WILLIAM JAMES ON MORAL PHILOSOPHY AND ITS REGULATIVE IDEALS

Henry Jackman
York University
hjackman@yorku.ca

2018 WILLIAM JAMES SOCIETY
PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

James's "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" sheds light not only on his views on ethics but also on his general approach to objectivity. Indeed, the paper is most interesting not for the ethical theory it defends but for its general openness to the possibility of our ethical claims lacking objective truth conditions at all. James will turn out to have a very demanding account of what it would take to construct something like objective ethical norms out of more naturalistically respectable material such as our evaluative practices, but in doing so, he also faces up to the possibility that this objectivity is something we may fail to achieve. This comparatively pessimistic prospect in turn explains his surprising pivot toward the divine at the end of the "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" (MPML) James's appeal to the divine is characteristically idiosyncratic, however, and this paper will attempt to explain how it fits in with the more generally naturalistic framework that dominates the rest of the paper.

William James was a phenomenally successful public speaker. He consistently drew large crowds, and those crowds were appreciative enough that when he gave a series of lectures, the size of the audience often increased as the series progressed.[1] Still, he was not immune to having a presentation fall flat, and perhaps his most well-known public misfire was his delivery of "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" (hereafter "MPML")[2] to the Yale Philosophical Club in February of 1891. He wrote the next week to his brother Henry:

> I gave the address last Monday to an audience of about a hundred, absolutely mute. Professor Ladd, who was my host, did not by a single syllable elude the to the address after it was delivered, either on our walk home or the following morning. Apparently it was unmentionable.[3]

In spite of its initial reception, MPML is an incredibly rich, if occasionally frustrating, paper that sheds light not only on James's views on ethics but also on his general approach to objectivity. Indeed, it will be argued here that the paper is most interesting not for the ethical theory it defends but for its general openness to what I'll here call "semantic fallibilism" in the ethical realm. The fallibilism here is "semantic," rather than merely "epistemic," because it relates to whether we may be mistaken not only about whether our claims are true but also about whether they have objective truth conditions at all.[4]

One the most important themes in James's writing (and life) is the problem of finding a place for value in a world that seems increasingly to demand a purely naturalistic understanding, and for most of us this problem has always been the most salient with *ethical* values. James will turn out to have a very demanding account of what it would take to construct something like objective ethical norms out of more naturalistically respectable material such as our evaluative practices, but in doing so he also faces up to the possibility that this objectivity is something we may fail to achieve. This comparatively pessimistic prospect in turn explains his surprising pivot toward the divine at the end of the paper. This

ultimate appeal to the divine can seem hard to reconcile with the more naturalistic approach that dominates most of MPML, but James's appeal to the divine is characteristically idiosyncratic, and the following will attempt to explain how these naturalistic and theistic aspects of James's paper mesh together.

MORAL OBJECTIVITY AND THE METAPHYSICAL QUESTION
The problem of the objectivity of our moral claims relates most centrally to that part of ethics which James characterizes as focusing on "the metaphysical question." This question "asks what the very *meaning* of the words 'good,' 'ill,' and 'obligation' are" and is as much "metaphysical" as "semantic" since James takes it primarily to be an analysis of the potential truth-makers of our moral claims.[5] The metaphysical question will be our primary focus here, though the other two questions of ethics, the psychological question (which "asks after the historical *origin* of our moral ideas and judgments"), and the casuistic question (which "asks what is the *measure* of the various goods and ills which men recognize"), will come up when needed to shed light on James's answer to the metaphysical one.[6]

James starts his investigation into the metaphysical question with the assumption that moral terms "can have no application or relevancy in a world in which no sentient life exists," since:

> Goodness, badness, and obligation must be *realized* somewhere in order really to exist; and the first step in Ethical Philosophy is to see that no merely inorganic "nature of things" can realize them. Neither moral relations nor the moral law can swing *in vacuo*. Their only habitat can be a mind which feels them; and no world composed of merely physical facts can possibly be a world to which ethical propositions apply.[7]

Once he rejects the possibility of free-floating ethical facts, James needs another way to ground value, and he thinks we can do this by understanding values as dependent upon our practice of valuing. As he puts it:

> *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. Claim and obligation are, in other words, coextensive terms; they cover each other exactly. . . . [E]very *de facto* claim creates in so far forth an obligation.[8]

James plays notoriously free and easy with what is doing the constitutive work here. In the passage above, and in a number of others, he speaks of our "claims," but he also writes (often on the same page) of our "desires," "demands," "ideals," and our "likes and dislikes" as doing this work as well.[9] Still, all of these states have a "world-to-mind" direction of fit, and it is this direction of fit itself, rather than its particular manifestation, that most interests James.

