

William James and the Politics of Moral Conflict

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Who shall say it is not humanly possible both to believe, and also to harbor saving doubts; both to cast in your lot with one party, and also your opponents: both to feel a passion to your own cause and yet desire to give every cause a hearing; both to believe yourself right, and yet acknowledge the possibility that you might be wrong?

—Ralph Barton Perry¹

In *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, Cornel West argues in no uncertain terms that the general philosophical outlook maintained by William James:

is one of political impotence....

James's position is symptomatic of his class background, family upbringing, and personal temperament. The crises he encountered were personal and existential, not political or economic.²

James's thought, so West's argument goes, is geared toward the promotion of moral integrity over political provocation and the exercise of individual conscience over engagement in collective forms of action to confront the problematic social practices of his day. While James extols the heroic energies put forth by individuals seeking to transform their own lives through courage and personal struggle, he focuses little attention upon directing these energies toward matters of social and political import. Such matters, West thereby concludes, must simply be of minor importance to James.

This sort of critique of James's political thought is, to be sure, not new. And while the gravity of the indictment thereof has not always been quite so acerbic as that provided by West, the conclusions he draws correspond quite closely with the opinion of other of James's more seasoned commentators. In an insightful comparison with certain of the compassionate

sentiments shown by James's sister Alice regarding the ill treatment of the laboring class in England at the hands of capitalists, Max Otto, for instance, provides a compelling argument that James himself harbored certain egregious "blindnesses" that inhibited him from translating his powerful contributions to moral thought into an effective political philosophy.³ James's suspicion that social institutions invariably engender the sort of "regimentation or control" of individuals that "endangered the purity of individuality" and his central concern to catch "the luster of a life wherever and however it was lived" so as to inspire persons from all walks of life to be heartened by these lustrous patterns in their own practices come at a high price. For together they betray, Otto remarks, "a tendency to slight the environmental circumstances in response to which, or in spite of which, the better potentialities of human beings are realized, or, because of which—as happens, alas, too often—they are thwarted, twisted, and entirely crushed out."⁴ So too, James Campbell suggests, does the "ethics of fulfillment" promoted by James—an ethical outlook centered upon developing the means for personal contentment by striving to create for oneself the capacity to live by "some inner *ideal*"⁵—preclude him from offering an "ethics of reform" whereby he can employ his otherwise generous philosophical spirit to decry the appalling social and economic conditions in which so many lived in his day.⁶

It is indeed the case that the bulk of James's writings are directed, at the expense of attention to such concerns, toward addressing how individuals have it within themselves to overcome the personal crises of will that keep them from energetically acting to make the world a place in which they can feel more at ease. But that this makes his philosophical outlook one that is, for all intents and purposes, politically inconsequential is a deeply misguided conclusion for James's critics to draw. In fact, if I may be so bold, I suggest that James's thought can provide precisely the sort of guidance—or, perhaps more accurately, just the sort of challenge to

our prevailing modes of thought—that we need as we seek to navigate the rough waters stirred up by certain core aspects of contemporary political life.

Whether they come in the form of disagreements over the proper limits of reproductive, religious, or cultural rights; the use of public funding for political campaigns, education, or health care; the constitutionality of affirmative action or ‘special’ rights for women, homosexuals, and the disabled; or the justifiability of particular military actions, immigration policies, or changes in tax laws, a vast and (arguably) growing number of the political disagreements we face today revolve, as Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson rightly point out, around acute and pervasive *moral differences* between citizens.⁷ Although such disagreements are sometimes primarily fueled by wider social or economic concerns, perhaps their most dominant characteristic is that they reflect the deeply conflicting moral commitments of citizens: these including, among other issues, fundamental differences regarding what they believe they owe to other members of their community, who is to be considered part of that community, and how the ascription of communal status is to be determined. And, given the highly pluralistic nature of contemporary society—marked as it is by a wide array of divergent cultural, ethnic, and religious *Weltanschauungen*—the possibility for the conflict fomented by these differences to threaten the very stability of our political life, and thereby the viability of democratic governance, cannot be easily overlooked. Not only, then, are we challenged with the need to be attentive to the institutional issues connected with social and economic justice. It is equally important to seek means to address the potentially deleterious political implications of moral conflict; and the best place to begin in this regard is to rethink the normative bases of citizen comportment—the manner in which citizens engage in political life, especially when they are involved in such conflicts. In other words, questions regarding *political morality*, or what principles of morality should inform political action, require their due just insofar as do questions

of institutional design, or of the constitution and character of an adequate scheme of social and political institutions.⁸ It is specifically with regard to the former, I suggest, that James's thought proves its political worth.

That contemporary political life is marked by an increasing array of highly contentious moral conflicts can, to be sure, have the effect of driving all but the most zealous of citizens from political engagement—of cultivating a widespread sense of skepticism with regard to the fruits of one's labors and an acute distaste for (or perhaps even fear respecting the potentially physically and emotionally harmful consequences of) the widespread vitriol too often exhibited in public forums. In Part I of this essay, I thereby draw on James's central thesis in "The Will to Believe" (and later emendations on his part thereof) to show, in response to this eventuality, how his thought lends itself to reinvigorating those who have even the slightest interest to transform their "inner *ideal*" into effective public policy to be willing to do so. His thought, in fact, is particularly well suited to addressing a pivotal yet often overlooked aspect of political engagement: the means by which we gain the *motivation* to act on the basis of our convictions. The existence of moral conflict—heated as it may be—need not, and should not, thereby engender political quietism.

