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The nature of the moral life is the question of ethical philosophy. What is right? What is wrong? What is good? What is bad? How should I act towards others? What kind of person should I be? These are philosophical questions that humans have been asking for millennia. Philosophy seeks truth. What is the truth of good and bad and right and wrong? Is there a system of morality that answers these questions? Is there a true moral order in the universe?

James's discussion with his literary friends that fine summer day in 1895, the year Les Deux Margot opened, would be based on his 1891 paper delivered to the Yale Philosophical Club titled The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life (MPML). It is a remarkable critique of ethical and moral philosophy. In it he argues that philosophical systems cannot provide an adequate basis for objective moral truth. In James's fashion, he states in the first sentence his purpose: "The main purpose of this paper is to show that there is no such thing possible as an ethical philosophy dogmatically made up in advance." [2] To say it another way, philosophical a priori reasoning cannot be a proper basis for the truth of the moral life. The major premise of MPML is that morality is defined by human experience. We cannot provide a final accounting of right and wrong and good and bad through abstract thinking. Determining right and wrong is a human activity. For James, 'moral' connotes the relevance of choice, the idea that what we choose matters. The moral philosopher is one who takes choice seriously. How we act and experience the world determines the moral order, not philosophy. We won't know the final truth in ethics "until the last man has had his experience and said his say." Philosophy has its place, however. Until we reach the end of human existence, the philosophical hypotheses about the moral life, and how we act on them, are necessary, even indispensable, conditions to determining "what that 'say' shall be."

In MPML, as he analyses the subject, James takes the reader on the journey of his protagonist, 'the philosopher', an answer-seeker. The philosopher's journey in James's story is guided by an ideal, which is "to find an account of the moral relations that obtain among things, which will weave them into the unity of a stable system, and make the world what one may call a genuine universe from the ethical point of view." He must not be satisfied with ethical skepticism, believing that knowledge of moral truth is not determinable. Skepticism will not be "a possible fruit of ethical philosophizing, it can only be regarded as that residual alternative to all philosophy which … menaces every would-be philosopher who may give up the quest discouraged, and renounce his original aim." This philosopher is distinguished from the rest of us by his role in the quest for truth. He is there to ask questions, and keep our inquiry on track. We non-philosophers can accept some skepticism in these matters, but not the philosopher.

The philosopher studies the ideals that actually exist in the world with the purpose of getting them into a certain form. How do we act? How do our actions describe our morality? He is like an investigative judge in the civil law tradition, one whose goal is to find the ideal order of all things. This investigation is the philosopher's contribution to ethical philosophy. He fails to reach his goal if in his investigation if he does not find an account of moral relations that unifies all into a stable system. But he will not find a stable system "so far as the world resists reduction to the form of unity, so far as ethical propositions seem unstable."

James himself is not like this philosopher searching for a stable system. He does not seek or desire an objective moral order. James is a pluralist, who firmly believes that 'the world resists reduction to the form of unity.' He has said that philosophy essentially is an intellectual attempt to come to grips with reality. This reality can be viewed as one (monism), or as an irreducible many (pluralism). For James, ethical propositions are necessarily unstable, for reality is an irreducible many, as he will show in his paper. He is also a pragmatic pluralist; pragmatic in the sense of considering the meaning of ideas and the truth of beliefs not abstractly, but in terms of the practical difference they can make in people's lives. Unlike the monistic philosopher of MPML, pragmatic pluralist philosophers allow for possibilities in the world that monism, with its reduction of all to one, does not. Pluralism's possibilities allow for a 'melioristic' view of the future as possibly better, depending on choices we freely make. Meliorists believe the world can be made better through human effort, and that was James's message.

The philosopher's role is indispensable to how we live the moral life simply because it is he who attempts to answer our questions about the meaning of the moral life. A likely source of answers would be the writings of those who have sought the answers in the centuries before our time. What, for instance, does Kant have to say? Do his answers settle the matter? They don't, but they add salient points that inform the discussion and the analysis of what our say should be. You determine what your say is, and you make your statement through your actions. Your contribution to ethical philosophy and the human project of developing a moral world is seen in your character and how you act towards others. However small your contribution, it is, in one sense, greater than the philosopher's. You are an actual player in the experience-game; the philosopher is merely attempting to write the rules of the game while it is being played.

James says that there are three questions with which the philosopher must deal. He refers to them as the psychological question, the metaphysical question, and the casuistic question. The psychological question asks about the historical origin of our moral ideas and judgments. The metaphysical question asks about the very meaning of 'good' and 'ill' and 'obligation'. The casuistic question asks "what is the measure of good and ill which men recognize, so that the philosopher can find the true order of human obligations." In the first three sections of MPML James proceeds to show the limitations of philosophy's answers to these questions in achieving the philosopher's ideal of stable ethical propositions.

§ I The Sources of Our Moral Ideals The psychological question of the origin of our moral ideals is the starting point and the ending point in this inquiry into the moral life for most of us non-philosophers. Are our moral ideals divine commands, or evolutionary developments; i.e., supernatural or natural? James says that for most people searching for the foundation of ethics, their answer to this question settles any dispute. The source of moral sentiments is either God's divine thought, which we discover through reason or some mystical connection with Him, or our own human nature as it has evolved in adapting to the world.

It is not uncommon for people to believe that morality depends upon the existence of God. The notion is best expressed by Ivan Karamazov, in Dostoevsky's The Brothers Karamazov, who

famously declared that if God does not exist, then “everything is permitted.” The concept of God as the moral legislator was well presented by English jurist Sir William Blackstone (1723 – 1780) in his Commentaries on the Laws of England [3], the leading work on the development of English Common Law. His logical argument can be synopsized as this: Man is God’s creation. God formed the universe, created matter, and impressed certain principles on that matter. He established rules of action, or laws, for his creation. There are laws of physical science, mechanics, biology, botany, etc.; and there are laws of human nature. Unlike everything else he created, he gave man the free will to choose his actions and the ability to reason. He commanded man to use his free will and reason to discover the rules of action for human conduct that God had impressed upon him. Man, as a creature of God, is subject to the laws of his creator, and must conform to his maker’s will. Just as God impressed upon matter the laws of physics, he impressed upon man certain unchangeable laws of human conduct. Our wise God’s laws for us are based on concepts of justice that existed in nature before any human action. These concepts of justice are the eternal, unchangeable laws of good and evil. Some of these are to live honestly, hurt nobody, and render everyone their due. God impressed on human nature laws to govern human behavior; these laws are God’s will for us – our telos, our purpose. Our purpose is to be good, and to do good. That is the meaning of life. We use our God-given ability to reason to discover these rules of conduct, these natural laws, that are part of our nature. Our wise God gave us a simple way to discover these laws. We discover these natural laws by using reason to determine if a course of human conduct leads to man’s real happiness. If so, it is part of the law of nature. If it tends to the destruction of man’s true happiness, the law of nature forbids it. God gave us the freedom to choose how to behave, but also the ability to use our brain to figure out the rules that must govern our behavior. If you follow these rules, if you are true to the human nature God gave you, you will live the moral life, and find happiness.

