

Introduction

William James's Ethics in the Pragmatist Tradition

Pragmatism's Contested History

Well over a century since its founders proclaimed American pragmatism to be a distinct philosophical school, there is still remarkably little general agreement about its unifying themes, styles, beliefs, and methods. It has been variously characterized as a theory of truth, meaning, or reference; a kind of metaphysics; some stance or attitude toward philosophical problems or practices; a way to free ourselves from philosophical obsessions (or disarm philosophical disputes); intellectual therapy; a generalized form of antiessentialism; “a way of thinking about thinking”;¹ and much else besides. In a sense, this should not be surprising: the originators of the movement, Chauncey Wright, Charles Sanders Peirce, and William James (the so-called Golden Age pragmatists, together with John Dewey) held vastly different ambitions for philosophy, possessed diverse capabilities, and were educated in disparate professional fields. However, the amount of scholarly effort devoted to the matter in the years since, and the extent to which self-proclaimed pragmatists have been prepared to entertain even the broadest of characterizations, might have indicated the likelihood of progress. Instead, the divisions between pragmatism's various threads and the philosophers pursuing them are as wide as ever.

Of course, in intermural debates about which philosophy is superior, there are advantages and disadvantages to a position's being defined loosely. As Stanley Fish puts it, “A pragmatism so amorphous and omnivorous has the two advantages of being a very bad target—you feel that there is nothing to hit—and being a very bad substitute for the absolutes it tilts against—if

you don't know exactly what it is, it is hard to march under its banner. Pragmatism may be the one theory—if it is a theory—that clears the field not only of its rivals but of itself, at least as a positive alternative.”²

But there is another view: that pragmatism's heterogeneity—the very reason that it has proved difficult to define—is in fact a sign of its adaptability to developments both within philosophy and outside it. Perhaps pragmatism's engagement with new issues and perspectives tests and stretches its explanatory resources, helping to maintain its philosophical relevance. One of the tradition's most eminent figures, Richard J. Bernstein, holds that pragmatism is properly understood as a “conflict of narratives,” and that the working out of such conflict is crucial to its “continuity and vitality.”³

There are perhaps two aspects of the debate about pragmatism's meaning and intent since James announced its birth in 1898 from which one might draw definitional succor. First is a general thematic consensus that, though broad and highly abstract, has allowed scholars to at least identify thinkers who might potentially be called “pragmatists”: the understanding that pragmatism, in all its guises, examines philosophical concepts and problems in terms of human practices. The early pragmatists held that only if philosophy tested ideas in terms of practices and consequences could it move beyond generations of fruitless philosophical argument. In Nicholas Rescher's words, “The characteristic idea of philosophical pragmatism is that efficacy in practical application somehow provides a standard for the determination of truth in the case of statements, rightness in the case of actions, and value in the case of appraisals.”⁴ As such, there is no special dichotomy drawn by pragmatists between the realms of practice and theory; rather, theory is just one more practical tool for achieving human ends.

Second, uncertainty about pragmatism's meaning resolves to one principal issue over all others, such that, despite having set pragmatism in two very different directions, the nub of the issue is straightforward. As early as 1908, just a decade after pragmatism was so named and prior to either James's later excursions into metaphysics or Dewey's mature and protean works, Arthur Lovejoy famously located, in just the *epistemological* positions of the early pragmatists, thirteen different contentions “which are separate not merely in the sense of being discriminable, but in the sense of being logically independent.”⁵ Given the multitudinous directions in which pragmatism has developed since, one can but guess at how many more discriminable positions are afoot today. While it is unlikely that Lovejoy's despairing hope that “philosophers should agree to attach some single and stable meaning to the term” will be achieved anytime soon, it is true that

most current definitional effort is committed to just one controversy rather than many.⁶

The dispute traces two distinct lines of development in the pragmatist genealogy; one characterized by Peirce's championing pragmatism as a means for settling philosophical (often definitional) disputes and another by James's conceiving it as a particular orientation toward the world. While Peirce and James agree that thought is always in the service of developing beliefs and producing actions, and although each was keen to dismiss Cartesian rationalism and appropriation of a priori categories for establishing epistemological foundations, they did not agree on how these ambitions ought to be achieved, or the scope to which pragmatism ought to be applied. In its more recent guise, this misalignment has led to a schism between those who draw most strongly from Peirce and for whom pragmatism is principally a linguistic affair focused on epistemological matters (so-called neo-pragmatists or linguistic pragmatists) and those more concerned with reconstructing and expanding upon the work of such of the movement's other originators as James and Dewey, F. C. S. Schiller, Josiah Royce, Jane Addams, George Herbert Mead, George Santayana, and others (in my terminology, "recent classical pragmatists").

