

THE ETHICS OF ENERGY: WILLIAM JAMES'S MORAL PHILOSOPHY IN FOCUS. By Sergio Franzese. Ontos, 2008. 237 pp. \$124.

Everybody who has had the good fortune of making friends with Sergio Franzese (1962-2010) will remember his irrepressible laughter, sense of humor, and the irony, which Sergio lavished not only on his conversation partners (one never quite knew when one was about to become a target of his stabs), but also, abundantly, on himself. A few years ago, when Sergio first told me about the disease that had hit him, he laughed his fears away. The disease, he confessed, had brought out the ‘monster’ in him: not only had he accomplished the unimaginable – quit smoking, at least for a while – but, stronger than ever, he was now spending hours at the gym daily, determined to take good care of his body. In that and other conversations I did not raise to the challenge – the honor, as Jankelevitch would have written – of being chosen, if only for a moment, as an interlocutor of his ironic self-talk. Instead, I allowed myself to remain half blind not only to the truth that was hiding, well discernible, beyond his “pseudologia,” but also to the nature of Sergio’s feelings about himself and how life was treating him.

The Ethics of Energy. William James’s Moral Philosophy in Focus, Sergio’s last work on James, is the product of those tragic, yet humorous, and energetic years. It brings to completion Franzese’s reinterpretation of James’s work, as a “philosophical anthropology,” which Franzese began articulating in several essays and in his first book on James, *L’uomo indeterminato. Saggio su William James* (Rome: Anselmo, 2001). James’s diverse philosophical and psychological work, Franzese argued, aimed to outline a philosophical “science of man.” This philosophical anthropology, as James once wrote about philosophy, would be erected on the building blocks provided by the “special sciences.” It would not only seek to answer the central question of philosophy (the question of “the place of Man in nature”), but also to provide people with intellectual and practical tools that they could deploy in order to find the meaning of human life and better act and react within their multiple environments.

The book begins by challenging the canonical reading of “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” an essay in which many interpreters, following a pattern set by R. B. Perry, have seen an attempt to outline an ethical theory. Rather than offering a watered down (and transparently unsatisfactory) form of utilitarianism (and rather than committing himself to the

principle of maximum satisfaction, which Perry depicts as the “gist of James’s moral philosophy”), according to Franzese in this essay James dismissed as fundamentally misguided both idealistic ethics and utilitarianism. (In *Principles*, as Franzese reminds his readers, James had already debunked the hedonistic theory of action, underlying utilitarianism.) More: according to Franzese, in “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” James endeavored not to provide a specific moral theory, but, instead, to examine the conditions of validity of any moral theory. Here and in other early writings of James’s Franzese traces the emergence of the idea of the impossibility for the moral philosopher “to provide a sound positive answer to genuine moral problems.” (p. 42). This impossibility opens up a “field of indeterminacy,” which questions all established rules and “leaves everybody with no clue about the right attitude to adopt ... and committed to one’s own free choice.” (p. 42). In Franzese’s interpretation, in “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” James concluded that a prescriptive moral philosophy must be replaced by a “critical moral science,” one which regards “each moral ideal as an hypothesis and each moral choice as an experiment.” (p. 40). Dismissing moral philosophy, “bound to its descriptive task, and ... its casuistic question,” James turned to an “ethical perspective focused on the character of the moral agent,” and his/her emotional “emotional energy” in any given situation. (p. 45)

James’s conception of such a moral science, Franzese suggests, does not stem from any metaphysics. It derives, instead, from James’s conception of the human being as a fundamentally active, indeterminate being, uniquely situated astride the Kantian domains of nature and culture, and endowed with interests. The high number of instincts, which James ascribed to humans, in contrast to the limited number of instincts proper of animals, and the much greater complexity of the human brain enabled James to draw a clear line separating humans from animals, and allowed him to depict humans as fundamentally indeterminate. The reformulation of the reflex arc as a tripartite, rather than a bipartite, process, one always mediated by higher brain activity, completed this picture of a human being, whose responses to external stimuli are never determinate and machine-like. On this basis Franzese reinterprets what Peirce once identified as the gist of James’s “doctrine”: that is, the idea that “the end of man is action.” [p. 99] According to this idea — which Franzese labels the “principle of the primacy of action” — human action, which for James is always guided by interests, is the tool the human being uses in an attempt

both to determine itself and to “morally order the world”: “Active interest and interested action, as the core of human existence ... satisfy the “vital need for a human animal possessing no natural, instinctual, guidelines to obtain orientation and determinacy in an undetermined world of sensations.” [p. 102].

Franzese, however, goes one step further, and suggests that this ethics of “self-determination” and of the production of axiological order in the world was first and foremost an “ethics of energy.” “Ethics,” he writes, “is a vital need for the indeterminate being... That is, ethics must control and organize one’s power of action, or, what amounts to the same thing, one’s energy.” [p. 102]. In Chapter 4 Franzese details what he calls James’s “‘energetic’ turn,” a decided shift to an explicit and important use of the concept of energy, which became most discernible in *Varieties of Religious Experience*, especially in James’s famous identification of “the real self of the man” with “the centre of his energies.” (p. 146).

Franzese not only highlights the important role played by “energy” in all of James’s subsequent works, including, of course, “The Energies of Men,” but also argues that an ethics of energy (or an ethics of “power”) can be discerned much earlier in James’s thought. *Talks to Teachers* and the chapters on emotions and habit in *Principles* are exemplary in this regard. Franzese reinterprets the James-Lange theory of emotions reading it, as many of James’s contemporaries in fact did, as a practical instrument people could use both to prevent needless expenditure of energy (some emotions can be energy-draining) and to energize at a higher level. He also suggests that habit, which James famously viewed as an instrument for the fashioning of character, that is, an instrument of self-determination, was for James a formidable ergonomic tool. (This, however, as Franzese also notes, did not prevent James from realizing that the routinization of action involved in certain habits could also stifle spontaneity and creative energy, making those habits into “bad habits.”). Central to Franzese’s analysis of James’s philosophical anthropology and of James’s ethics as an ethics of self-determination and management of energy is his discussion of James’s theory of the will. His examination of James’s classification of decisions in *Principles*, in particular, will be of great interest to both historians of philosophy and of psychology.

