Understanding Philosophy, Understanding Modernism

The aim of each volume in **Understanding Philosophy, Understanding Modernism** is to understand a philosophical thinker more fully through literary and cultural modernism and, consequently to understand literary modernism better through a key philosophical figure. In this way, the series also rethinks the limits of modernism, calling attention to lacunae in modernist studies and sometimes in the philosophical work under examination.

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Volumes in the Series:

Understanding James, Understanding Modernism

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be set free for their own proper work" (ibid.). James's major example of this is that of the pianist, who begins by awkwardly banging out individual notes, but for whom years of muscular repetitions culminate in the ability to sit down at the instrument and translate notes written on a page directly into an expressive and meaningful artistic performance.

The social implications of habit are equally important in James's work. In one of his most well-known passages, James calls habit "the enormous fly-wheel of society, its most precious conservative agent":

[Habit] alone is what keeps us all within the bounds of ordinance, and saves the children of fortune from the envious uprisings of the poor. It alone prevents the hardest and most repulsive walks of life from being deserted by those brought up to tread therein ... It dooms us all to fight out the battle of life upon the lines of our nurture or our early choice, and to make the best of a pursuit that disagrees, because there is no other for which we are fitted, and it is too late to begin again. (PP, 125)

The tragic vision in this passage of a world in which people toil away in prisons built of the accumulated habits of their upbringing and the collective habits of their culture is accompanied by a seeming complicity with and approval of the entire enterprise. James imagines change, including radical change, elsewhere in his work, but this particular passage, with its dramatic images and its novelistic feel, offers habit as both the cause of the trouble it describes and as the comforting compensation for that trouble.

Ambivalence, multiplicity, complexity, and dynamism are the terms that capture James's notion of habit, and these terms also suggest the ways in which this vision is a particularly modern concept. Bringing together a range of ideas and categories that had long been estranged, James's concept of habit offers a new vocabulary for understanding, preparing for, and initiating individual and collective change.

Notes

1 William James, *Talks to Teachers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 47.
2 William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 1.126.

James on Morality

David Rondel

William James's moral philosophy is most lucidly set forth in the celebrat[ed] "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" (1891).[1] James there dist[inguishes] between three different questions in ethics, concluding in each case that the c[...] determinacy and normative neatness typically sought by moral philosophers [is] not in the cards.

The first question is the "psychological" one. It concerns *how* a thing significant or good in our minds. Here the contrast with utilitarianism is [...] While James acknowledges the importance of pain and pleasure in ethics, insists that "it is surely impossible to explain all our sentiments and preferenc[es] simple way" (*The Will to Believe* [WB], 143). This conclusion is bolstered by thought-experiment: suppose that millions could be kept permanently happ[y] "one simple condition that a certain lost soul on the far-off edge of things sho[uld] a life of lonely torture" (WB, 144). For most people, the enjoyment of such would be a "hideous thing" at such a cost. That feeling, James reasons, ca[n] accounted for by any utilitarian calculation and must be "brain born" (ibid.).

James next turns to the "metaphysical" question, which concerns the na[ture] meaning of moral terms like "obligation," "good," and "ill." James argues "application" and "relevancy" of such words wholly depends on the exis[tence] sentient life. Goods and evils do not reside in physical facts or material reality. moral relations nor the moral law can swing in vacuo" (WB, 149). Nothing can or right "except so far as some consciousness feels it to be good or thinks it to [be] (ibid.). In short, something is valuable because someone values it, and James that every person has an equal ability and right to engender value. It follows o[n] view that each demand or preference an individual expresses is equally valid, presents an equally strong prima facie claim to be satisfied. "Any desire," Jam[es] "makes itself valid by the fact that it exists at all" (WB, 149). Obviously the sat[isfaction] of some desires can be overridden by other considerations, but the mere fa[ct] desire or preference exists, James seems to have thought, gives us some reason its satisfaction. It is just better that preferences be satisfied than frustrated. universe containing more satisfied preferences is better, all things being eq[ual,] one containing fewer. This helps explain why the guiding principle for a

philosophy on James's view is "simply to satisfy at all times as many demands as we can" (WB, 155).