Everything demanded is thus at least *prima facie* good, but the question remains of how, given that demands often conflict, we can get an objective sense of what is good all things considered. This project would be comparatively manageable if there was just one demander, since a single, completely isolated individual could produce objective values simply by finding an equilibrium involving their own demands. As James puts it:

The moment one sentient being, however, is made part of the universe, there is a chance for goods and evils really to exist. Moral relations now have their *status*, in that being's consciousness. So far as he feels anything to be good, he *makes* it good. It *is* good, for him; and being good for him, is absolutely good, for he is the sole creator of values in that universe, and outside of his opinion things have no moral character at all. . . . Let us call the supposed universe which he inhabits a *moral solitude*. In such a moral solitude it is clear that there can be no outward obligation, and that the only trouble the God-like thinker is likely to have will be over the consistency of his own several ideals with each other . . . Into whatever equilibrium he may settle, though, and however he may straighten out his system, it will be a right system; for beyond the facts of his own subjectivity, there is nothing moral in the world.[10]

For the moral solitude, then, values can be understood as objective in terms of their being part of the optimal set that comes from bringing all of their demands into equilibrium.[11] The question

becomes, then, how this model of the solitary demander can be made to apply more broadly.

In particular, it is hard to see how this simple account of objectivity can be preserved when we move from the moral solitude to a situation with multiple demanders. James notes that "the ethical situation becomes much more complex" when even a second demander is added, but this seriously understates the problems that come up when his model is extended.[12] When the moral solitude sees a conflict among their demands, they will naturally endorse the pruning of demands needed to produce consistency, since they are, after all, the one doing the pruning. However, when you have a pair of demanders with conflicting demands, such a happy resolution is harder to achieve, since each would often be happiest if their demands were satisfied at the expense of the other's.

Still, it is not *impossible* for a pair to achieve the sort of harmony that the moral solitude is able to achieve, and James describes such a pair as follows:

> Were all other things, gods and men and starry heavens blotted out from this solar system, 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 can harbor . . . while they lived, there would be real good things and real bad things in the universe, there would be obligations, claims, and expectations; obediences, refusals, and disappointments; compunctions and longings for harmony to come again, and inward peace of conscience when it was restored; there would, in short, be a moral life, whose active energy would have no limit but the intensity of interest in each other with which the hero and heroine might be endowed.[13]

It is not insignificant that James describes the pair of souls here as "loving" since it is in precisely such loving relationships that multiple people can reach the sort of equilibrium more readily available to the solitary thinker. We may happily give up our immediate preferences in the face of the demands of those we love, and we can demand something ourselves solely because we find it demanded by our beloved. The sort of compromise made by the

loving pair is fully endorsed by each of the two and thus doesn't *feel* like a compromise at all. If a stranger and I need to share a single piece of pie, we may agree to split it, while both wishing we could have the entire thing, but a pair of loving souls (while they still might wish that the pie was larger) will more fully endorse the split, since neither would be happy if the other was left wanting. The fact that they *identify* with each other's desires (as when we identify our own happiness with that of our spouse or child) produces a more substantial sort of harmony.

META-ETHICAL FALLIBILISM AND THE PSYCHOLOGICAL QUESTION

Of course, the sort of loving relationship described above idealizes considerably the status of most romantic couples and family arrangements, and this model becomes even harder to extend when we expand the circle to include our friends, our city, our country, and ultimately, all of humanity.[14] Indeed, it is often understated, not the least by James, just how pessimistic this meta-ethical picture is.

James's picture of truth here is essentially Peircian, with ethical truth tied to the coherence and convergence of all our demands onto a single coherent set, but it lacks the metaphysical backstop that Peirce put in play (at least for what he considered to be science). Remember that in "The Fixation of Belief," Peirce took the "fundamental hypothesis" of the "Method of Science" to be:

> There are Real things, whose characters are entirely independent of our opinions about them; those Reals affect our senses according to regular laws, and, though our sensations are as different as are our relations to the objects, yet, by taking advantage of the laws of perception, we can ascertain by reasoning how things really and truly are; and any man, if he have sufficient experience and he reason enough about it, will be led to the one True conclusion.[15]

This is a plausible enough assumption to make for our perceptual judgments about tables and chairs, and perhaps it is for atoms and gravitational waves as well, but it isn't clear that it has as much

plausibility when it comes to all of our demands converging on a single ethical reality.[16] This is not, of course, to say that James simply rules this out, but his rejection of the superstitious view that there are free-floating ethical values eliminates the most obvious way to understand our ethical claims as responsive to independent facts in a way similar to the fashion in which our perceptual claims are responsive to tables and chairs.[17]

Further, his answer to the psychological question (and his denial that there is any single independent faculty of conscience) also makes things harder for any naturalistic model of how we, much less our demands, could track a single ethical reality.[18] For instance, many in James's time argued that our demands (or at least those that we describe as ethical) were ultimately tracking some single naturalistically specifiable property, and that "moral judgments have gradually resulted from the teaching of the environment."[19] For some, this reality may have promoted the survival of our species, or for others, may have promoted the happiness of our community, but in both cases, there was a single type of reality that moral experience was tracking. If that were the case, then we might hope to find something similar to the Peircian connection between "external objects" and the "laws of perception." By contrast, James takes our demands to have a much less predictable and systematic origin. His discussion of the psychological question has a largely negative take-home message: Moral sentiments are often "brain-born" preferences coming through the "back door" of accidental variations, rather than conclusions coming through the "front door" of personal, or even species-level, experience.[20]

