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ARTICLE

# The antipaternalist psychology of William James

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## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to first review William James's explicit positions on paternalism in the context of medical licensure and the annexation of the Philippines. Then I wish to show that these positions, as well as a more generalized antipaternalist stance, are the implications of James's philosophy and psychology and not simply his 'personal' sentiments. The elements of James's thought are arranged in such a way as to facilitate a comparison with contemporary behavioral (heuristics and biases) paternalism. The conclusion is that James has arguments against behavioral paternalism *avant la lettre* that are still useful and deserve discussion.

**Keywords:** paternalism; Jamesian psychology; toleration; rationality

... the result of all these considerations ... absolutely forbids us to be forward in pronouncing on the meaninglessness of forms of existence other than our own ... Hands off: neither the whole of truth, nor the whole of good, is revealed to any single observer ... It is enough to ask of each of us that he should be faithful to his own opportunities and make the most of his own blessings, without presuming to regulate the rest of the vast field.

William James (1983a: 149).

The first thing to learn in intercourse with others is non-interference with their own peculiar ways of being happy, provided those ways do not assume to interfere by violence with ours.

William James (1983b: 150).

[William James was] perhaps the most tolerant man of our generation.

Walter Lippmann (1996: 258).

In recent decades, behavioral economics in its heuristics and biases variant has introduced psychological ideas into economic theory and economic policy.<sup>1</sup> Much,

<sup>1</sup>When I write of 'behavioral paternalism' in this article, I always mean the version that stems from the heuristics and biases literature.

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although by no means all, of this has resulted in new arguments in favor of an old idea: paternalism. There is a danger, in my view, that psychological ideas in economics will be too tightly connected by the public and the academic professions alike to a certain policy stance. This would be unfortunate because psychology can indeed contribute to economic analysis in ways which do not undermine the liberal ideal of the sovereignty of individual choice.

It is generally recognized that William James is the father of modern scientific psychology.<sup>2</sup> His ideas found renewed appreciation after the era of classical behaviorism passed in psychology.<sup>3</sup> It is now permissible to talk about consciousness, meaning, subjective experience and the actively creative nature of the human mind. James's 'radical empiricism' takes individual experience and points of view seriously. At the risk of belaboring the obvious, he tells us that we are not all the same. We, ordinary people and experts alike, have only partial knowledge of only the part of the world toward which we turn our attention. This knowledge is also fallible and constantly changing. No one controls the evolution of knowledge and experience. We are not done until the last person has had his say on the last day.

The purpose of this essay is to show that William James's psychological and philosophical ideas have strong antipaternalistic implications.<sup>4</sup> Even if James had never expressed himself directly on the issue, this would be true in my judgment. However, he did express himself in two major instances. The first was his opposition to medical licensure in his home state of Massachusetts. The second was his opposition to the American annexation of the Philippines as a result of the Spanish–American War. Analysis of these practical policy stances will introduce us to certain important themes in his psychological and philosophical thought. These themes will then be subject to a more thorough-going examination. This examination will construct James's framework in a way adapted to the discussion of paternalism.

### ***Outline of sections***

This article consists of two parts. The first is thematic. In the first section of Part I, I discuss James's antipaternalistic positions in regard to medical licensure and the US annexation of the Philippines. In the second section, I review themes about rationality

<sup>2</sup>In 1927, as the prospects of behavioristic psychology were rising in the United States, a questionnaire distributed to seventy-three prominent American psychologists revealed that James was still considered the most important of all psychologists, based on his continuing impact. ... Two decades later, E.G. Boring ... the premier historian of psychology at that time, estimated that James had retained his place among the four most influential individuals in the development of modern psychology, the others being Darwin, Helmholtz, and Freud. And yet another two decades later, as the hegemony of behaviorism was waning, a select committee of the American Psychological Association concluded that James was still the dominant historical figure in American psychology ... (Leary, 2018: 296–297).

<sup>3</sup>Behaviorism has nothing to do with behavioral economics or with 'behavioralism'. It is the view that 'explanation of behavior through belief, intention and desire is somehow unscientific' (Blackburn, 2005: 38).

<sup>4</sup>By contemporary standards, William James's psychology is between the disciplines of physiology, psychology, philosophy and personal reflection (Goodman, 2022). Reck (1971: 296) characterizes 'James's *Principles of Psychology* ... as a contribution to philosophical psychology.' And yet his philosophical psychology 'is consistent with a suggested by scientific psychology' (302). Leary (2018: 47) says 'it is impossible to separate James's psychology from philosophical considerations, even though he presented his psychology as positivistic and devoid of metaphysics.'

and self-fashioning from some stories James tells. Part II is more analytical. Here, I attempt to show that James's antipaternalism is not simply a sentiment or extraneous political position. It is deeply rooted in his philosophical and psychological thought. In the first section of Part II, I make the case for James's methodological individualism and 'subjectivism'. The second section discusses the nature of values as it flows from the individualism and subjectivism. The third argues that the origin of values is a bottom up phenomenon in which the task of the ethical philosopher (or other spectator) is secondary. In the fourth section, I seek to establish a sense of James's standard of individual well-being. In truth, this is fairly complex, except to say that James is definitely not a Benthamite, but I point to what I believe are its essential features. In the fifth section, I show that James's conception of rationality is broad, especially in the context of individual decision making. His view might reasonably be called 'inclusive rationality'.<sup>5</sup> The sixth section is devoted to discussing what could be seen as an opening for paternalism – the obstructed will or *akrasia*. Nevertheless, I show that obstructed actions, frustrating though they may be, are a source of information and are integral to change. The seventh section reviews James's own suggestion for boosting the level of moral energy and improving the odds of individuals facing an obstructed will. The eighth section confronts a stereotypical behavioral paternalist case with the elements of James's thought we have presented. This shows how James's ideas are arguments against behavioral paternalism *avant la lettre*. The ninth section has some concluding remarks.

## Part I: Themes

### *William James, antipaternalist*

In 1894 and 1898, bills were introduced into the Massachusetts state legislature under the name 'The Medical Registration Act'. This Act would have required that medical practitioners either be graduates of a 'reputable medical school' or submit to an examination to test their competence. Those who did neither could not practice in the state. This would exclude many practitioners of alternative forms of healing, including homeopathy, mind cures, Christian Science and so forth. James's interest was primarily, although not exclusively, in the area of the treatment of 'nervous disorders' for which the medical establishment had little to offer.

James vigorously opposed the legislation for medical licensure (1987a: 142–150; 1987b: 56–62). He referred to it as 'too grandmotherly', 'maternal' and 'a paternalism' as well as a 'grotesque and puerile anomaly' in the laws of a state where:

... every man has from time immemorial been free to lose his health, and with it his fortune, life and soul, if he pleases, without the State either interfering or giving relief. If the word 'sacred' can be applied to any personal right, surely the right to treat one's own body as one chooses may claim this title (1987a: 145–146).

<sup>5</sup>Rizzo and Whitman (2020: 26–27) call their concept of rationality 'inclusive rationality'. However, this is before we were familiar with the work of William James. Nevertheless, I now believe that the concepts are similar.

James's reasons went beyond a simple normative individualism and were based on some fundamental ideas in his theoretical framework. Each healing perspective is 'necessarily partly perceptive and partly blind' and 'to no one of them can the whole of truth be revealed' (1987b: 60). In this case, the state through its laws should take no sides. It is not up to the state to determine the relative merits of each therapy. The matter is too complex (59–60). What is needed is a pluralism of approaches which will provide a 'mass of material [experiences] out of which the conditions and limits of such therapeutic methods may at last become clear'. Instead, the law proposes to block the development of truths by using a protectionist strategy similar to a 'powerful trades union, demanding legislation against the competition of scabs' (58). So 'hands off' (61).