Notice that this scenario involves the use of reasoning to discover within ourselves the meaning of good and evil. We don’t need God for that, we must do it ourselves. God’s role in this scenario was impressing on our human nature the truth of good and evil for us to discover, and providing a method for us to discover truth. Whether we characterize our search for moral truth as seeking to align our thoughts with Jehovah’s, or as developing a moral philosophy based on reason and experience independent of divine authority, the quest is the same; to find the Holy Grail, the meaning of life.

James does not discuss this supernatural/natural distinction, perhaps because he sees it as superfluous to the views he will express in his paper. Instead, he goes straight to a point that he “dogmatically believes,” which is that one source of our morality is our human preference for pleasure and the avoidance of pain. This is the philosophy of the 19th century British empiricists Mill, Bentham, and Bain, which is at the core of utilitarian moral theory. The only ethical motive for action is the desire for happiness. The Good is that which provides the most pleasure and reduces the most pain. The ethical act is the one that has the greatest utility, i.e., usefulness, in bringing about the Good. If something gives us pleasure, we associate goodness with that thing. James says that the empiricists “have done a lasting service in taking so many of our ideals and

showing how they must have arisen from the association with acts of simple bodily pleasures and reliefs from pain."

Many are content with this utilitarian answer. But James, the psychologist, shows its limitation. He goes on to say that while the association of a thing with pleasure will undoubtedly make the thing significant of goodness, this association with pleasure it is not enough to explain all of our sentiments and preferences. There is something more at work. Psychological studies of human nature find "traces of secondary affections, relating to the impressions of the environment with one another and with our impulses in quite different ways from those mere associations of coexistence and succession which are practically all that pure empiricism can admit." That is to say, we are affected by things and events in the world which make impressions in our minds and lead to impulses in thought and action. Empiricism is limited to seeing our impulses resulting from the association of one thing with another. But we are affected in ways that are not associations; i.e., secondary affections.

He gives examples of what he is talking about; examples of felt emotional discords and harmonies that cannot wholly be explained by association or utility: the love of drunkenness, bashfulness, fear of heights, sea-sickness, fainting at the sight of blood, susceptibility to musical sounds, the emotion of the comical, the passion for poetry, mathematics, or metaphysics. These affections go with other things that can be explained by association or utility. The origin of these secondary affections is found "in incidental complications to our cerebral structure," and this brain structure arose prior to and without reference to any perceptions of the secondary affections themselves. It is how we are wired.

James asserts that many of our moral perceptions are of this secondary and brain-born kind of affection. "They deal with directly felt fitness between things…. The feeling of the inward dignity of certain spiritual attitudes, as peace, serenity, simplicity, veracity; and of the essential vulgarity of others, as querulousness, anxiety, egoistic fussiness, etc. – are quite inexplicable except by an innate preference of the more ideal attitude for its own pure sake. The nobler thing tastes better, and that is all that we can say."

He offers two situations to illustrate instinctive moral response. In the first, a man shoots his wife's lover. Subsequently, the husband and wife make up, and live comfortably together again. In the second, in a future utopian world, millions can be permanently happy on one simple condition; that one certain individual set off on the far edge of things must live a life of lonely torture. His point is that in these circumstances many would immediately and instinctively sense a moral discord, a feeling of wrongness, which can only be attributed to brain-born feelings, and that the subtleties of this moral sensibility go beyond what can be deduced from the laws of association. "Purely inward forces are certainly at work here. All the higher, more penetrating ideals are revolutionary." These higher ideals are not found in the effects of past experience, but in the probable causes of future experience. It is these inward forces of moral sensitivity, these higher ideals, that shape our future environment.

James concludes the first section with this: “Our ideals have many sources. They are not all explicable as signifying corporeal pleasures to be gained, and pains to be escaped.” James, at this point, has identified two sources of morality. One is utilitarianism, based on the human desire for happiness. The proper moral order is the one that achieves the greatest good for the greatest number. The other is some innate sense of goodness. We have an innate sense of right and wrong without reference Benham, Mill, Bain, Kant, or for that matter, any philosophical system. It is part of our human nature. That is what we get in touch with when we look inward. Both sources are human. If we conclude that utilitarianism is not the final answer, and admit the idea that we have innate moral sentiments, we must conclude that we do not have a stable system, and that, at this point, the philosopher has not yet realized his goal.

§ II How We Create Moral Ideals and Obligations Consider ‘ethics’ as asking, what kind of person should I become? The ethical answer is to be the kind of person that acts in the right way. It is about character. ‘Morality’ is asking, what should I do, how should I act toward others? These are the questions of ethical and moral philosophy. What is the right way to be and to act? The opinions of others provide guidance, but they lack authority. If indeed we have “an innate preference of the more ideal attitude for its own pure sake,” as James says, then at least some of the answers are within us. This highlights the importance of self-reflection, looking inward to see ourselves, who we are and how we act. It presents the question of what the ideal attitude in fact is. Is that even an objective fact that we can discover? What should I be, how should I act? Should I be good? What is good? And do I have an obligation to act a certain way? These questions are metaphysical questions the philosopher must try to answer. James proceeds to address what the words ‘good’, ‘ill’, and ‘obligation’ mean.

First of all, he says the words ‘good’ and ‘bad’ can have no meaning in a purely physical world. Good and bad are value judgments, which require a judger to give them meaning. “Imagine an absolutely material world, containing only physical and chemical facts, and existing from eternity without a God, without even an interested spectator: would there be any sense in saying of that world that one of its states is better than another? … We are asking whether goods and evils and obligations exist in physical facts per se. Surely there is no status of good and evil to exist in, in a purely insentient world.” James’s point is that goodness or badness cannot exist in physical facts; in a purely insentient world,they simply are or are not.

