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**James on Emotions and Morals**

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Abstract. The Emotions chapter (XXV) in James' Principles of Psychology traverses the entire range of experienced emotions from the “coarser” and more instinctual to the “subtler” emotions intimately involved in cognitive, moral, and aesthetic aspects of life. But Principles limits himself to an account of emotional consciousness and so there are few direct discussions in the text of Principles about what later came to be called moral psychology, and fewer about anything resembling philosophical ethics. Still, James’ short section on the subtler emotions, when read in connection with his later philosophical writings, still provides insight on James’ views about how human emotion colors our moral psychology and agency. The paper tries to articulate how James' somatic account of emotion adds significantly to contemporary discussions at the borders of moral psychology and philosophy: discussions over the foreground/background distinction, emotional temperament, emotional learning, moral imagination, and selfhood and narrativity. The final section focuses on the neo-Jamesian character of "new sentimentalist" moral psychologists. Among the substantial connections I discuss between James and 1) between Jonathan Haidt’s “social intuitionism” and 2) Jesse Prinz’s "emotionism" are the critiques that they each share of the pretensions of hard universalist ethical theories.

**1. Introduction: Emotions and Morals in *The Principles of Psychology***

On the somatic or embodiment theory of the emotions that James gives in *The Principles of Psychology,* "Emotion is a consequence, not the cause, of the bodily expression."[[1]](#footnote-1) James challenged the folk psychology of his time with this thesis, reversing the accepted relationship between emotional affect and bodily changes. When James asserts that “emotion is a consequence” of physiological changes, he means the subjective experience of the emotion. While *The Emotions* chapter (XXV) traverses the entire range of experienced emotions from the “coarser” and more instinctual to the “subtler” emotions intimately involved in cognitive, moral, and aesthetic aspects of life, James limits himself to an account of *emotional consciousness* and so does not speak a great deal about either theoretical or practical reasoning. There are few direct discussions in the text of *Principles* about what later came to be called moral psychology, and fewer about anything resembling philosophical ethics. James makes a very basic distinction between the questions of psychology and those of metaphysics (including moral metaphysics) and casuistry. Still, James’ short section on the subtler emotions is insightful, and when *Principles* is read in connection with his later philosophical writings it still provides a basis from which to reconstruct James’ views about the ways that human emotion colors our moral psychology and our ways of making moral decisions.

When James does comment in *Principles* on questions that go beyond psychology but are of special interest to philosophers, his basic naturalistic insight remains that the mind and its environment have evolved together, and must be studied together. The ideas that mind and body are intrinsically and dynamically coupled, and that perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and judgments change in ways responsive to the state of the body, are not original to James. But few would contest Richardson’s (2006) claim that his development of them in *Principles*, and in *The Emotions* chapter more particularly, furthered them in ways that helped the burgeoning field of psychology emerge as a distinct discipline from philosophy on the one hand, and physiology on the other.

One metaphysical debate James explicitly takes up in *Principles* is that between rationalism and naturalism. Against the traditional “mind stuff” theory, James wanted to show that consciousness cannot be merely cognitive because it is principally active and purposive. James rejected the Platonic view of the self, with the faculty of Reason firmly the charioteer in control of Appetite and Will. But he also rejected the materialist view on which “science is satisfied when a psychic fact is once for all referred to a physiological ground.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Because James’ theory of emotion is couched in terms of feelings—the physiological changes and disturbances we feel when we are angry or joyful—it invites a phenomenological account of emotional consciousness. Although the importance of introspection and phenomenological description is basic to James, some other psychologists would deny the need for his thought experiments and phenomenology, while others would allow that need but still deny the substance of James’ account, holding that he gets the phenomenology wrong.

*The Principles of Psychology* was published in 1890, and we must allow for corrections to James’ theory wherever they are empirically cogent or philosophically well-motivated, but not if objections depend on a misreading of James or on ignoring important distinctions that he drew. Most often, James’ account of emotion is dismissed when it is classified as a version of emotions-as-feelings. “Feelings theories” are viewed by their critics as opposed to perceptual and appraisal theories of emotion, and as a simplistic view unable to distinguish among emotions themselves, or to capture the intentionality of emotion. For many years feelings theories characterized by the James–Lange thesis have been out of vogue, and James’ work on emotion with them. But some writers see James as making a comeback, due both to developments in cognitive and social psychology and to the work of neo-Jamesian “new sentimentalist” moral psychologists such as Jonathan Haidt and Jesse Prinz. These authors have pushed a number of James’s ideas about emotion in new directions, including his idea of “emotional temperament” and his psychologically–based critique of the project of normative ethical theory. Prinz for example discusses contemporary findings that "whenever neuroscientists look at brain activity during emotional states, they see heightened responses in exactly those brain areas that are known to register and regulate bodily changes." Discussing these and other studies he argues that "the weight of the evidence favors the embodiment theory" over certain of its rivals. Themoral psychology and philosophical views of the new sentimentalists also display a neo-Jamesian orientation. While the theme of “the emotional dog and its rational tail” that Haidt and Prinz share with James is a matter of considerable controversy today, their proximity to James demonstrates further the continued relevance or ‘liveness’ and many of the ideas we see given early expression in Principles. Contemporary pragmatists including Barbalet (1999), Ellsworth (1994), Palencik (2007),and Stoklosa (2012) have defended James against misinterpretation while highlighting some important trends in empirical psychological research that he anticipates.

