

The Life of the Mind: Pragmatism and Ethics in *The Principles of Psychology*

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ABSTRACT

In this talk I shall advance a radical reading of James' masterpiece *The Principles of Psychology*. I shall claim that the twelve hundred pages of the text, besides presenting one among the most imaginative and elegant surveys of the variety of aspects of our mental life, contain a precise picture of ethics along anti-foundational lines. There is a widespread vulgate about both James' conception of ethics and of his picture of the mind, which has its roots in a biased understanding of what 'pragmatism' meant for James. This reading commits to a biased understanding of the connection between our 'inner' and our 'outer' life, which is of the utmost importance for what regards the kind of descriptions of human beings ethics aims to. By challenging this broader understanding of James' characterization of pragmatism I would like to challenge the consequent misreading of James' ethics and philosophy of mind. I will concentrate on *The Principles* since in this text we can find the seeds of the position James struggled to articulate all along his intellectual career. Once put in its proper light, a very interesting and much more compelling picture of pragmatism will emerge, one whose relevance for *our present* ethical debate has long been neglected.