

# William James Studies

A publication of the William James Society

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## Volume 2 (2007)

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Article 1. <http://williamjamesstudies.org/2.1/editorial.html>

## From the Editors:

*William James Studies* was launched a little over a year ago. We are pleased with the response it has generated so far. 1  
On average the journal receives 36 “visits” daily. We use “visits” as a way to measure access to the site, rather than  
the more common “hits,” because it records only an individual’s initial access of the site and not each time that  
individual accesses a page. We find the number of visits to the site to be a more accurate—that is, less inflated—  
measure of how much interest the journal is generating. While 36 visits a day is certainly a good start, we expect the  
number of visits to continue to increase as more issues become available. We are also pleased by the level of interest  
in the journal from individuals outside of the United States. So far we have recorded visits from over 40 countries.

This issue continues our practice of featuring addresses by past presidents of the William James Society, presented 2  
at annual meetings of the American Philosophical Association: John J. McDermott’s history of the critical  
editions *The Works of William James* and *The Correspondence of William James* and William Gavin’s “‘Problem’ vs.  
‘Trouble’: James, Kafka, Dostoevsky and ‘The Will to Believe.’” We also offer articles by Kristin Boudreau, Mathew  
Foust, Sami Pihlström, and Charles Hobbes that in their own ways commemorate the centennial of the publication  
of James’s *Pragmatism*. In addition, we include essays by Todd Lekan, Michael Slater and Henry Samuel Levinson  
that focus on other aspects of James’s work. We are especially pleased to be able to provide book reviews for the  
first time.

As always, we are grateful to Paul Arroyo for his help in getting this issue out and to the University of Illinois  
Press for housing the journal. We particularly want to express our gratitude to our reviewers for their timely review  
of submissions and to all those who submitted essays to the journal. We continue to be impressed by the quality of  
submissions, and we hope that you will enjoy reading the essays in this issue as much as we have. We look forward  
to receiving submissions to future issues.

Linda Simon  
General Editor

Mark Moller  
Managing Editor

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# William James Studies

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Article 2. <http://williamjamesstudies.org/2.1/mcdermott.html>

### William James Presidential Address Philadelphia: December 2002

John J. McDermott

*Abstract. This, the first Presidential Address, was presented at a meeting of the William James Society. Its intent and style is more gently hortatory than strictly academic. Since the date of this "Address," 2002, The Correspondence, has been completed, in 2004, which yields 31 volumes of critically edited published and unpublished writings of William James.*

#### I. Historical Preamblings

My introduction to William James occurred in the early 1950's and came 'serendipitously' and through the back door. 1

R. C. Pollock: McDermott, your head is in German Phenomenology (Max Scheler) and your heart is in the subway—that is, America.

McDermott: What should I do about that?

Pollock: Read William James.

So I picked up the one-volume edition of R. B. Perry and read it on a bench in the sweat-stenched locker room in the gymnasium of an up-the downstairs school in the hard-tack neighborhood of Long Island City, New York. 2

When reading this book on William James, I recall saying to myself—I can understand this as in *Verstehen* or as in James himself, knowledge by acquaintance. So I wrote a dissertation on the history of the notion of experience in American thought so as to figure out what James meant by his cardinal devotion to a philosophy of experience. (From that day to this, with many interstices, permutations and seeming—though not actually so—detours, the meaning of experience is still my personal and philosophical focus.) 3

Some years later, in a second event of good fortune, I was to meet Herman Shapiro, who in turn, set up an appointment with Morris Philipson, Senior Editor at Knopf and the Modern Library. I brought a prospectus for an historical, multi-cultural, multi-discipline reader in American thought. As this was the mid 1960's, he did not bite. This book was to begin with the Indians and the Puritans. We were 20 years ahead of receptivity. Philipson said do you have anything else. In the first of two 'blurts' that are central to the publication of the Critical Editions, I said, William James, I can do that. Now what 'that' was, I did not have the slightest idea, nor of what was ahead—namely, Big problems. 4

First, upon scouring the extant editions of James, I found only a rag-tag, poorly edited, disconnected series of odds and ends. In 1953-1954 when I was the night reference librarian at the Duane Library of Fordham University, I was struck by the 'girth' present in the philosophy section. Many of the European philosophers had collected editions, some multi-volume, for example, Descartes, Kant, Ortega, and many in preparation, for example Husserl. The American philosophers, by contrast, presented themselves as if they were at a fire sale in 5

Filene's basement, or for New Yorkers, the bottom of the escalator in Gimbel's. This impression of textual shabbiness and the complete absence of girth was a lasting impression on me and served to fuel decisions that resulted in the publication of the scholarly editions of James, Dewey and Royce and my early involvement with Jo-Ann Boydston for the Critical Edition of Dewey, with Max Fisch for the Critical Edition of Peirce and with Herman Saatkamp for the Critical Edition of George Santayana. Also, more directly, this impression was active in my co-founding with Frederick Burkhardt the Critical Edition of *The Works of William James*. So too, more recently, with the Critical Edition of *The Correspondence of William James*.

Second, having decided that in terms of textual presence, the thought of James had been obsolete, I set out to create a comprehensive edition which would signal both the depth and the range of his work. But before proceeding, I had to secure permissions. Only those of us who have had to maneuver in this hoary underworld know its perils. I tracked the rights to an independent literary agency. In a bizarre telephone call, this person said OK—you can have the rights for \$3,000. Not having \$3,000, I said I'll take it.

Third, when I took the manuscript to the Modern Library, the new editor Berenice Hoffman was horrified by its size and by the printing expense of the *Annotated Bibliography* which I rescued from a long out-of-print edition by R.B. Perry in 1920. Corrected and adumbrated until 1967, this was a formidable publication by itself. When Berenice looked aghast at the suitcase size of this manuscript, I thought of Henry Holt confronting the gigantic manuscript of *The Principles of Psychology* when all he expected was a small book in the American Century Science Series. Nonetheless, to the undying gratitude of all students of William James, she not only decided to publish this manuscript but arranged for the first edition to be in the famous Random House series: Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, Augustine, Aquinas—and finally James.

We move now to the founding of the two Critical Editions of James, *The Works* and *The Correspondence*. In 1971, I was one of three faculty members of a search committee for the presidency of Queens College, C.U.N.Y. The Chair was Frederick Burkhardt, chairman of the Board of Higher Education for New York City. After the first meeting, Burkhardt leaned over the conference table and said how much he enjoyed and appreciated *The Writings of William James*. Without forethought, obviously, for I again 'blurted', Let's do all of it—that is, all the published and unpublished writings in a Critical Edition. Burkhardt responded, Yes, let's do it. We met subsequently at The Century Club to plan the edition. (The only other time I had been invited to The Century Club was also due to William James. In 1967, after the publication of *The Writings of William James*, I had a note from Julius Bixler, then the President of Colby College in Maine. The library at Colby, incidentally, was a repository of many letters in James's corresponding history, which I read in a major blizzard. The reason for the note from Bixler was not only praise for the *Writings* but gratitude that I cited his long-forgotten work, *Religion in the Philosophy of William James* (1926). It is of note also, that Bixler is the original author of the cited observation, *mutatis mutandis*: "The isolated reference from James is always unreliable." As instance, Of course I am a realist, over against, I am a realist except for my radical empiricism, wherein I "squint towards Idealism" (*Corr.* vol. 11, p. 455).

Returning to the conversation with Burkhardt, my insistence on a Critical Edition, appropriately sealed by the Center for Editions of American Authors, Modern Language Association of America, had two beddings for the *fons et origo*. First, just a year prior, in 1969, appeared the first volume of the Critical Edition of *The Works of John Dewey*. I was very taken with the importance of such extraordinary scholarly care for every possibility extant in providing for an accurate rendition of the originating holograph, or whatever textual source remained for scouring, verifying, correcting and locating within the full corpus. Second, when doing research in the mid 1960's at the Houghton Library of Harvard University, wherein most of James's papers are located, I stumbled on a small but symbolically and philosophically major editorial intrusion as set between holograph and text.

In a notebook entry, written when William James was 61 in 1903, James discusses Naturalism. I had known of this text from Perry, *Thought and Character*, Volume II, 699 ff. While reading the original, hand written entry in the Houghton Library, I was astonished by the first line. In Perry, it reads "How can I . . . justify the strong antithesis I feel," followed by a discussion of the tension between an epistemological constructivism and the objectivity given in the "Temperament of Nature." In fact, holographically the opening reads, "How can I, being a Deweyite," and then continues as above. Obviously Perry, no fan of Dewey and with an advanced philosophical agenda of his own could not abide William James's fealty to Dewey. There is another omission later in the line, where James states that 'nature itself' and subjective constructivism are radically opposed, but then adds that "one's higher indignations are nourished by the opposition." This is vintage James and in concert with what some of us take to be his not so covert epistemological relativism or euphemistically his pragmatic idealism.

I thought to myself, How many more of these editorially invasive elisions exist? And how many of his letters have been bowdlerized or simply hidden from view? It became clear—the edition has to be critically edited with no written stone unturned.

The second issue was whether to do all of it. When moving through the archival collection, bMS 1092, as I did with only a pencil allowed for taking notes, I was struck by the extensive number of manuscript drafts, unpublished lectures and very detailed written reflections on philosophical issues, witness here the notebooks known as the “Miller-Bode Objections.” This material made it clear that behind the often breezy prose of much of William James’s published work, there remained a bedding, a working structure that served as the granite behind his inimitable metaphorical philosophical language. So, we decided to publish ‘all of it’ (for example, *Manuscript Essays and Notes*, Vol 18 of the *Works*, wherein the “Miller-Bode Objections” take up 64 pages of published text as well as many pages of “Textual Apparatus”.)