In this paper I will generally support the defenders of James and the empirically informed ethics that they aim to develop. We will spend less time in defending James from any specific objections, however, than in more positively trying to articulate how his account of emotion adds significantly to contemporary discussions at the borders of moral psychology and philosophy: discussions over the foreground/background distinction, emotional temperament, emotional learning, moral imagination, and selfhood and narrativity. The viability of new-sentimentalist research programs is largely left open in this paper, and so is the question of how Jamesian in spirit these writers in general are either in their psychology or in their writings on philosophical ethics. We will, however, discussion substantial connections, 1) between Haidt’s “social intuitionism” and James’ ideas about emotional temperament and overbeliefs; and 2) between Prinz’s and James’ respective critiques of the limits of normative ethical theories.

**2.The Courser Emotions and the Embodied Self**

Phoebe Ellsworth in her paper from a special journal edition on William James and emotion, writes that, “The old theory, the commonsense theory, which James criticized, assumed the following sequence: stimulus > interpretation > affect > bodily response. The commonsense theory of a century ago is easily recognizable as the commonsense theory of today…with interpretation emphasized and bodily response generally neglected.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Written two decades ago, her paper finds that the commonsense theory “also resembles the current ideas of cognitive scientists.” Happily today, I believe this is no longer so. But Ellsworth does findJames culpable for speaking about the order of stimulus, interpretation, bodily response, and affect as if they are things, like billiard balls. “Over the past century, James’s [descriptions and examples] of large units of perception (see a bear), behavior (tremble, run), and feeling (feel afraid) have drawn our attention away from the recognition that none of these units is elemental, none is stable. They are all in motion, all the time, and there is no reason to believe that one must and before another begins.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

If this is correct, then certain aspects of long-standing debate over the *ordering problem* are misguided, and perhaps create roadblocks to a possible synthesis of the perception, appraisal, and somatic theories of emotion. We should probably also start by agreeing with Ellsworth that, “Some of James’s claims were definitely wrong, and others are confusing and possibly self – contradictory. He argued very firmly that there were ‘no special brain-centres of the emotion and this is certainly false. He was never very clear on whether the physiological feedback was a cause or a component of the emotion….”[[5]](#footnote-5)

James’ attempt to invert the cause/consequence relation accepted in his day led him to draw vivid contrasts that his critics sometimes jumped upon as an attack on common-sense. For example, he writes that “we feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble, and [it is] not that we cry, strike, or tremble, because we are sorry, angry, or fearful, as the case may be.”[[6]](#footnote-6) The Jamesian view thus puts strong emphasis on the physiological or ‘felt’ nature of emotions,caused by a physiological disturbance in turn was prompted by some disturbing situation or stimulus. Though James may treat emotional consciousness as a kind of epiphenomenon arising from bodily sensations, Ellsworth shows how far James is from the claim of some of his critics that he makes emotions dumb, and treats them as immune from social conditioning. The emotion was not the bodily response and nothing more. James’ defenders point out against the ‘nothing buttery’ interpreters of James that “Emotion is not like instinct or ‘impulse’ in so far as the behavioral consequences of emotion are not necessarily immediate and automatic.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Firstly, somatic theory as already mentioned has been enormously fruitful. Like Prinz, Stoklosapoints out that physiological responses preceding or attending the experience of emotions anticipated decades of investigation of emotion-specific autonomic nervous system activity, as well as keen interest in interoceptive responses. Individuals differ markedly in emotional expressions and in their ability to detect their own bodily sensations. Given James’ interest in abnormal psychologyhe would likely be very interested in how his theory fits with empirical work on the emotions and depersonalization, psychopathology, schizophrenia, and anxiety.