Franzese situates James’s use of the concept of energy in the context of the sciences of energy of his day and time, when the discourse on energy spread from its original context (the

industrial revolution and the physical sciences) to a range of academic or extra-academic disciplines, such as neurology (think, e.g., of George Beard's "neurasthenia"), clinical psychology (e.g. Pierre Janet's "psychasthenia"), mind cure, mental hygiene, and experimental psychology (e.g. Mosso's measurements of the expenditure of energy by hikers during alpine climbs being the signal example), as well as to politics, as Cotkin and others have shown. Franzese pays special attention to the physical sciences. While highlighting the ways in which various natural scientists, especially James Clerk Maxwell and Wilhelm Ostwald, functioned as resources for James's "energy-talk," Franzese also unearths important differences. These differences turn out to be key for a proper understanding of James's conception of energy. Here Franzese's analysis is razor sharp. James used "energy" in two ways, he argues. In a metaphysical sense (in his late writings), he used the term "energy" to account for "the whole of the *processes of the universe*, including *God* and the *psychic agencies*," as well as for experience, that is the "the process of interaction between 'subject' and 'world' conceived according to an energetic model," which, Franzese suggests, "mirrored Maxwell's theory of the fields of energy." In the *psychological* use, which lent itself to moral applications, James deployed the concepts of nervous and spiritual energy, both of which found expression in the "effort of attention," and in all activity aimed to overcome obstacles and difficulties. (164).

How did these two different accounts of energy relate? According to Franzese, James was aware of the importance of this question. He rejected both the claim that there was a continuity between the two (that is, the view that "psychological energy is only a part of the whole energy acting in the universe"), and the "*microcosmic model*, that is the view that nervous/psychological energy is in the human microcosms what energy tout court is in the greater universe." (p. 165) The former was reductionistic and could lead to deterministic implications. The latter, instead, opened up the problem of the difference between human energy and "the 'other' energy." Franzese answers his question by observing that, in contrast to natural scientists of the time, James did not view energy as a metaphysical substance. Instead, James used "energy" in a purely nominalistic way, as a collective name "for the sensations just as they present themselves (the movement, heat, magnetic pull, or light, or whatever it may be) when they are measured in certain ways." (James, *Pragmatism*). Franzese concludes that deployed the term "energy" as a "metaphor": more precisely, as a metaphor for "activity." James used the metaphor of energy to

give an “account of what, strictly speaking, can neither be said nor illustrated, namely, life itself, or the whole of the activity of the universe” and the very fact of the existence of activity. (p. 166).

Historian of science Fernando Vidal recently raised the question of why the concept of action (and related concepts such as “activity,” “enacting,” and “performance”) became central to turn-of-the-twentieth-century philosophy, arts, and politics. This, I think, is a broad historical epistemology question, which calls for a multi-disciplinary answer. Franzese’s book, by showing that action pervaded not only James’s theory of truth, but also his entire philosophy, makes the question central also to the field of James studies. By highlighting the importance James ascribed to disciplines of the self and to philosophical, psychological, and physiological exercises for the rearrangement of energy, *The Ethics of Energy* also indicates that an answer to Vidal’s question will require an examination not only of scientific and philosophical theories, but also of scientific and philosophical practices (including, I suggest, metaphysical practices, the importance of which has been highlighted, for example, by Gary Hatfield.)

In a footnote Franzese notes that that,—while making “the formation of personality” into the condition of a good life,” James “offers no substantial or universal axiological definition of ‘good’ and ‘evil.’” James, instead, takes virtue as “dispositional,” and identified “a good life” with “a fully fashioned [a “well structured and well disposed”] personality, whatever its ends and values might be.” (pp. 129-131). In turn, he defined personality “by the amount of attentive effort it can produce, that is, by the amount of power or energy an individual can expend in the deployment of his or her own existence.” (125). As a result, Franzese concludes, “good” becomes equivalent to “the creation of a character as a completely fashioned ‘tendency to act’ in the direction of whatever a person considers worthwhile to be acted on or for. ... In other words, ‘good’ is the creation of instincts as a determination of indeterminate being. Such determination, in turn, is ‘good’ because it is ergonomically advantageous and more effective.” (130). This is “the closest James ever came to a moral theory.”

I have quoted at length from this footnote, because I think these words not only illuminate Sergio Franzese’s interpretation of James’s ethics, but also may offer some consolation to Sergio’s friends. “Regret” was no banal term for James. No “mere emotional expression of discomfort or distress about some ‘unpleasant’ event,” it involved “the whole

moral structure of the individual,” “the meaning that existence has for such an individual.” What is at stake, in regret, just as for “existential” decisions (as Franzese terms the fifth kind of decision discussed by James in *Principles*), is a whole way of being, the choice of a self, “a determination” of the kind of person one wants “to be.” (p. 123, 141) I do not think Sergio regretted his merciless tendency to tax his body and his health – a true form of philosophical asceticism, one might say--, his sleepless nights (one could call him at any time, and find him invariably awake, working on some manuscript), or even the innumerable cigarettes, which helped him increase his energy and focus it on his self-chosen life task: his passionate study of James’s work. His was a good life, a philosophical life, one worth living and worth being faithful to, no matter the consequences.

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