

UNFAMILIAR HABITS: JAMES AND THE ETHICS AND POLITICS OF SELF-EXPERIMENTATION

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The notion of habit is pervasive in William James's entire intellectual biography, and plays a central role in his writings on psychology as well as in his ethical-political essays. While commentators have noticed this widespread presence, still scarce attention has been given to a generative tension internal to the very notion of Jamesian habit: if habit, as pictured in *The Principles of Psychology* and corollary psychological writings, is what carries us through the day and makes the accomplishment of the various activities in which we engage possible in the first place, in the moral and political domain habit might represent a serious impediment for one's personal and social flourishing because of its tendency to dry the very sources of our ethical wells.

In this paper I aim at exploring this tension by showing how, rather than a gross inconsistency, this double soul of habit (habit as advantage and habit as hindrance) represents the core of James's ethical project of putting self-experimentation back at the center of our reflective lives. If in fact the cultivation of habit is the key, vital activity through which we constitute ourselves as purposeful and effective subjects, their crystallization and stiffening results in the very mortification and deadening of the self, and especially of its moral and political ambitions. Through the education of habit we spin our characters and chances, and yet James invites us to keep this very effort alive in an ongoing exercise of self-criticism as once a certain habit is taken for granted we dissipate our energies and jeopardize our potentialities altogether.

Thus, according to James, not habits *simpliciter*, but rather *unfamiliar habits*, should lie at the very center of our psychological and practical life: that is, those habits unsettling us but still characterizing us, habits which we are always on the verge of losing grasp of despite inspiring our conducts and defining our biographies. This understanding of habit lies at the center of James's distinctive ethical vision of human beings as progressive and perfectible beings engaged in an unbroken and unfinished transformative work of the self on itself. This I take to be the underlying lesson informing James's earlier writings on psychology and his later ones on moral and political conduct alike.

HORTATORY ETHICS AND THE CULTIVATION OF THE SELF

The reading of James's conception of habit here defended is part of a wider, radical interpretation of his moral thought (and of his work *as* a moral philosopher)¹. As against the mainstream reading according to which in his writings James would have advanced a prescriptive moral theory (of which various accounts have been offered), I claim how it is possible to locate in his writings a pragmatic version of the classical² conception of self-cultivation and self-experimentation as the proper subject-matter and goal of ethics. Such heterodox project and line of inquiry is opposed to the orthodoxy of rule-based and action-guiding morality systems currently dominating the philosophical scene.

Two sets of texts can be brought as evidence of this revisionist reconstruction:³ the earlier psychological ones (*The Principles of Psychology, Psychology: Briefer Course*) and the later ethical-political ones (*The Will to Believe, Essays in Religion and Morality*). In his writings on psychology James elaborates a picture of the edification and care of the self as an activity of ethical significance: the moral life is described by James as a field for self-fashioning in which we challenge our styles of reasoning and ways of reactions, while moral investigation is understood as a critical inquiry into the postures and stances that we might take toward ourselves and the world. By painting a rich phenomenology of the various ways in which we might (and might not) take care of the various aspects of our life of the mind, James displays those techniques of the self that we can use, or misuse, in order to constitute as individual selves, and which for this precise reason are activities of moral relevance.

In his ethical-political writings James focuses instead on the most practical dynamics and outcomes of the unleashing of our moral energies in conduct. Heroism and individualism are depicted as chief ethical practices in which we have a chance to express our subjectivity in always-novel directions, thus resisting the widespread de-moralization caused by conformism and conservatism. In these texts what is at stake is a conceptual reconsideration of our reflective experiencing as an activity of moral significance in which we shape and take care of our selfhood in an unbroken re-negotiation of our biographies and of their boundaries.