In and of itself, however, this would seem not to aid in lessening the vitriolic effects of moral conflict but, on the contrary, to risk fomenting them; and without the second aspect of James's political morality firmly in place, this would warrant concern. Part II thus addresses the means whereby James seeks to channel the energies he incites into a mode of comportment that demands attention to, indeed respect for, others' convictions even as one remains strongly committed to acting in accordance with that in which she or he believes. We will see, I hope, that while coupling these two theses may prove to be a formidable task, it is nonetheless one that James rightly takes to be well worth the effort.

I

In “The Fixation of Belief,” Charles Peirce sets out to reveal how psychological agitation, or (in simpler terms) a feeling of doubt, drives human inquiry. Inquiry, he argues, begins when otherwise settled beliefs become unsettled through such agitation and ends with the relieving thereof by means of either establishing a new belief with regard to the matter under scrutiny or reaffirming the existing belief. “Hence the sole object of inquiry is the settlement of opinion. We may fancy that this is not enough for us, and that we seek, not merely an opinion, but a true opinion. But put this fancy to the test, and it proves groundless; for as soon as a firm belief is reached we are entirely satisfied, whether the belief is true or false.”⁹ The sort of doubt with which Peirce is concerned, he is quick to note, is neither hyperbolic nor hypothetical. Rather, it is of a “real and living” nature. It causes actual psychological distress and requires genuine relief. And on his account, empirical investigation—the “method of science”—typified as it is by the give and take of epistemic (or, to use James’s terminology, “intellectual”) reasons, yields the best means yet devised to find such relief insofar as it provides a proven approach to scrutinizing and resolving those matters that incite doubt.

James, to be sure, agrees with Peirce that inquiry begins with real and living doubt and ends with the establishment of belief, and he likewise lauds the merits of the method of science in helping to instantiate belief in a good many matters open to inquiry.¹⁰ One domain, however, wherein the method of science can provide little direct assistance, James maintains, is in developing concrete means to peacefully resolve some of the more troubling social and political conflicts plaguing late-nineteenth-century American society. As Joshua Miller remarks:

James lived through the Civil War and wrote his major works during the era of massive immigration from Europe, the building of the railroads, the escalation of American

imperialism, the Populist movement, the campaign for women's suffrage, the Haymarket riot, and violent struggles between labor and management. Reconstruction was dismantled while lynching became common, the Ku Klux Klan was formed, Jim Crow laws were passed, and, in response, a nascent civil rights movement took shape. Nonviolent resolution of domestic and international conflicts seemed a remote possibility.¹¹

Remote indeed. Feelings of overwhelming doubt and despair that the method of science was simply ill-equipped to relieve were widespread, feelings—as is well known—that James himself experienced.¹² And with these feelings came a sense of complacency and lethargy that had deeply paralyzing effects upon individuals' abilities to combat the social forces seemingly pitted against them. More to the point, the tenor of the disputes surrounding these conflicts often contained an underlying moral tincture that fostered a highly volatile form of contestation that only those with the strongest of stomachs or the most at stake were willing to endure. A good many individuals in American society, including (notably) "*les intellectuels*," increasingly "collapse[d] into yielding masses of plaintiveness and fear" and, in turn, resigned themselves to lives of passivity and quietism.¹³

Well aware of the negative impact such resignation can have on the pursuit by individuals of the concrete instantiation of their ideals, James sets out to combat these developments by investigating the means by which individuals can rekindle for themselves the belief that their actions can make a positive difference in their own lives and the lives of those in their communities. He seeks to provide ample reason to have faith that it is not only possible but, indeed, necessary to strive to live "a life that supervenes upon despair"¹⁴—a life marked by the conviction and determination to act even in the face of those obstacles that cause one acute distress. In so doing, he seeks to reinvigorate individuals' efforts at personal amelioration and

community revitalization: to aid those who have even the slightest interest in publicly expressing and, moreover, instituting those policies to which they are committed to develop the strength of will to motivate themselves to do so.¹⁵

What is required, first and foremost, in situations where one experiences genuine psychological agitation that cannot be relieved on intellectual grounds is to assert the value of drawing on non-intellectual reasons to develop belief, i.e., to do so in accordance with whatever interests and concerns happen to move one.¹⁶ With this idea in mind, James provides the following oft-cited thesis in “The Will to Believe”:

*Our passionate nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, ‘Do not decide, but leave the question open,’ is itself a passionate decision—just like deciding yes or no—and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth.*¹⁷

James’s approach to belief-formation does, to be sure, diverge from the account thereof offered by Peirce, for whom this process takes place mainly within the purview of a community of scientific inquirers. Instead, as Richard Gale puts it, James here attempts to justify being willing “to self-induce an *effective intention*”¹⁸: to commit oneself to ideas and ideals that do not necessarily lend themselves to empirical verification before the fact (if at all). Taking such measures is warranted, James maintains, not only because the option between competing hypotheses is intellectually undecidable but also because it is “genuine.” This entails that it is a *living* option in the sense that it stands as a “real possibility” for the inquirer, it is *forced* to the extent that it is unavoidable, and it is *momentous* insofar as the implications of the choice to be made are potentially quite significant. When faced with such an option, we must have the

strength of will to believe—even in the face of lingering doubt—in that which we may not yet necessarily have sufficient evidence to confirm and, moreover, to be willing to commit ourselves to acting on behalf of that belief. Belief, James therefore suggests, is an absolutely central feature of the active life; believing that one has the capacity to act so as to recreate or re-energize oneself is a necessary precondition for effectively acting at all.¹⁹

