

Theory and Practice of Conduct in James

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In the *Principles of Psychology*, which I claim to be a goldmine of moral considerations despite the poor attention that has been given to its pronounced ethical dimension, James explores in great detail the various ways in which one can shape the various aspects of her subjectivity, and their possible shortcomings that are relevant for ethics. In the chapters on habits, attention, belief and will (but similar considerations apply to virtually all the aspects of our life of the mind) James depicts the peculiar use one can make of her psychological constitution and the practices of self-cultivation that stand at the heart of this pragmatic re-interpretation of the classical model of self-fashioning as the proper object of ethics. If according to James moral philosophy should not dictate the possibilities of one's own development (for example, by making reference to some alleged moral principle established independently from the exercise of our sensibility) but rather opens up its potentials, then the ways in which one treat and experiment with her subjectivity will be an activity of ethical relevance. A moral philosophy should thus survey these possibilities of self-formation and expression, minding us of being reflecting about the dangerous shapes such techniques of the self might take. It is in this context that James claims that an ethics must be hortatory and suggestive more than prescriptive. As James writes in the introduction of *Talks to Teachers*

[t]he science of logic never made a man reason rightly and the science of ethics (*if there be such a thing*) never made a man behave rightly. The most such science can do is to help us to catch ourselves up and check ourselves, if we start to reason or to behave wrongly; and to criticize ourselves more articulately after we have made mistakes.

In this talk I would like to give you a sample of such a hortatory ethics as James depicts it in his masterpiece and some corollary texts, in which he gives us the coordinates for a theory and practice of the conduct of the self that according to my reading is for James the proper aim of moral reflection.

Figures of Ethics in the Principles of Psychology

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' (p. v), the *Principles of Psychology* represents James' most elaborate attempt to waive together an impressive number of psychological, philosophical and personal 'descriptive details' (p. vii) about what could be broadly characterized as our life of the mind. In it we can find together the seeds and the use of that pragmatic method that James kept elaborating in the course of his entire intellectual biography. In the *Principles* James looks at the various aspects of our life of the mind from the point of view of their use, and urges us to notice the variety of moral considerations surfacing when we look at them in this way. If one gives up a scientist picture (in the sense of a detached third-personal description) of the meaning of the various aspects of our subjectivity in favor of a *pragmatic* one, one can make room for a different picture of the kind of our psychological constitution that is relevant for ethics. In fact, from this perspective the various aspects of our subjectivity are presented from the point of view of their use, and not as mere data that an ethical theory should build a system of morality. If one strips this personal dimension in the description of one's subjectivity, thus treating human beings as external observers of their mental life, then one would tend to represent the role of psychology in ethics as foundational; instead, if one takes into account the active role of the subjects in the formation of their subjectivities, one would reach a perspective from which one could look at psychology as already morally suffused. Such a reconstruction seems consistent to what Colin Koompan says when he writes that

there are important ethical resources to be found in James's psychological writings and that the ethical resources featured in his more explicitly moral essays ought to be read in conjunction with the categories established in James's contributions to moral psychology... James in his contributions to both naturalistic moral psychology and hortatory personal ethics is engaged in working out a conception of freedom as a self-transformative practice.

Accordingly with the reading I defend in chapter two, for James psychological investigations are relevant for ethics neither because they give us a metaphysical image of the human beings on which to build a moral theory (as the rationalists claim), nor because they tell us which are the distinctive empirical traits of the moral subject (as the empiricists claim), but rather because they points us to those aspects of our subjectivity whose valorization or mortification is directly relevant for our moral life. James individuates the contribution of psychology to ethics in its characterization of the active and dynamic nature of the relationship human beings might establish with their own interiority. The pragmatic descriptions of the various aspects of our mental life that we find in the *Principles* show us the ethical importance of our engaged *stance* and *attitude* we ought to assume regarding its various aspects. Instead of conceiving morality as kept pure from any human involvements or shaping it after a metaphysical picture of human beings, a pragmatist approach to moral reflection envisions a radical alternative: James invites us to think ethical reflection as informed by a peculiar kind of anthropological description, namely a 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*. The investigation of such pragmatic descriptions could bring about some conceptual re-definitions of both ethics and anthropology. Pragmatic anthropology depicts human beings as *moral agents* constantly engaged in monitoring and improving their faculties. As Sergio Franzese compellingly summarizes

Ethics allies with physiology in showing the way to the good life, which consists above all in a well structured and well disposed personality.