Secondly, while James held that bodily sensations are essential to the experience of emotion, he does not appear to hold a reductionist view on which research on emotion is exhausted by research on bodily processes. The emotions are not exhausted by the coarser emotions as they must be to make a reductionist reading to be plausible. One thing that casting James’ account of emotion as a simplistic or reductionist feelings theory commonly overlooks, is that James explicitly acknowledged a spectrum of emotions from those he calls the coarser emotions, such as anger, fear, love, and shame, and those he calls the ‘subtler’ emotions. Some emotions, like some virtues, may be possible only for a reflective mind. To an indefinite degree both emotion *and* instinct can be inhibited or modified by habits, since instinct, for James, was not merely blind or reflex impulse. James in his philosophical writings had much to say about how our moral agency, and the quality of our lives, depends upon “habitually fashioning our characters” in better or worse ways, and how moral emotions are involved in character-formation and selfhood.[[8]](#footnote-8) Ellsworth finds it hard to ignore a substantial role of cognition (“perception” is more than the sensation) and appraisal in James’s theory. She would presumably like myself find much in common between James as she reads him, and Prinz’s attempt to integrate somatic, perceptual, and appraisal theories into one. But however that may be, Barbalet identifies the mistake of taking the theory of emotional consciousness in *Principles* as James’ *full* theory of emotion:

Because a reductionist reading of James is commonplace, the primacy he [James] places on emotions for practically every aspect of human being simply is lost to most accounts of this work. Emotion, for James, mediates all human actions. The idea, that it is emotions which endue ‘value, interest, or meaning [in] our respective worlds’ is not confined only to his study of religious experience. It pervades his work, from the early essays to his last writing.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Able defenders of James also respond to more specific objections brought against him, some of which we will pursue in this section and the next. One is that he ignores the role of experience and culture in the shaping of emotion. Another is that he said little about the possible roles of emotion in cognition and behavior. Still another is that he “gave no weight to the process of evaluating mentally the situation that causes the emotion.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Although it is certainly true that James does not speak a great deal in *Principles* about how emotion influences our moral judgments,Barbalet I think has little problem showing that a closer reading of *Principles* and a broader reading of James including his philosophical papers brings ample textual evidence to reject these three objections. Rather than taking them up in turn, we will return to them in the course of discussing some of James’ key insights related to the somatic theory of emotion. We can begin with his discussion of the foreground/background of conscious awareness, and how it involves bodily awareness.

The readiness for certain kinds of events and actions is reflected in consciousness. Both James and Dewey, who acknowledged James’ *Principles of Psychology* as a primary influence, held that recognition of a background, including its somatic dimension, is needed to explain the coherence of action and cognition. But what is the body’s role in structuring the pre-conscious background to conscious mental life and purposive action? For James this “fringe” of conscious awareness, this “halo of felt relations,”[[11]](#footnote-11) always involves a feeling of one’s body: “We think; and as we think we feel our bodily selves as the seat of the thinking. If the thinking be our thinking, it must be suffused through all its parts with peculiar warmth and intimacy that make it come as ours.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Some contemporary views that have overlaps with James but develop concerns with the background, selfhood, and emotion and narrativity include radical enactivism, which “defends an anti—intellectualist, non—representationalist account of what lies in the background of, and makes possible, our explicitly contentful speech, thought and action.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

James and Dewey both affirm a qualitative background as cognitively necessary for mental life. Richard Shusterman finds that Dewey makes a more sustained argument for the qualitative background necessary to mental life as having both somatic and social aspects. *Socially* conditioned habit is part of the structuring and guiding mental background of our agency. James certainly did not neglect the social conditioning of emotion, and indeed insisted on it for even the coarser emotions. Dewey is thus still elaborating the Jamesian insistence that “Habit is thus the enormous fly–wheel of society, it’s most precious conservative agent.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

But James’ and Dewey’s views diverge further over whether bodily background feelings should, to the extent possible, be regularly ‘brought to the foreground’ in practical life. James in *Principles* says that to foreground the somatic background “would be a superfluous complication.”[[15]](#footnote-15) While it is true that spontaneous habit often functions most effectively, does the Jamesian position adequately address the problem of the formation of bad habits? Full transparency of the somatic background seems unachievable, and somatic reflection may not reveal the self-deceptions about our emotional states to which we are prone. But Dewey allows the somatic background to be more articulate, and Shusterman argues that this as the most consistent pragmatist position. Since the somatic habits and qualitative feelings of the background are conditioned by environments both physical and social, critically scrutinizing one’s somatic feelings may allow a person to learn things about him or herself. For example, a person may become mindful of discomforts in interaction with people of certain races, religions, or ethnicities, and, Shusterman thinks, “through the recognition of such feelings come to recognize that he may have prejudices of which he was previously unaware.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

 Before moving on to the subtler emotions, it might be mentioned that the knowledge we have of the states of mind of others, and particularly of their emotions, is related at a physiological level by our ability to simulate the other's state. Given James’ keen interest in physiological functions it would not be surprising to find a modern-day James interested recent advances in brain imaging and the neurochemical analysis of specific neural circuits (e.g., the hypothalamic and limbic systems). I imagine a James also very interested in empirical research on mirror neurons and the vagus nerve, and how they engage empathetic emotions by allowing us to share the affective experience of others.[[17]](#footnote-17),