Choosing to act on the basis of such beliefs is, to be sure, to be weighed as far as possible by careful consideration not only of the potential consequences of so acting but also the possible costs of withholding or delaying action.²⁰ In this sense, James is not offering a brute doxastic voluntarism. He is not championing “an act of faith of the most arbitrary kind” or asserting that we can come to believe just anything we might will.²¹ Caution certainly may be warranted when the adverse consequences of deciding wrongly potentially outweigh those of being successful in one’s pursuits. And it is certainly the case that we cannot know in advance and without qualification what the results of our actions or our failure to act may be. They may prove beneficial. Then again, they may bring failure and the need for retrenchment and re-evaluation. But to refuse on principle to act in the face of doubt in order to relieve the agitation that arises from genuine options, when the occasion warrants such action, is simply to welcome despair and concomitant complacency.

Furthermore, James maintains, it truly is *worth* believing that human activities can have positive transformative effects upon the world. It is worth taking a “believing attitude” toward our capacity to make a difference and to act with resolve in light of this premise. In so doing, individuals themselves do indeed—from time to time at the very least—have the ability to actualize their beliefs, to make that in which they have faith come true. “For again and again success depends on energy of act; energy depends on faith that we shall not fail; and that faith in turn on the faith that we are right, —which faith thus verifies itself.”²² Believe that the cause for

which you act or the policy that you endorse can come to fruition, and your acting upon this belief has the potential to verify it. Roadblocks to such verification can and do inevitably arise, but they will not always and everywhere block the way.

So too is it worth believing that the world, indeed the universe, is amenable to human manipulation and thus that taking action even in the face of forces that are not wholly within one's control can potentially yield positive results.²³ "If we survey the field of history and ask what feature all great periods of revival, of expansion of the human mind, display in common, we shall find, I think, simply this: that each and all of them have said to the human being, 'The inmost nature of the reality is congenial to powers that you possess.'"²⁴ The human race does not live within a "block-universe" that is mapped out in advance of our coming. But neither is it chaotic in nature. Rather, James asserts that it is most beneficial to believe that the universe is "open," unfinished, and pluralistic in character: ordered from the bottom up and not the top down, typified by the actions of its sundry particulars ordering themselves, *e pluribus unum*.²⁵ Within such environs, then, there is always room to make a difference. The universe—*our* universe—is malleable, in the making, waiting to be molded in new and possibly better ways. As such, it need not be the case that our political environs in particular, even marked as they are by a vast array of volatile moral conflicts, invariably prevail upon us. In equal (if not greater) measure, we can prevail upon them if we operate with resolute faith in our abilities and are willing to meet inevitable setbacks with determination to pursue other avenues that may bring success.²⁶

James is thereby no pessimist concerning our capacity to make a positive impact upon our own lives and the lives of others. Yet, neither does he offer what Karl Jaspers calls a "cheap optimism" with regard to the results of human action.²⁷ He is, rather, a self-proclaimed "meliorist": he advocates belief in possibility, in a world in which not all voices have yet had a

chance to be heard nor all decisions about how the human race shall live already made.²⁸ His objectives and his method are, in this regard, pragmatic through and through—to promote belief in our abilities to undertake purposeful, even strenuous, action in order to fashion and refashion our environs to better cope with the risks and contingencies of life. With courage and resolve, individuals can develop the strength of will, even in the face of lingering doubt, to overcome the complacency and lethargy they experience that lead them to withdraw from political life. Moral conflicts and their political implications are, to be sure, themselves creations born of the risk and commitment of individuals; they are not somehow independent from individual acts of willing. This being so, there is no reason to believe that they cannot be effectively addressed.

Thus does James show unqualified support for individuals and their respective energies. But while his focus upon the powers of individuals certainly reveals a dominant aspect of his own philosophical temperament,²⁹ he maintains such a focus in order to reinvigorate the “sick souls” of the world: to help those individuals who have succumbed to despair to regard themselves as being capable of living active and engaged lives and thus to motivate them to participate, if they have but the slightest desire, in shaping and reshaping themselves and their communities for the better.³⁰ His emphasis upon re-energizing individuals, to borrow a bit of terminology from John Dewey, proves in this light to be a beneficial “simplification”—a means of focusing attention upon one specific feature of human doings and undergoings in order to raise awareness of that feature so as to incite further inquiry.³¹ And James’s simplification can be drawn on for the express purpose of counteracting just the sort of despair and quietism endemic within contemporary political life. It is, so to speak, a potent elixir for the weak stomach.³²

To thereby invert the well-worn statement, James clearly reveals that the political is personal. His is a philosophy that can be effectively drawn on to motivate political engagement and to see the world as not inhospitable thereto. Such means of engagement are, of course, but one way of staving off complacency and lethargy in the face of personal and social ills, and not necessarily the means that are of primary import to him. In relation to that of certain of his critics (most notably West), the application of his thought to politics is, in this sense, second order: whereas they tend to maintain that pragmatism must be directly relevant to instigating social and political change, James regards it as a tool to be utilized to empower individuals to discover *for themselves* how to refashion their lives and communities. This hardly makes James's thought politically inconsequential, however. Far from it, for without building faith in one's capacities to act so as to make the world a place in which one can truly feel at home, acting thereupon would itself (I dare say) seem to be of scant consequence.

