

**PRAGMATISM AND MORAL GROWTH:  
WILLIAM JAMES AND THE QUESTION OF VIVISECTION**

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*ABSTRACT: This paper is an examination of the process of moral growth as it appears in the thought of William James. While he has a clear sense of the possibilities of moral growth on the social level and of the role of moral prophets, he does not seem to have much appreciation for moral growth on the individual level. In this paper, his views on vivisection serve as the context for considering the relation between the individual and social aspects of moral growth.*

„Der Pragmatismus komme zwar aus Amerika, aber, Gott sei Dank, hat die Bewegung noch nicht das ganze Land in Besitz genommen. Der Pragmatismus ist eine Krankheit hervorgegangen aus der Sucht etwas Neues und ganz Originelles zu schaffen. Was aber wahr daran ist, ist nicht neu und was neu ist, ist falsch.“

Paul Carus

At the Third World Congress of Philosophy in Heidelberg in 1908, Paul Carus commented that "Pragmatism does indeed come from America; but, thank God, the movement has not yet conquered the entire land." He continued in that vein that Pragmatism is "an illness that has resulted from the search to create something completely new and original." From his point of view, however, "[w]hat is true in Pragmatism . . . is not new; and what is new is false."<sup>1</sup> In this passage, Carus offers us a number of themes by means of which we can approach the topic of Pragmatism and moral growth. The first, of course, is America and novelty. Pragmatism is seen as a unique American export, the product of a recent, largely Jamesian, movement. (Carus seems to have had a more favorable view of Peirce.<sup>2</sup>) Secondly,

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<sup>1</sup> Carus offered his comment as part of a discussion after papers by F.C.S. Schiller and Arthur Campbell Armstrong.

<sup>2</sup> Carus: "It is interesting to note that, since Pragmatism has become so popular and has grown into a powerful movement under James's leadership, the inventor of the name, Charles S. Peirce has had second thoughts. Although he is the father of this philosophy, he is no longer willing to recognize his own child. Thus he no longer calls himself a Pragmatist, but rather a

Carus suggests that the only values present in this Pragmatic movement are those that do not originate with it. A third theme is the clear implication that anything of value — for example, moral growth — should be pursued somewhere else.

Pragmatism as a general term suggests to some — perhaps to Carus — a kind of opportunism, and opportunism was, and remains, a legitimate meaning of the broader term. (Consider the familiar notion of a 'pragmatic' politician.) More positively, Pragmatism means a kind of intellectuality long central to the American way of thinking, one that emphasizes the importance of action, of getting the task done, of the practical rather than the ceremonial. According to Benjamin Franklin, Americans are more concerned with how a person acts than with that person's pedigree. In America, he wrote in 1784, "People do not enquire concerning a Stranger, What IS he? but What can he DO?"<sup>3</sup> Pragmatism as a philosophical approach represented the introduction of this perspective on action and knowledge into the hallowed halls of academia.

Various versions of philosophical Pragmatism have been introduced over the years. Arthur Lovejoy counted thirteen by 1908,<sup>4</sup> and a contemporary counting would appear impossible. The most important version of Pragmatism, I would argue, was the one developed by John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, Jane Addams, and others in Chicago around the turn of the twentieth-century.<sup>5</sup> The Pragmatism with the greatest initial

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Pragmaticist, to indicate his different viewpoint." ["Es ist interessant zu bemerken, dass, seit der Pragmatismus so populär geworden und zu einer mächtigen Bewegung unter der Führung von James gewachsen ist, der Erfinder des Namens, Charles S. Peirce [sic] stutzig geworden ist. Er ist der Vater dieser Philosophie, aber er will nicht mehr sein eigenes Kind anerkennen. Er nennt sich deshalb nicht mehr einen Pragmatisten, sondern einen Pragmatizisten, um anzudeuten, dass er einen anderen Geist in sich hat." (737)]

<sup>3</sup> Franklin, Information to Those Who Would Remove to America, 977.

<sup>4</sup> Lovejoy, "The Thirteen Pragmatisms."

<sup>5</sup> See James's 1904 appreciation of the Chicago School:

impact, however, was James's — although it was, and has remained, the most controversial. For some, it was the unfortunate commingling of Peirce's scientific insights and James's religiosity; for others, James's Pragmatism provided a bridge between Peirce's insights and Dewey's social interests. From the latter perspective, even if we consider James as in some sense an individualistic philosopher,<sup>6</sup> we may still find insights in his work for dealing with the problems of society.