Consistently, the object of moral reflection becomes what human beings make of themselves by engaging in a certain relationship with their life of the mind. The discussion of habit in the fourth chapter of the *Principles* can be read as an instance of such a philosophical anthropology.

Habit and Its Moral Purport

In the preface of the *Principles* James complains that the already outrageous length of the book led him to sacrifice, among other things, the treatment of the important subjects of 'moral and aesthetical feelings and judgments'. However, moral considerations soon enter the scenes into the very heart of its dialectic, and in the chapter on habit, they play a central role in the very definition of the simplest mental operations. The re-description of this aspect of our life of the mind can be fully inscribed in the treatment of habit gave by the empiricist tradition. In particular, James makes explicit reference to the works of William B. Carpenter and Alexander Bain. The confrontation with these authors is articulated by James on two levels, the physiological and the philosophical, which characterize the nature of habit. As Franzese writes, the novelty in James' approach on habit "is not much in the content, whether in the shifting of theoretical horizon and ethical perspective in which habit is explored". It is thus the practical dimension of this aspect of our life of the mind that is of the most interest in the discussion of James' ethics.

James presents habit as one of the most powerful laws of nature: without it our lives could hardly be lived, and yet its excesses are equally lethal for their flourishing, since they would suffocate some of its constitutive and most important aspects. In particular, an excess of habits, James says, would hinder and alienate our *moral* lives. James presents in the first place the physiological bases of habit; as he writes, "the *phenomena of habit in living beings are due to the plasticity of the organic materials of which their bodies are composed*" (James 1983: 105). James adds that "the philosophy of habit is in the first instance a chapter in physics rather than in

physiology or psychology...a physical principle admitted by all good recent writers on the subject” (James 1983: 105). Habit in fact refers to the kind of *movements* dictated by of our central nervous system. However, even at this basic physical level of analysis, James refutes a mechanistic characterization of the conditions of the functioning 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 passive, since it merely indicates those privileged paths of inertia (and nervous discharge). However, this passivity is in turn characterized as a condition for activity, since it suggests and facilitates the nervous discharge (and thus, at the psychological level, the performance of actions). Following Carpenter, James writes that habit *crafts* the nervous system by indicating to it the possibilities of its very exercise. One could speak here of an “active passivity”, or of a “passive action”: at the physiological level (but the same holds for the most complex philosophical level James investigates) habit organizes human beings’ *mental economy*. The control of this aspect of our mental life is thus of the utmost importance for the organization of the self, whose mental conduct will be morally judged dependently from the habits she will choose to nurture.

This characterization, as James writes, has some relevant *practical* outcomes. James is particularly interested in presenting two psychological features and general consequences of habits that gain great importance from the point of view of their philosophical description. He writes

Dr. Carpenter’s phrase that *our nervous system grows to the modes in which it has been exercised* expressed the philosophy of habit in a nutshell. We may now trace some of the practical applications of the principle to human life.

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* (1983: 112)

The next result is that *habit diminishes the conscious attention with which our acts are performed* (1983: 114)

It is important to notice how both these practical psychological applications of habit are presented by James from the point of view of their usefulness for the development of a satisfying mental life. In fact James writes how a mind endowed with the appropriate habits is more accurate in the achievement of its ends, and its conscious attention less solicited in the exercise of her actions. In this picture what makes a habit good or bad is the practice in which such habit is framed and the possibilities of conduct it allows us to undertake. The reference to the accuracy and conscious attention that is necessary for the successfulness of the action are normative parameters *internal* to the kind of relationship that we entertain with our subjectivity. In fact, if from the one hand habits make us more accurate and less solicited, their pervasiveness and hypostatization have the opposite effect of render us inattentive and passive. If thus for James it is important to nurture one’s habits, even more is to challenge them by asking oneself *which* habits to cultivate, and *how to* cultivate them.