> [A]part from the instinctive preferences and repugnances which are necessary to life, there must be others arising spontaneously or by "accidental variation" in minds which contain these. I firmly believe that we have preferences inexplicable by utility, or by the direct influence of the environment, preferences for certain kinds of behavior, as consistency, veracity, justice, nobility, dignity, purity etc etc.[21]

> Take the love of drunkenness; take bashfulness, the terror of high

places, the tendency to sea-sickness, to faint at the sight of blood, the susceptibility to musical sounds; take the emotion of the comical, the passion for poetry, for mathematics, or for metaphysics, no one of these things can be wholly explained by either association or utility. They *go with* other things that can be so explained, no doubt; and some of them are prophetic of future utilities, since there is nothing in us for which some use may not be found. But their origin is in incidental complications to our cerebral structure, a structure whose original features arose with no reference to the perception of such discords and harmonies as these. . . . a vast number of our moral perceptions are certainly of this secondary and brain-born kind. They with deal directly felt fitness between things, and often fly in the teeth of all the prepossessions of habit and presumptions of utility.[22]

This does not, in itself, undercut the validity of such sentiments, but if our various ideals "have no common character apart from the fact that they are ideals," that does give us reason to worry that they may not easily lend themselves to systematization.[23]

Furthermore, the sources of our demands may not only fail to be unified, but their mix may vary significantly from person to person. As James stresses in papers like "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings" and "What Makes Life Significant," the *types* of demands we feel are not uniform among demanders.[24] Conflict comes not only because we all want more of some commonly recognized set of goods, but also because we can disagree about what the goods are in the first place. If we really do start with a disunited plurality of demands that don't derive from a common source, finding a way to harmonize them may be an impossible task.[25]

THE MORAL PHILOSOPHER AND THEIR REGULATIVE IDEALS

At this point we should turn to a character who represents one of the most interesting argumentative strategies of James's paper, but who has thus far remained in the background: the moral philosopher. By speaking of the moral philosopher instead of directly about ethics, James distances himself from some of the commitments he associates with the moral philosopher, and this distancing is not

insignificant. The commitments James attributes to the moral philosopher are commitments that he likely would have serious reservations about. The most obvious of these commitments relates to the unlikelihood of our arriving at a systematic and harmonious resolution of all our disparate demands, and thus (given James's answer to the metaphysical question) there being any objective ethical truths at all. To be a moral philosopher is to disavow any skepticism in this area and to demand that there must be *some* proper ordering of these conflicting ideals.[26]

> Multiply the thinkers into a pluralism, and we find realized for us in the ethical sphere something like that world which the antique skeptics conceived of, in which individual minds are the measures of all and in which no one "objective" truth, but only a multitude of "subjective" opinions, can be found.
>
> But this is the kind of world with which the philosopher . . . will not put up. Among the various ideals represented, there must be, he thinks, some which have the more truth or authority, and to these the others *ought* to yield, so that system and subordination may reign.[27]

> [T]he philosopher, just because he is a philosopher, adds his own particular ideal to the confusion . . . and insists that over all these individual opinions there is a *system of truth* which he can discover if he only takes sufficient pains.[28]

To be a moral philosopher one must assume that absolute truth is available in the domain of ethics, and so the regulative ideals and the Peircian hopes for inquiry (namely that it will always converge on a stable determinate answer) are extended to the ethical.

One might think the demand for consistency and objectivity (and the regulative ideals they represent) is not unique to the moral philosopher and that these commitments are presupposed by all of us who make moral judgements that we take to be true. However, for the moral philosopher, this commitment to organizing all other demands into a "system of truth" is their *only* demand, and it thus has considerable sway with them. [29] The rest of us, on the other hand,

have other demands, and sometimes these other demands will trump any drive toward having a consistent set. The non-philosopher's commitment to endorsing the general principle that people should give their excess income to charity may be in some sort of tension with their desire to go on a Caribbean holiday, but their attachment to those individual commitments may be stronger than their commitment to consistency. Further, while they might like for there to be a consistent set of demands across society, this primarily involves society bringing its demands into line with their own, and they may have little taste for changing their own demands just to promote social consistency. Harmonizing everyone's demands into one system of truth would be nice, but if it means they don't get what they want (or they see some of their own ideals discarded), they may be willing to go without it. When push comes to shove, most people will prefer their particular ideals over the possibility of some other set of ideals being universally shared.

Nevertheless, while this all makes the moral philosopher's project hard, James doesn't give up on it. However, before we get to how James tries to give some hope to the moral philosopher's project, we need to briefly address his discussion of the casuistic question.

