

Horny Hands and Dirty Skin:
On the Virtues of Courage, Humility, Patience, and Tolerance

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Abstract

The American philosopher William James (1842 - 1910) offers a strong defense of tolerance as a virtue. James even admits that tolerance is a difficult and messy virtue: tolerance is a virtue that callouses the hands (“horny hands”) and dirties the skin. As a virtue, tolerance relates to how we engage with intolerance. Engaging with intolerant positions displays the virtue of courage, because it risks being perceived as the intolerant having a hold on you. Engaging with intolerant positions displays the virtue of humility, because you do not prioritize your own positions over and against those with whom you disagree. Engaging with intolerant positions displays the virtue of patience, because you endure the intolerance in your own life. In this presentation, I make a case for what I consider James’s four cardinal virtues: tolerance, patience, humility, courage. Second, I explain the significance of James’s metaphors of “horny hands” and “dirty skin.” Third, I discuss James’s understanding of happiness, joy, and living a significant life.

Argument

Listing cardinal virtues is part of a longstanding tradition of wisdom. For Aristotle, the four cardinal virtues are prudence, temperance, courage, justice. For Augustine, the three cardinal virtues are faith, hope, charity. Thomas Aquinas combines these two and defends seven cardinal virtues. For the defenders of the ethics of care in the 20th century, the four cardinal virtues are compassion, love, mercy, sympathy. William James offers his own version of the four cardinal virtues: courage, humility, patience, tolerance. Baruch Spinoza, John Locke, Voltaire, Immanuel Kant, and John Stuart Mill defend some version of tolerance as a virtue required within modern society (see Fiala 2003). Quite recently, tolerance has been defended and/or evaluated as the primary “liberal virtue” (see Bowlin 2016; González de la Vega 2016; Ward 2010). William James is part of this tradition of liberal virtue. Within this tradition, philosophers differ on the other virtues required.

According to William James, there is no set formula for the significant life. There are virtues, however, that aid us in coming to know how to navigate life without a set formula. James thinks that it does not matter which context you find yourself: these virtues are the ones required for the virtuous life, and living the virtuous life guides us in making our lives significant. I find ten virtues defended by James in “What Makes a Life Significant”: tolerance, courage, patience, sympathy, insight, good will, humility, reverence toward others, love toward others, and good humor. Cultivating these virtues result in happiness, joy, and living a significant life.

James divides his discussion of virtue into two groups: ideals and sentiments. An ideal has two characteristics: intellectually conceived and novelty. James argues “that there is nothing absolutely ideal: ideals are relative to the lives that entertain them.” The virtues that are ideals are not absolute ideals—which mean that they might look different relative to the person who cultivates them. By sentiment, James means the passionate part of human beings that tries to find balance and moderation; three virtues help us achieve this balance and moderation. For clarity’s sake, I define each of these virtues based on James’s words within “What Makes a Life Significant.” After defining each virtue, I focus on what I consider James’s four cardinal virtues: courage, humility, patience, tolerance.