James writes that “the ethical implications of the law of habit are numerous and momentous” (1983: 120). He presents habits as our “second nature”, since they craft human beings in every aspect of their mental life and their conducts. By breaking, after Bain, with the empiricist tradition that used to describe habits as the mechanical repetition of our responses through the comparison and association with our past experiences, James depicts habit as the distinctive trait of our active attitude toward our interiority and stance toward reality. Habit is a device to storage, organize and control our mental energy releasing in this way our attention, that is continuously solicited by the great amount of information investing in its exercise. 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 alleviate, so that we are free to concentrate on other aspects of reality that *interest* us by triggering our *will*. Our very ability to have experiences, as well as the ability to invest them with value (that is, breaking the order of immediate perceptive presence that presents us the world as an indistinct complexity) requires us to develop habits. In the essay *Reflex Action and Theism*, which represents another example

of the way psychological investigations might inform ethics in a non-foundational way, 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. (1978: 96).

Through our inclusion and omission we trace the path of habit and thus of our experiencing altogether. The aim of habit is to make us “feel at home”, breaking our experiences by connecting the elements that *interest* us with other that we find as much appropriate and worth entertaining in our minds (and lives). Habit thus contributes to our activities of making sense of the world and of our encounters with it. Through habit we craft the world giving to it a human shape in which be able to inscribe our actions and their meanings.

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 invisible law of celestial bodies. Habit deals with the education of one’s character since it represents the law of one’s *individual* conduct that we form and give ourselves through a discipline of the self. Habits are 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 subjectivity through our conduct. In the chapter on *The Laws of Habit* of the volume *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life’s Ideals* James writes that

our 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.

James states the connection between ethics and psychology in an even clear form in the *Principles* where he writes

The 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.

Habits should be our allies, and yet we should also stay vigilant because they could revel to be our worse enemies. For James, 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 relevant from a moral point of view. If from the one hand habits give voice to our deepest needs, values and interests, on the other hand their inappropriate use and growth might cause their very suppressions. James lists a few practical maxims underlying the philosophical treatment of habit. The fifth one is of the utmost ethical importance. 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. Asceticism of this sort is like the insurance which a man pays on his house and goods. The tax does him no good at the time, and possibly may never bring him a return. But if the fire *does* come, his having paid it will be his salvation from ruin. So with the man who has [p.127] 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. (1983: 125-7)

This practical maxim thematizes the dynamic relationship running between habits we might cultivate and our *personal attitude* toward them. James is interested in marking an internal connection between ethics and psychology by showing how our attitude toward those habits that we welcome or rather challenge is the mark of our moral destiny, so that human beings are the makers and sole 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 commerce with the world, is the constant thread of an impoverishment of such commerce. That is to say, the price to be inhabitants of the world is that of being strangers to ourselves. Only by acknowledging the habits we live by as *our* habits we might keep in place their significance without subjugating our subjectivity, nor making experiencing an impossible task to accomplish. James writes

It is surprising how soon a desire will die of inanition if it be *never* fed. One must first learn, unmoved, looking neither to the right nor left, to walk firmly on the straight and narrow path, before one can begin 'to make one's self over again.' He who every day makes a fresh resolve is like one who, arriving at the edge of the ditch he is to leap, forever stops and returns for a fresh run. Without *unbroken* advance there is no such thing as *accumulation* of the ethical forces possible, and to make this possible, and to exercise us and habituate us in it, is the sovereign blessing of regular *work*.

Quoting Mill's definition of character as a "completed fashioned will" James stresses the relationship between the sensation of effort/activity and the obedience to a certain habit: by representing a habit as something imposed from the outside, as for example from evidences and associations on which we have no grip nor active control, we distort both the way in which we arrive at having an habit and its very significance. We develop habits in response to our more genuine practical needs, so to relate in a more effective way to the world; however, when we represent habit as an impediment to the full flourishing of our interiority, a cage for its expression, we will find ourselves incapable to satisfy those very practical needs that gave life to them in the first place. 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.

Moral reflection, in its hortatory dimension, should show the practical advantages of the nurture and of the development certain habits, and the dangerousness in which we incur when we are alienated by them, making us incapable in engaging in conducts that are expressive of our subjectivity. According to this characterization the object of ethics is a certain kind of work on ourselves, while its contents are the descriptions of the ways which such formative activity might assume. James claims that this work on the self interests in the first place our habits and their ability to express our subjectivity or rather mortify it. Ethics exhorts us to take a vigilant attitude on our habits so to prevent those 'contractions of the self' typical of their deformation. Habits give voice to our practical perspective of moral agents precisely because their nurture and flourishing involve a work on the self that contributes to the formation of one's character and its possibilities of conduct.