THE CASUISTIC QUESTION
Not all of our demands can end up in a single system of truth, and so the moral philosopher must try to decide which demands should be kept, and which demands must go. James presents the moral philosopher's proposed answer to this casuistic question as follows:

> Since everything which is demanded is by that fact a good, must not the guiding principle for ethical philosophy (since all demands conjointly cannot be satisfied in this poor world) be simply to satisfy at all times *as many demands as we can*? That act must be the best act, accordingly, which makes for the *best whole*, in the sense of awakening the least sum of dissatisfactions. In the casuistic scale, therefore, those ideals must be written highest which *prevail at the least cost*, or by whose realization the least possible number of other ideals are destroyed.[30]

Since the moral philosopher has no demands other than that there be a system, they will treat all other ideals equally, which suggests that they would take some sort of maximization to be the optimal arrangement. The idea seems to be to imagine all of the separate demands/desires/ideals taken into one consciousness that would then sort them out in just the way that the moral solitude would sort out their own conflicting demands.[31]

I don't think that much hangs (at least for the purposes of this paper) on the details of James's proposal about the casuistic question.[32] In particular, the question of whether he is suggesting we satisfy the most demands, the strongest demands, or the demands of the most people (all of which James suggests at various points) may not have a clear answer. Neither should we worry too much about whether James is suggesting that we maximize the satisfaction of desires,[33] demands,[34] or even ideals,[35] since James just needs a general sense of all of the imperatives to be in play here. If all of the demands/desires/ideals were taken into a single consciousness, the resulting resolution would be a maximization of some sort, but arriving at it certainly needn't have a clear quantitative recipe.

Further, it should be noted (though James does not) that it isn't obvious that any sort of pure maximization strategy would be the *only* thing that appeals to the moral philosopher when they create their system. Of course maximization must have some appeal, but while the moral philosopher may not have any demands other than putting all of the other demands into a "system of truth," other works of James's (most notably, "The Sentiment of Rationality") show that such a demand is by no means a simple one, and even the disinterested moral philosopher may have theoretical ideals that help dictate the form of a preferred system of truth but may not always sit well with maximization.[36] For instance, a demand for a certain kind of systematicity and unity may push the moral philosopher in ways that conflict with simple maximization. Perhaps one moral philosopher will endorse a more Kantian system because of its beauty, while another will defend something closer to utilitarianism because of its simplicity, while still another may prefer messier

systems that actually satisfy more demands.[37] The conflicting cravings for universality and acquaintance that James describes in "The Sentiment of Rationality" could produce radically different moral theories among different moral philosophers, even those who left their other demands off the table.

Still, whatever their theoretical preferences are, one reason for the moral philosopher to not stray *too* far from maximizing the number of demands satisfied is that comparatively maximal systematizations may be the ones most likely to get a wide uptake. An ethical system, coherent or not, will not reach a stable equilibrium if the people embodying it are not satisfied with living the life that it dictates, and an adequate ethical theory must thus fit the grain of our "ethical experience." A systematization that appeals to moral philosophers, and moral philosophers alone, seems poorly placed to make up the objective truth about ethics, since it is the *actual demanders* that create the truth, and if they can't be brought into line with the system, then that system fails to hold true for them, and we are left with the plurality of subjective values rather than anything objective. The more inclusive system will be more likely to be widely adopted, and James thinks there is already a natural drift in this direction.

> The course of history is nothing but the story of men's struggles from generation to generation to find the more and more inclusive order. *Invent some manner* of realizing your own ideals which will also satisfy the alien demands,—that and that only is the path of peace! Following this faith, society has shaken into one sort of relative equilibrium after another by a series of social discoveries quite analogous to those of science.[38]

James proposes one of these more inclusive arrangements himself when he suggests that we harmonize the conflicting militaristic and pacifist ideals within a new form of public service as "part of the army enlisted against *nature,*"[39] but James is generally wary of such "closet-solutions,"[40] and on the whole he thinks that this maximization can't be determined *a priori*.

> The pure philosopher can only follow the windings of the spectacle, confident that the line of least resistance will always be towards the richer and the more inclusive arrangement, and that by one tack after another some approach to the kingdom of heaven is incessantly made. . . . so far as the casuistic question goes, ethical science is just like physical science, and instead of being deducible all at once from abstract principles, must simply bide its time, and be ready to revise its conclusions from day to day.[41]

That said, while *some* progress might be made, no amount of peace-core-like proposals are going to take us all the way to the sort of harmony that ethical objectivity requires.

Even if the moral philosopher did find a way to systematized all of our demands that was optimal in some relevant sense, this wouldn't be enough to create a system of truth unless they were able to get a buy-in from all the participants, and, this world being what it is, even the most optimal system is going to leave many of us with fewer demands satisfied than we had before. Why should the moral philosopher believe that such a universal buy-in is possible?

THE WILL TO BELIEVE OPTION

The simple answer is that such a belief is part of what it is, by definition, to be a moral philosopher, in James's sense. Still, one would hope that the moral philosopher could have *some* justification for this belief. James was, of course, well aware there was no compelling evidence that we could ever reach the sort of lasting convergence his account of ethical objectivity requires, but he still felt we were entitled to believe that such a stable convergence would eventually be reached. In particular, the belief in the possibility of such a convergence was an instance of the sort of case covered in his "The Will to Believe."[42] That is to say, whether we will reach such a consensus is an evidentially unsettled question about which we have the right to follow our inclinations about what to believe. Not only was the question of the objectivity of morals, at least for James, "live," "force," and "momentous," but the belief in such objectivity is arguably one of those beliefs that could contribute to their own truth. By believing that convergence can, and will,

eventually be reached, we may help bring it about (and such a consensus probably won't ever be reached if parties with conflicting ethical beliefs are convinced that no such consensus is possible).