“Goodness, badness, and obligation must be realized somewhere in order to really exist.” They do not exist in the nature of things. “Their only habitat can be a mind which feels them; and no world composed of merely physical facts can possibly be a world to which ethical propositions apply.” For that, a sentient being is required.

James imagines a universe with only one sentient being. Once this one sentient being is made a part of the universe, there is the possibility for goods and evils to exist. Moral relationships have status in that person’s consciousness. “So far as he feels anything to be good, he makes it good. It is good, for him; and being good for him, is absolutely good, for he is the sole creator of values in that universe, and outside of his opinion things have no moral character at all.”

James calls this universe of a single being a moral solitude. It would be absurd, in a moral solitude, to ask whether that person's judgments of good and bad are true, because "[t]ruth supposes a standard outside of the thinker to which he must conform; but here the thinker is a sort of divinity, subject to no higher judge." While there is no outward obligation, the solitary thinker might still struggle with the consistency of his own ideals (values). Some may be felt stronger than others. "Some of these will no doubt be more pungent and appealing than the rest, their goodness will have a profounder, more penetrating taste; they will return to haunt him with more obstinate regrets if violated. So the thinker will have to order his life with them as the chief determinates, or else remain inwardly discordant and unhappy." However this solitary thinker orders his life, it will be right, "for beyond the facts of his own subjectivity, there is nothing moral in the world."

James then introduces a second sentient being into the universe. The two thinkers may simply ignore the other's attitude about good and bad, at which point we would have a moral dualism, but no moral unity. If we multiply the thinkers into a pluralism, we find the ethical sphere of the ancient skeptics, where individual minds are 'the measure of all things', and in which there is no one objective truth, but only a multitude of subjective opinions. The philosopher, James asserts, cannot accept this. He insists that among the subjective ideals, there must be some which have more truth or authority, to which others ought to yield, "so that system and subordination may reign." The word 'ought' requires consideration of the idea of obligation and duty, and James sets out to make its meaning clear.

He echoes Shakespeare when he says that "[t]he outcome of the discussion so far has been to show us that nothing can be good or right except so far as some consciousness feels it to be good or thinks it to be right." (Hamlet:"There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.") Different opinions of value of moral ideals, some seen as better or worse, cannot be explained by any abstract moral 'nature of things' existing prior to the actual, concrete thinkers themselves. Just as the concepts of goodness and badness must be realized in a sentient being to exist, so must the concepts of better and worse be realized in order to be real. "If one ideal judgment be objectively better than another, that betterness must be made flesh by being lodged concretely in someone's actual perception." Comparative value's essence is its perception, just as is the essence of the ideal of goodness or badness itself lies in perception. Thus the question of which ideal ought to be superior, and which inferior, has to lie in the composition of the mind of a sentient being, "the de facto constitution of some existing consciousness. This consciousness must make one ideal right by feeling it to be right, and the other wrong by feeling it to be wrong."

Among us, is there a sentient being whose ordering of moral values ought to be our moral law? 'Ought' in the sense that we have an obligation to act in accordance with that being's sense of right and wrong? James put the question this way: "what particular consciousness in the universe can enjoy [the] prerogative of obliging others to conform to a rule which it lays down?" Who or what has the authority to create an obligation, and what would be the basis for the obligation? We determine what is good, each of us, but there is no absolute authority. To make

what is good or right objective, there has to be an authority, but there is none, unless we conceive of one.

If one of the consciousnesses thinking about the proper subordination of values were divine, and all the rest human, James suspects that there would probably be no dispute; the divine thought is the model to which others should conform. The divine consciousness would provide the authority. But even then the question would remain; what is the ground for any obligation to act in accord with the divine thought?

James is going to offer a new way to look at the source of obligation. He first describes the assumption ordinary men make when debating the question of good and bad. “They imagine an abstract moral order in which the objective truth resides; and each tries to prove that the pre-existing order is more accurately reflected in his own ideas than in those of his adversary.” Because one of the disputants is backed by the overarching abstract moral order, we think we should submit to its authority. Even if one of the thinkers is God, we follow the same pattern, and imagine an officially sanctioned, de jure, God-response to a particular situation, based on God’s thoughts which existed prior to the facts of the particular situation. What is ‘right’ is to conform our thoughts to God’s thoughts, even if we prefer as a matter of fact to go on thinking for ourselves.

James then encourages us to shift our mode of thought. He says that once we take a ‘steady’ look at the question, “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 whenever there is a claim.” Obligations are the result of claims by humans. Claims and obligations are two sides of the same coin. Therefore, says James, the idea that we are subject to a pre-existing overarching moral system where things are ‘true in themselves’ is either just a superstition, or merely a provisional abstraction from the idea of an ultimate Thinker whose thoughts we must (are obliged to) follow.

James recognizes that for those with a superstitious view, it is difficult to accept that every claim in fact made creates an obligation. They think that for a claim to create an obligation, the claim must be ‘valid’. James rejects the idea of validity of a claim as something that exists outside of the mere existence of the claim itself; that my claim must be judged by some outside source to determine if the claim has worth. This conception of validity, he says, “rains down upon the claim, we think, from some sublime dimension of being, which the moral law inhabits, much as upon the steel of the compass-needle the influence of the Pole rains down from out of the starry heavens.” He wonders how this abstract idea can add to the imperativeness inherent in the claim itself. The validity of my claim is established by me making it.

He poses a challenge to the reader: “Take any demand, however slight, which any creature, however weak, may make. Ought it not, for its own sole sake, to be satisfied? If not, prove why not.” The only kind of proof you could show would be that some other creature had a contrary demand. Any claim, any personal desire, makes itself ‘valid’ by the fact that it exists. James recognizes that we generally do not give much weight to the claims that represent small desires,

“put forward by insignificant persons,” and that we may make light of their corresponding obligations, but the fact that they do not have much in the way of obligation-value does not invalidate larger demands.

One generalized, impersonal way to talk about this would be “to say that the ‘universe’ requires, exacts, or makes obligatory such or such an action, whenever its expresses itself through the desires of such or such a creature.” James cautions us, however, against personifying the universe unless we believe in an actually existing divine consciousness. If such a consciousness did exist, its demands would carry the greatest obligations because they are the greatest in amount. “But it is even then not abstractly right that we should respect them. It is only concretely right – or right after the fact, and by virtue of the fact, that they are actually made.”