For Peirce, the meaning of a concept is identified by its future practical consequences. Seeking to establish a definitive means for deciding the meaning of scientific and philosophical notions, he expressed pragmatism's main tenet as follows: "that a *conception*, that is, the rational purport of a word or other expression, lies exclusively in its conceivable bearing upon the conduct of life; so that, since obviously nothing that might not result from experiment can have any direct bearing upon conduct, or if one can define accurately all the conceivable experimental phenomena which the affirmation or denial of a concept could imply, one will have therein a complete definition of the concept, and *there is absolutely nothing more in it.*"⁷ While Peirce's terminology is steeped in its late nineteenth-century intellectual context and imprecise by today's standards (Peirce acknowledged the maxim's vagueness), his emphasis on "a word or other expression" and his championing of the definitional potential of experimentation point the way toward a linguistic theory: that the meaning of an expression ought to be assessed on the basis of its consequences for human actions, which are determinable by formal scientific experimentation.

Only a close reading of Peirce's influential statement reveals the wider potential utility suggested by the expressions "rational purport" and "conduct of life" from which James takes his lead. James believed that by

shifting the focus away from questions of how human experiences relate to a reality *outside* experience and toward relations *between* experiences, Peirce had delivered a way of avoiding philosophical skepticism and investigating what human experiences mean for behavior and a practical grasp of the world. The pragmatic method, James writes, “is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences. What difference would it practically make to anyone if this notion rather than that notion were true?” (*P*, 28).

Pursuing this path, James gives pragmatism a humanistic and individualistic focus in place of Peirce's impersonal and objective one. By interpreting Peirce's maxim in terms of a psychology of action, setting aside the communal aspects of science's regulative processes, and referring pragmatism's general tenet to particular consequences and actions for a particular person, James makes of pragmatism a general theory of first-person meaning. The meaning of one's personal experiences is a matter of their impact upon how one thinks and acts, and pragmatism ought to focus on how one's thinking influences and is influenced by human practices. He contends that “if there were any part of a thought that made no difference in the thought's practical consequences, then that part would be no proper element of the thought's significance” (*P*, 259). Acting or “doing” becomes the aspect of human life most worthy of attention while “knowing” and “defining” are demoted, and so pragmatism ought to be less concerned with what is meant by calling a diamond “hard” or a table “flat” (the kinds of example used by Peirce) and more concerned with resolving issues in ethics, the down-to-earth decisions of daily life (for clarity, I shall refer to such matters as “practical” rather than “pragmatic”), religion, and psychology. As such, James claims, pragmatist philosophy is a “turn away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad a priori reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins” and a “turn towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action, and towards power” (*P*, 31).

The influence in the twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries of this schism between Peirce and James is much explored and greatly contested. Until recently, it had been explained in terms of “the eclipse narrative,” an account of the influence of pragmatism taken as a single, clearly identifiable movement. This rendering begins with pragmatism in the ascendant at the time of James's death in 1910. In the United States its adherents—many of whom had been his students or acolytes—dominated senior faculty appointments at the most highly regarded universities, Dewey was becoming the best known and most influential academic in American public life, and

a hearty appetite among the educated public for pragmatism's accounts of contemporary social issues saw it widely publicized in print and at public conferences.

But during this same period, the new logic of Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell was also attracting attention. The decline of Dewey's long and distinguished career was marked by his failure to adopt the techniques and nomenclature of the new mathematical logic and his continued emphasis on first-person experience rather than language. With Dewey's death in 1952, Jamesian pragmatism lost its greatest advocate and most able innovator without a successor in view. In place of experience-focused pragmatism came preoccupation with epistemological concerns, and successive waves of work inspired by Frege and Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, Ernst Mach, Rudolf Carnap, Albert Tarski, and those various incarnations of positivism and logical empiricism loosely linked with the successes of experimental science. Even the style and language of philosophy moved on from "the quicksilver brilliance of James and [George] Santayana and toward . . . the technical virtuosity of philosophers like C. I. Lewis."⁸ According to the eclipse narrative, pragmatism had virtually disappeared from university faculties and public view by the time that conceptual analysis and ordinary language philosophy had gained prominence in the 1950s, and only the rise to prominence of the bold and controversial Richard Rorty, with his 1979 work *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, was pragmatism revived.