In both these psychological and ethical-political writings the notion of habit seems thus to be playing a central role. Yet, at a first sight that of habit does not seem to be a very promising notion to work with when practicing ethics in a Jamesian mood. Habit (and habitual responses and thought) would in fact figure by its own definition as an impediment for moral self-realization understood in terms of creative self-fashioning. James himself seems very suspicious and critical of habit and customs because of their conservative inertia. There are plenty of evidences for this concern. In “The Energies of Men” James notices for example how

[m]ost of us feel as if we lived habitually with a sort of cloud weighing on us, below our highest notch of clearness in discernment, sureness in reasoning, or firmness in deciding. Compared with what we ought to be, we are only half awake. Our fires are damped, our drafts are checked. We are making use of only a small part of our possible mental and physical resources.⁴

James sensibly argues that such condition is at least partially due to the inhibition of excitements, ideals and efforts, which are precisely what according to James “carry us over the dam” of our ordinary existences. The distress caused by such condition originates in suffocating conventions and habits grew too stiff around our subjectivity, thus alienating and disciplining us to lead lives of quiet desperation.

As against this picture, James praises novelty and improvisation as morally refreshing attitudes, praising heroic figures for their capacity to break the spell of custom thus opening up new fields of possibility and meaning. It is in fact those exceptional individuals who, by forcing the barriers grew around their subjectivity with “physical work, intellectual work, moral work, or spiritual work” serve as exemplars to imitate and as provocations challenging our deepest personal convictions. We all have been there.⁵ In “The Importance of Individuals” James states that

[t]here is thus a zone of insecurity in human affairs in which all the dramatic interest lies; the rest belongs to the dead machinery of the stage. This is the formative zone, the part not yet ingrained into the race's average, not yet a typical, hereditary, and constant factor of the social community in which it occurs.⁶

For James such generative moments are of the utmost importance as by shaking us from our certainties they help us to plunge again into experiencing and create importance in our life and in that of the community we partake to –not to mention the crucial possibility of opening up novel paths of dialogue with alien outlooks and politics. According to James we should always be willing to re-negotiate the truths we live by in order to keep their meaning alive, our mindset plastic, and our selfhood mobile. This willingness to live courageously in the absence of certitudes and assurance is for James the signature mark of the pragmatic temperament, which he encourages us to explore in conduct.⁷

At the same time James reportedly praises habit for its usefulness in facilitating our worldly dealings as well as for its importance in securing our own narrative sense of identity necessary for their flourishing. According to James the very notion of rationality as cashed out in our everyday practices would be nothing but a mustering of settled habits whose reputation we trust and honor.⁸ Having given up any non-conversational, external foundation for our practices of knowledge and action alike, the only pragmatic viable alternative seems to be exactly that of indulging in conventions and simmering in customs. Habits are thus not only practically important for the successfulness of our ordinary commerce with the world, but the acknowledgment of their pervasive character is also philosophically crucial to contrast those metaphysical accounts of norms and normativity pretending to explain the rightness (and rightfulness) of our practices from outside of their habitual exercise.

A quick survey of the texts would thus suggest how for James habit is both the key to unleash our moral energies in conduct, and their foremost threat and source of alienation. In what follows I shall argue that, rather than at an inconsistency, this active tension best exemplifies James's conception of the experimental work of the self on the self as the chief ethical-political activity. In particular, an attentive reading of the peculiar characterization of habit in *The Principles of Psychology* and corollary works would allow us to appreciate how James endows habit the philosophical resources to make it the centerpiece of his ethical-political thought. Before selectively comment James's discussion of habit as it appears in his psychological writings, I shall briefly offer some context for reading *The Principles of Psychology* as a resourceful work *for* and *in* ethics. This is in fact a necessary passage to appreciate the richness and productive character of habit as James understood it and put it to work in his later writings as well.

THE MORAL LIFE OF THE MIND

The presence of moral considerations in *The Principles of Psychology* has been variously documented, and yet it is difficult to characterize in detail. There have been offered diverse reconstructions of such presence, and while only in some cases such considerations have been thematized in the wider context of James's variegated moral production, very seldom they have been inscribed in the wider discourse of the hortatory character of ethics, which I take to be the central dimension of James's moral thought.⁹ According to the reading I advocate, rather than presenting the single *constitutive elements* of the moral

life¹⁰, in *The Principles of Psychology* James would have rather explored the *reflective work on them* necessary for its flourishing.¹¹ This feature makes the text a gold mine for ethics understood as the critical inquiry into our postures and conducts from the point of view of the transformative work on the self necessary for their cultivation and guidance.