However, it should be noted that James did not object to a related piece of legislation that would have required those who claimed to be MDs to be certified in that claim by the state (1987a: 149–150). This was just truth in advertising and did not block the practice of alternative methods so long as the practitioner did not claim to have a medical degree (if he did not). People had the right to know but did not have the right to be to 'saved' from alternatives not approved by the state.<sup>6</sup>

James was also a strong anti-imperialist. He was a member of the American Anti-imperialist League which was founded in 1898 to protest the annexation of the Philippines following the conclusion of the Spanish–American War. In 1899, James helped organize a mass anti-war, anti-imperialism meeting in Cambridge. Many prominent people were also members of this society, including Andrew Carnegie, former president Grover Cleveland, John Dewey, Samuel Gompers, William Graham Sumner, and Mark Twain (who was a founder). James himself was vice president of the League from 1904 until his death in 1910.

While there were several arguments proffered in favor of the US annexation and war against insurgents in the Philippines, James focused on a paternalistic argument. However, unlike in the medical registration case, paternalism here refers to a collective phenomenon. It was predicated on the alleged inability of individual Filipinos to cooperate in order to attain their collective and individually beneficial goal of self-government. Nevertheless, as we shall see, many of the arguments James uses are also applicable to the more standard cases of individual paternalism.

Some claimed that the US had a mission 'which we suppose Providence to have invested us with, of raising the Filipinos in the scale of being...' (1987a: 160). Furthermore, in James's characterization:

We are to be missionaries of civilization, and to bear the white man's burden, painful as it often is. We must sow our ideals, plant our order, impose our

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<sup>6</sup>It might be claimed that James was not entirely consistent because he favored limits on drug advertising in newspapers. In the same year (1894) that he opposed the Medical Registration bill, he wrote to the editor of *The Nation* that advertisers in many newspapers were creating 'panic', 'hypocondriacal misery and actual disease' by their 'elaborate accounts of symptoms' and 'portraits of sufferers'. Some of the drugs peddled in these ads may have worked but many other were simply 'pretended cures' (James, 1987c: 143). Importantly, his proposal was not to ban the advertisements altogether but to limit their size. This would prevent the sellers from elaborate, alarming descriptions of diseases and from publishing extensive testimonials of the benefits of the proposed remedies. Furthermore, he would not block the sale of the remedies.

God. The individual lives are nothing. Our duty and destiny call, and civilization must go on (1987d: 157).

Part of the problem with this rhetorical mission was that it consisted in abstractions quite divorced from the concrete lives of the Filipinos. The individuals do not matter, but the cause of bringing them to a higher level of civilization is paramount. It is an odd paternalism that is independent of any improvement in the lives of those paternalized.<sup>7</sup> In particular, James criticizes then-Secretary of War William Howard Taft who was instrumental in creating the governance regime in the Philippines. Taft was at once too close and too far from the situation. Too close – because he was responsible for setting up the colonial regime and could not see the ‘full rottenness’ of the occupation. Too far – he is morally isolated as ‘hardly a native meets him sincerely’ (1987g: 178). He is not aware of their aspirations. And yet he believes that he knows best for these people. He wishes to promote ‘the permanent welfare of the natives – *as we are able to conceive that welfare*’ (177, emphasis added). Our duty as the conquerors see it, again in James’s words:

We are to give to the Filipino true liberty instead of the false liberty he aspires to; we are to reveal his better self to him, to be his savior against his own weakness (178).

But the deficiency of our knowledge and the absence of sympathetic imagination make hollow the abstractions promoted by Taft, Roosevelt and previously President McKinley.<sup>8</sup>

For James, the two fundamental problems with this instance of imperialist-paternalism, aside from the deficiency of knowledge, are rooted in the failure to recognize the pluralism of the good and the role of learning by mistakes. ‘We Americans surely do not monopolize all the possible forms of goodness’. Each people find their own way. That finding is often replete with errors and struggle and failure. But ‘[a]ny national life, however turbulent, should be respected which exhibits ferments of progress, human individualities, even small ones, struggling in the direction of enlightenment’ (180). Taft was willing to someday grant Filipino independence but he thought that the day was far off – fifty or a hundred years.<sup>9</sup> James was having none of that. They should have their ‘freedom, “fit” or “unfit”, that is, home rule without humbugging phrases’ (1987d: 158).<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup>In ‘The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life’, James (1979b: 147) attacks the theoretical foundations of such an idea: ‘If one ideal judgment be objectively better than another, that betterness must be made flesh by being lodged concretely in someone’s actual perception.’

<sup>8</sup>On the deficiency of knowledge, James (1987f: 161) says: ‘Surely any reflecting man must see that, far away as we are, doomed to invincible ignorance of the secrets of the Philippine soul (why, we cannot even understand one another’s souls here at home) ...’

<sup>9</sup>As a prediction, Taft was not too far off in his early estimate. The Philippines was given independence in 1946.

<sup>10</sup>James (2002: 60) clearly understood the more general paternalistic context of the Philippine annexation: ‘Christ died for us all, so let us all be as we are, save where we want to reform *ourselves*. [The only unpardonable crime is that of wanting to reform *one another*, after the fashion of the U.S. in the Philippines.]’

As we have seen, William James held antipaternalistic views in at least two areas of public policy. The question we must now address is whether these views are simply expressions of political opinions which have little basis in his psychological and philosophical framework. The historian of political thought, George Sabine, takes the view, as reported by Livingston (2016: 3) that ‘James’s anti-imperialism was merely the consequence of his sensitive temperament given free rein during a period of doctor-prescribed bed rest that just happened to overlap with the outbreak of the [Spanish–American] war’.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, when invited to a conference to discuss pragmatism and politics in 1943, Sabine said that James had no political philosophy (1). Ralph Barton Perry, the great biographer of James, held similar (but less medically oriented) views. He considered James’s political views as ‘social and political sentiments’ rooted in his humanity and hatred of cruelty (Perry, 1935: 280).<sup>12</sup>

In fact, James did not have a developed political philosophy in the sense that any political philosopher or theorist would recognize. However, this is not important for the thesis I wish to advance. What I wish to show is that antipaternalism in its varied forms is an objective implication of the Jamesian psycho-philosophical framework.<sup>13</sup> The fundamental ideas of pragmatism and radical empiricism strongly point to undermining arguments in favor of paternalism as a public policy. In what follows I shall characterize elements of a *psychological* case against paternalism. This will be informed by the current behavioral economics discussions in their basic outline. Thus, I will be emphasizing those aspects of James’s system that seem to connect and contrast most closely to what today’s behavioral paternalists are saying. My ultimate claim is that James provides counter-arguments to the central pillars of behavioral paternalism. In other words, a reply to behavioralists *avant la lettre*.

### ***Core of the antipaternalist framework: the subjectivism of meaning***

James (1983a: 132–149; 1983b: 150–167) wrote two very important essays, ‘On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings’ and ‘What Makes a Life Significant’ that set out in an informal way some of the antipaternalistic elements of his system of thought. These were originally his ‘Talks to Students’ probably delivered in 1895.

<sup>11</sup>This is Livingston’s summary of part of a letter from Sabine to Harold Stoke from 31 March 1942.

<sup>12</sup>Perry (1935: 290) also thinks that a social class factor explains James’s views: ‘The root of James’s politics is to be found not in his ethics and philosophy, but in the fact that he belong to the educated class, and accepted on that account a particular role and a particular responsibility.’ This *noblesse oblige* (if that indeed is what it is) does not seem plausible as a basis of his *antipaternalism*.

<sup>13</sup>In ‘The Moral Equivalent of War’, James (1982b) discusses the possibility of conscripting young men into a vaguely described national service corps. Is this an exception to his antipaternalism? On the whole, it is not. James believed that there was a deep psychological need for the performance (and the admiration) of ‘manly’ virtues such as courage, discipline, loyalty to a group, strenuous efforts and so forth. War and military service have heretofore provided the outlet for these. If, however, the chances of war were to be reduced, a different context for the expression of these virtues must be found. James thought it could be found in national service. This could be ‘the moral equivalent of war’. It could be part of the ‘war against war’. At the same, it would *benefit* the ‘gilded youth’ who in peacetime know only ease and are unaware of the lives of others. In this aspect, James’s proposal could reasonably be considered paternalistic. However, his main motivation was to reduce to chances of war. In modern economics parlance, this is primarily about the provision of a ‘public good’ and only secondarily about paternalistic state action.