## II

In many places in his thought, James emphasized the importance of individuals. This is especially true in his discussions of the powerful role that individuals play in the process of social change.<sup>7</sup> While acknowledging the contradictory Spencerian view that social changes are "irrespective of persons, and independent of individual control ... due to the environment, to the circumstances, the physical geography, the ancestral conditions, the increasing experience of outer relations," James still maintains that social changes over generations are the result of "the accumulated influences of individuals, of their examples, their initiatives, and their decisions" (WB 164). He continues that "the relation of the visible environment to the great man is in the main exactly what it is to the 'variation' in the Darwinian philosophy." The environment, in other words, "adopts or rejects, preserves or destroys" individuals; but it does not make them what they are. When the environment adopts the great man and preserves his influence, it is in turn "modified by his influence in an entirely original and peculiar way" (WB 170).

Such an individual — "whether he be an importation from without like [Robert] Clive in India or [Louis] Agassiz here, or whether he spring from the soil like

Mahomet or Franklin" — is the factor of change who modifies, to a greater or lesser extent, the future of the society. James continues that the mutations that take place over time in societies are primarily due "directly or indirectly" to the work of "individuals whose genius was so adapted to the receptivities of the moment, or whose accidental position of authority was so critical" that they were able to function as "ferments, initiators of movements, setters of precedent or fashion, centres of corruption, or destroyers of other persons." Others, in other situations to which their particular gifts were more appropriate, "would have led society in another direction" (WB 170). We can consider here his point that, while the development of some moral system was inevitable in the West, the fact that the one that developed was Christian makes a great difference because it offered no particular protections to non-human animals. Speaking from outside of this system, James writes, "[w]hat animal, domestic or wild, will call it a matter of no moment that scarce a word of sympathy with brutes should have survived from the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth?" (WB 194).

In any particular instance of social change, James reminds us of the importance of both factors. On the one side, there is the individual who derives "his peculiar gifts from the play of physiological and infra-social forces, but bearing all the power of initiative and origination in his hands." On the other side, there is "the social environment, with its power of adopting or rejecting both him and his gifts." Without the operation of both factors change will not occur. "The community stagnates without the impulse of the individual. The impulse dies away without the sympathy of the community" (WB 174). Still, there remains a certain ballistic aspect to James's position. The individual moral thinker proceeds in a quasi-predetermined direction to either success or failure. The public, by its process of selection, is the deciding factor. As a result, while there may be moral growth at the social level, for James there would seem to be none at the individual level.

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EP 102-106; cf. Correspondence 10:232-233, 321-325, 327-328, 336.

<sup>6</sup> See my essay: "William James and the Ethics of Fulfillment"

<sup>7</sup> See my essay: "Systems of Justice and the Role of the Moral Prophet."

If this seems to be an extreme — even mistaken — position, we need to consider how James believes moral ideas grow, beginning with his understanding of their origin. For him, the answer is to be found in the individual consciousness of the moral thinker. James begins in good empiricist fashion by noting that "[association with many remote pleasures will unquestionably make a thing significant of goodness in our minds." At the same time, he continues, it is impossible to account for "all our sentiments and preferences in this simple way." The empiricists' "associations of coexistence and succession" cannot fully explain how our "secondary affections" arrange our impulses and the environmental influences to produce the directions of our lives. He urges us to consider a vast array of human behaviors: "Take the love of drunkenness; take bashfulness, the terror of high places, the tendency to sea-sickness, to faint at the sight of blood, the susceptibility to musical sounds; take the emotion of the comical, the passion for poetry, for mathematics, or for metaphysics." Attributing these diverse behaviors to "incidental complications to our cerebral structure," James further suggests that "a vast number of our moral perceptions also are certainly of this secondary and brain-born kind" (WB 143). As examples, we can add here the strong personal insights, driven by a hunger and thirst for greater justice, of the early American Abolitionists and of the current advocates for the homeless. "Rightness is not *mere* usualness, wrongness not *mere* oddity," he notes. When it comes to what he calls "[t]he most characteristically and peculiarly moral judgments that a man is ever called on to make," he writes that they represent "unprecedented cases and lonely emergencies, where no popular rhetorical maxims can avail, and the hidden oracle alone can speak" (PP 2:1265; cf. 1235).

James maintains that when individuals respond to particular problems it is their personality that makes for their unique responses. He is especially interested in the role of the moral prophet. "Individuals of genius show

the way and set the patterns, which common people then adopt and follow" (ECR 109). The solution to any problem will appear in "one brain, and no other, because the instability of that brain is such as to tip and upset itself in just that particular direction." Here he is pointing to "the personal tone of each mind, which makes it more alive to certain classes of experience than others, more attentive to certain impressions, more open to certain reasons"; and he emphasizes that this personal uniqueness is, as we have seen, the result of the unknown forces within the nervous system that make the brain function one way rather than another. This person's unique contribution and those of others, then enter into the process of social selection. "The products of the mind with the determined aesthetic bent," for example, "please or displease the community." If individuals are more inclined toward Wordsworth and follow him, they will "grow unsentimental and serene." If, on the contrary, they follow Schopenhauer, they will learn "the true luxury of woe." In the long run, moreover, whatever attitude dominates "becomes a ferment in the community, and alters its tone" (WB 186-187).

