

WILLIAM JAMES (D. 1910) VIEWS ON ETHICS

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ABSTRACT

*William James is an American-born philosopher. Although he is also known as a psychologist, his writings emerged as America's early contribution to modern philosophy. He is one of the great proponents of pragmatism and had promoting the idea around Europe and America. The main objective of this paper is to study the important aspects of James writings on ethics. This qualitative research will analyze his ethical views based on his writings *The Will to Believe*, *Pragmatism A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* and *Pragmatism and Four Essays from the Meaning of Truth* as well as other researchers' findings. This article found that ethics according to James are consequentialism, pluralism and meliorism. All the three principles used are subjected to criticism as it was mainly based on ratio-empirical method which caused moral relativism. Whereas, this article upholding Islamic ethical system for its strong foundation and stable thus will provide objective and universal values for man.*

Keywords: James, Ethics, Pragmatism, Consequentialism, Pluralism and Meliorism

1.0 Introduction

Ethics is one of the most important discussion in philosophy. Throughout the course and history of philosophy, ethical discussion appeared in many writings of the great Greek sages. For instance in Aristotle's *Magno Moralia* and *Nichomacean Ethics*, Platos' *Republic* and other writings of Aristippus of Cyrene, Antisthenes, Epicurus and Zeno of Citium. During the medieval era, a vast number of ethical discussion are recognizable in Muslim writings such as *Daf' al-Ahḡān* by al-Kindī, *Tahdhīb al-Akhlāq* by Miskawayh, and in *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* by al-Ghazālī. Although ethical writing by the Muslim philosopher has been influenced by the Greeks, their writing is unique and influential as majority of them uphold the vital role of religion in ethics. During the emergence of modern era, philosophical discourse is dominated by the Western philosophers. This new era in the West marked as the reaction of their intellectuals towards religion and church. Although their philosophy is develop based on the ideology of secularism, liberalism, humanism and religious skepticism, the discussion of ethic still remain important. Leibnitz for example wrote *Ethics Geometrically*, Kant with his deontological ethics, J. S. Mill in his consequentialism and many others.

At the end of this modern era, one the most important American philosopher, William James emerged to discuss ethics through his writing like *The Will to Believe* (1896), *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), *Talk to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some's of Life Ideals* (1899), *Pragmatism, A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (1907) and *Pragmatism* (1907). Though James promoting new terminology in philosophy known as pragmatism, there is no doubt his idea is being influenced by Mills' consequentialism. This article will examine the pragmatic ethic based on James' writings as he is the one who has promoting pragmatism and also a unique figure among other early pragmatists where many ideas about religions and ethics in pragmatism are came from him.

Therefore, this writing will neither discuss the whole idea of James pragmatism nor other pragmatist views on ethics but only on James significant contribution in philosophy of ethics.

2.0 William James and Pragmatism

William James (1842–1910) came from New York City, United States of America. He was born in a home where free intellectual growth is encouraged. His father was a Swedenborgian mystic and well acquainted with the literary-intellectual elites of his day. From 1855 to 1860, James studied in England, France, Switzerland, and Germany. His interests shifted from painting to natural science and medicine, then psychology, and lastly to philosophy. Thus, his writing is unique and original. He took his M. D. at Harvard in 1870, and taught there on physiology, then psychology, and finally philosophy from 1872 until his death, 1910. His study in medicine and special interest in psychology make him able to publish the great book on the psychology in 1890 and it was considerably the highest possible excellence. James readings also covered widely in the literature of philosophy especially related to experimental psychology and studied the works of J. S. Mill, Kant, and Hegel. He wrestled with questions such as: What does it mean to be a human being? To what extent are humans free? How do ideas affect our lives?

James was a highly social person whose friends, including Charles Sanders Peirce, Chauncey Wright, Oliver Wendell Holmes and Ralph Waldo Emerson formed an influential intellectual community. They are belonging to different fields like science, mathematics, philosophy and psychology. Form this intellectual community in Cambridge, Massachusetts known as *The Metaphysical Club*, pragmatism was emerged. Therefore, James is among classical pragmatist apart from Charles Sanders Pierce and John Dewey. Pragmatism emerged as America's first major contribution to philosophy. Historically, pragmatism was founded by Peirce, it gained popularity through James, and it was applied to a diversity of social arenas by Dewey. This philosophical movement was concerned more with real problems of life, and “cash-values” of ideas rather than abstract, absolute philosophical issues. Their aim is to treat philosophical issues in a ‘scientific’ manner. Pragmatism is therefore concerned with what ‘works’ in actual practice rather than what idle, metaphysical speculation leads us to believe.

