

James and Politics: The Radical Democracy of a Radical Empiricist

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Abstract and Keywords

William James never developed a comprehensive political philosophy. The radically pluralist epistemology and metaphysics for which “pragmatism” became his shorthand represented a revolt against all closed systems of thought. Yet James’s very resistance to certainty and finality led him to participate actively in civic life. Varying by context, this activity was consistently guided by James’s pragmatist accounts of individual experience, moral obligation, and social interdependence, which to him implied a collective, ongoing responsibility to balance freedom, justice, and order amid complexity and change. Though providing no detailed blueprint for achieving and maintaining that balance, James’s writings suggest a suite of practices and institutions that, in various forms and degrees, have proven effective in the past and deserve continued trial. These writings also articulate a regulative ideal by which to evaluate all such experiments: an ideal of popular participation in all levels of social ordering that James described, toward the end of his life, as “radical democracy.”

Keywords: William James, political thought, political philosophy, ethical republic, radical democracy, radical empiricism, radical realism, deliberation

William James never developed anything resembling a comprehensive political philosophy. The radically pluralist epistemology and metaphysics for which “pragmatism” became his shorthand represented a revolt against all closed systems of thought. Yet James’s very resistance to certainty and finality led him to participate actively in the civic life of his day, in order to promote both popular appreciation and practical opportunities for social experimentation and growth. Varying from context to context, this activity was consistently guided by James’s pragmatist accounts of individual experience, moral obligation, and social interdependence, which to him implied a collective, ongoing responsibility to balance freedom, justice, and order amid complexity and change. Though providing no detailed blueprint for achieving and maintaining that balance, James’s writings suggest a suite of practices and institutions that, in various forms and to varying degrees, have proven effective in the past and deserve continued trial. Equally important, his writings articulate a regulative ideal by which to evaluate all such working models of politics:

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an ideal of popular participation in all levels of social ordering that James described toward the end of his life as “radical democracy” (CWJ 1909, 12.291).

That ideal might sound ethereal, especially to ears ringing from the massive collapse of social equality and incessant clang of political dysfunction in many advanced democracies. Yet even from the distance of a century, it speaks with uncanny force to just those problems. Consequently, despite James’s own lack of interest in articulating a self-contained and authoritative political philosophy, contemporary scholarly interest in his exploratory and provocative political philosophizing is mounting (e.g., Smith 2007; Stob 2011; Throntveit 2014; Kittlestrom 2015). Such interest is not unprecedented, but its revival is overdue. James’s efforts to explain and promote his radically democratic ideal inspired some of the most consequential political thinkers and reformers of the early twentieth century in the United States (Kloppenber 1986; Throntveit 2014, 2017). Yet few participants in the pragmatist revival that began in the 1970s have addressed the political implications of James’s version of pragmatism, and despite renewed attention they remain widely ignored or misunderstood.

The reasons are not mysterious. James famously and frequently described his philosophy as “individualistic” (e.g., TTP 1899, 4), and that is how most interpret it (Otto 1943; West 1989; Danisch 2007). Yet James also denounced the free rein of “egoistic interests” (CWJ 1909, 12.291), instead advocating expansive, equal, and effective freedom for all people regardless of economic, social, or political status. As he wrote in 1905, the “best commonwealth” is that which cherishes the “residual interests,” and “leaves the largest scope to their peculiarities” (ECR 1903, 97). This practical association of personal autonomy with the social obligation to promote its widespread enjoyment is central to James’s radically democratic ideal, and responsible for his opacity to anyone seeking a neatly organized schedule of ethical and political goods. Human flourishing, as James understood it, requires both democratic deliberation and existential choice; respect for norms and suspicion of them; close-knit communities and idiosyncratic thinkers who challenge their conventions. When or how heavily to weigh some factors versus others in any given context is a matter for negotiation, and James’s insistence that democracy lies in the quality and sustainability rather than the specific outcomes of such negotiations resulted in political writings as variegated as the events they addressed. Yet collectively those writings exhibit a philosophical richness, organic consistency, and breadth of application rarely achieved by the formal rigor of dominant liberal and communitarian theories (e.g., Walzer 1984; Rawls 1993; cf. Williams 2005).

Indeed, James’s deepest relevance to the study of politics stems from his concern, not with the logical form, but rather the central problem facing modern political theory: the problem of plural values, especially in cases of individual or minority interests at odds with more powerful or popular agendas. Abjuring any attempt to solve that problem for his fellow citizens, James outlined the features of a polity equipped to ameliorate it, contain it, and even exploit its agitating effects: a pragmatist polity, with powers and authority calibrated to the dynamic and diverse historical experiences of its members yet employed to optimize freedom of thought and action across social space and time. More than

a set of constitutional and legal forms, the pragmatist polity depends on virtues of deliberation, experimentation, historical reflection, and empathic reasoning to animate them. Nevertheless, the practice of those virtues must be encouraged and negotiated through institutions that foster tolerant exchange, promote mutually intelligible norms of reasoned discourse, and model the same awareness of interdependence that prompts their creation, all while remaining accountable and adaptable to public demand. Rather than “displacing” politics (Honig 1993), these institutions, formal and informal, should create “free spaces” in which political activity, including conflict, is equally, broadly, and fruitfully engaged—thus giving winners and losers alike a stake in their continued existence (Evans and Boyte 1986; see also Phillips 1991; Keane 2009).

The Ethical Republic

James’s pragmatist politics, including his vision of “radical democracy” and his interventions to advance it, emerged from his efforts to formulate a pragmatist ethics: a practical guide to conduct in an unfinished and irreducibly complex universe. James never attached any label to his guide, but he captured its nature in an arresting metaphor expressing his ethics in terms of its purpose: an “ethical republic” (WB 1897, 150; cf. Throntveit 2011, 2014). Ethics, pragmatically conceived, is not a fixed program or ranking of ideals. Rather, it is itself an ideal, of private and public interests converging—an ideal derived from experience, yet suggesting at every moment the terms and consequences of its own realization. In James’s view, it is an empirical fact that all individuals have unique ideals, requiring cooperation or acquiescence from other individuals for realization. Thus all individuals, through their ideals, impose hypothetical obligations on others. The *practical* validity of ideals and obligations, however, can only be established in the course of moral life, as their consequences are considered and judged by the community. Thus while *an* ethical republic is an inescapable fact of experience, *the* ethical republic of each day depends for its scope and character on its members’ interventions and interactions in it. The purpose of pragmatist ethics is to help people reflect on, test, and revise their ideals to accord with the republican reality of moral life, while also helping them alter that reality to accommodate as many other ideals as possible. “We all help to determine the content of ethical philosophy so far as we contribute to the race’s moral life,” James asserted in his seminal essay, “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life.” “In other words, there can be no final truth in ethics any more than in physics, until the last man has had his experience and said his say” (141).