Despite its well-known self-proclaimed positivistic intents, according to which he “[has] kept close to the point of view of natural science throughout the book”, *The Principles of Psychology* represents James’s most elaborate attempt to waive together an impressive number of psychological, philosophical and personal “descriptive details” about what could be broadly characterized as our life of the mind. In it we can find the seeds as well as some of the most elegant deployments of that pragmatic method that James kept elaborating and polishing in the course of his entire intellectual biography, in which critical descriptions, tactical provocations, and original insights are blended together to fashion a unique prose and style.¹² In *The Principles of Psychology* James looks at the various aspects and functions of our life of the mind from the point of view of their *use*, and exhorts us to notice the variety of moral considerations at play when we look at them in this way. James in fact claims that the analysis of our mindedness and its various traits would be conducted from the point of view of their *activity*, because a good description of our interiority as a bundle of functions and forces could not but consider its *practical exercise* as its proper dimension and achievement.

James individuates in this way the contribution of psychology to ethics in its characterization of the dynamic nature of the relationship that human beings might entertain with their own subjectivity: the pragmatic illustrations of the various aspects and functions of our life of the mind disseminated in *The Principles of Psychology* would show the moral importance of the *engaged attitude* we might entertain with ourselves. This way of presenting psychology as an inquiry directly relevant for ethics brings to light a picture of moral reflection whose object is what human beings might make of those features of their own interiority that bring them in a certain relationship with themselves and the world.

By giving up a detached, third-personal description of the various facets of our selfhood in favor of an engaged, first-personal one, James makes room for a different picture of the way in which psychological considerations might be relevant for ethics. In fact, from this perspective the various threads of our subjectivity are presented from the point of view of their use rather than as neutral and ready-made data on which an ethical theory should build a prescriptive morality system. Rather than one of *foundation*, the relationship between ethics and psychology would thus be for James one of *emergence*. Instead of conceiving morality as kept pure from any human involvements or shaping it after a metaphysical picture of human beings and their worldliness, a pragmatist approach to moral reflection envisions a radical alternative. James invites us to think ethical reflection as informed by a peculiar kind of pragmatic anthropological description portraying human beings neither as they *are* nor as they *should be*, but rather from the point of view of what they *might make of themselves*.¹³

In this perspective ethics acquires the form of the analysis of these forms and techniques of self-cultivation: moral reflection, by inviting us to refine and take care of the various dimensions of our subjectivity, reconfigures itself as the critical survey of the kind of self-experimentations we can undertake in ordinary conducts through a work of the self on the self. This process involves a revolution of the self in which we awaken those aspects of our subjectivity from the torpid state in which they tend to fall when not exercised through a daily training, and use them to face experience and its challenges in original, rewarding, and enriching ways.

HABIT BETWEEN EXPRESSION AND EXHAUSTION

The discussion of habit in the fourth chapter of *The Principles of Psychology* can be read as a chief instance of such pragmatic anthropology.¹⁴ James presents habit as one of the most powerful law and pervasive phenomenon of our mindedness and worldliness: without it our lives could hardly be lived, and yet its excesses might be equally lethal for their flourishing, since they would suffocate their constitutive and most important venues of expression and growth. In particular, an excess of habit, says James, would hinder and alienate us from ourselves, thus depriving us from those very energies and resources constituting the best part of our selfhood: the higher or further self we might have been or become if only we would have dared to think and conduct ourselves differently from how we habitually do.¹⁵

James presents in the first place what he calls the physiological bases of habit, writing that “the *phenomena of habit in living beings are due to the plasticity of the organic materials of which their bodies are composed*”¹⁶. Habit in fact refers to the capacity for *movement* of our central nervous system. However, even at this basic physical level of analysis, James refutes a mechanistic characterization of the very nature and working of habit. He in fact subscribes the anti-reductionist perspective of the reflex arch and of the electro-chemical discharge, which portray habit as the fixation of the nervous discharge trajectories in our nervous system in perennial tension. At this level of explanation habit is still described as a somewhat passive device, since it merely indicates those privileged paths of inertia. However, this passivity is in its turn characterized as a condition for activity, since it suggests and facilitates the nervous discharge (and thus, at the practical level, the performance of actions). Further, and most importantly, for James “our nervous system grows to the modes in which it has been exercised”¹⁷: once such paths of inertia and discharge are chosen and reinforced *in conduct* they grow thicker and acquire strength and influence, thus shaping our very dispositions and reactions.

