

The Incoherence of William James’ Moral Philosophy

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In this paper, I contend that William James’ moral theory is incoherent. James argues that we should permit a pluralism of values, viewing all demands as *prima facie* goods. In order to construct the best moral theory, he argues, that we should try to fulfill as many demands as possible, thus contributing to a richer and better moral universe. I argue that if James maintains that all demands are equally good, then the demands of opposing moral theories should be fulfilled just as much as the demands required by James’ moral theory should be. James could introduce a standard of tolerance, requiring that all demands made must not conflict with other existing demands. This would require all moral theories to be inclusive of each other, thus eliminating the apparent conflict between his moral theory and other moral theories. However, a standard of tolerance would require that the demands of James’ moral theory be reformulated so that they do not conflict with other moral theories. I will begin by outlining James’ moral theory. I will then explain why it runs into the problem of conflicting demands, and show that if my objection is correct, James’ argument is incoherent. Next, I will consider a response to the problem of conflicting demands. This response will argue for the introduction of a standard of tolerance that must be met in order for a demand to be good, resolving the problem of conflicting demands. Finally, I will argue that even if James introduces a standard of tolerance into his moral theory, his position remains incoherent.

First, it is necessary to see exactly what James’ argument is and what conclusions he draws from his argument. He begins by denying the

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existence, or at least the importance, of a moral metaphysical realm. He writes:

There is no such thing possible as an ethical philosophy dogmatically made up in advance. We all help to determine the content of ethical philosophy so far as we contribute to the race's moral life. There can be no final truth in ethics. (610-611)

A moral realist would argue that there is a metaphysical realm which dictates the rightness and wrongness of certain acts and functions as a final moral truth. It is up to us, according to the absolutist, to discover the truths of this realm in hopes of implementing them into society. It is not, however, changing or alterable. James denies the existence of an unchanging, perfect, and distant moral realm, viewing ethics as ever-evolving. He goes on to say that, even if the metaphysical realm did exist, discerning it would be impossible. If, for example, a God exists, "exactly what the thought of the infinite thinker may be is hidden from us" (628). At the very least, James concludes, we should build our moral philosophy as if no knowledge of a metaphysical realm will provide us with a moral philosophy. If no moral metaphysical realm exists, morality must be found in the physical realm. James argues that morality is to be found in the desires and demands of individuals. He writes:

Goodness, badness, and obligation must be realized somewhere in order to really exist...their only habit can be a mind which feels them... moral relations have their status, in the beings consciousness. So far as he feels anything to be good, he makes it good. (614)

If anything is good or bad, it is so because it is or is not desired by some individual. He continues to say, "The only force of appeal to us, which either a living God or an abstract ideal order can wield, is found in the 'everlasting ruby vaults' of our own human hearts, as they happen to beat responsive and not irresponsive to the claim" (618). James attempts to shift philosophy's focus from the abstract to the concrete. The good is to be found exclusively in the desires and demands of moral agents. Many things are demanded, however, but not all demands can be fulfilled. The task of the moral philosopher is to find a way to sort out the demands that should be fulfilled from the demands that should be fulfilled in the ideal moral world. James presents an interesting dilemma. If we cannot glean morality from some metaphysical realm, we must either find a common essence among goods, or satisfy as many demands as possible. He writes:

If it were found that all goods qua goods contained a common essence, then the amount of this essence involved in any one good would show its rank in the scale of goodness, and order could be quickly made; for this essence would be the good upon which all thinkers were agreed, the relatively objective and universal good that the philosopher seeks...no one of the measures that have been actually proposed has, however, given general satisfaction. (620)

The goal of moral philosophy has been to find a common essence of this sort. According to James, Kant's deontology, Bentham's and Mill's utilitarianism, and so forth, have all failed to provide a satisfactory theory of how to prioritize goods and thus have failed to direct us how best to act. James argues that some are not universally applicable, some are too vague, some have obvious counter-objections, and so forth. Suffice it to say that the theories that have attempted to find a common essence among goods have all fallen short. In the absence of such a theory, James concludes that "the essence of good is simply to satisfy demand," and thus it should be our goal to satisfy as many demands as possible (621). He takes this to be the inevitable conclusion of his argument, writing:

Since everything which is demanded is by that fact a good, must not the guiding principle for ethical philosophy be simply to satisfy at all times as many demands as we can?...the victory to be philosophically prayed for is that of the more inclusive side, of the side which even in the hour of triumph will to some degree do justice to the ideals in which the vanquished party's interests lay... invent some manner of realizing your own ideals which will also satisfy the alien demands, that and that only is the path of peace. (623)

