2009

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Visions and Values: Ethical Reflections in a Jamesian Key

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The purpose of this article is to provide a quick survey of William James's views on the plurality of visions that humans have regarding reality, as a background for more extensive discussions of his views on the plurality of values that orient human thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, as well as his views on the enactment of those values through active resistance to the ways things are and the risk-taking involved in striving to improve the human condition. Consonant with pluralism itself, I intend this discussion to open up rather than close off further considerations of James's views on ethics.

Pluralism, as proposed by William James, is generally taken to pertain to ontology and epistemology: to the study of what *is* and what we can *know*, or in more Jamesian terms, to the study of the variety of things (or facts) and the variety of perspectives (or visions) embedded in the stream of experience. This concentration on ontology and epistemology is not surprising since James himself focused primarily on these matters in his classic work on *A Pluralistic Universe*. Nevertheless, James was committed to the proposition that pluralism also pertains to ethics: to the study of what we can and should *do*, or in more Jamesian terms, to the study of the variety of priorities (or values) that humans should enact.[1]

[1]The classic branches of philosophical reflection are ontology, epistemology, ethics, and aesthetics, which deal respectively with the nature of being, truth, goodness, and beauty, all traditionally understood as having definitive, unchanging essences. James cared about each of these topics, but he was among the first to realize the revolutionary consequences of adopting a Darwinian worldview. These consequences included a shift from rationalistic analyses of static "being" to empirical investigations of dynamic "becoming" and the related recognition that truth, goodness, and beauty — not just beings — assume a wide variety or plurality of forms in this world. (Therefore we should speak in the plural of different kinds of truths, goods, and beauties.) Also included among these consequences was the realization that any strict separation of the ontological, epistemological, ethical, and aesthetic dimensions of what James called "the stream of experience" is somewhat artificial. As we shall see with regard to the key terms that I will use, James felt that ethical "values" derive at least in part from epistemological "visions" of the ways things are at a given moment in time.

James hinted at the ethical dimension of pluralism when he criticized "monistic idealism" in *A Pluralistic Universe* (James, 1909/1977, pp. 27–28). Using an analogy, as he so often did, he suggested that those who believe that everything and everyone in the universe — past, present, and to come — has a predetermined place in a single, unchanging, inexorable system, are like "readers" of a "cosmic novel" who believe that they can discern "the author's point of view," identify all the "villains" and "heroes," and anticipate every twist and turn of "the plot," even those still to come. This assumes, James pointed out, that the "world-drama" is "timeless" — that its script has already been written out in full and that it can and will be subject to absolutely no revision. As James put it elsewhere, the monists' story allows for no surprises, no novelties, and no possibilities: world history, like our individual biographies within it, represents the ineluctable unfolding of what must be (James, 1904–1905/1988b, p. 341; 1906–1907/1988c, pp. 424–427; 1907/1975, pp. 70–71; and 1911/1979c, pp. 76–79).

But are we really mere readers of a story that has already been written, James went on to ask? Are we not ourselves "the very personages of the world-drama"? Don't we feel that we are involved day to day in an evolving and not fully determined story, as we interact with others "whom we help in their vicissitudes even as they help us in ours"? And don't we experience a very personal "satisfaction" when we aid one another — a kind of satisfaction that we would not feel if we sensed that our actions were as completely predetermined as the monists suggest? Surely the "absolute reality" that they posit would give us a different kind of feeling since we could "neither help nor hinder it" (James, 1909/1977, pp. 27–28).

In contrast to the monists' story, James offered a belief in pluralism, which makes "the very life we lead seem real and earnest." For only in a world of "finite multifariousness" would "every end, reason, motive, object of desire or aversion, ground of sorrow or joy that we feel" actually matter. Only in such a world would "anything really happen" that had not been foreseen and foreordained from the beginning of time (p. 28). And, of course, only in such a world would our lives, choices, and actions deserve to be called ethical or unethical.

The purpose of this article is to provide a quick survey of James's views on the plurality of visions that humans have regarding reality, as a background for more extensive discussions of his views on the plurality of values that orient human thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, as well as his views on the enactment of those values through active resistance to the ways things are and the risk-taking involved in striving to improve the human condition. Consonant with pluralism itself, I intend this discussion to open up rather than close off further considerations of James's views on ethics.[2]

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[2]I will be pulling James's ethical views together from a variety of sources since they were never treated by him in a single, summative account. Indeed, it would have been contradictory — a "monistic" rather than "pluralistic" activity — for James to spell out, once and for all, a fully rationalized set of ethical principles and corollaries. (This would have suggested something that James rejected, namely, the primacy of a priori reason over a posteriori experience.) As we shall see, what James offered instead of preestablished principles were some core values on the

Besides contributing to centennial reflections upon *A Pluralistic Universe*, this article also represents a partial response to an address presented by M. Brewster Smith at the 2008 convention of the American Psychological Association. The occasion of Smith's presentation, entitled "Toward Transcending Relativism: A Late-Life Perspective," was his well deserved reception of an Award for Distinguished Contribution to Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology. The central concern that he raised in that address was the need for psychology and other disciplines to transcend relativism with regard to both knowledge and values. Interestingly, even though Smith indicated that he accepts the epistemological critiques of recent decades and therefore acknowledges that final, absolute truth is beyond human ken, he expressed confidence and apparent comfort with the idea that we can arrive at "useful approximations of truth" regarding the world and its inhabitants. (His position depends, in particular, on the use of multiple, overlapping processes of corroboration.) However, Smith's confidence and comfort does not carry over to the relativity of values and the associated choices premised upon them. Indeed, he expressed considerable distress at our collective failure to clarify the nature and variety of values, and hence our difficulty in resolving the humane and ethical dilemmas that confront us as human beings and as practitioners of human services and behavioral science.