Will and the Moral Self

James' treatment of will is another instance of such a exhortative ethics. Chapter xxvi on the *Will* is one of the longest and densest of the *Principles*, so that my discussion here will be even more selective than the one I sketched of habit. The discussion of the will, as the one of habit,

proceeds from the investigation of its physiological aspect. In particular, James analyzes the connection between the sensation of effort and the voluntary actions generated from it. The will can be distinguished by mere wish because of it represents objects that are under its reach in which the effort is crucial for their realization. After a scrupulous analysis of the relevant literature available, James concludes that such connection should be understood in the light of the characterization of the will as the readiness of the mind to entertain the idea catching its attention and act in order to realize them.

In the *Principles* James works within the theoretical framework of ideomotorial actions independently developed by Bain, Renouvier and Lotze, who argued for the existence of ideas with the capacity to produce movements without the need of other nervous mediations nor psychological considerations. James writes

Whenever movement follows *unhesitatingly and immediately* the notion of it in the mind, we have ideomotor action. We are then aware of nothing between the conception and the execution. All sorts of neuro-muscular processes come between, of course, but we know absolutely nothing of them. We think the act, and it is done; and that is all that introspection tells us of the matter.... In all this the determining condition of the unhesitating and resistless sequence of the act seems to be *the absence of any conflicting notion in the mind*. Either there is nothing else at all in the mind, or what is there does not conflict.

For James the connection between thought and action would not be mediated by any physiological or psychological trigger, but rather is direct. According to this picture, we act on the apprehension and the conceptions we have to determine contents and concepts because the entertainment of a certain idea *just results in* the endorsement of a certain conduct, despite some impediments might hinder its realization (as for example the presence of a contrasting idea on which we cannot make our minds). The will is thus the expression of the way in which we *entertain* certain ideas. By connecting in this tight way thought and action, James breaks with the empiricist tradition picturing a divide between cognitive and conative aspects of our mental life; between beliefs that represent reality and desires that prompt us to act in a certain direction. For James deliberation is not a matter of a quasi-hydraulic exercise of our desiderative part, but rather it consists in the evaluation of the conflicting ideas that we entertain in our mind. The resulting action is the expression of the resolution of the will, that through the exercise of attention selects among the conflicting ones the idea that is *relevant* to entertain, leaving the others in the background. The choice between diverse ideas made by the will is however not an heuristic mechanism in which some are chosen by making reference to a neutral and external system of evaluation. Rather, the choice is an expression of the exercise of our sensibility that brings the silencing of the contrasting ideas. Choosing is described by James as an art, that is as the result of a creation that is expressive of our point of view, thus giving voice to our cognitive and conative abilities (that are always jointed together in their practical exercise).

If one must have a single name for the condition upon which the impulsive and inhibitive quality of objects depends, one had better call it their *interest*... 'The interesting' is a title which covers not only the pleasant and the painful, but also the morbidly fascinating, the tediously haunting, and even the simply habitual, inasmuch as the attention usually travels on habitual lines, and what-we-attend-to and what-interests-us are synonymous terms. It seems as if we ought to look for the secret of an idea's impulsiveness, not in any peculiar relations which it may have with paths of motor discharge, - for *all* ideas have relations with some such paths, - but rather in a preliminary phenomenon, the *urgency, namely, with which it is able to compel attention and dominate in consciousness*.

The moral consequences of this characterization are numerous and momentous. James, by portraying the will as the expression of our attitude toward reality and the personal representations we make of it, secures practical considerations at the very heart of our most basic perceptive and discriminatory activity. This irreducibly practical character of our cognitive and practical activities permeates all the aspects of our life of the mind and guides its expression.

Since nothing is knowable nor even perceivable if the mind does not find it interesting and thus pays no attention to it, the activity of will consists in the *exercise* of this attention through which we give relevance to some aspects of reality above other that might strike us. The will, far from being the mediator between impressions and action as the classical empiricist school argued, is rather the expression of our point of view on a certain situation, which without our effort of attention would disappear from our horizon of experience. By deciding to pay attention to some ideas the subject choose to take care of a certain aspect of reality, and such a choice will determine the self she will became and the experiences she will be able enjoy.