James is particularly interested in presenting two psychological features of habits that would have great relevance from the point of view of their philosophical description and ethical consequences. He writes,

The first result of it is that *habit simplifies the movements required to achieve a given result, makes theme more accurate and diminishes the fatigue*.¹⁸

The next result is that *habit diminishes the conscious attention with which our acts are performed*.¹⁹

For James, thus, a subject endowed with the appropriate habits is likely to be more accurate in the achievement of its ends, and its conscious attention less solicited in the exercise of her actions. These two features of habit are of the utmost importance from an ethical point of view. In fact, if on the one hand habits make us more accurate and effective, on the other their blind and uncritical deployment have the opposite effect of render us inattentive and passive. If thus for James it is essential to nurture one’s habits, even more is to challenge them by asking oneself *which* habits to cultivate, and especially *how* to cultivate them.

James presents habits as our “second nature”, since they craft human beings in every aspect of their mental life hence their thoughts and deeds. Rather than

the mechanical repetition of our responses through the comparison and association with our past experiences, James depicts habit as the distinctive feature of our active attitude toward our interiority and engaged stance toward reality. Habit becomes thus the chief device to storage, organize and control our mental energy releasing in this way our conscious attention, which is continuously solicited by the great amount of information involved in our experiencing. Once we internalize some aspects of reality to which we pay selective attention, our consciousness of them and the effort to entertain them in our mind is alleviated, so that we are free to concentrate on other aspects of reality that are of interest for us.

For James our very ability to have meaningful experiences and invest them with value as contrasted with registering their sheer factual happening (that is, the breaking of the order of immediate perceptive presence presenting us the world as an indistinct complexity in order to generate meaning) requires us to develop all kinds of habits. In the essay “Reflex Action and Theism” James writes,

We have to break [the perceptual order] altogether, and by picking out from it the items that concerns us...we are able to...enjoy simplicity and harmony in the place of what was chaos...It is an order with which we have nothing to do but to get away from it as fast as possible. As I said, we break it: we break it into histories, and we break it into the arts, and we break it into sciences; and then we begin to feel at home.²⁰

Through our inclusion and omission we trace the path of habit and thus of our experiencing and agency altogether. The aim of habit is to make us “feel at home” in the world by breaking our experiences and connecting the elements that interest us with other that we find as much appropriate and worth entertaining in our lives. Habit thus contributes to our very activity of making sense of the world and of our place in it: through habit we craft the world giving it a human shape in which to inscribe our conducts and their deepest significances.

The ethical stakes of such a characterization are of the outmost importance. James claims in fact that habit is the “engine of society” and its “precious preserver”. However, James adds, the primary object of habit is the *character* of human beings, representing its “invisible law” in the similar manner as the “universal gravitation” represents the law of celestial bodies. Habit has to do with the education of one’s character as it represents the mark of one’s personal point of view that we shape through a discipline of the self. Habits are thus morally relevant because they pervade our lives and guide our encounters with the world, thus making the latter a place hospitable for the expression of our interiority in conduct. In the chapter on “The Laws of Habit” of *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life’s Ideas* James writes that

[o]ur virtues are habits as much as our vices. All our life, so far as it has definite form, is but a mass of habits,—practical, emotional, and intellectual,—systematically organized for our weal or woe, and bearing us irresistibly toward our destiny, whatever the latter may be.²¹

A similar formulation can be found in *The Principles of Psychology*, where James concludes that

[t]he great thing, then, in all education, is to *make our nervous system*

our ally instead of our enemy. It is to fund and capitalize our acquisitions, and live at ease upon the interest of the fund. *For this we must make automatic and habitual, as early as possible, as many useful actions as we can,* and guard against the growing into ways that are likely to be disadvantageous to us, as we should guard against the plague.²²

For James habits should be our closest allies, and yet we should also remain vigilant in their handling as they could reveal to be our worse enemies. According to this view, in fact, habits are not virtuous or evil *per se*, but rather it is *what we make of them* and *how do we nurture them* that makes them advantageous or rather harmful, and thus relevant from a moral point of view. If from the one hand habits give voice to our deepest needs, cravings and interests, on the other hand their misuse might cause the very suppression of our subjectivity.