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**3.The Subtler Emotions and the Development of Moral Character**

The section of *The Emotions* chapter titled “The Subtle Emotions” introduces them by saying, “These are the moral, intellectual, and aesthetic feelings.”[[18]](#footnote-18) By describing his focus as being “feelings,” James signals that he is still restricting himself to the psychological study of emotional consciousness, not an account of how emotions do or should affect moral, intellectual and aesthetic *judgments*. Still, James here introduces his idea of personal temperament, and explains the grounds for holding that there are substantial emotional differences between individuals that affect moral character and judgment.

Emotional responses can certainly influence behavior, but the connection is indirect, in contrast with instinct which James treats as a “faculty of acting” or as leading to behavior directly. But James does not neglect in *Principles* to discuss either 1) the emotional apprehension of possible outcomes of action; or 2) the relationship between emotional knowledge of the self and behavior. Options to trust or not to trust, which James highlights in his “Will to Believe” paper, for example, are emotionally – dependent: they involve emotional apprehension of different possible futures or outcomes. Moreover, emotional consciousness makes its way not only into practical reason on the side of wants and desires, but also on the side of beliefs. For emotions are integrally involved in intellectual or cognitive matters through those judgments of salience upon which all rational thought and action depends. Ronald de Sousa’s theory of emotions (2013) appears close to James when he writes that “emotions are not so much perceptions as they are ways of seeing—species of determinate patterns of salience among objects of attention, lines of inquiry, and inferential strategies.”

James' chapter, *The Emotions* follows his chapter, *Instinct*. Instincts and emotions are two classes of impulses, and both have a physiological basis in the sense of their general causes. "*Every object that excites an instinct excites and emotion, as well":* Emotions in this way “are continuous with instinct, but the class of emotional impulses is larger than that of instinctive impulses.[[19]](#footnote-19) James also thought that despite the continuity, emotion attaches to more objects than instinct, and emotion plays a less direct role in explaining behaviors. It played a less direct role in part because emotional reactions are often excited by objects with which we have no practical dealings, for instance, aesthetic appreciation of an art piece. "Its stimuli are more numerous, and its expressions and more internal and delicate and often less practical."[[20]](#footnote-20)

So while James focuses much more on the coarser emotions, James certainly allows that people can reflect upon their emotions, and do not necessarily act upon them. That emotion does not cause behavior directly is supported not only by James’ distinction between emotion and instinct, but also by that between the *study* of emotion versus the study of behavior/action. So while courser emotions including anger and hate can quickly incite violent actions, the subtler emotions are less the “primitive emotional species” that we associate with instincts and reflex actions. What we have is a continuum of more to less direct impact on action, and it is for some of the same reasons that James *always* refers to a coarser-subtler *spectrum* rather than employing a more demonstrative coarse/subtle *distinction*. This would also seem to allow recognition, as Ellsworth wants, that emotion plays a vital role in cognition, but that cognition can also play a major, initiating role in emotion; an experienced emotion can occur due to a blind reflex action *or* as a result of cognitive appraisal.

That James primarily used “emotion” in a narrowly-defined sense to refer to emotional feelings and their physiological causes seemed to serve his purposes, but also had the unfortunate effect of inviting his critics to say that he ignores many functions of subtler emotions in mental life. James’ theory is then classified as a “feelings theory” theorist, and the whole class of theories is tagged as untenably reductionist, allowing emotion to be an epiphenomenal affect serving no functions. James’ full theory of emotion on a charitable reading allows that the function of emotion consists in motivating an organism to contend with the challenges of its environment. James clarifies this misunderstanding in his later paper, “The Physiological Basis of Emotion” (1894), at the same time responding directly to a critic who objected that in admitting subtler forms of emotion. James ‘throws away his whole case.’ This is a complete Straw Man, James responds, the imagined ‘case’ referring to a theory quite other than his own: “all that I ever maintained being the dependence on incoming currents of the emotional seizure or Affect.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

Passages such as these add to Barbalet’s response to the charge that James gave no weight to the process of evaluating mentally the situation that causes the emotion. To Ellsworth they also suggest that cognition and appraisal play a far greater role in James’ theory than his critics allow. But isn’t a "judicial state of mind ... classed among awarenesses of truth," and thus *independent* of somatic initiation or influence? Aren’t our judgments of neat, right, witty, generous, and the like, intellectual perception of how certain things are to be called? No, here James insists otherwise. He does intend to undermine a certain cognitivist, folk psychological view that this notion suggests: As if consciousness were only cognitive! He admits looking back at *Principles* that his language might be thought to suggest a more thoroughly biological or behavioristic account than he intended, but claims that all that he had insisted upon there was that the body’s sounding board is still among the “ingredients” of the subtler emotions: "As a matter of fact, however, the moral and intellectual cognitions hardly ever do exist thus unaccompanied**.** The bodily sounding-board is at work, as careful introspection will show, far more than we usually supposed."[[22]](#footnote-22)