Suppose you say that something is wrong. When asked ‘why’, you can say that it is contrary to God’s demands. Or you could say that it violates an a priori ideal moral order. Do these hypotheses make the wrongness any more understandable or acceptable? Do they have a forceful appeal to you? James says that “the only force of appeal to us, which either a living God or an abstract ideal order can wield, is found in the ‘everlasting ruby vaults’ of our own human hearts, as they happen to beat responsive and not irresponsive to the claim. So far as they do feel it when made by a living consciousness, it is life answering to life.” If the human heart is not responsive to the claim, it is impotent, and neither talk about an a priori moral order nor a living God can give it any force. Human responsiveness to human needs is complete without the need for an ideal backing.

James concludes section II asserting that the metaphysical question is answered. The words ‘good’, ‘bad’, and ‘obligation’ mean “no absolute natures, independent of personal support. They are objects of feeling and desire, which have no foothold in Being, apart from the existence of actually living minds. Wherever such minds exist, with judgments of good and ill, and demands upon one another, there is an ethical world in its essential features.”

He offers a simple metaphor to help understand an ethical world. Imagine a universe where all things, “gods and men and starry heavens,” were blotted out, and there were left only one rock with two souls on it. That rock would have as thorough a moral constitution as any other possible world. It is a tragic world, because the two would die. “But while they lived, there would be real good things and real bad things in the universe; there would be obligations, claims, and expectations; obediences, refusals, and disappointments; compunctions and longings for harmony to come again, and inward peace of conscience when restored; there would, in short, be a moral life.”

We are like those two souls on the rock. We form an ethical republic, whether or not God exists “in yon blue heaven above us bent.” This leads us to conclude that in a universe where the highest consciousness is human, ethics have a genuine foothold, just as in a universe where there is a God. This James calls ‘the religion of humanity’. “The ‘religion of humanity’ affords a

basis for ethics as well as theism does." The question remains as to whether this purely human system can satisfy the monistic philosopher's demand for a stable unified system.

James's religion of humanity is a thoroughly human basis for ethics and morality. It is humanness at every point. 'Good', 'bad', 'right', 'wrong', and moral 'obligations' are all human concepts. Our moral sentiments are mind-based, part of our human nature. We have an innate preference for the higher ideals. Goodness and badness, rightness and wrongness, are concepts that exist only in the mind that feels them to be good or bad. We make something good or bad through our thinking and how we act on it. By making something good or bad, we define how we ought to act toward others. Our beliefs determine our acts.

All human beings share one commonality. We all have intrinsic value just because of our existence as human beings. We are all connected to each other and our planet. Each of us, and all of us, play a part in creating an ethical world through our thinking and our actions. Each of us has needs and desires and innate feelings about good and bad. We make claims about how the world should be, and we feel obligations for our claim. If we see an act of kindness, like someone helping a stranger in need, we conceive it as good because we feel it as good, and our thinking follows our feeling. If we see an act of cruelty, like someone kicking a dog, it is wrong because we instinctively feel it to be wrong. If we see human practices that risk human extinction, like unnecessarily polluting our atmosphere with carbon emissions that raise the temperature of the earth and result in climate changes that produce climate disasters, we feel threatened and regard the practices as wrong. We do not need to consult outside philosophical or religious sources to make a determination of wrongness. We instinctively and immediately feel; i.e., experience, wrongness or unfairness, and then cognitively provide reasons for our conclusions. Some claims are more important than others, and carry a greater obligation. Some are insignificant. They have value as claims, but not much in the way of obligation-value. The best possible world would be one where all desires are met, but that cannot be.

We can, however, make it a better world. Human needs are reflected in claims for how something ought to be. If we feel responsive to the need, and if it can be satisfied without impairing a greater need, then we ought to respond to it. Our moral obligation, our duty, is to make life better for ourselves and our fellow human beings through our actions, whether or not there is a God. That is our purpose; that is our project. We make the world moral, one day at a time. That is the magnificence of humanness. It is a project with no end in sight. This is the religion of humanity.

§ III The Measure of Our Moral Values James's philosopher has not yet realized his ideal, to "find an account of the moral relations that obtain among things, which will weave them into the unity of a stable system, and make the world what one may call a genuine universe from the ethical point of view." Everything is subjective, but among the subjective ideals, he believes that there must be some which have more truth or authority, to which others ought to yield, so that system and subordination may reign. Some claims are more important than others, and carry a greater obligation. We determine what is a good and what claims are more important than others. If there is a best good, there will be a second-best good, and a third and a fourth, ad

infinitum. How we act, as individuals and a society, shows what we value as the highest good, and the subordination of other goods. This ranking of values is the casuistic problem [4], the third question of ethics; how to prioritize competing goods where not all can be satisfied. How do we go about determining a good's proper ranking?

A 'good' is that which is desired or demanded. Happiness is a good; justice is a good, the love of a particular man or woman is a good; financial and personal security are goods. James begins section III by observing our situation. We are living in a world where the existence of a divine thinker is doubted by some; no authoritative god to provide the moral order. In this world, there are many ideals which are generally agreed to, but also many for which there is no general consensus. He gives examples: "the wars of the flesh and the spirit in each man, the concupiscences [lust] of different individuals pursuing the same unshareable material or social prizes, the ideals which contrast so according to races, circumstances, temperaments, philosophical beliefs, etc. – all form a maze of apparently inextricable confusion with no obvious Ariadne's thread [5] to lead one out." The philosopher must insist that over all of the individual and differing opinions of man, there is a discoverable system of truth.

James has shown "that truth cannot be a self-proclaiming set of laws, or an abstract 'moral reason,' but can only exist in act, or in the shape of an opinion held by some thinker really to be found. There is, however, no visible thinker invested with authority." This presents us with a dilemma. Do we proclaim our own ideals as those with authority, or do we, recognizing there is no objective moral standard, simply be skeptics?

James says that there is a way out of this dilemma and confusion, one that has been used by the ethical schools. The casuistic problem can be solved by examining those things desired/demanded and see if they furnished their own test and measure. "If it were found that all goods qua goods contained a common essence, then the amount of this essence involved in any one good would show its rank in the scale of goodness, and order would be quickly made; for this essence would be the good upon which all thinkers were agreed, the relatively objective and universal good that the philosopher seeks."

