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"Kant, James, and the Practice of Ethics"

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1. The heterodox side of ethics

Both Kant and James's moral philosophies challenged generations of scholars, proving to be much more complicated and multi-faced than even an attentive look might betray. Kant is in fact *not* the hard-nosed deontologist pictured by modern and contemporary commentators alike, as James is *not* a flamboyant consequentialist. Or, at least, *not only*. And this is not because in both authors we can detect references to, and endorsements of, different—sometimes opposite—moral views and conceptions, but rather because in selected portions of their respective works they pointed to a heterodox picture of what moral philosophy is about in the first place. One in which the nature and point of philosophical ethics are not best caught by *moral theorizing* (or not at all), but rather by a peculiar kind of *moral practice*: a cultivation and care of the self which in Kant takes the shape of self-constitution while in James takes the shape of self-experimentation.[1]

In what follows, rather than attempting a comprehensive reading of their moral thoughts, I intend to investigate selective aspects of this heterodox philosophical line. In particular, I shall focus on Kant and James's rather original inquiries into the vexing issue of the relationship between ethics and anthropology/psychology,[2] which, as I shall argue, they con-

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[1] Cf. respectively, Foucault 2008, Louden 2000, Donatelli 2015, Franzese 2008, and Marchetti 2015, although the literature is growing voluminous.

[2] The intricate and much debated topic of the relationship between anthropology and psychology, even if central to the understanding of Kant and James's work, falls well beyond the scope of the paper, and hence I shall pass over it in silence. What interests me is in fact what is common between Kant and James in their characterization of anthropological

tributed to unraveling with some compelling insights yet to be fully appreciated. It will in fact be my contention that both Kant and James, in key moments of their intellectual biographies, addressed the issue of a *pragmatic* anthropology and psychology, offering a fruitful path along with rethinking the nature and shape of moral reflection altogether. By surveying some central lines of Kant's *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* and James's *Principles of Psychology*, I argue for a picture of the entanglement of ethics and anthropology/psychology along pragmatist lines standing in opposition—and hence representing an alternative—to the foundational account of the entanglement offered by the orthodoxy of ethical theory. According to the picture offered by ethical theory, the clash between the purely descriptive register of anthropology/psychology and the utterly prescriptive one of ethics necessarily brings the former to yield to the demands of the latter. Pragmatism staunchly resists such foundational dynamics: by eyeing a conception of *pragmatic* anthropology and psychology which illuminates an important dimension and register of the moral life that moral philosophy should account for—that is, self-cultivation and experimentation—Kant and James envisioned a novel path along which thinking of the relationship between ethics and anthropology/psychology as one of convergence and mutual reinforcement over the inquiry of what human beings might make of themselves by entering in a certain *critical* relationship with themselves.

Notwithstanding the detail and relatively narrow scope of the inquiry over this particular theme, if compared with their wider moral productions, I take this to be a key theme running deep in Kant and James's respective—and, in more than one respect, rather distant—philosophical agendas, despite the theme seeming to create more than a friction with the rest of their work—especially so in the case of Kant. Before outlining the contours of Kant and James's pragmatic moves as well as of their synergies, let me spell out in some more detail the philosophical problem with which they were—and we contemporary readers of ethics *after* them still are—wresting with.

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and psychological investigations as *pragmatic*—as against metaphysical and/or physiological. For a reference to Kant's and James's distinctive understandings of anthropology, psychology, and their respective features and domains, see the introductions to the critical editions of *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* by Louden (Kant 2006 [1798]) and of *The Principles of Psychology* by Evans and Myers (James 1981 [1890]).

2. Normative descriptions and the self

The problem of placing anthropology and psychology in ethics is an en-trenched and nagging one in the history of moral philosophy—a problem which we encounter in different shapes and guises in moments as diverse as Greek philosophy, the long season of pre-modernism, and the so-called secular age. To narrow down, if only slightly, the timeframe to the En-lightenment and post-Enlightenment—but a similar discourse, although dressed in rather different theoretical clothes, can be located in selected earlier moments of Western intellectual history—the problem of how to best square the normative demands of ethical reflection with the empiri-cal evidence about human nature crossed the moral thought of virtually all great thinkers in such tradition from Hobbes to Hegel, and still in-forms our contemporary echoes of such debates. Despite the most diverse answers to the issue, a common assumption underlying most approaches, with only a few exceptions, can still be appreciated. What is in fact usually assumed is that what anthropology and psychology give us are factual de-scriptions of human beings as beings of a certain kind (natural, rational, or divine), while ethics deals with such normative notions as those of duties, imperatives, and laws. The first tells us what there (empirically) is, while the second—very roughly—what there should (morally) be. According to the widely accepted view defended by ethical theories understood as pre-scriptive endeavors articulated in a second-order, meta-ethical component and a first-order, normative one,[3] by merely describing how human beings are, we cannot derive any information that is relevant for ethics, if not by pointing out those very features of human beings whose implementation would count as the *realization* or *promotion* of a certain moral principle. In this picture, ethics can profit from anthropological and psychological con-siderations, but only in an external way: namely, by picking from them some raw materials and arranging them according to *its own* normative criteria. The one counter-move sometimes envisioned to contrast such an approach—which however represents nothing but its sheer reverse, shar-ing the assumption about the sharp division of roles and goals between ethics and anthropology/psychology—has been a return to a burdensome metaphysical account of human nature in which there would be inscribed those very ethical qualities that moral theory prescribes us to *respect* or