The explicit message of these essays is toleration and sympathetic understanding of what others find meaningful in their lives. A corollary of this is 'non-interference' with them, especially by coercive means, as long as they do not violently interfere with others (1983b: 150). The values that people have are fundamentally rooted in feelings. These are then associated with ideas and can become ideals worth striving to attain. However, people are too busy with their own lives to take much interest in the meaningful experiences of others. They are often quick to judge negatively without real understanding.<sup>14</sup> Spectators have only partial knowledge of others, not the intimate experiential and valuational knowledge of the individual herself.<sup>15</sup>

Consider James's story of Jack and Jill (150–151). Jack is a 'maniac' over Jill. She is one of the 'wonders of creation' to him. Spectators are blind to most of this. Of course, he himself may be blind in certain respects also. And yet who sees more truly? James says it is Jack because he *feels* more deeply and thus values more profoundly. *It is not a matter of ascertaining facts about her that others do not know.* It is about his emotional evaluation of her 'charms and perfections', the 'enchantment' which she produces in him and her 'magical importance'. These are not facts but emotions and valuations. And to these, others have only imperfect and partial knowledge.

James uses his Jack and Jill story to make a general point. We, as spectators, are blind to the full extent of what is meaningful to others whether it be their loves, their efforts to cut down trees thus destroying pristine nature in order to build basic unattractive homes, their efforts to construct the Boston subway system, and so forth. The struggle to attain one's own values is where the meaning of life is to be found.

James spent a week one summer at a town (Lilydale) at the Chautauqua Lake Assembly Grounds in New York State. It was perfect: an 'atmosphere of success', 'intelligence and goodness, orderliness and ideality', 'cheerfulness'. 'It is a serious and studious picnic on a gigantic scale'. There is music, every athletic endeavor, no crime and no need for police. And yet when James left he was relieved to have done so. 'This order is too tame, this culture too second rate, this goodness too uninspiring'. They 'have the best of company, and *yet no effort*' (1983b: 152, emphasis added). James (153) concludes from the Chautauqua experience:

The ideal was so completely victorious already that no sign of any previous battle remained, the place just resting on its oars. But what our human emotions seem to require is the sight of the struggle going on. The moments the fruits are merely being eaten, things become ignoble.

There is no *giving* meaningful experience, values or a significant life, ready-made. Furthermore, the central criticism he had of Chautauqua was 'not based on ... [a

<sup>14</sup>Hence the stupidity and injustice of our opinions, so far as they deal with the significance of alien lives' (James, 1983a: 132).

<sup>15</sup>As Livingston (2016: 153) says in the Conclusion of his book: 'Each individual is a spectator to the inner lives of others, blind to their personal values, interpretations and desires. This blindness is the root cause of the sense of moral superiority that leads individuals to take their perspectives as universal and so discount or discredit those of others. It is just this hubris born of blindness that James finds in the imperialist discourse of civilizing the Filipinos.'



claim] that its architects err[ed] profoundly in their assumptions as to what people want ... The ideals of the Assembly's founders coincided fully with those of James ...' (Ferguson, 2007: 1–2). The problem was not that the outcome was wrong but that there was no day-to-day process of achieving it – or perhaps more exactly, that it was lost in a distant past. As James (1977: 117) would later say 'What *really* exists is not things made but things in the making'.

James (1983b: 154) spared no criticism of those who would make the world (or at least his country) into 'a mere Chautauqua Assembly on an enormous scale'. Life is in the transitions.<sup>16</sup> '[T]he thing of deepest – or, at any rate, of comparatively deepest – significance in life does seem to be its character of *progress* ...' (164). 'But with each new ideal that comes into life, the chance for a life based on some old ideal will vanish ...' (167). James's (166) ultimate point is:

The solid meaning of life is always the same eternal thing – the marriage, namely of some unhabitual ideal, however special, with some fidelity, courage, and endurance; with some man or woman's pains. And whatever or wherever life may be, there will always be the chance for that marriage to take place.

In these thematic essays, James presents many of the elements that constitute an antipaternalistic framework. Meaning and well-being in its full sense is individual. Spectators have inadequate knowledge of what makes anyone else's life significant. Significance cannot be simply handed out. It is not a state but a process. The process is a struggle for some ideal however idiosyncratic it may be. We should tolerate and even indulge the plurality of lives, the plurality of struggles. Success is never guaranteed. Life is in the effort. We must overcome the blindness inhibiting us from tolerance. No one possesses the whole truth. We should attend to changing ourselves, not others by force.

## Part II: Building the analytical framework

### *Methodological individualism and subjectivism*

At the heart of James's psychological framework is the individual, the *personal self*. 'The universal conscious fact is not "feelings and thoughts exist", but "I think" and "I feel"' (James, 1981: 221). Every thought is owned by someone. While James thought that no psychology could deny the existence of personal selves, he did not foresee that later psychologists (classical behaviorists) might do this, and would thereby – he would have thought had lived long enough – rob psychology of its essential characteristic. For him, the personal self was the immediate and obvious datum of the discipline. The focus on personal selves also implies an irreducible pluralism: different selves, different minds and different perceptions.

The mind is constantly engaging in selective activity or selective attention. It picks out from the plethora of sensations and characteristics of objects those that are

<sup>16</sup>In a 'World of Pure Experience', James (1976: 42) says: 'Life is in the transitions as much as in the terms connected; often, indeed, it seems to be there more emphatically, as if our spurts and sallies forward were the real firing-line of the battle ... In this line we live prospectively as well as retrospectively.'

important to us. We say that the true color of brick is the ‘sensation it gives when the eye looks squarely at it from a near point, out of the sunshine and yet not in the gloom ...’ (1981: 275). We could say otherwise. We view the same object as a chair or as a pile of wood for burning depending on our purposes at the moment (Leary, 2018: 260). These psychological observations underlie *pluralism* because different individuals have different interests and different purposes. Even out of a physical event like an identical trip to Europe people will come back with different memories and, in fact, different experiences depending on their interests. Some will bring back ‘only picturesque impressions’. Others will remember ‘distances and prices, populations’. Still others ‘theatres, restaurants, and public balls’. And yet another ‘his own subjective broodings’ (James, 1981: 275–276).<sup>17</sup>

A consistent emphasis on the personal self and its individualized selective activity implies that a main focus of psychological research is the *agent’s point of view*.<sup>18</sup> However, the great danger that the psychologist faces ‘*is the assumption that the mental state studied must be conscious of itself as the psychologist is conscious of it*’ (195, original emphasis). This is the ‘psychologist’s fallacy’.<sup>19</sup> It is the replacement of the agent’s point of view with the psychologist’s point of view. The agent’s point of view – her feeling or thought – may see the object or ‘reality’ (as the psychologist would term it) differently. The agent may not see the relationship of her thought to the others she has and, in that sense, her view is incomplete. She may not be aware of other relationships that the psychologist deems important. On the other hand, the agent may explicitly or implicitly see different relations. The mind is practical; it seeks solutions to problems. And yet the problem as perceived by the agent may be different than that perceived by the psychologist. It is not as if the psychologist’s understanding is irrelevant. But a full understanding of the agent must begin with her point of view. The assumption that what the psychologist knows is known by the agent prevents us from even asking the right questions.

### Value theory

As a methodological individualist, James quite naturally begins his discussion of value with the interests of the individual. As Perry (1935: 265) summarizes:

The principle is clear: value derives ultimately from the interests of the individual; and the social whole is justified by the inclusion and reconciliation of its individual parts. Individualism is fundamental.

The mind is teleological, whether in science or in practical life. Its interests are outgrowths of individual purposes. Therefore, the mind values experiences insofar as they directly or indirectly tied to the attainment of ends. A judgment of value is not simply a ‘psychical fact,’ it performs a function. ‘[T]he value of an object ... must play the recognizable part, in the agent’s survey of the situation, of prompting

<sup>17</sup>Other minds, other worlds from the same monotonous and inexpressive chaos!’ (James, 1981: 277).