During Smith's address, I found myself wondering why many of us — not just Smith himself — have become reasonably comfortable with the notion that we can produce largely truthful, if not definitively true, statements about reality, yet still think of values — and yearn to make decisions — that are demonstrably "right" rather than "wrong"? Why aren't we as confident and satisfied to say that we can arrive, and perhaps have arrived, at "useful approximations of value"? Such questions led me to ask, What would William James say about this matter? This article is my initial attempt to answer these queries.[3]

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basis of which individuals might be inspired to take ethical risks in addressing what he called the ethical "demands" rather than "commands" posed by their real-life experiences. Because James never articulated a formal ethical system (though James, 1897/1979b and 1899/1983b, are particularly instructive with regard to his ethical sensibilities), I will speak of "ethics in a Jamesian key" rather than "Jamesian ethics." In so speaking, I will use "vision" and "values" as shorthand terms to epitomize a range of words that James used to express his epistemological and ethical views, and I will present my comments more as "reflections" than "analyses" since they will sometimes reach beyond what James actually wrote. Among those who have presented more formal analyses of James's moral or ethical thought are Brennan (1961), Bird (1997), Cooper (2002), Gale (1999), Perry (1935), Rambo (1980), Roth (1969), Slater (2007), and most notably Myers (1986). Cotkin's (1990) study of James's political views inevitably touches upon his moral and ethical thought. For an excellent introduction to James's life, times, and ways of thinking, including his moral and ethical concerns, see Richardson (2006).

[3]The reasons I asked what James would say are fairly straightforward. (1) I have spent a good amount of time studying James's thought (see, e.g., Leary, 1990b, 1992, 1995, 2003, and in press), and I am currently writing a book on a neglected aspect of his life and work. (2) I was struck by the Jamesian quality of Smith's comments on knowledge and truthfulness. (3) I could not help wondering why a Jamesian approach to ethics would not satisfy Smith and others as much as a Jamesian approach to knowledge.

Visualizing the Ways Things Are

From very early in his career, William James conceptualized knowledge in terms of visual metaphors. No doubt this reflected his previous experiences as an artist's apprentice (see Leary, 1992), but his metaphors were nonetheless more substantial and general in import than their status as figures of speech might suggest. James really believed and presented evidence to show that knowledge is perspectival: that the vision it provides is always achieved and expressed from a particular point of view. Thus, in one of his first publications, he argued that philosophy depends upon "the habit of always seeing an alternative, of not taking the usual for granted, of making conventionalities fluid again." When articulated in a coherent way, such alternatives provide "mental perspective" and communicate an "independent, personal look" at reality (James, 1876/1978a, pp. 4–5).[4]

Of course, philosophy, like science, aims at more than individualized, personal perspectives. As a result, once an alternative perspective has been created by someone (through mental processes described by James, 1878/1983a and 1878/1978b), assurance of its relative validity must be provided by others who confirm that it has been useful in their own attempts to understand and deal with this or that aspect of reality. This verification through corroboration and adoption can happen formally, as in philosophical analysis and scientific experimentation, or less formally and even spontaneously. For, as James (1890/1981) said, while most individuals "have no eyes but for those aspects of things which they have already been taught to discern," virtually "any one of us can notice a phenomenon after it has once been pointed out" to us (Vol. 1, p. 420). In either case, the advancement of knowledge depends upon the acceptance of new ways of looking at reality that "work" in some tangible way.[5]

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[4]That James used visual metaphors derived from his own experience as an artist illustrates his contention that everyone understands things from the perspective of his or her own past experience. Here is a relevant passage from A *Pluralistic Universe* (1909/1977): "No philosophy can ever be anything but a summary sketch, a picture of the world in abridgment, a foreshortened bird's-eye view of the perspective of events. And the first thing to notice is this, that the only material we have at our disposal for making a picture of the whole world is supplied by the various portions of that world of which we have already had experience. We can invent no new forms of conception, applicable to the whole exclusively, and not suggested originally by the parts. All philosophers, accordingly, have conceived of the whole world after the analogy of some particular feature of it which has particularly captivated their attention" (p. 9). In this regard, with reference to the fundamental contribution of what I call "comparative thinking" in psychology as well as philosophy, see Leary (1990a).