James then turns to the "casuistic" question, which concerns "the true order of human obligations" and "the measure of the various goods and ills" that human beings recognize (WB, 142). Here James movingly argues for a deep and persistent pluralism: there are innumerably many ideals—some of them incommensurable and mutually exclusive—and they "have no common character apart from the fact that they are ideals" (WB, 153). Against a strong current of ethical thought, James concludes that "no single principle can be used to yield a "scientifically accurate and genuinely useful casuistic scale" (ibid.).

James's ethics can be profitably read as a series of correctives to the two most dominant ethical doctrines of the last several centuries, Kantian or deontological theories on one hand, and utilitarian or consequentialist theories on the other. James's ethics takes consequences seriously (as Immanuel Kant's does not), but it does not assume (as Jeremy Bentham's does) that different goods can be converted into some supreme moral metric like utility or happiness. Unlike Kantians and utilitarians, who, despite all their differences, agree that there is always a correct course of action for every moral situation, James argues that some part of our ideals must be "butchered." Moral loss, he thinks, is an inescapable feature of the human predicament. James also stresses, against Kant and Bentham, that morality cannot be summed up in a list of principles or a set of obligations. There is no master maxim from which right conduct can always be deduced. Ethical life is infinitely richer than a collection of principles and obligations can disclose. James sets himself against finality and closure in ethics: because obligations are always tied to the claims of concrete others, "concrete ethics cannot be final" (WB, 159), at least not "until the last man has had his say" (WB, 141). Such openness and indeterminacy is at the very center of James's ethical vision. We may hanker for systematic closure and finality, but James reminds us that the honest and responsible ethical agent must "bide their time" and be prepared to revise their conclusions from day to day.

Note

1 William James, *The Will to Believe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 141–62.

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James on Philosophical Temperaments

Tom Donaldson

In the first lecture of *Pragmatism* (*P*), William James says:

> The history of philosophy is to a great extent that of a certain clash of human temperaments.... Of whatever temperament a professional philosopher is, he tries when philosophizing to sink the fact of his temperament. Temperament is no conventionally recognized reason, so he urges impersonal reasons only for his conclusions. Yet his temperament really gives him a stronger bias than any of his more strictly objective premises.[1]

This claim will remind some of Friedrich Nietzsche's claim that "every great philosophy so far has been ... the personal confession of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir."[2] F. H. Bradley put it more bluntly when he defined "metaphysics" as "the finding of bad reasons for what we believe upon instinct."[3] James goes on to distinguish two different philosophical temperaments: he called them "tough-mindedness" and "tender-mindedness." Briefly, tough-minded people are empiricist, scientific, and sceptical; tender-minded people are rationalistic, religious, and dogmatic. James gives Gottfried Leibniz as a paradigm of tender-mindedness (*P*, 18–20);[4] he also claims that the absolute idealists are tender-minded. We might offer David Hume as a paradigm of tough-mindedness. James suggests that some tough-minded philosophers are materialists.[5] However, he also claims that some tough-minded philosophers are phenomenalists.[6]

James asserts that the "antagonism" between the two kinds of people has "formed in all ages a part of the philosophic atmosphere." However, he argues that tough-mindedness is currently ascendant. "Never were as many of a decidedly empiricist proclivity in existence as there are at the present day," he writes. "Our children, one may say, are almost born scientific (*P*, 13–14). Even so, James claims that few people can be content with a purely tough-minded philosophy that is satisfactory:

> For a hundred and fifty years past the progress of science has seemed to mean the enlargement of the material universe and the diminution of man's importance. The result is what one may call the growth of naturalistic or positivistic feeling. Man is no lawgiver to nature, he is an absorber. She is who stands firm; he it is who must