On James's account, it is an *empirical* question whether ethical claims have objective content or not. However, the question is also, crucially, a *practical* one. Whether we *in fact* ever reach the sort of ethical consensus the objectivity of our ethical claims requires is, in James's eyes, *up to us*. We can't simply decide that values are objective, but it may remain within our power to (collectively) make them so. This movement of the question of objectivity from the theoretical to the practical realm is one of the most characteristic features of James's pragmatism.

Still, even if ethical objectivity is evidentially underdetermined in *some* sense, given the way that James cashes it out, the evidence seems pretty compelling against it, and this brings us to the remarkable theistic turn that James's paper takes toward its end.

THE ROLE OF GOD IN ETHICS
James notoriously concludes his paper by arguing that "the stable and systematic moral universe for which the ethical philosopher asks is fully possible only in a world where there is a divine thinker with all-enveloping demands," and this turn can seem like quite a surprise given that James's initial answers to the psychological, metaphysical, and casuistic questions seem to work within a more naturalistic framework.[43] So just what work is God doing here?

Now, God isn't here simply as some sort of divine commander who makes up an independent moral order.[44] Even if God endorsed a specific systematization, it still wouldn't be binding on us unless we were willing to endorse it ourselves, since

> the only force of appeal to *us*, which either a living God or an abstract ideal order can wield, is found in the "everlasting ruby vaults" of our own human hearts, as they happen to beat responsive and not irresponsive to the claim.[45]

Much the same could be said for the idea that God grounds objectivity on this model by tipping the casuistic scale his way in

virtue of having an *infinite* number of desires (or perhaps just *really, really, really* strong versions of the desires that he does have).[46] The desires of an "infinite demander" might drown out the rest and tip the moral philosopher's casuistic scale their way, but, once again, the moral philosopher's casuistic scale isn't automatically binding on regular folk, and so simply having an agent with infinite desires isn't enough to ground objectivity.[47] If we don't endorse the infinite demander's demands, then it's not clear why they are binding on us.

This points, however, to a related claim that James makes, namely that the demands "put forward by insignificant persons" can be taken less seriously than those of the rest.[48] This can sound like elitism on James's part,[49] but there is no need to understand James's talk of significance in an elitist way.[50] In particular, the desires of significant people can be understood as carrying more weight than the desires of insignificant ones because when a significant person wants something to occur, they can *create* a desire in others (and this comes not just from the others' desire to curry favor with the significant person). This is often the sense in which, say, the child's demands are significant for the parent. Indeed, the significant person's demands may give the other a reason to bring about an outcome even if they think the significant person will never know their role in making that happen. On the other hand, a desire of an insignificant person may have no tendency to create corresponding desires on the part of others.

In this respect, God may have potential as the ultimate significant person, since many people would change their ideals to fit God's *just because they are God's ideals*. God's ideals overshadow the others, not because they are stronger in the sense of being more numerous or intense, but rather because they have the power to inspire other people to bring their own ideals into line with them.

God's potential for this sort of significance consists at least in part in the ability of religious belief to release in us what James calls the "strenuous mood." According to James,

> The deepest difference, practically, in the moral life of man is the difference between the easy-going and the strenuous mood. When in the easy-going mood the shrinking from present ill is our ruling consideration. *The strenuous mood, on the contrary, makes us quite indifferent to present ill, if only the greater ideal be attained.*[51]

Even if the moral philosopher were able to work out an ideal casuistic formula, they couldn't, without some divine help, realistically expect others to make the required effort to endorse it. Doing the right thing can occasionally be hard, and some days we can just expect people to adopt the easy-going mood and treat themselves to a Caribbean holiday instead of giving their extra money to charity. As James puts it, "in a merely human world without a God, the appeal to our moral energy falls short of its maximal stimulating power."[52]

However, if God were in play, and we knew he endorsed the ideal casuistic scale, then perhaps we could *happily endorse* it as well, even if it was not quite as comfortable for us as some others. As James puts it, "we joyously face tragedy for an infinite demanders' sake," (and so are happy to, say, forgo our everyday pleasures in order to bring about the greater good).[53] To happily live with any unified and stable casuistic scale, we need our moral energy to be at "its maximal stimulating power," and James thinks that it can't stay at that level without God in the picture.[54] Of course, not *every* divine being might inspire us in this way, but James thinks that *only* something divine could do so, and he admits that he "would openly laugh at the very idea of the strenuous mood being awakened in us by those claims of Remote Posterity which constitute the last appeal of the religion of humanity."[55] The strenuous mood is often discussed as important for getting us to do things that are the right things to do *anyway*, but according to the reading above, it is even more important than this.[56] The strenuous mood is required of *us* for anything to be objectively right *at all*, since the sort of consensus needed to produce ethical objectivity may not be available to us without it.[57]

Of course, it takes only the *belief* in God to unleash the strenuous mood, but the strenuous mood is no boon for the moral philosopher if it's directed the wrong way. Royce's moral insight and the pluralistic inclusivity associated with it can, in many ways, seem much more appealing to those in the "easy-going" or "genial" mood. The easy-going type might not be as motivated to make sacrifices for the inclusive order, but the inclusive object of action might still appeal to them. The more strenuous (or "stern")[58] type, on the other hand, are typically just strenuous about *their own* ideals, and are often not motivated to support (indeed, they are often motivated to *oppose*) the ideals of others.[59] We need a very particular type of God to direct the strenuous mood in the right way, and if such a God doesn't exist, we are all unlikely to find ourselves believing in something like them anyway.

