Kant, James, and Pragmatic Anthropology

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1. It is hardly arguable that Kant is perhaps the most important classic of modern philosophy, and James is on the way to become a figure of reference for the contemporary one. It is also well know that the complexity of their philosophies is no second to their importance, and as such any narrow of allegedly final interpretation of their respective thought shows as presumptuous if not ludicrous when faced with the richness of their respective intellectual paths. The more so when we focus on their ethical writings: both Kant and James present the reader with a variety of texts and notes that challenge any quick interpretation of their moral thought. Secondary literature on their respective works is growing voluminous, and not without harsh quarrels between the diverse contenders – this is especially true of Kant, currently contended among several different philosophical lines and traditions, but also James's scholarship is finally awakening from several decades of purported unquestioned assumptions and progressively attracting the attention of unexpected philosophical provinces. Without pretending to advance any comprehensive reading of such authors, I rather intend to selectively investigate some specific aspects of their works as moral philosophers.

These cautionary – and, perhaps, somewhat suspicious – words that I lay bare at the outset are motivated by the manifest mismatch between the complexity of such authors and the somewhat microscopic use of some themes that I will be reading in them. In particular, I shall focus on some features informing their inquiries on the vexing issue of the relationship between ethics and philosophical anthropology[1], which, as I shall argue, they contributed to unravel with some compelling insights yet to be fully appreciated. It will in fact be my contention that both Kant and James, in some specific moments of their intellectual biographies, addressed the questioning of the characterization of a *pragmatically informed* anthropology, offering a fruitful path along which rethinking the nature and shape of moral reflection. By surveying some central lines of Kant's *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* and James' *Principles of Psychology* I argue for a picture of the entanglement of ethics and

[1] From now on I will drop the characterization "philosophical" before "anthropology", as I will only deal with the use philosophers made of anthropological surveys and reflection.

anthropology along pragmatic lines standing in opposition – and representing at the same time an alternative – to the foundational account of the entanglement offered by ethical theory, according to which the clash between the purely descriptive register of anthropology and the utterly prescriptive one of ethics necessarily brings the former to succumb to the demands of the latter. In such heated discussion, a pragmatist progress takes the form of a negation of such marked clash in the first place: by envisioning a conception of *pragmatic* anthropology which illuminate an important dimension and register of the moral life that moral philosophy should account for – that is the one of self-constitution and care of the self –, Kant and James envision a novel path along which thinking the relationship between ethics and anthropology 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 narrow scope of such an inquiry over this particular theme if compared with their wider moral productions, which at least in the case of Kant seems to create more than a friction, I take this to be a key theme running deep in their respective (and for more than one aspect rather distant) philosophical agendas. In fact, although my intentions are expressively theoretical and my goal here is to make the case for the presence in these authors of the seeds of a certain way of conceptualize both ethics and anthropology, still my reading of Kant, James and the intertwinement of some of their claims over this particular theme nurtures some aspirations of historical soundness, which hopefully will echo at some stages of the concluding section – albeit lingering in the background of the ones preparing its ground. Obviously, in order to make a strong case for my reading and with the two authors having rather different philosophical commitments and goals, my reconstruction will be intentionally selective but hopefully not narrow.[2]

Before outlining the contours of their respective pragmatic moves as well as of their synergies, let me spell at some more detail the philosophical problem with which Kant and James were – and we contemporary reader of ethics after Kant and after James are still – wresting with.

2. The problem of placing anthropology in ethical reflection is an entrenched and nagging one in the history of moral philosophy – a problem which we encounter in

[2] I won't in fact be able to discuss nor engage the many historiographical works dealing with the details of Kant's and James' positions, but I shall rather sketch my own reading of their views and their intertwinements departing from some selected literature.