James individuates five kinds of decisions in which we can be involved. The difference between them amounts to the presence in deliberation of the effort of attention and its dialogue with other aspects involved in the evaluation of ideas and thus in choice. A common feature of all the five types is the idea that the will consists in paying attention to the way we conceive a certain situation and to the way in which such situation is connected with our most intimate practical cravings. James thinks in fact that it is only in this way that our actions and conducts can be genuinely expressive of our subjectivity and of the way in which we *see* things. The notion of interest thus indicates the practical nature of our mind, since it portrays human beings as agents perpetually engaged in evaluating and assessing the various aspects of reality that strike their attention. The active interest and the actions springing from it denotes the intentional nature of our mental life, that can be honored or rather mortified depending on the appreciation or the denial of its active contribution in the process of experience and decision. James writes

It may be said in general that a great part of every deliberation consists in the turning over of all the possible modes of *conceiving* the doing or not doing of the act in point. The moment we hit upon a conception which lets us apply some principle of action which is a fixed and stable part of our Ego, our state of doubt is at an end...*In action as in reasoning, then, the great thing is the quest of the right conception.* The concrete dilemmas do not come to us with labels gummed upon their backs. We may name them by many names. The wise man is he who succeeds in finding the name which suits the needs of the particular occasion best. A 'reasonable' character is one who has a store of stable and worthy ends, and who does not decide about an action till he has calmly ascertained whether it be ministerial or detrimental to any one of these.

If thus in each type of decision the function of the will is that one of choose, between the various (real or only imagined) possibilities, the *best* one from the point of view of our apprehension and conceptualization of the situation at hand, it is only in the fifth case that such choice is characterized by the active exercise of that effort of attention that makes it both voluntary *and* morally relevant. James writes

In the *fifth and final type* of decision, the feeling that the evidence is all in, and that reason has balanced the books, may be either present or absent. But in either case we feel, in deciding, as if we ourselves by our own wilful act inclined the beam; in the former case by adding our living effort to the weight of the logical reason which, taken alone, seems powerless to make the act discharge; in the latter by a kind of creative contribution of something instead of a reason which does a reason's work.

In these cases, in fact, the object of the will, and thus of decision altogether, is not merely an option among others, but rather it is the self that we will be *through* such a choice. These situations are in fact the ones in which we are called for critical decisions in which the self moves in a territory that is devoid of any pre-existent parameters that could help her in the choice, since it is only *through* choosing that she fashion herself and her system of evaluation altogether. James writes

Whether it be the dreary resignation for the sake of austere and naked duty of all sorts of rich mundane delights, or whether it be the heavy resolve that of two mutually exclusive trains of future fact, both sweet and good, and with no strictly objective or imperative principle of choice between them, one shall forevermore become impossible, while the other shall become reality, it is a desolate and acrid sort of act, an excursion into a lonesome moral wilderness. If examined closely, its chief difference from the three former

cases appears to be that in those cases the mind at the moment of deciding on the triumphant alternative dropped the other one wholly or nearly out of sight, whereas here both alternatives are steadily held in view, and in the very act of murdering the vanquished possibility the chooser realizes how much in that instant he is making himself lose.

The engaged attitude that characterizes this kind of decisions is for James twice as relevant from a moral point of view. On the one hand it prompts us at partaking in reality with an attention that allow us to appreciate its moral salience, and on the other hand it expresses a *personal transformation* that is of moral significance. The discussion of the will in the *Principles* continues with the characterization of this double moral register. James argues that the effort of the will is a function of the effort of attention that we pay toward the diverse aspects of experience. The effort of attention, in its turn, is nothing but the expression of our selective consciousness. Attention is a function of the interests we have since for James we pay attention only to those aspects of reality that *appear as* interesting to us. James speaks about the ‘normal ratio’ of our will, which naturally pursues those aspects to which we pay the most attention. When this happens, we can speak of an ‘healthiness of will’. James writes

There is a certain normal ratio in the impulsive power of different sorts of motive, which characterizes what may be called ordinary healthiness of will, and which is departed from only at exceptional times or by exceptional individuals. Each stimulus or idea, at the same time that it wakens its own impulse, must arouse other ideas (associated and consequential) with their impulses, and action must follow, neither too slowly nor too rapidly, as the resultant of all the forces thus engaged. Even when the decision is very prompt, there is thus a sort of preliminary survey of the field and a vision of which course is best before the fiat comes. And where the will is healthy, the vision must be right (i.e., the motives must be on the whole in a normal or not too unusual ratio to each other), and the action must obey the vision's lead.