[5]This is a highly abbreviated rendition of James's pragmatic theory of truth. Throughout this article I will avoid using special jargon related to James's radical empiricism and pragmatism, since I want to convey the central gist of his views through the kind of metaphors that he found instructive. Regarding James's reasons for adopting radical empiricism, which emphasizes the richly varied and deeply individualized nature of experience, see James (1912/1976); regarding James's reasons for adopting pragmatism, which posits that the survival of any perspective, and the use of the concepts and terms associated with it, should and does depend upon their practical utility, see James (1907/1975).

A great deal of James's intellectual work focused on elaborating and drawing conclusions from this basic understanding of knowledge as a special kind of shared vision. Whatever reality may be, our knowledge of it, James argued, is advanced by trying to see what it looks like from multiple perspectives. Some of these perspectives, or some combination of perspectives, will be found to be more useful than others; some, for instance, will be helpful in controlling as well as understanding an array of phenomena. Other perspectives, or visions, will have more delimited yet still meaningful utility, as they are applied to a narrower range of phenomena or to the needs of particular types of individuals. A well known example that James offered in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890/1981) makes this latter point as well as anything else:

> Let four men make a tour in Europe. One will bring home only picturesque impressions — costumes and colors, parks and views and works of architecture, pictures and statues. To another all this will be non-existent; and distances and prices, populations and drainage-arrangements, door- and window-fastenings, and other useful statistics will take their place. A third will give a rich account of the theatres, restaurants, and public balls, and naught beside; whilst the fourth will perhaps have been so wrapped in his own subjective broodings as to tell little more than a few names of places through which he passed. Each has selected, out of the same mass of presented objects, those which suited his private interest and has made his experience thereby. (Vol. 1, pp. 275–276)

Clearly, each of these individuals has seen reality in a "true" way, though each has also overlooked aspects of reality that others have noticed. James's point is that no one way of knowing reality, or visualizing experience, will obviate the possibility and need for other ways. No vision, however accurate, will be complete or final. The aesthete's interests will differ from the plumber's, the politician's from the physicist's, the economist's from the priest's.[6]

Nevertheless, given our common sensory apparatus and typical modes of interacting with the world, we can expect a certain convergence of visions — of how reality can be understood. Contrary to various simplifications of his thought, James was a realist, though far from a naïve realist who expects every eye to observe reality from the same perspective, as if from everywhere or nowhere. In the end, as James pointed out, the inevitable variation of perspectives — the obvious plurality of human experiences — works to our common benefit. We can

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[6]James wrote many passages on this point. The following one, from a lecture subsequently published in *Pragmatism* (1907/1975), graphically underscores the interconnection between ontology and epistemology as well as the plurality of perspectives and resulting visions that James had in mind: "What shall we call a *thing* anyhow? It seems quite arbitrary, for we carve out everything, just as we carve out constellations, to suit our human purposes. For me, the whole 'audience' [to whom I am speaking] is one thing . . . . But in your own eyes, ladies and gentlemen, to call you 'audience' is an accidental way of taking you. The permanently real things for you are your individual persons. To an anatomist, again, those persons are but organisms, and the real things are the organs. Not the organs, so much as their constituent cells, says the histologists; not the cells, but their molecules, say in turn the chemists" (p. 122).

and do learn from one another, and we profit from what others point out to us: "We exchange ideas; we lend and borrow verifications, get them from one another by means of social discourse. All truth thus gets verbally built out, stored up, and made available for everyone" (James, 1907/1975, p. 102).

This active exchange of our visualizations of the ways things are, including our criticisms as well as corroborations of each other's perspectives, is what allows us, like Brewster Smith, to feel reasonably confident and comfortable with the knowledge that we have. It may not be perfect or definitive, but it has been tried and found reasonably reliable. It works to a very significant degree. And to the extent that it doesn't, it remains susceptible to improvement so long as motivated, discriminating, and creative individuals continue to explore and share alternative visions of what they have experienced. In addition, the fact that there are multiple ways of viewing the virtually limitless aspects of reality helps assure that we will be able to adapt our knowledge, as needed, to changing circumstances. With this truncated summary of James's views on human knowledge in mind, we are ready to reflect on ethics in a Jamesian key.

Visualizing the Ways Things Should and Should Not Be

When William James asserted, in A *Pluralistic Universe* (1909/1977), that "a man's vision is the great fact about him" (p. 14), his statement applied to ethics as much as epistemology. For even as he felt that vision was central to human knowledge, he was also convinced that it mattered in ethics. In fact, he had underscored this point ten years earlier in his essay "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings" (1899/1983c), which recounted some of the moral costs associated with *not seeing* the distinctive inner life and value of other individuals, especially those who are unlike ourselves and who enjoy and desire different things.[7] This essay was one of James's favorite publications: "much more," he said, "than the mere piece of sentimentalism which it may seem to some readers." Instead, it expresses "a definite view of the world and of our moral relations to the same . . . . I mean the pluralistic or individualistic philosophy." The consequence of this philosophy, he went on to say, is "the well-known democratic respect for the sacredness of individuality" (James, 1899/1983b, p. 4).