James lists five practical maxims involving the exercise of habit, in which what is at stake is our very attitude we might assume in their respect. These maxims have a clear and pronounced moral salience in their dealing with the ways in which our habits might be expressive of our subjectivity or rather contribute to its capitulation. The last maxim best catches the spirit of the exhortative moral register informing James's dialectics of habits (and wider moral agenda). He writes,

As a final practical maxim, relative to these habits of the will, we may, then, offer something like this: *Keep the faculty of effort alive in you by a little gratuitous exercise every day.* That is, be systematically ascetic or heroic in little unnecessary points, do every day or two something for no other reason than that you would rather not do it, so that when the hour of dire need draws nigh, it may find you not unnerved and untrained to stand the test...So with the man who has daily inured himself to habits of concentrated attention, energetic volition, and self-denial in unnecessary things. He will stand like a tower when everything rocks around him, and when his softer fellow-mortals are winnowed like chaff in the blast.²³

This practical maxim thematizes the dynamic relationship that runs between the habits we live *by* and the life we might have *with* them. James is here interested in marking an internal connection between ethics and psychology by showing how our posture toward those habits that we welcome or rather challenge is the mark of our moral destiny, thus depicting human beings as the makers of themselves and responsible for their own fates. The price we have to pay for the metaphysical comfort of habit, representing the shield we use in order to be successful in our dealings with the world, is the constant thread of an impoverishment of such commerce. That is to say, the price to be thriving inhabitants of the world is that of being desolate strangers to ourselves. Only by acknowledging the habits we live by as *our* habits we might keep in place their significance without either subjugating our subjectivity or making knowledge an impossible task to accomplish.

Quoting Mill's definition of character as a "completed fashioned will" James stresses the relationship between the sensation of effort/activity necessary to manage a certain habit and its moral character: by representing a habit as a yoke imposed from the outside, as for example from evidences and associations on which we have no intentional grip nor active control, we distort both the way in which we arrive at forming an habit in the first place as well as jeopardize its very significance. We develop habits in response to our more genuine practical

need so to cope in more effective ways with the world; however, when we represent habit as a given with which to deal, we shall find ourselves incapable to satisfy those very practical needs which gave life to them in the first place. What was crafted to facilitate the successfulness of our practices suddenly becomes an impediment to the full flourishing of our interiority, a cage for its expression. James writes,

The physiological study of mental conditions is thus the most powerful ally of hortatory ethics. The hell to be endured hereafter, of which theology tells, is no worse than the hell we make for ourselves in this world by habitually fashioning our characters in the wrong way. Could the young but realize how soon they will become mere walking bundles of habits, they would give more heed to their conduct while in the plastic state. We are spinning our own fates, good or evil, and never to be undone. Every smallest stroke of virtue or of vice leaves its never so little scar.²⁴

Moral reflection, in its hortatory dimension, aims at showing the practical advantages of the nurture and of the development of certain habits, and the dangerousness in which we incur when we alienate our subjectivity to their blind dictates.