<sup>18</sup>As Hilary Putnam (1987: 70) says, ‘The heart of pragmatism, it seems to me – of James’s and Dewey’s pragmatism ... was the insistence on the supremacy of the agent point of view.’

<sup>19</sup>See the fuller discussion in James (1983c: 161–167).

and supporting a definite practical attitude with reference to the object' (Stuart, 1903: 339).<sup>20</sup> For James, there are no interests or valuations in the air. Not only must they be concretized in an individual's mind but they must be manifest in some way, including as *attempted* implementation, in concrete action.<sup>21</sup> Judgments of value operate at two inter-related levels (272). First, they can resolve conflicts of ends by either arranging a hierarchy of them or simply eliminating certain ends. Second, they can order the various means at the individual's disposal in the most efficacious ways. The direct creation of valued ends is the ethical aspect. The organization of means is the economic aspect.

Value judgments are beliefs and beliefs for James are propensities to act. 'Beliefs are really rules for action ...' (James, 1975: 28–29).<sup>22</sup> What therefore about judgments of value that are not 'incarnate' in any person and hence cannot be rules of concrete action? How would James view hypothetical or counterfactual valuations? These are the 'truth[s] of the intellectualist':

... the truth with no one thinking it, is like the coat that fits tho [sic] no one has ever tried it on, like music that no ear has listened to. It is less than real, not more real, than the verified article; and to attribute a superior degree of glory to it seems like little more than a piece of perverse abstraction worship (James, 1975: 276).

There is an obvious connection, which I explore later, between these remarks and the concept of true values in the form of 'true preferences' adopted by contemporary behavioral economists (Thaler and Sunstein, 2003).

### ***Ethical values from the bottom up***

Perhaps the most famous statement by William James about ethics is '[T]here is no such thing possible as an ethical philosophy dogmatically made up in advance' (1979b: 141). The implications of this claim are numerous. I will stress just a few here. First, ethical values are not derived from an abstract moral system created by moral philosophers (or economists acting as moral philosophers). Values emerge from individual experience and reflection. Second, the implementation of ethical values is an activity of self-fashioning. The right thing to do in any context cannot be imposed from above.

We must first make clear that James is using the words 'ethical', 'ethics' as well as 'moral', in a broad way to refer to the pursuit of some *ideal* whether it be for one's

<sup>20</sup>Henry Waldgrave Stuart was a student of John Dewey at the University of Chicago and a follower of James and Dewey. The essay cited above was based on Stuart's doctoral dissertation under Dewey. It was published in a collection edited by John Dewey called *Studies in Logical Theory* (1903). Stuart was president of the American Philosophical Association (Pacific Division) from 1926–1927.

<sup>21</sup>Ruth Anna Putnam (2017: 367) summarizes the point: 'For pragmatists it makes no sense to say that someone has a certain purpose but does nothing to further it.' This would appear to put counterfactual valuations, that is, valuations people might or would have under conditions different from those they are actually in, in the problematic category.

<sup>22</sup>James is interpreting (and approving of) statements by Charles Sanders Peirce. See also Gale (1999: 25): 'Belief is an action.'

own improvement or the improvement others, including that of 'society'. Thus, the ethical domain is quite broad. Many seemingly ordinary, everyday decisions are 'ethical'.

Making choices relevant to the pursuit of ideals encounters some internal resistance because, by definition, these choices constitute non-routine and non-habitual behavior. In pursuit of an ideal, the individual, at least initially, must break out of the accustomed ways. This is part of James's notion of the strenuous moral life. The ethical decision is not restricted to a certain category of goods. All goods are potentially relevant – even the most ordinary – because man's struggle for meaning is ongoing.<sup>23</sup> The significance of goods as potential ethical options is made from the point of view of the agent. What does that choice mean in *his* concrete life? What are *his* ideals? The pursuit of a moral ideal is a wide-awake conscious choice.

James makes a distinction between the normal moral life and 'critical ethical moments' (1981: 287–288).<sup>24</sup> The normal moral life does not stray too far from the moral ideals that a person normally follows. It may involve, for example, a *reconsideration* and then *reaffirmation* of a previously held ideal. Or it may involve a new decision to diet or exercise. The critical ethical moment, on the other hand, is making a difficult decision to pursue a new ideal that has *major consequences* for a person life. It is not only a decision about what to do but a decision about what kind of person to become. These decisions do not generally occur often but they need not because even a single one may have an enormous impact. Here again, we must not be deceived by the spectator's characterization of the option or choice. It *could* be as 'ordinary' as deciding what profession to pursue or college to attend or it could be a dramatic decision to hide Jews from the Nazis. The common element is that it is a decision that breaks from the individual's automatic, habitual and routine behavior, as in the normal moral life, but in the critical moment the decision has great individual significance as well.

The individual is not, and cannot be, engaged in moral decision making all of the time. Many conventional or habitual ways of acting have produced satisfactory results over long periods of time. Moral decisions are thus built on a structure of decisions that are not, strictly speaking, moral. They are routine (e.g., waking up at the same time each morning, eating one of three different sandwiches for lunch in rotation). There is no psychological effort; there is no challenging of frameworks. Nevertheless, the acquisition of good habits is actually conducive to effective moral decision making insofar as it sets the individual free to direct limited powers of attention to important problematic issues (James, 1981: 126).<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup>See James (1979b: 158) and Marchetti (2015: 25, 108, 121, 124, 126, 233).

<sup>24</sup>The term 'normal moral life' was coined by Ruth Anna Putnam to describe the idea in James (R.A. Putnam, 2017: 366). The term 'critical moral moments' is James's.

<sup>25</sup>The matter of separating moral decisions from the non-moral is complex. The matter is not simply one of routine activities freeing up time. They may be *inputs* into the pursuit or production of ideals. 'Of course, simpler, less time-consuming, more routine ideals [this may not be the correct word] and labors (such as desiring to eat and then preparing a meal) are in their own ways instances of meaningful progress, for it is our everyday labors which develop the character of our grander schemes, while grander schemes help to shape the development of every day pursuits. Our daily ideals often become part of the means to yet further

But even *seemingly* ordinary and routine activities may have hidden moral meaning. James tells the story of a trip to North Carolina where he saw some settlers who had ‘destroyed’ some parts of the forest in a valley that was in his view ‘improved ... out of existence’ and ‘was hideous, a sort of ulcer, without a single element of artificial grace to make up for the loss of Nature’s beauty’. They built log cabins, put fences up to keep the pigs and cattle contained and grew some crops. ‘But when *they* looked on the hideous stumps [of cut trees], what they thought of was a personal victory.’ James admits that he had been ‘blind to the peculiar ideality of their conditions, as certainly as they would also have been to the ideality of mine ...’ (James, 1983a: 134). Even more distant from what many would consider the pursuit of an ideal: ‘To keep out of the gutter is for us here no part of consciousness at all, yet for many of our brethren it is the most legitimately engrossing of ideals’ (James, 1983b: 163). And thus a much wider range of problem situations, options, and decisions have ‘moral’ or ‘ethical’ character in James’s framework than many readers, accustomed to a more narrow conception of the moral realm, might have expected.<sup>26</sup>

Many decisions made by individuals are the fount of their moral progress and search for significance in life. We cannot always observe this non-material element because we do not always see things from the perspective of the actor herself. The individual creates her values. She, not the philosopher, is the source of moral experimentation and progress. The philosopher may create systems of morality. But these are to be thrown into the mix of criticism, experimentation and evaluation of consequences with the views of *hoi poloi*. The philosopher should not set himself up as a final authority neither as to the content nor structure of moral actions.

Thus, James is highly critical of rigid moral abstractions as regulators of human behavior. Moral judgment is the outcome of an activity of criticizing, re-evaluating old normative maxims to fit the contingent circumstances of individual. It is a form of *self-cultivation* and *self-fashioning* (Marchetti, 2015: 22–23). It is an ongoing activity with no absolute finality ‘until the last man has had his experience and said his say’ (James, 1979b: 141).