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, if only slightly, the timeframe to the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment – but a similar discourse, although dressed in rather different theoretical clothes, can be located in earlier moments of the western intellectual history –, the problem of how to best square the normative demands of moral theory with the empirical evidences about human nature crossed the moral thought of virtually all great thinkers in such tradition, and still informs our contemporary echoes of such debates. Despite the most diverse answers to the issue, still it can be appreciated a common assumption underlying most approaches, with only a few exceptions. In fact, it has been usually assumed that what anthropology gives us are factual description of human beings as beings of a certain kind (natural, rational, or divine), while ethics deals with normative notions such 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 prescriptive endeavors, 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 *promotion* of a certain moral principle. In this picture ethics can profit from anthropological considerations, but only in an external way: that is by picking from it some materials and arrange them according to *its own* normative criteria. The one counter-move sometimes envisioned to contrast such approach – which however represents nothing but its sheer opposite, sharing the assumption about the sharp divide between ethics and anthropology – has been a return to a metaphysical account of human nature in which there would be inscribed those very ethical qualities that moral theory prescribes us to honor. The only way anthropology can deliver from a moral point of view is by turning itself into the site of ethical principles, 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 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, but rather because it tells us something about what human beings *practically* make of

themselves as self-governing accountable being – thus envisioning an *internal connection* between anthropology and ethics.

From this angle pragmatism can be read as a way to bridge the is-ought gap informing a great portion of modern and contemporary moral philosophy. In order to retain normativity in the practical realm moral philosophers variously envisioned ways in which the prescriptive character of morality would be accounted in terms of a reference to the natural traits of human beings, or at least it can be reconciled with it, so to avoid to fall short of a version of Hume's law or of G. E. Moore's naturalistic fallacy. The problem faced is that you 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. Any naturalistic description of a certain situation or psychological profile would in fact 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 idea that moral features can't dress in natural clothes (or, alternatively, that nature don't wear moral considerations on its sleeves), and conversely that all that is factual is as such normatively idle. Among the vary strategies to account for such possibilities, pragmatism as reworked by Kant and James in the texts under examination traces a distinctive and promising path.

Pragmatism refuses a dichotomic picture of moral thought in which anthropology and ethics pursue independent inquiries into different aspects of reality – the natural/descriptive and the non-natural/normative, which have to be somewhat artificially coordinated. The challenge facing pragmatist thinkers is that of showing the contiguity of such inquiries and the consequent harmony of their respective tasks. This moves is certainly not without conceptual consequences for the way in which we picture both task and their very objects: pragmatism questions in fact both the broadly reductionist view of anthropology according to which it would give us the description of human beings in terms of what they necessarily – that is biologically or culturally – are (thus stressing its normative neutrality 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 secure the objectivity of the values it advocates). As against the former it offers a picture of pragmatic anthropology whose object is what human beings as *agents* engaged in responsible practices 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 constitution and in its encountering the world. What gets dropped altogether is both a notion of the self as a given and a conception of moral normativity dependent on moral principles built in splendid isolation from human contingency.

In acknowledging such a closeness between ethics and anthropology, 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 factual image of human beings, hence violating the autonomy of ethics as a sphere of discourse and argumentation that aspires to a certain degree of rationality. In fact, the peculiar version of pragmatism I am reviewing, by depicting subjects as self-transformative beings, looks with suspect at those ethical projects interested in imposing a particular moral agenda by defending a certain fixed picture of human beings allegedly fulfilling its specifics. By contesting such foundational and prescriptive approaches, pragmatism aims at earning a picture of moral thought as a field of *practical* inquiry that is neither impermeable to the contingencies of human life nor committed to impose 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 alternative of putting at the center of its investigation the subject's practices of freedom and self-fashioning. The kind of *normative descriptions* we find in Kant and James in fact depicts human beings as engaged in the realization of a certain ideal or responding to a certain experience they pose themselves rather than obeying to a certain moral rule or principle externally imposed on them or expressing their essence. A selective use of Kant and James, to which I now pass, will help me to articulate these ideas and the larger philosophical picture animating them.

3. 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. 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 *Grundlegung* 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 text Kant envisions a radically different scenario for such a relationship. Such a distinction plays a seminal role for the articulation of an alternative 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 a integration in two different 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 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 way 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.