What guidance does James provide? If, as he asserts, our personal moral course through life affects the moral character of the universe we inhabit, we had best clarify the meaning and probable consequences of the goods we conceive before committing to their realization. That requires clarifying the meaning of “good” itself. James argued that the necessary consequence of conceiving any particular “good” is to lay an obligation upon someone, somewhere (even if only the original conceiver), to realize it (145–147). In other words, every imagined good entails a concrete demand that certain circumstances obtain over others; contrary to Kantian (and many modern liberal) formulas, there can be no

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obligation to abstract principles divorced from specific demands and consequences. As James wrote, “we see not only that without a claim actually made by some concrete person there can be no obligation, but that there is some obligation wherever there is a claim.” Therefore, he concluded, “the essence of good is simply to satisfy demand”—demand not just for pleasure, but for “anything under the sun” (148, 153).

Confidently as James stated it, this conclusion presents the obvious difficulty that demand cannot always be satisfied. For that reason, some scholars have characterized James’s ethics as tragic (e.g., Kloppenberg 1986, 116). Indeed, James himself deemed the question of demand “most tragically practical,” for “the actually possible in this world is vastly narrower than all that is demanded.” Any answer to what he termed “the casuistic question” in ethics promised to confirm rather than avert this tragedy, for the very need of a “scale of subordination” to prioritize divergent demands—a “casuistic” scale—proved that with every moral choice, “part of the ideal must be butchered” (WB 1897, 154). Thus, as James told his students, demand alone is “too wavering and fallible a thing upon which to found a definitive system of ethics. Its data must themselves be compared, discussed and judged. But how?” (ML 1888–89, 183–184).

As so often, James found the clue to his philosophical puzzle in human psychology. From his functionalist perspective, our impulses to identify and align our personal interests with a larger good can be interpreted as versions of a species-generic and ethically crucial impulse: the search for a system to harmonize *all* ideals, in accordance with the mind’s ceaseless efforts to organize experience in general (Throntveit 2014, 93–99). “*Invent some manner of realizing your own ideals which will also satisfy the alien demands,*” James theatrically enjoined in “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life”; “... that only is the path of peace!” (WB 1897, 155).

Actually, James did not believe this meta-ideal of moral organization could deliver us from the daily toil of moral butchery. He did believe, however, that it could serve an invaluable function. Its prevalence and persistence across history should inspire us to “throw our own spontaneous ideals, even the dearest, impartially in with that total mass of ideals which are fairly to be judged.” It should impel us to risk a collective experiment to determine which ideals are most compatible and which must be discarded, and to adopt as the “guiding principle” of moral life the duty “to satisfy at all times *as many demands as we can*” (151, 155).

Sacrifice—or at least our willingness to risk it—is thus the price of fullest freedom in the ethical republic. We must recognize our particular ideals as subordinate to the meta-ideal of moral harmony, which finds its imperfect realization in a collective process of winnowing and organizing demands. Despite his slippery phrasing, however, James did not conceive this process as crudely utilitarian (cf. Myer 1986, 398–399). Although he did state, confusingly, that the “best act” is that “which makes for the *best whole*, in the sense of awakening the least sum of dissatisfactions,” James stated in the same essay that every “end of desire” is “exclusive of some other end of desire,” making mathematical nonsense of any effort to satisfy the greatest number of desired goods (WB 1897, 155, 154). Alter-

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natively, if goods are not arithmetically equivalent but rather, as James asserted, share “a common essence” such as demand, “then the amount of this essence involved in any one good would show its rank in the scale of goodness,” and thus its fitness for preservation (152).

Thus, it is not the *number* of demands, but the *amount* of demand satisfied that should matter most to our moral calculations. And some demands are weightier than others. If “utopia” for millions required “that a certain lost soul on the far-off edge of things should lead a life of lonely torture” (144), would not some, at least, of the saved revolt against the bargain? Even if their revulsion were culturally conditioned, such deference to tradition indicates a deep-seated interest in values with no immediately discernible individual or social benefit other than a reputation for yielding, over time, “the maximum of satisfaction to the thinkers taken all together”—*thinkers*, not demands (156). Put briefly, when James, resigned to the necessity of “victory and defeat” in moral life, “prayed” for the triumph of “the more inclusive side,” it was not on behalf of abstract ideals but of the living persons holding them (155).

That inclusivity of persons is the hallmark of a healthy ethical republic, and the prism through which James’s “ultimate principle” of demand-satisfaction must be interpreted.¹ Thus emerges a dialectic of freedom and unity in moral life. Our free, subjective inquiries into the nature of that life both trace and rearrange its existing conjunctions to enhance their congruence with our interests. Our will to believe in a more personally satisfying world obliges us to think relationally—to inquire into the myriad and protean ideals that shape our social environment, in order more adroitly to pursue and even reconceive our own so that others can tolerate and sustain them. Crucially, both for critics of “high liberalism” (Galston 2010, 385) and for its own inclusive imperative, this dialectic is neither arbitrarily selected nor culturally specific. Rather, the mutually constitutive goodness of freedom and unity is implicit in our universal drive to manipulate both our personal behavior and our external environment, in order to bring them into more satisfactory relation. At the same time, the contingency of such negotiations implies that any prescriptions based on their results are open to testing by every individual asked to accept them (*pace* Roth 1969, 72, 77).