The eclipse narrative has been challenged of late in several ways. Louis Menand and others (inspired by the earlier work of Bruce Kucklick, Philip Weiner, and Edmund Wilson) have attempted to explain the shift in twentieth-century philosophical preoccupations in terms of extra-philosophical factors.⁹ Other interpretations use cross-pollinations between thinkers in the pragmatist tradition to explain how it appears today: that is, as a loosely definable grouping exhibiting porous "boundaries" and the ongoing schism between Peirce's language-centric theory and James's focus on first-person meaning. Most notably, Cheryl Misak has argued that Peirce's ideas were adopted and adapted by such key figures in the dominant analytic tradition as Lewis, W. v. O. Quine, Frank Ramsay, and Wilfred Sellars.¹⁰ On this account, rather than being "eclipsed," Peircean pragmatism developed into a discrete, antinaturalistic epistemology focused upon how meanings are communicated and acted upon in real-world settings.¹¹

Such challenges to the eclipse narrative rely upon identifying and describing a continuous (or nearly continuous) lineage of pragmatist ideas appropriated by other traditions throughout the mid-twentieth century,

becoming recognizably pragmatist again just in later years. As Tom Alexander points out, though, such approaches “resolutely ignore the way *discussion* of classical American Philosophy or the figures in that tradition nearly vanishes in mainstream philosophy, not to mention the open contempt shown to those who did show an interest in it.”¹² Furthermore, although it has proved possible to construct such a lineage for Peircean pragmatism, the same can almost certainly not be done for the more naturalistic version advanced by James and Dewey. This tradition and its proponents were indeed “eclipsed,” suffering a precipitous fall from prominence in the decades after Dewey’s death. Compared with more technical philosophies engaged with epistemological matters, and their supposed (though often unrealized) ties with the explanatory tools of modern science, theories about human experience “in the round” might have seemed quaint.

Nonetheless, although engagement with James’s work and themes in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s was limited to just a few philosophers, among them were some of the doyens of American philosophy; such “lonely laborers in the vineyard” (as Cornel West described them) as Bernstein, Max Fisch, James Gouinlock, Sidney Hook, John Lachs, Murray G. Murphey, Sandra Rosenthal, John K. Roth, John Smith, and Morton White.¹³ At the State University of New York and then Texas A&M University, John J. McDermott interpreted James through an existentialist lens to encourage careful consideration of the transient and perilous nature of human lives.¹⁴ At Rutgers, Bruce Wilshire used Jamesian resources interpreted phenomenologically to critique the “impersonal” nature of much analytic philosophy.¹⁵ At Northwestern University, James M. Edie returned to James time and again in developing his phenomenological insights.¹⁶ In the early 1960s, Duquesne University contributed a program on phenomenology that attracted such James scholars as Hans Linschoten.¹⁷ Perhaps most significant for the future of James studies, the philosophy program at Yale—“out of touch with history and the particularity of human life,” as one graduate student of the day writes—boasted several figures preoccupied with pursuing existential and historical questions by way of humanist philosophy: Smith, John Wild, and such highly capable graduate students as Bernstein, Rorty, and Roth.¹⁸

Significantly, these “laborers” were not content to treat the works of their Golden Age predecessors as mere source material for restatement or straightforward explication. Instead, they sought new directions by way of unexplored or underdeveloped themes, unstated assumptions, problems, and uncertainties, as well as ideas that could be brought into meaningful intercourse with other kinds of theory. They held that the very point of

James's pragmatism was about locating prospects for the future—new ways for addressing contemporary concerns, both theoretical and practical—rather than an endless cycle of review. For McDermott, this meant more than sixty years of writing about the pedagogical nature of experience and using it to aid the ill and dying; for Lachs, it meant bringing pragmatism into conversation with Stoicism and other schools of thought in terms of their recommendations for “styles” of living; for Smith, it was locating and publicizing lessons for American civil society; and for each of these figures, like James, it meant taking seriously an obligation to continue pragmatism's tradition of public philosophy through lectures outside the traditional university setting and engagements with other fields of study.¹⁹ In this very broad sense—the imperative that pragmatism (indeed, all philosophy) ought to address the real-world problems of ordinary people and the purposes, meanings, and values of human lives—pragmatism in the Jamesian vein is rightly conceived as a *humanism*.

As James writes (referring to Kierkegaard), we must “live forward” even though we “understand backward” (*P*, 107). All our ideals and most important judgments are prospective rather than retrospective. If the future of pragmatism as a distinctive school was beholden to retellings of its past (to the original debate between Peirce and James, for instance), and if developments within the school were always to be attributed for their context and evaluation to one side or other of the divide, then how might pragmatism per se “live forward” while understanding its history backward?

There seems to me an opportunity—an obligation, perhaps—to rejuvenate and develop some of the themes that emerged during humanist pragmatism's darker days, when truly original interpretative work was conducted by a few scholars largely unnoticed by the philosophical firmament. This means returning to some of the issues and engagements extant at the time (specifically, from the late 1950s through to the 1970s) but left subsequently underdeveloped and without progeny. In terms of pragmatism's orientation toward the future, it means testing and elaborating on the work of both the Golden Age figures and West's “lonely laborers,” using the latest ideas from the study of James's work to address contemporary circumstances and locate prospects for humanist pragmatism's development. I understand this kind of approach as consistent with James's imperative, quoted earlier, that “if there were any part of a thought that made no difference in the thought's practical consequences, then that part would be no proper element of the thought's significance”: unless such rejuvenation as I propose moves pragmatism forward, then it would be well lost amid its contested history (*P*, 259).