Another reason for James to want God (and not just the belief in God) in the picture is that, even if there is an ideal ordering of *all* the demands, it doesn't seem like a single person could hold such a complex system in their head. Since James requires that any ultimate ideal be consciously held,[60] it might seem that we would want a divine consciousness in place just to have the concrete embodiment of the ideal judgements. God also has the potential to provide a *stable* voice so that what satisfies the most demands doesn't change,[61] which is important, since James maintains that ethical objectivity requires not only that there will eventually be a type of convergence among our needs and moral views but also that such a convergence will endure.

CONCLUSION: WHAT'S LEFT OF ETHICAL TRUTH?
So, where does this leave us if just the right sort of God doesn't turn up to activate the strenuous mood and rally us around the sort of maximizing ideal associated with the casuistic question? This a possibility that James's moral philosopher may not be able to seriously consider, and while James at least *hopes* this won't be the case, he does provide a framework for talking about the situation should it occur.

After all, that James would be open to at least the *possibility* of there being no objective, or absolute, truth in ethics should hardly be surprising given that in later works such as *Pragmatism* he shows a healthy amount of skepticism about absolute truth more generally. In its place he stresses the importance of *temporary* truths for our practice. As he famously put it:

> The 'absolutely' true, meaning what no further experience will ever alter, is that ideal vanishing-point towards with we imaging that all our temporary truths will some day converge. It runs on all fours with the perfectly wise man, and with the absolutely complete experience; and, if these ideals were ever realized, they will all be realized together. Meanwhile we have to live today by what truth we can get today, and be ready tomorrow to call it falsehood.[62]

Ultimately it may be such temporary truth that we need to be satisfied with for our ethical claims as well. James still takes absolute truth as a regulative ideal for all of our inquiries, but the possibility that this ideal may not be realized remains for him very much a live one. That sort of "dual consciousness" can be hard to consistently maintain globally but is easier to lay out when talking about a comparatively discrete topic like ethics, where the regulative ideal can be bracketed and assigned to someone like the moral philosopher. The moral philosopher cannot accept that our ethical claims are only temporarily true, and while James certainly hopes they will be more than this as well, he suspects that without a helping hand from the divine, temporary truth may be all we can manage.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aikin, Scott F., and Robert B. Talisse. "Still Searching for a Pragmatist Pluralism." *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* XLI, no. 1 (Winter 2005): 145-160.

———. "Three Challenges to Jamesian Ethics." *William James Studies* 6 (2011): 3-9.

———. *Pragmatism, Pluralism, and the Nature of Philosophy*. New York: Routledge, 2018.

Atkins, Richard K. *Peirce and the Conduct of Life: Sentiment and Instinct in Ethics and Religion*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

Allen, Gay W. *William James*. New York: Viking, 1967.

Boyle, Deborah. "William James's Ethical Symphony." *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* XXXIV, no. 4 (Fall 1998): 977-1003.

Bush, Stephen. *William James on Democratic Individuality*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

Cantrell, Michael. *"*William James's Transcendental Theological Voluntarism: A Reading of 'The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life'" *William James Studies* 10 (2013): 1-11.

Cooper, Wesley. *The Unity of William James's Thought.* Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2002.

Gale, Richard. *The Divided Self of William James*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

———. *The Philosophy of William James: An Introduction.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2012.

Heney, Diana. *Towards a Pragmatist Metaethics*. New York: Routledge, 2016.

Jackman, Henry. "Prudential Arguments, Naturalized Epistemology, and the Will to Believe." *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* XXXV, no. 1 (Winter 1999):1-37.

———. "Jamesian Pluralism and Moral Conflict: Comments on Talisse and Aikin's 'Why Pragmatists Cannot be Pluralists.'" *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* XLI, no. 1 (Winter 2005): 123-128.

James, William. "Notes for Philosophy 4: Ethics—Recent English Contributions to Theistic Ethics (1888−1889)." Reprinted in *Manuscript Lectures*. Edited by Ignas K. Skrupskelis. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988.

———. *The Principles of Psychology*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1890/1981.

———. *The Will to Believe*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1896/1979.

———. *Talks to Teachers on Psychology*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1899/1983.

———. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1902/1985.

———. "The Essence of Humanism." Reprinted in *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1910/1976.

———. *Pragmatism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1907/1975.

———. *Essays in Religion and Morality*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982.

———. *Manuscript Essays and Notes*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988.

———. *The Correspondence of William James* Vol 2. Edited by Ignas K. Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley. Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 1999.

Lekan, Todd. "Strenuous Moral Living." *William James Studie*s 2 (2007).

Marchetti, Sarin. *Ethics and Philosophical Critique in William James.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

Misak, Cheryl. *Truth, Politics, Morality: Pragmatism and Deliberation*. New York: Routledge, 1999.

Myers, Gerald E. *William James: His Life and Thought*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986.

