

Phil 176/276G: Historical Philosophers—American Philosophy

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Handout #7: William James – The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life

1. Forms of Moral Skepticism

There are many different forms of moral skepticism. One can argue that there are no moral truths, no moral knowledge, or that no moral judgment or opinion is any better than any other. These are all argumentative positions that are commonly labeled “moral skepticism.” One can even argue that there is no such thing as moral beliefs. One can reject the very concept of morality as confused by admitting that we have norms, rules and conventions but insisting that there is nothing that distinguishes the rules of morality from any other set of social rules (e.g. rules of etiquette). (See, for example, Stich’s skepticism about the “moral/conventional” distinction.) Or one can allow that we do have a clear conception of moral action and moral character but argue that these ideas are purely or largely epiphenomenal. Maybe hypocrisy is the norm and moral language is primarily used to cajole people into forgoing advantages they could gain by ignoring one’s pleas. One might argue that people only act morally when they judge that doing so is in their self-interest, or that people free from illusion act in this way, and that moral concepts are therefore unnecessary or fantastical. A theorist might even try to limit her use of moral concepts and terms, vowing to live “beyond good and evil” to use Nietzsche’s phrase. All of these positions have been defended in print and there are cases in which people report or act out moral skepticism and nihilism by harming people in ways they would not were they to judge their actions immoral and where they would indeed judge their own behavior immoral were it not for an ideological conviction they have drawn after speculative reflection that morality is not real.

There is a sense in which this last form of moral skepticism on which it is “lived” or made manifest in behavior outside the lecture hall is necessary for moral skepticism of any sort according to pragmatist philosophers. Why is this? Well what would it be to refrain from believing that certain things are immoral and others positively virtuous in quality? This depends on what it is to hold a moral belief.

An intellectualist analysis of moral belief: To believe that x is immoral is to assert or be disposed to assert in seeming sincerity, “X is immoral” or words to that effect.

James and his fellow pragmatists reject the intellectual analysis of beliefs in general and moral beliefs in particular. And they do this for several reasons. For one thing, the pragmatists are more interested in what is actually going on in our minds/brains (i.e. “psychological reality”) than in the words we use to describe or express our minds. They deemphasize language. As they see it, if moral judgment is “real,” it should be something beyond moral assertion: e.g. a genuine “sentiment of blame” or disposition to such. Psychological reality can either match or fail to match the words we use to describe it. A second reason is that the pragmatists were influenced by the evolutionary approach to psychology pursued by Alexander Bain and Darwin, an approach which locates belief (and even some of the components of moral belief) in the minds of animals that are incapable of sentential assertion. Beliefs cannot be dispositions to assertion because many of the other animals have beliefs, but none of them make assertions.

Most contemporary analyses of moral belief by psychologists and philosophers of mind follow the pragmatists in this line of thought. Theorists try to analyze the possession of moral beliefs in terms of dispositions to think of prospective actions from the standpoint of those who will be affected by them, and to feel emotions like sympathy, guilt and remorse, to engage in social sanctioning and reward by praising and blaming others for intentionally helping or harming others, and so on. (Those who deny the moral conventional distinction place less emphasis on the psychology of harm and justice to include, within their definitions, dietary codes, respect for rituals and so on.) There is no widely accepted analysis of moral judgment, but all of those who work on the topic pursue this general line of decomposing the state into its customary causes, effects and substrates. No one adopts the intellectualist analysis equating moral beliefs with moral assertions except certain analytic philosophers of language.

A pragmatic analysis of moral belief: to believe that x is wrong is to be disposed to avoid x or feel remorse when one fails to do so, to blame or punish those who x without an excuse one finds acceptable, to train one’s children not to x, etc. or some weighted function of these paradigmatic expressions of the state of mind.

If we adopt a pragmatic analysis of moral belief we will conclude that moral skepticism is extremely difficult. The moral skeptic doesn’t believe that anything is immoral. But to refrain from these relatively natural beliefs, the moral skeptic will have to stop herself from blaming, punishing, feeling remorse, educating children in a certain way, etc. So understood, moral skepticism is a difficult life project, not just a matter of asserting things like “nothing is immoral” with associated feelings of conviction.

Questions: Can you live moral skepticism? Can anyone? Or is moral belief psychologically unavoidable? If you can’t help forming moral beliefs in the

sense at issue, might you still regard them as all false or unjustified or defective in some other way? Can you give a pragmatic analysis of the higher-order normative belief in question? That is, what is it to believe that one of your beliefs is false if you can't get rid of that belief? Of course, one can give an *intellectualist* analysis of this higher-order belief (e.g. one might be disposed to say "my moral beliefs are all false"), but this isn't really belief according to the pragmatists. It's just a bunch of words.