James’s entire oeuvre suggests that our principle means of such testing should be what today we might term “deliberation”—the open-minded exchange, comparison, and negotiation of ideas and ideals (cf. Dewey 1916; Barker et al., 2012). Indeed, the collective process of articulating, testing, and reflecting on moral hypotheses and their consequences constitutes both James’s ethical ideal and the program of its realization: a good desired for its practical service to desire itself. As James wrote in *Pragmatism*, “one great use of knowing things is to be led not so much to them as to their associates, especially to human talk about them” (P 1907, 105). The reason, of course, is that what we know is valid, and thus valuable, only in its practical application to our irreducibly social existence; “human talk” supplies the clues to, and ultimately passes judgment on, the validity and utility of our ideas. Thus, we ought always to believe and act in ways that human experience writ large has “funded,” while recalling that our beliefs and conduct—whether

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fruitful or frustrated—add to the “sum total of experience” both we and others will consult in the future (107). The goal of deliberation, in this Jamesian sense, is not necessarily to reach consensus, but to gain a “leveling insight” permitting responsible and legitimate action: action that demonstrates care for the inclusivity and sustainability of the deliberative process itself, and in that way promises “some stable gain” for the “religion of democracy” (TTP 1899, 156; cf. Singer 1973; Gutmann and Thompson 1996; Dryzek 2001).

Of course, to identify both the long-term interest of a community and the actions likely to promote it is a tall order, however deep our contemplations and conversations. James, however, endorsed three individual virtues to aid such inquiry: experimentalism, historical reflection, and empathic reasoning.

Ethical experimentation can cause conflict, but can also test, refine, or displace conventional and sub-optimal means of maximizing freedom. James described the phenomenon in organic terms as early as 1880, explaining the innovative socio-political perspectives of “great men” as spontaneous variations of social thought which the community’s aggregate judgments either conserve or extinguish (WB 1897, 163–189). More than fifteen years later, James articulated the same basic argument in explicitly political language, declaring that the “mental freedom” of an “intellectual republic” was essential to the healthy growth of human communities (WB 1897, 33). The “active faiths of individuals ... freely expressing themselves in life, are the experimental tests by which they are verified, and the only means by which their truth or falsehood can be wrought out,” James declared a year later. The moral knowledge that enhances freedom depends equally for its creation upon individual assertion and social assent; therefore all “ought to live in publicity, vying with each other” (WB 1897, 8).

This running moral experiment could be chaotic. Yet as James explained in “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” historical reflection on the practical needs and contingent factors driving it in the past could supply wisdom to discipline innovation without discouraging it in the present. Over generations, James argued, societies perform an “experiment of the most searching kind,” and each day’s initial casuistic scale should put “customs of the community on top” (WB 1897, 156). Certainly, some people are “born with a right to be original”—or at least a penchant for it—and at any time, deeply rooted as society’s norms might be, “revolutionary thought or action may bear prosperous fruit.” Still, such fruit is harvested “only through the aid of the experience of other men,” and its value determined the same way (157). James recapitulated this argument in *Pragmatism*, insisting that many ideas now considered routine or even fundamental are, in fact, “discoveries of exceedingly remote ancestors, which have been able to preserve themselves throughout the experience of all subsequent time” (P 1907, 83). That our “common sense” comprises the innovations of “prehistoric geniuses” reminds us that no truth is eternal and bold thinking drives the progress of knowledge. But it also cautions that even highly originaive ideas take effective form only through widespread social testing, against both current exigencies with historical roots and contemporary values that are historically conditioned. Moral innovators are crucial to social development. But history

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and the societies it shapes provide resources from which all experimenters draw, and impose constraints under which they operate.

Arguably the highest of James's pragmatist virtues is that of empathic reasoning, for it alternately galvanizes and moderates the practice of the other two. A basic respect for the moral lives of others is logically implied by James's psychological account of ideals and the obligations they entail; as he wrote in *The Principles of Psychology*, "A thing is important if anyone *think* it important" (PP 1890, 1267). Yet insufficient interest in others' feelings often handicaps our quest for moral unity and the enhanced freedom it brings. James conveyed the gravity of this debility in his famous essay, "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," stating pointedly that judgments made in ignorance of others' feelings are "sure to miss the root of the matter" and "possess no truth" (TTP 1899, 133). Fortunately, most of us at some point (and some of us at many points) experience a "gleam of insight" into "the vast world of inner life" beyond our own. At such instances "the whole scheme of our customary values gets confounded" and "a new center and a new perspective must be found" (138). James interpreted such moral recalibrations as signs that we should *search out* alien ideals, to help realize the potentially greater goods waiting upon our creative inquiry. Rather than shirking our "practical" duties to ourselves (138), seeking meaning in the ideals of others enriches our personal moral worlds.

Such seeking will go astray if guided only by good intentions or shallow relativism. Actually to *see* deep meaning in the lives of others requires that we scrutinize our own idiosyncratic and culturally inculcated values through a pragmatist lens. Empathy is impossible if we cannot reflect critically on the unexamined assumptions guiding our conduct and, in the process, learn to "tolerate, respect, and indulge" those of our fellows "harmlessly interested and happy in their own ways" (149). Yet the keyword just stated is "harmlessly." Tolerance, pragmatically understood, is a means of maximizing freedom, not a euphemism for apathy; it is not tolerance of everything, but "tolerance of whatever is not itself intolerant" (4). Certainly, the main benefit of empathy is the "humility" it fosters: a broadened perspective yielding "a certain inner joyfulness at the increased importance of our common life" (165). In the interest of that common life, however, we must avoid condoning moral novelties without carefully consulting our interpersonally forged and culturally transmitted values—without attempting, as it were, to empathize with the race as a whole and to imagine how our judgment will affect it.

In short, moral reasoning is at once an inter-subjective, empirical activity and an existential exercise. Conflicts will arise among well-meaning factions; mavericks will scorn the status quo; and "in the struggle that follows, the whole of us get dragged up after a fashion to the advanced position" (MEN 1899–1901, 313). But whose position, and with what consequences, none can reliably foretell. Moral courage lies in choosing sides, battle after battle, despite the risk of disaster. Moral wisdom lies in choosing deliberately, considering the historical needs and demands of the community that sustains and constrains us. Even then, to choose ignominy (or worse) over conformity remains our prerogative. As

James wrote, “it is at all times open to any one to make the experiment, provided he fear not to stake his life and character upon the throw” (WB 1897, 156).