James's individualism has sometimes been interpreted as a justification for selfishly pursuing the fulfillment of one's own needs and desires, but that is a profound distortion of what he had in mind. As he argued in very explicit terms, only an individual who suffers from a dehumanizing "blindness" to others will attend only to his or her own concerns. Anyone who truly values human dignity and respects what should be accorded to every human being will recognize that each person has an inalienable right to be seen, and once seen to be heard and allowed to flourish.

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[7]The timeliness of James's concern is indicated by the fact that the first portion of this essay has been identified and republished as one of the first significant statements of multiculturalism by Sollors (1996, pp. 34–36).

A distinctive set of implications follows from this radical individualism: an individualism that, as James insisted, should be applied across the entire spectrum of human beings. Chief among them is the realization that "neither the whole of truth, nor the whole of good, is revealed to any single observer." And beyond that, that "each observer gains a partial superiority of insight from the peculiar position in which he [or she] stands" (1899/1983c, p. 149).

This insight was the kernel of the contention James expressed several years later, that not only must we "borrow from the other parts of truth seen better from the other's point of view," but we must also realize that each of us, "from his [or her] particular angle of observation, takes in a certain sphere of fact and trouble, which each must deal with in a unique manner." And therefore, since each of us expresses but "a syllable in human nature's total message," we must all act with an awareness that "it takes the whole of us to spell the meaning out completely" (James, 1902/1985, pp. 383–384).[8]

Although we might be comfortable with the idea that each of us has a unique epistemic privilege, particularly with regard to our own individual experience, we are less likely to be comfortable with the demands placed upon us if we take James's ethical views seriously. For if I see something that you do not — a way things should or should not be — I may be called upon to act on my own, without your understanding, assistance, or approval.[9] As James said to those of us who feel compelled to find ways to end warfare and physical aggression as means of resolving international and interpersonal conflicts, we should not expect our efforts to be as easy and enjoyable as a "camping party" (James, 1910/1982, p. 162).[10] At some points, at least, we will be going against public opinion, not to mention the tide of human history and habitual behavior. As James suggested in a companion piece to his essay on human blindness, it has taken "exceptional individuals"

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[8]Note that if this is "relativism," it is a relativism that emphasizes a cumulative and supplemental rather than conflictual and otherwise problematic plurality of views and values. But note, too, that James did not deny that actual as well as potential conflicts are part of what humans must acknowledge, endure, and try to resolve. That was part of his message in his essay on human blindness (James, 1899/1983c), as he strove to make it clear that the ethical criterion for judging potential resolutions should be whether or not they would create a better world for all. Individuals might argue about what *that* would be — what a better world would look like — but it should be the ideal vanishing point for conversation and convergence.

[9]A moral question, after all, will not allow and, in any case, cannot await an answer for which anything like *proof* is available. As James (1897/1979a) put it, moral issues pose "a question not of what sensibly exists, but of what is good, or would be good if it did exist. Science can tell us what exists; but to compare the *worths*, both of what exists and of what does not exist, we must consult not science, but what Pascal calls our heart" (p. 27). The major burden of James's famous essay on "The Will to Believe," from which this quotation is taken, is that it is only through someone's believing and then acting *in light of* a given value that the value can and will be actualized.

[10]I haven't made up this example. I am quoting directly from James's essay on "The Moral Equivalent of War," which calls for an end to war and aggression as means of achieving human goals, whether those goals be laudable or not. James foreshadowed his criticism of "the barbaric tendencies in men" in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (James, 1902/1985, pp. 291–296).

throughout history to fight for significant, previously unenvisioned ethical ends: individuals who have had to work and endure "in obedience to some inner *ideal*, while their comrades were not actuated by anything worthy of that name" (James, 1899/1983d, p. 161). Now as then, actualizing such ideals will take not only moral courage but a commitment to what James often called "the strenuous life" (e.g., James, 1897/1979b, pp. 159–162, and 1902/1985, p. 292).

This is where the burden of ethical individualism comes in: the consciences of radical individualists — of those who accept their own responsibilities as well as acknowledge the right of every other individual to dignity and well-being — should dictate that they act, with others if possible but alone if necessary, according to what they see as the ways things should or should not be. As with those who pursue truth in its more purely cognitive manifestations, they may discover in time that some other view or related value should supersede their own, but in the meantime they ought to act as their conscience dictates. Humans are no more infallible — their visions are no more final — in moral than in epistemological situations. As James put it in an earlier essay, "there is no such thing possible as an ethical philosophy dogmatically made up in advance . . . . There can be no final truth in ethics any more than in physics, until the last man has had his experience and said his say" (James, 1897/1979b, p. 141).[11]

Nevertheless James was convinced, and offered historical evidence to support his view, that the long-term, if not short-term consequences of individuals acting in response to strongly felt (what he called "tyrannical") moral imperatives — including the actions of saints who were considered silly or mad in their own lifetimes — are more likely than not to advance the common good (see James, 1897/1979b, p. 159, and 1902/1985, pp. 262–300). In any case, whatever truth and goodness human beings can create or comprehend ultimately depends, James said, upon the shared visions and actions of all. And just as he maintained that "the main categories of thought" have emerged and will continue to develop "in the course of experience itself" (James, 1912/1976, p. 131), so too he believed that the main categories of value have emerged and will continue to develop over the course of human history. Which means that some values or modifications of values have not yet been envisioned, much less enacted. They await an advocate who sees something that should or should not be.