By clarifying the meaning and context of this invocation of James's, we will in the first place be clearer about how the pragmatist test of practical usefulness ought to be applied to the interpretation and application of proposals for addressing life's challenges, and, in the second, locate among disparate interpretations of James's practical philosophy one particularly suggestive proposal: that various aspects of his oeuvre might productively be understood as elements of a set of ethical recommendations for living a richer, more fulfilling life than much Western philosophy would indicate as possible, even amid the complexities and confusions of contemporary socioeconomic circumstances.

James's Pragmatism as Applied Philosophy

In one sense, James's belief that philosophy ought to "make a difference" is too general to distinguish humanist pragmatism from other schools of thought. As H. S. Thayer points out, "To be committed to a preference for useful over useless" is not to mark oneself out as a pragmatist but to just restate a position "as old as the human race," adopted not just in philosophy but by magic and religion, too.²⁰ But James clearly *does* mean to propose a distinctive philosophical position when couching pragmatism as an alternative to styles of philosophy more concerned with intricate analytical puzzles (which he refers to as "intellectual gymnastics"). He means that philosophy ought to return to praxis as the best means for engaging with one's circumstances from moment to moment: more thoughtful and consistent testing of one's beliefs in pursuit of a better path through life than can be offered by merely extending one's knowledge or applying some universal prescription to every case.

On this account, a philosophy's justification is found in the consequences of adopting it rather than the authoritative power of those pronouncing it, and its meaning is located "in the living" rather than in the pages of a persuasive text. James summarizes his hopes for simple, earthy pragmatism over highfalutin theory this way: "The really vital question for us all is, What is this world going to be? What is life eventually to make of itself? The centre of gravity of philosophy must alter its place. The earth of things, long thrown into shadow by the glories of the upper ether, must resume its rights" (*P*, 62). This is not to suggest that James's pragmatism ought to be understood *just* in terms of its applicability to real-world problems and practices; on the contrary, he brings to his theorizing a range of

praxeological commitments. But he is always concerned with testing and applying these commitments in practice.

The real-world setting for James's work was in some ways quite like our own, with individuals and societies under intense pressure and changing rapidly. Communities were fracturing and values changing: the rich were becoming richer and the poor relatively poorer; political divisions were evident in increasingly polarized agenda and uncivil means for pursuing them; scientific and technological changes proceeded with unprecedented scale and speed; new and powerful economic forces were emerging; interpersonal alienation was encouraged by the rapid breakdown of traditional modes of engagement; there was rampant growth in materialism and materialistic pursuits; and, the reach of government and corporate organizations into personal lives was increasing. Such changes challenged the human capacity not merely to accommodate them in the daily course of events but to make sense of one's own self, life, and place in the world, too.

According to James, philosophy had failed to respond appropriately. He recorded that philosophy had developed a poor reputation because of three problems in particular: first, in the eyes of its potential public audience, "philosophy makes no theoretic progress, and shows no practical applications"; second, it is "dogmatic, and pretends to settle things by pure reason"; and third, it is "out of touch with real life for which it substitutes abstractions. The real world is various, tangled, painful. Philosophers almost without exception have treated it as noble, simple, and perfect" (*SPP*, 12, 18, 19). Philosophy tended to go on constructing and refuting conceptual differences without having an impact on real lives. James's hope was that the new generation of scholars might have become sufficiently dissatisfied with a "philosophic atmosphere" that was "too abstract and academic" that they would be motivated to pioneer a more engaged philosophy: "Life is confused and superabundant, and what the younger generation appears to crave is more of the temperament of life in its philosophy, even though it were at some cost of logical rigor and purity" (*ERE*, 39).

In fact, we have seen that with rare exceptions, philosophy would become even more technical, obtuse, and inward-looking. Even at the time of pragmatism's rejuvenation in the late 1970s, Rorty expressed his dismay at philosophical argument that comprised "shoptalk" and "mere logic chopping," and a profession "which looks back only a few decades, and finds its principal justification in the sheer intelligence of the people who are part of it."²¹ Dewey, who of all the pragmatists engaged most directly with the realm of daily events, expressed humanist pragmatism's hope in this way:

“Philosophy recovers itself when it ceases to be a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers and becomes a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems of men.”²² It is significant, then, that he thought that “it is pragmatism as method which is emphasized . . . [and] uppermost in Mr. James’s own mind.”²³