From Ethical Republic to Radical Democracy

The political implications of metaphysical pluralism, psychological voluntarism, and ethical republicanism, if never crisply drawn by James, were powerfully apparent to him. His account of consciousness as autonomous, efficacious, and relational posed the problem of agency versus order at every level of human activity. As he wrote to fellow philosopher and future biographer Ralph Barton Perry, “the moment one *thinks* of other thinkers at all,” the leap from “solipsism” to “reasoned faith in radical democracy” has been made (CWJ 1909, 12.291).

The contrast with solipsism is instructive. Cognitively, “radical democracy” entails the recognition that other people are essential, active, and dynamic elements of the larger reality our thoughts and acts must accommodate. Politically, it implies a society that resists domination by narrow interests and instead values diverse perspectives, broad and effective participation, and adaptation to change. But what does radical democracy look like in practice? How do we translate “reasoned faith” in its value into practical action in its behalf?

On an individual level, James’s answer is straightforward: Practice the virtues of ethical republicanism. “Republicanism is of course the political corollary of free-will in philosophy,” James wrote in his early thirties (ECR 1873, 266), and throughout his life he preached a gospel of “civic courage,” calling each citizen to approach politics, like ethics, with as much concern for the moral commonwealth as for him- or herself (ECR 1888, 129; ERM 1897, 72). Human egoism makes it impossible to meet that standard fully. But the “democratic manners” (paraphrasing P 1907, 44) refined by pragmatism and its ethos of communal inquiry can, as James suggested to Perry, bring us to see others more clearly as equal partners in a creative process, whom we should get to know as well as we can and learn to work with as closely as possible if we want to build a decent public life.

Yet mere exhortations to ethical republicanism tell us little about how to organize its individualized practice in the service of radically democratic politics. Indeed, James is often portrayed as personally and intellectually indisposed to the kind of collective practice that politics entails (Kuklick 1977; Feinstein 1984; West 1989; Menand 2001; Danisch 2007). James bears much of the blame for these misconceptions. In a widely quoted letter of 1899 he declared himself “against bigness and greatness in all their forms, and with the invisible molecular moral forces that work from individual to individual.” The “bigger the unit you deal with,” he continued, “the hollower, the more brutal, the more mendacious is the life displayed.” Thus James declared himself opposed to “all big organizations as such, national ones first and foremost,” favoring instead “the eternal forces of truth which always work in the individual and immediately unsuccessful way, underdogs always, till history comes after they are long dead, and puts them on the top” (CWJ 1899, 8.546).

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There is no doubt that James decried the trends toward monopoly capitalism and extraterritorial imperialism that shaped American life at the turn of the twentieth century. But to make too much of his polemic against “bigness and greatness in all their forms” is to ignore a large portion of his writings. The truth is that various strands, ranging from anarchy to social democracy, were woven through James’s thought (Coon 1996; Kloppenberg 1986). As a pragmatist, James recognized that the problem of freedom and order takes different forms in different contexts. “Only in the free personal relation is full ideality to be found,” he wrote in 1899 (CWJ 1899, 9.41), and few philosophers, psychologists, or laypersons would dispute that the deepest forms of moral understanding occur in contexts of intimate acquaintance.² A decade later, however, when contemplating the balance of freedom and order on a national scale, James asserted that “utopia,” interpreted practically, could only mean “some sort of a socialistic equilibrium” (ERM 1910, 170). In the interim he described himself to a friend as “an anarchist” so far as his “ideas” were concerned, but applauded her “socialistic work” as more “practical” (CWJ 1903, 10.191).

That appreciation for the practical ends and constraints of politics is as common in James’s writings as is his critique of bigness. Indeed, James frequently invoked organized social action as a counterweight to narrow interests that threatened the broad enjoyment of individual autonomy. James’s most famous political cause—his protest against American suppression of the Philippine insurgency after the Spanish-American War—is a case in point. Widespread public support for the war left James feeling isolated, “more and more an individ[ua]list and anarchist,” chafing under a government and culture that seemed incapable of viewing the insurgents as moral equals with claims to be considered. Yet his proposed remedy was not to abandon representative democracy. Rather it was to organize a global opposition to its imperialist captors, “a league for the purpose of fighting the curse of savagery that is pouring into the world” (CWJ 1900, 9.362). Indeed, besides feeling sympathy for the Filipinos, James worried that the smothering of self-government abroad signaled its constriction at home. As he saw it, certain Americans had bullied others into ignoring the “unsophisticated verdict” of their “plain moral sense,” so that an ostensibly democratic polity was now “crushing out” another people’s effort “to attain the possession of itself, to organize its laws and government, to be free to follow its internal destinies according to its own ideals.” Worship of “a national destiny which must be ‘big’ at any cost” had resulted in the “impotence of the individual” in Cambridge as surely as in Luzon, while every soul destroyed in battle with the Filipinos destroyed a part of the “ancient soul” of America, too (ECR 1899, 156–158).

A high price indeed for bigness. And yet in seeking an antidote to his nation’s pathological impulse toward “aggrandizement” (CWJ 1901, 9.526), James looked not to the un-governed conscience but to the activated collective. “In a democracy the country belongs to each of us,” he once jotted privately, but in the United States, it seemed, only “the selfish interests” had “organized.” “Shall not the ideal ones”? (ERM n.d., 202). James’s “ebullitions of spleen” against bigness were provoked not by scale or complexity per se, but by “the more brutal, the more mendacious” arrangements of life; by violence to the particular truths of experience. Homogenization, not organization, was anathema to James; a more “systematically unified moral truth” remained, for him, the predicate and product of

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an expanding moral freedom (WB 1897, 161). Given the importance James accorded to experiment and interpersonal discourse in that process of moral growth, it is no wonder he was attracted to a method of social analysis he once described as “anarchy in the good sense”: a method assuming that “the smaller and more intimate” units of society gave the “truer” insights into its realities and possibilities. Yet in the same breath of praise for “anarchy” James equated its “good sense” with “democracy,” and asserted that the “common life is realized” through struggles for “order” (quoted in Perry 1935, 2.383).

At least from James’s perspective, it seems well-mannered anarchists and well-mannered democrats share the same pragmatist habits. Both look to the lives of their fellows when seeking patterns in which to better fit their own. Both resist abstraction and stagnation, conceiving order to mean capacity for complexity and growth. Both, in Tocquevillian fashion, view the everyday, interpersonal, local practice of communal inquiry and participatory problem-solving as antecedent rather than antithetical to the happier organization of large and diverse populations (cf. Pateman 1970; Evans and Boyte 1986).

