

The Utility of Pragmatism: William James' Humanism as Individualized Utilitarianism

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“To the Memory of John Stuart Mill, from whom I first learned the pragmatic openness of mind and whom my fancy likes to picture as our leader were he alive to-day.”¹ Thus reads the dedication in William James' *Pragmatism*, the series of lectures that popularized his doctrine of the same name. The influences of Millian utilitarianism are evident in James' philosophy: his unique flavor of humanism is a union of utilitarian principles and his “radicalized” notion of empiricism. This essay explores the role of utilitarianism in James' humanization of contemporary philosophy. First, I outline the foundation of pragmatism in first principles from utilitarianism and frame it as a method for practicing hopeful, individualized humanism. With the concept of concrete utility in hand, I show how James mediates between philosophy of the superhuman and philosophy of the human. But James' advances come with a cost: in the final section, I highlight the foundational weaknesses that stem from his adaptation of utilitarianism.

1. William James, *Pragmatism*, 2004, Dedication.

The Utilitarian Origins of Pragmatism

James' philosophical model contains first principles from two primary sources: empiricism and utilitarianism. First and foremost, he assumes the basic ontology of the empiricist: "the pragmatizing epistemologist posits there a reality and a mind with ideas. What now, he asks, can make those ideas true of that reality?"² James' building blocks are simple: noumena, sensations which present themselves successively, unbidden and unformed; and the mind, an entity capable of forming ideas in relation to experience and to one another. also holds that the relations between ideas and noumena – also an ontological element of his empirical philosophy – are "just as much matters of direct particular experience, neither more so or less so, than the things themselves" and do not require the "trans-empirical connective support" postulated by Locke and Hume.³ From our ideas about things and the relations between them, we form beliefs, "rules for action" which govern the mind's reaction to sequences of sensations, simple or complex.⁴ James calls this founding layer of his philosophy "radical empiricism."⁵

But what of utilitarianism? For James, the empiricist's definition of the mind is not complete. The mind not only experiences raw sensations and forms ideas about them; certain ideas are also "good in the way of belief."⁶ Just like the Millsian utilitarian, who believes that there is such a thing as human happiness and that human beings should act to increase it, James posits a psychological satisfaction principle that accompanies human beliefs. Satisfactions are "practical ends" or utilities; they are psychological responses to the empirical stream of sensation.⁷ Since utilitarianism generally refers to the "greater good" for an entire

2. William James, *Meaning of Truth*, 190.

3. *Ibid.*, xvi-xvii.

4. James, *Pragmatism*, Lecture II.

5. James, *Meaning of Truth*, xvi.

6. James, *Pragmatism*, Lecture II.

7. *Ibid.*, Lecture VI.

human population, the individual aspect of this reaction must be emphasized. James wrote extensively on the distinct “stream of thought” that composes every mind’s individual experience. Consciousness is personal, ever-changing, and continuous.⁸ “‘Satisfaction,’ in turn, is no abstract satisfaction überhaupt, felt by an unspecified being, but is assumed to consist of such satisfactions (in the plural) as concretely existing men actually do find in their beliefs.”⁹ I will refer to this satisfaction principle as concrete utility; concrete utility, as opposed to a more nebulous, intellectual form of utility, is tethered to experience by any number of intermediary ideas. Satisfaction, in other words, is utility empiricized and individualized.