Like McDermott, Lachs, and other recent classical pragmatists, James understood that pragmatism’s concern with real human lives meant that he was a public philosopher *de facto*, whether or not he cared to claim that title.²⁴ Following Ralph Waldo Emerson’s example, James addressed issues of public concern in language and locations accessible to a nonacademic audience. From the mid-1890s until the end of his life, James participated in public debates about issues as diverse as American imperialism in the Philippines (he was vice president of the Anti-Imperialist League), regulation of big business, care of the mentally ill, the awful problem of lynching, racism, homogenization of university teaching qualifications, medical licensing, and the status accorded new and heterodox approaches in science and medicine (especially psychology), and he sometimes engaged with the issues of particular professional groups (as in his *Talks to Teachers on Psychology; and to Students on Some of Life’s Ideals*, where he also touched upon the “duty, struggle, and success” of farmers in dealing with the challenges of their land [*TT*, 134]).²⁵ By involving himself in the social, economic, and political issues of his day, and applying insights from his technical specialities to the realm of public affairs, James meant to return philosophy to a more practical engagement with the world.

Most often, though, James’s pragmatism focused upon the lives and circumstances of individuals, deploying philosophical reasoning and argument (sometimes in conjunction with scientific observation and psychological speculation) to either undermine philosophical presuppositions that place untenable limits on human existence, or propose new ways for thinking about and living one’s life. He considered matters ranging from whether life is worth living at all to the limits of knowledge about the world, and from the nature of human psychological resources to prospects for a system of ethics and the proper place of religion, in almost every case exemplifying his commitment to the confluence between theoretical and practical philosophy.

In framing his advice, James is usually careful to acknowledge that we find ourselves subject in everyday life to a wide range of circumstances over which we have no direct control. As Rorty observes, “The world can blindly and inarticulately crush us,” revealing the “brute power and . . . naked pain” inherent in human life.²⁶ Yet even in the face of this reality, James believes

that our only option is to act. Complaining about human powerlessness is frivolous and pointless: “The return to life can’t come about by talking. It is an *act*. . . . [T]he concepts we talk with are made for purposes of *practice* and not for purposes of insight” (*PU*, 131). As such, the question “what ought I to do?” is the pragmatist equivalent of that used to frame ethical theorizing since the ancient Stoics and Epicureans: “How ought I to live?”

To the extent that James proposes ways of thinking in the cause of acting, he is also proposing an ethics for defining one’s life. Our ever-changing circumstances impose an unavoidable labor: to decide how to think and act differently in the future from how we have previously, thus laying out a direction for one’s life. With repetition, our responses become ingrained, revised just when they fail to yield the expected or optimal outcome. This is an inevitably first-person project, for only an individual—acting within a social context perhaps, but deciding alone—can “feel at home,” determine how she ought to behave, and develop habits of action. As one deals with life’s challenges more or less successfully, one develops one’s self by way of habitual dispositions, creative responses, and resignation to the limits on human power. James locates in these three aspects of selfhood prospects for meaningful exercise of human agency; that is, for understanding and coping with the events of the world and transforming one’s self while doing so.

For James, the ability to create and change one’s self by thinking and acting gives hope for real progress in life. As Roberto Unger puts it, for the pragmatists, “everything in the context—our context—can be changed, even if the change is piecemeal. And the change, in the form of an endless series of next steps, can take a direction, revealed, even guided by ideas. We can develop practices and institutions that multiply occasions for our exercise of our power of resistance and reconstruction.”²⁷ This opportunity, James believes, ought to give rise neither to blind optimism and the temptation to overlook or dismiss the vagaries of circumstance (which he describes as “indiscriminate hurraing for the Universe” [*ERM*, 114]), nor to suffocating pessimism (and consequent downplaying of the powers of human agency), but instead to realistic hope, or “meliorism”: provided that one is willing to commit sufficient effort and risk a turn in the wrong direction, a poor choice, or a habit with unfortunate consequences, then one has “a fighting chance” of living well and creating a self to be proud of.

Consequently, for James, the task for a philosophy properly engaged with human lives is not to construct a system that “defines away” the moment of decision, encompasses it within a universal teleology, subordinates it to a particular value-set, or reduces it to an instantaneous quest for epistemo-

logical certainty, but instead to inspire and instruct, thereby aiding resolve, commitment, and action. Philosophy “makes a difference” when it inspires commitment of energy and risk taking that is sufficient not just for coping with the world’s exigencies but also for living life well. James means to provide an ethics that will guide selection of actions from the range of options, a theory of selfhood that explains the import of those actions, a psychology that makes sense of the habituation of such actions, and a philosophy that inspires energetic commitment to particular courses of action in a moment and over a lifetime. As such, his work ought to be assessed less in terms of its consistency, rigor, and thematic continuity than its potential impact upon people’s lives in the face of life’s unavoidable challenges.