None of this suggests that moral decision making is an activity of the isolated individual. Consensus is often built. It starts, however, with *individuals* thinking, evaluating, criticizing, discussing and arguing. Both standards and content are the emergent outcomes of this process.<sup>27</sup> People will take stands even before all of the evidence is in. Therefore, there will be errors. Errors are instructive; among other things, they alert us to the ‘cries of the wounded’ by our actions (James, 1979b:

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ideals, and still are themselves ends to be enjoyed without recourse to their function in our higher goals’ (Hester and John, 2018: 66).

<sup>26</sup>‘Wherever a process of life communicates an eagerness to him who lives it, there the life becomes genuinely significant. Sometimes the eagerness is more knit up with the motor activities, sometimes with the perceptions, sometimes with the imagination, sometimes with reflective thought. But, wherever it is found, there is a zest, the tingle, the excitement of reality; and there is “importance” in the only real and positive sense in which importance ever anywhere can be’ (James, 1983a: 134–135).

<sup>27</sup>The pragmatic refusal to tell us once and for all exactly how to conduct scientific inquiry or exactly how to conduct moral inquiry is not accidental; it is intrinsic to the view that standards of inquiry should be expected to change in the course of the inquiry itself (H. Putnam, 2017: 342).

158). Nevertheless, outcomes must not be forced, especially not by those peddling *a priori* truths.<sup>28</sup>

### *The standard of well-being*

As we have seen, it all begins with the values of the individual. By this James most certainly does not mean values of which the individual is unaware or simply ought to be aware. He means actual values, as the individual understands them. James (1979b: 147) makes his point succinctly and elegantly:

... [N]othing can be good or right except so far as some consciousness feels it to be good or thinks it to be right ... Like the positive attributes good and bad, the comparative ones better and worse must be *realized* in order to be real. If one ideal judgment be objectively better than another, that betterness must be made flesh by being lodged concretely in someone's actual perception. *It cannot float in the atmosphere, for it is not a sort of meteorological phenomenon, like the aura borealis or the zodiacal light* (first italics, original emphasis; second italics, emphasis added).

Values are manifested in a world of many, sometimes incompatible, options as 'claims' or 'demands' for something.<sup>29</sup> The '*essence of good is simply to satisfy a demand*' (153, original emphasis). From the limited perspective of this essay on paternalism, demands will take the form of goods for the improvement of one's self.<sup>30</sup> Of course, improvement of the self can take the form of improving relations with other people, including acts of beneficence or avoiding acts of injustice. Nevertheless, the paternalistic concern is narrower, more self-regarding.

If we apply James's meliorist conception of ethics to the individual's care of himself we see that there are two aspects of the person's demands or claims: first, a value judgment about what is good for him, that is, what ideal would give greater significance to his own life and second, an instrumental judgment about how to attain that in the context of his own life. The first of these is in need of explication at this stage of the analysis.

The central point is that demands must be *felt*.<sup>31</sup> It is true that they are based on value judgments and when individuals are pursuing an ideal it is, to a greater or lesser degree, conceptualized. But the *concept* is not the underlying reality. Demands that are simply concepts are abstractions – values in the air. To say that a person feels a demand or claim means that it has an experiential significance. For James, meaning

<sup>28</sup>[B]oth Peirce and James argue that any attempt to impose answers to our questions, no matter of what sort, by sheer authority – including the authority of allegedly *a priori* truths – will fail in the long run' (H. Putnam, 2017: 342).

<sup>29</sup>Roth (1969: 152, n.49) urges caution here: "The term "demand" should be taken as synonymous with 'choice' or 'claim' which frees it from a flavor of dogmatism and militancy to some degree."

<sup>30</sup>... one of the chief and lasting themes in his [James's] work is that care of the self ... [is] an activity of ethical significance' (Marchetti, 2015: 119).

<sup>31</sup>'Our judgments concerning the worth of things, big or little, depend on the *feelings* that the things arouse in us. Where we judge a thing to be precious in consequence of the *idea* we frame of it, this is only because the idea is itself associated already with a feeling' (James, 1983a: 132).

is not a simple ideation. It is a motivator to action. The individual seeks to make a difference in the world.

This is why in a Jamesian framework we do not entertain the top-down imputation of values. From the agent point of view, they would be mere abstractions. And because of our blindness to the myriad of meanings, interests and demands of others, we *know* that we *cannot know* well enough to ascertain what is best for others. What is best for others is best from their point of view only. There is no absolute best. Thus to satisfy imputed 'demands' unrecognized by the individuals themselves is, in a sense, a contradiction in terms. Demands are recognized and felt.

The corollary to the requirement of experienced demand is that a self-regarding demand cannot be satisfied by an external agent producing an outcome. The outcome is not separable from the process of its coming into existence. Recall earlier that I said James was concerned with *self-fashioning* and *self-cultivation* – not simple fashioning or cultivation by whatever means. Values, interests and demands are not simply 'out there' to be gathered up and handed to individuals. Values always in the process of creation; they are not found, least of all by the philosopher (or the economist as philosopher). The philosopher must remain neutral or act as just another participant in the game of values creation. She has no privileged position as a creator or even imputer of values.

### *The problem of rationality*

In the most general terms, the problem of rationality is that it 'is as wide-ranging and complex as the domain of intelligence at large' (Rescher, 1988: viii). In a sense, there are different *rationalities* corresponding to the different purposes that people may have.<sup>32</sup> Theoretical rationality or logical coherence satisfies certain needs of the philosopher or scientist. James (1979a: 62) tells us, 'The interest of theoretic rationality ... is but one of a thousand human purposes. When others rear their heads, it must pack up its little bundle and retire till its turn recurs'.

The type of rationality that James believes is most relevant to individuals in their decision making does not gain its validity by its pedigree or its precise formulation. It proves its mettle by what it leads to – what useful truths it produces in the life of those who follow it. This is the agent point of view. From one perspective, a belief and resultant action may seem (and be) 'irrational' but from another it is not at all problematic. It is an error to generalize a particular demonstration of irrationality into an objective and universal claim (Algaier, 2015: 217). Since no single viewpoint captures all the aspects of a phenomenon something will always be left out of a given framework. The challenge is to determine the point of view of the agent and whether her beliefs lead her to correct (in her terms) behavior.

In a letter to his friend George Holmes Howison,<sup>33</sup> James (2001: 503) made the important remark 'I find myself more and more disposed to believe in irrationality as the *prius*'. What he meant was that, if within our framework, we determine that

<sup>32</sup>'Every way of classifying a thing is but a way of handling it for some particular purpose' (James, 1979a: 62).

<sup>33</sup>He was an American philosopher who established the philosophy department at the University of California, Berkeley.



a certain belief or behavior is irrational, that should be the beginning and not the end of our attempt to understand. It should not close off discussion. First, we should attend to the belief's or behavior's consequences for the individual in the circumstances she finds herself. Second, these consequences should be evaluated in the individual's own terms. The spectator must not give into his own blindness about alien lives. It is the obligation of the philosopher-spectator to explore alternative perspectives and explanations.<sup>34</sup>

Individuals may believe or behave in ways that violate the standard canons and axioms of practical rationality. For example, *in certain cases*, the desire that something be the case may increase the chances that it actually comes about. James (1979a: 80–81) illustrates this by the example of an Alpine climber who has no option to save himself other than to make a 'terrible leap'. If he lets the 'emotions of fear and mistrust preponderate' because there is no objective evidence that he can succeed he will lose confidence at the critical moment and fall to his death. But if 'hope and confidence' in himself preponderates he may awaken that extra bit of energy to make a successful leap. James does not claim that this is a common case but it is one '*where faith creates its own verification*' (80, original emphasis).<sup>35</sup> He thinks he will succeed because it is so important (desirable) that he do so.