II

Let us assume, James could be heard to declare, that we now have—or at least understand how to develop—the strength of will to undertake public forms of action, even in the face of lingering doubts, according to whatever “inner *ideal*” happens to move us. Let us likewise assume that we have an interest in doing so, that we “sick souls” have been properly motivated in accordance with James's thesis. If we have made it even this far, we have confronted and overcome a first formidable challenge with regard to moral conflict. For instead of flinching in the face thereof, we now find in ourselves a veritable attitudinal transformation: where such conflicts were before a most acute cause of our complacency and lethargy, they now elicit from us energy and perhaps even excitement. They are the very sparks of possibility, or, in a manner

of speaking, those spices of social life that reflect the interplay of the multifarious elements of a pluralistic universe seeking to order themselves, *e pluribus unum*.

Moral conflict, for James, therefore can and should be regarded as healthy.³³ It is a sign of social vitality to the extent that it reveals individuals' strenuous manners of living and their willingness to risk commitment. But this raises a fundamental question for James. Given the vitriolic tenor of moral conflicts, if yet more individuals engage in moral contestation would it not be a wonder if *any* significant degree of social cohesion between them were to remain? As Miller notes, it is often in just such cases that "politics—the peaceful resolution of conflict—breaks down and differences are resolved, if at all, by the weaker yielding to the superior power."³⁴ How, then, can moral conflict be both a sign of health *and* a deleterious feature of social life in need of resolution? More generally, how do we endorse moral conflict and commit ourselves to engaging therein while at the same time seeking to maintain not merely social cohesion but perhaps even strive to *strengthen* our social ties? Can moral conflict be both a source of social tension *and* of social solidarity? This is undoubtedly a profoundly difficult question; and James—no dilettante with regard to the exigencies associated with such conflict—provides no easy answer. But offer an answer he does, and a quite powerful one at that. For he calls, in effect, for a second attitudinal transformation that is no less, and is perhaps even more, important than the first: this entailing being willing to risk undertaking a fundamental shift in disposition with regard to our comportment toward others and thereby the very means according to which we engage in moral conflict.

Without making explicit reference either to it or to its philosophical progenitor, James ends "On a Certain Blindness of Human Beings" by lauding J. S. Mill's harm principle as perhaps the crucial starting point in determining how we are to comport ourselves toward others. As Mill notes, "the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member

of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.”³⁵ The only basis upon which we have rightful cause to intervene in individuals’ lives is to counter the pernicious effects of their behavior toward other individuals. Mill, however, is patently unclear regarding what exactly counts as harm, especially insofar as he remains committed to utilitarianism—to the *overall* aggrandizement of happiness within society—as the basic criterion for determining the worth of any particular action. In other words, certain harms done to others may well increase aggregate social utility. In this respect, the harm principle remains merely formal, hence underdetermined.³⁶

James is, I believe, intensely interested in giving content to the harm principle: to delineating what exactly counts as harm and how incidences thereof should be addressed. This delineation involves, initially, recognizing that moral conflict cannot be regarded as healthy *simpliciter*. As Perry remarks:

It is true that James attached intrinsic value to heroic action, and praised the life of conflict and struggle for the personal qualities it engendered. But taking James as a whole, there can, I think, be no shred of doubt that he regarded those qualities as subordinate in the moral hierarchy, compensations—yes—but not to be confused with the consummate value of peace.³⁷

James, in this regard, offers no “light-minded aestheticism” (Rorty) that promotes the mere exhilaration of the senses. “The world,” he notes in promoting pluralism, “is wide enough to harbor various ways of thinking.”³⁸ But so too, speaking melioristically, is the *moral* world in particular in a position to be either lost or saved: to dissolve into fractious infighting between opposing forces acting in accordance with the will to power or, by contrast, to be typified by the employment of peaceful, democratic means to achieve (at least roughly) mutually agreeable resolutions. In other words, accepting pluralism and meliorism compels us to admit the

possibility, indeed the irrationality, of evil: that not all ways of thinking and acting can possibly be tolerated if our moral world is to be saved.³⁹ Moral conflict, then, cannot be healthy in and of itself. It must be *made* healthy. This, James indicates, requires that we harness, mold, and channel such conflict to work to our mutual benefit, while combating its most deleterious effects.

In discussing the manner in which James approaches this issue, Perry distinguishes between two prevailing and opposed modes of comportment: that of ‘inclusiveness’ versus ‘exclusiveness.’ The inclusivist is interested in developing the means to abide by fair terms of cooperation. He strives to show respect for the values that others hold insofar as he “acknowledges the same right of self-affirmation in others which he claims for himself; and he rejoices in the numerous individualities and forms of intercourse which this acknowledgement engenders.”⁴⁰ The inclusivist, then, is a pluralist in spirit and a meliorist in action. And although he may well maintain certain blindnesses regarding the ideals of others, he does his best to recognize and overcome them. By contrast, the exclusivist, acts according to his own causes at the expense of those that are incompatible therewith. If he recognizes at all that he exhibits a definitive blindness toward others’ ideals, he nonetheless finds these ideals either utterly contemptible or, at the very least, not worthy of consideration.⁴¹ Seeking fair terms of cooperation, to the exclusivist, is akin to exhibiting a lack of political backbone.

