

# I

## The Existence of Morality

Before we examine in detail the moral implications of James's philosophy, it would be well to ask whether his pragmatism does not rule out, from the very start, any possibility of morality properly so called. Is it true that James's so-called morality is at best an endorsement of mere expediency, a code whereby each individual may legitimately do whatever he believes will best advance his own interests, regardless of the consequences, good or bad, which may accrue to other persons? This viewpoint is not without its adherents; at one time, for example, it was the view of Benito Mussolini, who claimed James as one of his philosophical masters. Declaring that James's pragmatism was of great use to him in his political career, Mussolini praised it for teaching him that "an action should be judged rather by its results than by its doctrinary basis."<sup>1</sup>

As a matter of fact, however, the moral views of James are much too complex to be reduced with any degree of fairness to any single formula. Moreover, as we shall see, James was vitally concerned with the construction of a system of ethical ideals which would not be equated with the so-called "ideals" of the "strong man." As we shall show, the Christian saint, with his renunciation and self-sacrifice and charity, embodies the highest moral ideals of James's pragmatism; Nietzsche's representation of saints as degenerates far *excellence* and men of insufficient vitality, is not implied at all in James's pragmatism.<sup>2</sup>

As a matter of fact, the philosophy of William James may be fairly viewed as a passionate and articulate protest against the dominant current of materialisms and rationalisms, a protest made often on behalf of moral beliefs. In the name of science, in the name of religion, and in the name of humanity, James affirmed, over and over again, the real existence and the intrinsic importance of morality.

Pragmatist though he was, James, in his utterances on the nature of morality, generally avoids what has been called the “narrowing and accidental reductions which the pragmatic outlook imposes upon our approach to being.”<sup>3</sup> As a matter of fact, James carefully avoids most such reductions with respect to morality. Of him we cannot say that he “takes it for granted that everything which is accessible to our immediate experience is doubtful, subjective, or at best only a secondary aspect of reality which cannot demand or win our full attention and interest.”<sup>4</sup> Denying the alleged superiority of the inorganic over the organic, he demanded that all data, subjective or otherwise, be given a full hearing on terms compatible with their possible autonomy and reality.

In the data of experience he discovered some data which corresponded to the realm traditionally called moral. These data, he affirmed, were true realities in every sense of that word. He saw man’s chief difference from brute animals in the “exuberant excess of his subjective propensities”;<sup>5</sup> and, in insisting over and over again that “the aim and end of every sound philosophy” is behaviors he stressed not only the reality of morality but the primacy of its role in philosophy. Men, he said, who were ascertaining the moral character of being were engaged in an almost infinite speculative task.

The moral interest of James continued in his seeing the final purpose of creation as being most plausibly “the greatest enrichment of our ethical consciousness.”<sup>7</sup> The drama of the cosmos exists for moral purposes; its most significant events are those that are morally relevant.

To enter into an objective philosophy of things, he said, we must take the yoke of moral duty upon our shoulders, “regard something else than our feeling as our limit, our master, and our law; be willing to live and die in its service.” We can come to *know* moral truths only by *doing* them; such truths cannot exist abstractly, that is, apart from some concrete consciousness, and they can be known only when they are actualized in concrete human experiences.

Being thus thoroughly convinced not only that morality is completely real but also that the primary object and goal of philosophy is behavior, James believed that some kind of moral system and subordination must exist. He saw that as long as a philosopher holds to the hope of having a philosophy, some ideals must be believed to have “more truth or authority” than other ideals and that to these “the others ought to yield.”<sup>9</sup>

In the process of exploring moral phenomena, man must consider his own subjective interests: “To bid the man’s subjective interests be passive till truth express itself from out the environment, is to bid the sculptor’s chisel be passive till the statue express itself from out the stone.”<sup>10</sup> Man’s subjective desire to have a genuine ethical universe is a *sine qua non* for the “discovery” of that universe—just as is the scientist’s subjective desire for a simple, consistent, coherent account of the world a prerequisite for the development of science. In both cases the human subjective interests are legitimate elements. (In the chapter on epistemology and morality we shall consider in more detail this creative role which man plays in his relationship to truth and the moral implications of this role.)

In following his desire to have a morally unified universe, the moral philosopher must take the ideals which he finds existing in the world and see how they can be got into a certain form. In doing so, however, the philosopher must avoid the “superstition” of believing in a system of moral relations which are true in themselves (unless the philosopher happens to be a theist, who can place the code in God’s mind).<sup>11</sup> He must avoid ethical philosophies dogmatically made up in advance; he must avoid the temptation to suppose “that our demands can be accounted for by any one underlying kind of motive,” realizing that the “elementary forces in ethics are probably as plural as those of physics are.”<sup>12</sup>

Having no common character apart from the fact that they are ideals, “the objective validity of moral ideals is lodged in the *de facto* constitution of some existing consciousness.”<sup>13</sup> Without an actual consciousness, goodness, badness, and obligation could not be realized. But wherever such actual living minds do exist “with judgments of good and ill, and demands upon one another, there is an ethical world in its essential features.”<sup>14</sup>

These judgments in moral matters are of utmost importance, so much so that skepticism in such matters is really “an active ally of immorality . . . The universe will have no neutrals in these questions.”<sup>15</sup> If we become Epicureans we shall have a world view that regards the world as being “of fundamentally trivial import”; if we become moralists we shall see the nature of things as being “earnest infinitely.”<sup>16</sup>

As we shall see, morality plays a major role in the pragmatism of James. Service in the ranks of morality is a kind of “cosmic patriotism”;<sup>17</sup> for James the “power of moral or volitional response to the nature of things will be the deepest organ therewith we shall ever possess.”<sup>18</sup>