The ethical schools have identified various 'essences of good' upon which an ethical system could be based. James lists the tests which have been used by somebody to constitute the essence of all good things or actions so far as they are good: "to be a mean between two extremes; to be recognized by a special intuitive faculty; to make the agent happy for the moment; to make others as well as him happy in the long run; to add to his perfection or dignity; to harm no one; to follow from reason or flow from universal law; to be in accordance with the will of God; [and], to promote the survival of the human species on this planet."

None of these measures of good has given general satisfaction, James says. Some are not present in all cases. The will of God is unascertainable and vague. Some are indeterminate in their consequences. The best measure seems to be the capacity to bring happiness, but this is not satisfying because, to make it the essence of good, it has to be expanded to include acts that never aim at happiness. James is left with the inevitable conclusion that the most universal

principle is that “the essence of good is simply to satisfy demand.” A demand can be for anything under the sun, and thus we have no more basis to believe that “all of our demands can be accounted for by one universal underlying kind of motive than [we do] for supposing that all physical phenomena are cases of a single law…. The various ideals have no common character apart from the fact that they are ideals. No single abstract principle can be so used as to yield to the philosopher anything like a scientifically accurate and genuinely useful casuistic scale.”

A casuistic scale is necessary as a guide to moral life, simply because there are so many diverse, and sometimes conflicting, demands wanting satisfaction. We can imagine a world where all demands are satisfied upon their making, but it would in no way resemble the actual world we inhabit. This imaginary world would make incompatible actions, such as taking a holiday and getting ahead in our work, or shooting and fishing and not harming any animals, or continuing to burn fossil fuels and reduce the harm of global warming, exist in conjunction with each other. “The actually possible in this world is vastly narrower than all that is demanded; and there is always a pinch between the ideal and the actual which can only be got through by leaving part of the ideal behind.” Every end of desire is exclusive of some other end of desire. “Shall a man drink and smoke, or keep his nerves in condition? – he cannot do both. Shall he follow his fancy for Amelia, or for Henrietta? – both cannot be the choice of his heart.” A casuistic scale is a practical necessity for the philosopher. “Some part of the ideal must be butchered, and he needs to know which part” is pinched and should be left behind.

We don’t see the difficulty of the philosopher’s task in establishing the right scale of subordination in ideals because we live in a society where those ideals are already ordered in some way. James says that this environment makes us partisans of particular ideals, rather than philosophers. The philosopher, however, must not be a partisan. If he clings to his ideal of objectivity, he must not rule out any ideal from being heard. He will know that he must not be guided by his own personal preferences, if he wants to find “the fulness of truth.” A single philosopher who “attempts to put his own ideas of order into that howling mob of desires, each struggling to get breathing-room for the ideal to which it clings,” is acting as a sort of god in the moral world. The very best of men are not sensible to many goods. The philosopher is in a natural position to fight to ensure that the goods to which he is sensible are not lost from this mob of desires. He must not, however, be a partisan in the ordering of demands.

James asks us to imagine Zeno, Epicurus, Kant, Schopenhauer, and others as schoolmasters telling us what all must think, rather than one-sided champions of special ideals. Their effort “to substitute the content of their clean-shaven systems for that exuberant mass of goods with which all human nature is in travail, and groaning to bring to the light of day,” would seem absurd. And imagine further, that they were not schoolmasters, but “pontiffs armed with the temporal power, and having authority in every concrete case of conflict to order which good shall be butchered and which shall be suffered to survive.” This would be cause for rebellion. “All one’s slumbering revolutionary instincts waken at the thought of any single moralist wielding such powers of life and death. Better chaos forever than an order based on any closet-philosopher’s rule, even though he were the most enlightened member of his tribe.” The monistic philosopher must be a judge in the debate, not a party advocating their favored ideal.

If his goal now is establishing the right scale of subordination in ideals, and he does not make his own preferences superior, how can he find the proper order for the many demands of human beings? He can, James asserts, by making “the guiding principle for ethical philosophy (since all demands conjointly cannot be satisfied in this poor world) be simply to satisfy at all times as many demands as we can?” The action that must be the best action is that which makes the best whole, in the sense of having the least sum of dissatisfactions. “In the casuistic scale, therefore, those ideals must be written highest which prevail at the least cost, or by whose realization the least possible number of other ideals are destroyed.” James says that since there is in this process victory and defeat, the philosophically desired victor is the most inclusive side, “the side which even in the hour of triumph will to some degree do justice to the ideals in which the vanquished party’s interest lay.” This, he says, is the course of human history; “men’s struggle from generation to generation to find the more and more inclusive order.” As he observed earlier, societies as they actually exist (or existed) have a de facto casuistic order. There is a social equilibrium, and it moves in conjunction with social discoveries. Examples he gives are polygamy, slavery, private warfare and liberty to kill, political torture, and arbitrary royal power. All of these have succumbed to actually aroused complaints. There has been moral progress.

The casuistic scale changes, through human experience. The scale, so far as it exists in the customs of a community, “is made for the philosopher already far better than he can ever make it for himself.” Where there is a conflict of ideals, there is a presumption in favor of the conventionally recognized good. And yet, it is a rebuttable presumption. There is nothing final in moral equilibrium. As “our present laws and customs have fought and conquered other past ones, so they will in their turn be overthrown by any newly discovered order…. ‘Rules are made for man, not man for rules’.” The philosopher must allow for the man who, at risk to his character and life, challenges the established order, and seeks a larger whole than the present order permits. “The pinch is always here. Pent in under every system of moral rules are innumerable persons whom it weighs upon, and goods which it represses; and these are always rumbling and grumbling in the background, and ready for any issue by which they may get free.”

To illuminate this point, James directs our attention to pinches in late 19th century America: abuses in the institution of private property; “unnamed and unnamable sorrows [of] the tyranny, on the whole so beneficient, of the marriage-institution,” the loss of opportunity under our regime of so-called equality and industrialization. “See everywhere the struggle and the squeeze; and the everlasting problem how to make them less.” Everywhere we look, we see needs and claims for higher ideals.