This rich quotation corroborates what James claimed in the previous chapters, pushing his position in an even more radical direction. James in fact binds the will with the capacity to *envision* some aspects of the world. Deliberation and action generates from such a bond, representing its practical success. When the will is *healthy*, the vision it expresses is *sound* and the actions following it *grounded* (since it follows from a *reliable* deliberation). All these terms are normatively charged, since they express the conditions of success of the will, deliberation and thus conduct.

According to James the objects of immediate interest (that is, the ones we evaluate as most important) catch more easily our attention. In these cases the will does not encounter any resistance, so that we picture them as near and under reach. Among these objects there are the ones that are emotionally charged, or those one with which we have more confidence and an history of gratifications. The less appealing ones are instead the most difficult ones to pay attention to, because of our indifference toward their realization. They are the remotest from our interest and the will, in order to realize them, must commit to them with a lot of energies and entertain them in our minds with great effort. Among them there are abstract conceptions, the most original ideals, and the motives with which we or our community never addressed.

However, says James, this order can be subverted, causing what he calls the ‘illness of the will’. James presents a detailed phenomenology of these possible deviations, which he divides into ‘precipitate will’ and ‘perverse will’. In the first case the action follows from the stimulus or the idea too rapidly, leaving no time for the arousal of restraining associates. In the second case these latter are appreciated, and yet the equilibrium that normally characterizes the restrictive and the inhibitory forces is distorted. James concentrates on the second possibility, which explores in great detail, while disregarding the former, which he retains as less interesting. The pervasiveness of the will can be characterized at greater detail by distinguishing the ways in which its contrastive forces are distributed: James talks about an ‘explosive will’ and an ‘obstructed will’. When we suffer of the former our will is impulsive (its inhibition is not sufficient or the impulse is excessive) and thus poorly accurate or even dangerous, while when we suffer of the latter our will is obstructed (the impulse is not sufficient or the inhibition is excessive) and thus timid and ineffective.

The second possibility has both serious moral consequences, since it seems to endanger our very personal integrity, and a great practical urgency, since it seems to jeopardize the grounding principle of the ideo-motorial hypothesis. James, however, has a strategy to avoid both threads. As already noticed in his discussion of belief, James claims that at times reality might appear as dead, inert and inexpressive depending on the attitude we might assume toward it. The same can be said about truths in relationship with the will. James writes

In Chapter XXI, as will be remembered, it was said that the sentiment of reality with which an object appealed to the mind is proportionate (amongst other things) to its efficacy as a stimulus to the will. Here we get the obverse side of the truth. Those ideas, objects, considerations, which (in these lethargic states) fail to *get to* the will, fail to draw blood, seem, in so far forth, distant and unreal. The connection of the reality of things with their effectiveness as motives is a tale that has never yet been fully told. The moral tragedy of human life comes almost wholly from the fact that the link is ruptured which normally should hold between vision of the truth and action, and that *this pungent sense of effective reality* will not attach to certain ideas...their moral knowledge, always there grumbling and rumbling in the background, - discerning, commenting, protesting, longing, half resolving, - never wholly resolves, never gets its voice out of the minor into the major key, or its speech out of the subjunctive into the imperative mood, never breaks the spell, never takes the helm into its hands...The more ideal motives exist alongside of them in profusion, but they never get switched on, and the man's conduct is no more influenced by them than an express train is influenced by a wayfarer standing by the roadside and calling to be taken aboard.

James labels as a “moral tragedy” the situation in which we are unable to connect the vision of truth with the realization of good. In these cases our will is torn apart by contrastive pushes, and its exercise is thus frustrated by an incapacity and obstruction to discharge. Such perversion impedes the will to motivate the subject to realize those truths that are apprehended. The way out of this psychologically consuming and morally upsetting situation is described by James in terms of a personal transformation in which we imagine and engage in an alternative conduct through which releasing the obstructed will.