Note: Though James begins "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" with a discussion of moral skepticism, he does not take any of the above forms of moral skepticism seriously. **James rejects moral skepticism on pragmatic grounds.** We cannot help embracing certain values and rejecting certain ways of reacting to each other, so we cannot be moral skeptics in any real (extra-intellectual) sense.

What James calls "ethical skepticism" is not what contemporary moral epistemologists mean by the term. What James has in mind by "ethical skepticism" is what is now called "skepticism with regard to the prospects of moral theory" or more simply "anti-theory."

James' conception of ethical skepticism: The ethical skeptic has a morality or an ethic we can extract from her life history but she does not seek to articulate that ethic, achieve greater consistency within it and explain its relation to the rest of what she knows about the universe and the origin and evolution of life on Earth. Equivalently, the ethical skeptic is someone who lacks an ethical or moral philosophy in some sense of that expression.

"What is the position of him who seeks an ethical philosophy? He must be distinguished from all those who are satisfied to be ethical skeptics. He *will* not be a skeptic...and renounce his original aim. That aim is to find an account of the moral relations that obtain among things, which will weave them into the unity of a stable system, and make of the world what one may call a genuine universe from the ethical point of view" (Haack, 248).

So what James means by "ethical skepticism" is the abandonment of moral theory: the renunciation of reflection, argumentation and the defense of abstract conceptions of what is right and good in favor of just living with the "common sense" morality one employs without theoretical reflection or analysis.

Questions: If Locke is right, the vast majority of people are ethical skeptics in James' sense and always will be. Most people have neither the time, nor the ability, nor a taste for the varieties of theoretical investigation into morality that James goes on to describe. Is Locke right about that? Have times changed, and has labor been sufficiently automated, so that a majority of the population in

wealthy countries does engage in moral theorizing of this kind? How many people take courses in ethical theory or their equivalents in other schools or departments? How many people have a taste for this sort of thing? What about discussion in other venues like the church, park and boardroom?

2. The Task of the Moral Philosopher

James thinks that philosophy can make a contribution to real ethics of the sort that guides people in the courtroom, elementary school classroom, shareholder meeting and other contexts of social judgment and interaction. But his optimism on this score is premised in a methodology he sketches in a vague and unsupported way.

(1) The philosopher must begin with a description of the ideals people actually have as revealed in their assertions and extra-verbal behaviors.

(Notice that (1) is not a trivial task, as is borne out by our study of Thomas Jefferson. Did Jefferson really hold the freedom and political equality of men as an ideal? The evidence suggests that his mind was divided on the matter. He was a hypocrite.)

(2) But the philosopher does not stop with (1), which is now a task undertaken by anthropologists, sociologists and psychologists. Instead, “the purpose which guides him is [an] ideal of his own, of getting them [i.e. the values he’s identified] into a certain form.”

(3) Establishing coherence or consistency in the ideals he’s discovered and reconciling them with what is known about biology (etc) is the **only** task that should be undertaken by the philosopher. This provides him or her with a level of neutrality she would lack were she to “interest herself” with “the triumph of any one kind of good.”

Questions: What is it to “interest yourself in the triumph of some kind of good” in the sense James has in mind? Do people really do that? Well, people have lifestyles. And unless you want to change your lifestyle you are in the position of having to defend its moral acceptability once it is challenged by people you cannot ignore. Insofar as you would have to assert the value of certain things to do that, you are “interesting yourself” in the “triumph” of those values. To make things clearer let’s suppose it’s the greater value of humans in comparison with other animals. To make James’ line of thought applicable we have to assume that there are people with whom you want to interact who do not accept this evaluation. As a moral philosopher trying to figure out whether it’s okay to eat non-human animals, can you, who believes in the superiority of humans, really

exercise neutrality as between your scheme of evaluation and the evaluative scheme of your militantly vegan critics? Can the moral philosopher stand above these important political controversies? Perhaps the scholar can achieve neutrality in her writing. (I often try to do this, especially when writing surveys or introductions to an area of study in ethics, which is defined, in part, by a continuing debate amongst scholars.) But if we adopt a pragmatic (i.e. non-intellectualist) conception of what it is to “interest oneself in the triumph” of some particular good, doesn’t neutrality with regard to conceptions of the good entail political inaction? Neutrality of this sort is incompatible with the tenor of pragmatism, and in fact James rails against the hypocrite who preaches charitable obligation without sacrificing material wealth and comfort.