Consciousness of selfhood allows for the development of character and the ability to more consciously control habits and emotional impulses. James and Dewey shared a recognition of the importance to personal identity of the emotional imagination, and with it, the moral imagination as well. *"An emotional temperament on the one hand, and the lively imagination for objects and circumstances on the other, are thus the conditions, necessary and sufficient, for an abundant emotional life*."[[23]](#footnote-23)James does seem to hint, though again not explore, how the subtler emotions enable moral awareness or mindfulness, for he finds them vital to the redirection of attention, and to determination of salience. Attention for James also involves imagination and anticipation.

Unfortunately, James restricts the discussion to this and a few other generalities about the subtler emotions. Temperament and its sway over cognition and action is of course explored in his philosophical papers, but if one is looking in *Principles* for something akin to a direct discussion of strong emotional temperament or its effects on the moral life they will probably be disappointed. James stops with a few seemingly motivational lines about how our bad habits and immoderate inclinations can be brought under self-control. There is a kind of "mindfulness" message in James's allusion to emotional development: "Refuse to express a passion, and it dies. Count ten before venting your anger, and its occasion seems ridiculous."[[24]](#footnote-24) Even while experiencing anger, we can develop the self-control to "assiduously, and in the first instance, cold – bloodedly, go through the *outward movements* of those contrary dispositions which we prefer to cultivate." This aids both self-control in the instant. Over the longer term, the construction of valuable habits is needed "if we wish to conquer undesirable emotional tendencies in ourselves.”[[25]](#footnote-25)

 While the idea of emotional temperament focuses on the individual, James did not neglect the social affections or the social aspects of selfhood. Evolutionary ethics tends to rest everything on the survival of the individual, but in asserting that the mind and its environment evolve together, James understood environment in terms of a social or relational self.[[26]](#footnote-26) The social affections allow survival as "only one out of many interests…. To the individual man, as a social being, the interests of his fellows are part of his environment."[[27]](#footnote-27) This helps us to see that moral emotions are objects of emotional learning, and 20th century moral psychology has concerned itself far more with moral development than psychology in James’ day.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Pragmatist approaches in ethics highlight the importance of the moral imagination and moral ideals. Many of the most complex moral emotions rely upon social-emotional intelligence, and the capacity to put oneself in a point of view other than one's own. The differences James finds between individuals include this ability to harness one’s imagination: “No matter how emotional the temperament may be, if imagination be poor, the occasions for touching off the emotional trains will fail to be realized, and the life will be *pro-tonto* cold and dry.”[[29]](#footnote-29) And in the *Imagination* chapter itself, even though it is not much concerned with the motion, James notes, “how unexpectedly great are the differences between individuals in respect of imagination.”[[30]](#footnote-30) James’s notion of intellectual and emotional “temperament” is all that is needed to make a further substantial connection with the value of the moral imagination to ethical judgment.

Enactivists like Daniel Hutto overlap with pragmatism in emphasizing connections between moral development and narrativity. As Hutto puts it, the emotions “have a kind of structure that is ripe with narration”[[31]](#footnote-31) We make sense of our own actions and those of others by placing them in a narrative. We forge continuity between our past, present, and future selves in the same way.[[32]](#footnote-32)

**4. James and the New Sentimentalists**

A final question to raise in this paper is how far the moral psychology of emotionists like Prinz and social intuitionists like Haidt can be used to show the continued relevance and influence of some of James’ core ideas about emotion.

The neo-Jamesian character of “New Sentimentalist” thought is firstly evidenced in the claim that Haidt and Prinz make, that experiments in ethics reveal a story of 'the emotional dog and its rational tail.' This thesis is one that Humeans and pragmatists earlier propounded. It is interesting to see how James, Haidt, and Prinz each use psychology as a challenge to the ambitions of hard universalist normative ethical theories. Utilitarianism and deontology both expect the moral agent to deliberate when faced with an ethically charged situation, and to apply certain principles understood as universal dictates of reason. In the construction of morals, sentimentalism generally challenges the rationalist preference for cool principles over passionate engagement. Haidt’s social intuitionism and Prinz’s emotionism differ in their understanding of human moral psychology, but both see emotions guiding ethical judgments, and emotional and social competence or intelligence rather than deliberation as main drivers of ethical decision-making. Prinz thinks that, "If we could replace our passionate rules with cool principles, they would be hideous consequences...we would risk becoming indifferent to the needs of distant others….Sentiments are better suited for the regulation of behavior than any dispassionate alternative. They are the safeguards against vicious indifference….Sentiments are better suited for the regulation of behavior than any dispassionate alternative."[[33]](#footnote-33)