Individuals may also fail to meet logical demands in their beliefs. Is this irrational? James (1979a: 66, 89) does in fact argue that an important normative constraint is that beliefs be consistent. However, this could be easily misunderstood because James is not arguing that beliefs must be part of a consistent *system*. He is simply arguing that individuals cannot acceptably claim that something is true and untrue at the same time. Statements like 'I know my camera is in the basement but I am going up to the second floor to retrieve my camera' are nonsense as stated. We could call this 'irrationality'. But perhaps the agent means something else (Anscombe, 1963: 35–36).

A more interesting case would be the *intransitivity* of a series of actions.<sup>36</sup> This is often cited as a violation of the logic of action. However, it is more precisely a violation of the constructed axioms of preference created by standard neoclassical economics. It is part of the idealized game of 'economic man'. It is constitutive of what it means to be rational within a point of view, within a system of thought. Rules like these are 'only binding on those who enter the game' (James, 1979a:

<sup>34</sup>Provided with an 'irrational' event or belief, James is the type of individual that is likely to examine how and why an individual has an exceptional experience or alternative worldview: not necessarily because it is objectively true, but because it may contain a possibility to provide us with hope for meaningful living or uncover some new truth about ourselves, the natural world, and our relationship to it' (Algaier, 2015: 215).

<sup>35</sup>This form of wishful thinking violates a requirement of the standard neoclassical economics definition of rationality. 'If Aesop's fox were to decide that chickens are available because they taste better than grapes, he would be guilty of the utopian mistake of allowing his assessment of what actions are available ... to be influenced by his preferences ...' Rationality requires that these be independent of each other. See Binmore (2009: 5). But there is evidence that over-optimism can improve outcomes. See Rizzo and Whitman (2020: 121–122).

<sup>36</sup>It is important to note that the idealization is that a certain set of preferences is being held *simultaneously* in an individual's mind. To go beyond this and make the claim that a series of *actions over time* are inconsistent is to assume that there has been no change in the individual's preference field, that is, he has not changed his mind during the series. See Mises (1966: 103–104).



78). James concedes that we often do enter the game when it helps us attain our ends. But often it does not.

Let us imagine the following series of preferences (Broome, 1999: 70). As between mountaineering in the Alps (M) and touring in Rome (R), Maurice prefers Rome. When he compares staying at home (H) and touring Rome, he prefers to stay at home. But now when comparing staying at home with mountaineering he prefers mountaineering. Thus: R is preferred to M, H is preferred to R, but M is preferred to H. Transitivity, however, requires that H is preferred to M. With the structure of neoclassical rationality, this is an irrational series of preferences. What would James say? I suggest that he would look outside of this particular point of view and consider Maurice's reasons. Maurice believes that if he were to stay home instead of mountaineering it would show cowardice. But we might ask, 'Why did it not show cowardice to prefer Rome instead of mountaineering?' He answers, 'That is because indulging in the culture of Rome is a good reason not to go mountaineering'. We are still puzzled, 'Why is it okay to prefer staying at home to visiting Rome?' He responds, 'Because relaxing at home is a good reason not to indulge in the culture of Rome'. Everything now seems perfectly understandable – rationalizable. So what happened? We went outside of the limited point of view which deemed the preference series irrational and discovered its rationality. Now Broome tediously redescribes the preferences in such a way as to make them transitive. He goes outside of the point of view to understand and then returns to the point of view with an 'appropriate' redescription. However, this stratagem is fully dependent on the alternative point of view to succeed. The original point of view blinded us to the rationality of the individual.<sup>37</sup>

Is it rational to believe that personal consciousness (the soul?) can survive the death of the brain? James (1982c: 77–101) addresses the issue in a lecture, 'Human Immortality'. The important matter for our purposes is not whether James personally believed in the immortality of the soul or whether such a thing is likely. Rather, I see this as important because James shows that within one framework immortality is clearly impossible while in another framework it is at least *possible*. James accepts that there is a relationship between the physical brain and the mind (personal consciousness or the soul). There is concomitant variation at a minimum. But is the relationship something more: Is it a productive or a transmissive relation? On the productive interpretation, when the brain dies so must consciousness. So life after death is impossible. However, on the transmissive interpretation, it is possible. A transmissive interpretation is analogous to radio waves being received by the radio (brain). But when the radio is broken (brain dies), the signals may still be broadcast (Algaier, 2018: 211). Analogously, if personal consciousness is an emanation of some disembodied form of consciousness 'out there' afterlife is possible in some form. This argument, perhaps unpersuasive to many contemporary ears, is not to be construed as saying the afterlife is *probable*. The point is simpler: Since an afterlife is possible, people have the right (epistemically) to believe that it is true. For our purposes, this case illustrates how changing the framework changes the rationality of certain claims *within that framework*. More generally, all statements about rationality or irrationality are relative to some framework.

<sup>37</sup>For a fuller analysis, see Rizzo and Whitman (2020: 66, 69–70).

### The self and its stresses

The case for paternalism is sometimes made on the grounds that people *know* what is best to do but still do not do it. This is the classic case of *akrasia* or weakness of will.<sup>38</sup> In the modeling of today's behavioral economics, the phenomenon has been portrayed in a number of different ways. Sometimes, it is cast as a conflict within an individual between the planner and the doer. Invariably, the planner is seen as the rational self – the self who knows the better or best option. And the doer, in the problematic case, is the one who is weak and therefore takes the inferior option. This seems to be a clear case of deficient *willpower*.

Alternatively, the individual has two points of view. The first from the position of immediate outcomes – either the individual 'overweights' the disutility of the effort required to attain the preferred outcome or overweights the immediate benefits of the inferior outcome. The second is from the distant position. When the individual looks at the relevant options from a distance, he will 'correctly' weight the costs and benefits. In this case, the *valuations* of the individual are inconsistent. And the immediate valuation is considered 'wrong'. This is a case of present bias.

In James's framework, when the individual is 'obstructed' from doing what she thinks best, there is no indication of an irrationality in the *valuation* process.<sup>39</sup> She still reasons correctly but faces an obstacle. Her will is obstructed. This case is one in which a voluntary action requires a choice among two or more desirable options. Each of the options has its advantages and thus its motivational force. However, some options or courses of action are *habitual*. This means they have been performed time and again with normally satisfactory consequences. Therefore, the *effort* required to choose a habitual course of action is quite low.<sup>40</sup> If, on the other hand, the putatively better option is something novel in the individual's life, the effort required to overcome the tendency toward the habitual action may be high. When the individual fails to provide that degree of effort we say that her will is *obstructed*.

It is important to understand that James does not always make a negative evaluation of instances of obstructed will. They are neither immoral nor irrational from the external perspective. They just *are*. However, there is important normative significance from the point of view of the individual herself. In general, an obstructed will is not a stable situation.<sup>41</sup>

There are two reasons for the instability. The first is that the unresolved conflict of choices is an information-generating experience. The second is that as this is still a

<sup>38</sup>In any given observed case, it is always difficult to distinguish unsettled valuations from weakness of will. This is a complex and important problem. For my own views on *akrasia*, see Rizzo (2016).

<sup>39</sup>But in the morbid condition in question the vision may be wholly unaffected, and the intellect clear, and yet the act either fails to follow or follows in some other way' (James, 1981: 1152–1153).

<sup>40</sup>There is an obvious resemblance here to Daniel Kahneman's 'System I' (Kahneman, 2011). However, Kahneman builds into his System I a whole series of other characteristics beyond effortlessness. For an analysis, see Rizzo and Whitman (2020: 181–189).

