

Jamesian Liberalism and the Self

SARIN MARCHETTI

1. Despite he did not write any full-fledged and comprehensive treatise of the kind Thomas Jefferson, Walter Lippman, or John Rawls did, William James is among the great American liberal philosophers. As Ralph Waldo Emerson before him, and John Dewey and Richard Rorty after him, James was indeed highly skeptical of the opportunity of theorizing upon such matter – and much else –, mostly because of his wider distrust of top-down, idealized approaches in philosophical and political matters alike. As a consequence, and consistently with the pragmatist line he was part of, throughout his work we find a wealth of bottom-up, non-ideal insights about how to picture and exercise this particular option. In what follows I shall briefly present James's distinctive understanding of liberalism, highlighting the two key features of it that in my opinion are still very much relevant for us today, placing them in some historical context: namely, the ethical feature of liberalism and its grounding in a conception of the self as contingent and mobile.

2. Like most, if not all concepts, philosophical and otherwise, liberalism meant different things to different people, and still do. That said, on a minimal and relatively uncontroversial understanding of it, liberalism has to do with liberty: with what liberty is and most importantly with what we might do with it. By taking liberty as one of our dearest human values, James was a liberal thinker through and through. Still, rather than defending liberty as a metaphysical feature of the world or of ourselves as part and parcel of it, James took liberty as something to build and care for amidst our daily activities, hence furthering J.S. Mill's practical (that is moral and political) analysis and defense of such concept in his 1859 master-

piece *On Liberty*. The metaphysical footing of liberty, if there is such a thing, was to be found in the ethical practices made possible and fostered by it: the “dilemma of determinism”, as James famously and forcefully claimed in his timely essay bearing that name, is truly an ethical one about which kind of universe would home our dearest moral concerns and transactions (James 1978a). It is in fact a running theme of James’s pragmatist approach that of asking not so much how something can be conceived or justified from without our individual and communal lives, but rather how something can be achieved and reshaped from within them. Liberty – or freedom, James’s preferred term for it –, was such a thing, and centrally so: at once an ideal to pursue and a distinctive way of life to nurture through strokes of daily practice at pains of losing it and its benefits altogether.

Differently from Mill, James did not dedicate one single work to articulating his view but rather scattered his reflections on the topic throughout his writings. If this makes it somewhat harder to guess the shape of his proposal, James opted for this impressionistic (at times Gestaltic) approach for a reason: given the centrality of freedom in human affairs, no single entry would suffice to shed proper light on it. A multi-focused approach would then better serve the purpose, showing its widespread presence and role in our lives and philosophies. James’s psychological, philosophical, and religious writings are variously permeated by discussions of different aspects of this seminal notion. We Jamesians are to be very grateful to Sami Pihlström for his many efforts to put some order in this wealth of material, and for the resulting original interpretation of James as a philosopher of freedom and indeterminism¹. It is indeed impossible, if not at the cost of glaring oversights, to isolate and pick one thread without weighting its place within the wider context, which Pihlström carefully reconstructed and conveniently put to work to show the opportunity of a Jamesian worldview on such topics. Now, the very minimal unit one should take into consideration when accounting for James’s master-notion, and this is what I shall be doing in this text, is the combo of metaphilosophical and ethical considerations at the heart of

¹ See, among his many publications, Pihlström 2008 and 2009.

his conception of freedom and hence of liberalism as it surfaces in some key moral writings. In so doing, I will briefly argue for the opportunity of giving practical and ethical considerations about freedom primacy over metaphysical ones, engaging in this way – although only tangentially and at any rate only cursorily – Pihlström’s rich and sophisticated reconstruction².