As an aside, we might consider here James's unfortunate prejudice in favor of the educated class at a time in America when only a small fraction of the population had access to higher education. He notes that it is the individual members of the educated class, not the working class, to whom we should look for whatever progressive social change is to be anticipated. America's college-bred represent, in their capacity as "the only permanent presence that corresponds to the aristocracy in older countries" (ECR 110), a force to recognize and rally support for great men who would act as great leaders. He further notes that "[t]he best claim we can make for the higher education," he writes, is that "it should enable us to know a good man when we see him" (ECR 108).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. ECR 105-106; Correspondence; cf. 9:41, 362; 11:270

Returning to our main theme, we recall that James offered a mostly negative evaluation of institutions. Institutions, for their part, are habitual social responses that tend to promote or stymie individuals' ability to effect social change, and at the same time to foster or prevent the flourishing of individuals. He writes, for example, that, when responses to human wants are formalized into institutions, the institutions themselves tend to hamper "the natural gratification" of those very wants. Whether the institution be legal or religious, educational or medical, he believes that too often "such institutions frustrate the spiritual purpose to which they were appointed to minister" (ERM 77). Rather than advancing justice or holiness, learning or health, such institutions tend rather to advance institutional values like stability and conformity. "Every great institution is perforce a means of corruption — whatever good it may also do," he writes to one correspondent. "Only in the free personal relation is full ideality to be found" (*Correspondence*, 9:41). To another, he writes "[t]he bigger the unit you deal with, the hollower, the more brutal, the more mendacious is the life displayed" (*Correspondence*, 8:546). James was a strong individualist who remained ever suspicious of social organizations, of interaction and cooperation to reach shared goals. Still, he did address some topics of public concern that he wanted to be rectified.

### III

James engaged himself with such topics as heterodox medical practice, the care of the mentally ill, labor issues, and the lynching problem, although we find in his writings almost no extended discussion of specific social issues except for the 1910 essay "The Moral Equivalent of War" (ERM 162-173; cf. 120-123). As a man of the nineteenth-century, he further did not seem to be greatly troubled by issues of race, class, and gender. His focus was elsewhere, on issues of personal fulfillment. As we have just seen, the greatest evil for him was the crushing of individuals by institutions. Even so, it would

seem to be valuable to piece together his discussions of another issue of public concern, with a focus on his understanding of the process of moral advance. That issue was vivisection.

James was a leading figure in the dissemination of the early results of experimental physiology and psychology, including research on animals. The very similarities that made comparative studies worthwhile, however, also made them matters of ethical concern. He writes of the importance of sentience to our thinking about moral questions. In an insentient world, he notes, there could be no "status" for good or evil because no "physical fact, considered simply as a physical fact" can be better than any other (WB 145). In a world of conscious beings, however, in a world of pleasure and pain, right and wrong do play a central role. There is for James no "good or right except so far as some consciousness feels it to be good or thinks it to be right" (WB 147). Thus, all claims of sentient beings are to be taken seriously: 'right' and 'wrong' refer to the satisfaction or non-satisfaction of the demands of sentient beings. As a result, he rejects any situation in which one human should suffer for the benefit of others — even a situation in which millions would benefit "on the one simple condition that a certain lost soul on the far-off edge of things should lead a life of lonely torture" (WB 144). But how did he feel about animals suffering for human good? There was no doubt that the animals that were popular research subjects, like dogs and rabbits, felt pain; and there were many anti-vivisectionists who complained about the wanton cruelty of the laboratories. James initially felt himself to be in the middle.

As a young professor of physiology in 1875, James writes that that entire science is "based, immediately or remotely, upon vivisectional evidence." While he admits that vivisection had so far offered only "minute" therapeutic advances, he believed that, because of its potential for future scientific contributions, it should be allowed to continue. He writes that "the vivisectional

results of to-day, which are liable to be corrected to-morrow, will be corrected by the vivisections of to-morrow and by nothing else." As a result, he continues, "[t]o taboo vivisection is then the same thing as to give up seeking after a knowledge of physiology." He thus regards it "a painful duty" to continue with vivisection. At the same time, however, he wants all to admit "without higgling about more or less, that, in principle, vivisection admits of cruelty." He urges us to consider, for example, "[a] dog strapped on a board and howling at his executioners, or, still worse, poisoned by curare, which leaves him paralyzed but sentient." This conscious subject find himself "literally in a sort of hell" that he can neither understand nor change. The dog can see "no redeeming ray in the whole business." In the world of scientific research, however, "in a world beyond the ken of his poor, benighted brain, his sufferings are having their effect — truth, and perhaps future human ease, are being bought by them." Thus our little martyr has taken on a role "infinitely superior to any which prosperous canine life admits of, and, if his dark mind could be enlightened, and if he were a heroic dog, he would religiously acquiesce in his own sacrifice" (ECR 11-12).