The first step we took turned out to be deflating. Burkhardt took the project to the Executive Board of the American Philosophical Association and requested financial support. Predictably, the result was a rousing rejection, with only one vote, that from Maurice Mandelbaum, coming our way. The reasons were also predictable, given the climate of the early 1970’s. William James was said to be antediluvian, bypassed, irrelevant and, on behalf to the then reigning clique, not mainstream. I explained to Burkhardt that this was a deadbeat route and we had to seek other sources of funding. He was not only shocked and dismayed, but angry as well. Consequently, he took fiduciary responsibility for the project into his own place of responsibility, the American Council of Learned Societies, of which he was the President. The illustrious Fredson Bowers was chosen as the Textual Editor and I brought Ignas Skruskelis to the project as Associate Editor. We chose an Advisory Board, whose primary role was to choose and vet the introductions. Frederick Burkhardt, as General Editor, began to request funds from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

In 1974, the first grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities was awarded. Also, we received a grant-in-aid from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. In 1975, publication began with the Critical Editions of *Pragmatism* and *The Meaning of Truth*. The nineteen volumes of the Edition were completed with the publication of *Manuscript Lectures* in 1988.

One last issue here. It was decided to publish the Edition with the major published works coming first, the gathering of loose essays second and the unpublished material last. Consequently, this was *not* done chronologically, for which some scholars have chastised us. The Critical Edition of *The Works of John Dewey* was done chronologically and the Critical Edition of *Charles Sanders Peirce* is being done chronologically. In the case of Dewey, the evolution of his thought is remarkably apparent because of the chronology. But several classic volumes, for example, *The Influence of Darwin*, do not appear as such and the cohesive character of that signal work is rendered scattered. With regard to Peirce, the obstacles are formidable, for all extant material has to be found and dated before the project can be laid out chronologically. The Critical Edition of George Santayana is akin to that of William James, with several major published works coming out first, for example, *The Last Puritan*. In the middle of the Santayana project, the letters are being published chronologically. Each approach has both merit and demerit.

I turn now to the Critical Edition of *The Correspondence of William James*. During the research for the *Works*, it became apparent that the extraordinary written quality of the letters written by William James was only hinted in the previous, truncated editions of his long and thick epistolary history. In conversation with the National Endowment for the Humanities, they made it clear that they would support only a Critical Edition, a stipulation with which I agreed.

In consultation with the editorial staff of the *Works*, it was agreed that I would become General Editor, Project Director and Principal Investigator for a twelve-volume edition of *The Correspondence*. Ignas Skruskelis was chosen as Editor and Elizabeth Berkeley became Associate Editor. In truth, it is they who are responsible for the ‘work’ of the *Correspondence*: transcriptions, database, editing, back matter and thousands of details which emerged *seriatim*. My task, primarily, was to oversee the introductions and to raise the money.

I wrote the prospectus for the first grant which was prepared by Patricia McDermott with the technical computer section provided by the kindness of my colleague Herman Saatkamp. (It is of note that the *Works* were completed earlier without major computer assistance). The grant was awarded and the first volume was published in 1992. There was a tangle over the decision to make the first three volumes *The Correspondence of William and Henry*. I objected, because I wanted the entire twelve volumes to be chronological. I lost. But when the intention was to publish the next four volumes as family friends and professional correspondence, I objected again and this time prevailed. Consequently, volume four begins with a letter from William James in 1856, when he was fourteen, “to Edgar van Winkle, from and about London,” and continues chronologically through the twelfth and final volume, published in 2004. The last letter is from William James to Thomas Mitchell Shackelford on August 21, 1910, five days before his death.

The need to sustain the *Correspondence* financially was not without its perils. As you know, NEH went through some very treacherous funding times and our project was rendered precarious on a number of occasions. At one very perilous time, we were rescued by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation who responded to our matching grant from NEH and enabled us not to lock the door to the project office. We also raised significant matching funds, directly or indirectly from several members of the Advisory Council. Our fiduciary home, the American Council of Learned Societies, our editorial home, the Alderman Library of the University of Virginia, and our publication home, the University Press of Virginia were each understanding, cooperative and supportive through some very lean periods. 19

Over the decades there have been many cheering and depressing events, anecdotes, vignettes and running stories. I tell you just two small ones for reasons of flavor. 20

The first is a story pertaining to a letter written from Chocorua, N.H., by William James to Maxim Gorky (1868- 1936) on February 20, 1906. We knew the letter was written but did not have a copy. (In researching and transcribing correspondence one is led to many byways, names of persons, places and things had, once had, wanted to have, that is, in letters written but not within our possession.) After the collapse of the penultimate revolution in Russia, 1905, the anti-Tsarist activist, Maxim Gorky, was imprisoned for a time in the Fortress of Peter and Paul. Forced to leave Russia, Gorky came to America in the spring of 1906, hoping to raise funds for a subsequent revolution. He came with his 'mistress' and was summarily bounced out of a hotel in New York City. John and Alice Dewey learned of this affront and made a public announcement to wit: For those who are looking for Maxim Gorky and his 'friend', they are staying at the home of John and Alice Dewey, 431 Riverside Drive. Suffice to say that Dewey was egregiously pilloried for this magnanimity. 21

In time, Gorky arranged a visit to Glenmore, New York, where he was scheduled to meet William James at the Martin residence. No cigar—James left the day before Gorky arrived. 22

Now to the letter from William James to Maxim Gorky. After Boris Yeltsin stood on the tank and the curtain began to lift, the Gorky archives were accessible. A kind and willing professor of Soviet Studies at the University of Virginia offered to search for us. He told me to write a letter of request and sign it with as many official titles as are truthful. I did so. He found the letter, which is a hand-written, dictated seven pages of praise for Gorky—but no invitation at that time. A paraphrase, by John J. McDermott, emotively rendered, comes over as: wonderful Gorky, courageous Gorky, brilliant writer Gorky, you get America right Gorky and best to you and 'Mrs. Gorky' (that is, the Russian Actress Madame Andreeva), and in your next visit (*mirabile dictu* egad) drop by, Mrs. James and I would love to see you. 23

The second anecdote involves money. Through the good effort of an Advisory Council member, we came upon an elderly woman whose family had known William James. She was, as they say, partial to his memory and offered to help us. And she did, writing a check for \$5,000 which, as I trust you know, when matched by the NEH gave us \$10,000. I was deeply grateful and to show that gratitude I sent her all of the nine volumes that had been published. There came back to me a cry of alarm. Tell that James man, that is McDermott, to stop sending these gigantic books. I have a very small apartment and since they arrived I can hardly walk around. Stop! 24

Now some rhetorical questions: What is the future of these Textual Editions, for example Josiah Royce? Where is the funding? Where are the text editors? Where is the commitment to a project that takes virtually a life time? Where is the support from publishers, libraries and the mysterious, elusive intelligent public? Critical and difficult questions—I am not sanguine regarding answers. 25

Yet, for us and I trust for you and for others, it has been worth doing and I can say that it has been done well. Praise for the *Correspondence* has been unstinting, glowing and planetary in scope. Volume six won the Morton N. Cohen Award from the Modern Language Association, holding that the Edition "is in itself a work of literature." The citation reads that "the editorial apparatus is outstanding and includes a number of features that any scholar will greet with delight . . . This beautifully laid out edition enables readers to watch a fertile, brilliant and affectionate mind at work and play." Were he to know, I trust that William James would be pleased at the rendition of his work. 26

## II. On Reading William James

Given that vastness of the publication enterprise just detailed, I offer a few *aperi* as a way into the text of William James. In the homage to William James upon his death in August of 1910, John Dewey wrote: "Our greatest act of piety to him to whom we owe so much is to accept from him some rekindling of a human faith in the human significance of philosophy." Dewey's choice of the word *piety* is instructive and telling for that is the word he used in the first edition of *Experience and Nature* to convey his urging upon us a 'reconstruction of 27

philosophy.’ Quite simply, Dewey wrote that ‘we should have piety toward experience.’ It is precisely the diagnosis of the ‘streams of experience’ which is so central to the bequest of William James. And it is due to James on experience that the line from Jonathan Edwards, through Emerson and on to Dewey has such vertebral strength, inverting a two-millennium long deprecation of the experiential as the point of departure for philosophical inquiry.

William James lamented, publicly, his fidelity to the squashy popular lecture style, vowing to do something more *strengwissenschaftlich*. The publication of his notebooks and manuscript drafts fulfilled that vow, posthumously. Also, the spate of highly sophisticated monographs beginning with Gerald Myers, Charlene Seigfried, and on through David Lamberth, Wesley Cooper and Richard Gale among many others, has put to rest permanently the assumption that James was a casual or ‘just’ a popular philosopher. Of course, for those of us who long ago were familiar with the James-Bradley letters or the secondary literature appearing in the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, focused on the complexity of James’s philosophy, this ‘popular appellation’ has always been a canard.

Still, we have to be careful here, for James abhorred what I call ‘conceptual incest,’ that is words, concepts, or philosophical labels conjugating without embodiment, without feet, without grounding in our experiential flow. He wrote to a student who had finished a dissertation on his work, praising the industry but lamenting the disconnection from what he thought he was ‘up to,’ comparing it to an ant on top of an ant hill. To another student, he wrote “that the whole Ph.D. industry of building up an author’s meaning out of separate texts leads nowhere, unless you have first grasped his centre of vision, by an act of imagination.” I take these reproaches seriously and I believe that they sit behind his philosophical mantra: “Let me repeat once more that a person’s vision is the great fact about them” (gender edited). I note here that this ‘vision’ of James is not that of Descartes or of Husserl. Rather it is James the physiologist speaking, namely, to see is to be seen. Vision as all of the human senses for James, is double-barreled, like life, experience and history. The senses are interest oriented and they are prehensile. The question before us can be put as follows: if it is true that where there is no vision, the people perish, and I think that to be so, than James’s call for our gestating a vision as the ‘great fact’ about us becomes of paramount importance.

On behalf of William James, I offer here, in cameo, a few of those philosophical DNA strands in the multiple helixing of our own vision. The text from which I take my departure is found in the aforementioned notebook (cf. McDermott, “Afterword,” *Correspondence*, vol. 12, p. 579).

