibilism to a notorious extreme. Rejecting the “realist intuitions” that burdened the Western tradition, Rorty urged philosophers to seek “solidarity” over “objectivity,” and democratic cultures generally to adopt a “cautionary sense of true” describing merely those cultural constructions we successfully persuade others to accept.54 Habermas has criticized Rorty’s radically contextualist pragmatism on various grounds, the most important of which, perhaps, are purely pragmatic: it neither explains what people do nor achieves what Rorty wants. Ignoring the implicitly universal character of truth and justice claims, Rorty distorts the everyday linguistic practice through which he hopes solidarity can be achieved. According to Habermas, any attempt to reach agreement on moral norms depends upon the “realist intuition” that there is a reality independent of our thought and actions, against which ideals can be tested to determine their universality.55 But as Bernstein recently argued, Habermas’s “Kantian pragmatism” also violates pragmatist principles. To avoid relativism, Habermas introduces dualisms of the kind James abhorred, distinguishing between unconditional “moral norms” and contextual “ethical values,” and between a “theoretical philosophy” that explores the former and a “practical philosophy” that applies the latter. Not only do these distinctions divorce truth from experience, they do so to no purpose, for all truths, whatever we call them, gain or lose credence through human experience.56 Ultimately, neither Habermas nor Rorty provides a satisfactory model for both democratic discourse and action. Whether we are stripped

54 Richard Rorty, Consequences of Pragmatism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982); idem, Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
56 Bernstein, Pragmatic Turn, chapter 8.
of the means to judge among values, or bound by universals which everyone perceives differently (and fallibly), our course is determined by coincident interests or calculated force.

James navigated these shoals by the light of a pluralistic universe, a world both connected and disconnected, one and many, depending on the questions we ask about it—and sometimes, the answers we give. James’s quest for the larger moral whole did not depend on reconstructing truths independent of particular human values. But neither did it ignore the world that contains and exceeds our moral lives, and to which we and others are responsible. James sought a common rather than a universal moral ground, one selected and partially created, rather than discovered, by moral actors. The conjunctions and disjunctions between our own moral lives and others we seek to understand remind us of a world beyond ourselves, and present opportunities to multiply conjunctions through unilateral or multilateral compromise. Objectivity and solidarity both can be enhanced if we find such compromises worth making. This Jamesian political ethics suits an increasingly interdependent world, in which spheres of self-containment shrink while dangers of cultural imperialism proliferate. It is only through tolerance and compromise that contingent values become moral truths. Yet it is only through faith in truth’s distinction from mere preference that we find the courage to make or demand sacrifices for the common good.

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