Foucault Studies

REVIEW ESSAY

James, Nietzsche and Foucault on Ethics and the Self‡

Sergio Franzese, *The Ethics of Energy. William James's Moral Philosophy in Focus* (Frankfurt: Ontos Verlag, 2008), ISBN: 978-3868380118

Sarin Marchetti, Sapienza Università di Roma

> What ties Dewey and Foucault, James and Nietzsche together [is] the sense that there is nothing deep down inside us except what we have put there ourselves, no criterion that we have not created in the course of creating a practice, no standard or rationality that is not an appeal to such a criterion, no rigorous argumentation that is not obedience to our own conventions.
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> R. Rorty[1]

1. Varieties of ethical experience

I would like to begin my essay review with a short *détour* into the far present, thus moving to the near past, and finally settling to the proper timing of the book under consideration. This digression should be read as a way to adjust the optical focus at what I think could be an interesting frame through which investigating some of the book's ideas. The validity of such a path will be critically discussed in the latter paragraph of the essay, once the discussion of—which at times turns out to be a dialogue with—the book will be fully in place.

In his 1983 interview *On the Genealogy of Ethics* Foucault traces a fascinating overview of his work from the late seventies and early eighties, underling the continuities as much as the discontinuities of his interests for what he calls 'the techniques of the self.' The point of assessing the place of those techniques in the history of western ethics is both that of conveying their significance in the development of western culture, and showing how much the

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‡ I dedicate this essay to the memory of Sergio Franzese, whose recent passing away represents a serious loss, for the philosophical community and beyond. I deeply regret he did not see the essay in print as he wished, since it is shaped by many stimulating discussions with him on our respective views on these themes.

[1] Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), xlii.

investigation of such techniques can be instructive to illuminate our *present* ethical situation. Foucault's late journey into the Greco-Latin world and its concern for how to conduct one's life in a way that is neither subjected to the laws of society nor to those of religion, represents in fact an interesting instance of that 'history of the present,'[2] through which engaging in neglected and unexplored exercises of self-understanding. He writes

> [I] wonder if our problem nowadays is not, in a way, similar to this one, since most of us no longer believe that ethics is founded on religion, nor do we want a legal system to intervene in our moral, personal, private life. Recent liberation movements suffer from the fact that they cannot find any principle on which to base the elaboration of a new ethics. They need an ethics, but they cannot find any other ethics than an ethics founded on so-called scientific knowledge of what the self is, what desire is, what the unconscious is, and so on. I am struck by this similarity of problems.[3]

Foucault is interested in presenting a way of understanding ethical thought as informed by the idea of a 'care for the self,'[4] one which runs deep into the history of western culture, as opposed to a conception of morality grounded in a more or less scientific description of what human beings are as seen from a detached and unengaged perspective. According to this alternative conception, which Foucault in a late *course* calls 'the pragmatic of the self,'[5] the proper target of ethical interest is the way human beings conduct themselves: ethics is redefined as the inquiry into the 'self's relationship to itself,' and in particular into the relationship of care it establishes with the action, thoughts and values which articulate its moral conduct.[6] Such a path of reflection about the meaning and nature of ethics can be fruitful to understand, and possibly change our present situation regarding how to conduct ourselves ethically. However, as it is clear from his late interviews, Foucault is not interested in finding a *solution* for our contemporary problems by pointing to some moral criteria endorsed in the past, as opposed to

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[2] For the *locus classicus* in which this expression is employed, see the lecture of 7 January 1976 of Michel Foucault, *Society Must be Defended. Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-76*, edited by Mauro Bertrani and Alessandro Fontana (New York: Picador, 2003).

[3] Michel Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of the Work in Progress," in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault. Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 231.

[4] Foucault dedicates the course of 1982 at the *Collège de France* to the presentation of his research into the Greco-Latin conception of ethics as a *rapport á soi*, which he describes at the same time as an attitude toward the self, others, and the world; see, Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject. Lectures at the Collège de France 1981-82*, edited by Frédéric Gros (New York: Picador, 2005). Frédéric Gros' *Course Context*, which closes the volume, is particularly helpful for the understanding of the place of this seminal *course* in Foucault's intellectual journey.

[5] Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others* (New York: Picador, 2010), 5.

[6] In the course of 1978 at the *Collège de France*, Foucault tackles the question of the emerging *dispositif gouvernemental* in the ethical and political western tradition, dedicating the lessons of March 1st and March 8th to the analysis of the concept of conduct that is pivotal for his definition of ethics; see Michel Foucault *Security, Territory, Population. Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-78*, edited by Michel Senellart (New York: Palgrave Macmillan-Picador, 2009). For the entanglement of the two 'technical' notions of conduct and ethics in Foucault, see the "Introduction" by Arnold Davidson to the Course.

the ones currently accepted in our time. An example of such problems could be those concerning sexuality or the liberty over one's own body. He is rather interested in tracing a 'genealogy of problems, of *problématiques*,'[7] which prompted the discovery or invention of new ways of conceiving one's conduct as ethically meaningful, so to react to, and escape from, forms of oppressive coercion by either social or religious institutions and powers. Foucault warns us that conceiving such ancient techniques as alternative solutions available for us to address our present moral problems, is unavailing for two orders of reasons, one external and one internal to morality itself: in the first instance, because the socio-historical situation in which such ethical practices have flourished is very distant from ours, and secondly because of variation in the very self-understanding of such practices by the subjects involved. These two aspects are deeply entangled, and in order to spell out this entanglement Foucault makes a distinction within ethics, between different aspects of the moral life experienced by the subjects involved. He discriminates between the ethical substance, the mode of subjection, the self-forming activity and the *telos*. These aspects are at the same time connected and independent one from the other, so that changes in the contingencies of historical situation prompt, but do not overlap with, changes in the way in which subjects experience their own conduct as ethically meaningful. For example ethical substance (that is the aspect of the self or behavior concerned with moral conduct and relevant for ethical judgment) may remain the same while the *telos* (that is the kind of being we aspire to be when behave morally), the self-forming activity (i.e. the means by which we shape ourselves in order to become ethical subjects) and the mode of subjection (or the way subjects are prompted to recognize their moral obligations) may change. Foucault's examples, taken from the history of sexuality, spanning from the appropriation of classical and late antiquity's concept of *epimeleia heauton* in regards to the meaning and practice of *aphrodisia* by the early Christian tradition, to the transformation of the analysis of sexual perversion as we find it spelled out by Augustine and in eighteen century's treatises on masturbation, show the danger of postulating the existence of some fixed moral concepts that are able to account for such a varieties of ethical experiences, since the very understanding of such concepts changes together with the conditions under which they are experienced. The very same principle or moral concern can be, and has been, experienced in very different ways and aimed at opposite results, so that the nostalgia for the return to a celebrated past, in which our moral life was governed by an unswerving truth exemplified in some definite moral concepts, appears to him historically as well as philosophically unstable. These reasons forbid a plain translation between ancient forms of ethical conduct and our present moral behaviors. According to Foucault, investigating the past—more or less distant from us—is neither aimed at finding modern solutions to old problems nor at finding old solutions to new problems, but rather at spelling out the trajectories of the questions that are still felt as urgent to address in the present. In another revealing interview, Foucault justifies his interest for the genealogy of ancient practices of subjectivation as motivated by saying

> [t]hese ways of thinking and behaving [are] still with us. I try to show, based on their historical establishment and formation, those systems which are still ours today and within

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[7] Foucault, *On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of the Work in Progress*, 231.

which we are trapped. It is a question, basically, of presenting a critique of our own time, based upon retrospective analysis.[8]

According to the reading I would like to suggest, passages like these claim that our interest for those ancient techniques lies in their being a model for thinking about *moral reflection itself.* One of Foucault's main interests is showing how a certain enlightenment project[9] for the establishment of universal principles of moral evaluation on the base of which judging the moral quality of a certain conduct was doomed to fail, given the clash between its appeal to some immanent anthropological features human beings should realize in order to behave morally and the widespread variety of moral experiences that characterizes the history of human societies. However, this failure does force us to give up saying something interesting about moral reflection. In fact, according to Foucault what is still possible and worth-while exploring through a genealogical analysis of such practices is a *model* for understanding what morality altogether could look like. In another late interview Foucault writes

> [F]rom a strictly philosophical point of view, the morality of Greek antiquity and contem-porary morality have nothing in common. On the other hand, if you take them for what they prescribe, intimate and advise, they are extraordinary close. It's the proximity and the difference that we must bring to light and, through their interplay, we must show how the same advice given by the ancient morality can work differently in the style of contemporary morality.[10]

Foucault's incursions into the classical and early-modern worlds aim at showing that even if moral behaviors undergo substantive transformations, what underlies them, i.e. a certain way of thinking moral reflection, can survive its many possible declinations and be fertile to address our present problems concerning how to conduct ourselves morally. In order to achieve this goal, what is needed is not another normative model, but rather an analysis of the forms in which the self's relation to itself have been problematized. In *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History* Foucault describes his philosophical method as genealogical after Nietzsche's, and presents it as follows:

> [G]enealogy does not pretend to go back in time to restore an unbroken continuity that

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[8] John K. Simmons, "A Conversation with Michel Foucault," *The Partisan Review*, 38 (2), (1971), 192.

[9] Foucault is attentive in distinguishing a Leibniz-Wolff-early Kantian variant of enlightenment from a Hume-Rousseau-late Kantian variant, the former being concentrated in sorting out an all-inclusive principle of rationality capable of assessing human thought and conduct, while the latter interested in showing the developing character of our claims of knowledge and action and how reason and reflective though is nothing but one among the devices that can be used for their assessment. Foucault tackles incidentally this theme in his *What is Enlightenment?*, in *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 32-50; for a wider discussion of these authors and their respective lineage, see Jerome B. Schneewind, "Toward Enlightenment: Kant and the Sources of Darkness," in *The Cambridge Companion to Early Modern Philosophy*, edited by Donald Rutherford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 328-351.