Hidden in Plain View: Uncovering James’s Ethics of Self-Transformation

Although James’s commentators have often acknowledged the extent to which his concern with practical issues guided his development of theory, they have not typically highlighted the point in regard to his prescriptions for how individuals might best live their lives.²⁸ But in the 1960s, two figures in particular—Bernard Brennan in 1961 and John K. Roth in 1969—argued that James’s whole oeuvre ought to be understood in terms of his abiding interest in moment-to-moment decisions of practical import, such that James ought to be considered first and foremost as an ethicist. Furthermore, they contended that his ethics is derived from (and best explained in terms of) his ontology, epistemology, and psychology.

As James Campbell has observed, “to maintain that William James was essentially a moralist is hardly a controversial claim. Josiah Royce, for example, wrote that James was ‘profoundly ethical in his whole influence’; and this viewpoint has been echoed over the years by Ralph Barton Perry, John Wild, Thayer, and Abraham Edel.”²⁹ West writes that James “is first and foremost a moralist obsessed with heroic energies and reconciliatory strategies available to individuals,” a “restless patrician of the street” who favored “a specific way of life” over epistemology and science.³⁰ But Brennan and Roth go further than merely championing James’s credentials as an ethical theorist, with each of them advancing an interpretation of his work in terms of its guidance for the practical, everyday decisions that together comprise a life.

Brennan begins his book *The Ethics of William James* by claiming that “any attempt to understand [James’s] moral thought requires, first of all,

the construction of an outline of his ethical views, synthesizing the moral implications of his statements on metaphysics, religion, and epistemology, and, of course, his statements on explicitly ethical topics” since “any systematic exposition predominately in terms of one or two of his principal angles of vision, to the exclusion of others, will produce a distortion that is utterly false to James’s general intentions.”³¹ According to Brennan, the most valuable texts for this purpose are “*The Will to Believe*, which affirms the basic importance of moral questions and affirms also the existence of morality; *A Pluralistic Universe*, which develops an ethics-oriented metaphysics; *The Principles of Psychology* (hereafter, *Principles*), which supports James’s effort to find an objective basis for ethics by introducing the doctrine of necessary ideas; and *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, which concludes that Christian sainthood embodies the highest morality yet attained.”³²

Despite this holistic approach, Brennan’s analysis is missing any consideration of the self, so that, although he builds an intricate picture of interrelationships between James’s ethics and wider philosophy, it is not clear why one should *care*, at least in terms of understanding or adopting his recommendations. By contrast, such matters are “front and center” for Roth, who contends that James’s philosophy begins with the realization that human life “is a search for meaning. It is an attempt to find and to give sense to existence. Ethical reflection seeks to establish guidelines that will establish an environment where the chances for finding a meaningful pattern of life are enhanced for each individual . . . [and] the norms that a man may follow do not become norms without a man’s active participation in their establishment.”³³ James’s ethics is meant “to help people make good judgments and good decisions and to assist us in determining what is most important and valuable. Doing these things involves paying close attention to experience, engaging in critical inquiry, recognizing fallibility, and taking risks, including the risks that go with admitting error and striving for correction.”³⁴ Roth contends that James’s philosophy is framed by his belief that “our lives are permeated by a freedom that gives us the chance to shape the world that we inhabit” and so is an attempt to answer the following question: “If I am free to act in a variety of ways, how should I act and what values should I take to be the most important? Human freedom forces this moral question upon us.”³⁵

Yet the imperative of individual freedom doesn’t stand alone: “James’s ethical philosophy revolves around his assumption that the most important values . . . are those of freedom, on the one hand, and personal and social unity, on the other.”³⁶ For James’s ethics to be complete requires not just

recommendations for how best to exercise one's freedom but for how that might cohere with one's community. According to Roth, his answers are not to be found in any "fully systematic ethical theory" or "system of rules," but instead in "a general ethical stance towards existence" that is "scattered throughout his writings."³⁷

Like so much of the extraordinarily innovative and insightful mid- to late-twentieth-century scholarship on pragmatism, the work by Brennan and Roth was ignored by the philosophical mainstream and even by most scholars working on pragmatism. Only in the last decade or so has it reemerged, initially in footnotes to studies of James's works most obviously concerned with ethics, and then among philosophers pursuing more holistic analyses. Of the latter, four figures in particular have been central to renewed interest in James's ethics, although several others have contributed mightily.³⁸ Foremost among them, Sarin Marchetti agrees that James's ethics relies on a series of disparate ideas located across a range of books and lectures, including some that don't relate to ethics in any obvious way.³⁹ He interprets James as conducting a radical critique of the presuppositions, methods, and goals of traditional ethics, both as a field of philosophical inquiry and as personal practice.⁴⁰ Marchetti argues that for James, we should give up ethics conceived as a search for certainty realized in projects of foundationalist system-building and focus instead on the particular moral problems that we encounter and our practices in response. For James, our habits carry potential both for "stiffening" behaviors to the point where they constitute "the very mortification and deadening of the self" but also "the key, vital activity through which we constitute ourselves as purposeful and effective subjects."⁴¹ Whether particular habits are of the first kind or the second is decided, Marchetti argues, by the extent of one's therapeutic self-criticism and self-training—those "practices of the self" presaged in James's early publications—which together constitute a form of "self-transformation." Although Marchetti does not attempt a systematic explication of these various threads, his general approach to reinterpreting James's corpus and his emphasis on the dynamics of habit are central to this book, too.