All neat schematisms with permanent and absolute distinctions, classifications with absolute pretensions, systems with pigeon-holes, etc., have this character. All ‘classic,’ clean, cut and dried, ‘noble,’ fixed, ‘eternal,’ weltanschauungen seem to me to violate the character with which life concretely comes and the expression which it bears of being, or at least involving, a muddle and a struggle, with an ‘ever not quite’ to all our formulas, and novelty and possibility leaking in.

Last fall I was privileged to speak about William James to the Texas Chautauqua. My audience was mostly senior citizens and when I read this text to them, they glowed, nodded and, in effect, said, Yeah! In addition to James’s devastating dismissal of absolutes, clarity—that is, the baleful bequest of the Cartesian heritage—notice as well, his affirmation of novelty and possibility. Closure is *verboten*, whether it be personal or cosmic, and the vaunted claims of epistemological certitude are shrouded by an attitude made famous by Maria Montessori—all takes of importance have the character of ‘*un tentativo*.’

His aversion to closure is tied to his stress on possibility. Unacknowledged but nevertheless an inheritance from Emerson, possibility is not only potentially fructifying, it is also personally necessary. Without possibility the soul shrivels. Without possibility we live our lives, cornered, trapped and in time we become that person dangerous to ourselves and to others—that is, we become one of Royce’s ‘detached individuals.’ Put differently, possibility is what gives the “Will to Believe” its viability. In that essay, he calls possibility by the phrase, a ‘live option.’ I prefer to keep possibility for that entails the dreaded companion impossibility. The possibility of possibility requires that novelty can occur. Novelty here is not a trinket in Woolworth’s, nor is it a ‘gizmo’ on an automobile or a bicycle. For James, novelty is an eruption in the allegedly ascertained flow, one which forces us to reconnoiter, regather, regroup and reconstruct. Obviously, novelty can be for ill or for good or as yet to have its cash value, namely the consequences. He holds that novelty and possibility ‘leaks in,’ thereby stressing the subtly quotidian character of these eruptions, disruptions or more likely, slight but significant permutations in our stream of consciousness.

Yet what of consequences. Because of the row over the bold claims of pragmatic epistemology and allied commitments to consequentialist ethics, James’s understanding of consequences has been blurred. For James propositions are not declarative sentences; they are probes. Percepts lead, concepts follow. Concepts function as blankets, mostly wet and stultifying. If James knew some medieval theology, he would have followed Scotus Erigena, holding that ideas were energies and not restricted to what he calls knowledge ‘about,’ involving rather ‘knowledge by acquaintance,’ that is, read experience.

If you understand propositions to be probes and if you read novelty as surprise then I believe that you have what James means. In sticking out my neck, I come upon possibilities undreamt, heretofore unknown and given to me if and only if I take a chance. On the other hand, if I lead with *any* form of a categorical schema, the ‘surprises’ will show up in a familiar, preconceived garb and their bite will be lost to me, until it is too late. We then say, “who would have thought,” “how could that happen,” or revealingly, “I had no idea.” After all, for William James, ‘What has been concluded than can be concluded?’ 35

Our last cameo is the first in importance and I trust that this audience is well apprised of its lineament, if not its etymology. None of James holds if we do not embrace his radical empiricism. This goes for *The Will to Believe*, *Pragmatism* and *The Meaning of Truth*. Quite simply, consciousness is not a container but a stream, objects are mock-ups, relations are not mere logical connectors but affectively undergone and the human self is an activity, in peril of disappearing at any time. By this I mean who I am is how I do. If I bury myself in names, concepts, clarity, devotion and salutes to the obvious, I am driven to living a second-hand life, that is, I become an *imitatio* of Ivan Ilych. 36

Among the many reflective gifts bequeathed to us by William James, I regard the most signal of them to be his maxim that ‘philosophy is the habit of always seeking an alternative.’ If I follow that advice, then I am open to novelty, to possibility and, above all, to the juvenescing presence of surprise. With that attitude, I do not close down until the day I die. Following Dewey I continue to be a live creature and as a person I grow until cut off once and for all. Can we ask for any more than that? I do not! 37

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## 'Problem' vs. 'Trouble': James, Kafka, Dostoevsky and 'The Will to Believe'

William J. Gavin

*Abstract.* John Dewey once said that "it is a familiar and significant saying that a problem well put is half solved." But what happens when the situation at hand can't be "put" into a problem, or it can be put into multiple problems, incommensurate in nature? At issue is whether every situation is at least potentially problematic, or whether some remain, "troublesome," "tragic," or characterizable in some other "non problematic" manner. Dostoevsky and Kafka present us with such instances. The underground man is terribly worried about being predictable when he chooses. Kafka's character Joseph K. is stuck in a situation that is over-determined, i.e., it can be looked at psychologically, politically, and/or religiously. For James too, there are some situations which are not solved by "thinking the situation through." These may not be termed "tragic" or "troublesome," but they are other than "problematic." I show this by comparing "The Will to Believe" and "The Sentiment of Rationality" with Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* and Kafka's *The Trial*.

In "The Pattern of Inquiry" John Dewey is at pains to show how things go wrong in our experience, and what we can do about it. An indeterminate situation becomes a "problematic" one through the process of inquiry. "It is a familiar and significant saying that a problem well put is half-solved."<sup>1</sup> Inquiry for Dewey is the transformation of a uniquely qualified indeterminate situation into a problematic one, i.e. one capable of being solved. To his credit, Dewey does realize what would happen if the situation at hand were not uniquely qualified. He tells us that "unless a situation is uniquely qualified in its very indeterminateness there is a condition of complete panic."<sup>2</sup> And again, "no situation which is completely indeterminate can possibly be converted into a problem having definite constituents."<sup>3</sup> At issue here is whether every situation is at least potentially problematic, or whether there are some that remain troublesome, or even tragic, or characterized in some other, non-problematic fashion.

In the Introduction to the volume entitled *William and Henry James, Selected Letters*, John McDermott tells us that "In Irish family parlance, a distinction is made between problem and trouble. The former can be managed by patching, punting or the steadfast waiting it out as time erodes the difficulty in question. Trouble, however, is a very different matter. It is the name given to the century-long-intransigence within the embattled factions of Northern Ireland. The meaning of trouble is that one is at wit's end. Trying is possible and spiritually helpful but seemingly nothing can be done for alleviation."<sup>4</sup> But in his *Lectures in China, 1919-1920*, Dewey himself conflates these two terms "problem" and "trouble," or worse, he reduces the later to the former. "When we encounter trouble, we try to identify the problem, and to think about it in order to find a solution to the difficulty."<sup>5</sup> McDermott uses this distinction between "problem" and "trouble" to provide insight into the lives of various members of the James family. Surprisingly, he tells us that William James had only problems in his life. He did not have "trouble" in the way his sister Alice did. "To my mind William and Henry James had problems. Garth Wilkinson James also had problems, big ones, and his premature death at age thirty eight prevents us from knowing whether they were intractable. Robertson James and Alice James, however, had trouble, were in trouble, and caused others in the family to be constantly both distressed and irritated."<sup>6</sup> This suggests that there was something "inexplicable" in Alice's life, perhaps something tragic, but not in William's life.

However, in his book *The Divided Self of William James*, Richard Gale tells us that there might indeed be something tragic about James's outlook. He says: "The best way to characterize the philosophy of William James is to say that

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it is deeply rooted in the blues. It is the soulful expression of someone who has ‘paid his dues,’ someone who, like old wagon wheels, has been through it all. Whereas its immediate aim is to keep him sane and nonsuicidal – ‘to help him make it through the night’ – its larger one is to help him find his way to physical and spiritual health. In this respect James is very much in the Nietzschean and Wittgensteinian mold . . . . The deep difference between James and Dewey is that Dewey couldn’t sing the blues if his life depended on it.”<sup>7</sup> Gale ends his insightful text with this same reference he used at the beginning. “No one sang the blues with more soul than did William James, with his ‘Divided Self Blues’ [mystical self vs. Promethean self] as his perennial chart-topper.”<sup>8</sup> The connection between the tragic and the blues is made explicit by the Nietzsche scholar Kathleen Higgins, who characterizes Zarathustra as a “blues singer,”<sup>9</sup> suggesting that “if we love life as a whole we cannot edit out the vulnerability to the tragic that is an inescapable condition of our existence.”<sup>10</sup> Regarding Dewey, McDermott argues in the Introduction to *The Philosophy of John Dewey* that Dewey’s life did not lack a sense of the tragic – witness the loss of two of his children. “Dewey’s philosophy never strays from his insight into the irreducible presence of the tension between the ‘precarious’ and the ‘stable,’ while, more than most philosophers, he integrates the experience of loss and setback with that of growth.”<sup>11, 12</sup> But even while highlighting Dewey’s attempt to deal with loss, through integration, McDermott is also careful to distance him from other, more “fragile” and less integrating thinkers. “Despite his cosmopolitan experiences, he [Dewey] maintained a Yankee simplicity to his person, and the experience of the ‘underground’ man or the world of a Kafka . . . would be extremely peripheral to his vision.”<sup>13</sup>

Given the above association between the blues and the tragic, and the demarcation between problems and troubles, I am inclined to say that Dewey dealt primarily with problems-though there are texts where he tells us that “the dark and twilight abound.”<sup>14</sup> That is, he did not deal well with tragic situations, if you define tragedy not as good vs. good, but as a situation which does not lend itself to a post-mortem analysis, i.e., which remains “inexplicable” or in deweyan terms, “non-mediated.” As Higgins put it, “The kind of suffering from which tragedy draws its material is not remedied by thinking the situation through.”<sup>15</sup> But leaving aside the important question of whether Dewey could or could not deal with the tragic, I am inclined to say that not every situation was a problem for James. That is, for James, there are some situations which are not solved by “thinking the situation through.” These may or may not be termed “tragic,” but they are other than “problematic.” As I will argue below, “the will to believe” is not a problem, i.e. not an issue in philosophy to be solved in one way or the other. In this respect at least, James is more capable of addressing the issues highlighted by Dostoevsky’s underground man and Kafka’s Joseph K. than Dewey. I shall try to show this by using “The Sentiment of Rationality” and “The Will to Believe” as my focal texts, and by contrasting these with Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the Underground* and Kafka’s *The Trial*.