James claims that, in these critical situations, we spontaneously conceive effort as an active force added to the ones of the motives prevailing in our will. In a normal situation, both in the case of bodies moving because of physical forces and in cases of an “healthy will” we represent the movement or action “in the line of minor resistance”, or of “major traction” of the effort. However, in the case of complex situations in which what is at stake are ideals and higher conceptions, we *feel* that the contribution of effort to the will does not proceed along the line of less resistance, but rather along the one of *greater* resistance. In the cases in which the will seems to be obstructed, ideals mark a difference with mere propensity because of the relationship that they establish with the effort that we have to employ in order to realize them. James writes

the sensualist never says of his behavior that it results from a victory over his ideals, but the moralist always speaks of his as a victory over his propensities. The sensualist uses terms of inactivity, says he forgets his ideals, is deaf to duty, and so forth; which terms seem to imply that the ideal motives *per se* can be annulled without energy or effort, and that the strongest mere traction lies in the line of the propensities. The ideal impulse appears, in comparison with this, a still small voice which must be artificially reinforced to prevail. Effort is what reinforces it, making things seem as if, while the force of propensity were essentially fixed quantity, the ideal force might be of various amount. But what determines the amount of the effort when, by its aid, and ideal motive becomes victorious over a great sensual resistance? The very greatness of the resistance itself. If the sensual propensity is small, the effort is small. The latter is *made great* by the presence of a great antagonist to overcome. And if a brief definition of ideal or moral action were required, none could be given which would better fit the appearances than this: *It is action in the line of the greatest resistance.*

In those decision characterized by effort it is involved our entire dimension of the self. The choice of a moral ideal over a personal advantage is not a mere choice of contrasting motives,

but represents rather as a commitment to assume a certain perspective on the self, through which the self gives voice to the strenuous stance that guiding her will. In the fifth type of decisions, the task of the will is the one of keeping a firm grasp on the hardest option, often represented by an ideal, by an act of attention.

There is an heroic component in this process of transformation undergone by the self connected with this characterization of the will. Affirming new ideals, and thus shaping one's own character, implies a strenuous resistance to the forces and inertia of one's mental habits. This heroic component of one's will should be cultivated and exercised so that we can use it when in need. As for the discussion of habit, James speaks of an exercise on oneself through which one fashions one's subjectivity, pragmatically described as a center of efforts and commitments. The result of such exercise is the formation of a self that is transformed in respect to the one facing the dilemma with torn its interiority apart. This exercise has the form of a training of one's sensibility to the effort and commitment toward those ideals that expresses her visions and give voice to her attitude toward reality. James says

volition is primarily a relation, not between our Self and extra-mental matter (as many philosophers still maintain), but between our Self and our own states of mind.

we measure ourselves by many standards. Our strength and our intelligence, our wealth and even our good luck, are things which warm our heart and make us feel ourselves a match for life. But deeper than all such things, and able to suffice unto itself without them, is the sense of the amount of effort which we can put forth. Those are, after all, but effects, products, and reflections of the outer world within. But the effort seems to belong to an altogether different realm, as if it were the substantive thing which we *are*, and those were but externals which we *carry*.

Colin Koopman, even if through a slightly different path, arrives at concluding that for James

Moral action at its core involves the reflexive transformation of the self by the self. James, following Emerson and anticipating Dewey and Rorty, thought of ethics in terms of reflexive processes of self-transformation, self-development, and self-perfection... The freedom and the willing involved in transforming ourselves on the basis of nothing greater than our own selves, which of course would be selves which always find themselves in the midst of others to whom they are given, is the beginning of an ethics that would be exceptionally well-oriented to the task of living well in our ever uncertain world.