Further questions: Does adopting James’ ethical methodology have a necessarily conservative consequence? I mean insofar as you engage in moral philosophy as he describes it, you will grant some initial level of credence or respect to every value you find embraced by the population in which you want to live. Does this ensure that you will retain a pluralistic conception of morality over time? How much neutrality can you start with? And how much neutrality can one dissolve through philosophical modes of examination and reflection?

3. Three Varieties of Moral Philosophy or Theoretical Investigation into Morality

James distinguishes three different species of moral philosophy, aimed at three kinds of question: psychological questions, metaphysical questions and casuistic questions.

A. Psychological Questions:

What is it to hold a moral belief or make a moral judgment? What is it to value something or regard something as an obligation? How did these mental or neural structures (however analyzed) come to exist? Were they implanted in us by an intelligent being, or did they evolve via “natural” processes of selection? How are they changing or evolving today?

James does not focus on these questions in their general form. Instead, he addresses the debate over their answers then active between “intuitionists” (the intellectual descendant of Reid) and “empiricists” (descended from Hume). James’ sympathies are with the empiricists and he acknowledges that feelings of pleasure and pain are the primitive evaluations of stimuli from which our more complex evaluations originate. But he criticizes the empiricists for focusing on association as the only mechanism or process through which simple evaluations gave rise to more complex ones.

“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....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” (Haack, 250).

James then uses these reflections to argue against utilitarianism as a descriptive thesis or a psychological account of how we form moral judgments.

Descriptive utilitarianism: People judge pleasure and the sources of pleasure good and judge pain and the sources of pain bad. All moral judgments are “extensions” of these initial judgments, generated by habits of association and similar mechanisms.

James’ argument: We have “deontic” intuitions, which descriptive utilitarians cannot explain/predict.

“If the hypothesis were offered us of a world in which Fourier’s and Bellamy’s and Morris’s utopias should all be outdone, and millions kept permanently happy on the simple condition that a certain lost soul on the far-off edge of things should lead a life of dreary torture. What except a specific and independent sort of emotion can it be which would make us immediately feel, even though an impulse arose within us to clutch at the happiness so offered, how hideous a thing would be its enjoyment when deliberately accepted as the fruit of such a bargain?” (Haack, 251)

But James does not stop with using the intuitive injustice of using suffering as a means to a modestly greater good to reject descriptive utilitarianism. Instead, he uses these intuitions and others like them to reject the adequacy of any empiricist model of moral judgment that analyzes evaluation as nothing beyond **representation**; here representation of pleasure, pain and the sources of pain and pleasure or harm and benefit. Instead, James supports a pragmatic psychology of evaluation on which rules or norms or modes of evaluation are often enough endogenously or creatively generated by people (and perhaps other animals) even if natural forms of selection then winnow the variety thus generated. People “create” moral codes and schemes of evaluation, they don’t just “learn” them from experience of what is pleasurable and what is not.

Though James criticizes utilitarians (Bentham, the Mills and Bain) for their overemphasis on association when explaining the origin of our moral ideals, his picture is perfectly in sync with the Darwinian revolution in biology according to which variation is generated through genetic mutation and other relatively random or creative factors and selection proceeds on the basis of the consequences of this variation for the reproductive prospects of the organisms who vary in the ways specified. It also meshes with Mill's idea of "experiments in living" which serve as a source of variation from which nature (or man) might select.

"Purely inward forces are certainly at work here. All higher, more penetrating ideals are revolutionary. They present themselves far less in the guise of effects of past experience than in that of probable causes of future experience, factors to which the environment and the lessons it has so far taught us must learn to read" (James in Haack, 251).

Question: Do you know where your morality comes from? When you do come to some view as to how you came to hold the moral beliefs that you currently hold, does this alter your conviction in those beliefs? How, if at all, does knowledge of the origins of a belief affect your confidence in the truth or validity of that belief? How much of your morality is utilitarian? How much of it goes beyond considerations of pleasure or suffering, harm or benefit?