Based on the significant contribution of James, pragmatism, as know it, is basically founded by James. He was motivated by science as well as religion, and both these elements are visible in his works. On the scientific side, the study of medicine had given his thoughts a tendency towards materialism, which, however, was held in check by his religious emotions. His writings include *The Principles of Psychology* (1890); *The Will to Believe* (1897); *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902); *Pragmatism* (1907); *The Meaning of Truth and A Pluralistic Universe* (1909); and others published after his death, *Some Problems in Philosophy* (1911); and *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (1912). He always gave public lectures thus, became a leader in pragmatism, and wrote a number of books as mentioned above that are classics in American philosophy. By referring to the writings after 1900, his publications were utmost in the field of philosophy.

Russell, B. (1947) wrote an important text book for philosophy under the title *History of Western Philosophy* said that James was primarily a psychologist, but was important in philosophy on two accounts: he invented the doctrine which he called “radical empiricism” and he was one of the three protagonists of the theory called “pragmatism” or “instrumentalism”. In later life he was, as he deserved to be, the recognized leader of American philosophy. According to Heidi White (2010), epistemology pragmatism by James promoting the middle position between rationalism and empiricism. Will Durrant in elaborating James pragmatism:

Truth is process, and “happens to an idea”; verity is verification. Instead of asking, or whence is an idea is derived, or what are its premise, pragmatism examines its results; it “shift the emphasis and look forward”; it is “the attitude of looking away from the first things, principles, categories, supposed necessities, and of looking towards last thing, fruits, consequences, facts”. – Scholasticism asked, what is the thing? - and lost itself in “quiddities”; Darwinism asked, what is its origin? – and lost itself in nebulas; pragmatism asks, what are its consequences? – and turns the face of thought to action and the future.

3.0 Pragmatic Ethics According James

For James, all philosophical problems were ultimately ethical (Throntveit, 2014). As James is one of the great proponents of pragmatism, he considered the elementary maxim for any ideas is its usability and practicality. This maxim should apply in all matters including ethics. He discussed about ethics in his popular lecture *On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings* (1899). According to Russell, B. (1947), James focus more on religion and moral (on the concept of ‘the will to believe’) compare to other pragmatist like Dewey which focusing more on scientific method and knowledge.

3.1 Pluralistic Ethics

A self-proclaimed ‘radical empiricist’, James held that the universe is pluralistic, and the only reality accessible to human minds is constantly changing - not least through the ceaseless flux of human consciousness, a fact as natural and consequential as any other (Throntveit, 2011). Thus, according to Cooper, W. (2003), James believe in pluralistic ethics. James acknowledged the importance of the diversity and variety of moral in order to achieve ideal ethics. Based on James writings, *On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings* (1899), man need to consider others perception, as the ethical problem requires all perspective of human being (White, 2010). Others opinion must take into account and ethics is not solely dependent upon one man as he strongly believed neither the whole of truth nor the whole of good, is revealed to any single observer. Implicit in this observation is not only James’s respect for the revelations of others but also his recognition of our limitations (White, 2010).

James insisted that ethical principles emerge organically from individuals’ collective experience in deciding moral questions (Throntveit, 2011). According to James, the principle of ethics exist naturally from collective experience of an individual within society which later become solution, guidance, result for any question related to moral. Every man has their own ideal model then they need others assistance and association with them to realize it. The validity of the ideal model is come from the moral life of an individual and it will be judge by the society. It is important to reflect and test that ideal so that it will align with the reality of society moral life and it also will help people to improve that reality. Man need to take a risk by experimenting for the most suitable ideal and need to adapt it as a principle of moral life which can satisfy demands as much as he can in time.

Ethics is come naturally from collective individual experience when they are facing and trying to solve moral issue. The integration between reason and practice in dynamic environment is the important ethical sense and practical guidance in searching for goodness. The demand will empower creativity and altruistic potential based on the importance of individual life and society. According to James, freedom, wisdom and virtues realized after man’s association with society. Thus, he believe in pluralistic ethics; the variety of truth in ethical problems. Ethics is dynamic and keep on changing with the change of man’s life and their social context. The call for openness and to allow pluralism caused the certainty of moral retain ambiguous as the judgment is in the hand of the last man.