Not surprisingly, the “radical democracy” that James envisioned in the context of America’s diverse and protean citizenry differs significantly from the direct rule of citizen elites associated with ancient Athens. Nevertheless, James’s writings suggest a meaning of “radical democracy” that is capacious yet still does justice to the phrase’s classical roots: a form or structure of power (Greek *kratos*) generated, sustained, and observed by the people (Greek *demos*) that form its root (Latin *radix*). It is an organic structure that can take many shapes, but which had evolved, by James’s day, certain basic organizing features, or institutions, vital to translating radically democratic consciousness into radically democratic practice. James believed that such institutions should serve not only to organize private quests for moral growth into collective action toward common goals, but also to maintain a form and degree of order that protects individual autonomy and permits collective retreat and revision.

James was not particularly creative in identifying his candidates for that dual task. In the spirit of pragmatism, he looked first to tools of proven value, at least when in good repair: popular government; social equality; rule of law; education; and finally, despite his hatred of violence, military service. Where James was bold, and the originality of his pragmatism evident, was in his vision of the social purposes these institutions could and should achieve.

For James, popular government meant more than plebiscites on the decisions of professional politicians. Above all, it meant citizen input in the business of state (cf. Barber 1984; Cohen 1989). As the Philippine fiasco showed, any form of “freedom” designed by self-styled experts and imposed on subjects was “sheer illusion, and can only mean rotteness and ruin” for the latter (CWJ 1899, 8.480). For this reason James was deeply critical of the American people (including himself) for their complacency in the run-up to the Philippine–American war (Throntveit 2014, 115–118). For the same reason he was generally disgusted with both major political parties in the late nineteenth century. Stocked with “pecuniary corruptionists” and “unscrupulous” partisans, they were too often “blind

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to the real life of the country," gulling its people with "dead shibboleths" and paralyzing its politics by their "hatred and prejudice." These "fossil" organs were deaf to the letters, pamphlets, speeches, rallies, and votes through which citizens sought to counsel their leaders and each other. Well ahead of the progressive movement, therefore, James called for "a new national party" to infuse greater "intellectual character and purposes" into American politics, with an eye not only to "civil service and economic reform" but "perhaps ultimately to certain constitutional changes of which we are in pressing need" (CWJ 1884, 5.505).

James never explained exactly what changes he envisioned, but it is certain he never saw them. Even after aligning himself with the Democratic Party's progressive wing in 1900 he criticized the "very mongrel kind of reform" they pursued (CWJ 1900, 9.357). Again James stayed silent on the specific details of his preferred platform, but it is safe to say that increased social equality would have been among its goals. James was convinced that the trenchancy and political efficacy of citizen deliberation depends on a broad and broadly equal participatory base. For much of his philosophical career he worried that economic disparities were constricting that base and eroding the nation's democratic habits. In 1899 he observed that divergent material circumstances were dividing the moral forces of society, and that "the distribution of wealth has doubtless slowly got to change" (TTP 1899, 166). By 1910, the year he died, he had grown more radical, identifying a "socialistic equilibrium" as central to his pragmatist political ideal (ERM 1910, 170).³

James was perhaps even more disturbed by racial inequality. He could indulge in casual racism, as in an 1897 letter relating his encounter with "the darkey" Booker T. Washington and the "good old darkey" veterans of the Massachusetts Fifty-fourth Regiment (CWJ 1897, 3.9). Yet in that same letter James praised Washington's eloquence in describing black Americans' efforts to educate and empower themselves. Some years later he publicly celebrated both Washington and the prominent African American social critic W. E. B. Du Bois as national political heroes, lauding both for embodying (in their different ways) the dual commitment to autonomy and reciprocity that radical democracy entails. Indeed, James warned, for African Americans to turn from or fail in their quest for equality would be "a national calamity" that "would turn our civilization into an irrevocable caste-system" (ECR 1909, 193).

The importance of social equality to James's pragmatist politics explains his deep commitment to another political institution, one often equated with conservatism rather than radicalism: the rule of law (Miller 1997, 25–26, 53). James did not just commend black Americans for demanding equal and humane treatment, but insisted that the laws assuring such treatment be followed and enforced. Above all, he decried the hideous practice of lynching. It was not just the dead and their kin who suffered from the violence. Countless others were prevented by fear from participating in deliberative political and social processes that depend for long-term success on inclusivity. Meanwhile, the farce of all-white juries acquitting murderers who gloated over their crimes undermined the whole legal and moral structure of ostensibly free communities. As James wrote in 1903, "the

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slightest loophole of licensed exception” could tear the seal of social order, especially in cases “where the impulse is collective.” James thus had an answer to the home-rule logic of Jim Crow apologists. Southerners, white and black, were part of a larger commonwealth whose millions of individual destinies were linked. Lynching was not just a “homicidal custom” peculiar to the South, but a “manifestation of anarchy” that threatened the nation and deserved a harsh response (ECR 1903, 171–173).

James’s frustration with Americans’ failure to respect the rule of law helps explain his thoughts on the purpose and importance of education. James viewed education as a social process of knowledge production rather than an individual process of knowledge absorption. Its largest purpose is to foster habits of inquiry that refine our impulses into judgments informed by facts, then translate our judgments into action tailored to context (cf. Dewey 1916; Pateman 1970; Barber 1984; Fishkin 1991). In James’s pragmatist polity, education comprises any and all tools and processes that facilitate this “sifting of human creations” (ECR 1907, 107); what one scholar dubs his “science of human nature” was meant to be a popular rather than arcane practice (Bordogna 2008, 10). That said, James recognized the value of specialized educational institutions to promoting that science (despite lamenting the over-professionalization of many disciplines, e.g., ECR 1903, 67–74). Indeed, he accorded one such institution a particularly important (and for some, controversial) role in promoting radical democracy—the modern college curriculum. He did not think highbrows and “prigs” (as he put it) should rule the country (ECR 1907, 108), nor did he call for an expert class to translate popular ideals into practical achievements (cf. Christiano 1996). Rather, he argued, the college-bred must fully embrace the spirit of the liberal arts, tabling assumptions and looking past stereotypes in order “to scent out human excellence” and bring it to society’s attention (ECR 1907, 108). In short, they must adopt the mantle of social critic, executing the American university’s mission of revealing the polity’s character to itself (cf. Jewett 2012).