<sup>41</sup>It is important not to view obstruction as a permanent or hard conflict between two or more selves. George Santayana (1996: 94–95, emphasis added) makes the general point when describing James's thought: 'He saw that experience, as we endure it, is not a matter of distinct sensations, nor the expression of separate hostile faculties, such as reason and the passions, or sense and the categories; it is rather a flow of *mental discourse*, like a dream, in which all of the divisions and units are vague and shifting....'

case of voluntary behavior the individual can overcome her obstructions. James gives some general suggestions which we will discuss in the next section. With regard to information, let us consider what happens when a person experiences the failure of willpower or engages in 'akratic action'. Bromhall (2018: 44–45) presents the essence of the argument within James's framework:

Akratic action provides the agent with valuable information that cannot be gleaned from anything else ... If akratic action involves an agent reverting to her settled habits despite making the conscious effort to act against those habits, then there is a fair bit of awareness at play. The agent must be aware of her decision to make such an attempt, aware that the attempt was made, and aware of the attempt's failure. Her persistent awareness yields information about the attempt and the subsequent failure; namely knowledge of the point at which the failure occurred, and the reason for her failure ... [T]rying and failing provides you with information that you can then take and use to increase the likelihood of success the next time you are faced with a similar situation.

The information provided to the individual by the failure is finely tuned to her own circumstances and her own valuations. The conflict emerges, at least in its pure form, not because anyone tells her to choose the harder option (although they may) but because she both wants and does not want to take what she considers the better option. And the particular obstructions are those which she values in her circumstances. Even if she ultimately overcomes the obstacles, the pull of the lesser but easier option is always there in the case of the obstructed will.<sup>42</sup> It is the *feeling* of what was lost which is intimately related to the effort of the decision:

[B]oth alternatives are steadily held in view, and in the very act of murdering the vanquished possibility the chooser realizes how much in that instant he is making himself lose. It is deliberately driving a thorn into one's flesh ... (James, 1981: 1141).

### *Jamesian boosting of moral energy*<sup>43</sup>

James had definite ideas about how individuals could overcome obstructed wills. To appreciate these, it is important to recognize that James believed that the obstructed or akratic individual is in the realm of voluntary behavior. Voluntary behavior is contrasted with automatic or reflex or instinctive behavior. The voluntary is conscious and is directed toward an explicit end. The agent must have a 'prevision' of its effect, although he may turn out to have been wrong. Furthermore, as we have seen, the kind of voluntary action with which we are concerned is 'willful behavior' that is, where 'there are multiple competing... ideas of how to proceed that inhibit each other ...' (Bromhall, 2018: 32). Thus, the struggle and effort he encounters in the process

<sup>42</sup>The reader should note that James avoids making the concept of effort a tautology. He does not say that whatever course the agent actually takes is the easier one. An agent can take the harder option although often takes the easier one. The feeling of effort is a real psychological state.

<sup>43</sup>For a contemporary version of 'boosting', see Hertwig (2017).

of making a decision attests to its voluntary and willful nature. Now, perhaps controversially among some, James believes that the decision about the *degree of effort* to attend to a certain preferred course of action is a free act. We certainly (usually) have the *feeling* that we *can* so decide, even if we do not. James accepts that this is, in fact, the case. We do have it in our power to make our lives better. This is integral to James's philosophy of meliorism.

Since, as we have seen, James has a very inclusive concept of rationality, a primary possible opening for paternalism would be in cases of obstructed will. The key obstruction is the ease of the habitual response when it no longer aligns well with the individual's best interest as seen by herself. James believes that raising the level of mental and moral energy is the 'most important thing that can happen to a man' (James, 1982a: 130). It is important to discover 'our means of unlocking' these powers (145). More specifically, an important task of practical psychology is:

... somehow to get a topographic survey made of the limits of human power in every conceivable direction ... and we ought to construct a methodological inventory of the paths of access, or keys, differing with the diverse types of individual, to the different kinds of power (145).

In the essay 'The Energies of Man' (James, 1982a) which was originally his presidential address to the American Philosophical Association in 1906 at Columbia University, James explores various unorthodox (for his time) possibilities. These included Hatha Yoga, breathing exercises, Ignatius Loyola's spiritual exercises, fasting, mind cures and so forth. He makes no definitive decision or recommendation about them, but he does insist that they have helped certain people in particular circumstances. Concentrating the mind, eliminating negative thoughts, and beyond these – exposing oneself to new '[e]xcitements, ideas, and efforts, in a word, are what carry us over the dam' (132, original emphasis).

In his much earlier work, *The Principles of Psychology*, he discusses more 'conventional' methods. These have two aspects: they work on training the individual and on manipulating her environment (Bromhall, 2018: 43). They are aimed at 'the acquisition of a new habit, or the leaving off of an old one' (James, 1981: 127). James organizes them as four maxims.

First, we '*should launch ourselves with as strong and decided initiative as possible.*' The involves mainly environmental changes such as '[a]ccumulate all possible circumstances which shall reinforce the right motives; put yourself assiduously in conditions that encourage the new way; make engagements incompatible with the old; take a public pledge, if the case allows ...' (127, original emphasis). Second, '*Never suffer an exception to occur till the new habit is securely rooted in your life*' (127, original emphasis).<sup>44</sup> Making an exception (for special days, circumstances, etc.) creates a slippery slope whereby the whole resolution may be undone. On the other hand, recognizing that an exception effectively means never changing will keep the ultimate

<sup>44</sup>The drunken Rip Van Winkle, in Jefferson's play, excuses himself for every fresh dereliction by saying: "I won't count this time!" Well! He may not count it, and a kind Heaven may not count it; but it is being counted none the less' (James, 1981: 131).

benefit in focus and increase the chance of success.<sup>45</sup> Third, ‘Seize the very first possible opportunity to act on every resolution you make, and on every emotional prompting you may experience in the direction of the habits you aspire to gain’ (128, original emphasis). Planning to change at some point in the future rather than now may be worse than nothing at all. There is the threat of perpetual procrastination.<sup>46</sup> ‘Every time a resolve or a fine glow of feeling evaporates without bearing practical fruit is worse than a chance lost; it works so as positively to hinder future resolutions and emotions from taking the normal path of discharge’ (129). In effect, a habit of inert sentimentality or dreaming is created. Fourth, and perhaps most generally, ‘Keep the faculty of effort alive in you by a little gratuitous exercise every day’ (130, original emphasis). The exercise consists of doing ‘every day or two something for no other reason than that you would rather not do it.’ It does not have to be anything important: extending your work for an extra half-hour, taking time to listen to someone’s problems, giving your seat on a bus to someone else, not eating a piece of chocolate, etc. This has a character effect in strengthening a person’s level of energy and power to make efforts where it really counts. It also tends to break unnecessary or superfluous habitual responses.

The power of individuals to overcome the ease of habitual responses where their good judgment deems they should take a different course is not a given. People may be temporarily locked in a low-level ‘efficiency equilibrium’ (James, 1982a: 132) but they can escape it. James has given suggestions for this kind of *self-transformation*.

### ***Against behavioral paternalism: avant la lettre***

The purpose of this section is to gather up the elements of James’s psychological-philosophical system we have previously discussed and to confront them with a ‘standard’ behavioral paternalist perspective. The associated table (at the end) summarizes the comparisons.

#### *Confronting James with behavioralism*

*a. Individualism and Subjectivism.* James begins with individualism both moral and methodological. This accounts for his insistence on seeing things from the agent’s point of view. But since individuals are different this means they have different points of view. This also implies, as James develops it, that each person has only partial knowledge. No one sees the whole picture. The whole picture is not just a picture of facts. It is also one of subjective interpretations, meanings and purposes. So those who *feel* more, to large extent *know* more, or at least, know some different things.

Behavioral economics pays only lip service, as it seems to me, to both methodological individualism and subjectivism. Diversity of preferences is generally ignored (Rizzo and Whitman, 2020: 265–279). Different perspectives (‘frames’) are considered non-normative, that is, they should not have an effect on decisions. Individuals interpret games and experimental situations as the economist sees

<sup>45</sup>This is similar to the point made by Ainslie (2012).

<sup>46</sup>Planning to do it *now* rather than *later* works against ‘present bias’ conundrums.

them. Another way to put it is that behavioral economists tend to be at best *incomplete* individualists and subjectivists.