Challengers to the existing moral order, among them “anarchists, nihilists, and free-lovers; the free-silverites, socialists, and single-tax men; the free-traders and civil-service reformers; the prohibitionists and antivivisectionists; the radical darwinians with their idea of the suppression of the weak,” says James, “are simply deciding through actual experiment by what sort of conduct the maximum amount of good can be gained and kept in this world.” These experiments are to be judged, not a priori, but by how much more outcry or appeasement comes about, after the

fact. We cannot anticipate the results of these experiments in social change. We do know, however, that there are among us exceptional people, born to be champions of some ideal, who will fight to death on its behalf. The philosopher's judgment as to the outcome is not worth much. He can't set the scale, he can only observe its development. He can be confident though, that the easiest path forward will be the one that leads toward the richer and more inclusive arrangement.

§ 4 The Philosopher's Failure and Philosophy's Success At this point, James must conclude that the monistic philosopher cannot realize his goal of identifying a stable moral system of superiority and subordination of moral values. "No philosophy of ethics is possible in the old-fashioned absolute sense of the term." Our philosopher has failed in his quest to find an objective moral order. James has made his point, which was to show that no ethical philosophy made up in advance can find moral truth, because moral truth is always evolving with human experience.

But he has done much more. He has shown us a path to the moral life. Not by providing a philosophical system that deduces moral truth, but by providing a method for understanding and addressing moral issues. James gives us a moral philosophy. Jamesian philosophy does not define moral ideals, but does show how to achieve them. In showing how "old-fashion" philosophy has failed in its quest, he shows us how new-fashioned philosophy has succeeded.

What he has shown us is a better way to look at the meaning of morality. A way based on our humanness. We can see that moral sentiments have many sources, and that one of the most primary is our innate feelings of goodness and badness; our instinctive response to an experience. We feel moral value. We are informed by scripture, philosophical and theological writings, science, and social custom, and based on feelings and reason, we make choices on how we act. We make something good by believing it to be good and then acting on that belief. Our actions determine our morality, and the morality of our world is what we have made it. That is the human project, the making of morality. It is an on-going project, one that calls for constant evaluation and re-evaluation of the effects of our actions.

We can evaluate how well we have done in achieving the moral life. Ask yourself, what are the ideals expressed in the dominant universe of American society, and how have we prioritized them? On a scale of one to five, one being totally immoral and five being extremely moral, where do we rank? Despite some common agreement on moral imperatives, we have a world where many human needs are apparent but not addressed adequately. Poverty and hunger, racism, social violence, deprivation of human rights, the threat of human extinction, all of which represent human claims with high obligation-value, are not vigorously responded to. To repeat, morality is about what we do, how we act toward and respond to the needs of others.

James has done a great service in providing a basis for our moral obligations to each other. To summarize the above, all of us have demands, claims, and needs for a good. The essence of good is to satisfy demand. The guiding principle of ethical philosophy should be to satisfy at all times as many demands as we can. The action that must be the best action is that which makes

the best whole, in the sense of having the least sum of dissatisfactions. An obligation corresponds to every claim. The greater the ideal of the claim, the greater the obligation. Our moral obligation to each other is to be responsive to the other's needs.

Showing the way to a better moral life requires thinkers who see the pinch in ideal achievement in the universe that dominates. Thinkers who "may replace the old 'laws of nature' by better ones; [who] 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." The moral life is a "growing, elastic, and continuous life." Those with a superstitious nature and a dogmatic temperament, with absolute distinctions and unconditional 'thou shalt nots'," change the continually developing moral life into "a superstitious system of relics and dead bones…. There are no absolute evils, and no non-moral goods. James says that the highest ethical life "consists at all times in breaking rules which have grown too narrow for the actual case. There is but one unconditional commandment, which is that we should seek incessantly, with fear and trembling, so to vote and to act as to bring about the very largest total universe of good which we can see."

James is clearly advocating for moral progress, both in the individual and in society. We make moral progress when we align our thoughts and acts with good, whatever that may be. We make moral progress when we act to make ourselves, our character, better, and when we act to make the lives of others and the world better. The moral life is better life. Philosophy and philosophers can help, but not as much as our own intuition and our efforts to improve the moral life. Every moral dilemma presents a unique situation, with its own combination of ideals realized and ideals disappointed, and creates a universe without precedent. The philosopher is in no better position to determine the best universe than the non-philosopher. He is perhaps better than most is seeing the question of the different universes to which the ideals belong. He knows that the preference is for the richer universe, the one that provides for the more inclusive whole. But he cannot know which is the better universe in advance. "In all this the philosopher is just like the rest of us, so far as we are just and sympathetic instinctively, and so far as we are open to the voice of complaint." All he can do, and all we can do, is to make every act, every day, reflect the higher ideals.

James concludes section IV taking a poetic turn, which would have been appreciated by his literary friends at Les Deux Margot. Given that the philosopher is no better than the non-philosopher in defining the moral life, if he wants to touch truly on the moral life, his books on ethics "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 economic reform." Old-fashioned, clear-cut, philosophical 'systems' must be abandoned for poetic themes of moral life. Stories, not treatises, show the way.

The Meaning of Life in the Religion of Humanity

The question, what is the meaning of life, is very ambiguous. What is being asked? We know the meaning of the noun 'life' is the condition of existence of animals and plants. This is a

scientific answer. But that is not what is being asked by philosophers. Their question can be what is the purpose of life, or why am I here, or what is the significance of life, or what gives my life meaning, or what is the value of life, or is life worth living, or any other question that asks about the nature of existence.

The question of the religion of humanity is what is the meaning of the moral life. Life 'as it is' is based on human action. Humans act in ways that reflect their values and beliefs, and the measure of their importance. The collective acts of humans determine the nature of the world, its level of immorality. At the very heart of morality is the question of how we act toward others; how we respond to the needs of others; what is life 'as it ought to be'?

The religion of humanity implicitly reflects James's meliorism. Meliorism is the belief that the world can be made better through human action. Does anyone not believe that? Well, maybe the pessimists don't. But what good does pessimism offer? Does not every act of kindness make for a kinder world? The world is full of claims by humans, needs. The religion of humanity teaches that where there is a claim, it coexists with an obligation. The moral life is the life that attempts to satisfy as many claims/needs as possible with the least amount of dissatisfaction. Our obligation, our moral obligation to each other human, is to make the world better.

