Jamesian Pluralism
and Moral Conflict

While most pragmatists view themselves as pluralists of one sort or another, Talisse and Aikin (hereafter "T&A") argue that the two views are, in fact, "not compatible" (T&A, p. 2). However, while their charge may be true of the types of pluralism that they consider, these pluralisms all presuppose a type of realism about value that the pragmatic pluralist need not accept. In what follows, I'll argue that the 'non-realist' account of value that one finds in James underwrites a type of pluralism that is both substantial and compatible with pragmatism.

When T&A argue for the incompatibility of pragmatism and pluralism, they have in mind mainly what they call "deep pluralism" which offers "an ontological account of the persistence of moral dispute" (p. 102), and as they put it:

> According to the ontological account, the moral facts are *themselves* in conflict; consequently there is a number of true moral propositions that nonetheless do not form a consistent set. Hence even a cognitively perfect being ... must confront moral conflict. Given this, to expect moral consensus among mere humans is unreasonable. (p. 102)

> Deep pluralism ... is generally the prescriptive outcome of a strong ontological account of value conflict. Given that conflict is interminable and built into the very fabric of moral reality, one must adopt a kind of agonistic attitude toward all values, where there could be no moral reason to adopt any view over another. That is, the deep pluralist lives in a world where conflicts among goods are arational and consequently often violent, and the only prescription could be to secure or protect one's own values. (p. 103)

T&A argue that pragmatists can't be deep pluralists of this sort because such deep pluralism treats each conflicting viewpoint as "static and perfect" and thus not subject to criticism or correction (T&A, p. 109). Deep pluralism is thus in conflict with pragmatist commitments to falibilism and the importance of

inquiry.

T&A consider another type of pluralism with which pragmatism is compatible, namely, the 'shallow' pluralism that takes disagreement over values to have an *epistemic* rather than ontological explanation. There may be facts of the matter relating to moral disagreements, but neither party in moral dispute might be subject to criticism because the questions are so complex that human beings might not ever be capable of settling them. T&A, however, consider such a view to be "pluralism in name only", since the kind of pluralism it endorses (which includes a monism about the moral *facts*) could be accepted by writers such as Plato and Descartes, neither of whom should count as pluralists (p. 111). Consequently, if shallow pluralism is the only kind of pluralism that the pragmatist can endorse, then pragmatists are not 'really' pluralists at all.

However the dilemma offered between deep and shallow pluralism[1] is one that the pragmatist need not accept. Indeed, given pragmatism's tendency to tie together epistemic and ontological questions, it should not be surprising that a pragmatist might seek a way of understanding the persistence of moral disagreement that is neither purely epistemic nor purely ontological. Indeed, James's pluralism is not only compatible with his pragmatism, but also instructively different from the varieties of pluralism that T&A consider. In what follows, I'll outline what I take to be some of the main features of a Jamesian story about value,[2] and while I won't defend the view in any detail, I hope to show how a Jamesian approach to moral disagreement is different from the more traditional epistemic or ontological explanation mentioned above.

First of all, for James, values are *produced* by our practice of valuing, and this 'constructivist' assumption behind James' pluralism, contrasts sharply with both the "unabashed moral realism" of the deep pluralist (p. 107) and the implicit moral realism of the shallow pluralist. In spite of this comparative lack of realism about value, James still insists that our values purport to be "objective". While values are constructed out of our valuations, they are meant to be more than simply expressions of our preferences. Value judgments aspire to be truth-apt, and because of this, any set of valuations can be criticized for being inconsistent (either with other valuations or our beliefs about the world). Further, an ethical system, coherent or not, will not reach a stable equilibrium if the people embodying it are not satisfied living the life that it dictates. An adequate ethical theory must fit the grain of our "ethical experience". Valuations must be brought into "wide" reflective equilibrium, and they only succeed in being true if they eventually do so.

While a valuation only becomes true by becoming part of a stable equilibrium, there is no guarantee that any particular set of valuations has a *single* equilibrium accessible to it. It *may* be that there is a single set of values that our current valuations would inevitably lead to if its inconsistencies were removed, but it is equally possible that (1) there is *no* equilibrium available to our current set of valuations,[3] or (2) there are *many* such equilibria available. This latter

possibility is true both because there may be multiple starting points (different individuals or cultures may start with different sets of valuations), and because there may be multiple, equally good, ways to make a single set of starting valuations consistent. Consistency may put severe constraints on what possible sets of valuations can truly be said to reflect values, but there is no guarantee that there need only be just one set of consistent valuations. The Jamesian pragmatist is thus committed to a type of "meta-ethical fallibilism". We are practically committed to reaching an equilibrium for our valuations, but there is no guarantee that we (or anyone else) will do so. Our faith in the existence of *any* such equilibria is, in James's terms, a "will to believe" option.[4]

The process of constructing values out of valuation becomes considerably harder if one believes, as James does, that values need to be consistent within a valuing community. A single, completely isolated individual could produce values simply by finding an equilibrium involving his own demands, but such a "moral solitude"[5] changes radically when other agents are added to the scene. One could have a type of "twin solitude" if the two agents didn't take any interest in each other (and didn't recognize each other as moral agents at all), but barring that, recognition and interaction involves trying to bring the combined set of demands into equilibrium.[6] That is to say, members of a single community can't individually reach different equilibria, since the presence of alternatives disequilibriates the whole. When there is a conflict between alternative ways of making things consistent, it is not that *both* are adequate, but rather that, in the face of each other, *neither* are.