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. The cultivation of our faculties aims at a perfection that is not dictated by any moral abstract rule but rather emerges from the use we make of them. 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. As Michel Foucault showed us in his 1964 *Introduction à l'Antropologie,* Kant's later work on anthropology has deep intertwining with his critique period, not only for biographical reasons – the Antropology class was held by Kant for some 25 years from 1772 to his retirement in 1797 – but also because what is at stake in Kant's anthropology is a redefinition of the boundaries of the human that stands as an interesting –even if problematic– 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 alternative picture, to live morally one must make something of herself according to some ideal of good life, in the same manner as to live healthy one must make something of himself according some ideals of an healthy life[3]. 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 build up our life in accordance to some ideas of perfection we ourselves posit. If what guides our practices of self-constitution is an activity according to reason, in the *Anthropology* such reason is portrayed not as an apriori feature of our metaphysical constitution, but rather as one of the possibilities of the human life when approached from the point of view of what one might do of onself. 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. The pragmatic *should*, without doubt a normative notion, is derived from a description of one among the possible 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 the world, but rather as practical knowledge of the ways human beings establish a certain relation with themselves in experiencing. Pragmatic anthropology

[3] '*Il y aussie une* délectation spirituelle [*Geistesgenuß gib*] *à communiquer ses pensées; mais on est rebuté si cette communication est imposée sans être profitable comme nourriture pour l'esprit (par example la répétion identique de certains traits qui devraient être spirituals ou drôles, peut, par cette identité meme, nous devenir insupportable); dans ce cas, on appelle par analogie dégôut cet instinct naturel à se libérer,* |*bien que kw dégoût ici ne relève que du sens interne'* (Kant 2008: 115). Later on Kant employs the notion of 'psychological diet' (2008: 134) to characterize such regimes of conduct through which we educate our faculties to their right exercise.

describe human beings in their practices of cultivation and refinement of their faculties: by organizing and presenting relevant aspects of human experience to agents, anthropology allows them to reflect about what is in their power to do and thus about what kind of persons they shall be. 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 standpoints –theoretical and practical– we can take toward experience, and not as a 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 in advance 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 experiences. I shall now explore 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 sound experiencing.

The Pragmatic Anthropology is divided in two parts: the Didactic or Doctrine of Elements (*Elementarlehre*), and the Characteristic or Doctrine of Method (*Methodenlehre*). The former, subtitled 'on the art of knowing the interior as well as the exterior of man', 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 art of knowing the interior of man from his exterior', articulates the ways in which these are shaped as to form a character. Kant describes character as 'what man makes of himself' (Kant 2008: 184): it indicates the way we conduct ourselves and thus represents the way we articulate our agency. Anthropology pragmatically understood refutes the existence of an external standpoint from which to assess the good exercise of our faculties.

> Thus what remains to us for indicating the human being's class in the system of living nature and thus characterizing him is nothing but this: he has a character that he himself makes, in that he has the faculty of perfecting himself in accordance with ends he takes for himself.

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 moral in the measure in which she fully express her character through the good exercise of her rational capacities, but such an exercise stems from a certain description of human beings as capable of *forming* their character. In order to have a character, and so to be moral, human beings must *do* something, and thus they must *become* certain kind of persons. Character is portrayed by Kant as a 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:

> Man must, therefore, be educated to the good. But he who is to educate him is again a human who still finds himself in the crudity of nature. This human, now, is expected to bring about what he himself is still in need of.

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

> 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, illegitimate.

This meaningful change of emphasis depicts human beings in the middle of their struggles for formation and self-education, and their faculties as something that is not merely given but rather always to be achieved. The good exercise of our faculties is reflected in the notion of sound experience. Kant struggles to present a great varieties of ways in which our faculties (theoretical, aesthetical and moral) can fail to achieve their proper perfection, that is fails to provide us with the kind of knowledge they aims at. Both theoretical and practical judgment require the subject being experienced in the right way with the relevant particulars, and thus they can be impaired in a varieties of ways according to the failing 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 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[4]. As an example, Kant discusses courage (§77)[5] 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 a moral principles, but rather in describing the varieties of ways in which a courageous conduct can be exhibited; only through such a description of human beings engaged in certain activities of courage it emerges a moral criterion for their assessment. The treatment of the morality of suicide offers the best case in which such a dialectics is 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 in respect the relevant experience – if for example it express a respect for the autonomy of one's life threatened by an evil tyrant or rather a consuming grief for one's big frailty – tells us everything there is to know to judge such occurrence as morally regrettable or not.