[10] Michel Foucault, *The Return of Morality*, in *Foucault Live (Interviews 1961-1984)*, edited by Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Semiotext(e), 1996), 468.

> operates beyond the dispersion of forgotten things; its duty is not to demonstrate that the past actively exists in the present, that it continues secretly to animate the present, having imposed a predetermined form on all its vicissitudes… [O]n the contrary, to follow the complex course of descent is to maintain passing events in their proper dispersion; it is to identify the accidents, the minute deviations-or conversely, the complete reversals-the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us; it is to discover that truth or being does not lie at the root of what we know and what we are, but the exteriority of accidents.[11]

Foucault's genealogy of morality is aimed at showing the varieties of ways in which something—as an interest for the ethical self—has surfaced out of some practices and experiences. This way of thinking moral reflection is very unlike a normative model as we find it spelled out in the modern western ethical tradition, in its relative silence about the individuation of the principles according to which moral appraisal or criticism should be pronounced. The contrast that such a genealogy brings to the fore is between a picture of morality as the articulation of the principles human beings ought to follow in order to be moral and a picture of ethics as the analysis of the ways in which human beings have conceived their conduct and interiority as morally relevant. Ethics is for Foucault a methodological and not a substantive notion, and refers precisely to a peculiar way of conceiving one's relation with oneself, that can be, and has been, articulated in different ways and driven by opposite concerns. In the third chapter of *L'Usage des Plaisirs* Foucault gives a perspicuous characterization of the contrast between moral codes as the observance of normative or customary codes and ethics as the shaping of one's self according to some ideals it helps establish through an act of endorsement. This is a contrast emphasized with different tones and even terminology by Nietzsche and James as well, as a contrast between a morality the self merely receives or applies and an ethics it invents by forming its self inspired by some ideals. It is important to understand that Foucault is not suspicious of moral codes *per se*, but rather he is suspicious of the sublimation of such codes as the only aspect of one's conduct that is ethically relevant. Foucault thinks that what is important in the characterization of one's ethical life is the relationship the self establishes with those very moral codes: that is, its capacity of accepting, interpreting or refusing them as revealed in its practices of self-formation. According to Foucault in fact, one's ethical conduct must be distinguished from one's moral behavior: both belong to what Foucault labels as morality, but they refer to very different aspects of our subjectivity. While moral behaviors denote the accordance of one's actions to the rules and values prescribed by certain agencies through the establishment of moral codes, ethical conduct refers to one's movements of self-constitution according to some practices and activities in which the self develops a relationship with itself. The two aspects are distinct but indissoluble, since one's ethical conduct expresses the very reaction one can have in respect to moral codes, so that their different understandings will determine one's formation in accordance with, or critical opposition to them. Foucault gives great emphasis to the moment of dissent, whose importance is even greater than that of endorsement, since by refusing the moral and political cate-

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[11] Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy and History," in *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 81.

gories and institutions, which are supposed to inform our conduct, we create the possibility for new experiences that can also improve those very categories and institutions we have resisted. The notion of counter-conduct, whose first explicit appearance in the work of Foucault is datable to 1978's *Lectures at the Collège de France* (see note 5 for reference), represents the hub that connects the notions of conduct and care of the self. It is in the moment of counter-conduct that the self constitutes itself as an moral self, since conducing in a way that is alternative to—but not in bare opposition with—the field of options that is given to us by a particular power or historical contingence, requires working on ourselves such that we engage in some practices and experiences whose aim is that of shaping our liberty within the boundaries of a certain field of possibilities.[12]

Given this distinction,[13] Foucault characterizes ethics as a

> [p]rocess in which the individual delimits that part of himself that will form the object of his moral practice, defines his position relative to the precept he will follow, and decides on a certain mode of being that will serve as his moral goal. And this requires him to act upon himself, to monitor, test, improve, and transform himself.[14]

This picture of ethics is very instructive if seen on the background of Foucault's engagement with Nietzsche, and in particular with his genealogical method for the assessment of the western ethical tradition. Nietzsche's analysis of morals, under the form of a genealogy, is aimed at showing the epistemological and psychological underpinnings of contemporary moral thought. Nietzsche is interested in unraveling the philosophical and psychological foundations of contemporary moral thought, in order to show its unsatisfactory grounds and suggest an alternative built into a new philosophical and psychological conception of human beings[15]. His concern is that of 're-evaluating values' by liberating the self from self-imposed habits and moral codes. According to Nietzsche, the first and necessary step for the achievement of a rich

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[12] An excellent characterization of this intertwinement is given by Foucault in his "Friendship as a Way of Life," in Michel Foucault, *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, vol. 1: Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, edited by Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997). See also, "The Social Triumph of Sexual Will" and "The Ethics of the Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom," both in Foucault, *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, vol. 1: Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*.

[13] I would like to thank Alan Rosenberg for some useful advices about Foucault's terminology, and for his encouragement to make my ideas clearer on this point. For further considerations about the relationship between ethics and morality in Foucault see Arnold I. Davidson, "Archeology, Genealogy, Ethics," in *Foucault: Critical Reader*, edited by David C. Hoy (Oxford: Basic Blackwell, 1986); James W. Bernahuer & Michael Mahon, "Michel Foucault's Ethical Imagination," in *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault (2nd edition)*, edited by Gary Gutting (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and Michael Mahon, *Foucault's Nietzschean Genealogy* (Albany: SUNY, 1992).

[14] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality vol. 2: The Use of Pleasure* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 26.

[15] If this amounts to saying that Nietzsche is advancing a philosophical anthropology is a matter I cannot pursue here. Both Nietzsche and Foucault are explicitly refuting any anthropological backup of their discourse, although it should be précised which *kind* of anthropology they are resisting. For an interesting analysis of this theme, see Béatrice Han, "The Analytic Finitude and the History of Subjectivity," in *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault (2nd edition)*, edited by Gary Gutting (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

and authentic ethical life is precisely the refutation of any received morality and the human beings we are when thinking and acting under the unreflective and unengaged sway of such a morality. Instead of being the object of moral concern, the self, for Nietzsche, is its very result: the self is something we have to form, attain and achieve in order to be moral. Nietzsche's refutation of the moral self as a given, amounts to a refutation of ethics as the inquiry of the condition of possibility of moral *appraisal* of the self in favor of a conception of ethics as the inquiry of the condition of the moral *constitution* of the self.

His treatment of exemplarity, especially in writing such as *The Uses and Abuses of History for Life, Schopenhauer as Educator* and *Daybreak,* represents the cornerstone of his genealogical project of showing the unsatisfactoriness of moral reflection, conceived as the justification of values established independently from any practice of endorsement by the individuals whose life is governed by such values. Nietzsche's critique of morality begins with the question 'How can I confer upon my life the greater value?', and proceeds with the instruction that what is needed—above all—is a vigilant skepticism toward all inherited concepts. It is only by questioning the validity of such moral concepts that we earn the possibility of claiming some values that are really expressive of our moral life. Up to a certain amount, the self that is the target of moral evaluation emerges from this very activity of *skepsis* in which what is at stake is its very identity as a moral subject. Through questioning its received thoughts and habits, the self discloses the possibility to constitute itself as a moral subject, that is as a subject responsible for the values it endorses and morally healthier than the one it was before such questionings. According to the reading given by James Conant, which stands in fierce opposition to the one given by Thomas Hurka,[16] Nietzsche's statements, rather than advancing an elitist and aestheticist picture of the moral self, suggest an image of human beings as 'progressive beings,'[17] whose task is that of recognizing their capacity for grasping values out of their practices and experiences of subjectivation. Nietzsche's purpose is *critique*,[18] and his attacks on received thoughts, prescriptions and codes are provocations aimed at shaking our deep convictions about the sources and groundings of our moral ideas. Nietzsche asks us to acknow-

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[16] James Conant, "Nietzsche's Perfectionism," in *Nietzsche's Postmoralism*, edited by Richard Schacht (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and Thomas Hurka, *Perfectionism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). A hint of response by Hurka to Conant can be found in "Nietzsche: Perfectionist," in *Nietzsche and Morality*, edited by Brian Leiter and Neil Sinhababu (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). For a companion reading of Nietzsche as a perfectionist thinker, see Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), ch. 11.

[17] The characterization of human beings as progressive beings is depicted by John Stuart Mill in the first chapter of *On Liberty*. For a compelling reading of Mill as a perfectionist thinker and fellow traveler of the authors we are discussing, see Piergiorgio Donatelli, "Mill's Perfectionism," *Prolegomena*, 5 (2), (2006).