Rather than special privileges or power, then, James conferred upon the college-bred “aristocracy” an *obligation*: to promote the “rule of the best” whatever, wherever, and whoever the best may be. They must open their ranks to all who exhibit the “higher, healthier tone” of life that defines membership in their class, and they must count themselves students of those they seek to engage and instruct (ECR 1907, 111). Their calling is to inquire “how diverse the types of excellence may be, how various the tests, how flexible the adaptations,” so that, through their curious and humble example, their fellows, too, can “gain a richer sense of what the terms ‘better’ and ‘worse’ may signify” (108). Dispersing any lingering whiff of elitism, James declared any education “a calamity” that does not develop a “sense for human superiority” capable of penetrating station and circumstance. “Democracy is on its trial,” he cautioned, and if its product is mediocrity, low-born or well-born, the world will condemn it. It can triumph only by producing citizens alert to its flaws yet “bound not to admit its failure”—citizens through whom it conceives itself, in a pragmatist spirit, both as it *is* and as it *ought* to be (108–109).

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That humbly aristocratic vision of democracy—as precious, even fragile, yet capable of greatness if our best selves do the work—inspired James’s boldest idea for a pragmatist political institution: a “moral equivalent of war.” Though pacifistic by inclination, James thought military training and combat cultivated many of the virtues he treasured, and reckoned the baser instincts that war inflamed impossible to extinguish. Rather than excoriate the military as a hopeless evil or aberrant excrescence, therefore, James sought to replicate its best features in a civil institution that might ultimately transform its parent and the polity: a national service corps, conscripting “the whole youthful population” in an “army enlisted against Nature” (ERM 1910, 171). James had no romantic attachment to force: violence of any sort, he wrote in “The Moral Equivalent of War” (1910), entails too high a cost to be justified by its “ideal fruits” alone, and inter-group violence especially is a high-risk and nearly zero-reward affair (ERM 1910, 162). Nevertheless, the stubborn fact of human nature remains: war appeals to our natural “pugnacity,” a trait that partakes of both our drive to control our environment and our desire for others’ esteem (ERM 1910, 164). But here James saw the glimmer of a solution, for war, as organized pugnacity, taught our ancestors to seek the esteem of *groups*. Over time it had “trained societies to cohesiveness” (ERM 1910, 164), and the world’s militaries had refined this training till it approached a science. “Martial virtues” mix the egotistical and social instincts into the “enduring cement” of political life, and therefore “remain the rock upon which states are built” (170).

But war is not the only field in which to learn and practice those virtues. “All the qualities of a man acquire dignity when he knows that the service of the collectivity that owns him needs them,” James wrote (ERM 1910, 169); the qualities need not be belligerent, nor the service violent. Thus James proposed the reform and gradual transformation of the military and the nation through a new kind of service corps, dedicated to universal training and concrete expressions of “civic passion.” Invoking the contingency of ideals and the social purpose of moral inquiry, he insisted that any vision of collective achievement might serve as a “spark” around which patriots could rally. If enough people were given practical experience in “constructive” collective activities—ameliorating pain and suffering, building better public spaces, harnessing resources for the economic relief and spiritual recreation of fellow citizens—the allure of social justice and its morally enriching effects would increase. Universal service would instill “hardihood and discipline” in the nation’s youth while revealing to the eyes of privilege their “relations to the globe”—including the “hard and sour foundations” of the comforts they take for granted (171–172). Despite disconcerting some later readers with his rhetoric of a manly army conquering nature (Martin 1987), James in fact challenged his nation to obviate aggression and destruction through promotion of inclusive, constructive causes. The moral equivalent of war did not consist in the specific tasks of a civilian corps, but in the continuous effort of a free commonwealth to enlarge its effective membership, supplanting the volatile “morals of military honor” with a robust “morals of civic honor” (171; cf. Kaag 2009, 119–121; Throntveit 2018). As with popular government, social equality, rule of law, and education, James sought not to design radically democratic institutions himself, but to project the basic contours of radical democracy on an institutional canvas that others, alerted to

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the radical potential contained in life's familiar materials, would fill. "Strenuous honor and distinterestedness abound," James asserted; only an "alteration in public opinion" stands between the present and "utopia" (ERM 1910, 173).

Nowhere did James draw a map of his own utopia—and fittingly so. "Faiths and utopias are the noblest exercise in human reason," he once wrote (ECR 1907, 109), but their nobility inheres in their eternally aspirational character and inspirational function. Nevertheless, James did have some sense of how a pragmatist polity aspiring to radical democracy would operate. Appropriately, his most revealing illustration was an extended reference to historical experience.

On Decoration Day in 1897, in a speech dedicating Boston's Robert Gould Shaw Memorial, James eulogized Colonel Shaw, along with the all-black Massachusetts Fifty-fourth Regiment he commanded in the Civil War, as models of the boldness, circumspection, empathy, and sacrifice that radical democracy requires of citizens. Shaw and most of his regiment were slaughtered in an assault on South Carolina's Fort Wagner, but James was not interested in the Fifty-fourth's battle record. He recounted its tale as a lesson in the virtues of the ethical republic, and as a reminder of the highest object of political life: securing freedom through enhancing solidarity. That object was "embodied" in the very "constitution" of the Fifty-fourth, a battalion of the oppressed marching not for their own freedom merely, but as "champions of a better day for man." From its beginnings the republic they fought for had been an "anomaly," a "land of freedom" with "slavery enthroned at the heart of it." Although slaveholders claimed liberty to organize their communities without northern interference, any liberty so wholly destructive of others' freedom imperiled what James considered the nation's defining faith: that "common people can work out their salvation well enough together if left free to try" (ERM 1897, 65–66).