3.2 Consequentialism

According to Wesley Cooper (2003), James is consequentialist because his morality aim to satisfy the demand (but the satisfaction not valued an individual's satisfactory). Michael R. Slater (2007) explain about practical and natural ethics according to James as well as the practical prove for religions (beliefs) in his writings *The Moral Philosopher and Moral Life*. James believe that any ethics or its theory is true when it is beneficial for moral experience of an individual. In recognizing that usefulness, sentient being is important. Therefore, the important condition for ethics is the existent of rational being who are also able to use it or to translate it in reality. At one time, James dedicated the book *Pragmatism* to John Stuart Mill, saying that pragmatism applied the same concept of utility to truth, which Mill had applied to good in his utilitarianism. James (1904) explained in the article, *What is Pragmatism*, from series of eight lectures, *A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*:

The whole function of philosophy ought to be to find out what definite difference it will make to you and me, at definite instants of our life, if this world-formula or that world-formula be the true one.

Theories and philosophies like ethics in James writings are therefore “instruments” which we employ in our lives to solve problems, and the truth is judged in terms of how successful they are in solving those particular problems.

3.3 Amelioration¹ Ethics

As one of the most influential exponent of pragmatism, James believes that any idea should have its practical dimension and give benefit to the society. This principle also imply in his understanding of ethics whereas ethics for him should improve society. This major thesis of pragmatism distilled a career spent describing an unfinished world, in which human thoughts and actions made differences for which thinkers and actors were responsible (Throntveit, 2011). Similar with his contemporary Dewey, James also suggested the idea of cultivation of moral in a self in order to have good life. Thus, meliorism or the idea of amelioration became one of the most important discourse on James pragmatic ethics. Based on this meliorism, James acknowledged on the significant role of society and its institution in ethics. The practical dimension of ethics lay down by man's realization of their relationship and association with others. This condition is compulsory and need to be fulfil by all human being.

The idea of man, society and ethics is eminent because man unable to have an isolated life or free himself from others and live his life alone. Man's life is within his social context, associated with others and live together with them. K. Betrens (2003: 208) also stated that it is impossible to divide ethics into social ethics and individual ethics since human beings are social beings and every ethical issue of an individual is nevertheless within social context. Hence, the study of ethics related with sociology because humans cannot live except within society (Ahamad Amin 1977). This melioristic social orientation has an individual analogue, a moral bearing discernible in several writings by James on the individual, the self and the moral life. Denying both devout optimism and staunch pessimism for their empirical inadequacies, pragmatists assert that social amelioration is neither inevitable nor impossible

¹ From the word *meliorism*; the doctrine believe that the world will become better from man's effort. (the opposite of *pessimism*). the belief that the world tends to improve and that humans can aid its betterment. See: The Reader's Digest Great Encyclopedic Dictionary. 2nd edition. 1964. London: The Reader's Digest Association Limited & Oxford University Press. pg 557.

(Uffelman, 2011). Collective intelligence offers society the means to its own improvement. Fundamental to the legitimacy of an ethic of self-cultivation is the belief that an evolving and expanding self is a prerequisite to a socially engaged, socially responsible individual. James give his attention to the self-cultivation ethic due to pragmatic belief that any idea, theory or philosophy should have its practical benefit to reality and able to solve social issue. Begin with self-cultivation, collective virtues able to generate, then benefit society.

4.0 James Pragmatic Ethics: A Critical Evaluation

James writings on ethics is similar with his views on religions. There are also no differences on his understandings of religion and ethics with his writing on psychology. All ideas are built upon the paradigm of pragmatism. The problem arose when James trying to apply his pragmatic approach in every dimensions of life. Some aspects of life like ethics and religion is beyond senses and experiences of human beings, is therefore the test and result is invalid. In Islam, although reason and senses is welcomed as a tools for gaining knowledge, some dimension of life like ethics and religion should be free from humanistic interpretation because it is beyond human capability. Pragmatic approach might be useful when it is related with the practice of science and technology but some other aspects should not be intervene by pragmatism as its understanding is come from faith, believe and inner part of man (Kamal Azmi Abd. Rahman 2016). Those knowledge come from revelation; God and His Messenger. Meanwhile, Slater (2009) also claimed that all of James interpreters have failed to bring out the deep interconnections between his religion and morality. Therefore, the epistemology of pragmatism started problematically. It started the meaning of truth on the shaky stand. Originally, pragmatism come from Mill and Bentham utilitarianism, British empiricist and many other hedonistic philosophy from ancient Greek like Democritus, Cyrenaic School and Epicureanism.