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[3] For a classical statement of what moral theories are, of their goals and limits, see Jamieson 1991. For a thorough, and by now classical, criticism of moral theorizing so under-stood, see Williams 1985.

honor. The only way anthropology and psychology can deliver from a moral point of view is by turning themselves into sites for ethical principles and rules, and hence the way in which we can morally learn from human nature is by investigating its inbuilt ethical constitution.

The vast majority of accounts thus resolved the alleged clash between ethics and anthropology/psychology by reducing the one to the other. Pragmatism, as it is exemplified by Kant and James in the texts under consideration, refutes the terms of the debate suggesting the possibility of a *description* of human beings that is *ethically relevant* not because it makes reference (even if only an implicit one) to a moral rule, law, or principle inbuilt in our human makeup, but rather because it presents what human beings *practically* make of themselves as self-governing accountable beings—thus envisioning an internal and non-foundational connection between anthropology/psychology and ethics.

Read this way, pragmatism works towards bridging the is-ought gap informing a great portion of modern and contemporary moral philosophy. In order to retain normativity in the practical realm, and shaping it after the normativity as found in the theoretical one, moral philosophers envisioned rather different ways in which the prescriptive character of morality could be accounted for in terms of a reference to the natural traits of human beings, or at least it can be reconciled with them, without falling prey to a version of Hume's law or G. E. Moore's open question argument (and hence to the naturalistic fallacy). The problem faced is that one cannot derive ethical conclusions from merely factual premises because in no factual description of a certain situation (worldly or psychological) could figure those very normative features relevant for ethics. In fact, any naturalistic description of a certain situation or psychological profile would not satisfy the normative demands of ethics understood as a prescriptive intellectual activity. What is presupposed by this picture, however, can be—and has been—challenged: namely, the ideas that moral features cannot dress in natural clothes (or, alternatively, that nature does not wear moral considerations on its sleeves), and conversely that all that is factual is as such normatively idle are under attack from a number of corners.[4] Among the many strategies to account for a picture of moral normativity along different lines, pragmatism as reworked by Kant and James in the texts under examination, traces a distinctive and promising path.

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[4] For a recent survey and showcase of these strategies, see Marchetti and Marchetti 2016.

Pragmatism resists the dichotomic picture of moral thought accord-ing to which anthropology/psychology and ethics pursue independent inquiries into different aspects of reality—the natural/descriptive and the non-natural/normative respectively. Given their heterogeneous character, the two tasks need to be somewhat artificially coordinated. The challenge facing pragmatist thinkers is that of showing the contiguity of such in-quiries and the consequent harmony of their respective tasks. This move is certainly not without conceptual consequences for the way in which we picture both tasks, their very strategies and goals. Pragmatism questions in fact both the broadly reductionist view of anthropology and psychol-ogy according to which they would give us neutral descriptions of human beings as they simply—that is culturally or biologically—are (thus stress-ing its normative idleness and grounding in brute facts), and the broadly intuitionistic understanding of ethics as the prescriptive discipline of what should be independently from any particular perspective (as a way to se-cure the objectivity of the principles and values it advocates). As against the former, pragmatism offers a picture of anthropology and psychology as revolving around what human beings as *agents* engaged in a certain worldly practice might make of themselves, while as against the latter it suggests a picture of moral thought as the survey of such practices as practices involving a critical evaluation of the self in its practical, worldly constitution and transformation. What gets dropped altogether is both a notion of the self as a given and a conception of moral normativity as dependent on moral principles built in splendid isolation from human activities and contingency.

In acknowledging such a closeness between ethics and anthropology/ psychology, this conception of moral thought silences at the same time the temptation of reducing the former to the latter: that is, reducing moral thought to a mere defense of a specific metaphysical image of human beings, jeopardizing in this way the autonomy of ethics as a sphere of discourse and argumentation that aspires to a certain degree of detach-ment from what is merely given. In fact, by depicting subjects as self-shaping and transformative beings, the peculiar version of pragmatism I am reviewing looks suspiciously at those ethical projects interested in imposing a particular moral agenda by defending a fixed picture of hu-man beings allegedly fulfilling its specifics. By contesting such founda-tional and prescriptive approaches, pragmatism aims at earning a picture of moral thought as a field of *practical* inquiry that is neither imperme-able to the contingencies of human life nor committed to imposing any

given arrangement of them. Instead of conceiving morality as kept pure from any human involvements or shaping it after a fixed picture of human beings, a pragmatist approach to moral reflection envisions the radical option of putting at the center of its investigation the subject's practices of self-fashioning and transformation. The *normative descriptions* we find in Kant and James, in fact, depict human beings as engaged in the realization of an ideal or responding to an experience they pose to themselves, rather than obeying to a moral rule or principle externally imposed on them or mirroring their metaphysical essence. A selective use of Kant and James, to which I now pass, will help me to articulate these ideas as well as the larger philosophical picture animating them.