Meanwhile, the best practical advice that James could offer in his article on "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" (1897/1979b) was that we should try "to satisfy at all times as many demands as we can," realizing our own ideals, so far as possible, in a manner that "will also satisfy the alien demands." "That

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[11]Just as James (1909/1977) criticized "vicious intellectualism" as a kind of preemptive strike against those who believe that there will always be facts that do not fit perfectly within any given philosophical system (p. 32), so he could have spoken against a "vicious moralism" that denies the possibility of significantly modified or entirely new kinds of moral situations and dilemmas. "Philosophy," after all, "lives in words, but truth and fact well up into our lives in ways that exceed verbal formulation" (James, 1902/1985, p. 360).

and that only," he said, "is the path of peace" (p. 155). So, the appropriately moral individual "must vote always for the richer universe," the one that fulfills the needs and wishes of as many individuals as possible, though "which particular universe this is he cannot know for certain in advance; he only knows that if he makes a bad mistake the cries of the wounded will soon inform him of the fact" (p. 158). When such cries are heard, of course, the moral individual should change the way he votes and acts, if he can, since the "one unconditional commandment" is "so to vote and to act as to bring about the very largest total universe of good which we can see" (p. 158).[12]

Resisting, Risking, and Changing the Ways Things Are

William James recognized that religious belief would provide a firmer basis for arguments about ethical responsibility, but he was never able to muster sufficient confidence to make a leap into supernatural faith. As a result, his arguments for living "strenuously" had to be based on resolutely secular beliefs in the native ability and inclination of human beings to assume responsibility for themselves and others. Among the conceptual sources of those beliefs, for James, was Ralph Waldo Emerson's (1841/1983) assessment of the possibility and need for "self-reliance." Even more deeply, however, James's ethical premises were rooted in his own experiences of resistance to claims that human existence — his own individual existence as well as the existence of all other humans — was ultimately meaningless. It *would* be meaningless, he felt, if he and others were but spume on the wave of

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[12]James sometimes spoke of a "demand" rather than "good" in order to convey the imperative quality associated with realizing the way things should be, as when one realizes that a particular social arrangement really should exist or that a particular action should be undertaken. James used the metaphor of "voting" in these passages to indicate that in acting this or that way an individual is, in essence, casting his lot for this or that kind of moral universe. James's statement about attending to "the cries of the wounded" may seem flippant if it is taken to be a mere rhetorical flourish. But as he demonstrated in "On a Certain Blindness of Human Beings" (1899/1983c), he meant it very sincerely. This does not mean that he himself always attended to every cry; he has been criticized, with some justice, for this or that deafness or personal blind spot (see, e.g., Garrison and Madden, 1977, and Otto, 1943). No one, after all, can see all things and all people all the time. Generally, however, he has been recognized as an unusually sensitive and sympathetic individual. Perhaps I should add, in this context, that James extended his ethical concern to non-human animals, as exemplified by the fact that he told his students, however whimsically, that ours cannot be the best of all possible worlds, as monistic idealists must perforce claim, as long as there is "a single cockroach suffering the pangs of unrequited love" (Train, 1943, p. 4; also reported in Hapgood, 1939, pp. 67 and 78). More seriously, James's concern about animals prompted him to reflect upon the ethics of experimental vivisection. Although he welcomed the scrutiny of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals as a way of keeping physiologists vigilant and assuring that they will be prosecuted for any untoward behavior, he concluded that vivisection is warranted if there are potential benefits for humans and if animals receive humane treatment (James, 1875/1987a and 1876/1987b). He was, in short, a cautious, qualified proponent. (I should note that he was also an experimental physiologist by training.) James acknowledged his colleague Josiah Royce as the source of his notion that the variety of "goods" should be maximized (see 1888–1889/1988a, p. 185).

history, as materialist science suggested: if, as he put it, "we are Nature through and through" and hence "*wholly* conditioned," so that "not a wiggle of our will happens save as a result of physical laws" (James, 1869/1995b, p. 370).

For many years James struggled against fears that this *might* be the case, but on April 30, 1870, he performed his famous Emersonian act of self-assertion, expressing his definitive resistance to the postulate of determinism and staking his future on the will to believe that his thoughts, feelings, and behavior were not entirely the result of physical forces.[13] However limited the wiggling of his will might be, he chose to assert its efficacy, and for him this assertion — and related beliefs — made all the difference in the world. From that point on, he was committed to expressing his freedom and individuality through a concentration of attention, effort, and action, trusting that he could indeed become a genuine factor — which is to say, an ethical agent — in the course of human history. It all depended, he concluded, on committing his life to "the self-governing *resistance* of the ego to the world" (James, 1870, p. 84).