[18] For by now classical readings of Nietzsche's genealogy as critique, see Bernard Williams, "Nietzsche's Minimalist Moral Psychology," in *Making Sense of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Philippa Foot, "Nietzsche's Immoralism," in *Moral Dilemmas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002); David C. Hoy, "Nietzsche, Hume and the Genealogical Method," in *Nietzsche, Genealogy and Morality*, edited by Richard Schacht (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); and Alasdair MacIntyre, "Genealogies and Subversions," in *Nietzsche, Genealogy and Morality*. For a fresh analysis and an up-to-date comparison between Nietzsche and Foucault on this aspect, see Hans Sluga, "I am Simply Nietzshean," in *Foucault and Philosophy*, edited by Timothy O'Leary and Christopher Falzon (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

ledge the perspectiveness[19] of our values and truths, and thus take responsibility for this fact by behaving consequently, both in our intellectual and in our practical life. He writes

> [w]hatever exists, having somehow come into being, is again and again reinterpreted to new ends, taken over, transformed, and redirected by some power superior to it; all events in the organic world are a subduing, a *becoming master,* and all subduing and becoming master involves a fresh interpretation, an adaptation through which any previous "meaning" and "purpose" are necessarily obscured or even obliterated…[t]he entire history of a "thing," an organ, a custom can in this way be a continuous sign-chain of ever new interpretations and adaptations whose causes do not even have to be related to one another but, on the contrary, in some cases succeed and alternate with one another in a purely chance fashion. The "evolution" of a thing, a custom, an organ is thus by no means its *progressus* toward a goal, even less a logical *progressus* by the shortest route and with the smallest expenditure of force, but a succession of more or less profound, more or less mutually independent processes of subduing, plus the resistances they encounter, the attempts at transformation for the purpose of defense and reaction, and the results of successful counteractions. The form is fluid, but the "meaning" is even more so.[20]

Given the perspectiveness of our values and the provisional character of the situations in which they are experienced and exercised, Nietzsche calls for the endorsement of an active stance toward our thoughts and actions, and thus the education of them in order to achieve that Emersonian 'unattained but attainable self' through which we could experience and express at full our moral life.[21] Both the ability to experience values and to have experiences that are valuable must be cultivated, and a genealogy of morals would prompt us to recognize the history of the struggles over self-formation by means of this questioning morality from within its very exercise. As Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg have suggested, we can give Nietzsche's alleged nihilism a negative as well as a positive characterization, according to Nietzsche's remark that 'it can be a symptom of increasing *strength* or increasing weakness.[22] Corresponding with the negative characterization, the absence of a transcendental system of values makes human begins incapable to act and causes their will to perish. Following the positive characterization, however, such an absence prompts one's will and sensibility to create own values by shaping oneself in a certain way. There is no better declaration of this principle than the one stated in §6 of the preface to *The Genealogy of Morals*, where Nietzsche writes

> [L]et us articulate this *new demand*: we need a *critique* of moral values, *the value of these values themselves must first be called into question*—and for that there is needed a knowledge of the conditions arid circumstances in which they grew. Under which they evolved and changed

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[19] For an assessment of this aspect of Nietzsche, and its relevancy for contemporary reflection on ethics, see Raymond Geuss, *Outside Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), exp. introduction and ch. 13.

[20] Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 77-8.

[21] For the Emersonian echoes in Nietzsche's philosophy, see the first chapter of Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome. The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990).

[22] Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg, "The Aesthetic and Ascetic Dimension of an Ethics of Self-Fashioning: Nietzsche and Foucault," *Parrhesia*, 2, (2007).

(morality as consequence, as symptom, as mask; as tartufferie, as illness, as misunderstanding; but also morality as cause, as remedy, as stimulant, as restraint, as poison), a knowledge of a kind that has never yet existed or even been desired. One has taken the *value* of these "values" as given; as factual, as beyond all questions.[23]

Questioning one's values means questioning the experiences to which such values are attached, and the activities that constitute the background of meaningfulness and legitimacy of those very experiences. Foucault elaborates Nietzsche's insight in a fruitful direction, giving moral reflection an interesting characterization: by investigating the ways in which human beings have shaped themselves accordingly to some practices and ideals it is possible to understand the varieties of ethical experiences they have undertaken. Ethical experiences and not moral principles stand at the centre of moral reflection, the aim of which is organizing such experiences according to the role they play in the lives of the subjects involved. This achievement requires work on one's self that is very unlike the one expected by merely conforming or agreeing to a set of norms that one lives by. Experiencing, and especially moral experiencing, requires work on one's self, since authors—in order to experience something as valuable the self—must be a in a peculiar state of mind which prompts conduct that is transformative of its own sensibility. In this alternative conception of moral reflection the target of moral interest shifts from mere actions and motives to the whole conception of one's own conduct. This self-understanding becomes the very object of moral concern for it is only by giving one's life a certain shape—that is, by conducing oneself in a certain way—that one comes to appreciate a variety of moral experiences which are excluded when it unreflectively lives with the values it merely inherits as given.

In what follows I shall argue that some of these insights are echoed in the ethical thought of William James. What James, Nietzsche and Foucault share is a conception of ethics as an activity of self-care. According to these authors, individuals constitute themselves as ethical subjects by being attentive to the experiences and thoughts that are transformative of the way in which they conduct themselves. Notwithstanding the differences in both their style and interests, I will claim that these authors have shaped their ethical investigations departing from the very same question, namely: 'what does it take to have a moral experience?', and claimed that the answer should have the *form*: 'to take care of one's own self.' Nietzsche and Foucault trace this answer back into the history of western culture—with some interesting incursions into eastern thought as well—while James investigates its possibility by assessing the state of art of modern ethical thought, concentrating in particular on its two most representative parties, that is empiricism and rationalism, as well as on their European and American contemporary developments. James sees the achievement of this alternative way of conceiving moral reflection as a consequence of a proper focus on the moral psychology and epistemology on which moral experiencing is grounded, while Foucault sees this as the result of the play (*jeux*) of the historical contingencies human beings encountered in their practices of subjectivation. Nietzsche would have subscribed to James' characterization of the entanglement between ethics and psychology, agreeing at the same time with Foucault's claim about the historicity of its understanding by the subjects involved. Thus, despite the di-

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[23] Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 20.

versities of style and interests, these three philosophers share a common concern in respect to a certain way of picturing moral thought and its relation to the moral life it should address. By investigating the way in which individuals become ethical subjects through engaging in the relevant experiences, these authors suggests a way of thinking moral reflection as an analysis of the practices and conducts that give access to such experiences.

While the literature about Nietzsche's and Foucault's approaches to this particular theme is wide and growing, the interest for this aspect of James' moral philosophy has been meager and the connection with his pragmatist philosophy overlooked. In fact, James' moral philosophy has barely been considered on these lines, while much emphasis has been given to the alleged promethean character of his ethical reflection, which would have committed him to an elaborate version of utilitarianism.[24] Sergio Franzese's compelling book *The Ethics of Energy. William James's Moral Philosophy in Focus* represents a notable exception in James-studies. In fact, in this book the author explores a number of interesting features of James' moral reflection that have been largely ignored: most notably, the idea that we can understand the nature and point of ethics only through a more imaginative look at our moral life. This path of investigation is aimed at undermining the grounds on which the standard reading of James' ethical thought rests, since it puts in question the very feasibility of moral theory as it has been usually conceived.

Franzese's book, whose exposition of James's moral philosophy asserts itself among the most interesting assessments in James scholarship, both for its attentive reconstruction of James' position and for the innovative character of its interpretative line, advances a reading of James' moral philosophy as an inquiry into the nature and shape of moral reflection itself. The most interesting aspect of Franzese's book is its main argumentative line, i.e. the claim that the major interpretations of James' moral philosophy rest on the mistake that what James was advancing was a normative system of morality. Through the analysis of his moral writings, Franzese shows how James was instead interested in depicting an alternative way of conceiving morality altogether. It is important to notice, however, the book's intended disinterest for Foucault: the author aims at a critical exposition of James' moral thought and of its anthropological commitments, while some space is given to its intertwinements with the work of Nietzsche—especially with his though on the ethical importance of 'the care, development and control of human force.' Thus, after presenting the arguments advanced in his book, I would like to conclude by explaining why, despite the author's resistances, another ally of James and Nietzsche on this particular aspect of their work is Foucault. I shall argue that the connection between these three authors should be traced in their shared struggle against what, following Richard. J. Bernstein, I will call a Cartesian conception of the self, and in particular the companion foundational anxiety for what regards its epistemological as well as its moral

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[24] The most authoritative defender of this reading is Richard M. Gale, *The Divided Self of William James* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Even if *Gale's James* is far from the one sketched in the book under review, this work presents a powerful interpretation of his philosophy and is plenty of interesting instructions about some fundamental issue about morality and psychology, for example concerning the question raised in the note 25.

powers.[25]   James, Foucault and Nietzsche developed their respective philosophies as attempts to delineate a picture of the self that is neither captured by the traditional narrative about the place of human beings in the natural world as proposed by the Christian-Cartesian heritage, nor by the scientific revolution and developed along positivistic lines in a significant portion of our western modern and contemporary philosophical culture.   The *leitmotiv* behind their dialectics is the refusal of these traditional images of the self, and the demand for an alternative way of picturing the emergence of the moral subject from its activities of self-constitution.   Following Franzese, I will now present James' place in such a narrative, concentrating on three intertwined aspects of his moral philosophy that are particularly relevant in regards to the theme of the subject's ethical formation: the anti-foundational character of moral reflection, its exhortative tone and its underlying pragmatic anthropology.

2. James against moral theory

The volume by Franzese opens with a chapter, '*William James' Moral Philosophy in Focus,*' which sets the tone for the whole book.   The author undertakes a detailed analysis of James' essay *The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life* (MPML), by far the most quoted and yet the most misunderstood of James' papers.   The importance of this essay, lectured by James in 1891 as an address to the Yale Philosophical Club, cannot be underestimated, since it does not only represent James' clearest exposition of his ethical position, but also because it contains the methodological instructions that are necessary for the understanding of James' moral ideas as they are explored in his other writings.[26]   Therefore, it is not a case that its deep misunderstandings brought a paltry reception of the whole James' moral philosophy.

The misunderstanding consists in a *misreading* of the tone and aims of the essay altogether: with a few exceptions[27] MPML has been understood as a defense of utilitarianism,

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[25] Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983). Bernstein has dedicated a chapter of his most recent book to a reading of James' moral philosophy as an attempt to rescue from both these foundational anxieties and the thread of relativism they mean to address. See Richard J. Bernstein, "The Ethical Consequences of James's Pragmatic Pluralism," in *The Pragmatic Turn* (Polity Press: London, 2010).