According to this characterization the subject matter of ethics would thus consist in a certain kind of work on the self, while its contents in the descriptions of the strategies that such formative activity might take. James claims that this work on the self involves in the first place the monitoring of, and the experimentation with, our habits and their ability to express our subjectivity or rather mortify it. James invites us to take a vigilant attitude on our habits so to prevent those “contractions of the self” typical of their deformation. Such critical activity of self-monitoring and self-transformation lies at the very heart of James’s ethical-political writings, where he launches a fierce campaign against various forms of acquiescence in our private and public lives. The latter has been James’s signature intellectual fight, and its roots are to be found in the notion of unfamiliar habit at the heart of his pragmatic anthropology. Such notion in fact pivotal to understand James’s investigation of the crucial issue of the possibility of conducting ourselves in ways which are at the same time expressive of our subjectivity and mindful and respectful of how our fellow individuals lead theirs. His writings on human blindness and on the moral equivalent of war can be read as variations on this theme, and his painstaking work to carve out a space of personal freedom within natural and social boundaries represents yet another example of his insistence on the cultivation and transformation of the habitual self as the key ethical-political activity.²⁵

CONCLUSION

The notion of habit is pervasive throughout James’s writings, informing his pluralism, transitionalism and perspectivism alike. Rather than confining the discussion and use of such concept to the psychological writings, James makes habit the centerpiece of our very agential nature as it gets expressed in its various activities of self-edification and world-making. There would in fact be an overall shift in philosophical emphasis from mere sensitivities to an enriched conception of agency underlying James’s characterization of habit. This idea gets articulated in various contexts throughout James’s work,²⁶ but affects directly the way James understood the dynamic interplay between the urge to familiarity and the strive for estrangement, between the necessity of stability and the importance of uncertainty –a tension lying at the very heart of the moral life

as a pragmatist sees it. The work on the self is thus itself a moral task, where “moral” acquires the meaning of the critical concern, inquiry and transformation of conduct and activity from within one’s practices.

Habit would impoverish our lives if understood as passively operating on our beliefs and desires, but by intertwining habit with agency and activity James shifted the focus from the acquisition and stabilization of habits to their education and practical experimentation. What is of primary moral importance for James is in fact our life with our habits: what we make of them and how we put them to work. In discussing habits James is not describing the working of an allegedly impersonal principle; rather, he is exhorting us to *do* something with ourselves in an imaginative exercise whose moral relevance lies in the liveliness and transformative character of its process rather than in its capacity to fulfill some prefixed aims.

Contrary to other philosophical treatments of habit, for James the validity and evaluation of habitual conduct should not be measured against the yardstick of some already established norm or principle –whether brute or transcendental–, but is rather to be re-negotiated in practice at every instance of its deployment.²⁷ If there is a teleological dimension in this ethical picture, it is not imposed from the outside of our practices (because of some sort of finalism) but rather can only be gained from the within of our efforts (as an expression of genuine experimentalism). Unfamiliar habits are thus important because they force us to constantly question and unsettle ourselves, and thus cultivate and take care of ourselves in an ongoing negotiation of the boundaries and background of our selfhood. For James personal growth and collective flourishing are in fact dependent on habitual dishabituation, an exercise in possibility and melioristic attitude at the heart of our best ethical and political efforts of tuning the self with itself.²⁸

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NOTES

¹ Marchetti 2015.

² Virtue ethics, both in its ancient (Aristotelian) and modern (Humean) variations, being the obvious reference, the concern for the care of the self as the chief ethical task is also argued (although along slightly different lines) by the philosophical tradition of spiritual exercises (Hadot 1995, Foucault 2005), as well as by moral perfectionism (Cavell 2004).

³ In my wider study of James's moral thought I examine and assess the whole corpus of his writings, offering a synoptic view of his (work on) ethics and its grounding in a distinctive pragmatist metaphilosophical agenda, while

here I shall only touch on those works which are functional to address the topic of Jamesian habit.

⁴ ERE, 131.

⁵ It should be noticed how for James those of heroism and individualism are *ethical practices* (rather than metaphysical assumptions) constantly informing our most ordinary activities as long as we are concerned with the genuine character of our selfhood, challenging the identities supplied by those models we too-often unwittingly accept. The charges of elitism often raised against such perfectionist approaches –beside James, and limiting to the short time-span of one century, one might think of figures as different as John Stuart Mill, T. H. Green, Emerson, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein– should thus be at least substantially reconsidered (if not dropped altogether), as those very resources and materials for ethical transformation are constantly under our nose and thus up for us to grab rather than available only to the elites. If there surely are wider psychological, social, environmental, and cultural obstacles to such experimentations, they constitute the very background against which enacting such efforts in self-transformation: the former might well frustrate the *factual outcomes* of such practices of freedom, but in no way they can undermine their *strategic value*. Furthermore, for some versions of perfectionism such transformative exercises can only be enacted in conversation with others, and contribute to the overall well-being of one’s community –if only in making one more self-conscious of her own implicit assumptions, concealed expectations, and hidden regulations.