B. Metaphysical Questions:

Metaphysics is the study of what is or what exists. Alternatively, it is the study of existence or being. Moral metaphysicians typically describe themselves as inquiring into whether there are moral facts or moral properties and asking about the relation between these purported facts or properties and the relatively value neutral (non-moral) facts or properties with which we are familiar. For example, Gilbert Harman focuses on an example in which some teenagers burn a stray cat for fun. The non-moral or relatively value neutral facts in this case are the teenagers' motives and actions, the pain and suffering of the cat, and, perhaps the expectations of people in the society in which all of this is supposed to be taking place. When we say that the teenagers trap and burn the cat on purpose, that they do this because they take enjoyment in watching the animal suffer, that the cat in question is feeling pain and dying from its burns and that people in the community look down upon and punish this sort of behavior, we haven't yet made any **distinctively moral claims** or offered an "evaluation" (in contrast with a "description") of the situation. We're just describing the situation as a journalist might; someone who is trying to be neutral and "stick to the facts."

The metaphysical questions then are: (1) whether the teenagers are acting badly or wrongly or immorally in the case we've described, and (2) if they are acting immorally, **what is the relationship between the immorality of the act and the value-neutral components of the case** that we have described above: e.g. the teenagers' motives and the suffering of the cat?

If a metaphysician thinks that the act in question is "really immoral" and that its immorality is in some sense "distinct" from the act's motives and consequences, she needs to provide some theory of what such moral qualities or facts are. (For the record, I think this is a mistake. We should just identify the act's immorality with its "wrong-makers": i.e. the facts we use to explain why it's wrong)

Metaphysicians who accept the existence of moral facts or properties typically argue about the degree to which the attitudes or sensibilities of people enter into these facts. For example, is the immorality of the teenagers' behavior entirely independent of the disgust or condemnation most of us would feel were we to observe their actions? Or is the immorality of an action like the funniness of a joke, where a funny joke is, by its very nature, the kind of joke that makes an audience laugh. (I assume here that if a joke doesn't make anyone laugh, it isn't funny, and that's because funniness is "defined" in terms of laughter or amusement: i.e. the reactions of those who observe the thing we're evaluating for humor.)

Questions: **If metaphysics is an inquiry into the nature of moral properties** and their relationship to value-neutral states of affairs, **why does James describe metaphysics as an inquiry into "what we mean by the words 'obligation,' 'good' and 'ill'?"** (Haack, 252).

Inquiry into the meaning of words is typically labeled "semantics" or "semiotics" or "semantic theory."

Questions: What is the relationship between semantics and metaphysics? What is the relationship between the meaning of words and the existence of those phenomena we use our words to describe, explain and evaluate?

James' conflation of moral metaphysics with the semantics of moral terms seems hasty, but we can see from our discussion of moral metaphysics above, why James might think that an inquiry into the nature of moral phenomena might ultimately hang, at some point or other, on debates about the meaning of moral terms. Recall that I said we define "funny" in terms of laughter and amusement. It's in part because of the way we use the word "funny" that a joke cannot be funny if no one finds it amusing. There is no further investigation to conduct into whether the joke is funny once we verify that no one is inclined to laugh or smile

at it. Once we verify that the joke invariably bombs we can infer that it isn't funny. And someone who knows that some joke never has and never will provoke amusement but still doesn't see why this entails that the joke isn't funny, shows himself or herself to be ignorant of the meaning of "funny." In cases like this metaphysics gives way to semantics. That a joke isn't funny has two components however difficult they may be to disentangle: (1) the observable fact that it doesn't provoke laughter, and (2) the conceptual or semantic or linguistic fact that provoking laughter is essential to humor.

Does moral metaphysics similarly give way to semantics? Bentham and Mill were the most famous utilitarian moral philosophers. And James was very much influenced by their work. And Bentham and Mill both held that "**goodness**" (or at least "intrinsic goodness") **should be defined as pleasure or happiness**. That is, both Bentham and Mill argued that our ordinary use of the word "good" left its meaning confused, vague, and jumbled in various ways. The word means wildly different, incompatible things in the mouths of different people and even in the mouth of a single person at different times. The only way for a theorist or legislator to provide a stable well-defined meaning for the term is to equate it with happiness, so that "happiness is good" becomes true by definition and the good of other things beside happiness can be determined by investigating whether those things are parts or causes of happiness. **On this view, moral semantics is the largest part of moral metaphysics.** (All that's left, once we've defined terms, is to describe the nature of happiness and figure out how best to promote it.) Moreover, according to the utilitarians moral semantics is not a matter of surveying and reporting the use of moral terms within a given community of speakers. (They didn't engage in what's now called "X-phi.") Instead, **moral semantics boils down to a set of choices as to how we are going to define moral terminology** that is left largely indeterminate in meaning by common usage. If James has Bentham and Mill in mind, this would explain why he equates moral metaphysics with moral semantics.