This way of presenting anthropology as an inquiry that is morally relevant brings to light an image of ethics focused on what the self makes of herself through pondering certain thoughts and engaging in certain conducts. This idea, articulated at length by Michel Foucault and Pierre Hadot (among others) 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, and in the last part of this talk I am about to briefly sketch the way James elaborates these ideas in his 1890 masterpiece *The Principles of Psychology*.

[4] See §§ 63-69 for an articulation of such a reading.

[5] A similar point could be made in respect to features as well; Kant discusses passions (§§80-6), imagination (§§34-6) and taste (§§67-71) by using this very same dialectic.

4. James read Kant's *Anthropology* in 1868, and described it as a 'marvelous, biting little work'[6]. Notwithstanding the small evidence in the published as well as in the unpublished writings, and despite some *trenchant* judgments about his major works, there has been an intensification of studies regarding James' Kantian legacy[7]. 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 its early encounter. Accounting the detail for such an historical connection, although extremely compelling, is a complex task exceeding the scope of the present talk. Rather, I'm interested in the most humble venture of investigating the way in which James envisioned in the *Principles* a pragmatic picture of the entanglement between ethics and anthropology on lines closely resembling Kant's, despite a 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' (p. v), the *Principles of Psychology* represents James' most elaborate attempt to waive together an impressive number of psychological, anthropological, philosophical and personal 'descriptive details' (p. vii) about what could be broadly characterized as 'our mental life' (p. 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 PP 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

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[6] R. B. Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston and Toronto, 1935, vol. 1, p. 512-3.

[7] M. Murphy*, Kant's Children: The Cambridge Pragmatists*, Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society, vol. 4, 1968; M. H. DeArmey, *The Anthropological Foundations of William James's Philosophy*, in M. H. DeArmey and S. Kousgaard, *The Philosophical Psychology of William James*, University Press of America: Washington, 1987; T. Carlson, *James and the Kantian Tradition*, in *The Cambridge Companion to James*, ed. by R. A. Putnam, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; S. Franzese, *The Ethics of Energy*, Ontos Verlag: Frankfurt, 2008, p. 51-8. Dewey had been the first to remark James' –and pragmatism's– debt to Kant for the very notion as well as for the naming of *pragmatishe*. See J. Dewey, *The Development of American Pragmatism*, in *The Collected Works of John Dewey 1882-1953, Later Works vol. 1*, Carbonade: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976, [1925].

system 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 kind of conducts that we can assume in respect to our very subjectivity.

The cornerstone of James' pragmatic anthropology would thus be a conception of human beings as makers and not mere spectators of their lives of the mind. In PP James would not present the single elementary constituents of the moral life as most of the scholar 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 and not as *themselves* 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 that is not seen by the kind of descriptions of the mental life offered by either classical empiricism and rationalism.

The discussion of habit in the fourth chapter of *The Principles of Psychology* can be read as a chief instance of such pragmatic anthropology.[8] James presents habit as one of the most powerful law and pervasive phenomenon of our mindedness and worldliness: without it our lives could hardly be lived, 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 self we might have been or become if only we would have dared to think and conduct ourselves differently from how we habitually do.[9]

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[8] As an aside, one might say that for James habit is a sort of ethical *Überkoncept*, as according to this reconstruction it represents at once one of the features of our interiority in need of reflexive working and the device through which all other facets would get transformed. I owe this observation to a conversation with Mathias Girel on an ancestor of this paper.

[9] 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.