A good moral theory, according to James, will be measured by the number of demands it lets us satisfy; the more demands of moral agents it meets, the more beneficial the theory is. Let us consider whether James' theory is tenable. I will first consider an objection raised by Robert Talisse and Scott Aikin. They note the existence of conflicting demands and ask whether James' theory can resolve the conflict. Talisse and Aikin argue that

Certain kinds of ideals are such that to hold them is necessarily to judge certain other ideals to be immoral and thus unworthy of realization. Not all moral conflict is due to an overall lack of resources or a general inability to accommodate everyone. Some conflict is due to the fact that some moral commitments involve a rejection of

other moral commitments. (Talisie and Aikin 8)

For example, what happens when a group of white supremacists demand that African-Americans *should not* be allowed to vote and African-Americans argue that they *should* be allowed? Let us assume that there are approximately an equal amount of individuals with each demand, or at the very least, that it is difficult to conclude which demand holds the majority. Each of these demands requires that someone else's demand goes unmet. The demands cancel each other out, and although a good state of affairs would be achieved if either one is fulfilled, an equal amount of bad, or at least privation of good, would also be gained due to the demand that goes unfulfilled. The objection is that James' theory has no means by which to arbitrate between conflicting demands of this sort. This example provides an admittedly narrow consideration of the entire moral field. James would require us to survey the entire field and try to include as many demands as possible. However, this example does illustrate the point that, in situations where there is no conceivable way of deciding whether the fulfillment of one group's demands is better than the fulfillment of another group's demands, it is impossible under James' theory to arbitrate between conflicting demands.

If this objection is correct, then I contend James' theory is incoherent. To see the problem with James' theory, we must begin by viewing the moral claims of his theory as demands. It does not seem problematic to view them this way. A moral theory makes demands on us to act in some ways rather than others. To make a moral claim concerning X is to say: "I demand that you do X." It seems that any moral theory, insofar as it carries normative weight, makes such a demand of moral agents. Is James justified in making the demand that I abide by his moral theory? It seems that he is not. If the above objection holds, then he has no means by which to compel other moral philosophers to change their own viewpoints. Other moral philosophers have created moral theories that make demands which conflict with the demands of James' theory. However, if all demands are equal, then the demands of other moral theories are just as legitimate as the demands of James' moral theory. Suppose, for example, that I am a deontologist. It stands to reason that my conception of the perfect moral world would be considerably different from the conception written into James' moral theory, and that James' conception and mine would conflict with each other. However, under James' theory, all demands are equally legitimate; for example, my demand that the individuals follow the rules of deontology is just as legitimate as James' demand. James has no means by which to reconcile these conflicting views.

It does seem that, if James' theory comprised a majority, his view

would, under his theory, be the most preferable. Insofar as his theory, if believed by the most people, would fulfill a greater number of demands than a theory with fewer supporters, it would be the better theory. However, it seems that it would be difficult if not possible to sort through the varied and complex pluralism of moral theories and create a hierarchy of moral demands based solely on numbers. Furthermore, if James' theory did not comprise the majority, he would be morally obligated to subscribe to the prevailing moral theory. Let us assume then that no such priority based on the number of people subscribing to a moral theory can be assigned.

Let us see if we can construct a response to the objection of conflicting demands, thus avoiding the problem of incoherence. It seems that James would argue that we should alter our demands in order to accommodate the demands of others. In other words, to return to the example given above, the white supremacist could be permitted to hate the African-American, as long as the African-American is allowed to vote. Likewise, perhaps I should, as a deontologist, reformulate my views so that my demands are no longer in conflict with the demands of proponents of other moral theories. That way, everybody's new demands are satisfied. This response seems to introduce a standard of tolerance to which demands must adhere. This standard of tolerance would classify good demands as those that accommodate the demands of others. However, as Talisse and Aikin put it, "this kind of account of the value of toleration would have to identify the value of toleration outside of the existing economy of desires and demands," so there is a problem, since "James is committed to the thesis that there is no such thing as a good that is not in fact demanded by some person" (9). A restriction of demands based upon some requirement of a standard of tolerance, it seems, would be very un-Jamesian. To say that demands must meet a standard of tolerance seems to go against a key tenant of James' argument, which is that we should reject the goodness of demands based on a common essence and treat all demands as equal. Now Ruth Anna Putnam argues that James can "easily adopt a doctrine of tolerance. In the absence of an accessible absolute truth, we must make our demands humble in nature" (Putnam 26). Henry Aiken writes that, for James, "tolerance is intrinsically valuable as well, that it is good, or right, per se to be tolerant" (Aiken 59). James himself writes that we must commit ourselves to "the well-known democratic respect for the sacredness of individuality," and to "the outward tolerance of whatever is not itself intolerant" (Putnam 26). The standard of tolerance does provide a solution to the problem of conflicting demands, and with James' respect for individual freedom and his value of pluralism, perhaps a standard of tolerance would be the move he would make. Let