Prinz and the Haidt are both concerned with how habits of numbing or suppressing emotion can easily impair moral reflection. James, who had a keen interest in abnormal psychology, understood connections between certain pathological personalities and missing or deviant emotional responses. Valuing moral emotions balances and provides counterpoint to what Prinz describes as the ills of 'detached analysis.' A prime example of both this point and the previous may be the trolley footbridge scenario in well-known Trolley Problem experiments on moral decision-making. A comparison of the “pull a lever” and “push a person from a footbridge” scenarios shows that "diminishing the emotional intensity of the method of killing doubles the approval rate."[[34]](#footnote-34) A second source of support for this conclusion comes from variations where they language of description not being one’s first language, also dramatically increases the approval rate for pushing a random bystander to his death with the intention of saving five others. So presumably it is a good thing if emotions rise up and stand in the way of an over-easy act utilitarian calculus that might indicate the rightness of pushing the stranger from the bridge.

Psychologists note the emotion-center engagement of those who pull back from the deed, due to the emotional dread or horror of actually pushing a person to their apparent death. This is why ‘happy pushers’ wind up higher on psychological gauges of psychopathological tendencies, rather than appearing as poster-children for utilitarian ‘impartiality.’ James, anyway, understood Mill’s utilitarianism too well to mistake it for an individual’s rational decision-procedure. But by trading in Benthamite hedonistic calculus and Millian utilitarianism for a simpler casuistic practice animated by the claims and demands of actual stakeholders, James again marks his break from the ambitions of modernist normative ethical theory.

Of course, the psychological study of emotion in moral-decision-making is not one-sided. Psychologists have shown conclusively that too much dependence on emotions leads to confusing ethical judgments with what personally disgusts us (the ‘yuck factor’), while too little engagement of emotions correlates with tendencies to disregard moral rules and perhaps even to be constitutively unable to be concerned with the welfare of others.

The social aspect of Haidt’s social intuitionism emphasizes that we “bind” intellectually or ideologically into groups, after which group dynamics appear which often lead to creating us/them polarities. *Binding can thus be blinding*: Binding serves positive functions, but also results in a kind of partiality as we learn to see things in terms of the particular intuitions or moral ideals with which our chosen group bonds. In terms of the analysis of political discourse in the United States that this yields, neither the political left nor the political right is necessarily more ethically principled, although they prioritize ethical values and symbols in divergent ways. An example that Haidt develops is the contrast between liberal and "equality of outcome" and conservative "equity of rewards of and punishments." These are competing ideals of fairness, the one emphasizing distributive justice, and the other merit, and rewarding the deserving.

Haidt's social intuitionism reintroduces something like temperament into the study of ethical differences, and powerfully extends it to the analysis of political orientations, left and right. It should be remembered that, as for Haidt, temperament for James clearly encompassed social influences and group affiliations. While James does not refer to intuitions very often, he does take a quite holistic view the passions and emotions that inspire religious and ethical "overbeliefs." The most direct connection may be to the role James gives to "temperament" in explaining philosophical and religious disagreement, and in defense of a moderate fideism in which faith is “the greeting of our whole nature to a kind of world conceived as well adapted to that nature.”[[35]](#footnote-35) Here James in his usual way restricts himself to personal attitudes. Although he had great insights on personal religiosity, etc., it is perhaps unfortunate for contemporary readers that he never progressed to discuss social and institutional religion to anywhere near the same extent. James saw emotions energizing moral agency, and Haidt’s social intuitionism can perhaps be taken as showing how what James calls the strenuous mood is motivated in diverse ways by conservatives and liberals.

*Gut Reactions* (2004) develops Prinz’s theory of emotion, and *The Emotional Construction of Morals* (2007) engages issues at the intersection of empirical psychology and metaethics. In *Gut Reactions* Prinz develops what he calls an *embodied appraisal theory* of emotion that marries James-Lange somatic theory with aspects of an appraisal and perceptual theories, both of which there may be some textual basis for in James’ writings.[[36]](#footnote-36) Emotions for Prinz are perceptions in the double sense that they are states within systems dedicated to detecting bodily changes, but also, through the body, they carry information and appraisal regarding one’s situation. This claim that emotions are perceptions, when separated from certain intellectualist assumptions, “falls out” of any somatic theory. Contrary to much conventional wisdom, emotions also qualify as appraisals: They carry information, representing "organism-environment” relational themes bearing on well-being. They are valenced, implicitly appraising concerns in one’s physical or social environment by registering a pattern of physiological responses. The claimthat "emotions are also appraisals, insofar as they represent concerns, as standard cognitive theories maintain"[[37]](#footnote-37) seems foreign to James-Lange, but “means that an emotion can be unwarranted or warranted." That as appraisals, emotions are valenced and are generally experienced with a positive or negative character, Prinz thinks, helps to explain motivation.