James situates himself firmly in the inclusivist camp.⁴² Yet, instead of seeking to meet the exclusivist head on by attempting to show him the error of his ways (normatively speaking), he performs an ingenious flanking maneuver in order, on the one hand, to defeat the exclusivist on terms with which the exclusivist can readily identify and, on the other, to show just how politically savvy and tough-minded the inclusivist can be. In so doing, moreover, he begins the all-important task of giving content to the harm principle.

The respect due to others, James notes, arises from our ability to appreciate their capacity—equal to our own—to risk belief even in the face of lingering doubts and to passionately act on behalf of these beliefs.⁴³ This, in turn, requires that the inclusivist maintain a particular disposition with regard to belief itself: this entailing the ability to take a firm stand in the way of belief, to have faith in one’s ability to verify the truth thereof, yet to likewise recognize (given the fact of pluralism) that we ourselves cannot possibly have a monopolistic hold on the truth. The truth, that is, admits of many faces; veritable ideals come in a wide array of forms. As James proclaims, “Faith thus remains as one of the inalienable birthrights of our mind. Of course it must remain a practical, and not a dogmatic, attitude. It must go with toleration of other faiths, with the search for the most probable, and with the full consciousness of responsibility and risks.”⁴⁴ As such, we must not succumb to the fear that there is something patently dangerous in others having a share of the truth, even if their beliefs conflict with ours. Be willing to engage with others, to put your beliefs on the block. Be open to the possibility that there is genuinely something to be gained by our encounters with others, whether it is the altering of our beliefs or their more substantive confirmation.

Miller notes, however, that although this attempt by James to redefine faith to incorporate saving doubt may indeed be “a formidable and worthy goal,” he in fact “disguised the difficulty of keeping [faith and doubt] together.”⁴⁵ He himself underdetermines the strength of character needed to undertake the second attitudinal transformation insofar as he fails to make explicit the high degree of psychological dissonance it may well cause. Although he does indeed highlight why the beliefs of others deserve our respect and how our encroachment thereupon would constitute harm, adhering to the harm principle constituted as such effectively demands endorsing two incommensurable positions at once. For the maintenance of passionate belief would seem to entail renouncing pluralism itself: taking an unflinching stand regarding the truth

of one's own commitments that short-circuits remaining open to alternative points of view. Thus does James play directly into the exclusivist's hands by sapping the would-be inclusivist's ability to develop the strength of will to hold to her cause.

Miller is, to be sure, warranted in noting the formidability of developing such a disposition, especially insofar as contemporary political life often seems to require as an entry fee being absolutely unflinching in one's beliefs. Holding firm to one's position or damning that maintained by an adversary makes a far stronger impression than do championing respect for one's political opponent and being willing to attentively listen and respond to her policy proposals. Given these circumstances, Perry too asks:

How can [the inclusivist] mix enough heat with his light, and enough conviction with his honest doubts, to influence the course of human affairs, or even to save himself? How can he be true to his purpose of peace and moderation, and yet be militant enough, defensively and offensively, to prevail, or even survive, when every faction carries arms and marches to warlike music?⁴⁶

The answer that James provides arises, I take it, from his defense of meliorism; and it reveals precisely how he seeks to outflank the exclusivist. Despite the intransigence our opponents often show, he notes that it is indeed worth maintaining a "disciplined good temper towards the opposite party when it fairly wins its innings."⁴⁷ What this equally entails, however, is that we have absolutely no reason to capitulate to those who strive to win their innings *unfairly*—i.e., by using scare tactics to incite public outrage at proposals made by competing parties or to surreptitiously shift attention from one's own questionable political tactics, seeking to silence others by questioning their national loyalty or their trustworthiness, labeling their stated platform as politically extreme or 'out of touch' with community interests, and so on. In other words, our respect for the ideals of others must not extend to those who, like the exclusivist, exhibit

disrespect and a blatant unwillingness to engage in open and honest political dialogue. For, in line with his attempt to give content to the harm principle, such disrespect and unwillingness are, James remarks, “the root of most human injustices and cruelties, and traits of human character most likely to make the angels weep.”⁴⁸ If the moral world—and with it political life—is to be saved, if moral conflict is to be made healthy, as the meliorist maintains it can, we too must be willing to reveal the evil that exclusiveness can do. The inclusivist must thereby challenge the exclusivist at every turn. And this is most effectively done by challenging him in a manner with which he is disposed to identify: through the exhibition of a militant *esprit de corps* that is often regarded as a mode of comportment exhibited solely by the exclusivist.