[26] There is an interesting question about the connection between James' methodological considerations on the nature of morality and the moral instructions pervading his work on psychology and pragmatism, a question not explicitly addressed in these terms by Franzese. An interesting treatment of this aspect is given by Bernard P. Brennan in the last two chapter of his *The Ethics of William James* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961).

[27] Most notably, Hilary and Ruth Anna Putnam, who both in their joint papers and in their individual works on James have developed a compelling reading of such an essay. See in particular, Hilary Putnam and Ruth Anna Putnam, "William James' Ideas," in Hilary Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), where a foundational reading of James' moral philosophy is dismissed as inappropriate: 'James (as well as Dewey) takes the same approach to ethics as he does to common sense and science. Here too, he thinks, there are procedures which can be imperfectly characterized and which might be improved in the course of ethical inquiry itself. What is not available is a set of final ethical truths or a method by which they can be discovered. *He tries to change our philosophical sensibility*, rather than to replace one foundationalist ethical project with another, on the one hand, or to convince us that ethics is "noncognitive," on the other' (223, our italics). See also Hilary Putnam, "Philosophy as Reconstructive Activity: William James on Moral Philosophy," in *The Pragmatic Turn in Philosophy. Contemporary Engagements between*

due to the presence of some passages that, if read out of context, could sound as a defense of a nuanced version of the principle of maximization of goods. However, an attentive analysis of the dialectic in which those passages are embedded will reveal the real stakes of this capital essay, in particular its anti-foundational and anti-theoretical inspiration. As Franzese puts it in the very first page of his book

> the essay of 1891 does not work as an outline of a moral theory because it was certainly not intended to be one. On the contrary, it was intended to show the futility of that traditional philosophical task, which is perhaps why philosophers have intended not to read it too closely…[t]he 'The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life' is a critical analysis of the validity of any moral theory, in the terms of its relation to the moral philosopher, rather than presenting another specific moral theory.[28]

The author engages in a patient analysis of the interpretations given to the essay, and in particular he concentrates on Perry's 1935 monumental work *The Thought and Character of William James*, in which Perry advances a very biased reading of James' moral philosophy. Franzese tackles Perry's interpretation by challenging the textual evidences, taken both from James' printed works and from his personal notes for the classes on moral philosophy he taught at Harvard during the 1880s and 90s, which Perry quotes to vindicate James' alleged utilitarianism. In particular, Perry reports a passage taken from the notes for a course on moral philosophy held by James in 1888-9,[29] in which he makes reference to Royce's claim that in order to choose which goods to promote in a situation in which some have to be sacrificed, we must use *moral insight*, that is 'consider *every* good as a real good, and *keep as many as we can*.'[30] The major flaw in Perry's account consists in reading James' reference as an endorsement of Royce's principle for the solution to value conflicts, whereas in those notes James only presents some theoretical options that have been used in the history of philosophy to address some central problems of morality. Even if the themes of these notes trace out the themes discussed in MPML, there are important differences between the two texts, which Perry's melting pot fails to appreciate when he accounts for them. The most important feature that differentiates MPML from the notes is precisely its intent to criticize the very possibility of a theoretical account of morality by showing the limits of those moral principles that have been advanced to address ethical questions. The difficulty James wants to spell out refers to the ability of moral reflection to address the problems that characterize our moral lives, and what is called for is precisely a new understanding of ethics as a field of discourse and reflection that is able to inform our moral life in addressing *its* difficulties. According to this more attentive reading, James' quotation of Royce is supposed to show how the endorsement of his principle of moral insight can help us in our moral lives when facing situations in which what

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Analytic and Continental Philosophy, edited by William Egginton and Michael Sandbothe (Albany: State University of New York, 2004); and Ruth A. Putnam, "The Moral Life of a Pragmatist," in *Identity, Character and Morality*, edited by Amelie Rorty (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1990).

[28] Sergio Franzese, *The Ethics of Energy. William James's Moral Philosophy in Focus*, 3.

[29] William James, "Notes for Philosophy 4: Ethics – Recent English Contributions to Theistic Ethics (1888-9)," in *Manuscript Lectures* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 182-6.

[30] Ibid., 185.

is at stake is the decision between incompatible values, but it does not represent the moral criterion for the resolution of them as such.[31] In fact in MPML, James claims that the invocation of moral insight has—at most—a negative function: namely, bewaring those conservative positions which invoke custom as the chief moral principle to settle disputes about values.

Franzese claims that Perry's unimaginative reading misses the roots of James's discourse and makes MPML as unintelligible as incoherent, since according to it there seem to be too many incompatible claims advanced at once—an error perpetuated by those commentators who took Perry's words for granted. In order to understand how the claims advanced in MPML are not incompatible, and contest in this way Perry's reading, Franzese engages in an painstaking examination of the essay. Once read in the light of James' considerations about habit and action, which the author examines in the second and third chapters—the essay conveys a precise picture regarding the shape morality should take in order to entertain a profitable relationship with the moral life it should address. According to this more attentive reading, the many claims advanced in the essay about the nature of moral values and the origin of our moral ideas, are to be taken not as conflicting moral principles, but rather as the various aspects of our moral life that moral reflection should address, and the purpose of James is precisely that of showing the difficulty for a narrow picture of ethics conceived as the establishment of a hierarchy of moral values and principles to meet this goal.

As the author notices on page 16, no attention has been paid to the title of MPML, however, the headline is very instructive for understanding the subject-matter of the essay: namely, the relationship between the moral philosopher (that is moral reflection) and the moral life. James claims that ethics is an inquiry into the nature of moral facts—which are much more variegated than both classical empiricism and idealism are ready to admit—as they are experienced by human beings in the course of their moral lives. This characterization eschews any role for moral reflection conceived 'in the old-fashioned absolute sense', that is 'dogmatically made up in advance.' Moral reflection, for James, aims at understanding our moral experiences as they are displayed in ordinary practices. A piece of moral philosophy, thus, must be suggestive rather than prescriptive: it must convey the depths and trivialities of our ordinary moral experiences, rather than prescribing which course of action should be appropriate accordingly to some established moral principle. Franzese writes

> [i]t is James's insight that an ethics, or a moral theory, is to be suggestive more than imperative, hortatory more than prescriptive.[32]

In order to spell out this instruction the author quotes a passage of capital importance made by James in the introductory chapter of a textbook on philosophical psychology originated by

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[31] The author dedicates a detailed comparison between James and Royce on the nature of moral thought at pages 19-22. For a broader presentation of their disagreement on the conception of pragmatism and its consequences for the characterization of truth that is relevant for ethics, see James Conant, "The James/Royce Dispute and the Development of James's "Solution,"" in *The Cambridge Companion to William James*, edited by Ruth A. Putnam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[32] Franzese, 10.

some addresses to Cambridge teachers, which dealt with the topic of the art of teaching and its relevance to psychology. James writes

> [T]he science of logic never made a man reason rightly and the science of ethics (if there be such a thing) never made a man behave rightly. The most such science can do is to help us to catch ourselves up and check ourselves, if we start to reason or to behave wrongly; and to criticize ourselves more articulately after we have made mistakes.[33]

Franzese claims that these instructions set us on the right path to see the real purposes of MPML. They in fact points to a central feature of James' ethics: namely, the claim that it is both impossible and pointless telling in advance which kind of experiences could be assessed as morally relevant. For James, morality is unbounded since the recognition of a certain experience as moral or not will depend each time on its capacity to *fulfill* or *frustrate* our sensibility. If that is so, then a certain experience will be morally satisfying or lacking not for its being in accordance with some alleged moral principle, but rather because it places ourselves in a momentous relation with the world and ourselves or not. James writes that

> [A]bstract rules indeed can help; but they help the less in proportion as our intuitions are more piercing, and our vocation is the stronger for the moral life. For every real dilemma is in literal strictness a unique situation; and the exact combination of ideals realized and ideals disappointed which each decision creates is always a universe without a precedent, and for which no adequate previous rule exist.[34]

Thus, the language of moral principles is misplaced due to the very phenomenology of our moral life. This theme is explored at depth in the central sections of MPML, in which James sketches the three main aspects of moral discourse—namely, the psychological, the metaphysical and casuistic question—and discuss the limits and point of a philosophical account of these various aspects as they are experienced in our moral life. Franzese writes that those sections must be read remembering that James' purpose in MPML

> [i]s not to define a system or a hierarchy of moral values and principles intended to rule individual or collective behavior, but rather to inquire into the constitutive attitudes and activity of moral philosophers in order to outline a more adequate approach to the nature and meaning of moral experience.[35]

This is a point of the outmost importance, since in my opinion it represents the most promising aspect of the author's interpretation of MPML. However, not all the expectations are met, since while I think that here Franzese does a great job at debunking the foundational readings of the essay, still I claim that the *method* he uses, however sound with his the overall

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[33] William James, *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 15.

[34] William James, "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," in *The Will to Believe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 158.