*Embodied appraisal theory* is intended to reconcile a long–standing debate between those who say emotions are cognitive and those who say they are noncognitive. Embodied cognitive theory is built to allow both views and even to deflate the philosophical importance attached to that contrast. Although the intellectualism of the original appraisal theory is rejected, Prinz balances the effects of nature and nurture: "We are products of culture and experience, not just biology…culture and history are essential to an understanding of who we are and how we think and act."[[38]](#footnote-38)

In *The Emotional Construction of Morals,* Prinz goes further in mediating the debate between evolutionary psychologists and social constructionists. Prinz calls his view emotionism, or more formally, *constructivist sentimentalism.* Prinz’s emotionist account of moral decision – making picks up his embodied appraisal theory, but goes much further into philosophical issues. He argues that moral values are based on emotional responses, and that these emotional responses are inculcated by culture, not hard-wired through natural selection. Building emotionism on a non-cognitive theory of moral emotions is meant to establish the priority of emotions and sentiments over any more universal moral criteria. The only ground to unify moral properties are our emotional reactions. On a metaethical level, Prinz presents moral properties as response – dependent properties.

These views, which fall into what James called moral metaphysics, we need not pursue further. But I want do want to highlight one strong overlap with James regarding the new sentimentalist use of experiments in ethics to challenge the ambitions of hard universalist normative ethical theories. The limits of normative ethical theories, whether based upon track record or empirical studies in moral psychology, is a shared theme of James, Dewey, Haidt, and Prinz. Not just a failed track record of establishing the correct theory, but also empirical work on how people actually make moral judgments can lead to skepticism about the pretentions of normative ethical theory. From a pragmatist perspective we can certainly appreciate Prinz's conclusion that "there is no single litmus test for moral progress" and that we need to acknowledge a plurality of standards of assessments for morality. The great normative ethical theories "are stunningly elegant and ambitious... [But] they are ambitious to a fault. Human morality is multifaceted. We have a range of different rules that cannot be unified under any single principle."[[39]](#footnote-39)

If James is sometimes criticized for not saying enough about how emotions affect the moral judgments, the critic must realize that James is affirming this connection while at the same time rejecting the Kantian tradition and its whole way of approaching a so-called metaphysics of morals. James’s sentimentalism, grounded in his psychological studies, leads to viewing ethics as more perspectival and situational than normative ethical theories like Kant’s typically insist it must be in order for moral agents to be rational, and in order for their actions to have moral worth. If, as sentimentalists assert, morals are emotionally based, then people lacking strong emotions should be blind to the moral domain. That psychopaths turn out to suffer from profound emotional deficits, deficits that lead them to treat moral rules and principles as mere conventions, supports the sentimentalist contention that emotions are necessary for making moral judgments. None of this means that reasoning is irrelevant to morality, but it shows that emotional or social intelligence are crucial to ethical development and that deliberation based upon master principles may not be. Contrary to their treatment in the Enlightenment style normative ethics, moral emotions and emotional sensitivities can be seen as necessary aspects of moral agency/competence.

Psychology can ask about the origins of our moral ideas and moral judgments, but psychology’s questions are different from those of metaphysics and casuistry. James does not reduce moral motivation to a biological affair. But James’s skepticism about the ambitions of Kantian duty ethics and other universalist normative ethical theories is indicated by his replacement of them with what he calls the casuistic question. What complements or alternatives are there to “horatory” ethics, ethics which appeals to moral ideals and motivations? James we saw asserting that “the physiological study of mental conditions is thus the most powerful ally of horatory ethics.”

In James’ casuistry, we can ask how we should take each other’s aims into account, and to rank our claims alongside theirs, but James is skeptical of the claims of ethical philosophies to articulate what Alan Ryan calls **“**a ‘point of view of the universe’ which would yield the answer that a holy rational agent with except as binding on himself.”[[40]](#footnote-40)“Why be moral?” does not appear to be a question that philosophy can answer in some knock-down, logically compelling way.Skeptical about the ambitions of normative ethical theory, James opts for an arbitration, a mediation between stakeholders with their own ineliminable interests and perspectives. In “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” James also insists that philosophers have no special authority or expertise when they venture to say which course of action is best. They are no different from other people in how they react to moral situations, “so far as we are just and sympathetic instinctively, and so far as we are open to the voice of complaint”— receptive to the cries of the wounded. Here is another aspect of Jamesian sentimentalism, as an alternative to the passive and intellectualist conceptions of agency inherited from Kant and the Enlightenment.