Finally, for James, humans are "plastic" in the sense that their demands and preferences can be partially shaped by the environment that they are brought up in. Consequently, a set of possible values that may go against the grain for one group may be adopted quite naturally by another. This fact may make pluralism about values considerably more intractable than simple pluralism about theoretical matters. For the theoretical pluralist, the world has a (comparatively) fixed grain that alternative theories must all match. Rival theories are just different ways of describing the same thing. By contrast, for the practical pluralist, an important part of the world's grain shapes itself to fit the theories, so two possibly adequate theories need not be, as it were, "practically equivalent."[7] The "direction of fit" between values and the world goes two ways. A system of values must be rejected if it clashes too deeply with our demands, but our demands can, to a certain extent, be molded to fit the system.

This is only to highlight a few aspects of what I take to be a Jamesian view, and I won't present or defend it here in more detail,[8] but this should be enough to show how, whatever other faults it may have, a Jamesian moral pluralism is neither deep nor shallow in T&A's suggested sense.

First of all, unlike the deep pluralist, the Jamesian pluralist does not offer an ontological account of value that allows that there could be conflicting moral *truths*. If two valuations conflict, at least one of them must fail to be true. This

does not however, entail the sort of monism that leaves the pragmatist with only a "shallow" pluralism that explains the conflict in values as being merely "epistemic". This is because, while conflicting valuations cannot both be true, they can both be in a position to *become* true. That is to say, there may be two possible equilibria for our collective moral practice, and each one, if actualized, would make true one of the conflicting valuations. However, since only *one* of the possible equilibria can be made actual, the conflicting valuations can't both be true.

Even if we reach a stable community-wide equilibrium, we can recognize that there might have been other sets of values that *could* have been true, though possibly not *true for us*. As mentioned above, human plasticity allows value-systems to shape us in a way that reduces the "pinch" between our inclinations and what we ought to do. This gives us another sense in which competing value systems really are incompatible: they are not just alternative perspectives on a shared world, because each may require, to reach equilibrium, that we be shaped in different ways.

The Jamesian pluralist is thus committed to the possibility of their being no pre-existing fact of the matter when we are faced with some moral disputes, and thus that there may be no purely reason-based ways to settle some moral disputes, with consensus only being reachable by one party "converting" the other. However, it isn't clear why such a bullet cannot be bitten since, unlike T&A's deep pluralist, the pragmatist need not take any *actual* moral systems to be immune from rational criticism. Given that one cannot be sure, indeed given that we have good reason to doubt, that our own moral views are in equilibrium, we still have the sort of openness to others associated with shallow pluralism in place. Currently endorsed moral systems may all be inadequate, but each of them may emphasize demands that a fully adequate moral system must take account of. Consequently, an openness to all of them may be the best policy.[9] Something like the "agonistic" attitude would only be justified if we could be assured that *neither* party in a moral dispute had an equilibrium accessible to it, and we have no reason to make such an assumption.

It is important to note that this presentation of a Jamesian pluralism is not *simply* a version of the defense that "'pluralism' *as pragmatists employ the term* does not fit in [T&A's] proposed taxonomy" (T&A, p. 112). Unlike the version of the retort that T&A consider, which just takes "pluralism" to be a blanket term for various virtues such as "experimentalism, inclusion, openness, and contextualism", the Jamesian moral pluralism proposed here itself suggests what is problematic with the sort of deep and shallow pluralisms that T&A take to dominate the literature. The sort of pragmatic pluralism outlined above suggests that both sides of the deep/shallow divide are undermotivated, in that neither the purely ontological nor the purely epistemic explanation can be taken to follow from the seemingly intractable nature of disagreements about value.

The fact that there is comparatively blameless disagreement may be a starting

point in thinking about ethical conflict. However, both the shallow pluralist (who assumes that a consensus must be, in principle, reachable, and the explanation of disagreement is just epistemic) and the deep pluralist (who assumes that both sides of the dispute represent *objective* values) make substantial assumptions about ethical ontology that the pragmatist does not. The disagreement *may* be merely epistemic, or there *may* be incompatible equilibria accessible, but there is no *a priori* reason to be assured of either.

The Jamesian explanation of value conflict is thus a mix of the epistemic and ontological. The explanation is ontological in the sense that there may be no current fact of the matter that would make one of the disputants mistaken. It is "epistemic", in the sense that, for all we know, there may just be one equilibrium available to us, and that one of the valuations could never turn out to be true, but for all we know, neither might be supportable, or possibly even both. Meta-ethical falliblism prevents the Jamesian pluralist from giving firm answers to questions about the sorts of facts that lie behind moral disputes.

In conclusion, while I agree that deep pluralism is inconsistent with pragmatism, I also think that the Jamesian framework highlights what is wrong with such deep pluralism and the realist framework that it presupposes.

York University
hjackman@york.edu

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NOTES

1.   I'll skip any discussion of *modus vivendi* pluralism, though given its ontological underpinnings, it will suffer from the faults that I will attribute to deep pluralism.

2.   Particularly in "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" in James 1896. Elements of this account are presented and defended in more detail in Jackman 1998, 2004, and forthcoming.

3.   Of course there will always be sets of merely *possible* valuations that could reach an equilibrium, but sets of *merely* possible valuations, consistent or not, do not produce values. Consequently, the Jamesian is only talking about possible equilibria that could realistically grow out of our own valuations.

4.   For a discussion of this, see Jackman 1999, 2004, forthcoming.

5.   James 1896, p. 146.

6.   James 1896, p. 146-7.

7.   This is, in James' terms, one of those areas where we are "makers" rather than merely "recorders" of truths.

8.   Though, once again, see Jackman 1998, 1999, 2004, forthcoming.

9.   Further, if all of the current ethical systems are only partial and inadequate when viewed globally, then there may be reason to move from one to another depending on one's context, since different systems may deal better with different parts of our ethical experience. (Compare the sort of pluralism that follows from James's instrumentalism about our general theories of the world in his *Pragmatism* (James 1907)).