us assume that James' value of tolerance would prompt him to make an allowance for a standard of tolerance in his moral theory.

The fact remains, though, that recourse to some metaphysical conception of tolerance, goes against James' rejection of the metaphysical realm. If tolerance is the elusive common essence that makes demands good, then it seems that we get a completely different argument from James. Good demands become those that can accommodate other demands, whereas bad demands are those that call for the restriction of the demands of others. Although I think this revision of James' ethics undermines a central tenant of his argument, namely his rejection of a common essence among goods, let us consider the revised Jamesian ethics for the sake of the discussion. Perhaps James could argue that all (or at least most) moral agents would agree that tolerance is desirable, and thus a moral theory requiring a standard of tolerance would exist insofar as it satisfies a great number of demands. Thus, James' escape from the problem of conflicting demands is to require that demands not be intolerant of the demands of others. We will say that the demands that are able to tolerate the demands of others have met a standard of tolerance. This standard of tolerance will be the measure by which good demands are separated from bad demands, and if tenable, will save James' theory from the problem of conflicting demands. I will now address a final objection to James' theory that grants the allowance of a standard of tolerance.

It follows from the revised Jamesian ethics that, in order for a demand to be legitimate, the demand has to meet the standard of tolerance. However, the demands of James' moral theory do not seem to be at all tolerant. James, for example, demands that we act as if the metaphysical realm does not exist, yet moral realists demand that we act as though the metaphysical realm does exist, so it seems that James' demand is intolerant of the moral realist's demand. It seems that James' moral theory as a whole also falls victim to this objection. His moral theory demands that I try to accommodate the demands of as many other individuals as I can. But has he met this demand of his own moral theory in the creation of his moral theory? James' moral theory demands that the demands of the utilitarian, the deontologist, the divine command theorist, and so on, go unmet. Insofar as he demands adherence to his moral theory, and such adherence would require one to not fulfill certain tenants of other moral theories, James demands that the demands of other moral theories go unmet. This seems to be deeply problematic. Let us imagine, once again, that I am a deontologist. I argue that the perfect moral world is one in which everyone lives their lives under the guidance of the categorical imperative. James' moral theory, if it is meaningfully different from deontology (which I think it is), demands a world that stands in contradiction

with the demanded world of the deontologist. It may be true that James and I would agree on many things, but at some point our paths would diverge. His own theory cannot meet his own standard of tolerance. James' theory cannot include the demands of other moral philosophers. If all demands are good and tolerant demands are best, then James' theory, as well as all other moral theories, should be discarded. At best, James could argue for some sort of synthesis of all existing moral theories. He could attempt to take the tolerant aspects of his theory and the tolerant aspects of all other theories and combine them to meet the demands of as many moral philosophers as possible. He has no grounds on which to reject the demands of other moral philosophers. However, if he tries to accommodate those demands of other moral philosophers, it seems that his theory will crumble. It would lose any uniqueness whatsoever, no doubt lost to vagueness and obscurity. James' theory would no longer provide anything of consequence to the moral philosophy discussion.

Consider where this leaves us. If the objection about conflicting demands holds, then all demands are equally good if fulfilled, and we come to an irreconcilable impasse when demands conflict with each other. James cannot say with justification that his moral theory is better than its competitors. And if we admit the introduction of a standard of tolerance that good demands must meet, the demands of James' own theory do not pass his own test. His demands conflict with the demands of other pre-existing moral philosophies. If he tried to accommodate those demands, he would have to scrap his moral theory. In other words, if he treats all demands as equal and good, then he suggests that the demands of his moral philosophy are no better than the demands of other moral philosophies; and if he says that demands must be tolerant, then the demands of his own moral theory fail to meet his own requirement in their conflict with preexisting moral theories. I conclude that his theory is incoherent.

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