What exactly did that mean for James? For one thing, it did *not* mean that resistance to the world was to be based solely on the ego's self-interest. As early as the tender age of 16, James had averred that "we must all lead an active life and live for others, not for ourselves" (James, 1858/1995a, p. 13). So resistance to the world, according to James, must entail attention to others and opposition to anything that negatively affects their dignity, development, and well-being. This is consistent, of course, with the central premises that we have already encountered in James's later thoughts about ethical behavior. In addition, James said, we must lead "an active life" as opposed to the kind of existence he himself had been living in the years leading up to April 30, 1870: an existence that consisted primarily of wallowing in thought rather than engaging in action. An active life, then, is one in which a person's "powers of action" are not endangered by a surfeit of "mere speculations and contemplative Grübelei [musing]" (James, 1870, p. 82).

And beyond calling for a proactive style of living, James recognized that actions intended to change the status quo in the interest of improving human lives will necessarily be unconventional at times, and as such will be risky. After all, conventional behavior, by definition, both reinforces and is reinforced by the ways things are. But for James, the risk of going against customary ways was a positive, not negative thing. Even at the level of personal experience, an awareness of risk was not anxiety-provoking for him. To the contrary, as he admitted to his wife-to-be in 1877, he never felt more "deeply and intensely active & alive" than when he was engaged in a meaningful, risky act in which there was "an element of active tension, of hold-

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[13]James's assertion of his own free will, and his consequent decision to live *as if* he were free for the coming year in order to see what the results might be, is often attributed to his reading and reflection on the philosophy of Charles Renouvier. No doubt that was a factor, as James (1870) himself reported. But there is good reason to characterize his *act* of believing as an example of the kind of self-assertion that Emerson (1841/1983) had described as a requirement of true selfhood.

ing my own as it were," "without any guarantee" regarding the outcome. Indeed, "make a guarantee," James said, "and the attitude immediately becomes to my consciousness stagnant and stingless" (James, 1877/1995c, pp. 570–571).

Many of James's early letters and diaries celebrate risk-taking for adding zest as well as opportunities to life. Conversely, other letters and documents report James's tendency toward boredom when he was in safe and hence unexciting environments and occupations. A good example is provided by his reaction to a Chautauqua Assembly in the late 1890s. James chafed at the "ice-cream soda-water" world that he experienced there. It was a world, he said, that removed all occasions for ethical heroism by papering over the ethical challenges that existed outside its walls. He felt uncomfortable in such worlds and in any situation that excluded, or tried to exclude, the plurality of experience, especially those aspects of experience that were novel, difficult, or what he called "wild" (James, 1899/1983d, pp. 152–154). The way he saw it, "all the higher, more penetrating ideals are revolutionary," and he therefore welcomed the fact that "every now and then" someone will come along and assert "the right to be original." At that point, "revolutionary thought or action" is likely to take place, thus making possible the production of some new "fruit." In James's estimation, it is only with such novel thought or action that there will be a chance for old ways to be replaced by something better (James, 1897/1979b, p. 157).

Yet even when such positive changes are wrought, the perpetrator of the new good, even if he or she is "an out-and-out saint," will have been working "at his [or her] peril" (James, 1902/1985, p. 298). Doing and creating good, in other words, is not for those who wish to avoid risk and the corresponding possibility of personal difficulty, perhaps even personal harm. "The *highest* ethical life," after all, "consists at all times in the breaking of rules which have grown too narrow for the actual case." And "however few may be called to bear its burdens" — and however many fewer will actually end up daring to act, albeit "with fear and trembling" — it is only through the risky responses of such individuals to the ethical imperatives that they feel, that the world and its inhabitants will enjoy the possibility of better days (James, 1897/1979b, p. 158).[14]

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[14]James's use of "fear and trembling" recalls Søren Kierkegaard's (1843/1941) consideration of the same ethical question: whether and when someone, in obedience to some higher calling, has the right or even obligation to violate established laws. Although James was not familiar with Kierkegaard's work when he used this phrase, he took the phrase from the same source as Kierkegaard, namely, from St. Paul's letter to the Philippians: "Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (King James version, 2:21). The implied ethical insight is that if one has a deeply ethical nature — if one typically obeys moral commandments even when moral authorities will not know — then one can be trusted to work out his or her own alternative course of action when it seems fit to do so. This is equivalent to an ethical principle that James explicitly endorsed in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902/1985), namely, Saint Augustine's maxim that "if you only love God enough, you may safely follow all your inclinations" (p. 288). James said of this "antinomian saying" that it "is morally one of the profoundest of observations" even though "it is pregnant, for such persons, with passports beyond the bounds of conventional morality" (p. 72).

So, for James, it is through resistance to the ways things are, manifested in ethical action, that we can earn "the *chance* of salvation," understood in a purely secular sense. Having this chance and taking advantage of it, without any assurances, was "enough" for him, James said, and he believed that it was enough for others, too, since "no fact in human nature is more characteristic than its willingness to live on a chance." It is just this element of having a chance, an opportunity, a fresh possibility in life, James emphasized, that distinguishes "a life of which the keynote is resignation" from "a life of which the keynote is hope" (James, 1902/1985, p. 414).