Not only is Millsian utilitarianism individualized, it is also democratized. James is deliberately vague about the specific form of satisfaction – it may be a genetic predisposition or a human project – but emphasizes that it varies between individuals and can only be assessed in the facts of experience. It follows that individuals have a particular “temperament” when it comes to beliefs and different beliefs are “taken up” by different degrees than others.¹⁰ Because “our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions,” “we have the right to believe at our own risk any hypothesis that is live enough to tempt our will.”¹¹ In fact, James claims that “the history of philosophy is to a great extent that of a certain clash of human temperaments.”¹² Most importantly, the philosophies that stem from these temperaments cannot be sensibly separated since they are founded on variable factors of the human condition. “When we look at certain facts, it seems as if our passional and volitional nature lay at the root of all our convictions.”¹³

The fact of temperament and the problem it poses for broadly prescriptive philosophies

8. William James, “Stream of Thought,” in *The Principles of Psychology, Volume 1*, 224.

9. James, *Meaning of Truth*, 192.

10. William James, “Will to Believe,” 136.

11. James, “Will to Believe,” 141; James, “Will to Believe,” 147.

12. James, *Pragmatism*, Lecture I.

13. James, “Will to Believe,” 137.

is the motivation for James' humanism, and the source of "open-mindedness" he mentions in his dedication to Mill. In the absence of a temperamentally ubiquitous human philosophy, how does the individual answer important questions that concretely affect their daily lives? Philosophy "in each of us is not a technical matter; it is our more or less dumb sense of what life honestly and deeply means. It is only partly got from books; it is our individual way of just seeing and feeling the total push and pressure of the cosmos."¹⁴

With the goal of guiding human beliefs towards greater individual utility, James does not find it necessary to construct an elaborate architectonic philosophy. After all, "few people have definitely articulated philosophies of their own. But most everyone has his own peculiar sense of a certain total character in the universe, and of the inadequacy fully to match it of the peculiar systems he knows," no matter how ancient or famous.¹⁵ To accommodate the diverse circumstances of human beings, James instead adopts Charles Peirce's simple principle of pragmatism: that the meaning of an object is merely its "conceivable effects of a practical kind."¹⁶ Most notably, this philosophy – like utilitarianism as an ethical system – is prospective; it is concerned with the "conceivable," hypothetical, or counterfactual effects of a given idea, not merely its foundation in historical data. To this end, James redefines truth to mean that which "we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify."¹⁷ Pragmatism finds truth at every stage of knowledge, from recently ingested perceptions to broad-reaching theology: "the immediate experience in its passing is always 'truth,' practical truth, something to act on;" but "if theological ideas prove to have value for concrete life, they will be true."¹⁸ True beliefs are provisional and pluralistic; they depend on concrete, actual experiences that are not necessarily universal or eternal. Most importantly, they are

14. James, *Pragmatism*, Lecture I.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*, Lecture VI.

18. William James, "Does Consciousness Exist?," 156; James, *Pragmatism*, Lecture II.

evaluated on the basis of their concrete utility.

Thus pragmatism, the union of empiricism and utilitarianism, manages to improve on both. Taken narrowly, pragmatism would appear to be singularly selfish, hedonistic, or as one critic puts it, “cold, dull, and heartless.”¹⁹ But James responds that humans “find that to believe in other men’s minds... is satisfactory” simply because it is not satisfactory to live in a cold, dull, and heartless, world.²⁰ On the contrary, utilitarianism might also be accused of heartlessness; in pursuit of “general good,” it may sacrifice the individual. From a pragmatistic perspective, selfless beliefs are true insofar as this kind of optimism is satisfactory; and likewise, selfish beliefs are true insofar as they favor the individual human being pragmatism serves. By virtue of its theoretical selfishness and practical selflessness, pragmatism combines the best of both.

Applying Pragmatism: Utilitarianism, Reality and Consciousness

The utilitarian themes James interweaves with the theory of pragmatism also pervade his thoughts on reality and consciousness. James’ primary accomplishment with respect to theories of reality is to mediate between the unforgiving empiricism of Hume and the mysticism of religion by including human needs and ends in the criteria for meaning. Empiricism typically requires beliefs to held conservatively, but the introduction of utility allows James to answer questions for which there is insufficient empirical evidence. James spends Lectures III-V of *Pragmatism* demonstrating the use of the pragmatic method for resolving metaphysical debates by weighing the foreseeable utility of the counterfactual presented by each side. Because human teleology is engrained in truth, religion may be truer than science when it is better for human beings. “On pragmatistic principles, if the hypothesis of God works

19. James, *Meaning of Truth*, 188.

20. *Ibid.*

satisfactorily in the widest sense of the word, it is true.”²¹ Though he is not as expansive as the rationalists, James treats religion and spirituality in general with a liberal optimism that British empiricism lacks.