[35] Franzese, 27.

project of the book, is not the proper one—that is, it is not completely faithful to James' instructions. Our disagreement consists in a disagreement about the way in which the essay brings us to see what goes wrong when we do moral philosophy by advancing moral theories. Franzese reads the essay in completely negative terms, as the proof of the complete failure of moral theorizing to account for the facts of our moral life, and claims that the consequences James draws consists in the abandonment of philosophical reflection as the proper stage at which assessing our moral lives. He takes the essay as demanding us to shift the focus of our attention from *philosophical accounts* of morality to 'historical and constitutive process of social dynamics at work in the establishment of the moral order.'[36] In this direction, Franzese claims that, for James

> [m]oral philosophy is possible only as a critical science which takes each moral ideal as an hypothesis and each moral choice as an experiment.[37]

While I wholeheartedly agree with this perceptive statement, I suspect that this suggests an *alternative* to philosophical reflection. I think that James' intentions in the essay were *precisely* those of presenting *another* conception of moral reflection, one capable of meeting the difficulties of the moral life it should address. I found the invitation to conceive moral choices as experiments very illuminating for the understanding of the relationship moral thought should entertain with the moral life. Inventive experimentations require a work on ourselves that consists, among other things, in the willingness to change one's perspective, the commitment to the tentative nature of our moral ideas, and the striving for the attainment of one's own ideals. Franzese claims that this characterization has to be understood in the light of James' debt to Lotze's conception of 'experimental ethics' as he depicts it in his *Ethik*, in which what is invoked is precisely an understanding of morality on the model of scientific (although not positivistic) inquiry. However, equating moral reflection to the *mere* registration of our personal and social achievements seems to downplay the very dialectic of the essay, in which James bewares of picturing accepted values as the criterion for deciding hard cases of moral disagreement. Read in this way, the essay looses its most groundbreaking force, since according to Franzese in it James would be merely substituting an a-priori understanding of moral criteria with an a-posteriori one, while in my opinion in the essay he is interested in showing how ethics deals with *the way we understand and live* with principles. The experimentations James is talking about are *personal* experimentation, in which what is at issue is precisely the understating that the subjects involved have of what there are doing as devoid of meaning or not. There is trace in James' essay of moral relativism and historicism as interesting moral positions, but Franzese is still held captive by the temptation of the foundational rhetoric James is debunking if he thinks that James' response to it is that of crediting a subjectivist variation of moral relativism.

In this direction, I read the point and method of the essay not as that of showing the shortcomings of, in turn, a psychological, a metaphysical, and a casuistic foundation of mora-

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[36] Ibid., 39.
[37] Ibid., 40.

lity—as Franzese does at page 28-40—but rather as the investigation of the peculiar short-comings *internal* to these various aspects of our moral lives when addressed through intellectualistic requirements and their dissolution when freed from such a deceiving picture of what morality should be. This shift has interesting consequences on the very understanding of the central sections of MPML, too. According to an alternative reading I am advancing, these sections present the various aspects constituting our moral phenomenology and give an overview of the difficulties peculiar to each aspect. The role of the moral philosopher is a descriptive one, and consists in accounting at a reflective level how we fail to appreciate this variety if we portray the point of our moral life as the establishment of moral principles independently from our activities of endorsement and valuing the relevant moral experiences. According to James, the gist of the moral life is the personal striving each human being employs in the achievement of its own ideals, and thus the adoption of the right *attitude* that will lead to this achievement. James discusses at length the notion of ideal in such essays as "Is Life Worth Living?," "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings" and "What Does it Make a Life Significant," in which he applies the considerations already sketched in the concluding chapter of the *Principles* titled "Necessary Truths and The Effects of Experience," where he claims that our moral ideals are more the fruit of new ways of thinking than of past experiences. In MPML James insists on the dynamic character of moral ideals in the context of discussing the validity of the empiricist principle of association in explaining the origin of our moral ideas and the nature of value claims. Even if he praises Mill and Bain for their service to ethics in debunking aprioristic accounts of moral relations, still he contends that the mere reference to past experiences and their association with pleasant or useful sensations is not enough to account for the origin and normative force of our moral ideas. He writes in this direction that

> [e]very now and then…someone is born with the right to be original, and his revolutionary thought or action may bear prosperous fruits. He may replace old "laws of nature" by better ones; he may, by breaking old moral rules in a certain place, bring in a total condition of things more ideal than would have followed had the rules been kept… [t]he *highest* ethical life—however few may be called to bear its burden—consists at all times in the breaking the rules which have grown too narrow for the actual case.[38]

The metaphysical underpinning for this claim is that nothing could count as a moral good except from its capacity to satisfy a *demand* actually made by someone, and that the role of the moral philosopher is that of ascertaining the validity of these demands as he founds them historically claimed by the moral subjects. James stresses the conceptual connection between the advancement of a claim and the notion of obligation, arguing against those positions that portray the validity of value claims as depending on some extra-empirical moral order. In case of conflicting values, James says that the only option worth pursuing consists in an act of creation. He writes,

> [i]*nvent some manner* of realizing your own ideals which will also satisfy the alien demands—that and that only is the path of peace! Following this path, society has shaken itself into one

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[38] Ibid., 158.

sort of relative equilibrium after another by a series of social discoveries quite analogous to those of science.[39]

James underlines that this is all that can be said about demands and obligations. He invites us to abandon the pretense to settle disputes about values by invoking the normative significance of some past or even present state of affairs. What is needed then in these cases is to work on ourselves. Here we are asked to invent new and hitherto unimagined conducts expressive of our ideals from which—as with Foucault and Nietzsche—the whole society will benefit. The Jamesian vocabulary is thus that of invention and imagination, and not that of correspondence to some established order of values.

What is at issue in our different readings of James' essay is an opposite understanding of the pragmatic conception of goodness he advances. Franzese, quoting out of context James' well-renewed and highly discredited slogan, characterizes goodness in terms of 'satisfaction of desires,' while I think that there are far better and most perceptive passages in which James characterizes the notion of goodness than the ones Franzese picks out: for example those in which James equates goodness and truth to the peculiar *stance* we can take toward experiencing itself. It is important to notice, as Franzese tells us, that what underlies this conception of values and obligations is James' pragmatic conception of truth. Franzese rightly underlines the importance of James' conception of truth as the underlying ground to James' conception of morality, especially for understanding passages like the one quoted earlier from MPML. However he considers only one aspect of James' conception of truth as relevant (truth as what is better for us to believe), while he ignores another fundamental conceptual linkage between truth and ethics that is even more important for James. Truth informs ethics since holding something *as true* requires us to work on ourselves—on our perceptions, receptivity and sensibility. This is similar to what is required to have moral experiences and entertain moral ideas. By debunking a conception of truth as correspondence to a mind independent reality, that is one independent from our noticing, appreciating and valuing it, and rather favor one as the expression of our active endorsement of the reality of certain aspects of the world *we found worth noticing*, James opens the way to an alternative understanding of the connection between truth, action and morality. Truth informs one's conduct by pointing to those values and ideals affecting one's experiencing of reality. A discussion of James' conception of truth along these lines would have been congenial to Franzese's discourse, since some of the most interesting passages used by the author to spell out James' views about ethics make direct reference to this aspect of truth. Franzese quotes many passages from the *Principle*, and in particular from the chapter on "The Perception of Reality," in which such an intertwinement is explicit. There James clearly states that believing something requires both being in a certain state of mind, and that the truth of the things believed must have some certain effects on the believer. The effects are described in pragmatic terms, while the state of mind is described as the result of an exercise of attention and selection of those aspects of the world that are worth noticing. The truth of a certain belief, thus, is a function of an activity of endorsement determined by its importance for us. In the lectures on *Pragmatism* James dedicates many pages to the characte-

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[39] Ibid., 155-6.

rization of truth, deepening his previous ideas about the intertwinement between truth, action and morality. Some passages are particularly interesting since they emphasize this aspect of truth, as I have been suggested here. More specifically, I have in mind James' claim that

> [T]ruth is *one species of good,* and not, as is usually supposed, a category distinct from good, and coordinate with it… [i]n this world, just as certain foods are not only agreeable to our taste, but good for our teeth, our stomach, and our tissues; so certain ideas are not only agreeable to think about, or agreeable as supporting other ideas that we are fond of, but they are also helpful in life's practical struggles. If there be any life that it is better we should lead, and if there be any idea which, if believed in, would help us to lead that life, then it would be really *better for us* to believe in that idea, *unless, indeed, belief in it incidentally clashed with others greater vital benefits*.[40]

The language is strikingly similar to the one used in MPML. James argues for an internal, non-instrumental connection between holding something to be true and its leading to the endorsement of a life in which the presence of that truth would render something morally better. The importance of truth for ethics is therefore not confined to the pragmatic characterization of mindedness as the directedness of mental states to satisfy ethical demands, or the identification of thought with action. Truth is relevant for ethics because its attainment involves one's active involvement for the sake of realizing a life that is morally superior. Ideas are true insofar as they make us conduct ourselves in a way that is morally rewarding and healthier. The connection between truth and ethics is thus not instrumental; it is conceptual and internal to the re-description of both notions as proposed by James.[41] A perceptive example for this conception is James' claim at the very end of MPML, where he claims that

> [t]he *highest* ethical life—however few may be called to bear its burden—consists at all times in the breaking of rules which have grown too narrow for the actual case… [b]ooks on ethics, therefore, so far as they truly touch the moral life, must more and more ally themselves with a literature which is confessedly tentative and suggestive rather than dogmatic—I mean with novels and dramas of the deeper sort, with sermons, with books on statecraft and philanthropy and social and economical reform. Treated in this way ethical treatises may be voluminous and luminous as well; but they never can be *final*.[42]

Here James is neither claiming that good is relative, nor that it is the mere outcome of the most accepted ideas spreading in our society. He is precisely bewaring us not to equate goodness— and truth, for what matters us here—with what is most widely accepted as good—or true. Furthermore, the tentativeness and suggestiveness of ethics should be understood not in relativistic terms, but rather pointing to the kind of *activity* it conveys, one more allied with literature and social treatises than tables of duties or sociological laws, in which what we are called for is self-examination and inventive experimentation.

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[40] William James, *Pragmatism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 42.

[41] I have tackled these themes at more length in my "William James on Truth and Invention in Morality," *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*, vol. 2, no. 2, (2010), 126-159.

[42] William James, "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," in *The Will to Believe*, 158-9.