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*"[10]. 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 portray 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 (and thus, at the practical level, the performance of actions). Further, and most importantly, for James "our nervous system grows to the modes in which it has been exercised"[11]: 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

> The first result of it is that *habit simplifies the movements required to achieve a given result, makes theme more accurate and diminishes the fatigue.*[12]

> The next result is that *habit diminishes the conscious attention with which our acts are performed*.[13]

For James, thus, a subject endowed with the appropriate habits is likely to be more accurate in the achievement of its ends, and its 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 their blind and uncritical deployment have the opposite effect of render us inattentive and passive. If thus for James it is essential to nurture one's habits,

[10] PP: 110.
[11] PP: 117.
[12] PP: 117.
[13] PP: 119.

even more is to challenge them by asking oneself *which* habits to cultivate, and especially *how to* cultivate them.

James presents habits as our "second nature", since they craft 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 our past experiences, James depicts habit as the distinctive feature of our active attitude toward our interiority and engaged stance toward reality. Habit becomes thus the chief device to storage, organize and control our mental energy releasing in this way our conscious attention, which is continuously solicited by the great amount of information involved in our 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 alleviate, so that we are free to concentrate on other aspects of reality that are of interest for us.

For James our very ability to have meaningful experiences and invest them with value as contrasted with registering their sheer factual happening (that is, the breaking of the order of immediate perceptive presence presenting us the world as an indistinct complexity in order to generate meaning) 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 concerns 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 than we begin to feel at home.[14]

Through our inclusion and omission we trace the path of habit and thus of our experiencing and agency altogether. The aim of habit is to make us "feel at home" in the world by breaking our experiences and connecting the elements that interest us with other that we find as much appropriate and worth entertaining in our lives. 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 deepest significances.

The ethical stakes of such a characterization are of the outmost importance. James

[14] WB: 96.

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 the similar manner as the "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.[15]

A similar formulation can be found in *The Principles of Psychology*, 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.[16]

For James habits should be our closest allies, and yet we should also remain vigilant in their handling as they could revel to be our worse 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 do we nurture them* that makes them advantageous or rather harmful, and thus relevant from a moral point of view. If from the one hand habits give voice to our deepest needs, cravings and interests, on the other hand their misuse might cause the very suppression of our subjectivity.

James lists five practical maxims involving the exercise of habit, in which what is at

[15] TT: 47.
[16] PP: 126.

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 maxim best catches the spirit of the exhortative moral register informing James's dialectics of habits (and wider moral agenda). He writes

> As a final practical maxim, relative to these habits of the will, we may, then, offer something like this: *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.[17]

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 welcome or rather challenge is the mark of our moral destiny, thus depicting human beings as the makers of themselves and responsible for their own faiths. The price we have to pay for the metaphysical 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 desolate 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/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 on which we have no intentional grip nor active control, we distort both the way in which we arrive at forming an habit in the first place as well as jeopardize its very significance. We

[17] PP: 130.

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 to satisfy 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 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.[18]

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 in which 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 contents 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 monitoring of, and the experimentation with, our habits and their ability to express our subjectivity or rather mortify it. James invites us to take a vigilant attitude on our habits so to prevent those "contractions of the self" typical of their deformation. Such critical activity of self-monitoring and self-transformation lies at the very heart of James's ethical-political writings, where he launches a fierce campaign against various forms of acquiescence in our private and public lives. The latter has been James's signature intellectual fight, and its roots are to be found in the notion of unfamiliar habit at the heart of his pragmatic anthropology. Such notion in fact pivotal to understand James's investigation of the crucial issue of the possibility of conducting ourselves in ways which are at the same time expressive of our subjectivity and mindful and respectful of how our fellow individuals lead theirs. His writings on human blindness and on the moral equivalent of war can be read as variations on this theme,

[18] PP: 130-1.

and his painstaking work to carve out a space of personal freedom within natural and social boundaries represents yet another example of his insistence on the cultivation and transformation of the habitual self as the key ethical-political activity.[19]