3. William James’s moral and political thought was remarkably well adapted to its historical context, and in particular to the emergence, in the late nineteenth century, of a generalized culture of uncertainty, risk, and probability. That context has been ably charted by intellectual historians such as Ian Hacking, who depicted it as a pivotal moment within the broader trend of the formation of new psychological, epistemological, and political subjects and subjectivities as conceptualized by Michel Foucault in a number of by-now classical writings³. In the face of normalization, and counter to it, James developed a strenuous ethics rooted in a conception of liberty or freedom as self-transformation. Such an ethics remains a valuable source of freedom today insofar as we remain bound to probability and uncertainty as an ongoing context for moral living⁴.

By the end of the nineteenth century, in an era which witnessed the painful yet liberating passage from a culture of certainty to one of probability, with the invention of insurance companies and the scientific management of risk, chance became something which individuals and society as a whole simply could not ignore or circumvent. An entire new mindset suddenly broke into the lives and institutions across the Atlantic, making the world of fixities and certainties look outdated and more importantly frustrating. The old categories of – and reliance on – tradition, custom, and authority

² A sample of our disagreement has been given by Pihlström himself in his generous review of my work Pihlström 2015.

³ See Hacking 1990, which is very much indebted to Foucault’s 1970s writings on institutions, technologies, and biopower. For pragmatism as a revolution driven by the taking of chance and mobilization of things and persons seriously, see Menand 2001.

⁴ On this extremely rich context and James’s pivotal contribution to it, see Koopman 2016 and 2017, to which this section is indebted.

cast a dim light on the meanings, values, and truths people and nations lived by. What took place was a generalized-yet-microscopic call for action in the face of uncertainty and instability. Not only we witnessed radical changes in practices – epistemological, moral, and even religious –, but the very picture of rationality – theoretical as well practical – was turned upside down, with transaction replacing mirroring as the privileged model of, and metaphor for, sound thinking, speaking, and acting.

Now, fascinating as it is, this is not material for historians of philosophy and culture only, as our contemporary world is still very much indebted to, and relying on, this indeterministic intellectual and social climate. We the heirs of chance and probability can indeed hardly make sense of the modern – let alone the ancient – mindset of certainty and authority, if not derogatorily. For sure we still sometimes crave for stable enough rules and feasible plans, but always against a background of mobile hypotheses and risky assumptions. The very notions of possibility and novelty lie at the very heart of our scientific and artistic pursuits alike. Variables took the place of invariances, as we started to conceive and account for reality – brute or social alike – as something to cope with rather than to copy – where the latter activity is itself a function of our practical attitude and interests. Descartes's quest for certainty (and, well before it, Plato's duplication of worlds) is now conceived as a deceiving answer to a misguided problem: that of reconciling necessity with contingency. If necessity as certainty goes, all we are left with are ways of making the best of contingency as mobility. Between Descartes and us, in a period that culminates in the late nineteenth century of Darwin and Nietzsche, chance had stabilized as the very practical tool with which distributing meanings, values, and truths. Further revolutions in technology, imagination, and ways of living together fostered ever new ways of making sense of our individual and communal practices without transcendental banisters or fixed rails, adjusting our expectations and provisions of a future yet to be fully written and still entirely within the reach of our best hopes.

4. I have been presenting the so-called probabilistic revolution as the wider context through which we can begin to understand the shifting sands of the moralities and epistemologies of selfhood in late nineteenth-century America, of which James offered a particularly strong version: the very moralities and epistemologies we have been furthering ever since by adjusting them to our most pressing contemporary needs. James provides an exemplary case study of how we first came to terms with the specifically moral problematic of probability, with which we are still very much struggling. James's entire philosophical vision, from his functionalistic psychology to his pragmatist conception of truth to his exhortative ethics, can in fact be seen as a positive response to chance, possibility, and probability, which are part of the broader shift in sensibility concerning the very viability of the project of living with doubt and uncertainty.

In a late account of his overall philosophical outlook, summing up the main features of his individualistic philosophy, James explicitly relates novelty and activity with a democratic form of individualism. He writes:

This then is the individualist view...

It means many good things: e.g.