Interestingly enough, Franzese embrace this more radical reading of James when in the last part of the first chapter he brilliantly examines some details of this conception of ethics as experimentation, discussing in particular a central element of it: namely, the role of the innovator or genius, whose Emersonian 'normative autonomy'[43] deploys that *strenuous mood* that is so important for morality in its making us responsive to the ethical character of a certain situation, despite the resistances of the community to recognize it as such. Here we found the first occurrence of the theme of 'the organization of energy,' which the author will characterize at more depth in the last chapter of the book. I think is important to notice that this characterization of ethics is utterly silent about the peculiar *contents* of moral evaluation, and concentrate itself only on *its form*. James is interested in showing how an account of morality should reveal the sources and constraints of our moral life, resisting the temptation to specify those aspects of our moral life that are relevant for moral evaluation. This feature, implicitly laying in the background of Franzese's reading of James, is a major theme that in my opinion connects the American philosopher with Nietzsche and Foucault.

In MPML James makes implicit references to the practical nature of human beings: his philosophy of mind and his conception of the self as a practical being constitute the theoretical background against which such an understanding of ethics makes sense. James depicts this entanglement between ethics and psychology as the requirement for the legitimacy of any discourse about morality, to be grounded in how human beings, *qua agents*, engage in the relevant experiences which they recognize as making normative demands on them from their engaged point of view. From this wider perspective, ethics appears as an exercise of questioning the principles and assumptions on which we evaluate a certain situations as morally meaningful. This exercise aims at the appreciation of the formative character of moral experiences, whose endorsement requires us to experiment with alternative conducts stemming from them. What is important to notice is that this characterization of ethics is utterly silent about the particular *contents* of moral evaluation, and concentrates on *its form*. James is interested in showing how an account of morality should reveal the sources and constraints of our moral life, resisting the temptation to specify which aspects of moral life are relevant for moral evaluation.

Following Franzese, let us now make a brief survey into James' pragmatic anthropology, in order to see which are the elements and devices of our psychological constitution that are relevant for ethics, conceived in this peculiar way. Such a survey into the human mind will tell us which are the aspects of our cognitive and affective life that we must take care of, and right exercise of which represents the goal of one's work on oneself.

3. Ethics, anthropology and pragmatism
Once discarded the possibility to ground ethics on purely metaphysical grounds, Franzese claims that the theoretical frame preferred for the articulation of James' moral philosophy, is that of philosophical anthropology. In the second and third chapter of the book the author explores James' philosophy of psychology in order to show how the elementary constituents that structure our moral sensibility have to be traced back in the pragmatic picture of human

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[43] Franzese, 45.

beings, elaborated by James in his masterpiece *The Principles of Psychology*. As Franzese argues, James' treatment of the mind is relevant since it shows the impediments to be overcome in order to *become* moral. It also highlights the aspects of our cognitive as well as of our affective life to be improved in attaining full awareness of the reality, which makes ethical demands on us. James claims that we must train ourselves to have a moral experience, and that this requires acknowledging the development of habit and purposive thought as the most important marks of our practical nature.[44] In the long discussion of James' conception of habit, Franzese underlines the importance for ethics of this aspect of his philosophy of mind. He writes that, according to this picture, 'ethics is the main and ultimate chapter of a philosophical anthropology.'[45]

The author suggests tackling the anthropological question by investigating the relationship between culture and nature, which James developed in critical comparison with Darwin and Lotze.[46] He writes

> [t]he moral question requires a major preliminary work since it is not clear at all how a moral life is possible in the deterministic landscape drawn by the empirical sciences of nature... [T]he moral question can be posited only after the relationship between human being and nature has been clarified.[47]

James grew up in a time when it was impossible to avoid the debate on evolution,[48] and yet his attitude toward Darwin's theory can hardly be squared with both its defenders and its debunkers. James' relationship with Darwin and Darwinism is complicated, and Franzese spends a long section analyzing it. James praised Darwin's principle of chance variation, which was congenial to his ideas of indetermination and spontaneity as our peculiar conditions in the world as practical beings, but suspected the pretence of the principle of natural selection to describe *all* behaviors, since it seemed to take away responsibility from the hands of human beings, by depriving them of the burden of being makers of their own destiny. James' reservetions about the evolutionary picture of human beings dealt with its capability to address those aspects of our moral life that he thought non-negotiable: the grounding of values in our sensibility and capacity to respond in the relevant ways to the world, the

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[44] The connection between habit and ethics has been further explored by the author in his *Abitudine ed Etica. Coercizione e Autonomia nella Formazione del Sé*, in *Darwinismo e Pragmatismo, e altri Studi su William James*, (Milano: Mimesis Edizioni, 2009).

[45] Franzese, 51.

[46] James' internal critique of Darwinism is seen by Franzese as a leading thread into James' early and late philosophy. For a longer treatment of this connection, see his *Darwinismo e Pragmatismo* in *Darwinismo e Pragmatismo, e altri Studi su William James*. For a discussion of Lotze's influence on classical pragmatism, see Christopher Hookway, "Lotze and the Classical Pragmatists," *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*, vol.1, no. 1, (2009).

[47] Franzese, 50.

[48] The most fascinating intellectual history of the cultural and social background to this period of scientific and philosophical turmoil in America can be found in Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club. A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001); and Bruce Kuklick, *The Rise of American Philosophy: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1860-1930* (New Heaven: Yale University Press, 1977).

experimental character of moral choices and the tentative nature of moral ideas. James challenges the way the Darwinian theory accounts for these aspects. What James finds disappointing in Darwin is precisely his reduction of moral life to a struggle for survival. He contends that moral ideas are not those which are most useful for our survival in the world, but rather those which express our interests and concerns for the world. The problem is not one of usefulness, a notion of which James made a great use, but rather with the passivity such a picture conveys. James felt that little space is left for activity and decision, which are the fundamental mark of our practical nature. As the author notes, a criticism advanced by James was that this picture downsizes the activity of the mind to that of mere cognitive judgment by overlooking its emotional and axiological aspects, which are instead central features of our mindedness.[49] While I agree with Franzese's emphasis of this aspect, I suspect he endorses a dualism James that would have refuted when, by way of sketching James' criticism of the correspondence conception of the mind, he contrasts cognitive with emotional (or practical) judgments. The problem James is anxious to address is not that by ignoring the practical character of our engagement with the world we miss some non-cognitive access to it that is important for our moral life, but rather that by ignoring it we fail to have a *full cognitive access* to the aspects of the world in which values are nestled. Our moral ideas are not the projection of our emotions and sentiments on a morally neutral reality, but rather they represent the very (cognitive) grasp we have on those aspects of the world, which through this peculiar gaze are re-enchanted with the values and meaning that are accessible only from within a sensibility fully equipped with the relevant emotional and sentimental apparatus. By leaving out emotions and sentiments we not only elide our preferences and responses from our encounter with the world, we also misrepresent *how things are*. Franzese comes close to this reading while discussing James' refutation of hedonism at page 113-119, but still his discussion is held captive by a dualistic language.

The criticism James advanced against Darwinism, a friendly fire after all, can be understood in part as motivated by his tormented relationship with Kant's philosophy. James was a severe critic of both Kant's rationalism and intellectualism, as they are articulated in his epistemology, metaphysics and moral philosophy. However, James was also an attentive reader of the *Anthropology*, in which Kant sketched a very interesting analysis of human beings (actually, of their faculties) from a pragmatic point of view.[50] Franzese engages in a very interesting—although brief—sketch of Kant's pragmatic anthropology, which was moved by the concern for the possibility of reconciling the natural with the moral image of subjects. According to the Kant of the *Anthropology*, the culture-nature dichotomy is resolved through a re-description of human beings, not as metaphysical subjects, but rather as practical beings, who are capable of shaping their conducts in ways that are not reducible to natural behavior. The capacity to set aims for one's conduct that are expressive of one's own *character*—a capacity

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[49] See, William James, "Some Remarks on Spencer's Definition of Mind as Correspondence," in *Essays in Philosophy*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978).

[50] There is a very interesting question about the connection between the 'two' Kant, an issue of big interests also for James' scholarship that could partially explain his tension with Kant's writings. This question is addressed in the articles by Werner Starks, Allen B. Wood and Robert B. Louden published in *Essays on Kant's Anthropology*, edited by Brian Jacobs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

that is not prior to such an endorsement—is what characterizes *human* nature. This is therefore not something we merely find, but that we must create through such an exercise of spontaneity. This Kantian picture is presented in the *Anthropology* not as a transcendental deduction from a certain conception of normative reason, but rather as the outcome of a work on ourselves (what Kant calls the discipline of reason), a possibility of human nature we fail to meet if we do not cultivate those very faculties (read: aspects of the human mind, broadly conceived) whose proper exercise would bring us into fruitful relations with the world.[51] James was captivated by Kant's text when he read it back in his thirties,[52] and its influence on his thought goes far beyond the adoption of the name pragmatism to characterize his own philosophical approach. What caught his imagination was precisely Kant's characterization of the various aspects of the human mind from the part of their use, and the claim that this pragmatic description conveys the emergence of the moral subject from its own activities of self-care. Franzese writes

> [i]n stressing, consistently with his Kantian (and Emersonian) references, the creative and active autonomy of Man, James more or less assumes the account of human nature as culture, and accepts the view that the human form of life exists in a state of insuperable tension between culture and nature. Man is the being which has "culture" as Its own nature. Morality, as the point at which the tension between nature and culture becomes most evident, is the core of this tension, but it is also the highest expression of that autonomous creativity that is at the very heart of the human form of life.[53]

All these instructions were reworked by James in his writings on ethics, psychology and pragmatism. He struggled to conceive the connection between ethics and psychology as inspired by both (the sound part of) Darwin and the late Kant. This solution accommodates James' suspects for both the positivistic and the idealistic solution to the anthropological question, and opens the way for his own pragmatic picture of human beings, as it was developed in the *Principles*. James' philosophy of action and activity is the result of his encounter with these thinkers, which brought him to realize that the proper stage for addressing ethical issues is that of our psychological scene.