4.1 Moral Relativism

Fauziah (2014) explain that pragmatism is not a new idea rather it was a continuation of previous Western philosophy; empiricism and utilitarianism. Even James acknowledge that pragmatism used the same method in understanding truth with J. S. Mill. Therefore, he dedicated his writing, *Pragmatism* (1907) for him. By using experience, empirical method, consequentialism approach, pragmatism is creating a problem of relativism. Every idea is subjected to its benefit and usefulness. Although pragmatism had guaranteed the dynamism and diversity, it also has a potential to create lot of ethical values without its universality and objectivity. Throntveit (2014) criticized James ethics as he encouraged individualistic morality denying objectivity, the share value among man. This ethical system has a probability to create relativity immoral and man will lose altruism – moral concern. Thus in Islam, truth is absolute come from God in His Revelation and it is not come from human being capability of thinking and reasoning. Komarudin (2012) in his comparative study on religious experience according to al-Ghazālī dan James said that James has his own advantages on science but lack on the source of sciences which further creating relativism in moral. Thus, man need the guidance from the Absolute to provide objectivity in moral and effective solution whenever there are no final answer. Russell, B. (1947) criticized James for privileging belief over suspension of judgment, and thus encouraging people to live in private moral universes rather than seek objective grounding for common values. Today, some intellectual historians continue to echo Russell and likeminded contemporaries, judging ethical pragmatism tantamount to moral relativism, even moral apathy.

4.2 The New Paradigm of Theology

Major criticism towards pragmatism is their final product; relativism not only in moral but also in religion. James view on religion as well as ethics is not new in socio-religious life in the West. In reality, it was the continuation of past philosophical ideas from C. Darwin, H. Spencer, E. Durkheim and many other thinkers to whom we may credited for their effort in creating a new method in studying religion known as philosophy of religion (Hamid Fahmy Zarkasyi, 2012). Right after that, the discourse of religion is no longer part of theology but philosophy. They are organized themselves to treat religion as natural as they can. This kind of religious understanding keep on evolving and during this post-modern era, philosophy of religion become Cross-Cultural Philosophy of Religion. According to them, pragmatic views on religion finally created global theology or religious pluralism by its great proponent, John Hicks and Wilfred Smith. Based on that historical fact, James and his pragmatism inspired the development of humanism in the West in the hand of more contemporary philosopher like F.C.S. Schiller and Charles Francis Potter. What the problem with all this kind of view, ethics is independent of all even religiosity but still subjected to the doctrine of philosophy.

4.3 Postmodern Ethic

According to Hamid Fahmy Zarkasyi (2012), James pragmatic idea already promoted relativism, criticized previous abstract philosophical system, promoting scientism and contributing a lot to the emergence the new era known as postmodernism. Postmodernism caused iconoclasm which damaged the old modernism. Postmodernism is now the worldview of the West and by the means of globalization, they try to impart to the entire world. Kamal Azmi Abd. Rahman (2016) also discussed about the emergence of pragmatism from the revolution modern western philosophy which is began with the rise of rationalism and empiricism to a newly promoted idea emphasized on practicality and free from metaphysical discussion. Although pragmatism ensure the development of knowledge and technological advancement, pragmatism bounded with humanism, egoism instability of relativism.

5.0 Conclusion

Pragmatism is a worldview for James. None of ideas are exception from this worldview and even the idea of religion also used the same measurement. According to him, religion passed the pragmatic test 'if the hypothesis of God works satisfactorily in life, then 'God exists'. Therefore, his ethical theory is firmly based on the idea of pragmatism as well. Apart of his concept of 'the will to believe', James clearly promoting pluralistic ethics which is suit with consequentialism and amelioration attitude. According to him, the idea will benefit the society and will ensure the progress and dynamicity of human being. While looking on pragmatic side of ethics, James ethical view is subjected to criticism because he is promoting moral relativism, full-encouraging of pluralism, creating the new paradigm of religion, generating instability of postmodern ethics. Therefore, although pragmatism ensure the idea of democracy, pluralism and dynamism, his ideas lack of objectivity and absolutism. Vice versa Islamic ethics is governed by religion and it is not independent from God. Revelation is the must-referred source. Islamic ethics is therefore, unlike the pragmatic ethics; whereby ethics in Islam based on unity (principle of *Tauhīd*), *Īmān* (religious belief), and *Ihsān* (which is undoubtedly contradicted with the teaching of consequentialism). Therefore, all Muslim should practice Islamic ethical system so that any idea to say that religious ethics (Islam) cannot guaranteed success and regressive is proven wrong.

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