## The Sentiment of Rationality

“The Sentiment of Rationality” commences by noting that all conceptualizations are perspectival in nature. “None of our explanations are complete.”<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, James argues, even if presented with a certain explanation we would reject it. “Our mind is so wedded to the process of seeing an other beside every item of its experience, that when the notion of an absolute datum is presented to it, it goes through its usual procedure and remains pointing at the void beyond.”<sup>17</sup> James terms this “ontological wonder-sickness” and he does not indicate that it has a cure, at least not in this life. The world is “over-determined,” to use Freud’s term. And “there is nothing improbable in the supposition that an analysis of the world may yield a number of formulae, all consistent with the facts.”<sup>18</sup>

Given that we can’t “solve” theoretical problems on a completely logical manner, what do we do – for “sentimental reasons?” James suggests that there are two types of theory which we as individuals will not accept. We will not accept a completely pessimistic theory, and we will not accept a theory that doesn’t give us at least a small role to play in life. James argues forcefully for this position, but there is no way that he can “prove” it completely. Indeed, given the title of the essay, calling for or assuming the attainment of such proof would constitute a contradiction in terms. Indeed, the article ends with James presenting the reader with an ultimatum: “The only escape from faith is mental nullity.”<sup>19</sup> Faith in this text is defined quite broadly as “belief in something concerning which doubt is still theoretically possible.”<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, it is intergenerational, and the outcome will not be known until the last person has had her say. Finally, there are some cases “where faith creates its own verification,”<sup>21</sup> like leaping over the abyss while climbing in the Alps. Most importantly, this case “is one of an immense class.”<sup>22</sup>

The conservative way to take this article is to divide and conquer, i.e., to separate the tender -minded and the tough-minded domains, to say that it has to do with soft topics like religion, morals, etc, but not, say, with science. Such damage control does keep James from going off the deep end of accepted philosophical discourse. But it

does so at a price. It deradicalizes James's thought; preserves the subject-object dichotomy, and, equally important, it goes against his later attempt to offer a marriage between the tough minded and the tender-minded in *Pragmatism*. Furthermore, it would ignore the fact that James explicitly uses examples from science to verify his position in this article, e.g. in evolution, saving the present generation and ignoring the next, or helping the future on at the expense of the present. Similar issues arise in James's later article "The Will To Believe."

### The Will to Believe

In "The Will to Believe" James defends each person's right to choose that hypothesis which is most appealing in a situation where the options are "living", "forced" and "momentous." What is not clear is just how many of these there are, and how one goes about distinguishing such situations from others. As in "The Sentiment of Rationality," James is careful to assert first that certainty is not a possibility: "Objective evidence and certitude are doubtless very fine ideals to play with, but where on this moonlit and dream-visited planet are they found?"<sup>23</sup> And again: "I live, to be sure, by the practical faith that we must go on experiencing and thinking over our experience, for only thus can our opinions grow more true; but to hold any one of them *I absolutely do not care which* as if it never could be reinterpretable or corrigible, I believe to be a tremendously mistaken attitude"<sup>24</sup>

Even granted that there is no certainty, James is still careful to assert that one can't simply make something true by believing in it. For example, we can't just believe that we are well and about while lying in bed overpowered by rheumatism; we can't feel sure that the two dollars in our pocket are one hundred dollars, etc. The reason for this is that the will to believe is only operative in those situations wherein one has two diverse hypotheses, each equally coherent and each capable of corresponding to empirical data to an equal extent. But here a further problem arises, for James himself at times seems to demarcate the area of science from that of religion/morals – in terms of where the will to believe applies. He says: "in our dealings with objective nature we obviously are recorders, not makers, of the truth; and decisions for the mere sake of deciding promptly and getting on to the next business would be wholly out of place. Throughout the breadth of physical nature facts are what they are quite independently of us"<sup>25</sup> Such a demarcation, while apparently simple and acceptable, represents a preservation of the status-quo, i.e., the subject-object dichotomy. It must be admitted that James himself is responsible for some of the confusion here. On the one hand, James set up the criteria of forced, living and momentous decisions, and seems at least to leave the door open to scientific hypothesis to enter into this domain. From such a perspective, science *qua science* would not be excluded, but only those sets of hypotheses which were either not forced, or not living, or not momentous. On the other hand, James sometimes speaks as if our scientific hypotheses were, by definition, inaccessible to the will to believe. As he says, "The questions here [in science] are always trivial questions, the hypotheses are hardly living (at any rate not living for us spectators), the choice between believing truth or falsehood is seldom forced."<sup>26</sup> I want to suggest that James is at his best when he distinguishes forced, living and momentous situations from non forced-living momentous situations, letting the philosophical chips fall where they may. There are no hypotheses which by domain definition are excluded from the will to believe.<sup>27</sup> However, this second, methodological view does have metaphysical presuppositions. The text of the will to believe does not stand alone; it only makes sense in an unfinished universe, one where personal preference may sometimes become a constituting aspect of the outcome. As the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel once said: "Being is, as it were, attested."<sup>28</sup> In other words, being is not a problem to be solved, but rather something we are involved with rather than looking at. We must resist the temptation to see being as a problem and then attempt to solve it. We can locate ourselves within the mysterious situation, but we cannot, or should not, turn the mystery into a problem, in Marcel's terms. Ellen Suckiel has caught some of the flavor of this when she suggests that the last step of James's faith ladder, a clone of the will to believe, "may be considered not as a descriptive claim about god, but rather as a performative utterance by which the subject takes the leap and both attains and proclaims a religious commitment."<sup>29</sup> Hilary Putnam has also argued that the will to believe is very akin to that situation faced by Pierre in Sartre's "Existentialism and Humanism." This is not, in other words, a mere matter of calculating the consequences and then choosing on this basis. This is not something the scientific method can help you with, even if, as Putnam notes, "your conception of the scientific method is as generous as Dewey's."<sup>30</sup> We also fail to notice, Putnam argues, "that [the will to believe] is meant to apply to the individual's choice of a philosophy, including pragmatism itself."<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, the need to believe "in advance of evidence" is, Putnam argues, not domain specific, not policed. "It plays an essential role in science itself."<sup>32</sup> Putnam tells us that James's claim – which "paradoxically the logical positivists helped to make part of conventional philosophy of science with their distinction between the context of discovery and the context of justification – was that science could not progress if we insisted that scientists never believe or defend theories except on sufficient evidence."<sup>33</sup>

In sum, the will to believe is not a "problem" to be solved, in Deweyan terms. It is a stance or posture towards the universe, an admission and affirmation that the universe is "wild, game flavored as a hawk's wing." The will to

believe is not a matter of preserving freedom in terms of calculating and selecting between two alternative theories. It is a matter of selecting, for passionate, idiosyncratic grounds – not just weighing the odds. It's a matter of doing something after all the odds have been weighed and there is still something left to do. It's supposed to allude to situations wherein freedom cannot be defined in terms of probabilities; it's not utilitarian, but rather extra- or post-utilitarian in nature. It may be unreasonable or irrational, as James argues, not to exercise the will to believe, if doing so cuts off options not otherwise available, but the content selected via use of the will to believe is not based upon calculation or probability but rather passion. Perhaps James has two notions of freedom or free will. One of these is like Mill; but the other is more like Dostoevsky's underground man.

## Notes From the Underground

Dostoevsky's underground man is very worried about being predictable when he chooses. Dostoevsky wrote the text in opposition to one written by Chernyshevsky, entitled *What Is to Be Done?* In this later text, moral choices about, e.g. whether a young woman should marry an older but wealthy man, were made in terms of scientific calculation, i.e., a form of utilitarianism. In opposition, the underground man says sometimes it's better to say that 2 plus 2 are 5 rather than 4. Sometimes it's better not to accept that we're descended from apes, even though it's incontrovertible, etc. The only way the underground man can see to maintain his freedom is to be spiteful. He defines a human being as someone who stands on his hind legs and is a spiteful. The underground man is dancing as fast as he can. He is free, but at a terrible price. Spite remains his only way of "communicating" both with Lisa and with you the reader. The underground man or woman is one step away from exhaustion or surrender – surrender to the argument of the Grand Inquisitor. It is he who has made the people happy by taking away their freedom. He has given them "miracle, mystery, and authority," in short, certainty. The underground man barely manages to maintain his spite, snarling at the reader that she is already "dead" as she "abstractly" reads the last page of the story.

For James, one chooses not for spiteful but for "passionate" or "sentimental" reasons. The challenge to James which parallels the temptation offered by the Grand Inquisitor comes from his colleague Josiah Royce. Like the Grand Inquisitor, Royce initially seems to say that the will to believe asks too much of us. Arguing that "life has its unheroic days,"<sup>34</sup> Royce in *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy* offers certainty in the form of an argument for the existence of God based on the existence of human error. By the time of *The Philosophy of Loyalty*, Royce's position has evolved into one of more than "mere postulates," i.e., it is one of "commitment," albeit to something eternal and certain. Royce defines "loyalty" as "the Will to Believe in something eternal, and to express that belief in the practical life of a human being."<sup>35</sup> Earlier in the text, he had argued, in a very Jamesian fashion, on the necessity of choosing among causes, and not playing the role of Hamlet. "Decide, knowingly if you can, ignorantly if you must, but in any case decide, and have no fear."<sup>36</sup> Royce sees his position here as quite analogous to that offered by his colleague James in "The Will to Believe." Perhaps anticipating a criticism, he hastens to say that this "is no sort of 'moral holiday'."<sup>37</sup> Whether or not Royce has shifted paradigms radically in these two texts may be left for another time. But his statement that we all have unheroic days, i.e., ones where we not only will not but rather cannot cope, requires attention.

It would be hard to find a better portrait of a bad day than that provided by Franz Kafka in his novel *The Trial*.