“Our ancestors,” James declares in his quintessentially brash manner, “have bred pugnacity into our bone and marrow, and thousand of years of peace won’t breed it out of us.”⁴⁹ Why should the inclusivist not harness this pugnacity, this militant spirit—which, James argues, pushes us to act strenuously to actualize our ideals—in pursuit of her own agenda? Cannot she militantly fight to uphold the value of respect itself, of attentively listening and responding to those opponents who seek to fairly win their innings, inasmuch as the exclusivist militantly fights for his own cause at the expense of showing respect for others? Does not the harm done to others by the exclusivist’s actions in fact demand such militancy on the part of the inclusivist? Perhaps, just perhaps, the psychological dissonance of which Miller makes note with relation to James’s call for maintaining a sort of faith that carries with it saving doubt arises not so much from the incommensurability of these values but instead from the long-standing habit of regarding respect itself as breeding a general acceptance of placation and pacifism. But even pacifism, James maintains, can profit from more than a dash of militancy. “Pacifists ought to enter more deeply into the esthetical and ethical point of view of their opponents. Do that first in every controversy..., *then move the point*, and your opponent will follow.”⁵⁰ Or at least the

chance that she will follow is increased, despite her general tendency to remain obstinate, insofar as the initial point of discussion is one to which she can relate or even endorse outright. In any case, while it certainly would seem to be the case that the exclusivist's acumen at maintaining power often arises precisely from her intransigence, if the inclusivist is not to abandon his faith in peace and democracy he simply must be willing to take such an approach in this regard.

To return at last to the impact this second attitudinal transformation would have upon moral conflict, we can now identify a core benefit that can arise in this respect from developing an inclusive disposition. We have noted James's desire to harness, mold, and channel moral conflict to be both a source of social solidarity inasmuch as it can be—and is, within the scope of contemporary political life—a source of acute social tension. By engaging with the exclusivist in the militant manner that is already so comfortable to him and then making every feasible effort (consonant with her wider beliefs) to move the point of the discussion, the inclusivist can rob the exclusivist of his ability to invoke the fear of otherness or disloyalty or extremism he so desperately relies upon to motivate endorsement of his cause. By not only revealing the harm that embracing exclusiveness can cause but, moreover, holding strongly to the assertion that seeking fair terms of cooperation is indeed worthwhile, we can “cheat our foe, politically circumvent his action.”⁵¹ Or, at the very least, we can begin to reveal that moral conflict, when properly undertaken, allows for just the sort of pluralistic interplay of ideals whereby our moral world can be ordered for the better. We can elicit energy to engage in a healthy and vibrant form of moral conflict typified by the *fair* exchange of ideals—to develop a believing attitude toward the efficacy of such engagement. This would have the dual effect of promoting lively political engagement and, at the same time, of “raising the tone of democracy” itself: of thereby refashioning political life to be more conducive to inclusiveness itself.⁵² Thus is it possible to refashion, to purify, moral conflict in a way that (as it were) would make the angels sing. This,

indeed, is James's own "inner *ideal*," and it is likewise at the heart of the challenge he lays before us. Now, he would certainly ask, will we risk rising to meet it despite our linger doubts; or will we instead choose simply to sit down fatalistically before the croaker's picture?

Notes

¹ Ralph Barton Perry, *In the Spirit of William James* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University, 1958), p. 206.

² Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, 1989), p. 60.

³ Max C. Otto, "On a Certain Blindness in William James," *Ethics* 53 (1953): 184-191.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 189, 189, 187, and 187, respectively. For the most explicit accounts of James's blanket suspicion of social institutions, see his letters to Mrs. Henry Whitman (June 7, 1899) and William M. Salter (September 11, 1899) in *The Letters of William James*, vol. II, ed. Henry James (Boston: Atlantic Monthly, 1920), pp. 90 and 101.

⁵ William James, "What Makes a Life Significant," in *Talks to Teachers on Psychology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1983), p. 161.

⁶ James Campbell, "William James and the Ethics of Fulfillment," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 17(3) (Summer 1981): 224-240. This opinion is also voiced by John Patrick Diggins, *The Promise of Pragmatism* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994), p. 137; George R. Garrison and Edward H. Madden, "William James—Warts and All," *American Quarterly* 29 (1977): 207-221; Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (Boston: Beacon, 1955), p. 134; and Bruce Kuklick, *The Rise of American Philosophy: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1860-1930* (New Haven: Yale University, 1977), pp. 306-314. It is worth

noting, however, that this view is not universal. For laudatory comments with regard to James's social and political thought, see Henry D. Aiken, "William James as Moral and Social Philosopher," *Philosophical Exchange* 3 (1981): 55-68; Joshua L. Miller, *Democratic Temperament: The Legacy of William James* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas, 1997); and Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James*, vol. II (Boston: Little, Brown, 1936), chapters 67 and 68.

⁷ See, in particular, chapter 1 of Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1996). Gutmann and Thompson are avowed proponents of deliberative democracy. While they do not look to the pragmatic tradition for philosophical progenitors, a number of other deliberative democrats do: Cheryl Misak, for example, pays homage to Peirce in *Truth, Politics, and Morality: Pragmatism and Deliberation* (New York: Routledge, 2000); James Bohman to Dewey in *Public Deliberation: Pluralism, Complexity, and Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1996); and Jürgen Habermas to Peirce, Mead, and Dewey in "A Philosophico-Political Profile," *New Left Review* 151 (May/June 1985), pp. 76-77. James, however, is noticeably absent within these discussions. Although I do not address this matter directly, this essay is meant in part to pave the way for further discussion of what role, if any, James can play in this respect.