Questions: Does moral metaphysics give way to moral semantics in the manner Bentham and Mill described? Is there a way to explore the nature of moral properties without investigating the meaning of moral terms? Are terms like "good" and "bad" as indeterminate in meaning as Bentham and Mill claimed they are? When we "do moral metaphysics" are we really just deciding how to use our words?

James' first metaphysical/semantic claim: moral terms "can have no application or relevancy in a world where no sentient life exists" (Haack, 252).

Questions: Is this true? Is it how we want to use our moral terms? Aristotelians (like Locke) will argue against this as we can talk about what is **good for plants**

and what is **bad** for them. And we can say that we **ought** to water a given plant with a given frequency etc. And may of us who say these things believe that plants do not have sensations and are therefore not sentient. Do these judgments have no relationship to the judgments we make about the wellbeing of animals and humans and the goodness of providing them what they need to survive and flourish and the badness of depriving them of these things? It would seem that James is assuming the utilitarian value system here to the extent that he assumes that pleasure and pain are necessary for (or essential to) goodness and badness.

Assessing James' first hypothetical: Is a world with plants "better than" a world without them even if there are no sentient creatures in either?

Epistemological Concerns: Consider definitions of "good" that do not revolve around pleasure or happiness thought of as experience of a certain kind but instead invoke "proper functioning" or "flourishing" so that all organisms have a good which consists in their proper functioning or flourishing whether or not they feel anything. How can we decide between these different conceptions or metaphysics of value? Is there anything like evidence that can be brought to the choice between utilitarian and Aristotelian metaphysics of value? Those supporting the superiority of one scientific theory over its rivals often invoke observational evidence. Is there anything that might play this role in the resolution of the kind of debate within moral theory that we have just identified?

James' reasoning: James rightly points to a distinction between the world when there were plants but before animals evolved and the world soon after animals came on the scene. Many animals have some awareness of what is good for them and what bad. Unless you think plants have minds (and to the best of my knowledge James didn't think this, though Darwin was tempted to believe it) you will conclude with James that plants lack any perspective on what will promote their survival and reproduction. We might put this by saying that there is a **good for plants** but no **good to plants**. When animals develop feelings and perceptions through which they identify painful stimuli, they therein come to have some grasp of what is bad for them in the sense at issue. James infers that God was indifferent as between the world before plants and the world with them, which is surprisingly sacrilegious. Doesn't it imply that the creator had no reason for doing what she evidently did: i.e. evolve animals out of plants?

The relationship between sensation and value

James writes, "The moment one sentient being, however, is made a part of the universe, there is a chance for goods and evils really to exist... 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...In such a universe as that 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 supposes 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" (Haack, 253).

Criticism: But this is much too fast as it conflates what is good to X with what is good for X and does so without argument. We've at least raised doubts about whether its right to say that good for depends on good to. At the very least, we can ask, Is this the best way to conceptualize the biological facts? Notice that we are forced into this conception by utilitarian commitments. If we want to equate goodness with happiness or experience of the sort plants cannot enjoy we cannot say that certain things are good because good for them. The fact that water was good for the plants (long before it was good to the animals) must not involve any goodness. Either that or goodness cannot be equated with happiness because there was no happiness until neurons evolved.

So let's assume with James that there was no good in the universe until there were creatures with desires, creatures who were also capable of feeling pleasure when they got what they wanted and pain when they got that to which they were positively averse. The problem here is that what a creature wants *needn't* bring her pleasure and she can be adverse to things that would bring her pleasure. Similarly, the creature can experience pain when getting what it wants and often enough would experience pleasure were it to get that to which it is averse. This is not uncommon because we learn what's good for us in the relevant sense *through* experience. Sometimes you only want something because you incorrectly think that it will be pleasurable. When you get it you are dissatisfied. And sometimes, you don't want something that unexpectedly brings you pleasure when it is forced upon you. You expand your tastes. So desire and pleasure are actually two conceptually distinct measures of value.

Questions: Is it good for you to get what you want even when you only want it because you incorrectly think it will give you pleasure? If we stick with classical utilitarianism and define "good" in terms of pleasure rather than the satisfaction of desire, then we will reject James' claim that what is good for the solitary agent is just what she thinks is good. Pleasure and pain are in some sense "independent" standards "outside" the "thoughts" or evaluative judgments of thinkers that can be employed to label their judgments true or false. If you judge that smoked salmon is bad because of its smell, but you would really love it were you to try some, and even come to love that smell through association with the pleasure of eating it, then we can say that your evaluation is "false" in the relevant sense. But we could not say this were we to equate your good with what you actually want given your aversion to the fish. This is why most

metaphysicians who define a person's or agent's good in terms of her desires, do not rest content with that agent's *actual* desires. Instead, they define an agent's good in terms of those desires she would have were she "fully knowledgeable and rational" and so not mistaken about the experiences she would have were she to secure the objects of her desires.