## The Trial

In Franz Kafka's novel, *The Trial*, we are presented with a text that allows for, and even demands, multiple interpretations of an incommensurate nature. At the very beginning the hero (or anti-hero) Joseph K. rings a bell and his trial commences. Does he put himself on trial? Or, is he brought to the trial by the Law? He says later on in the text that the "guilt lies with the organization," but this statement could be merely a diversion, i.e., a form of repression. Is K. a representative of nineteenth century bourgeois capitalism, or does he transcend this sociopolitical situation? But there is also some evidence for a more psychological interpretation of the novel, one suggesting that K. is repressing some more a-contextual truth or necessity- that the alienation is more fundamental to human nature at large. At the very beginning he encounters two warders; one of them is named "Franz," not coincidentally. As K. brushes by him, that is, as K. "crosses the threshold," he encounters the second warder, reading a book, who tells him that the two warders "stand closer to him than any other people in the world"; he also says that Franz should have told him to stay in his room. The two warders show up later in the lumber-room of the bank, where they are about to receive a whipping. In "real life" banks do not have lumber rooms, but "rumplekammer" in German carries with it the connotation of dead text and dry ink wells, i.e. perhaps the semi-repressed image of Kafka as a failed writer- one who could not create.

From an existential perspective, K. is guilty of “bad faith,” of not assuming the upright posture, of trying to become “thing-like”, an *en soi*. Twice in the novel he is treated as an object, and seems to find some satisfaction or at least relief in this. Indeed at the end of the novel he is almost a thing- almost, but not quite, a piece of matter being carried to the quarry by his warders. Yet even here closure is not to be had, as Kafka tells the reader, on the last line of the text, that “the shame of it must outlive him,”<sup>38</sup> i.e., that even at the end there is not an end. K. will live on ignominiously, “like a dog,” in the reader/author’s mind.

There is also a religious interpretation of the novel, ending with the famous parable of the doorkeeper, where a man from the country approaches and tries to enter a door being guarded by a doorkeeper. He is told he can not do so- at least not at the present moment, and winds up spending his entire life waiting at the side door and not trying to push through. At the end when he is about to expire he asks the doorkeeper why no one else has ever shown up at the door, and is told that the door was only for him, and that it is now about to be shut. The parable, like the text, is susceptible to multiple interpretations. Did the doorkeeper lie to the man? Or only tell him the truth when asked? Can he really shut the door, etc. Joseph K’s activity, or lack thereof in the text, raises the religious issue of the covenant of grace vis a vis the covenant of works. Can one do anything about one’s “sinful” condition or should one rather merely accept on “blind,” i.e., not “informed,” faith. There is a real question in Kafka’s text as to whether the attempt to investigate the situation is *itself* a form of pride, or hubris. Or is it rather the case that K.’s investigation is noteworthy and commendable, but that his refusal to act without certainty, i.e. to engage in the “will to believe,” is grounds for criticism. Kafka might reply that Joseph K. was *incapable* of acting otherwise than he did- that he was not quite up to being human. It was not, in short, that K. has existentially or religiously lapsed from a previous state, or if so that he could do anything about it. He was more “like a dog,” i.e. pre-human, or post-human. We are left then with the metaphor of the mountain pass confronting the parable of the doorkeeper. James says that you can’t do nothing, i.e., wait by the door, not try to get down the mountain in the snowstorm. Kafka says don’t move until you have a clear view, not just a glimpse. When does an obstructed view become a glimpse? This, we should note, is a “vague” question, for it admits of no precise answer – like the Sorites question: “After the addition of which particular grain of sand does a pile become a heap?”

While Hilary Putnam is right to compare Sartre to James, the issue of BOTH Sartre and James confronting Kafka’s Joseph K remains, and this too cannot be solved by logical argument. Joseph K. could be interpreted as some one in “bad faith” i.e. as someone who refuses to exercise the will to believe. He wants certainty, a.k.a. definite acquittal, and refuses to do anything until it is attained. Since it never arrives K. does nothing throughout the duration of the novel. But on another level K is unable, not unwilling, to exercise the will to believe. The intimation of the novel is that K did nothing, but also that, if he did try he would have failed in his attempt. K was not unwilling to take the knife at the end and commit suicide, he was unable to do so. The picture provided us in *The Trial* is precisely akin to that presented by James in “The Sentiment of Rationality,” and it is one James says that we, as humans, will not accept. It is totally pessimistic, and it gives us no role to play. The argument between James and Kafka is not one that can be solved. There are no crucial experiments to be set up to prove that one is right and the other wrong. Both can, to a degree, appeal to experience. Kafka may be too pessimistic, James too romantic. James might be able to claim that Joseph K is not the rule, i.e., is not everyman or everywoman. Kafka might respond by saying that James’s Promethean self is overly romantic, i.e., the exception to the rule, rather than the rule itself, perhaps representative of the grand inquisitor, but not of humankind in general. James, I think, is clear that the Clifford-like character named Joseph K. can’t be proven wrong, or inadequate in character development. James can only point, point to the ambiguity or vagueness of the situation-and to suggest to us, the readers, that at a meta-level the situation ITSELF is forced, living and momentous, thereby requiring us to chose, which, of course, is precisely what Joseph K either will not or cannot do. Once again, the will to believe is not a problem to be solved. It is a stance, a position which, perhaps, has to be continually reaffirmed. It is not a matter of believing THAT, but rather a matter of believing IN, as Hester and Talisse have noted in their little volume *On James*.<sup>39</sup> Or, in James’s own terms, it is “life exceeding logic.”

James did not seem to feel that he had to go as far as Dostoevsky, i.e., to affirm “spitefulness” in order to preserve freedom. But he did seem to feel that he had to go further than Dewey, who seemed, at least sometimes, to believe that every event was at least potentially problematic, i.e., capable of being solved, even if the solution was not of a permanent, i.e. certain nature. The Jamesian self is both sentimental and strenuous, but also frail and fallible; the Dostoevsky self is a spiteful one, with two worries: first, that true freedom will be undermined by a degenerate form of a variation of itself, viz., probability or calculation. Second, the strong case that Dostoevsky himself made for the position of the Grand Inquisitor has led many to believe that Dostoevsky himself agreed – that most people just can’t bear freedom. The self portrayed for us by Kafka is a “shameful” self. Joseph K is manipulative, very ad hoc in dealing with people in specific situations. He wants certainty, i.e. definite acquittal,

but fails to find it because, in the tortured logic of Kafka's world, the very asking of the question takes away salvation.

It is instructive to note that the three texts, "The Will to Believe," *Notes from the Underground*, and *The Trial*, all end with the subject of death, and the attitude we have or should have towards it. Joseph K dies like a dog, i.e. at a subhuman but sentient level. He is either unwilling, or more probably unable to take the knife passed back and forth over him by his warders. The underground man suggests that his readers are already half-dead "cripples" i.e. abstract ideas who cannot stand real life. "We are still born. [and] are developing a taste for it."<sup>40</sup> For James "we stand on a mountain pass in the midst of whirling snow and blinding mist, through which we get glimpses now and then of paths which may be deceptive," etc, etc. "What must we do? 'Be strong and of good courage.' Act for the best, hope for the best, and take what comes. ... If death ends all, we cannot meet death better."<sup>41</sup> Certainty is something Joseph K. wants; he just doesn't get it. The underground man is resisting with all his might; but he might not make it. As Robert Lord has noted, *Notes From the Underground* "anticipates Kafka."<sup>42</sup> James's "promethean self" is perhaps better off: but we should remember James's own vulnerability to melancholia and depression – witness his temptation to suicide and his veiled reference to the epileptic figure who was, in fact, himself in *The Varieties*. It is McDermott himself who admonishes us to keep this in mind. "If it can be said that James assented to 'The Will to Believe' until the end, we must caution that it was a belief always shot through with irresolution and doubt. Behind the constant cadences of a rich and future oriented prose, there lurked a well-controlled but omnipresent sense of despair."<sup>43</sup> Or, as Phil Oliver has noted in *Springs of Delight*, James's "bootstrapping" approach to depression and suicide indicates that this was not a "problem" for him to solve, once and for all.<sup>44</sup>

I can put this differently by saying that, while martial metaphors may be necessary for James, they are not sufficient. That is, it is not a matter of deciding, on a one time basis, to take life aggressively and, hence, solve the issue by exercising the will to believe – for some times we will fail to do so. While James might urge us to inculcate the "habit" of exercising the will to believe, we must recognize that we are, as in Nietzsche might say, "human all too human," and therefore will sometimes fail to do so. But we will not necessarily fail all the time, Kafka to the contrary. Nor must we necessarily pay the dreadfully high price for it – as portrayed by Dostoevsky.

The will to believe is a cardinal element in the Jamesian corpus. It appears, in one version or another, at least four times. It describes for us, in deweyan terms, a uniquely qualified indeterminate situation, but one that is not "problematic" in nature. The major difference between tragedy and the will to believe is that one is prospective or forward looking and the other retrospective in nature. This difference, while very important, should not be allowed to efface what they have in common: both are modes of being that are other than "problematic" in nature. As Cushing Strout has pointed out, "We too often forget that in his mature work, the *Pragmatism* of 1907, he [James] cried out with a tragic sense that John Dewey never had: 'Is the last word sweet? Is all "yes, yes" in the universe? Doesn't the fact of "no" stand at the very core of life? Doesn't the very "seriousness" that we attribute to life mean that ineluctable noes and losses form a part of it, that there are genuine sacrifices somewhere, and that something permanently drastic and bitter always remains at the bottom of its cup?"<sup>45</sup>

Even if we don't want to go as far as Strout in highlighting the "tragic" in James, we should at the very least realize, and affirm, that there are situations in James that are more than "problematic" – and these, ultimately, are the most important ones. Perhaps, in the last analysis, this is another way of remembering James's desire to "reinstate the vague to its proper place in our experience."<sup>46</sup>

In conclusion, there is something non-problematic, if not tragic, present in James that is not present, or at least not *as* present in Dewey. The world of Dostoevsky, or of Kafka would indeed be very peripheral to Dewey's vision-profound as it was. But the worlds of Kafka and Dostoevsky would be closer to that of James – at least insofar as all three had a "problem with problems." Kafka would indeed like his character Joseph K. to be able to solve the problem of salvation – but he posed the problem in such a fashion as to perpetuate its continual existence. It is the very asking of the question "What must I do to be saved?" that constituted the problem and that simultaneously prevents it from being solved. If Dostoevsky does indeed anticipate Kafka we may view the realm of the Grand Inquisitor in *The Brothers Karamazov* as that of a problem solved, once and for all, i.e. certainty attained, except for the few hundred thousand who know the awful truth. Joseph K. wants certainty, a.k.a. definite acquittal and not merely ostensive acquittal (read probability), but does not get it. The underground man is only one step away from "heaven on earth" i.e., certainty, and the discovery that there is a "genetic explanation" for his spite, as a form of recombinant DNA.