⁶ WB, 192.

⁷ See e.g. P: 31; MT: 124.

⁸ See e.g. WB: 67.

⁹ Even the most authoritative commentators (e.g. Royce 1891, Perry 1935, Myers 1981) only registered the most superficial and evident moral features of the text by making reference to those parts where the canonical moral language of duties, rights and commitments makes its day view, without however either characterizing in depth the dialectic in which such notions occur or noticing the multiple references to the other writings in which similar considerations surface as well.

¹⁰ See e.g. Roth 1965; Franzese 2008. Contrary to the authors mentioned in the previous note, both Roth and Franzese have an articulated and interesting story about the moral dimension of *The Principles of Psychology* as well as of the wider picture of James’s ethical reflections as spelled out in his other writings –although a different story from the one here defended.

¹¹ The first account of *The Principles of Psychology* in which this practical register has been acknowledged is Seigfried 1978. For an articulated defense, see Koopman forthcoming.

¹² The best characterization of James’s distinctive methodological blend of “divination and perception” is Seigfried 1990 (esp. part II).

¹³ I shall here pass over silence the Kantian resonances of this way of portraying the nature and point of a pragmatic anthropology so understood –at least, in the way Kant depicts pragmatic anthropology in his *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht* [1798] as well as in his Königsberg lectures on anthropology [1772-1798], which is in tension with the “official” story narrated in his major Critical works. I have tackled the issue at some depth elsewhere (Marchetti, forthcoming).

¹⁴ As an aside, one might say that for James habit is a sort of ethical *Überkonzept*, as according to this reconstruction it represents at once one of the

features of our interiority in need of reflexive working and the device through which all other facets would get transformed. I owe this observation to a conversation with Mathias Girel on an ancestor of this paper.

¹⁵ An in-depth comparative study of the Jamesian and the Deweyan conceptions of habit is still lacking, and unfortunately so. Dewey (most notably in Dewey 1922) in fact borrowed, reworked, and expanded the Jamesian philosophy of habit along promising lines, adding some historical edge to James's conceptual analyses and reconstruction. Differences between their respective accounts still mattering, I read in both authors a congenial insistence on the "good of activity" as the chief theme at the heart of the (pragmatist) ethical project.

¹⁶ PP: 110.

¹⁷ PP: 117.

¹⁸ PP: 117.

¹⁹ PP: 119.

²⁰ WB: 96.

²¹ TT: 47.

²² PP: 126.

²³ PP: 130.

²⁴ PP: 130-1.

²⁵ Following Koopman one might claim how James was interested in "the philosophical and political idea of a *personal* action which is reducible to neither *individual* power nor *social* relations" (Koopman 2005: 175).

²⁶ See e.g. PP: ch. xxvi; WB: 197-8; P: 98-9. For a comment, compare Parker 1999, Uffelman 2004, Koopman forthcoming.

²⁷ For a survey of James's conception on similar lines, see Tursi 1999. A brief intellectual history of the rise and fall of philosophical accounts of habit in relation to James's can be found in Thomas 1993.

²⁸ I am grateful to Lee A. Bride for having accepted the original paper for its presentation at the 2014 William James Society meeting held within the 111th APA Central Division annual convention in Chicago. I am also thankful to Tadd Ruetenik for his valuable comments during the conference, to appear in this symposium. I have here not attempted at replying to his critical remarks, hence change my paper accordingly, as that would have rendered their publication superfluous, but will take them into consideration in my future work on James's ethics. Finally, I wish to acknowledge the Irish Research Council for a New Foundations Award (2013), which made my trip to Chicago possible.