The Classical Liberal Conception of Goodness: **X is good for S if and only if S would want x were she fully knowledgeable about X and thinking clearly about it and the alternatives to it.**

Question: Is this an adequate conception of what is good for someone? Is what is good for you what you would want to have (or do) were you already experienced with the objects of choice (or courses of life) available to you?

Classical liberals like Mill accept this conception and think of it as a conception that you (i.e. their audience) can adopt by choosing to define "goodness" in a certain way. So there is a tight connection here between possessing the requisite conception and being utilitarian, though, on Mill's account utilitarianism requires the further assumption that more good is better than less and Bentham's recommendation that legislators try to produce as much good as possible for the constituents they are meant to represent by limiting the laws to one among the "optimific" (or maximally happiness promoting) set.

For those of us who lack the authority to write law, utilitarianism recommends retaining our customary morality once it is improved through utilitarian critique. We should accept norms unless we judge that our community will be made happier once they're abandoned. Social change is hard, even when the case is clear that change will be good in a utilitarian sense (so that people will be made happier by that change).

Mill did more than most to advance utilitarian critique, making him a hero to liberals and those who have benefited from liberalization. Surprisingly, James rejects utilitarian critique as unphilosophical and embraces conservatism on the basis of his a priori bias for neutrality as between conceptions of the good. James refuses to define "good" and so refuses to define it in terms of happiness. And this refusal in his intellectual life is correlative (especially given James' allegiance to a pragmatic conception of belief) to James' refusal to advance the project of liberalization in his philosophical work. On James' own lights, advocating for liberalization, even on utilitarian grounds, renders a work unphilosophical.

(While this is not how we use "philosophical" today, one can see James' point.)

The Relation between Morality and Religion: James points out that morality can be thought of as a set of psychologically real relationships between people.

Were all other things, gods and men and starry heavens, blotted out from this universe, and were there left but one rock with two loving souls upon it, that rock would have as thoroughly moral a constitution as any possible world which the eternities and immensities could harbor. It would be a tragic constitution, because the rock's inhabitants would die. But 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.... We, on this terrestrial globe, so far as the visible facts go, are just like the inhabitants of such a rock. Whether a God exist, or whether no God exist, in yon blue heaven above us bent, we form at any rate an ethical republic here below. (James in Haack, 258)

Questions: No doubt our **expectations** of one another are psychologically real. It is a fact about a particular human animal existing in a particular location at a particular time, that it **expects** another human to do various things and refrain from doing others. The same might be said of **disappointment** and **longing for harmony**. These seem to be psychological states that exist in the minds/brains of particular people at particular times. **Claims** and **refusals** are similarly speech acts and can be identified with sociologically real events. Once two speakers are in a linguistic community, speech or gestures of a certain kind, made in space over time, constitute the making of a claim or the refusal to accede to a demand. **But what about obligations?** Are obligations psychological or sociological phenomena? That S *feels* obligated to X is a psychological fact. That R *judges* that S is obligated to X is a psychological fact. But might these feelings and judgments all be mistaken?

Recall Locke's view that S is only obligated to X if someone has the power to punish S for her failing to X. In a case where S can get away without X-ing in this life (e.g. where she is wearing the ring of Gyges), Locke invokes God's power to punish in the afterlife to maintain that S is nevertheless obligated to X. Why does James ignore Locke's theological conception of obligation? Why does James ignore the varieties of moral skepticism we outlined at the beginning of this handout? How convincing is James' claim that morality in general and moral obligations in particular can exist in a universe that lacks a God or an effective "enforcement mechanism" that will ensure that those who do not do what they know they are obligated to do will be made to suffer for their failures? Mustn't

secular conceptions of morality provide some answer to “Why should I do what I am morally required to do?” that cites something other than prudence or self-interest as a reason to be moral? Or is Kant right that people shouldn’t need a reason to do what they are morally obligated to do beyond the mere fact of its being something they are morally obligated to do?

C. Casuistic Questions: “Casuistry” has both a neutral and a pejorative sense.

In the pejorative sense it refers to the use of clever but unsound reasoning to argue for a particular moral judgment or course of action.