I agree with this conclusion, and I conclude the second chapter of the book by showing how not only habit and the will, but also belief, memory and attention are for James those elements of our subjectivity that we should educate through a work on ourselves. Their use and appropriate exercise constitute the most genuine expression of our engaged stance toward reality, in which our interiority, by giving voice to its various aspects, makes the world an hospitable place for our human conducts and practices. From this picture we can draw some interesting considerations on the very nature of moral thought. In *Talks to Teachers* James writes

Our moral effort, properly so called, terminates in our holding fast to the appropriate idea. If, then, you are asked, "*In what does a moral act consist* when reduced to its simplest and most elementary form?" you can make only one reply. You can say that *it consists in the effort of attention by which we hold fast to an idea* which but for that effort of attention would be driven out of the mind by the other psychological tendencies that are there. To *think*, in short, is the secret of will, just as it is the secret of memory. This comes out very clearly in the kind of excuse which we most frequently hear from persons who find themselves confronted by the sinfulness or harmfulness of some part of their behavior. "I never *thought*," they say. "I never *thought how* mean the action was, I never *thought of* these abominable consequences." And what do we retort when they say this? We say: "Why *didn't you think*? What were you there for but to think?" And we read them a moral lecture on their irreflectiveness.

Thinking, being a collective name for all these central aspects of our subjectivity, is a moral act since though it we decide what to attend and what to ignore. A moral problem, as James will

show in some of his other moral writings, might in fact assume the form of the accuracy of a certain representation of the world, of our contribute to its formation, and of the most apt conduct which that calls for. Through the exercise of attention and will we portray certain living options as available to us, and we focus on particular aspects of the world that would otherwise be lost as background noise, being in this was indifferent to them. This is an epistemological as well as an ethical problem: it means in fact excluding them from our epistemic and evaluative horizon, and thus from our field of practical possibilities. James writes

The indicative and the imperative moods are as much ultimate categories of thinking as they are of grammar. The 'quality of reality' which these moods attach to things is not like other qualities. It is a relation to our life. It means *our* adoption of the things, *our* caring for them, *our* standing by them. This at least is what it practically means for us; what it may mean beyond that we do not know.

The formation and education of the self are an essential part to the cultivation of one's evaluative capacities for the articulation of an authentic moral life (and itself an activity of moral significance). Ethics thus acquires the form of the analysis of the ways of self-cultivation, which a pragmatic anthropology from the point of view of what she does of herself. From this perspective moral reflection, exhorting us to refine the aspect of our subjectivity, takes the form of the analysis of the kind of experiences and experimentations we can undertake in ordinary conducts. One of the desired outcome of such an exhortative register is a self-fashioning which has the character of a revolution of the self: a transformation of the way of describing as well as of the way of living our lives and the experiences articulating them.

In Lieu of a Conclusion

This picture of the way in which psychology is suffused with moral instructions has immediate bearings for how we should conceive ethics. James wrote his major moral writings when the ink of the pages of the *Principles* was still fresh, and in them he often makes reference to his treatise on psychology for further treatments of the issue at stake. The analysis of some passages in the *Principles* in which ethical considerations are central to the very definition of our life with the mind throws a whole new light on the inquiry about the very nature and contents of James' moral philosophy. From such a perspective, moral reflection should take the form of the inquiry into the possibility of the self-constitution. This characterization does not exhaust the whole nature of ethics, but it represents a relevant aspect of it, one which puts in doubt the standard reading of James' moral philosophy as a piece of moral theory. By portraying psychology as an inquiry of the conditions of the formation of the moral subject James questions the usual understanding of moral reflection as an axiological inquiry into the nature of value. According to this alternative understanding, ethics has to do less with moral principles and more with the formation and care of one's self. By investigating the very nature of our experiencing both ourselves and the world, James envisions an alternative path along which to proceed in our moral investigations; one which puts at its center the peculiar *stance* the subject might take toward her own experiencing and experimentations. In the *Principles*, this alternative picture is explored from the point of view of its psychological tenets, while in his later ethical writings James inquiries its most practical applications.

There is a common menace haunting both our mental and our moral life, and it is the tendency of portraying them as fields in which our personal contribution is unnecessary or worse unwelcome. While in the psychological case this leads to an understanding of the mind as a given and of our stance toward experiencing as a passive one, in the ethical case it leads to a picture of moral life as the dead respect of rules and principles conceived independently from any personal contribution. These companions attitudes lead to mental and moral conservatorism, the two tendencies of the human soul that, according to James, an attentive philosophical reflection should individuate, explore and finally eradicate.