⁸ See Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (New York: Oxford University, 1986), pp. 3-6, for a discussion of the distinction between these two core facets of contemporary political philosophy. As he notes, this division is more a matter of convenience than the reflection of a fundamental theoretical distinction. It is certainly the case that questions of political morality both influence and are influenced by those of institutional design. I choose to adhere to the distinction, however, and to emphasize the manner in which James can contribute in particular to addressing

the former insofar as it has received less sustained attention within contemporary political philosophy—including, for example, by such prominent figures as John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas—than has the latter.

⁹ Charles Sanders Peirce, “The Fixation of Belief,” in *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, 8 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1931-1958), 5.375.

¹⁰ See, e.g., William James, “The Sentiment of Rationality,” in *The Will to Believe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1979), p. 79n.

¹¹ *Democratic Temperament*, p. 3.

¹² See George Cotkin, *William James, Public Philosopher* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1990), and Michael A. Weinstein, *The Wilderness and the City: American Classical Philosophy as a Moral Quest* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts, 1982), pp. 69-89, for helpful discussions of how the depression James experienced in his early years affected the tone and content of his philosophy.

¹³ William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. II (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1983), p. 1181. James remarks in “The Social Value of the College-Bred” that the college educated “ought to have our own class-consciousness. ‘Les Intellectuels!’” See *Essays, Comments, and Reviews* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1987), p. 110.

¹⁴ William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1977), p. 137.

¹⁵ That this pursuit is intended to have not merely personal but social and political import as well is made evident, e.g., by James’s praise of anarchist Morrison I. Swift. Swift criticizes Josiah Royce and F. H. Bradley for their Right-Hegelian-informed idea that human suffering is itself rational insofar as it somehow contributes to the absolute goodness of the world. See James’s discussion thereof in *Pragmatism and the Meaning of Truth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard

University, 1978), pp. 20-23. By insisting upon the importance of individual lives and experiences, James maintains that individuals need not rest content with the ‘rationality’ of the status quo but can instead take up the struggle against suffering wherever they find it. Harvey Cormier notes in *The Truth Is What Works* (Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield, 2000), chapter six, that this attitude is likewise suffused into James’s pragmatic theory of truth.

¹⁶ It is worth noting that James does not take it to be the case that developing belief on non-intellectual grounds is only acceptable *after* one has definitively shown that the method of science cannot be employed in this process. The passional, volitional, and intellectual cooperate, according to James, from the beginning of inquiry. See, e.g., “The Sentiment of Rationality,” p. 77. For a defense of this thesis, see Gregory Fernando Pappas, “William James’ Virtuous Believer,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 30(1) (Winter 1994): 77-109.

¹⁷ William James, “The Will to Believe,” in *The Will to Believe*, p. 20 [original emphasis].

¹⁸ Richard M. Gale, “William James and the Ethics of Belief,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 17(1) (January 1980): 13.

¹⁹ For more on this point, see William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1985), pp. 52-53. Robert O’Connell argues in *William James on the Courage to Believe*, 2nd edition (New York: Fordham University, 1997), that James means his thesis to be restricted solely to beliefs that are unverifiable, the most pertinent of which is belief in the existence of God. Consequently, he reads James less as a pragmatist than as a voluntarist. For criticisms of this position, see Patrick Dooley’s review in *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 21(4) (Fall 1985): 569-576; John J. McDermott’s review in *International Philosophical Quarterly* 22(2) (June 1986): 189-191; Gregory Fernando Pappas, “William James and the Logic of Faith,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 28(4) (Fall 1992):

781-808; and Phil Cox, "William James's Epistemological 'Gamble,'" *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 36(2) (Spring 2000): 283-296.

²⁰ In this respect, W. K. Clifford's defense in "The Ethics of Belief" of not merely the irrationality but, moreover, the immorality to establishing belief without sufficient intellectual justification to sustain that belief is itself a decision laden with risk. Withholding belief in the face of a genuine option, on James's account, is itself a decision based upon non-intellectual reasons inasmuch as is willing belief. See Clifford's *The Ethics of Belief and Other Essays* (Amherst, MA: Prometheus, 1999), chapter four.

²¹ See William James, "Faith and the Right to Believe," in *Some Problems of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1979), p. 113, and *Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 174. For a critique of James on these grounds, see, e.g., Bertrand Russell, *Philosophical Essays* (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 87-149, and G. E. Moore, *Philosophical Studies* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965), pp. 97-146.

²² William James, "Reflex Action and Theism," in *The Will to Believe*, p. 100.

²³ As John J. McDermott notes, "For casual readers of James, the term 'Kosmos' [or 'universe'] may seem rather pre-possessing. Indeed, it is nothing less than the cosmos that is the immediate environ." See *Streams of Experience: Reflections on the History and Philosophy of American Culture* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts, 1986), p. 51.

²⁴ "The Sentiment of Rationality," p. 86.

²⁵ See *A Pluralistic Universe*, p. 145.

²⁶ See "Faith and the Right to Believe," pp. 115-116.

²⁷ Karl Jaspers, *Man in the Modern Age*, trans. Eden and Cedar Paul (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951), p. 160. Jaspers's cynicism arises from his belief, concomitant with that of Russell and Moore, that James's thesis regarding the will to believe licenses wishful thinking.

²⁸ See "Pragmatism and Religion," in *Pragmatism*, p. 139, and *Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 414.

²⁹ See, e.g., William James, "Thomas Davidson: Individualist," in *Essays, Comments, and Reviews*, pp. 87-97.