3. Kant on pragmatic self-constitution

When engaging the *Anthropology*, Kant's readers face the formidable problem of placing this particular text (as well as the numerous impressions of the lectures representing its corollaries) in the broader context of his ethical thought and writings.[5] What is usually expected from it is a picture of morality as a system of imperatives, only depicted from the part of the subject. In this picture, suggested by Kant himself in some passages from the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* as well as from the *Lectures on Logic*, anthropology would be a mere application of a self-contained, a priori, and already established system of moral imperatives to human beings, or at best the necessary knowledge of the empirical conditions on which a moral system can be built. However, by drawing a distinction between physiological and pragmatic anthropology, in the *Anthropology* Kant envisions a radically different scenario for such a relationship. Such a distinction plays a seminal role for the articulation of a heterodox picture of the relationship between ethics and anthropology.

   According to Kant, the principles of pure ethics, precisely because of their purity, have no special connection with the human life. Such a connection can only be established by bringing empirical knowledge of human nature into the picture. However, we can conceive such integration in two different, parting ways: either externally or internally. In the former case, according to the story narrated in the major ethical writings, anthropology is relevant for ethics as long as it gives the materials and indicates

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5 Cf. Jacobs and Kain 2003 (in particular, Wood, Louden, and Jacobs's essays), Frierson 2003, Wilson 2006, Heidemann 2011 (in particular, Sturm, Vanhaute, and Whyrwich's essays) and Cohen 2011 (in particular, Makkrell, Guyer, Wood, and Wilson's essays).

the way in which an already formed moral theory can apply to human beings, given their peculiar constitution. According to such a narration, a good representation of morality is in need of a good description of how human beings are, but only because anthropology gives us information about the empirical way in which freedom can be empirically achieved by human beings. In this scenario, moral freedom is pictured as a property of pure practical reason with no connection with the contingencies of the human life, if not in its *ruling* their possibilities from the above of its formal dimension. In the latter case, instead, ethical normative elements emerge from a pragmatic description of human beings: pragmatic anthropology, differently from physiological anthropology, deals with the knowledge of human beings' engagement in their practices of freedom. As Kant writes at the very outset of his *Anthropology*,

> A doctrine of knowledge of the human being, systematically formulated (anthropology), can exist either in a physiological or in a pragmatic point of view —Physiological knowledge of the human being concerns the investigations of what *nature* makes of the human being; pragmatic, the investigation of what *he* as a free-acting being makes of himself, or can and should make of himself.   Kant 2006 [1798], 3

According to a pragmatic description of their life of the mind, human beings are *makers* of themselves and not mere spectators of a nature that in a second step has to be moralized with reference to an ethical principle. The cultivation of our faculties aims at a perfection that is not dictated by any morally abstract rule, but rather emerges from the use we make of them. Rather than a metaphysical constituent, moral freedom is a possibility of our subjectivity when we experiment with its practical uses.

Such a change of emphasis throws new light on the whole Kantian characterization of human beings as torn between reason and nature. Kant's later work on anthropology is deeply intertwined with his critique period not only biographically—his "Anthropology" classes were held by Kant for some 25 years from 1772 to his retirement in 1797—but also because what is at stake in Kant's pragmatic anthropology is a redefinition of the boundaries of the human that stands as an interesting alternative to the one offered in the first two *Critiques*. In the lectures Kant refuses to picture human beings as mere observers of what nature makes of themselves, suggesting a way in which their liberty is achieved through the employment of their faculties when engaged in experiencing and experimentations. According to this heterodox picture, to live morally one must make something of oneself according to some ideal of good life, in the same

manner as to live healthily one must make something of oneself according to ideals of a healthy life. However, unlike the dietetic example, such ideals are not inscribed in advance in some physiological constitution: a good life does not consist in an activity of mere heuristic rule-following of an independently fixed order, but is instead an inventive practice in which we shape and take care of our life in accordance to some ideas of perfection we posit for ourselves. If what guides our practices of self-constitution is an activity according to reason, in the *Anthropology* such reason is portrayed not as an a priori feature of our metaphysical constitution, but rather as one of the possibilities of human life itself when approached from the point of view of what one might do of oneself. The moral *ought* (*sollen*) depends on an anthropological *can* (*können*), which is articulated as a daily exercise (*künstlicher Spiel/Ausübung*) of our capacities for the sake of action. Our normative *praxes* are derived from a description of one among the possible reflective postures we can take in respect to a certain situation.