We are all workers in the human project. We don't know why we are here, although many ascribe metaphysical reasons. But we do know that we make the world the way it is by how we respond to life. The human project is the creation of the world we know. Each and every human bears a responsibility for that creation. Every act, no matter how small, contributes to the morality of the world. We have, in one important sense, a purpose. That purpose has driven mankind's moral life since the beginning of human existence. It is to make our existence better. It is our job. We give meaning to our lives by how we respond to the experience of the world, and the greater our response in pursuit of higher ideals, the greater the meaning in and of our lives. That is the meaning of life. [6]

§ V The Practical Utility of God The final section of MPML is puzzling to some. James has spent the entire paper showing that our morality, our ethical philosophy, is based on human experience, without the necessity or interference of a God whose moral standards should be our own. Now he comes and seems to argue that our monistic philosopher can only find the stable and systemic moral universe in a world where there is a God. And he seems to be speaking of a monotheistic god. It is confusing.

Recall that James's philosopher's goal was to identify a unified, stable, moral system, with our higher ideals at the top of our casuistic scale of moral values. He seeks to make sense out of the world, and make a whole. He seeks an objective moral order, but as was said above, while we determine what is good, there is no absolute authority to make our subjective opinion good unless we conceive of one. In this final section of MPML, James presents the argument that if we are to find a stable moral system, a god is a practical, inevitable, necessity to making the subjectivity of our concrete ethics objective. God is an over-belief that serves a purpose.

Choosing to believe in a god is a human choice; it is natural. It is a metaphysical component to the religion of humanity.

James begins the section saying that the chief reason concrete ethics, that arising from human experience, cannot be final because "they have to wait on metaphysical and theological beliefs." Is he saying that concrete ethics can be final if backed-up with metaphysical and theological beliefs? Can metaphysical and theological beliefs provide the objective moral system that the philosopher seeks?

He reminds us that he has said that "real ethical relations existed in a purely human world," ethical relations being the comparative force of different ideals. To support this, he refers to the thinker that exists in moral solitude. Even alone, he will have various ideals, and "[h]is self of one day would make demands on his self of another." Some demands will be tyrannical and urgent, while others may be gentle and easily put aside. James calls the tyrannical demands imperatives, and says that if we ignore them, there will be consequential damages and regrets from "the good which we have wounded." Thus, obligation to moral imperatives can exist within this one solitary self, and he will not have peace if he fails to live in accord with a casuistic scale that puts the imperative goods on top. Sometimes adhering to the greater obligation will be painful, but that is a cost that must be borne if we are to life the moral life.

We are all in a sense solitary thinkers. We each have a value system, a personal casuistic scale. We all occasionally struggle with conflicting ideals and demands at the time we are making choices on how to act. Sometimes the higher ideal feels the pinch, especially when we seek to avoid unpleasant situations. Too often, this does not work out well. As James says, "[i]t is the nature of these [more imperative] goods to be cruel to their rivals…. They call out all the mercilessness in our disposition, and do not easily forgive us if we are so soft-hearted as to shrink from sacrifice in their behalf."

What is the difference between those who are willing to pay the price of the higher ideal and those who would avoid its cost? It is a matter of attitude, which James labels as the 'easy-going' mood and the 'strenuous' mood. The easy-going mood would be one characterized by ethical indifference, cowardice, and weakness of will. The strenuous mood would be characterized by ethical concern, courage, and resolve. James says the capacity for the strenuous mood probably "lies slumbering in every man, but it has more difficulty in some than in others in waking up. It needs the wilder passions to arouse it, the big fears, loves, and indignations; or else the deeply penetrating appeal of some one of the higher fidelities, like justice, truth or freedom." Without these 'wilder passions', our thinker's ideals are merely preferences, and he cannot escape the easy-going mood.

We would all be better makers of moral goods if we were in the strenuous mood; if our attitude were characterized by ethical concern, courage, and resolve. How can we achieve that? Here James shows the benefits of adding a spiritual dimension to the religion of humanity. He says where our thinker's ideals have roughly the same value, and can be used as he prefers, "in a merely human world without a God, the appeal to our moral energy falls short of its maximal

stimulating power. Life, to be sure, is even in a world a genuinely ethical symphony, but it is played in the compass of a couple of poor octaves, and the infinite scale of values fails to open up." The religion of humanity is indeed the proper basis for ethical philosophy, but it is constrained by its finitude, and as such lacks the inspirational power of religious belief. Spiritual belief will provide the appeal of the strenuous mood its maximum stimulating power. In the non-spiritual world of the religion of humanity, we will make, through our human project, a better world, but in its finiteness it "lacks the note of infinitude and mystery, and may be dealt with in the don't-care mood."

The belief in God, however, opens up an infinite perspective. "The more imperative ideals now begin to speak with an altogether new objectivity and significance, and to utter the penetrating, shattering, tragically challenging note of appeal." The ethical symphony is played outside of the confines of the poorer octaves of finitude; "the scale of the symphony is incalculably prolonged."

Believing in God brings on the strenuous mood, whether or not such a God exists. Here is James's practical point. Postulate a god. He says that "[t]he capacity for the strenuous mood lies so deep down among our natural human possibilities that even if there were no metaphysical or traditional grounds for believing in a God, men would postulate one simply as a pretext for living hard, and getting out of the game of existence its keenest possibilities of zest."

James's final conclusion is that our monistic philosopher's ideal of a stable moral universe can only be achieved in a world where there is a divine thinker/demander. Such a thinker would subordinate demands to a final objective casuistic scale. "His ideal universe would be the most inclusive realizable whole."

Objectivity can only arise within the concept of obligation; the objectivity of moral judgment devolves to authority. Moral objectivity is a plausible idea, but only as a matter of faith in an infinite demander. Thus, in "the interests of our own ideal of systematically unified moral truth, … we, as would-be philosophers, must postulate a divine thinker." We cannot know this divinity's thoughts, even if we are certain of His existence. Our postulation of Him only serves one purpose, which is to let loose the strenuous mood; to provide the motivation for the moral life. This is what it does in all humans, philosophers or not.