James's self is neither the shameful self left at the end of *The Trial* nor the spiteful self flailing away at the end of *Notes From the Underground*. But neither is he exclusively the promethean self for whom everything might be viewed as a problem to be solved – a sort of nietzschean camel. The jamesian sentimental or passionate self would

reject the paradigm offered by Kafka as inaccurate or at least incomplete – i.e. not everything goes wrong with one’s life all at once all the time. Most of the time we “solve” matters, via a marriage function, i.e., by trying for a minimum of jolt and a maximum of continuity, as he says in *Pragmatism*.<sup>47</sup> But sometimes things do go wrong in a cataclysmic fashion; the options are forced, exclusionary in nature. Perhaps the paradigms become incompatible and not just incommensurate in nature. The Jamesian self would also reject the picture offered by Dostoevsky, the one offering spite as the only or the most important emotion – though agreeing on the importance of emotion. You do need to be idiosyncratic for James, to select among forced options for non-predictable reasons, but you do not have to be spiteful to do so. You can admit that your errors are not such serious things, as he does in the will to believe. On the other hand, all is not play; you have the right to believe, i.e. to risk your own life, in some particular goal, option, cause, etc.

Is this enough? Has it gotten harder to exercise the will to believe since James wrote the article? I’m not sure. Perhaps it just gets harder for each individual as they age. James himself kept trying to exercise the will to believe through one crisis after another throughout his life – and it did get harder to keep on dancing. But he did dance, i.e., write, his own form of exercising the will to believe, up until the very end. Perhaps this is his answer to Kafka and Dostoevsky-if “answer” is the correct term. If so, it may have been a very “pragmatic” one. For truly, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, or, in this case, in the writing.

McDermott once said: “I now believe, shakily, insecurely, and barely, that life is worth living.”<sup>48</sup> Perhaps this is the only way to exercise “the will to believe” – shakily, insecurely, and barely. If so, it may be easier to see that for James, not everything is a problem. If James reminds us of how important it is to highlight the importance of the uncertain, or the vague, Dostoevsky and Kafka remind us of how difficult it oftentimes is to do so.

James’s answer to Dostoevsky and Kafka is twofold: the will to believe, and pluralism, i.e., a fat and multifarious context. True, there are spiteful moments and also kaffasque situations. But there are also prospective will-to-believe moments, as well as deweyan problematic moments subject to inquiry. Pluralism allows us to accept the tragic as a subset of reality, while offering alternatives. “The providence of tragedy,” Kathleen Higgins reminds us, “is related to an extreme subset of the actual – the part of actual human experience that is painful and not susceptible to relief through analysis.”<sup>49</sup> But while tragic situations cannot be “solved,” they can perhaps be countered by offering alternative options. The tragic experience should not be explained away, but neither should it be taken as indicative of experience in general. The same can, and should, be said concerning the attribution of the term “problematic” to experience. That is, some moments are not just potential problems or puzzles waiting to be solved. One of these concerns the tragic. But another concerns the “will to believe.”

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> John Dewey, “The Pattern of Inquiry,” in *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, two volumes in one, edited, with an introduction by John McDermott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), vol. 1, p. 229.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 227.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 227.

<sup>4</sup> *William and Henry James, Selected Letters*, edited by Ignas Skrupskelis and Elizabeth Berkeley, with an Introduction by John J. McDermott (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997) p. xxii.

<sup>5</sup> John Dewey, *Lectures in China, 1919–1920, on Logic, Ethics, Education and Democracy*, translated from the Chinese by Robert W. Clifton and Tsuin-Chen Ou, with the assistance of Henry C. Lu (Yangmingshan, Taiwan: Chinese Culture University Press, 1985) p. 3.

- <sup>6</sup> William and Henry James, *Selected Letters*, Introduction, p. xxii.
- <sup>7</sup> Richard M. Gale, *The Divided Self of William James* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 1.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 332.
- <sup>9</sup> Kathleen Marie Higgins, *Nietzsche's Zarathustra*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987) p. 198.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 199.
- <sup>11</sup> *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, Introduction, p. xvi.
- <sup>12</sup> McDermott in this Introduction also argues very briefly for a sense of the tragic in James's life. "William James, who lost an infant son by whooping cough, suffered all his life from severe psychoneurosis and major family crises and was plagued in the last decade of his life by increasing heart failure." (p. xv)
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid, xxviii.
- <sup>14</sup> John Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1958), p. 21.
- <sup>15</sup> Higgins, *Nietzsche's Zarathustra*, p. 19.
- <sup>16</sup> William James, "The Sentiment of Rationality," in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1897) p. 67.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 71.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 76.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid. p. 93.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 90.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 97.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid. p. 97
- <sup>23</sup> William James, "The Will to Believe," in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, p. 14.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 14.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 20.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 20.
- <sup>27</sup> Cf Richard Rorty, "Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance," in *The Cambridge Companion to William James*, edited by Ruth Anna Putnam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 84-102.
- <sup>28</sup> Gabriel Marcel, *Being and Having, An Existentialist Diary* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, Harper and Row, 1965), p. 96.

<sup>29</sup> Ellen Kappy Suckiel, *Heaven's Champion: William James's Philosophy of Religion*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), p. 103.

<sup>30</sup> Hilary Putnam, *Renewing Philosophy*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 191.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p. 192.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 192.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p. 193.

<sup>34</sup> Josiah Royce, "The Possibility of Error," in *The Philosophy of Josiah Royce*, edited and with an Introduction by John Roth, (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1971) p. 44.

<sup>35</sup> Josiah Royce, "Loyalty and Religion," in *The Philosophy of Josiah Royce*, p. 329.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p. 312.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p. 343.

<sup>38</sup> Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1968) p. 229.

<sup>39</sup> See Robert B. Talisse and D. Micah Hester, *On James*, (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth-Thompson Learning, 2004), p. 90.

<sup>40</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes From the Underground and The Grand Inquisitor*, selection, translation and introduction by Ralph Matlaw, (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co. Inc, 1960), p. 115.

<sup>41</sup> William James, "The Will to Believe," in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, p. 31, quoting Fitz James Stephen.

<sup>42</sup> Robert Lord, "Descent From Reality," in *Dostoevsky, Essays and Perspectives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), p. 35.

<sup>43</sup> *The Writings of William James*, Introduction, p. xxi.

<sup>44</sup> See Phil Oliver, *William James's "Springs of Delight": The Return to Life* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2001), p. 15, pp. 46-49.

<sup>45</sup> Cushing Strout, "William James and the Twice-Born Sick Soul," *Daedalus*, 97 (Summer 1968), p. 1079.

<sup>46</sup> William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 2 vols. (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1950), vol. 1, p. 254.

<sup>47</sup> See William James, *Pragmatism*, (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907), p. 61.

<sup>48</sup> John McDermott, "Why Bother: Is Life Worth Living?" *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 88, # 11 Nov. 1991), p. 683.

<sup>49</sup> Kathleen Marie Higgins, *Nietzsche's Zarathustra*, p. 19.



## The Greatest Philosophy on Earth: William James's Lowell Lectures and the Idiom of Showmanship

Kristin Boudreau

*Abstract. William James's 1907 Lowell Lectures on Pragmatism borrow from the idiom of P.T. Barnum, the self-proclaimed "Greatest Showman on Earth." In James's use of Barnum's middlebrow form of address, we see a philosopher who not only ardently wished to change public opinion, but one who looked to populist forms of entertainment and instruction for models of how best to do so. Although the shadow of Barnum in these lectures clearly indicates the commodification of philosophy for this man who hoped to make money from his lectures, it also suggests some of the more oppositional cultural functions contained in his lectures — lectures that resembled the tangled, muddy street that James persisted in seeing as the real world.*

In late 1906 and early 1907, William James delivered a series of lectures to the Lowell Institute, a Boston organization devoted to the promotion of learning to the Boston populace. His lectures on pragmatism, which would later be published as a book, marked James's second appearance at the Lowell Institute; in 1896 he had delivered eight lectures on what he called "Exceptional Mental Phenomena." In that earlier series, he invited his audience to consider sleep and dreams, hypnotism, the subconscious self, witchcraft, trances, multiple personality, hysteria, demoniacal possession, degeneration, mediumship, and genius. Nine hundred Bostonians crowded into Huntington Hall, hoping for titillating stories of these "morbid" topics but finding the lectures "decidedly anti-morbid in their tone."<sup>1</sup> The lectures were a great success. Not only did James retain his audience of 900 until the end of the series, but he was well compensated for his efforts. As he wrote to his brother Henry, the series required "very little work" and netted him \$1000.<sup>2</sup>

Although James sometimes complained privately about being forced to sell his ideas in such a popular venue, confessing to his brother that "lectures have such an awful side (when not academic) that I myself have forsworn them — it is a sort of prostitution of one's person,"<sup>3</sup> he clearly felt ambivalent about the opportunity to reach out from the stale atmosphere of the university and bring his message to the masses. He certainly enjoyed the approval of his audiences, both in 1896 and again in 1906 when he received a "thunderous ovation" at the close of his series on pragmatism.<sup>4</sup> "The lectures," he wrote his brother, "hav[e] come to a prosperous end last night, and me called before the curtain!"<sup>5</sup> James was acutely aware of alternative possibilities. Eleven years earlier he had waited anxiously in Cambridge for news of his brother Henry's own great experiment before a live audience. The production of *Guy Domville* at London's St. James Theatre was to be the final test of the novelist's five-year attempt to establish himself as a successful dramatic writer. When it ended disastrously, with the perhaps malicious theatre manager taking the nervous and unsuspecting author by the hand and onto the stage, Henry James found himself helpless before a jeering audience. To be sure, many in the house appreciated the play. But their polite response was overwhelmed by the disgruntled and scornful noises from the play's less restrained critics. As James himself would recall the episode to his brother William,