In Kant, but a similar point can be made for James as well, the adjective pragmatic characterizes anthropology not as a scholastic knowledge of little or no use in our experiencing of the world, but rather as practical knowledge of the ways human beings establish a certain relation with themselves when engaged in worldly affairs. Pragmatic anthropology describes human beings in their practices of cultivation and refinement of their own faculties: by organizing and presenting relevant aspects of human experience to agents, anthropology allows them to reflect about what is in their power to achieve and hence about what kind of persons they shall be by so engaging the world and themselves through it. In the *Anthropology* Kant reinterprets the sharp dualism he elaborated in the *Critiques* between world-knowledge and moral-knowledge. He is still interested in defending the dualism, but now he presents it as deriving from the two mobile standpoints—the theoretical and the practical—we can take toward the world, rather than as the consequence of our metaphysical constitution. From such a perspective, not all word-knowledge will count as empirical moral knowledge, but many instances of world-knowledge that at a first glance appear to be non-moral can suddenly acquire moral significance when placed in the right (that is practical) perspective. According to this pragmatic account, it is impossible to tell, before conduct takes place, which human aspect is resistant to moral assessment, because as agents human beings are capable of determining *which* aspect of the world might turn out to be morally relevant by engaging in the relevant practice.

Let me showcase this seminal idea by briefly sketching two recurring topics discussed at length in Kant's *Anthropology*—that is the notions of character and that of experience as engagement.

The *Pragmatic Anthropology* is divided into two parts: the "Anthropological Didactic", or "Doctrine of Elements" (*Elementarlehre*), and the "Anthropological Characteristic", or "Doctrine of Method" (*Methodenlehre*). The former, subtitled "On the Way of Cognizing the Interior as Well as the Exterior of the Human Being", is concerned with the analysis of the three faculties—theoretical, aesthetical and moral—of human beings from the part of their formation and use; while the latter subtitled "On the Way of Cognizing the Interior of the Human Being from the Exterior," articulates the ways in which these are shaped as to form a character. Kant describes character as "what the human being *makes of himself*" (Kant 2006 [1798], 192): it indicates the way we conduct ourselves and thus represents the way we articulate our agency. Anthropology, pragmatically understood, refutes the existence of a standpoint external to our human practices from which to assess the good exercise of our faculties. He writes that:

> in order to assign the human being his class in the system of animate nature, nothing remains for us than to say that he has a character, which he himself creates, in so far as he is capable of perfecting himself according to ends that he himself adopts.
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> <div align="right">Kant 2006 [1798], 226</div>

By conceiving the normativity of agency as always embedded in the practices through which human beings conduct themselves, pragmatic anthropology pictures human beings as always in the making of their moral identities. Kant writes that a human being is (or, rather, becomes) moral in the measure in which she fully expresses her character through the good exercise of her rational capacities. Such an exercise, however, stems from a pragmatic description of human beings as capable of *forming* their character. In order to have a character, and hence to be moral, human beings must *do* something, and thus they must *become* a certain kind of persons. Character is portrayed by Kant as the conduct of thought: achieving a character means cultivating one's faculties according to a system of values that is always embedded in one's ordinary practices of freedom. Morality is thus always exercised and never founded:

> The human being must therefore be *educated* to the good; but he who is to educate him is on the other hand a human who still lies in the crudity of nature and who is supposed to bring about what he himself

> needs. Hence the continuous deviation from his vocation with the
> always-repeated returns to it.   Kant 2006 [1798], 230

To this image of character as something in the making, Kant juxtaposes one of experiencing on the same lines. The *Anthropology* follows the division of the faculties as portrayed in the *Critiques*; however, the domain that it privileges is not that of where the faculties positively manifest what they are, but rather it is the domain where they manifest their weakness and danger of perishing. With the words of Foucault, the privileged domain of the *Anthropology*

> is not where the faculties and powers show off their positive attributes
> but where they show their failings—or at least where they face dan-
> ger, where they risk to be obliterated. Rather than their nature or the
> full form of their activity, anthropology is concerned with pointing
> up the movement by which the faculties, distancing themselves from
> their center and their justification, become other than themselves, ille-
> gitimate.   Foucault 2006, 69

This meaningful change of emphasis depicts human beings in the middle of their struggles for formation and self-education, and their faculties as not merely given but rather as always and yet to be achieved.

The good exercise of our faculties is reflected in the notion of engaged experience. Kant struggles to present a great variety of ways in which our faculties (theoretical, aesthetical and moral) can fail to achieve their proper perfection, that is fail to provide us with the kind of knowledge they aim at. Both theoretical and practical judgment require the subjects being experienced in the appropriate way with the relevant particulars, and thus they can be impaired in a variety of ways because of our failure in grasping the proper experience. Such incapability, whose casuistry is not determined in advance but only in the very assessment by an act of judgment, is not a non-moral empirical (psychological) deficiency that can be eradicated by means of some external moral warrants, but rather an already morally relevant aspect of what we make of ourselves. From such a standpoint, every empirical *can* implies a pragmatic *ought*, provided that the content of such normative notions can be specified only with reference to the practices undergone by agents. What counts as a sound experience is one that increases the possibility for its grasping and enjoyment, and thus, if it is in the reach of human capacities, its pursuit

counts as a morally normative activity, one that should be promoted or blamed.[6]