Franzese begins a detailed analysis of James' debt to Lotze, whose philosophical anthropology could be read as the third way between Kantianism and Darwinism that James

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[51] Foucault, in his critical introduction to the text, stresses the importance of Kant's negative characterization of faculties. 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 'Ce qui est indiqué, plus que leur nature ou la forme pleine de leur activité, c'est le mouvement par lequel, s'éloignant de leur centre et de leur justification, ils vont s'aliéner dans l'illégitime' (Michel Foucault, "Introduction à l'Anthropologie, " in Immanuel Kant, *Anthropologie d'un point de vue pragmatique* (Paris: Vrin, 2008), 43.

[52] The influence of this text on James can be compared to the one exerted on Foucault. A serious study of the relation between James and Foucault should thus depart from the examination of their shared deep engagement with Kant's *Anthropology*.

[53] Franzese, 73.

had been struggling to find. James in fact found—in Lotze and his experimental school of psychology—the ideal framework which could square his pragmatic picture of human beings as practical beings, one that was free of the unwanted implications in Darwinism.[54] What James learned from Lotze is precisely the idea that the study of psychological phenomena must be sensitive to moral phenomenology, and it cannot pretend to explain away morality by reference to mere facts as a view from nowhere. According to Lotze, our nature is culture, and our access to the world does not result in correspondence, but rather shapes it to welcome our moral and spiritual cravings. This picture integrates morality into our most basic engagements with the world, and makes action the paradigmatic aspect of our subjectivity in such an encounter. Nothing happens, even in the factual world, without some interest from our part, at least in *noticing* it, and according to Franzese James drew on this picture for characterizing experience. He writes

> [e]xperience, thus, is not a passive recording of stimuli, but the product of the intentional interaction between original and preexistent mental structures and the overabundant stimuli from the external environment: humans experience what they are *interested* in experiencing.[55]

According to such an insight, which appeared to James as the baldest evidence our ordinary worldliness can possibly provides us, all our mental life must be rethought in accordance with the idea that our contact with the world is in terms of function and purpose—not representation, but action. Franzese thus sketches James' pragmatic account of emotions, instinct and action, and their connection with the formation of habit, which he portrays as the aspect of our psychology, which has the greatest ethical importance. Habit is for James the cornerstone of our character, which he describes, quoting Mill, as 'a completely fashioned will.'[56] James' conception of habit is indebted to Bain, who was the only exponent of the empiricist school to stress the connection between habit, will and *interest*.[57] These notions are not purely subjective, since there is an intrinsic reference to the world in all of them (their exercise entails a cognitive grasp on reality), and yet they are expressive of our own attitude toward it. What they exert is the acknowledgement of the entanglement between though and action whose product, once refined, forms our character. Our character is the upshot of our attention to certain aspects of reality above others, our choices to attend some thoughts above others, and

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[54] Another source of inspiration discussed by Franzese is the philosophy of Charles Reneuvier, whose direct influence on James' thought is well documented.

[55] Franzese, 87.

[56] William James, *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals*, 50.

[57] Hume was a notable precedent, although he portrays interest as a *non-cognitive* access to the world by means of our sentiments and passions. While James applauses Hume's emphasis for the sentimental and affective dimension of our engagement with the world, he criticizes the logical role Hume gave to it. According to James the role of sentiments and passions is not that of coloring a brute world in order to make it hospitable for moral relations, but rather is that of selecting those aspect of the world that are value-laden. James' and Hume's worlds count the very same elements, although what changes is the moral psychology through which they are arranged. For a powerful defense of Hume's view, see Eugenio Lecaldano, "The Passions, Character and the Self in Hume," *Hume Studies*, 28, (2002).

our decision to manage ourselves in certain ways above others. This feature of our minded-ness remains obscured if the mind is described in purely associationistic terms. If habits were mere projections of past experiences on future states of affairs reinforced by feelings of plea-sure and pain (or even more sophisticated ones as guilt, shame or reward), we couldn't explain in which sense a habit can be *wrong*. James is claiming that the wrongness of a certain habit does not consists in the connection between certain experiences with the wrong feeling, but rather it consists in the attention to the *inappropriate aspect of the world*. Franzese argues that for James by selectively attending some ideas over others we outline the horizon of values we endorse and thus conduct ourselves in a certain direction, and this is a matter of decision and not of association. James writes in the *Principles*

> [t]he 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 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 the never so little scar.[58]

What is needed is thus an education and care of our attention, through which we can acquire the right ideas. Paraphrasing James, Franzese writes

> [t]he action *sub specie boni* is the action that follows from an adequate conception of the state of affairs… [A]ll that a moral act consists of is nothing but thinking; that is, a moral act is one that follows from the acquisition and possession of adequate ideas… [C]lear understanding, adequate knowledge, sound inference, and holding fast to the idea are the way to the good, and the only possible ethical precepts.[59]

The attainment of one's moral self requires the organization and care of our character for the selection of the right ideas. This activity consists in working on oneself to keep the capacity of attending to those aspects of reality deserving consideration alive. In one of the most impor-tant chapters of the *Principles*, titled *The Will*, James says that if he is asked 'In what does *a moral act* consist when reduced to its simplest and most elementary form?' the only available reply should be that it consists in the effort of *attention*, by which we hold on to an idea, which otherwise would be driven out of the mind by other psychological tendencies. By 'idea' James means everything that is considered important to keep our mind on, and a major source of importance consists in the relationship between how things are in the world and the practical difference they make in our life. Having an accurate idea about how things are in the world is relevant, because it helps our agency respond successfully to the world; that is, responding in a way that is both expressive of our perspective and attentive to the way the world asks us to respond in *its* own terms. There is for James a triangulation between agency, psychology and morality, and according to Franzese, the notion of energy is the best device—and metaphor—to understand how they stand together.

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[58] William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. 1 (New York: Dover, 1950), 127.

[59] Franzese, 137-8.

4. James and energy: Nietzschean themes

For James, energy—as the author spells at length in the long third section of the fourth chapter – has to be intended not in a metaphysical acceptation, but rather in a pragmatic one. This is as the mental and spiritual activity of human beings. Leaving aside James' characterization of spirituality, which Franzese addresses at pages 161-9, I am interested in showing how the author argues for the importance of of energy in the moral experience of the world. There is a robust entanglement between a conception of human beings as agents, whose purpose is that of organizing their energy, and a conception of experience as the proper stage for the assessment of their moral life. According to a first characterization, Franzese writes that for James

> [i]n such a perspective, ethics appears as the problem of consistency in the organization of the self, that is, of one's own power and action, and in the deployment of the experiential field... [t]he ethics of energy turns out to be a philosophy of action, which has moral meaning exactly because the human being is the animal that acts and human moral life is not exhausted just in thinking or contemplating the ideals but requires their enactment.[60]

James' conception of energy is portrayed by Franzese in dynamic terms and accordingly with his pragmatic notion of will. He writes that

> "[e]nergy" is not a principle, let alone a metaphysical principle on which a an aesthetics or an ideology of power can be built up; it is rather an expedient way to unify and account for different phenomena, ranging from psychological to nervous, from physiological to spiritual which constitute the emotional and active matter of moral life.[61]

The author goes on exploring James' characterization of energy by showing its entanglement with the notion of effort, which has a strong ethical connotation as the heroic stance taken towards experience, as opposed to an unengaged one. Effort, as the Romantic's *Streben*, in fact denotes the practical striving toward the realization of one's self by shaping one's character accordingly to some moral ideals. James' considerations about the significance of human energy are thus congenial for his rejection of morality conceived as the respect of principles and rules, in pain of withdrawing from one's moral community. The relationship between the subject and its community must be one of exemplarity,[62] and by portraying the self as a center that

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[60] Ibid., 7-8.

[61] Ibid., 47.

[62] Akeel Bilgrami, in his illuminating reading of Gandhi's ethical and political philosophy, portrays a notion of exemplarity as informing the relationship between the self and its community on similar lines. The contrast he draws is one between an ethical stance characterized as the observance of principles or the obedience to imperatives and one conceived as the 'living one's life by setting an example to everyone.' The author inscribes the moral psychology underlying such a stance in the Romantic tradition, and he contrasts it with the understanding of the place of truth and values in morality and politics as proposed by the Liberal tradition. See, Akeel Bilgrami, "Gandhi's Integrity: the Philosophy Behind the Politics," *Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 5, No. 1, 2002. I owe very much to the reading of this and related papers by Bilgrami, and to him for many enriching conversations on these themes.

generates and organizes energy, morality will thus take ascetic and heroic connotations,[63] since it primarily requires working with vigilant criticism about one's own character and ideals on the background of those accepted by one's community. Franzese writes that, according to James

> [t]here is something heroic in the process of changing one's own character, as well as in the affirmation of new ideals, which entails a strenuous resistance to the inertial force of old habits or of more genial attitudes. The heroism of individual volition is, for James, something that needs to be prepared and cultivated through a sort of ascetic exercise. Like muscular strength, the disposition to heroic effort needs to be kept alive by daily practice: the energy required in the moral emergency is not a gift of nature but the product of a wise accumulation and management of one's own energies.[64]

James, like Nietzsche, was interested in showing how the shallowness of our moral philosophy is fallout from the shallowness of the human beings inhabiting the world, and that a change in the former should be instigated by a reshaping of the latter. Franzese brings as evidences of this entanglement James' portrayal of the life in mid-nineteen century rural cities of America, where the tranquil and monotone flowing of everyday activities has weakened the very moral *Streben* of their inhabitants—or what following Emerson James calls 'one's *mood*', and thus also their very capacity for engaging in significant moral conducts. Here the idea expressed in the *Principles* according to which the formation of the wrong habits has the utmost ethical significance finds its proper stage, since what James is claiming is precisely that by loosing the capacity of *attention* toward one's own self, we loose consequently the very grounds for ethical assessment. Nietzsche's critique of Christian morality—the morality of the herd—was moves by similar concerns, and the author engages in a comparison between the two authors to show both their differences and shared concerns. Both James—especially in *Varieties of Religious Experience*—and Nietzsche discuss the exemplar, the hero and the saint as models from which to get inspiration in our personal moral investigation due to their radical attitude toward their own interiority: such figures organize their life around the ideals of care and enchantment of their own vital force, which represent together the conditions and the goal of moral conduct. According to both authors, claiming that the aim of morality is this empowerment of the self does not amounts to say that its point is that of setting moral standard of good action or good life, but means rather to stress the attention for the importance, in our moral life, of a conduct inspired by ideals that are together inventive and expressive of one's own attitude toward the world. As Franzese writes, according to these authors

> [n]o real moral achievement is possible unless individuals and society learn how to organize and manage their own energy, that is, unless they learn how to give form to their life and how to preserve their action from decay and passivity. Thus, even though the ethics of ener-

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[63] James addresses these aspects of the self's relationship with itself in reference to religious experience in the chapters on "Conversion" and "Saintliness" of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. He discusses the differences between ethical and religious experience in the early chapter on "Circumscription of the Topic" of the same book.