There followed an abominable ¼ of an hour during wh. all the forces of civilization in the house waged a battle of the most gallant, prolonged & sustained applause with the hoots & jeers & catcalls of the roughs, whose roars (like those of a cage of beasts at some infernal "Zoo") were only exacerbated (as it were!) by the conflict. It was a char[m]ing scene, as you may imagine, for a nervous, sensitive, exhausted

author to face — and you must spare my going over again the horrid hour, or those of disappointment & depression that have followed it.<sup>6</sup>

For Henry James, the experience of standing thunderstruck before a jeering audience—one of the actors years later reported that James seemed “green with dismay”<sup>7</sup>—was so traumatic that he begged his brother not to “ask for more details.”<sup>8</sup> Though he kept a few letters from well-wishers that he forwarded to William, he instructed William to burn them after reading them and added, “Please don’t send me anything out of the newspapers.”<sup>9</sup> Eleven years later the specter of the pale and shocked Henry standing before a hissing audience must have remained with William, whose very different experience at the Lowell Institute may have prompted him to describe his audience’s reaction —not only the thunderous ovation but also the odd curtain call— in terms more appropriate to a theatrical production than to a lyceum lecture, particularly in a setting with such an august history as the Lowell Institute.<sup>10</sup> If William James sometimes dismissed the uneducated audiences of these popular lectures as “good, but depressing” in their “mediocrity,”<sup>11</sup> neither could he contain his delight at having pleased them.

It is hard to understand the audience appeal of James’s lectures on pragmatism as anything but the result of a deliberate effort to lure in an audience that extended beyond the usual genteel and educated readers of philosophy. James’s brother later suggested that he find a title that would attract the widest possible audience for his book and make it pay. “Invent a vulgar (comparatively) & mercenary name” for the collection, Henry advised.<sup>12</sup> The advice was in keeping with William’s lectures, filled as they are with economic tropes and injunctions to make our efforts pay. Henry’s suggestion is the kind of strategy one would recommend to an entrepreneur, and indeed we might consider the influence on *Pragmatism* of one of the great American entrepreneurs of William James’s youth, the showman, circus promoter and advertiser extraordinaire, Phineas Taylor Barnum. In 1875 Barnum had joined James Redpath’s Lyceum Bureau, becoming a client of the man who was also promoting Mark Twain, Wendell Phillips, Julia Ward Howe, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Harriet Beecher Stowe —joining, in short, some of the most popular, respected and highest-paid lecturers in the country.<sup>13</sup> But it was as the owner and promoter of the “Greatest Show on Earth” that Barnum was primarily known.

William James would no doubt be dismayed by the comparison. His few known references to P. T. Barnum suggest that the adult James regarded Barnum’s name as shorthand for quackery, boastfulness and a lack of substance, the worst of Gilded Age excess. James describes the English royalty, for instance, as “trashy, all fluff and plush, and gilt plaster, like one of Barnum’s circus cars, with no real style or force.”<sup>14</sup> Likewise, the Republican platform of 1884, he complained, is a “Barnum advertisement.”<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, in spite of this apparent disdain for the great showman’s crassness, William James did not regard vulgarity itself as entirely damning. If we consider his account of the differences between rationalist and empiricist thought, we will see that he had much more contempt for the refinement of rationalism than for the commonness of empiricism. Whereas empiricism, “the world of concrete personal experiences to which the street belongs[,] is multitudinous beyond imagination, tangled, muddy, painful and perplexed,” he wrote, the world of rationalism is artificially pure.<sup>16</sup> A “kind of marble temple shining on a hill,” this world offers not an “explanation of our concrete universe, [but] another thing altogether, a substitute for it, a remedy, a way of escape.” While “refinement has its place in things,” James argues, “a philosophy that breathes out nothing but refinement will never satisfy the empiricist temper of mind. It will seem rather a monument of artificiality” (14). Though he doesn’t overtly choose the common over the refined, James’s rhetoric seems to betray a clear preference for the common, as he summons a beloved American archetype to describe the flight from rationalism. “Men of science,” he notes, prefer “to turn their backs on metaphysics as on something altogether cloistered and spectral, and practical men shak[e] philosophy’s dust off their feet and [follow] the call of the wild” (14). Appealing to that familiar free-spirited figure of American self-reliance, Huck Finn lighting out for the territory, James aligns the common with the free, the natural, the curious, the open-minded and the wild — the best, that is, of this comparatively new republic — while he nearly dismisses refinement as artificial, haughty and irrelevant to ordinary folk.<sup>17</sup>

As if to emphasize his identification with these democratic masses, James often illustrates his ideas with examples drawn from common life, and he occasionally begs his audience to permit him a “vulgar” expression (98). He may have been deliberately emulating Barnum in this regard, for Barnum eschewed the serious tone of his fellow lecturers on the Redpath circuit and instead tended toward the amusing, entertaining, and informal. Barnum’s talks, note his biographers, were

peppered throughout with original Barnumisms. He liked honest, down-to-earth English. Instead of “inexpensive” he said “dog-cheap”; a giant woman was “a whopper”; reconciling himself to a failure, he said, “[S]ome pork will boil that way.” He spoke in ways that made people smile — “I am happy as a clam

in high water,” he would say, or, “My brain is so full of all sorts of things it is milk and water.” Whether it was for his “Art of Money Getting” lecture, or “Science of Humbugs,” or “Success in Life,” or “The World and How to Live in It,” crowds everywhere roared at Barnum’s racy anecdotes, chuckled away at his unique brand of wisdom, and applauded him heartily, often calling it, later, the “lecture event” of the year.<sup>18</sup>

Barnum’s lowbrow language was not only the mark of his upbringing but also part of a deliberate cultural program that governed his enterprises. As Christopher Irmscher points out, “the story of Barnum’s museum is a story of boundary crossings: boundaries between people small and large, rich and poor, black and white.” The effort was both lucrative and novel.<sup>19</sup> As we might expect of a philosopher equally determined to make his professional enterprises pay, William James also searched for an idiom that would appeal to the masses. Though his listeners know him as a Harvard professor – and his polite requests remind them that he doesn’t customarily use the vernacular in his lectures – James appears on many occasions to identify himself with the hoi polloi, even if from a slight distance: his talk of “gumption,” fakery, and “milk in the cocoanut” (79, 112, 98) marks him as a man of the people. Intent on presenting himself as a person who shares an amateur’s interest in diverse topics and none of the professional philosopher’s disdain for these “seriously inquiring amateur[s]” (18), James notes that these amateur philosophers represent the “typically perfect mind” (18).

The amateur mind, James implies, is uncluttered by professional loyalties, disciplinary blindnesses, allegiance to the noble principles of one’s vocation. (As James declares, “when a view of things is ‘noble,’ that ought to count as a presumption against its truth,” 35). Driven by curiosity, the amateur is more likely to meet phenomena with an open mind, a mind as open as James’s own must have been when he first visited P.T. Barnum’s American Museum in the 1850s. Situated on Broadway near the James family’s Washington Square residence, Barnum’s museum featured a dazzling array of live acts – jugglers, serpent charmers, moving mechanical figures, ventriloquists, Indian chiefs, phrenologists, trained chickens – a constantly changing spectacle. There were relics as well: a plaster cast of a cannibal, an intricate model of Paris, tableaux of historical scenes. The greatest draw was Barnum’s collection of human oddities: an albino lady, Tom Thumb, an endless series of fat children, a bearded lady, a giant couple, an armless man – in short, an evolving collection of natural freaks.

We know little of what the young William James thought of these displays, only that he and his brother were frequent visitors in the 1850s.<sup>20</sup> But we might be able to speculate in a roundabout way on the impact it had on James’s later thought, by considering a similar episode in the life of Ralph Waldo Emerson, the philosopher and neighbor of James’s youth whom the younger philosopher so admired. The account of Emerson’s visit to the Jardin des Plantes in Paris is well known. There, overwhelmed by the exhibits – the orderly arrangement of a staggering variety of species – he first began to ruminate not only on nature’s rich abundance, but also on the connections between these many varieties, suggesting as they did hidden natural laws. He considered, too, the question of design – the design of the natural world, its ordered complexity, and the insights of an individual mind learning to discern law and design within this variety. He began to suspect a correspondence between the human mind and the natural world, the presence of invisible laws ordering the spirit as they order the material universe. As he would later declare in *Nature*, natural facts are signs of spiritual facts.