James closes with a significant, humanistic, point, which is that the decision on which course of action is best for us is a matter of our character and our choice. He quotes from Deuteronomy 30:19: "See, I have set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil; therefore, choose life that thou and thy seed may live." James says that when this challenge comes to us, "it is simply our total character and personal genius that are on trial…." The solutions to our moral questions, in the end, lie simply in the willingness or unwillingness of our inner character. "The solving word … is not in heaven, neither is it beyond the sea; but the word is very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it." [7]

James began this fifth section saying that the chief reason concrete ethics cannot be final because "they have to wait on metaphysical and theological beliefs." He then presents the

argument that belief in God provides the foundation for moral objectivity. Moral objectivity is a plausible idea, but only as a matter of faith. That faith consists of a belief in God's infinite scale of value, moral demands, and participation in the moral life. Without faith, the "infinite scale of values fails to open up" the religion of humanity to higher octaves.

James seems to be speaking of God as the theistic god of his audience in New England, but his message need not be limited to that God, or indeed any god at all. James did not believe in a divine thinker/demander/authority, but he did believe in others right to believe. James's point is that the practical effect of conceptualizing a divine being is to bring one closer to the moral life.

Perhaps a way to make section V less puzzling is to consider what it says to those whose religion of humanity excludes divine beings. James always said the religious impulse is finally not about god, it's about life; more life, deeper and richer and more satisfying life. Is he showing only that, apart from a concept of god as a divine thinker being a basis for objective moral truth, such a more satisfying life is possible with a greater experience of transcendence? A liberal reading of MPML would focus on the purpose of promulgating a god rather than the nature of that god, and see his message as proposing no more than that we make a connection with the divine in order to find a deeper and richer experience of life. We don't have to have a god with a will who makes demands on us. The 'divine' is not necessarily a supernatural being, or a supernatural divine thinker. James said we must postulate; i.e., conceive, a god in order to find the unity the monistic philosopher seeks, but James, the pragmatic pluralist, does not seek unity or see it as possible or desirable. God is a human conception, whether or not a god exists in some other reality. God exists for some because of a desire to make the abstract idea of the Absolute more concrete. They make the infinite finite. It does not have to be so. There are many conceptions of God apart from Jehovah, the personal-creator god with a will. Pantheism, for instance, is the belief that God is identical to the cosmos; that God is Nature. There is the Great Spirit of Native Americans. There is the Hindu concept of Brahman, the eternal imperishable non-dual Absolute, and of Ishta Devata, where each person creates their own god. There is Taoism, where the Tao is that which makes everything possible, the primordial source of all being.

Reflecting on and trying to make sense of the universe is metaphysical thinking. If we think about our place in the universe and our connection with all other things, we necessarily become spiritual. Imagine a walk in the mountains on a beautiful snowy morning, and being overwhelmed by the grandness of nature, and having a sense of your own finitude, as well as a sense of the infinite. It is a transcendent spiritual experience, found in the springs of delight in life. You experience a higher level of consciousness; you experience the world differently. It is a human experience. The spiritual nature of the moment brings greater zest to life. James can be saying that a spiritual connection will help give life more meaning, and greater inspiration and motivation to live the moral life. He is not saying that the moral life involves following the demands of a divine authority, a proposition he rejects emphatically. The answers are found within us.

Recall James's poetic turn at the end of section IV. Stories, literature, and poetry develop the themes of the moral life. Mythologies show us truth. Greek mythology, Hindu mythology, Taoist mythology, Biblical mythology, Native American mythology, all contain the wisdom of human experience and provide the guidance we need to find our inner path to the divine.

The lesson of MPML, as understood by this beginner, is a lesson on how to live your life. The best life is the moral life, in which we work to be of good character and be responsive to the needs of others, to work to make the world better. The best way to live the moral life is in the strenuous mood, with an attitude ethical concern, courage, and resolve. We need to put at the top of our personal scale of values those ideals that do the most good. And we need to work to put the higher ideals at the top of society's scale.

The moral life is nothing more than the pursuit of goodness in the choices you make. Make that your vocation.

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1. I am a beginner in the study of philosophy. I am not a professional philosopher, or even a philosophy graduate student. I am merely a man interested in understanding what philosophy has to teach me about how to live a good life. This essay deals with metaethics, the study of moral thought and moral language, a vast subject about which I know very little. It is not an 'academic' paper. It is how I, a beginner, would explain to my two man-friends over a martini, my Jamesian philosopher friend, my law student friend, my dinner partners, and my family, my understanding of what James is or may be saying in MPML and his other work. It reflects what James says to me directly, without the input of what others have said in the extensive academic analyses of his work. William James has much to say to me about how to live the good life, and I believe he would for others.

2. Italicized text within quotation marks are direct quotes from MPML; underlined text within or outside of quotes is James's emphasis.

3. Introduction, Section 2, Of The Nature of Laws In General, Commentaries On the Laws of England (1765 – 1770)

4. Casuistry, in ethics, is a case-based method of reasoning. It is the study of cases of conscience and a method of solving conflicts of obligations by applying general principles of ethics, religion, and moral theology to particular and concrete cases of human conduct. It typically uses general principles in reasoning analogically from clear-cut cases, called paradigms, to vexing cases. Similar cases are treated similarly. In this way, casuistry resembles legal reasoning. Casuistry may also use authoritative writings relevant to a particular case. Practitioners in various fields value casuistry as an orderly yet flexible way to think about real-life ethical problems.

5. In the Greek myth of the labyrinth and the Minotaur, Minos, the king of Crete, had built a labyrinth to house the Minotaur, an extraordinary monster of Crete that had the body of a man

and the head of a bull. The labyrinth was famous for being unnavigable, and anyone who entered was doomed to be eaten by the Minotaur. Minos had recently conquered Athens, and he demanded as tribute that every year Athens would send seven maidens and seven youths to be sacrificed to the Minotaur. Theseus, a son of King Aegeus of Athens, volunteered to be among those to be sacrificed. He traveled to Crete, and as soon as he arrived Ariadne, King Minos' daughter, fell in love with him. She offered to help him conquer the labyrinth and kill the Minotaur if he would marry her and take her away from Crete. He agreed. Ariadne gave him a ball of red thread, and Theseus unrolled it as he penetrated the labyrinth, which allowed him to find his way back out. He found the Minotaur deep in the recesses of the labyrinth, killed it with his sword, and followed the thread back to the entrance. Ariadne's Thread is the way out of a confusing labyrinth.

6. And is this that different from Blackstone? See text accompanying endnote 3.

7. Deuteronomy 30:12 – 14
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--Ed Craig, 10 Dec, 2021