Colin Koopman explores the relationship between James's "will to believe" and ethics in greater detail.⁴² He studies James's theories of habit and will in terms of the human capacity for self-reflexive self-review, and argues that the concept of the will to believe—often misunderstood by James's critics as a weak justification for wishful thinking—is actually "a naturalistic account of the value of sculpting our habits."⁴³ Since habits

define much of what is distinctive about a person, Koopman concludes that James's "contributions to moral psychology and normative ethics are both . . . oriented around self-transformation," his response to the difficulties of indecision, and the need to act on moral probabilities rather than certainties.⁴⁴ Although Koopman's interpretation is not too concerned with either the intricate psychological dynamics of self-transformative activity or practical exercises for achieving it (both of which are central to this book), he does a fine job of explaining how, for James, "volition is not primarily a relation between our Self and extra-mental matter . . . , but between our Self and our own states of mind" (*PP*, 1172).

Like Marchetti and Koopman, Lucas McGranahan emphasizes the philosophy of self-transformation in his work on James's use of concepts from Darwin's biology to explore the nature of individuality.⁴⁵ For McGranahan, too, "James's philosophy is ethical to its marrow," and the ethics is realized primarily by his accounts of individual agency and the selective nature of will.⁴⁶ Although McGranahan is more concerned to show that James's philosophy relies on a "Darwinian functionalist model of volition" than with the methodological imperatives, metaphysics, and psychology emphasized in this book, he agrees that "the result [of James's theory of the will] is the outline of a viable moral philosophy with concrete consequences for pedagogy—taken both in the narrow sense of educational theory and in the broadest sense in which philosophy is intended to offer a general theory of living and dying well."⁴⁷

The fourth key figure in the recent renewal of interest accorded James's ethics is Trygve Throntveit, whose thematic emphasis is slightly different again. He proposes that James's disparate works can be read as elements of a single project describing how freedom is possible, such that "the multi-stranded philosophy of knowledge, truth, and experience that came to be known as pragmatism was originally, and remained essentially, a tool in the quest to imbue human life . . . with moral significance."⁴⁸ Throntveit conducts his investigation at the nexus between morality and politics, with less emphasis on the philosophical and psychological particulars of James's ethics and more on the various ways in which his conceptions of freedom play out in diverse practices and institutions.

This book takes its lead from the interpretative start-points provided by figures like Brennan and Roth, advancing a line of study from those darker days of James scholarship preceding pragmatism's renaissance. It is intended to "put flesh on the bones" of the minority view that James ought

to be understood as an ethical theorist (among very many other things), not just for his insightful criticisms of traditional normative ethics but for advancing a constructive theory for how to live a good life. The position advanced here—that it is not merely ethical *themes* that James provides us but a holistic and comprehensive theory—is meant as a step forward in reinterpreting James's humanistic pragmatism. It shows that even some of James's more obscure and technical analyses contribute to a conception of the self that is consistent with the first-personal experience of selfhood and the undervalued capacity to change one's self and life in small but significant ways. Like those “lonely laborers” working during the dark decades of the “eclipse,” I aim to honor the classical pragmatists, not by rehearsing their philosophy but by “putting it to work,” encouraging changes to philosophical practices and individual lives.

Specifically, I construct an orderly version of James's therapeutic pragmatism by weaving together his more substantial commentaries with those that McDermott describes as “*aperçus*, gleanings, quick shots of wisdom that strike at the heart of the everyday: that is, the fabric in and through which we live our lives” and then to test them according to pragmatist criteria: the practical differences that they can make.⁴⁹ For James, a good reader gives sympathetic consideration to an author's context and worldview, placing themselves “at the centre” of the author's “philosophic vision” in order to “understand at once all of the different things it makes him write or say” (*PU*, 117).⁵⁰ Regarding James's ethical recommendations, a critical point of context is the scattering of relevant ideas across numerous works written over the course of a lengthy career, so that a representation and interpretation of them means *necessarily* drawing from disparate works intended for disparate audiences. “Since human action is a response to some vision of the world, it cannot be sharply separated from the other . . . branches of philosophy,” and so James's various theorizations of that vision contribute to and are components of his ethics.⁵¹ By reading together James's early works on scientific and philosophical psychology with later ones on the metaphysics of experience, pedagogy, and ethics, and emphasizing thematic and conceptual continuities, I intend to do justice to James's restless and ambitious spirit. My point is not that James *intended* these works to be “of a piece” but that they can be productively and helpfully interpreted as if they were—and that such an interpretation gets to the center of James's vision for pragmatism. To use James's own words: “I have sought to unify the picture as it presents itself to my own eyes, dealing in broad strokes” (*P*, 5).