As an example, Kant discusses courage (§ 77)[7] not as a feature of disembodied or minded-less actions, but rather as a certain description of what we might do of ourselves. He is not interested in giving an abstract definition of courage by making reference to moral principles, but rather in describing the variety of ways in which a courageous conduct can be exhibited. In fact, it is only through such a description of human beings as engaged in certain activities of courage that a moral criterion for their assessment can come into view. The treatment of the morality of suicide nicely depicts this dialectics at play. Judging if suicide driven by considerations of courage is morally permissible requires investigating the soundness of the experience provided by those considerations: acknowledging the point of view of the agent with respect to the relevant experience—if, for example, it expresses a respect for the autonomy of one's life threatened by an evil tyrant or rather a consuming grief for one's mortal frailty—tells us everything there is to know to judge such occurrence as morally regrettable or not. Here as elsewhere, what is given prominence and value is the contrast between activity and passivity: the perfection of our better selves goes through the training of oneself in experience and the sedimentation of such practices of self-fashioning in modes of acculturation.

This way of presenting anthropology as an activity of self-scrutiny and formation brings to light an image of ethics revolving on what the self makes of herself through pondering certain thoughts and engaging in certain conducts. This idea, articulated at length by a cluster of authors belonging to rather disparate philosophical traditions[8] as a theoretical instrument to re-read large portions of the history of ethics, can be presented as a central feature of pragmatism intended as a moment in such an history. I will now briefly sketch the way James elaborates these ideas in his 1890 masterpiece *The Principles of Psychology*, where a powerful picture of human beings as transformative beings is given flesh.

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[6] Cf. §§ 63–69 for an articulation of such a reading.

[7] A similar point could be made in respect to other features as well; Kant discusses the passions (§§ 80–6), imagination (§§ 34–6), and taste (§§ 67–71) by employing a similar dialectic.

[8] To name but a few names, think of Michel Foucault, Pierre Hadot, Charles Taylor, Bernard Williams, and Richard Rorty

4. Jamesian self-transformations

James read Kant's *Anthropology* in 1868, and described it as a "marvelous, biting little work" (Perry 1935, 512-3). Such nice words, it has to be noticed, will not be extended to the rest of Kant's work. Notwithstanding the small evidence in James's published as well as unpublished writings, and despite his overall critical stance towards Kant's major works, there has been an intensification of studies regarding James's Kantian legacy.[9] The *Anthropology* was very likely the one single work by Kant whose contents James genuinely endorsed, although it is debatable how much he effectively engaged it after their early encounter. Accounting for the detail of such a historical connection, although extremely interesting, is a complex task exceeding the scope of the present paper. Rather, I'm interested in the more humble venture of investigating the way in which James, in the *Principles,* envisioned a pragmatic picture of the entanglement between ethics and anthropology along lines closely resembling Kant's, despite their differences in emphasis and scope.

Despite its well-known self-proclaimed seemingly positivistic intents, according to which he "[has] kept close to the point of view of natural science throughout the book" (James 1981 [1890], v), the *Principles of Psychology* represents James's most elaborate attempt to weave together an impressive number of psychological, anthropological, philosophical and personal "descriptive details" (James 1981 [1890], vii) about what could be broadly characterized as "our mental life" (James 1981 [1890], 1). In it, we can find together the seeds and the use of that pragmatic method that James kept elaborating in the course of his entire intellectual biography. In the *Principles,* James looks at the various aspects of our life of the mind from the point of view of their *use*, and urges us to notice the variety of moral considerations at play when we look at them in this way.

According to James, if one gives up a detached, third-personal *physiological* description of the various aspects of our subjectivity in favor of an engaged, first-personal *pragmatic* one, one can make room for a different picture of the kind of our psychological considerations that are relevant for ethics. In fact, from this perspective, the various aspects of our subjectivity are presented from the point of view of what we might do of them, and not as mere data on which an ethical theory should build a system

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[9] On this topic, cf. Murphy 1968, DeArmey 1987, Carlson 1997 and Franzese (2008, 51-8). Dewey has been the first to remark James's—and pragmatism's—debt to Kant for the very naming of *pragmatische*. Cf. Dewey 1976.

of morality. Ethics would thus be intertwined with psychology because it deals with the way in which we perceive and describe ourselves, and with the postures and conducts that we can assume with respect to our very subjectivity. James, echoing Kant in this respect, sets up to explore the "inner" from the point of view of the "outer": one's interiority really is the appropriation of reality through practice, that is through what we do *of* ourselves *in* the world. And this, James adds, is not discovered as a piece of theoretical information or physiological evidence—even though James also goes some way towards showing how the latest physical and chemical discoveries of his day seemed to prove this very point as well—but rather taught and suggested to the reader as part of a live, engaged practice of the self with the self. The *Principles*, then, similarly to Kant's *Anthropology*, is no schoolbook to be employed in the laboratory but rather a practical manual to be lived on the streets.