To consider a second scenario, James admits that "a rabbit's pain differs *toto coelo* from human pain, in that the moral element, the element of subjective *horror*, is absent." Still, this does not eliminate the question of cruelty. The question we need to ask is: "Do we give them all the pain that they are susceptible of suffering, be that much or little? If so, we are cruel; and there is no doubt that vivisection is often obliged to go to this extreme." Based upon his earlier ethical assumption that inflicting pain is wrong, expanded here to maintain that "[n]othing is more calculated to deaden the moral sensibility of students than familiarity with blood shed for trifling ends," he proposes that it is our duty "to restrict the amount of *useless* vivisection." As far as making the determination of usefulness, however, he would leave that question "solely with the investigator himself." Further, he believes that any broad prohibition

would simply fail to be adopted in a society that is so dead to animal pain that it "boils millions of lobsters alive every year to add a charm to its suppers." Throughout the essay, James's commitment is to advancing medical research, and therefore to continuing vivisection. "It is better," he writes, "for many quadrupeds to perish unjustly than for a whole scientific body to be degraded" (ECR 10-13; cf. 18-19; WB 47).

Nearly three decades later, in 1903, James returns to the subject of vivisection; but by this time his view has shifted. He now writes to a correspondent that even if we grant that "inflicted suffering may be right," we need to think more deeply about the question of "*whose, how much, when, where*, etc." From his point of view, "[a]bsolutely irresponsible power to inflict pain on animals for human ends cannot well be entrusted to Tom, Dick, & Harry." On the contrary, in spite of his ongoing doubts about institutions he maintains that "*in principle* vivisection should be made responsible to some tribunal for what they do." Further, James believes that "[t]hey ought to welcome such responsibility" (*Correspondence*, 10:303-304). A few years later he continues that he recognizes the claims of "the various medical and scientific defenders of vivisection," who protest that "it is *no one's business* what happens to an animal, so long as the individual who is handling it can plead that to increase science is his aim." In response, however, he maintains that this position "flatly contradict[s] the best conscience of our time," maintaining that "[t]he rights of the helpless, even though they be brutes, must be protected by those who have superior power." James contends that over the decades, while society has progressed in its interpretation of our moral obligations toward these animals, the physiologists have failed to adopt any "corporate responsibility" or "code of vivisectional ethics for laboratories to post up and enforce" (ECR 191-192). Further, they have proposed no legislation themselves. At about the same time, James comments to a correspondent about the inadequate rhetoric of the

vivisectionists. "Instead of frankly admitting," he writes, "that experiments on live animals are an atrocious necessity, and confessing the duty of the utmost economy of misery & brutality," he notes that the proponents of vivisection focus rather on those aspects of the anti-vivisectionist argument that are "manifestly weak and preposterous," thus leaving the false impression that "a laboratory is a sort of garden of Eden" (*Correspondence*, 12:249).<sup>9</sup> As a result, it has become necessary for outsiders to step in and protect the animals from gratuitous cruelty in the laboratories. Of course, James regrets the graceless agitation of the anti-vivisection movement, "with all its expensiveness, idiocy, bad temper, untruth, and vexatiousness"; in this regard, he views this movement negatively, as he views all social movements. Still, this blundering social movement had been necessary to drive home "to the careless or callous individual experimenter the fact that the sufferings of his animals are somebody else's business as well as his own" (ECR 192). The lesson had been learned and social changes were necessary.

Over the years, there had thus been moral growth on the topic of vivisection. What James calls 'the best conscience of our time' had improved over earlier views, and society had learned to think differently. I do not believe, however, that this change was simply the result of vivisectionists being outvoted by their opponents. Rather, I think that people in general — James included — grew in their moral intuitions. He had a strongly individualistic view; but, over time and with experience, he managed to grow in his sense that useless cruelty to laboratory animals had to be stopped. This interpretation, however, seems to be less in accord with the ballistic understanding of moral thinking that we encountered above, and more in accord with the understanding of the Chicago School that individuals and society grow by means of the educational possibilities of cooperative living.

#### Literature

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Correspondence*, 12:259-260, 435-437.