*b. Rationality.* Although rationality, or perhaps irrationality (bounded rationality), is a critical factor in behavior paternalism. Importantly, James does not emphasize this because he has an *inclusive* concept of rationality.<sup>47</sup> He sees rationality as relative to a contextual framework. There is nothing sacred about any given framework. In fact, he bemoans the tendency, especially for intellectuals, to elevate *theoretical* rationality in the context of everyday life. Truth (and rationality) is what works for the purposes at hand. In that sense, and because of his life-long commitment to evolutionary theory, James is an ecological rationalist. He emphasizes what has worked and what still works in terms of the purposes of individuals. On the other hand, claims of irrationality are the *prius* – the starting point of deeper analysis. For example, wishful thinking can be functional in certain conditions. The imposition by spectators of a certain structure like transitivity can blind us to the agent's meaning. James says we should listen carefully to people and get into their point of view.

Behavioral economics is firmly committed to theoretical rationality, that is, the rationality of big, coherent and complete systems. Preferences and choices must reflect a logical or axiomatic structure. They must be complete, independent of irrelevant alternatives, transitive and so forth. Violations are at the very least *prima facie* indications of some problem. While it claims not to impose alien preferences on individuals, it clearly chooses one side of any inconsistency – for example, long-run preferences rather than immediate or short-run preferences.

*c. Values.* Values within a Jamesian framework are based on the interests ('demands') of individuals. They express practical attitudes in specific contexts. They are real propensities to act by individuals as they are. Thus values emerge from the bottom up. The moral philosopher may try to organize them in a system (that is her profession!). Nevertheless, these systems are not normative for the individuals. It is *their* values that are normative and the system is only a tentative external framework. Reality has a way of breaking out of the systems of philosophers as people explore and confront new problems. Behavior which violates a property of the system is a problem for the *system*, and does not suggest that the individuals have necessarily got things wrong.

It is quite difficult to see James having sympathy for ideas like counterfactual preferences, that is, preferences that people are theorized to have under *unrealized ideal* conditions – such as the presence of all relevant knowledge, the absence of significant computational deficits and no lack of willpower (Thaler and Sunstein, 2003). These are also 'given' and not in the process of emergence or creation as the result of exploration or experimentation. Counterfactual ('true') preferences are, however, an

<sup>47</sup>James's inclusivity extends to the use of the term 'abnormal'. Leary (2018: 298) points out: 'Reflecting his pluralistic respect for the full variety of human experience, James avoided the negative term "abnormal" when discussing atypical mental states, arguing that "exceptional" states, as he called them, can be beneficial at times, whether from society's or the individual's point of view.' For a contemporary view of 'inclusive rationality', see Rizzo and Whitman (2020: 25–38).

essential feature of behavioral paternalism. It is the central concept without which the entire normative system collapses. However, this is the ‘truth of the intellectualist’. It is a form of ‘abstraction worship’. These preferences exist in a hypothetical world in which the individual is different from his actual self.

*d. Well-being.* The standard of well-being for James is complex. Nevertheless, we start out with the requirement that the satisfaction of interests must be *felt*. For this to be the case, the interests or demands of individuals must be perceived by them and their satisfaction must be experienced as such. Thus, there is no satisfaction of preferences in the air. No objective state of affairs unconnected with experienced interests counts. Secondly, the satisfaction of interests must be *self-fashioned*. It is the process of *self-cultivation*. People are not to be handed it or manipulated into it. Thirdly, the spectator lacks the knowledge required (both of personal circumstances and of the individual’s mindset) to direct the individual. The wise spectator knows that he does not know.

On the other hand, for behavioral paternalists, well-being is constituted by the satisfaction of counterfactual preferences. In so doing, they reject the necessity of an experience criterion. Counterfactual preferences are preferences people don’t actually have. So even if they are satisfied the ‘satisfaction’ is not experienced as *preference* satisfaction. Indeed, the resultant state of affairs might actually be disliked by the individual. Behavioral paternalists also reject the self-fashioning criterion as an essential criterion of well-being. And they minimize the imperfect spectator-knowledge limitation.

*e. Obstructed Will.* As we saw earlier, a central problem in James’s framework is the obstructed will. He did not consider, as far as I am aware, the issues of incorrect, insufficient or biased computational abilities. For James, the inability of individuals to enhance their well-being is primarily a matter of insufficient psychological power. The ways in which James addresses the obstructed will are very important for our contrast with behavioralism. He treats obstruction as opening up the possibility of the individual learning about herself: what she really wants and how to get it. The conflict experienced by the individual can add in a very specific and personalized way to the partial self-knowledge she has.

On the other hand, many behavioral paternalists minimize the likelihood and importance of individuals learning for themselves and, especially, from their own failures. Biases are considered stubborn. They do not view obstructions to the satisfaction of true preferences as opening the door to their amelioration.

*f. Individual Boosting.* James was clearly aware that people have problems becoming better by their own lights. The obstructed will cannot be simply ignored. James suggests various means that people can use to help themselves. This is quite consistent with his idea that meliorism is about self-fashioning and self-cultivation of individuals and thus about, person by person, changing and improving the world. An important aspect of that is tolerance, born of knowing that we do not know and that we cannot determine what constitutes a meaningful life or action for others. A



better world is one in which we as spectators or policymakers do not attempt to judge or regulate the field.

On the other hand, behavioral paternalists look to policymakers to solve problems of everyday decision making: defaults, framing manipulation, sin taxes, even mandates and prohibitions. Economists have taken it upon themselves to fix the self-regarding behavior of individuals. Ironically, the one doctor in the room, William James, would not.

## Concluding remarks

I have not chosen to review William James's philosophical and psychological framework as it applies to paternalism because I believe that James had a final or definitive word on the subject. But I do agree with Hilary Putnam's (1995: 17) observation 'William James is a figure who simply won't go away.' This is because he continues to be a source of fertile ideas in psychology and in philosophy. Many of them, as we have seen, constitute challenges to the basic assumptions and perspectives of today's behavioral paternalism. In the spirit of intellectual engagement, these challenges require and deserve responses. I am also keen to dispel the idea that the introduction of psychology into economics or public policy more generally necessarily involves a paternalistic stance. In fact, it is easy to see that an antipaternalistic stance based on psychology is also quite credible. Finally, and most generally, I do believe that there are many untapped elements of wisdom in the old masters. And William James is certainly one of them.

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## Appendix: Table of comparisons

Characteristic	James	Behavioralism
1. Individualism (Methodological and Ethical)	Individuals: main unit of analysis and concern. Different interests, preferences and viewpoints. All goods based on actual individual interests ('demands').	Aggregate outcomes emphasized. Differences de-emphasized. Goods often depend on <i>true (counterfactual)</i> preferences of individuals.
2. Subjectivism	Subjective individual interests and meanings. Difficult for observers to ascertain and assess.	Tendency to conflate the subjective interests and meanings with objective economist perspective. Conflation minimizes the observer's ascertainment and assessment difficulties.
3. Rationality	Wide, inclusive conception. Not theoretical, adaptive and pragmatic. Context and framework specific.	Narrow: neoclassical economics and preference axioms. Theoretical, abstract. Independent of context.
4. Values	Values formed and expressed under actual conditions. Propensities to act. Subject to revision. Normative systems and standards of the philosopher secondary.	True preferences are formed/expressed under purified conditions. Not tied to actual choices. Constant or given. Normative systems and standards of the 'philosopher' (economist) primary.

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(Continued.)

Characteristic	James	Behavioralism
5. Well-being	Felt, not an objective state. Self-fashioned. Spectator's knowledge problem significant (‘blindness’).	Counterfactual preferences – not necessarily felt. Can be imposed. Economist's knowledge problem minimized
6. Obstructed Will	Will to do the better frustrated by habits. Dynamic model. Learning from failure.	Will to do the better frustrated by present bias. Static model. Individuals trapped in akratic cycle. No learning from failure.
7. Remedies for Failed Attempts	Generalized boosting techniques. Remedies at the level of the individual and voluntary social relations.	Problem-specific solutions. Remedies at the level of policies usually involving government: defaults, sin taxes, mandates.