The cornerstone of James's pragmatic anthropology would then be a conception of human beings as makers and not mere spectators of their lives of the mind. For James a good account of our life of the mind is one from the point of the use we make of it. We can in fact read the *Principles* as an exhibition of the varieties of ways in which we encounter the world in a process of experiencing which is always and at the same time a process of self-experimenting. In the *Principles* James would not present the single elementary constituents of the moral life (e. g., certain sentiments, sensations, or beliefs) as many readers argued, but rather explore the personal work necessary for their full development. James thus presents the moral dimension of some aspects of our subjectivity in relationship with the kind of attitude and disposition that we might assume toward them. According to James, the dynamic character of the relationship between such aspects of our interiority and the *use* we make of them has been too often ignored, picturing them as given and not as accomplishments. This picture, besides mortifying the richness of attitudes we might have in respect to the various aspects of our subjectivity, tends to distort their very nature by representing them as brute data rather than as the result of a certain work on ourselves. According to James, there would be a dynamic tension internal to our subjectivity between its various aspects and the kind of use we make of them that is relevant for ethics, a tension overlooked by the kind of descriptions of the mental life offered by either classical empiricism (mind as mirror of nature) or rationalism (mind as insight into nature).

The discussion of habit in the fourth chapter of the *Principles* can be read as a chief instance of such pragmatic anthropology. James presents

habit as one of the most powerful laws and pervasive phenomenon of our mindedness and worldliness: our lives could hardly be lived without it, and yet its excesses might be equally lethal for their flourishing, since they would suffocate their constitutive and most important venues of expression and growth. In particular, an excess of habit, says James, would hinder and alienate us from ourselves, thus depriving us from those very energies and resources constituting the best part of our selfhood: the higher or further selves we might have been or become if only we would have dared to think and conduct ourselves differently from how we habitually do.[10]

James presents in the first place what he calls the physiological bases of habit, writing that "the *phenomena of habit in living beings are due to the plasticity of the organic materials of which their bodies are composed*" (James 1981 [1890], 110). Habit, in fact, refers to the capacity for *movement* of our central nervous system. However, even at this basic physical level of analysis, James refutes a mechanistic characterization of the very nature and working of habit. He in fact subscribes the anti-reductionist perspective of the reflex arch and of the electro-chemical discharge, which portrays habit as the fixation of the nervous discharge trajectories in our nervous system in perennial tension. At this level of explanation, habit is still described as a somewhat passive device, since it merely indicates those privileged paths of inertia. However, this passivity is in its turn characterized as a condition for activity, since it suggests and facilitates the nervous discharge (hence, at the practical level, the performance of actions). Furthermore, and most importantly, for James "our nervous system grows to the modes in which it has been exercised" (James 1981 [1890], 117): once such paths of inertia and discharge are chosen and reinforced *in conduct*, they grow thicker and acquire strength and influence, thus shaping our very dispositions and reactions.

James is particularly interested in presenting two psychological features of habits that would have great relevance from the point of view of their philosophical description and ethical consequences. He writes that "The first result of it is that *habit simplifies the movements required to achieve a given result, makes them more accurate and diminishes the fatigue* [. . .] The

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[10] An in-depth comparative study of the Jamesian and the Deweyan conceptions of habit is still lacking, and unfortunately so. Dewey (most notably in Dewey 1922) in fact borrowed, reworked, and expanded the Jamesian philosophy of habit along promising lines, adding some historical edge to James's conceptual analyses and reconstruction. Differences between their respective accounts still mattering, I read in both authors a congenial insistence on the "good *of* activity" as the chief theme at the heart of the (pragmatist) ethical project.

next result is that *habit diminishes the conscious attention with which our acts are performed* (James 1981 [1890], 117, 119). For James, thus, a subject endowed with the appropriate habits is likely to be more accurate in the achievement of her ends, and her conscious attention less solicited in the exercise of her actions. These two features of habit are of the utmost importance from an ethical point of view. In fact, if on the one hand habits make us more accurate and effective, on the other hand their blind and uncritical deployment has the opposite effect of rendering us inattentive and passive. If thus for James it is essential to nurture one's habits, even more is to challenge them by asking oneself *which* habits to cultivate, and especially *how to* cultivate them.

James presents habit as our "second nature", since it crafts human beings in every aspect of their mental life, hence their thoughts and deeds. Rather than the mechanical repetition of our responses through the comparison and association with past experiences, James depicts habit as the distinctive feature of our active attitude towards our interiority and engaged stance toward reality. Habit becomes thus the chief device to store, organize and control our mental energy, releasing in this way our conscious attention continuously solicited by the great amount of information involved in experiencing. Once we internalize some aspects of reality to which we pay selective attention, our consciousness of them and the effort to entertain them in our mind is alleviated, so that we are free to focus on other aspects of reality catching our interest.