³⁰ See, in particular, chapters VI and VII of *Varieties of Religious Experience*. In this sense, James is not providing a song for all seasons—a message to all political actors. In *The Thought and Character of William James*, Perry provides the following quote by James from a lecture delivered on January 9, 1902: "Speaking broadly, there are never more than two fundamental parties in a nation: the party of red blood, as it calls itself, and that of pale reflection: the party of animal instinct, jingoism, fun, excitement, bigness; and that of reason, forecast, order gained by growth, and spiritual methods," (p. 299). "The Will to Believe," James remarks, is directed toward the latter sort of actor, and I suggest that the same holds (*pace* Miller) regarding the general thrust of his political morality. See *Democratic Temperament*, chapter 4.

³¹ John Dewey, "Freedom and Culture," in *The Later Works*, vol. 13, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University, 1988), pp. 116-117. For a rather typical airing of this sentiment—in this case, remarking about his attempt to open up discursive space regarding the thesis of pluralism—see James's letter to A. O. Lovejoy (September 13, 1907) in *The Thought an Character of William James*, vol. II, p. 480.

³² Both West and Diggins criticize James for underemphasizing the merits of collective action. See *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, pp. 59ff, and *The Promise of Pragmatism*, p. 137.

Yet, aside from the fact that this distinction between individual and collective modes of action would rub James the wrong way, he hardly overlooks the power of collective action to provide a powerful, shared means of acting. See, e.g., “Robert Gould Shaw: Oration by Professor William James” in *Essays in Religion and Morality*, p. 65. West himself, it is worth noting, does indeed recognize the value of individual action—bringing him closer to James’s position than he perhaps realizes. See *The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought* (New York: Monthly Review, 1991), p. xx, and *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, p. 214.

³³ See James’s letter to George H. Palmer (April 2, 1900) in *The Letters of William James*, vol. II, p. 122, for a clear expression of this sentiment. See also his compelling account of leaving the “Sobriety and industry, intelligence and goodness, orderliness and ideality, prosperity and cheerfulness” of Chautauqua Lake in “What Makes Life Significant,” p. 152.

³⁴ *Democratic Temperament*, p. 54.

³⁵ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, in *On Liberty and Other Essays*, ed. John Gray (New York: Oxford University, 1991), p. 14.

³⁶ For criticism of Mill on these grounds, see James Fitzjames Stephen, *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991). It is worth noting that although James dedicates *Pragmatism* to Mill, he is clearly aware of Stephen’s critique given that he refers to Stephens’s text in “The Will to Believe.” For a more recent critique of the harm principle, see Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (New York: Oxford University, 1969), pp. 128ff.

³⁷ *In the Spirit of William James*, p. 147.

³⁸ Quoted from a letter to F. C. S. Schiller (April 19, 1907) in *The Letters of William James*, vol. II, p. 272.

³⁹ See *Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 113, and *A Pluralistic Universe*, p. 60.

⁴⁰ *In the Spirit of William James*, p. 133. Despite his criticisms of James, Campbell proceeds to highlight the beneficial political implications of the ethics of fulfillment. These benefits coincide rather closely with those highlighted in Perry's remarks. See "William James and the Ethics of Fulfillment," pp. 237-238.

⁴¹ See Ruth Anna Putnam, "Some of Life's Ideals," in *The Cambridge Companion to William James*, ed. Ruth Anna Putnam (New York: Cambridge University, 1997), p. 295.

⁴² Miller nonetheless discusses James's apparent elitist (i.e., exclusivist) tendencies in *Democratic Temperament*, chapter one. I believe, however, that there are two significant ways in which these tendencies can be understood inclusively: First, James is intensely interested in motivating academics to increase their civic engagement. He gains confidence from the manner in which French academics rose up in defense of Alfred Dreyfus and seeks to infuse their American counterparts with this same fighting spirit. See his letter to William M. Salter (September 11, 1899), in *The Letters of William James*, vol. II, p. 99. For a good account of the Dreyfus Affair, see Jean-Denis Bredin, *The Affair: The Case of Alfred Dreyfus* (New York: George Braziller, 1986). Second, James regards the pursuit of a college education as perhaps the most powerful means to gain inclusivist values that help one to avoid being blind to the value of non-intellectual lives. See "What Makes a Life Significant," p. 163, and "The Social Value of the College Bred," p. 108. Gerald E. Myers provides a similar interpretation of this second aspect in *William James: His Life and Thought* (New Haven: Yale University, 1986), p. 430.

⁴³ This becomes clear in a letter to Dickinson S. Miller (August 30, 1896), in *The Letters of William James*, vol. II, p. 49, as well as in one to E. L. Godkin (August 17, 1897), *ibid.*, p. 65.

⁴⁴ "Faith and the Right to Believe," p. 113.

⁴⁵ *Democratic Temperament*, pp. 92 and 81, respectively.

⁴⁶ *In the Spirit of William James*, p. 125.

⁴⁷ “Robert Gould Shaw: Oration by Professor William James,” p. 74.

⁴⁸ “What Makes a Life Significant,” p. 150.

⁴⁹ William James, “The Moral Equivalent of War,” in *Essays in Religion and Morality*, p. 164.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

⁵¹ “Remarks at the Peace Banquet,” in *Essays on Religion and Morality*, p. 122.

⁵² “The Social Value of the College Bred,” p. 112.