Abstract

In this essay, I explore one of the most polemic faces of William James’s philosophy: his view of moral life as struggle of individuals powered by moral energies which escape from social controls but which, properly re-conducted, could revert to the common good. Far from glorifying the ideal of a self-sufficient and olympic selfdominated by a will to power, James claimed for the virtues of passionate and strenuous individuals but also self-conscious of their many limitations and of the intrinsic contradictions of human moral actions. The essay, in addition, connects James’s moral individualism with his axiological pluralism raising some doubts about the public viability of an individualistic ethics centred on radical antagonism between values.

Keywords

Pluralism, pragmatism, americanism, Santayana.