In its neutral sense casuistry just means “applied ethics”: i.e. the use of theoretical reasoning of one sort or another to decide what to do in a case in which one is concerned with acting in a morally permissible or even morally excellent (i.e. virtuous) manner.

James begins his analysis of casuistic questions by taking (a) widespread moral disagreement and (b) doubts about God’s existence and relevance to morality, as the context in which we ask casuistic questions. But he remains dedicated to finding a systematic or theoretic guide to morality, and he has rejected the appeal to a priori intuition (or “moral reason”) as a source of the sound moral theory for which he is searching.

1st Question: Why shouldn’t the moral philosopher just stick with the moral principles with which she finds herself when she begins to reflect on morality in a systematic way?

James’ answer: this would amount to anti-theory. **“If we are true philosophers we must throw our own spontaneous ideals, even the dearest, impartially in with that total mass of ideals which are fairly to be judged.”**

Criticism: (a) Isn’t complete neutrality impossible? (b) Even if it were possible, wouldn’t this be like Descartes’ trying to rebuild science from indubitable first principles? Isn’t it a recipe for complete moral skepticism?

James seems to acknowledge this danger. “How then can we as philosophers ever find a test; how avoid complete moral skepticism on the one hand, and on the other escape bringing a wayward personal standard of our own along with us, on which we simply pin our faith?” (James in Haack, 260).

1st Possible Response: Find a **First Principle**, which supplies both the aim or goal of the moral system and a way to resolve debates as to how to act in service of that aim or goal.

For example: Mill argues that happiness (and the avoidance of suffering) are the only intrinsically good things and that for this reason, the principle of utility (or greatest happiness principle) can be used as means for resolving difficult casuistic questions or moral dilemmas.

“To be a mean between two extremes; to be recognized by a special intuitive faculty; to make the agent happy for the moment; to make others as well as him happy in the long run; to add to his perfection or dignity; to harm no one; to follow from reason or flow from the universal law; to be in accordance with the will of God; to promote the survival of the human species on this planet,—are so many tests, each of which has been maintained by somebody to constitute the essence of all good things or action so far as they are good” (James in Haack, 260-1).

James advances a number of criticisms against the moral “first principles” described above. Some only offer partial advice and so cannot help resolve certain moral dilemmas. Some are too vague to offer guidance. Without argumentation, James claims that Mill’s answer is best: promoting happiness is the aim of moral systems.

But James points to a flaw in Mill’s understanding of happiness. Mill equates happiness with pleasure, but Mill also allows that people find happiness in radically different things that have little connection to pleasure when pleasure is conceptualized as the kind of feeling we get from warm baths, sexual stimulation, eating things we find delicious, etc. People strive for all sorts of things that are unrelated to pleasure in this sense. And James infers from the plurality of things we value for their own sakes to a plurality in the basic principles we must posit in our ethics, even when we are “philosophers” aiming to construct a coherent system.

“There is really no more ground for supposing that all our demands can be accounted for by one universal underlying kind of motive than there is ground for supposing that all physical phenomena are cases of a single law. The elementary forces in ethics are probably as plural as those of physics are. The various ideals have no common character apart from the fact that they are ideals. No single abstract principle can be so used as to yield to the philosopher anything like a scientifically accurate and genuinely useful casuistic scale” (James in Haack, 261).

Question: Why can’t we just set up a morality that will allow us to best promote all of the various goods or things people regard as intrinsically valuable upon due reflection?

James' Answer: Because the pursuit of some goods comes at the cost of others. "There is hardly a good we can imagine except as competing for the possession of the same bit of space and time with some other imagined good" (262).

James' 2nd Answer: We underestimate the competition in question because some goods are hidden from us by our particular place in history. For example, those of us living in modern liberal, capitalistic societies see the good in freedom, but are blind to the value of tradition. We can see how wide the set of possible goods is by reading the philosophical works of very different people, who wrote about the good life in very different circumstances: Zeno and Epicurus, Calvin and Paley, Kant and Schopenhauer, Herbert Spencer and John Henry Newman.

James' Meta-Level Critique: At this point James seems to reconsider the idea of moral philosophy when that is construed as the effort to evaluate moral systems from a neutral perspective so as to arrive at the "best" guide to life. The idea of a philosopher advancing any one guide to life so understood: whether it be utilitarianism or Calvinism or Social Darwinism, or Kantianism, is both pathetic and grotesque. It is pathetic because philosophers don't have the power they would need to impose their views on other people. It is grotesque because if a philosopher did have this power and exercised it, the result would strike us contrary to morality, no matter how good we regarded the first-order moral system in question.