In the end, then, ethics is the science and practice of hope — and action — for a better world. Summing everything up, ethics rests on the assertion of personal freedom and responsibility in the advancement of values based on visions of the ways things should be. No matter how clear or unclear one's vision may be, *the assumption of ethical responsibility involves resistance to the way the world is* and acceptance of the personal risk entailed in trying to change it for the better. These characteristics — resistance and risk — can be used to contrast epistemology and ethics in a way that is germane to Brewster Smith's concerns, which were outlined in the introduction to this article.

The Real World, the Possible World, and Brewster Smith's Concerns

Let's take stock. We have seen that the physical aspects of the world, according to James, are available to us cognitively through this or that way of seeing. All such seeing is necessarily from this or that perspective. When a new perspective is tried but found to yield no tangible benefit over an already established way of seeing, it is likely to be overlooked. Hence, whatever counts as knowledge at any given time is simply the way of seeing that has proven to be most useful to the greatest number of individuals who are hoping to achieve a particular kind of purchase upon reality. But at any moment knowledge can change as a result of continuing feedback from experience. As James summed the matter up, the truth about the world, so far as we can know it, is what we are fated to believe, given the resistance of the world to our attempts to see it otherwise.[15]

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[15]James elaborated on "the presence of resisting factors in every actual experience of truth-making" in *Pragmatism* (1907/1975). After defining truths as "beliefs about 'Reality,'" he defined reality as "what truths have to take account of" (p. 117). In focusing in this final section of my article on knowledge of the physical world as opposed to ethics in the social world, I am obviously simplifying matters so that I can more readily separate the core differences between epistemology and ethics. Still, I should note that epistemology is as concerned with knowing social facts as physical facts. Similarly, ethics can and often does involve physical as well as social facts, though primarily with regard to whether or not they can and should be preserved or changed. For instance, the possibility of changes in physical arrangements becomes relevant to ethics when such changes may impinge upon the social world: most would agree that it would be unethical not to repair a dam when repairs can be made and when not making them will result, sooner or later, in human tragedy.

When it comes to ethics, however, the direction of resistance is different. Rather than bacteria or nebulae or some other entity resisting our inaccurate visions, it is we who resist the constitution or procedures of social life. It is we, not the world, who provide the relevant point of reference. And whenever we resist the ways that society tries to impose upon us, we leave the realm of epistemology, with its recording of how things are, and enter the realm of ethics, with its assessment of how things should be.

If the human need to conform to the ineluctable requirements of physical life motivates our quest for knowledge of "the real world," it is our human desire to flourish — to develop and to live a good life — that spurs the discovery and then the enactment of values that promise to create "the possible world." And it is precisely in our confrontation with possibility, James felt, that our fullest measure as human beings is taken. For possibility is the essential mark of ethical life, just as it is part and parcel of the pluralist worldview in general, along with "incompleteness, 'more,' uncertainty, insecurity" as well as "fact, novelty, compromise, remedy, success" and such contrasts as "better and worse" and "loss and gain" (James, 1906–1907/1988c, p. 426).

Reflection on this litany suggests the source of Brewster Smith's discomfort with the plurality of values in the world. Possibilities may be exciting, but they are associated with loss as well as gain, failure as well as success. As we have seen, James believed that when it comes to choosing among alternative possibilities, there are no absolute guarantees regarding outcomes, however much we might wish that there were. Acting responsibly, if it involves a true choice, is not acting with certainty. And whereas uncertainty is also involved in epistemological conjectures — in positing beliefs about "the real world" — there is a qualitative difference in the uncertainty that attends ethical action on behalf of "the possible world." After all, in ethical activity, one makes a deeper and more personal investment, one that is subject to the moral approbation or condemnation of self as well as others. As James argued in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890/1981), when one makes a serious ethical choice one not only chooses between two or more possible future worlds, but also between two or more possible future selves. To a significant extent, what an ethical agent "shall *become* is fixed by the conduct of this moment" (Vol. 1, p. 276). Thus, in "critical ethical moments," the issue is not simply "what act he [or she] shall now choose to do," but "what being he [or she] shall now resolve to become" (p. 277).

So, a great deal is involved, as James insisted, when we are asked "the most probing question we are ever asked," namely, "*Will you or won't you have it so?*" And we answer this question, James noted,

> by *consents* or *non-consents* and not by words. What wonder that these dumb responses should seem our deepest organs of communication with the nature of things! What wonder if the effort demanded by them be the measure of our worth as men! What wonder if the amount which we accord of it be the one strictly underived and original contribution which we make to the world! (Vol. 2, p. 1182)

Realizing the extent of our investment in how things are and how they should be will help us understand the kind of discomfort that Brewster Smith reported regarding the plurality of values and the need to choose among them. Such discomfort is natural, especially when the stakes are high, but more pertinently, it may be a necessary prerequisite for the kind of strenuous and even heroic action that has the potential to make the greatest positive difference. For if we are true pluralists rather than closet monists — if we recognize the diversity of visions, values, and possible futures that confront us — all we can do is accept or reject the freedom to risk enacting the value that is most imperative at a given moment. The crucial question, in the end, is whether our behavior will take the course of least resistance or resist social pressure for the sake of risking action that enacts rather than violates a deeply held value.