This allowance for the superhuman may seem to diminish the human being in James’ work, but the human agent is still very present in his theory of consciousness. James notes the selective attention cognition perpetually applies to the inflow of sensations: “that [sensations] are is undoubtedly beyond our control; but which we attend to, note, and make emphatic in our conclusions depends on our own interests; and, according as we lay the emphasis here or there, quite different formulations of truth result.”²² Alongside the selection bias of attention, there is a positive aspect to the mind’s treatment of reality, in which truths are built into a framework on top of reality in the course of experience. The empirical ground beneath this framework shifts and the structures of truth mutate until the edifices of belief are so consequential to human actions that they are inseparable from and functionally the same as reality itself. A large majority of perception is shaped by the mind for its own ends; thus, the functional principles of utilitarianism pervade James’ model of even the most covert cognitive processes. Truth, as reality’s correspondent, is inextricably linked to a particular, embodied human being’s “particular sense of the universe.” Such a theory of perception marginalizes the empiricist’s noumena and emphasizes the role of the human being in world-creation.

Weaknesses in Empirical Utilitarianism

Having fully demonstrated the fruits of a more pliant, utilitarian empiricism, one is left to wonder where pragmatism might stand without the empirical and utilitarian aspects of James’ theory of consciousness. James packages pragmatism as a standalone method; he claims that “one of pragmatism’s merits is that it is so purely epistemological. It must assume

21. James, *Pragmatism*, Lecture VIII.

22. *Ibid.*, Lecture VII.

realities; but it prejudices nothing as to their constitution, and the most diverse metaphysics can use it as their foundation.”²³ While this is partially the case, James neglects an important component of pragmatism’s assumptions demonstrated here: utilitarianism itself assumes the existence of a satisfaction principle in the mind, without which pragmatism is inoperable.

Compared with ontological elements such as sensation and ideas, the principle of satisfaction is vaguely grounded. James generously shows that pragmatism allows for a provisional form of theology, but a pure theist could argue that pragmatism is a useless method in a world where abstractions are supreme. The central drive of pragmatism – to judge an idea by its potential useful effects in concrete experience – would be a waste of time, when there is an abstract Truth to be pursued. James confronts this possibility directly in *Meaning of Truth*, calling rationalism “perverse abstraction-worship,” but he has no ground to fall back on but the primacy of “practical utility.”²⁴ Even worse, in a world where there is no such thing as utilitarian happiness or intellectual satisfaction, pragmatism is as good as a coin flip.

Fortunately, it is the intuitive instability of this claim that lends James’ pragmatism its credibility; few can say they have not experienced satisfaction, and so pragmatism relies on the intuition of empirical utility. For James, this is not a flaw; he is unapologetically unconcerned with pragmatism’s everyday usefulness to the individual. So long as human beings experience satisfaction and thereby find some beliefs useful, pragmatism is the ideal democratic philosophy for the masses and successful by its own utilitarian standards. James thus ends his lecture where it began, with the individual’s temperament: “But if you are neither tough nor tender in an extreme or radical sense, but mixed as most of us are, it may seem to you that the type of pluralistic and moralistic religion that I have offered is as good a religious synthesis as you are likely to find.”²⁵ Perhaps James’ humanism, and

23. James, *Meaning of Truth*, 215.

24. *Ibid.*, 205.

25. James, *Pragmatism*, Lecture VIII.

the pragmatism it practices, is as good a philosophical synthesis as a satisfaction-seeking individual is likely to find.

References

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