In conclusion, then, the work of empirically-based “new sentimentalist” writers like Haidt and Prinz meshes pretty well with pragmatist ethics and makes interesting use of key aspects of James’ theory of emotion. The authors recognize that, as pragmatists like Stuart Rosenbaum put it, our moral ideals must be concrete, not abstract; “They must be psychologically available to ordinary individuals, not an achievement of reason or theory.”[[41]](#footnote-41) One need not embrace whole hog the sentimentalist thesis of ‘the emotional dog and its rational tail’ to allow that empirical studies of emotion and moral judgment strongly confirm the Jamesian and Dewey critique of the ambitions of hard universalist normative ethics.

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1. James (1981)[1890], 1058. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. James (1994) [1894], 205. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ellsworth (1994), 227. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ellsworth (1994), 228. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ellsworth (1994), 224. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. James (1884), 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Barbalet (1999), 254. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. James (1981), 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Barbalet (1999), 262. James quoted from *Varieties,* 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Damasio (1994), 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. James (1981)*,* 247. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. James (1981)*,* 235; see also 246. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Daniel D. Hutto (2012), 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. James (1981), 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. James (1981), 126. This claim seems to me in tension with other claims James makes, that “the physiological study of mental conditions is thus the most powerful ally of horatory ethics and that James’s suggestion that foregrounding the background would be a superfluous complication is arguably inconsistent here with his own better pragmatic maxim telling us that any one experience “must be sifted and tested, and run the gauntlet of confrontation with the total context of experience, just like what comes from the outer world of sense.” (1985)[1901], 311). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Schusterman (2008), 220. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie (eds.)(2011), , especially pgs. xxviiix-xxx. This nerve when it fires releases oxytocin to the mirror neurons at witnessing a compassionate act, causing us to simulate and to literally feel another person’s joy almost instantaneously. Given James’ interest in para-psychology research, a contemporary James might even be intrigued by soma-based Heartmath, with its thesis that human emotions emit a very real physical field, and that not brain activity but heart rhythms stand out as the most dynamic factor related to experience of inner emotional states. These physiological states according to some new-age spiritual groups, present another subliminal door, besides that of mystical experience, onto our connectedness with other living things, and so with “a wider world of being than that of our everyday consciousness” (James, (1985), 523-4). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. James (1981)*,* 1082. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. James (1981), 1058. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. James (1981), 1058. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. James (1994) [1894], 208, note 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. James (1981)*,* 1085. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. James (1981), 1088. See also 704. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. James (1884), 197. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. James (1884), 198. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. See Richardson (2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. James (1878), 182. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. See also Morton (2013).James and Dewey's recognition of moral imagination is amplified by Morton’s study of emotion and imagination, especially where he writes that we *should not* “take "complex emotions, particularly moral approval and condemnation, at face value, [but rather] see how they can result from really basic emotions – anger, fear, discussed, hope – gathered and structured in terms of our ability to imagine from different points of view" (87). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. James (1981),1088. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. James (1981), 704. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Daniel D. Hutto (2006), 17. Radman (2012), for example, writes, “it is not unaided and uneducated; it has a reason of its own that resides in the ‘knowing body’ and is manifested in the automatism of routine and in complex mental acts no less than in most simple movements.” (xi). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. . For Hutto and other philosophers of emotion like Peter Goldie, the thoughts and feelings in which an emotion is embedded typically have not only a somatic dimension, but a narrative one as well. See Hutto, from Menand (2006), 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Prinz (2007), 307-308. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Prinz (2007, 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. James (1988), 414. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. James held that, "Not a cognition occurs, the feeling is there to comment on it, to step it as a greater or lesser worth." Quoted from Richardson (2006), 183. See also Ellsworth. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Prinz (2007), 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Prinz (2012), 365. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Prinz (2007), 304. This is quite similar to Dewey's claim about their being multiple sources or springs of moral value, and how this undermines viewing normative ethical theories as competing for a single, uniquely correct decision procedure. Dewey perhaps developed this from James’ similar but less developed claim that while “various essences of good” have been propounded as *the* base for a unitary system of ethics, none have proven satisfactory (1956)[1891], 200. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Ryan (2013), 223. “James was hostile to premature tidiness in any field of inquiry, and may have thought that ethics was a field where tidiness came a poor second to richness of sympathy….[D]ifferent ideals pull us in different directions and…no uniquely rational resolution of the conflict is to be had in Jamesian thought.” (224). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Rosenbaum (1987), 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)