Peirce, Charles S. "The Fixation of Belief." *Popular Science Monthly* 12 (November 1877): 1-15. Reprinted in *The Essential Peirce, Volume 1: Selected Philosophical Writings 1867-1893.* Edited by Nathan Houser and Christian J.W. Kloese, 109-123.

Royce, Josiah. *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1885.

Slater, Michael. *William James on Ethics and Faith*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

NOTES

[1] Allen, *William James*, 423, 457. For instance, James's pragmatism lectures in New York drew audiences of over 1000 people, while his Gifford Lectures consistently attracted audiences of 250-300 people, compared to, say, Royce's Gifford Lectures two years earlier which had their attendance dwindle to as low as fifteen.

[2] Reprinted in James, *Will to Believe*.

[3] James, *Correspondence,* 175.

[4] One could even characterize his position as a type of semantic *pessimism*. However, while James's view can make moral objectivity seem *unlikely*, he certainly does not consider a lack of objectivity to be

inevitable, and since James associates pessimism with a type of inevitability, I will stick with "semantic fallibilism" rather than "semantic pessimism" here.

⁵ James, "MPML," 142.

⁶ James, 142.

⁷ James, 145.

⁸ James, 148.

⁹ For a discussion of this "thorny problem," see Gale, *Divided Self,* 44; and Gale, *Philosophy*, 31.

¹⁰ James, "MPML," 145-6. One should note, however, that James denies that the claims of the moral solitude would be *true*. As he puts it: "it would of course be absurd to raise the question of whether the solitary thinker's judgments of good and ill are *true* or not. Truth presupposes a standard outside of the thinker to which he must conform. But here the thinker is a sort of divinity, subject to no higher judge" (146; See also James, "Notes for Philosophy," 184). That said, he believes something like this is true of our "descriptive" beliefs as well, and that "Should we ever reach absolutely terminal experiences, experiences in which we all agreed, which were superseded by no revised continuations, these would not be *true*, they would be *real*, they would *simply be"* (James "The Essence of Humanism," 103).

¹¹ Aiken and Talisse, "Still Searching," points out that James's thoughts on the relation between demands and values can be understood in two ways: Either something has value simply by being valued (the "phenomenalist" interpretation of the relation between values and valuing), or something has value only if it is valued after we succeed in bringing our initial values into an equilibrium (the "coordinating" interpretation of the relation between values and valuing). They then go on to argue that James endorses the phenomenalist interpretation of the relation, so that the coordinating interpretation defended in Jackman, ("Jamesian Pluralism"), while possibly a pragmatist view, is not James's. However, as we can see in the discussion of the moral solitude, James endorses *both* the phenomenalist and coordinating interpretations of the relation between values and valuing. James turns out to be a phenomenalist about *prima-facie* goods (the subjective values) and a coordinatist about what is good all things considered (the objective values).

¹² James, "MPML," 146.

[13] James, 150.

[14] To say nothing of the "demands" of non-human animals.

[15] Peirce, "Fixation," 120.

[16] Though some (see Misak, Atkins, and Heney) think Peirce himself did apply his model to ethics as well, though even if he had, this seems more characteristic of his post-1905 work (see Heney) than the positions he was defending when James presented "MPML."

[17] James, "MPML," 148.

[18] James, 142.

[19] James, 142.

[20] James discusses these aspects of our mental life that are "brain born," "born inside the house," or coming through the "back stairs" or "back door" extensively in the final chapter of his *Principles of Psychology* (especially 1224-6).

[21] James, "Notes for Philosophy," 183.

[22] James, "MPML," 143.

[23] James, 153.

[24] James, *Talks to Teachers*, 149-50.

[25] See Royce, *Religious Aspect,* 165-7 for a similar emphasis on the plurality of our aims and the lack of apparent unity behind it. To put the problem in contemporary terms, if we thought we were engaged in a more-or-less Rawlsian project of bringing out moral intuitions into some sort of reflective equilibrium, the project would be considerably harder if psychologists like Haidt are correct that these intuitions stem from six different sources that have evolved to track occasionally conflicting "ideals" such as Care, Fairness, Liberty, Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity respectively (with most "weird," (i.e. Western, educated, industrial, rich, democratic), with moral philosophers being comparatively blind to all but the first three (see Haidt, 297)). If there were a single source, one might think that, if put behind some sort of "veil of ignorance," we would all settle on a similar equilibrium, but having the six sources makes getting to an equilibrium considerably harder, and if it turns out that different people feel the pull of these conflicting sources to different degrees, the prospect of reaching an equilibrium for the entire group seems even more distant.

[26] James, "MPML," 141.

[27] James, 146-7.

[28] James, 151; 141-2 and "Notes for Philosophy," 182.

[29] And this separates James's moral philosopher quite radically from actual moral philosophers, most of whom bring with them various substantive moral commitments they wish to defend.

[30] James, "MPML," 155.

[31] This is, as James admits, a version of Royce's "moral insight" (James, "Notes for Philosophy," 185 and Royce, *Religious Aspect*, 141). In many respects it can seem as if James very much has Royce in mind when he speaks of the moral philosopher.

[32] In this respect, I'm inclined to agree with Marchetti (*Ethics,* 105) that James is more making a tentative proposal than trying to present a full-blown theory.