To save this faith, James continued, had required imagining what better form it might take, reflecting on what that new form required, and acting to bring it about. It was just such an "experiment" in ethical republicanism that James meant to commemorate: the bold decision, by Massachusetts Governor John Andrew, Colonel Shaw, and the soldiers of the Fifty-fourth, to fight for a more integrated society with a more integrated army (67). Praising their boldness, James also noted the historical rationale behind it. By the 1860s, "law and reason" were under perpetual threat from a practice that was not only antithetical to democracy but that decades of "policy, compromise, and concession" had failed to arrest (66). Finally, James conveyed Shaw's empathy for the enemy and the increase of moral unity that he and his troops achieved. He quoted a Confederate officer who praised the gallantry of the "negroes" even as his very uniform denied their humanity, and he explained how the callous mass burial of the Fifty-fourth's dead in fact "bore witness to the brotherhood of Man," as Shaw's body was "united with the forms" of his comrades (71).

James was careful not to exalt destruction along with the destroyed. Instead of glorifying the martial exploits of his subjects, he suggested that their highest virtues, those of the ethical republic, could have prevented war had more Americans shared them. These virtues instilled the "lonely courage" to look beyond one's narrow interest, and the "civic

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courage” to act for the greater good of a community. Perhaps no passage in James’s writings better encapsulates both the ambiguity and power of his political ideal than this equation of “lonely” with “civic,” and of “courage” with “saving day by day.” For James, the patriot is the citizen committed to “speaking, writing, [and] voting reasonably,” maintaining “good temper between parties,” and resisting the influence of “rabid partisans and empty quacks.” Through such daily acts the deliberative citizens of healthy democracies can reduce conflict and realize the ethical republic. “Such nations,” James wrote, “have no need of wars to save them” (72–73).

Nevertheless, war had come, and its arrival illustrates the single most important feature of James’s democratic theory. Democracy, for James, denotes a people’s collective capacity for conceiving, discussing, and addressing problems deliberatively; it does not describe a set of eternally effective or perfectly efficient institutions. It thus empowers citizens at the cost of imposing a burden on them: the burden of deciding, with no sure knowledge of the consequences, when their particular forms of democracy have failed the ideal, and their current deliberative processes have exhausted their use. Neither theory nor history provides a formula for making that decision; as James put it, “Democracy is still upon its trial.” Certainly, citizens of “civic courage” can enhance its power and resilience, cultivating habits of “disciplined good temper” toward those who respect its principles and “merciless resentment” toward those, like the “Slave States,” who subvert them (74). Yet these remain habits, not precise formulas. Our practices and institutions are means of approximating a radically democratic ideal of inclusivity, creativity, and collaboration in public life; they have no independent claim on our loyalty. Sometimes other means are necessary. When, and of what sort, James did not say. As in our moral lives, uncertainty is the price of a politics accommodating both individual and collective freedom. Only in the “zone of insecurity”—“the zone of formative processes, the dynamic belt of quivering uncertainty, the line where past and future meet”—can we join in the work of ordering rather than stifling difference and change (WB 1897, 192).

James and Modern Political Theory

However essayistic and incomplete, William James’s century-old writings on politics continue to inspire as well as challenge a variety of efforts to revive pragmatism as a public philosophy.⁴ Less explored is the way James’s writings speak directly to contemporary projects in academic political theory.

James’s political thought is perhaps most congruent with what William Galston (2010) (among others) has identified as a “realist” trend in political theory, one taking politics as it is as the starting point for inquiry into what it *can* and *ought* to be. In response to John Rawls, Ronald Dworkin, and other prophets of a “high liberalism” (386) seeking to eliminate conflict by appeal to an ultimate principle or universal interest, realists from Bernard Williams, Glen Newey, and John Gray to Bonnie Honig, Judith Shklar, Jeremy Waldron, and Stephen Elkin insist that no particular interest (e.g., Rawlsian justice) can be peremptorily and eternally established above all others without endangering the negotia-

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tion and ordering of interested pursuits that defines the essence of politics. Instead, political theory must identify “distinctively political” principles and methods by which persons wielding power can seek public warrant for doing so: principles and methods not imported from a temporally or logically prior morality, but derived from the essential character of politics as orderly contestation (388–389; cf. Williams 2005). To permit contestation in an absence of standards is to abandon politics to the power relations it is meant to regulate. To judge contestation from a prior moral standard, however, is to preempt politics and invite the same result.

In their quest to save political theory from practical irrelevance Galston’s realists adopt several Jamesian commitments. These include “a moral psychology that includes the passions and emotions; a robust conception of political possibility and rejection of utopian thinking; [and] the belief that political conflict—of values as well as interests—is both fundamental and ineradicable” (Galston 2010, 385). Less clearly but still plausibly Jamesian is their “emphasis on the evaluation and comparison of institutions and regime-types, not only principles,” in advancing political theory and practice (385, 408). Yet Galston identifies other features of realism that James’s politics of radical democracy might enhance or outperform. First is the lack of a “coherent affirmative alternative” to the “liberal utopianism” that realists criticize, including some means to identify the “line dividing adversarial relations from all-out enmity.” Legitimate conflict, by (realist) definition, is conflict that respects and invigorates the polity in which it occurs, and proceeds on the basis, however narrow and deeply buried, of “some idea of agreement and endorsement” (408). But what that basis is, or how citizens can build, reshape, relocate, and reestablish it in the course of the polity’s conflictual evolution, is unclear in the realist literature. Second, realists quite reasonably insist that “ought implies can”—that “if a political proposal simply cannot be realized, it loses normative force”—but tend, less justifiably, to assume a narrow scope for human psychological and moral adaptation (408–409). Together, those commitments circumscribe the universe of political ideals, practices, and institutions open to theoretical inquiry and—if instantiated in political structures—to democratic discussion and experiment. The danger is not just theoretical impoverishment but political stagnation and illegitimacy.

James’s writings suggest solutions to these problems that emerge from another difference between him and the realists: his refusal to draw sharp lines, either between political and moral life or between moral life and the rest of the pluralistic universe. In James’s ethical republic, moral principles and virtues emerge from the same type of dynamic contests and negotiations that realists identify with politics. Because membership in an ethical republic is an ineluctable condition of life for all human beings, whose selfhood and self-creation depend upon recognition and cooperation from their fellows, these contests and negotiations proceed on the assumption (however dimly recognized) that actions calculated to destroy the republic are illegitimate. James’s radical democracy is an effort to identify and describe the virtues of the most widely satisfactory moral communities and promote them on the scale of modern societies. Thus the standards for legitimate public claims in a democratic polity are those of the ethical republic: embodiment of concrete demand; consideration of social consequence; submission to public criticism and judg-

ment; and implementation through collectively endorsed procedures. The agreement to observe these standards as often and as carefully as possible creates the field upon which legitimate conflict is engaged and from which naked domination is prohibited. Finally, the very need for such a field of orderly conflict speaks not to a fixed psychology or moral capacity but to the limitless and unpredictable fecundity of individual human consciousness: an ever-evolving, idiosyncratic engagement with an ever-changing, subjectively apprehended world of pure experience.