Of course, someone could accept James's depiction of the heroic nature of difficult ethical decisions and actions, and still feel uncomfortable about the seemingly unbridled relativity of values underlying potential human action. Couldn't someone who accepted James's way of envisioning ethical behavior feel warranted in doing *anything* he or she feels like doing in a particular situation? Is there no criterion that could be used to adjudicate his or her current and future behaviors?

In fact, there is a criterion — a pragmatic criterion — even, or especially, when one is confronted with a diversity of values. This criterion can guide the selection and retention of values. Initially, after all, values simply emerge in the stream of experience. Something is experienced as positive or negative, constructive or destructive, good or bad, right or wrong. (Such valuing, James felt, is an intimate and immediate aspect of our ongoing experience.) But when a value leads to an action, and that action to an outcome, an assessment of that outcome will then allow us to affirm, negate, or qualify the ethical efficacy of the value that initiated the process, just as surely as the cognitive outcome of a particular vision of reality will allow us to affirm, negate, or qualify its epistemic validity. Only if there is an actual plurality of values as well as genuinely possible alternative actions does such testing make sense, and this testing, James argued, is a good as well as necessary thing: it is the sine qua non for ethical contention, evaluation, and action within the context of the current, existential situation.

In essence, prior to acting, an ethical person will ask, implicitly or explicitly, Will or won't acting in light of this particular value contribute to the improvement of life for myself and for others? And after acting, the same person will ask, Did or didn't my action contribute to the improvement of life for myself and for others? Further, Did this action affirm the dignity of myself and others? And yet further, Did it enhance the well-being of the larger community, including those who have typically fallen outside the bounds of my normal daily life?

Ethical reflection in a Jamesian key would revolve around questions like these, the underlying assumption being that the same basic process that works

for epistemology (examining and selecting visions that seem to work better) will also work for ethics (examining and selecting values that seem to work better). Unquestionably the assessment of outcomes and the consequent reconsideration of initiating values will be contentious at times, but so too will be the sorting through and selecting of visions regarding the nature of the world as it exists at this moment. Over the long run, persons of good will, who are not blind to the needs and desires of others, will enact values that promise to enhance human life, so that overlooked individuals as well as themselves and their communities will enjoy good lives.[16]

Without a doubt, these ethical reflections represent an act of faith: a will to believe that beyond all the variations in human motives and ideals, human beings share a fundamental tendency to envision, and a fundamental desire to create, a good life for themselves and others. Not knowing for certain, ahead of time, exactly what a good life would look like — and not knowing for certain which version of that life is actually possible for tomorrow or the day after — we humans will necessarily have to continue testing our values in and through our actions, but as James pointed out, there are reasonable grounds for us to conduct this testing with hope rather than resignation. After all, the same diversity of values that can sometimes arouse discomfort also makes possible a better, more inclusive, and more satisfying future for all.

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[16]The notion of "testing" values is consonant with Anthony Appiah's (2008) concept of "experiments in ethics." Appiah's ethical reflections are consistent with James's pluralism, as one might expect since he, like James, starts from some of John Stuart Mill's premises (see Appiah, 2005 and 2006). It is telling and appropriate that Appiah (2008) ends his most recent ethical considerations with a section on "complications." "My philosophy," he notes, "is that everything is more complicated than you thought" (p. 198). Nonetheless, he suggests that really seeing others (not being blind to them, as James would say) is to see, at minimum, that "each other person" is not just "someone with preferences, pleasures, and pains" but also, primarily, "a creature engaged in the project of making a life, striving to succeed on the basis of standards that are partly found and partly made . . . . The central thing that people are up to," he says, "is making a life. That is the human *telos*: to make a good life." This is something that humans must do in concert rather than conflict if they wish to be successful at it. And "precisely because making a life is an activity," Appiah writes, we should "expect to learn more from experiments in living than from experiments in philosophizing" (p. 203). Appiah's ethical discussions, like James's, raise issues that are echoed in Flanagan's (1991) views on "moral personality" and Wall's (2005) discussion of "moral creativity." And it is worth noting the ethical experimentation they both endorse can take the form of "thought experiments," such as those offered in literature. Coles's (1989) discussion of "the call of stories," Nussbaum's (1995) treatment of "poetic justice," and Johnson's (1993) plea for "moral imagination" address this important theme, while James himself (1897/1979b) noted that "novels and dramas of the deeper sort" are relevant to reflections on "the moral life," especially to the extent that they are "confessedly tentative and suggestive rather than dogmatic" (p. 159). Both ethical ideals and practical solutions can be explored as one reads and reflects on literature, for the stories presented in literature not only "cultivate our ability to see and care for particulars" (Nussbaum, 1990, p. 184) but also allow us to experience what it is like to search for "the morally salient" (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 14). It is relevant to note that James was inspired by literature in this way and that one of his students, George Herbert Mead (1913/1964), observed how "the modern western world has lately done much of its thinking [about the nature and challenges of human life] in the form of the novel" (p. 147).

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