Genuine novelty

order being *won*, paid for.

the smaller system the truer

man [is greater than] home [is greater than] state or church.

anti-slavery in all ways

toleration - respect for others

democracy - good systems can always be described in individualistic terms.

hero-worship and custom. (James 1975a, 285)

By emphasizing novelty and the need to win order and pay for it, James works out a conception of freedom amidst uncertainty as the work of self-transformation. This conception offers an alternative to standard modern accounts of freedom

as autonomous self-legislation. This alternative understanding of freedom involves a focus on our *practices* or *acts* of freedom as an unbroken work on the self as opposed to the emphasis on the *capacity* for freedom construed as giving the law to oneself of Lockean and Kantian heritage. James's alternative, I contend, is a resource for us today insofar as we are still learning how to negotiate lives of probabilities, chances, and indeterminacies after the demise of certainty.

Freedom as self-transformation avoids some of the more puzzling and contentious implications of the idea of self-legislation having to do with transcendental and metaphysical questions concerning the very possibility of self-sufficient, self-mastering subjects, apparently nowhere to be found in a secular, disenchanting world. Once we give up the philosophical mindset and scientific and cultural framework according to which the goal of individual and communal life is that of placing one's thoughts, words, and deeds against a non-human, certain as well as ideal reality in order to make sense of them and of ourselves, what we are left with is the open-ended task of reweaving such strings of thought, language, and conduct from the very contingent and mobile place we presently occupy, with further actual or fictionalized ones possibly available⁵. The quest for certainty made sense in the modern historical and intellectual context, where it was indeed a live option, while it turned unproductive and hence uninteresting with the probabilistic revolution which turned our philosophical and ordinary lives upside down. We find no pessimism in James, though, as he saw this passage as an injection of energy and opening up of possibilities in our ways of being free and giving our activities meaning. What was indeed problematic, for James, was exactly our being stuck in a modern, static conception of the self and its moral duties, which lead to the very petrification of our truths and values. A pragmatist, mobile account of freedom as self-transformation would have given individuals the moral force

⁵ This thread has been most profitably and imaginatively taken on and furthered by Richard Rorty, who took James's shift (and Dewey's) from certainty to contingency at the heart of his own pragmatist project. For a classical reference, see Rorty 1989.

to rethink and remake themselves otherwise for the sake of melioration.

James thought of freedom in terms of energy, effort, and what the vernacular of his day often referred to as the strenuous attitude: “the pragmatism or pluralism which I defend”, he wrote, “has to fall back on a certain ultimate hardihood, a certain willingness to live without assurances or guarantees” (James 1975b, 124). For James, the strenuous life was about the flexibility of the self in the face of practical necessity, not the power of the self over a weaker or stronger fixed external reality. The greatest challenge to ourselves is always our very self, such that what we find in the most strenuous moments of our lives is not the power of our self against something other than itself, but rather the effort of our will against our entrenched habits:

We forget that every good that is worth possessing must be paid for in strokes of daily effort. We postpone and postpone, until those smiling possibilities are dead. [...] By neglecting the necessary concrete labor, by sparing ourselves the little daily tax, we are positively digging the graves of our higher possibilities. According as a function receives daily exercise or not, the man becomes a different kind of being in later life. (James 1978d, 51)

James reinforces this picture by praising

[the] zone of insecurity in human affairs in which all the dramatic interest lies; the rest belongs to the dead machinery of the stage. This is the formative zone, the part not yet ingrained into the race’s average, not yet a typical, hereditary, and constant factor of the social community in which it occurs. (James 1978b, 192)

This willingness to live courageously in the absence of certitudes and assurances as opposed to the discouragement incidental to fixities and closure is for James the signature mark of the pragmatic temperament, which he encourages us to explore in conduct and reaffirm in strokes of daily effort:

The zone of the individual differences, and of the social 'twists' which by common confession they initiate, is the zone of formative processes, the dynamic belt of quivering uncertainty, the line where past and future meet. It is the theatre of all we do not

take for granted, the stage of the living drama of life; and however narrow its scope, it is roomy enough to lodge the whole range of human passions. The sphere of the race's average, on the contrary, no matter how large it may be, is a dead and stagnant thing, an achieved possession, from which all insecurity has vanished. Like the trunk of a tree, it has been built up by successive concretions of successive active zones. The moving present in which we live with its problems and passions, its individual rivalries, victories, and defeats, will soon pass over to the majority and leave its small deposit on this static mass, to make room for fresh actors and a newer play. (James 1978b, 193)

Now, the willful mobilization and transformation of our habitual stratifications, it has to be noticed, is *not* a mysterious power inbuilt in our nature, but rather a functional name for the effort of attention we bring to bear when we attend to the reworking of our own habits of thought, speech, and conduct. In this context, a notion of liberty worth the name would then have to be experimental, practical, and mobile rather than transcendental, fixed, and metaphysical. James looked toward situations where we meet our limits to exhort us to not be debilitated where all we have as a basis for our action is the slimmest of probabilities. For James, acting on probabilities involves resolving oneself to act with confidence where no certainty is to be found nor hoped for. This meant, for James, emancipating decision from certitude. Without either guarantee or insurance, still we go on acting with won or renewed confidence. James affirmed new forms of agency whereby we can transform ourselves midst uncertain conditions. He sought to embrace the new realities of chance in which he took himself to be living. In these new conditions, "the world we practically live" (James 1975a, 140) is not something metaphysically given, but rather a chance for self-transformation itself.

5. In closing, the Jamesian conception of freedom as self-transformation I briefly depicted guarantees no metaphysical grounding for the ethical life, but rather the other way around. It is because we come to morally react in such mobile and meliorative ways to the world, that we reshape its metaphysical substance – if any. It is not that the world has changed from the modern to the contemporary times, but

rather that, via reconfiguration in scientific, technological, and cultural *practices*, new spaces for moral thinking and practice opened up and fostered us to respond accordingly in an unbroken exercise in meaningful self-transformation. It might well be that it will come a time in which invariances will become actual and pressing concerns again – and we do unfortunately have some signs of such backward-looking attitude in our current politics –, and yet those won't be so many changes in the essence of the world but rather shifts in our ways of dealing with it. Jamesian liberalism tells the story of our individual and communal coming to maturity, where what has been given up as obsolete is a conception of the world and the self as inhospitable to chance, variance, and transformation.

Sapienza Università di Roma

References

- Hacking, I (1990), *The Taming of Chance*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- James, W. (1975a), *Characteristics of an Individualistic Philosophy*, in *Pragmatism: A New Name for an Old Way of Thinking*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press
- James, W. (1975b), *Pragmatism as Humanism*, in *The Meaning of Truth: A Sequel to Pragmatism*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press.
- James, W. (1978a), *The Dilemma of Determinism*, in James 1978c.
- James, W. (1978b), *The Importance of Individuals*, in James 1978c.
- James, W. (1978c), *The Will to Believe*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press.
- James, W. (1978d), *Talks to Teachers on Psychology; and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press.
- Koopman, C. (2016), "Transforming the Self amidst the Challenges of Chance: William James on "Our Undisciplinables," *diacritics*, vol. 44, no. 4, 40-65.
- Koopman, C. (2017), "The Will, the Will to Believe, and William James: An Ethics of Freedom and Self-Transformation," *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, vol. 55, no. 3, 491-512.
- Menand, L. (2001), *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

10 *Sarin Marchetti*

- Pihlström, P. (2008), "*The Trail of the Human Serpent is over Everything*": *Jamesian Perspectives on Mind, World, and Religion*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield.
- Pihlström, P. (2009), *Pragmatist Metaphysics: An Essay on the Ethical Grounds of Ontology*, London and New York, Continuum, 2009.
- Pihlström P. (2015), "Book Review of Sarin Marchetti, *Ethics and Philosophical Critique in William James* (2015)," *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, December 8.
- Rorty, R. (1989), *Solidarity or Objectivity?, Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989.