"All one's slumbering revolutionary instincts waken at the thought of any single moralist wielding such powers of life and death. Better chaos forever than an order based on any closet-philosopher's rule, even though he were the most enlightened possible member of his tribe. No! If the philosopher is to keep his judicial position, he must never become one of the parties to the fray."

Notice that this last critique is already something focused on by Kant and his intellectual heirs. If the point of morality is autonomy or freedom (as Kant argued), morality must be chosen or constructed or (to use Kant's term) **self-legislated**. According to Kant, someone who does the right thing simply because they were told it is morally right, has less worth than someone who does what is right from her appreciation of the moral law that (in conjunction with the facts of the case) renders the act permissible. Kantian philosophers have struggled, however, to reconcile the objectivity of the moral law as they conceive of it, with this idea of self-legislation.

James' Solution: Pluralism: Defend a meta-level moral system that enables the realization of as many moral codes or systems as can be enacted in the population without nullifying one another.

“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!” (James in Haack, 264).

Final questions:

(1) Though James says we should accommodate as many moralities as are compatible with our own, he insists, “The philosopher must be a conservative, and in the construction of his casuistic scale must put the things most in accordance with the customs of the community on top.” What has he said to justify this a priori preference for what is?

(2) Are there no other a priori constraints on the set of admissible moralities beyond their compatibility with the morality you find yourself with at the outset of inquiry? What about biology? Think here of Locke. Mustn’t morality at least take into account what is good for and bad for human beings in a biological sense of those terms? Consider David Wong, a Duke ethicist who argues for pluralism (or relativism) on the grounds that traditional eastern and western moralities each have distinctive if incompatible values they promote. And yet Wong argues that some moralities fall outside the set of admissible ones. For example, Wong argues that no admissible morality would permit female circumcision. Mightn’t we invoke the objectivity of the biological value of sexual pleasure and its role in a biologically good human life to argue against this component of traditional North African moralities? Or is human biology something that is not itself fixed in the relevant sense?

(3) In the quote above James argues that history is “the struggle from generation to generation to find the more and more inclusive order.” But this seems like an incredibly over optimistic conception of that history. Think of Colonialism or Nazism. Doesn’t history often feature the devastating destruction of diversity by a homogenous order made uncomfortable by that diversity? Didn’t the Europeans succeed in imposing a more monolithic Christian culture on a population that was until then divided into tribes which practiced their own unique customs and held each other to distinct sets of moral rules or norms?

Consider James’ description of the moral fights of his day. I focus on that relevant to our discussion of Darwin’s influence on the natural rights morality embedded in our founding documents as a result of Locke’s influence on the founding fathers and their supporters.

“See our kindness for the humble and the outcast, how it wars with that stern weeding-out which until now has been the condition of every

perfection in the breed. See everywhere the struggle and the squeeze; and everlastingly the problem how to make them less. The anarchists, nihilists, and free-lovers; the free-silverites, socialists, and single-tax men; the free-traders and civil-service reformers; the prohibitionists and anti-vivisectionists; the radical darwinians with their idea of suppression of the weak,—these and all the conservative sentiments of society arrayed against them, are simply deciding through actual social experiment by what sort of conduct the maximum amount of good can be gained and kept in this world... 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 more inclusive arrangement, and that by one tack after another some approach to the kingdom of heaven is incessantly made” (James in Haack, p. 266).

Why, according to James, is the “pure philosopher” so confident that we are evolving toward an “ever richer and more inclusive arrangement”? Are you confident of this? What could ground this sort of confidence? Is it a prediction of Darwin’s theory of natural selection? Or does that theory posit cycles of variation followed by selection for one variant over others, followed by new sources of variation, followed by selection for one among those variations, and so on?

(4) James closes in his essay by contrasting the “strenuous mood” toward ethics and morality with a “relaxed mood.” Though he has argued that morality exists even if there is no God, he now argues that only belief in God can make us so serious about what we take our moral demands to be that we labor with full energy toward the realization of those demands. Those who have a wholly secular conception of morality are less motivated than those who believe in a God who already has a conception of the ideal universe in his or her mind.

Does James’ belief in God so understood explain why he has such an optimistic view of the trajectory of human history? If we believe that God *insures* that human history evolves toward a more inclusive moral order, won’t that sap us of the strenuous mood James describes? Why should I adopt the strenuous mood and **labor** on behalf of moral diversity if I am confident that God will eventually realize this state of affairs on Earth?