Chapter 1 situates James's philosophy within the radical socioeconomic and intellectual circumstances of his time, highlighting the extent to which they undermined long-established certainties of American life. It shows that James meant his philosophy to be a response to the consequent questioning of extant beliefs, values, and conceptions of the world; or more precisely, a philosophically founded therapeutic recommendation not just for coping with such changes but also for exploiting them in pursuit of a richer, more rewarding life.

As interpretative exegesis, this book emphasizes how James's methodological decisions led him to surmount traditional disciplinary boundaries (sometimes despite himself) such that the various aspects of his work together lay the foundation for his ethics. Chapter 2 shows how James relies on introspection to access and describe the dynamism, richness, and complexity of experience. Taking his lead from David Hume's empiricism (but pressing well beyond it), he describes the relational character of conscious life both phenomenologically and ontologically as a "field" on which relations between ideas are constantly made and changed. In terms of ethics, James's account of experiential dynamism highlights the importance of novelty and context for one's decisions and indicates the potential to change the configuration of one's ideas—and thus one's lived reality.

James's phenomenological and ontological perspectives on the self are considered in chapter 3. Both of these are evident in his early work, *Principles*, where they indicate ambiguity between a purely descriptive project and a search for the very structures of consciousness and mind. Chapter 3 contends that the ambiguity is best resolved by a phenomenological reading of James's texts, as it enables his various conceptions of self-identity to be reconciled with his account of how we respond freely and creatively to experiential circumstances. On this view, selfhood has a "felt quality" describable as the arrangement of one's ideas around an ever-changing point of focus. Usually, that focus is decided by chance circumstances and one's immediate habitual response, and we pay it little heed. But at other times, it is determined by careful, deliberate attention to matters of special interest. Concentrated attention allows us to intervene in the moment between a stimulus and an otherwise habitual response and to create new configurations of ideas that, over time and with repetition, harden into new habits of thought.

Chapter 4 examines James's pedagogical recommendations for changing habits of thought and action in pursuit of a richer existence aligned with one's interests. It lays out his account of habit in detail, highlighting

the extent to which conscious life relies upon deeply engrained patterns of thought. But the psychological mechanisms for habit formation bring associated risks, too: one might overlook or ignore new ways of appreciating one's circumstances and capabilities or adopt simplistic conceptions of the world such as those offered by some sciences and religions, leaving one blind to other possibilities. James shows that life-enhancing ethics requires us to avoid ways of thinking that are simplistic or too rigidly patterned. By concentrating deliberately on one interest rather than another, or pursuing new relationships between ideas, one can not only respond to the world effectively but also challenge habits of thought that have come to define one's character. For James, character development, or self-transformation, is a lifelong project of reflective decision-making, risk taking, and habit formation. As soon as we stop paying attention to our habits, we tend to avoid energetic pursuit of our interests, thus ceding the potential for a more satisfying life.

The work concludes by recalling James's place in pragmatism's history as a philosophy of practice. James provides a pragmatist ethics oriented toward self-betterment. He does not propose that we can take complete control over our lives by sheer effort or "the power of positive thinking," as some self-help theories suggest. For James, our fate is neither completely in our own hands nor entirely out of our control. His sophisticated, subtle, and nuanced analyses—not always consistent, and sometimes difficult to piece together—show that we have some capacity for influencing the kind of person that we become and the kind of life that we lead, however constrained we are by the vagaries of circumstance.

In his celebrated and controversial work, *The Self Awakened: Pragmatism Unbound*, Unger writes of Golden Age pragmatism:

Its promise of freedom from many-sided dogma, its abandonment of the claim to see the world from the stars, its embrace of the awkward situation of the human agent, struggling against the institutional and conceptual structures that shackle him, its offer to help him loose and reinvent these structures so that he may become greater and more vital as well as less deluded—none of this would have been enough to make pragmatism what it is today: the philosophy of the age.⁵²

For Unger, classical pragmatism is in the ascendant because it has not been denuded of a primary focus upon self-conscious human agency, the context

sensitivity of our decisions and actions, or prospects for changing one's own life. These elements, rejected during philosophy's "emasculatation" and "retreat to more defensible lines," are pragmatism's richest and most important, loaded with potential for better understanding of how lives and communities might be improved.⁵³ I hope to show that Unger is right. After all, James tells us, our "ideals ought to aim at the *transformation of reality*—no less!"⁵⁴