For James, our very ability to have meaningful experiences and invest them with value, as opposed to the recording of their sheer factual happening, requires us to develop all kinds of habits. In the essay "Reflex Action and Theism" James writes

> We have to break [the perceptual order] altogether, and by picking out from it the items that concern us [...] we are able to [...] enjoy simplicity and harmony in the place of what was chaos [...] It is an order with which we have nothing to do but to get away from it as fast as possible. As I said, we break it: we break it into histories, and we break it into the arts, and we break it into sciences; and then we begin to feel at home.   James 1979, 96

Through our inclusions and omissions, we trace the path of habit, and hence build the river-bed of our experience and agency altogether. The aim of habit is to make us "feel at home" in the world by breaking down our experiences and connecting the elements that interest us with others that we find similarly appropriate and worthwhile. Habit thus contributes

to our very activity of making sense of the world and of our place in it: through habit we craft the world, giving it a human shape in which to inscribe our conducts and their meaning.

The ethical stakes of such a characterization are of the utmost importance. James claims, in fact, that habit is the "engine of society" and its "precious preserver". However, James adds, the primary object of habit is the *character* of human beings, representing its "invisible law" in a similar manner as "universal gravitation" represents the law of celestial bodies. Habit has to do with the education of one's character as it represents the mark of one's personal point of view that we shape through a discipline of the self. Habits are thus morally relevant because they pervade our lives and guide our encounters with the world, thus making the latter a place hospitable for the expression of our interiority in conduct. In the chapter on "The Laws of Habit" of *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life's Ideas* James writes that

> Our virtues are habits as much as our vices. All our life, so far as it has definite form, is but a mass of habits,—practical, emotional, and intellectual,—systematically organized for our weal or woe, and bearing us irresistibly toward our destiny, whatever the latter may be.
>
> James 1983, 47

A similar formulation can be found in the *Principles*, where James concludes that

> The great thing, then, in all education, is to *make our nervous system our ally instead of our enemy*. It is to fund and capitalize our acquisitions, and live at ease upon the interest of the fund. *For this we must make automatic and habitual, as early as possible, as many useful actions as we can*, and guard against the growing into ways that are likely to be disadvantageous to us, as we should guard against the plague.
>
> James 1981 [1890], 126

For James, habits should be our closest allies, and yet we should also remain vigilant in their handling as they could reveal to be our most dangerous enemies. According to this view, in fact, habits are not virtuous or evil *per se*, but rather it is *what we make of them* and *how we nurture them* that makes them advantageous or rather harmful, and thus relevant from a moral point of view. If, on the one hand, habits give voice to our deepest needs, cravings, and interests, on the other hand, their misuse might cause the very deadening of our subjectivity.

James lists five practical maxims involving the exercise of habit in which what is at stake is our very attitude we might assume in their respect. These maxims have a clear and pronounced moral salience in their dealing with the ways in which our habits might be expressive of our subjectivity or rather contribute to its capitulation. The last practical maxim, relative to the "habits of the will", best catches the spirit of the exhortative moral register informing James's dialectics of habits and wider moral agenda. He writes

> *Keep the faculty of effort alive in you by a little gratuitous exercise every day.*
> That is, be systematically ascetic or heroic in little unnecessary points,
> do every day or two something for no other reason than that you
> would rather not do it, so that when the hour of dire need draws nigh,
> it may find you not unnerved and untrained to stand the test [...] So
> with the man who has daily inured himself to habits of concentrated
> attention, energetic volition, and self-denial in unnecessary things. He
> will stand like a tower when everything rocks around him, and when
> his softer fellow-mortals are winnowed like chaff in the blast.
>
> <div align="right">James 1981 [1890], 130</div>

This practical maxim thematizes the dynamic relationship that runs between the habits we live *by* and the life we might have *with* them. James is here interested in marking an internal connection between ethics and psychology by showing how our posture toward those habits, that we might welcome or rather challenge, is the mark of our moral destiny. So depicted, human beings are the makers of themselves and responsible for their own faiths rather than beings in need of being educated and moralized from without. The price we have to pay for the practical comfort of habit, representing the shield we use in order to be successful in our dealings with the world, is the constant thread of an impoverishment of such commerce. That is to say, the price to be thriving inhabitants of the world is that of being daunting strangers to ourselves. Only by acknowledging the habits we live by as *our* habits, we might keep in place their significance without either subjugating our subjectivity or making knowledge an impossible task to accomplish.

Quoting Mill's definition of character as a "completed fashioned will", James stresses the relationship between the sensation of effort and activity necessary to manage a certain habit and its moral character: by representing a habit as a yoke imposed from the outside, as for example from evidences and associations which we merely inherited, we distort both the way in which we arrive at forming a habit in the first place as well as jeop-

ardize its very significance. We develop habits in response to our more genuine practical need so to cope in more effective ways with the world; however, when we represent habit as a given with which to deal, we shall find ourselves incapable of satisfying those very practical needs which gave life to them in the first place. What was crafted to facilitate the successfulness of our practices suddenly becomes an impediment to the full flourishing of our interiority, a golden cage for its expression. James writes

> The physiological study of mental conditions is thus the most powerful ally of hortatory ethics. The hell to be endured hereafter, of which theology tells, is no worse than the hell we make for ourselves in this world by habitually fashioning our characters in the wrong way. Could the young but realize how soon they will become mere walking bundles of habits, they would give more heed to their conduct while in the plastic state. We are spinning our own fates, good or evil, and never to be undone. Every smallest stroke of virtue or of vice leaves its never so little scar.   James 1981 [1890], 130–1

Moral reflection, in its hortatory dimension, aims at showing the practical advantages of the nurture and of the development of certain habits, and the dangerousness we incur when we alienate our subjectivity to their blind dictates. According to this characterization, the subject matter of ethics would thus consist in a certain kind of work on the self, while its method in the descriptions of the strategies that such formative activity might take. James claims that this work on the self involves in the first place the experimentation with our habitual responses and their ability to express our subjectivity or rather mortifying it. James invites us to take a vigilant attitude on ourselves so to prevent those contractions of the self typical of our taking ourselves for granted.