5. As a concluding remark I would like to go back to the question of the relationship between ethics and anthropology. Taking psychologism as the archenemy of philosophy, moral reflection has tried to keep ethics pure from psychology. Although the nobility of purposes, given the poor quality of the psychology often used in ethics, such an approach seems to be ill conceived from the very beginning. The right question seems in fact to be not whether psychology is relevant for ethics, but *which* kind of psychology might be relevant. Kant and James offered a radical answer to this query by conceiving psychological states as directly relevant for the articulation of the moral life of the subject entertaining them. Their pragmatic anthropologies are imbued with ethical considerations, for the conceived the analysis of mind as the clarification and assessment of our cognitive and affective life for their improvement. By investigating the nature of our psychology we attain a clearer picture of ourselves and a better grasp of the character of experiencing. The moral considerations that we find suffused in the *Antrhopology* and in PP have in fact the form of an invitation to take care and pay attention to the various aspects of our life of the mind, of which they present the various potentialities as well as its shortcoming.

The pragmatic anthropology underlying the picture of the relationship between ethics and psychology that Kant and James are resisting characterizes human beings as mere spectators that are moved to act morally because they are compelled by the observation of some moral principle whose justification does not involve the exercise of their sensibility. This way of characterizing the practical nature of human beings, as makers and not mere spectators, suggests an alternative conception of the scopes and strategies of moral philosophy, as well as of its relationship with philosophical anthropology. From this perspective ethics *emerges* from a certain pragmatic description of human beings without being *derived* from the analysis of their sheer factual constitution.

For both Kant and James the adjective *pragmatic* characterize anthropology not as a scholastic (and thus theoretical) knowledge, but rather as a kind of practical knowledge through which human beings take care of themselves in their possibilities of experience.

[19] Following Koopman one might claim how James was interested in "the philosophical and political idea of a *personal* action which is reducible to neither *individual* power nor *social* relations" (Koopman 2005: 175).

Pragmatic anthropology depicts human beings as *moral agents* constantly engaged in improving their faculties with some goal of excellence in view that however is not externally fixed by a principle, but rather is each time negotiated in our practices. The pragmatic descriptions of our faculties in terms of what they allow us to do and experience enable us to deepen our comprehension and use of our very capacity of having experiences, and in particular moral ones in which what is at stake is the establishment of a certain meaningful relationship between ourselves and the world. There is thus a sense in which such activities are of ethical importance themselves, since they have to do with some kind of working and improvement of our very subjectivity.

According to this picture, the object of moral reflection hence 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 PP*,* and its articulation makes it possible to read its most interesting chapters under a new light. James, differently from Kant, talks about mental activities discarding altogether the language of mental faculties that is still appreciable in the *Anthropology* (although presented from a quite different perspective than the one of the major Critical writings), but both characterize mental excellence as the capacity to explore and deepen our interiority by pursuing those interests defining most roundly our subjectivity. In order to evaluate if a certain mental activity is adequate, and thus if the experience to which it leads us is appropriate, we should look at the kind of relationship we entertain with such activity and experience; that is, the way they express our subjective point of view on a certain situation.

From such a perspective we can uncover a space for subjectivity that results as the outcome of a work on ourselves in terms of a development and elaboration of a life of the mind attentive to the richness of experience toward which we could be morally blind and unreflective. In PP James shows a way in which this option can be articulated: by giving a pragmatic description of the stance we *might take* in the investigation of our cognitive as well as affective life, he stresses the importance of philosophical psychology for the understanding of our moral life, a connection often overlooked by moral theories which portrait such an entanglement in foundational terms.

What I have been suggesting through my reading of Kant and James is that the notion of human being, and notion of a human perspective embedded in it, can be relevant for ethics if we renounce to concentrate to what human beings are, 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 ourselves in terms of a development and elaboration of a life of the mind attentive to the richness of experience toward which we could be morally blind and unreflective. In different but convergent ways, Kant and James have showed a way in which this option can be articulated: by giving a pragmatic description of the stance we *might take* in the investigation of our cognitive as well as affective life, both authors have stressed the importance of philosophical anthropology for the understanding of our moral life, a connection often overlooked by moral theories which portrait such an entanglement in foundational terms.

This way of presenting anthropology as an inquiry that is 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 point toward a way in which this alternative option can be articulated: by giving a pragmatic description of the stance we might take in the investigation of our cognitive as well as affective lives these authors suggest an interesting picture of ethics *as* anthropology.

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