[33] Gale, *Divided Self* and *Philosophy.*

[34] Slater, *William James on Ethics and Faith* and Bush, *William James on Democratic Individuality*.

[35] Cooper, *Unity*.

[36] As Boyle (1998, 995) points out, creating an "ethical symphony" requires more than just isolating the loudest and longest notes.

[37] Of course, there are many (Gale, *Divided Self* and *Philosophy*; Slater, Myers, Cooper) who suggest that James's casuistic maxim is just a version of utilitarianism. The relation of James's thought to utilitarianism is complex, and it should not be forgotten that in his discussion of the "lost soul" earlier in "MPML," he seems to deny that it would be right for there to be "millions kept permanently happy on the one simple condition that a certain lost soul on the far-off edge of things should lead a life of lonely torture" (144). However, the lost soul is not a counterexample to James's casuistic rule (though it may be one for any attempt to read him as a hedonistic utilitarian); rather, it just shows that he assumes we have a *very* strong demand that our happiness not be secured in such a fashion. If no one would be willing to satisfy their demands this way, then demand-satisfaction is not maximized by making this sort of compromise. This demand, like many others, may just be a "brain-born" psychological fact about us, and if this fact were to change, James might be committed to allowing such a case. Still, it is noteworthy that if we reject a world where our happiness is secured by such suffering, it is noticeably different from simply rejecting a world where we *are aware that* our happiness is secured by such suffering. The casuistic principle is supposed to maximize the number of demands satisfied, not just the number of demands whose

demanders *think* they are satisfied. This emphasis on objective satisfaction, rather than the more subjective *felt* satisfaction, would insulate James's account from the "Jane Hood" worry that Aiken and Talisse ("Three Challenges" and *Pragmatism, Pluralism*) present for James's account. Aiken and Talisse argue that if a particular billionaire is rich enough, Jane Hood could steal money from them and they wouldn't notice. Aiken and Talisse conclude that James thus can't explain the [purported?] fact that stealing is still wrong in this situation. However, if the billionaire's demands include people not stealing from him (not just his unawareness of being stolen from), then it seems James can easily explain the *prima facie* wrongness of this case.

[38] James, "MPML," 155-6.

[39] James, *Essays on Religion and Morality*, 171.

[40] James, "MPML," 157. After all, he opens "MPML" with the claim that its main purpose "is to show that there is no such thing possible as an ethical philosophy dogmatically made up in advance" (141).

[41] James, 157.

[42] See especially James, *Will to Believe*, 28. James's will to believe doctrine is presented in fuller detail in Jackman, "Prudential Arguments."

[43] James, "MPML," 161.

[44] Though see Cantrell, "Transcendental," for a recent defense of the claim that James is a divine command theorist.

[45] James, "MPML," 149.

[46] And James certainly does talk about God as if he would have the greatest amount of, indeed, infinite, demands. (See, for instance, "MPML" 149, 161).

[47] James, 161.

[48] James, 149.

[49] See Gale, *Divided Self*, 245 and *Philosophy*, 32, for a characterization of James's view as elitist.

[50] Nor need we follow Gale (*Divided Self*, 46 and *Philosophy*, 32-33) in seeing a person's "significance" as merely corresponding to how *assertive* they are about putting forth their demands.

[51] James, "MPML," 159-60, italics mine.

[52] James, 160.

[53] James, 161.

[54] James, 160. The motivating power of religious belief is a major them in James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*, where he describes religious experience as providing a "feeling of being in a wider life than that of this world's selfish little interests" (219) and a "shifting of the emotional centre towards loving and harmonious affections" (220) so that "[m]agnanimities once impossible are now easy" (216). In short,

> …in those states of mind which fall short of religion, the surrender is submitted to as an imposition of necessity, and the sacrifice is undergone at the very best without complaint. In the religious life, on the contrary, surrender and sacrifice are positively espoused: even unnecessary givings-up are added in order that the happiness may increase. *Religion thus makes easy and felicitous what in any case is necessary*. (49)

[55] James, "MPML," 160.

[56] As suggested recently in Lekan, "Strenuous" and Slater, *William James on Ethics and Faith*.

[57] Admittedly, it might seem that with this sort of "inspiring" God in the picture, we could achieve a consensus on *any* systematization. However, while James certainly thinks we might happily make sacrifices when divinely inspired, there may be limits to such inspiration, and while the strenuous mood gives us a "push," it is pushing against weaker headwinds if it is toward something that approaches James's answer to the casuistic question.

[58] In his Harvard lectures in the year prior to "MPML," he seemed to refer to the "strenuous" as the "stern" mood. (James, *Manuscript Essays*, 303, 305, 306.)

[59] See, for instance, Aiken and Talisse, *Pragmatism, Pluralism*, 86, for a discussion of how actual religious beliefs can make inclusive accommodation more difficult.

[60] "If one ideal judgment be objectively better than another, that betterness must be 'made flesh' by being lodged and concreted in some one's actual perception." James, "MPML," 147.

[61] For a discussion of the importance of such stability, see Bush, *Democratic Individuality*.

[62] James, *Pragmatism*, 106-7.