5. Towards heterodox ethics

As a concluding remark, I would like to go back to the question of the relationship between ethics and anthropology/psychology. The pragmatic anthropology and psychology depicted by Kant and James represent an antidote to the picture of human beings as mere moral spectators that are moved to act morally because they are compelled by the observation of some ethical principle which justification does not involve the exercise of their faculties and sensibility. This way of characterizing the practical nature of human beings, as makers rather than mere spectators of their own selves, suggests a heterodox conception of the scopes and strategies

of moral philosophy. From this perspective, ethics *emerges* from a certain pragmatic description of human beings without being *derived* from the analysis of their sheer factual constitution or their partaking to a moral dimension from without our moral practices. Their pragmatic anthropologies are imbued with ethical considerations, for they conceived the analysis of mind as the clarification and assessment of our cognitive and affective life for their improvement. Pragmatic anthropology and psychology depict human beings as agents constantly engaged in improving their subjectivities with some goal of excellence in view that however is not externally fixed by a principle, but rather negotiated in practice. The pragmatic descriptions of the various aspects of our life of the mind in terms of what they allow us to do enable us to deepen our comprehension and use of our mindedness and worldliness, where what is at stake is the establishment of a certain meaningful relationship with ourselves and the world. There is thus a sense in which such activities are themselves of ethical importance, since they have to do with the working and improvement of our very subjectivity.

According to this picture, the object of moral reflection becomes what human beings make of themselves by engaging in a certain relationship with their life of the mind. This characterization stands at the heart of the project of Kant's *Anthropology* and James's *Psychology*, where mental excellence is depicted as the capacity to explore and deepen our interiority by pursuing those interests defining most roundly our worldly subjectivity. In order to evaluate if a certain mental activity is sound or adequate, and thus if the experiences and concepts to which it leads us are appropriate, we should look at the kind of relationship we entertain with such activity: the resulting experiences and concepts would in fact express our subjective point of view in the problematic situation we find ourselves in.

What I have been suggesting through my selective reading of Kant and James is that the notion of human being, and the notion of a human perspective embedded in it, can be relevant for ethics if we renounce concentrating on what human beings are or should be, and investigate what human beings might make of themselves. From such a perspective, we can uncover a space for subjectivity that results as the outcome of a work on the self in terms of a crafting and transformation of a life of the mind attentive to the richness of experience and concepts toward which we could be morally blind and unreflective. In different but convergent ways, Kant and James have shown a way in which this option can be articulated: by giving a pragmatic description of the stance we might take in the investi-

gation of our cognitive as well as affective life, both authors have stressed the importance of philosophical anthropology and psychology for the understanding of our moral life—a connection often overlooked by moral theories which portray such an entanglement in foundational terms.

This shift marks a transition—or rather one possible beginning of one—from an age of representation to one of engagement: in different yet converging ways, Kant and James posited *practice* at the very heart of philosophical analysis. Ethical normativity, in this picture, takes the shape of a contrast between passivity and spontaneity in which what becomes central is the use we make of ourselves midst experiencing and conceptual reflection. For both Kant and James, if there is anything like a "science" of human beings and their behavior, it stands sensibly closer to biology than to physics: the teleological principle of activity rather than the mechanical one of passivity measures and rules moral understanding and growth. An art of living, then, rather than a set of principles is what we are in most need of, when we move away from transcendental or naturalistic foundations of the kind prescribed by moral theorizing and refocus on agential formation and transformation suggested by pragmatic exhortations.

This way of presenting anthropology and psychology as inquiries that are descriptive and yet morally relevant brings to light an image of ethics focused on what the self makes of herself through engaging in *a certain relation* to herself. This means renouncing to ground ethics on a once-for-all given conception of human nature without renouncing the idea according to which ethics has a certain shape in virtue of its being a certain *human* practice. In different but convergent ways, Kant and James pointed toward a way in which this heterodox option can be articulated: by giving a pragmatic account of the stance we might take in the investigation of our cognitive as well as affective lives, these authors have offered a compelling picture of ethics *as* a practice.[11]

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[11] This essay had a rather long gestation. It originated in my reactions to Piergiorgio Donatelli's lectures on moral philosophy I attended for several years as an undergraduate, graduate, and now colleague at Sapienza Università di Roma, and has been deeply influenced by his rendering of an alternative modern and contemporary moral canon. I thank him deeply for years of conversations and instructions.

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