None of this is to say that human beings invariably or even usually prefer legitimated claims to their own unrefined demands. Nor is it to deny that novel ideas and ideals are often just as limited by ignorance, prejudice, and selfishness as familiar ones. The point is that human beings *can* esteem the public good as highly as (or higher than) their narrow interest, and *do* at times imagine new goods and arrangements that scrutiny reveals to be feasible, but do so *rarely and ineffectively* unless the system encourages and facilitates it. In thus emphasizing the internal rather than imported character of political morality James moves even closer than the realists to their goal of aligning “ought with can,” in the process resolving a troubling and longstanding paradox of political studies: the paradox of a “liberal” project aimed at promoting the right of rational or virtuous individuals to govern themselves responsibly, but frequently producing evidence of irrational or base individuals thwarting one another repeatedly (Purcell 1973; Ricci 1984). James’s pragmatist approach obviates this existential threat, suggesting that democracies do not depend on rationality so much as seek to create it. Rationality and virtue are not political externalities, to be exploited by political systems. They are *inherently* political. They are relative measures of the success with which wilful people, embedded in society, contextualize, prioritize, and pursue their interests in satisfactory ways. To be sure, it is critical to determine the capacities for reason and virtue that a given democracy fosters and supports. But to limit democracy to its current achievements in those realms is, from a Jamesian perspective, tautological. Worse, it is tyrannical, firmly fixing the moral, social, economic, and political stations of democratic citizens so as to strip the label of all meaning.

Conclusion: Radical Realism

Here lies much of the power of James’s regulative ideal of radical democracy. It permits the democrat to assert that the cure for the ills of democracy is indeed more democracy—just not *more of the same* democracy. In this sense it resembles the ideal of James’s fellow pragmatist John Dewey, who insisted that the very concept of a theory of democracy implies “the need of returning to the idea itself, of clarifying and deepening our sense of its meaning to criticize and re-make its political manifestations” (1927, 144). In Dewey’s view, as in James’s, there is no single means or set of means “by which a scattered, mobile and manifold public may so recognize itself as to define and express its interests” (146; cf. Rogers 2009). If there were, we would have no need of democratic theory or even democracy. The experience of asserting, discussing, and peacefully negotiating diverse plans for associated life is exactly what fosters the “genuinely shared interest in

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the consequences of interdependent activities” which defines a democratic culture (155). Democracies are rooted in democracy.

Equally powerful, however, is the supra-realistic strain in James’s radical conception of democracy. Like his broader radical empiricism, it assumes a subject that in scope, variety, and novelty exceeds our apprehension, comprehension, and predictive capacity. The very existence of politics itself is explained by this impossibility of certainty. If certainty were possible, there would be no need for distinguishing and promoting legitimate versus illegitimate public claims and conflicts. Claims would simply be true or false, and those divining the truth would be bound, in the public interest, to ignore or suppress those too ignorant or sociopathic to grasp or accept it. James, by contrast, insisted that our claims on and about reality, however reasonable they seem at any given moment, are eternally subject to obviation or outright falsification by experience. This supra-realistic scepticism is particularly compelling in the case of public claims, which frequently demand choices and sacrifices so immediate as to make consensus—a potential proxy for certainty in some epistemic contexts—a practical impossibility. By disavowing certainty, Jamesian democrats can look instead to legitimacy in managing their unpostponable conflicts, responsibly eschewing correctness and agreement for reasonableness and provisional assent—presuming, of course, that the broadest possible community of inquiry is engaged in the process and invested in mitigating its failures.

After all, is that not what every empirical democratic community seeks, ideally, to embody in its institutions? James thought so. The embrace of uncertainty as both discipline and spur to action, as a call to “moral service” in “wider tribal ends,” is “the civic genius” that James dubbed the “only bulwark” of democracy (ERM 1897, 72, 74). It must express itself in habits and institutions, and James had clear ideas about what some of those, at least in his day, should look like. But whatever form a democratic system takes, it must never contain or dispel the “inner mystery” of the ethical republic—the mystery of a world demanding both realism and radicalism from its human inhabitants (74). Everyone is “ready to be savage in *some* cause,” James wrote in 1895, and we invite disaster if we fail to consider the concrete consequences of the savagery as well as the cause itself (CWJ 1895, 8.109). It is just as risky, however, to defer the ideal, and whatever “impotent row” against the system it demands, to a distant, impossible future free of uncertainty (CWJ 1903, 10.339). True democracy implies a contingent kind of progress, its standards subject to revision and achieved by the bold yet humble efforts of its collective creators and benefactors, “stumbling through every error till its institutions glow with justice and its customs shine with beauty”—and resuming their stumbling march whenever the glow fades and the shine dulls (ECR 1907, 109).

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Notes:

(1.) By contrast, Robert Talisse, in this volume, argues that James's description of goods as necessarily entailing demands that exclude other goods makes the goal of satisfying as much demand as possible non-sensical. This argument ignores James's view that a given good excludes *some* other goods, but nowhere close to *all* of them; as well as his view that there are qualitative differences among goods and varying levels of demand attached to them, both of which must be ascertained through communication among the individuals who experience them.

(2.) This is not to say that intimate acquaintance guarantees deep moral understanding; when one or more parties view proximity as a threat rather than an opportunity, the reverse is often true.

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(3.) Like Robert Dahl (1985), James suggested that more intimate and cooperative relations among workers and employers were as important to advancing democracy as a more equitable distribution of wealth; “blind to the internal significance of the other,” James wrote, the laboring and capitalist classes could only regard one another as “dangerously gesticulating automata” (TTP 1899, 166).

(4.) Given space limitations, we can only gesture toward this topic and direct readers to major relevant texts. See Rorty 1982, 1989; Bernstein 1998, 2005, 2010; Habermas 2000, 2003; Misak 2000, 2008; McGilvray, 2004; Talisse 2005.

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