[64] Franzese, 142.

gy does not set moral aims and values, it is, however, the way in which one becomes the master and author of one's own energy… [I]n the final instance, the two thinkers meet in the recognition of the instrumental value of asceticism as a source of spiritual energy and as an instrument of self-formation. Thus, asceticism gives us a set of practices useful to face the hardest of battles in conquering oneself, that is, in exercising that control of one's own indeterminate and manifold nature, which is the very meaning of spirituality. The individual energizes him or herself optimally, arriving at the stage of becoming one's own master. Such an ascetic activity is the fundamental condition of creative power in arts as well as in all other human deeds.[65]

This characterization of ethics as self-formation represents a most interesting achievement in James' scholarship, both for its novelty and for its capacity of accounting those texts like *The Gospel of Relaxation* and *The Moral Equivalent of War* that hardly found any place in the standard reading of James' moral philosophy. That of energy is for the author the key notion for the understanding those queer writings by James standing at the crossroad between physiology, psychology and philosophy, which but testify James' conviction that when doing moral philosophy some broader considerations about the very nature of selfhood must be taken in consideration. According to this reading, as Franzese spells out at pages 207-223, even religion 'becomes ethical,' in the measure in which it prompts us to confront with aspects of ourselves and our capacity to give sense to the varieties of ways in which we come to experience the world.

5. Ethics as a work on oneself: James and Foucault on ethics

In this last section I will collect what has been said so far by addressing the issue of affinity between James and Foucault for what regards their conception of ethics as a work on oneself. There are a number of passages by Foucault that are extremely close to some of James' ideas. They span from the role of subjectivity in the formation of knowledge (*savoir*), to reflection on the importance of experimentations for the development of our moral life. There are also passages by James whose striking similarity with Foucault's conception of ethics make hard to believe Foucault's rather scattered disinterest for American pragmatism, even more given his increasing interest for American culture and his frequent visits to the United States during the final years of his life. In fact, if Foucault's relationship with analytic philosophy is idiosyncratic—as he once remarked at a conference in New York, 'I'm not an analytic philosopher. Nobody is perfect'[66]—it seems fair to say that his relationship with pragmatism is one of consensual disregard. The reasons for this reciprocal suspect are manifold and go back to pragmatism's own travailed *affair* with analytic philosophy. However, in later years a fistful of authors—most notably Ian Hacking, Richard Rorty and those who likewise escape any easily

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[65] Ibid., 199-200.

[66] Michel Foucault, "Sexuality and Solitude," in Foucault, *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, vol. 1: Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, 176. Foucault makes direct reference to analytic philosophy, and in particular to ordinary language philosophy, in his "La philosophie analiytique de la politique," in Foucault, *Dits et Écrits 1954-1988 vol. 4* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994). For an analysis of Foucault's relationship with analytic philosophy, see Arnold I. Davidson, "Foucault and the Analysis of Concepts," in *The Emergence of Sexuality: Historical Epistemology and the Formation of Concepts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

recognizable philosophical affiliation—have showed how instructive the dialogue between these authors can be. It is not a surprise that the connections between Foucault and pragmatism have been investigated by those authors—philosophers, literary critics and historians—who were irritated by the nagging rhetoric about the analytic-continental dichotomy, in which pragmatism stands very often at the crossroad somewhere between the two. However, as this volume of Foucault Studies testifies, a wind of change, often invoked by both the healthiest parts of the barricades, has come to discard the parochial vulgate about the incommensurability of these different languages. A new season of studies is now blooming, and its seeds are steeping deep down the traditional divides which but for their seeming appeal could not even remember their deeper roots.

If thus there is no direct connection between James and Foucault, still a theoretical one can be drawn. I think it is important not to overlook their very radical differences of style, method, interest and even outcomes, and thus what must be acknowledged is a family resemblance between their respective agendas. I think that Franzese' book, even in its deliberate silence about Foucault, made a major service in this direction by showing some aspects of James's thought that share a number of themes with him. I would like to motivate my claim that, in his very imaginative reading, the author should have brought in Foucault as James' and Nietzsche's major ally. Given Foucault well-documented nietzschean inspiration, here I will concentrate on the James-Foucault relationship.

James and Foucault describe the engagement with oneself as the proper object of ethical concern and elaborate this picture in opposition to a conception of moral thought as the specification of the principles and duties prescribed to human beings, given their alleged metaphysical makeup. The negation is threefold: it is a negation of a certain conception of human beings, a negation of a certain understanding of moral thought and a negation of the connection between the two. James and Foucault are suspicious of the characterization of human beings as entities transcending their practices and activities. The only description of human beings worth having is the one portraying their thoughts and conducts as they are practically endorsed and undertaken. There is nothing beyond what human beings create and appreciate that confer them any substantial identity. Thus the understanding of ethics as a set of prescriptions drawn on one's metaphysical constitution looses its main referent. Both James and Foucault claim that the self is not a given but is rather an achievement, and ethics deals with the forms this achievement. The connection between this picture of human beings and this picture of ethics—what, by following the nomenclature of MPML, we could call the connection between the moral life and moral reflection—results in those practices and exercises that the self applies on itself in order to form itself. The leading idea behind this threefold characterization is that ethics and psychology are formal inquiries into the form of our conducts and ideas, and as such they must be silent about their respective contents.

By way of conclusion, I would like to give an example of James' closeness with Foucault by quoting a passage by James. When I first read it, I was struck—and still am—

about the foucauldian character of this passage, which is taken from the *Principles*.[67] While discussing habit and its importance in the development of our cognitive as well as of our affective faculties, James writes

> [A]s 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 night, it may find you not unnerved and untrained to stand the test.[68]

What James is depicting is precisely a conception of human beings (as practical beings whose gist is represented by the will and whose effort shapes its contours), of ethics (the formation of one's self as instigated by the contingencies of life it feels worth pursuing) and of the connection between the two (a set of exercises the self must undergone in order to achieve the condition to meet its own ideals). The object of ethics is the formation of the self and its means are the practices by which it constitutes and retains its shape. This feature about the nature and sources of moral thought is presented by Foucault in his analysis of ancient forms of asceticism and control of one's conduct, understood as a form of training one's self to the contingencies of life.[69] According to both James and Foucault, what one gains by forming oneself is the very capacity to have experiences, which they describe as the most important feature for the development of our moral life. Having an experience, for both James and Foucault,[70] requires training our sensibility, the recognition of its tentative character, and the acknowledgment of its unavoidable human dimension. Experiences require both experimentation and care for those aspects of our interiority that are at the same time the conditions for experiencing and the outcome of it. The attainment of one's self is obtained through one's experiencing and experimentation, and no assessment of its success can be told from the outside of such practices by the subjects involved.

As Franzese has shown us, James' treatment of these aspects must be traced in his philosophy of mind and his writings on pragmatism, while Foucault accounts for them in his resourceful reading of the history of the practices of the self's care for itself. Both accounts,

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[67] I would like to thank Piergiorgio Donatelli for his insightful comments raised in a lecture where I first presented my reading of James which set my tentative thoughts into a more solid form, and for his seminars on Foucault and moral philosophy that instigated my very thinking about these issues.

[68] William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. 1, 126.

[69] For a compelling reading of this aspect, see Arnold I. Davidson, "Ethics as Ascetics: Foucault, the History of Ethics," and "Ancient Thought," in *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*; and Paul Veyne, "The Final Foucault and Ethics," in *Foucault and His Interlocutors*, edited by Arnold I. Davidson (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1997). For a perceptive comparison of Foucault with Nietzsche on ethics and its connection with ascetics, see Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg, *The Aesthetic and Ascetic Dimension of an Ethics of Self-Fashioning: Nietzsche and Foucault*. For a comprehensive assessment of ancient philosophy as an exercise of self-care, see Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, edited by Arnold I. Davidson, (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1995).

[70] For further investigations into this aspect of Foucault's work, see Gary Gutting, "Foucault's Philosophy of Experience," *Boundary*, 29 (2), (2002); Timothy O'Leary, "Rethinking Experience with Foucault," in *Foucault and Philosophy*; and id., *Foucault and the Art of Ethics* (London-New York: Continuum, 2002).

driven by different concerns and achieved through different strategies, share the common goal of bringing back the ethical discourse to the contingencies of the practices and forms of moral conduct that human beings invent, attend and challenge in an ongoing exercise of self-(trans)formation.

Sarin Marchetti
Department of Philosophy
Sapienza Università di Roma
Via Carlo Fea
2 00161 Rome
Italy