Apart from his frequent returns to the museum during his childhood years in New York, we don’t know precisely how the young William James responded to P.T. Barnum’s American Museum, since unlike Emerson he did not keep a journal at the time. In later years, as we have seen, he would use Barnum’s name to signify puffery and inauthenticity. But perhaps he learned something else there as well. Overwhelmed, like Emerson, by the variety of natural specimens (both authentic and forged), he could have been struck as Emerson was by the collection’s uniformity. His adult writings indicate, however, that if the exhibit made a lasting impression on him, it would have impressed him with its diversity and chaos rather than its rational arrangement. If his brother Henry was moved, as Posnock argues, by the “heterogeneous, miscellaneous”<sup>21</sup> qualities of the world, we know that William was similarly moved, and he would have seen these qualities as a young boy at Barnum’s museum. The showman’s collection of natural history, devoted to the surprising rather than the orderly, emphasized the sensational and the bizarre. His museum guidebook, writes Irmscher, “is not characterized by a slowly emerging sense of a divinely ordered nature, but is instead punctuated by sudden, jarring transitions.” Barnum’s museum was governed by the principle of “the profusion of sights, not the achievement of insight into a predetermined order of things” (Irmscher 115). For the kind of visitor drawn to Barnum’s American Museum, wonder could be found more readily in freaks of nature than in pattern and reliability. A small boy marveling at its collection may well have been struck by the inexplicable, the unpredictable, the role of chance in producing such a wild array of “Miscellaneous Specimens,” an array, as Barnum put it, that included “all that is monstrous, scaly, strange and queer.”<sup>22</sup> Whereas Emerson’s visit to the Paris Museum of Natural History had made him veer toward unity,

James's encounter with these bizarre natural phenomena had no such effect on him. Though I do not wish to claim that the future pragmatist was formed in the exhibit halls of Barnum's museum, it would not be too much to suggest that the adult James – a pluralist, a man frequently overcome with a sense of wonder at a world that defied full explanation – was exactly the sort of customer P.T. Barnum had in mind. The world James encountered in Barnum's museum could accurately be described with the very words James would later use to describe the world of personal experience, a place “multitudinous beyond imagination, tangled, muddy, painful and perplexed,” (*Pragmatism* 14). To read that book of lectures, we can only imagine that William James had been struck by the wonder of multiplicity as a boy, and that as he matured intellectually, he continued to appreciate the frequently random nature of the world around him. If we take him at his word in *Pragmatism*, he believed strongly that ordinary people are not excluded from philosophy and that they will likely incline toward the open-ended, nondogmatic view of pragmatism. This might explain why the adult William James, for all his suspicion of Barnum's commercial puffery, still regarded the showman as an important cultural influence who might have something to offer intelligent people. Urging his wife to make the trip from Chocorua, New Hampshire to Cambridge to visit him in 1890, he promised that he would take her to one of Barnum's theatrical productions if she could find a way to come to Boston.<sup>23</sup> Barnum's productions reflected the same world that James endorsed in *Pragmatism*, a world “multitudinous beyond imagination.” Of course, more highbrow cultural sources also shaped his vision. The publication in 1859 of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* likely helped him to see that even apparent order does not necessarily argue a design or a designer; human evolution, he learned, was the result of a vast and tangled series of accidents. Darwin's work “has once for all displaced design from the minds of the ‘scientific,’” James noted (35). But like Barnum himself, whose guidebook “shrewdly adopts the perspective of the uninformed, ‘normal’ visitor,”<sup>24</sup> James was cheerfully suspicious of institutional authority, accepting ideas because of their usefulness rather than because of the status of their sources.

The sense of perplexity that James picked up in his miscellaneous readings persists in the lectures on pragmatism, which are marked by a comparative modesty, an unwillingness to stake too large a claim for any one particular truth. Though James confesses “to a certain tremor at the audacity” of his enterprise (7), his proposition is a simple one: that the truest of conclusions is merely that which “proves the most satisfactory” (113). He is willing to grant that today's truth may be tomorrow's wife's tale, that one person's explanation may fail to satisfy another. Though his tone is relaxed and reassuring, his pragmatic method perhaps owes its repose to that early experience of perplexity, the sense of how much we do not and cannot know. Whereas Emerson's attempt to delineate a theory that would “explain all phenomena,” caused him intense anxiety over the shape of *Nature*,<sup>25</sup> James is content to help his audience find their daily truths, vulnerable and impermanent as he knows all truths to be. “Meanwhile,” as he remarks in *Pragmatism*, “we have to live to-day by what truth we can get to-day, and be ready to-morrow to call it falsehood” (100).<sup>26</sup>

Like Barnum with his museum specimens, James poses his lectures on pragmatism as a genuine attempt to identify and satisfy the desires of his audience. Pragmatism, he assures us, is primarily a means of helping ordinary people navigate their way through the mysteries of human existence in a sometimes maddening, often painful world. In his lectures, the Harvard philosopher is careful to remind his readers that philosophy should, above all, help people live their lives, and he demonstrates that he understands the concerns of ordinary people. Philosophy is not just for professors but for landladies, who must scrutinize the philosophy of a potential boarder as intently as they investigate his bank account (7). James introduces his second lecture, on the meaning of pragmatism, with an anecdote concerning a metaphysical dispute among the members of a camping party. “In the unlimited leisure of the wilderness,” he explains, “discussion [about the meaning of “going round”] had been worn threadbare” (25). Though he does not say so, this context (unlimited leisure) implies its opposite, the more typical situation of most people: limited leisure, limited time. The threadbare debates of unlimited leisure suggest the unreal world of academia, but most of us have neither world enough nor time for such leisurely deliberation. Even James himself betrays a sense of urgency as he winds up his first lecture, noting that, as he is drawing “near the end of my hour, I will not introduce pragmatism bodily now. I will begin with it on the stroke of the clock next time” (18). As he notes in passing in a later lecture, “economy of time” is a pressing factor in how we interpret the world. “The usual business of life,” he reminds us, neither requires nor allows us to verify all of our beliefs (95). Thus we need a philosophy that will help us settle metaphysical disputes in an efficient way. “All dispute,” he argues, “is idle” unless it have some practical consequence (26), and the quicker one can arrive at this consequence, the better. Since ordinary people have practical business to conduct, they need a philosophy that is economical, not frivolous.

William James was a Harvard professor, but he was also a family man who worried constantly about finding enough time and money to support his family and perform his several careers. In 1906 when he first delivered these lectures, his four surviving children were between the ages of 16 and 27, and what he had written his brother several years earlier remained as true as ever: “I have finance very much on the brain.”<sup>27</sup> In 1898 he had been

finding the price of his children's education "extravagant," and he worried about losing his ability to earn as he grew older. "Every writer must look to the day when he gets *démodé* and make provision for a shrinkage of income after sixty from his current work," he wrote in 1898, his fifty-sixth year. "I am looking towards a gradual withdrawing from teaching within the next ten years." While he worried that his household expenses were dangerously approaching what he was able to earn, he was also anxious about the time it took to teach and to write the lectures that provided his income. He was forced to give up his adjunct teaching at Radcliffe College, which he enjoyed, because "it overworks me, and the Gifford preparation [his lectures later published as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*] will be arduous."<sup>28</sup> If *The Varieties of Religious Experience* made him a wealthy man when it was published in 1902, the years prior to that unexpected windfall were sometimes difficult.<sup>29</sup> When in *Pragmatism* James draws on a business idiom to describe the pragmatic method, then, he is not merely groping for a vernacular that his audience will understand; he is speaking in the currency of the anxieties that pressed him most uncomfortably in his earlier years. "[M]eaning, other than practical, there is for us none," he tells his audience, and we sense his own impatience with the interminable disputes of rationalists (27). What is the "cash-value" of an idea, a word, a choice? "An idea is 'true,'" he proposes, "so long as to believe it is profitable to our lives" (36). If new ideas are allowed to threaten our old ideas, they must be especially useful, since "the individual has a stock of old opinions already," and "he saves as much [of this old stock] as he can" (31). Practical people are just as frugal with ideas as with other commodities; our truths, for instance, we store "away . . . in our memories, and with the overflow we fill our books of reference. Whenever such an extra truth becomes practically relevant to one of our emergencies, it passes from cold-storage to do work in the world and our belief in it grows active" (93). Or again: "Truth lives . . . on a credit system. Our thoughts and beliefs 'pass,' so long as nothing challenges them, just as bank-notes pass so long as nobody refuses them. But all this points to direct face-to-face verifications somewhere, without which the fabric of truth collapses like a financial system with no cash-basis whatever. You accept my verification of one thing, I yours of another. We trade on each other's truth. But beliefs verified concretely by somebody are the posts of the whole superstructure" (95).

Though commodities (the truths lodged temporarily in cold-storage) ordinarily differ from currency – they are, after all, the "real thing" whose value the currency merely represents – James uses cash and commodity alike as values put to work in a market economy. "All human thinking," he maintains, "gets discursified; we exchange ideas; we lend and borrow verifications, get them from one another by means of social intercourse" (97). Here James means simply that ideas, like currency and like language, are not themselves the thing sought but are merely the means to achieve them, the agreed-upon symbols for something else. He draws his metaphors from the world of commerce as evidence for his claim that all meaning is determined by context: just as a dollar's "value" is conventional, not inherent, so too is the value of all truths. 15

We should note something else about his metaphors as well. They are deliberately vulgar. If James were casting about for any metaphor describing conventional meaning, the trope of language would be just as useful to him. A word, like a coin, is valuable – and its meaning limited – only insofar as the community of users agrees upon that meaning. Why does James choose a metaphor drawn from the world of economics, so laden with the burden of vulgarity, the anxiety of getting a living and keeping within one's means, the sometimes bullying imperative of making others pay for one's living? Though the marketplace may represent enterprise and energy, it also represents what Henry James called "the base uses of commerce."<sup>30</sup> For the Jameses' generation as for our own, the marketplace suggested something distasteful, as if mercenary motives are blameworthy. While William James felt queasy about lecturing for easy money,<sup>31</sup> he meanwhile encouraged his audience to pay attention to the process of profit, accepting as true the most profitable ideas and refusing to hide behind a more refined idiom. His theory is nothing if not overtly mercenary, or cast in mercenary metaphors. "The payments true ideas bring are the sole why of our duty to follow them," he announces (103). 16

Is his introductory lecture tongue-in-cheek, intent as it is on selling his idea? It reads like the most garish of advertisements, even like a carnival barker's promises. Greeting his listeners in the conventional address reserved for low-brow entertainments ("ladies and gentlemen") as he introduces his "bold" "enterprise" (7), Professor James suggests that his topic is a sensational one, eliciting "a curious fascination," a "problematic thrill," an "agreeabl[e]" "tickle" (8). Volunteering that his lecture series may be a considerable "risk" (8), James presents himself as a magician of sorts, a showman, a breathtaking performer. Perhaps he learned this approach, too, from Barnum, who promoted his museum by installing traveling advertising carts throughout New York City, publishing newspaper ads announcing his "breathtaking splendors" and "wilderness of realities," and projecting nighttime moving images on the walls of his museum. We see a bit of the showman in James's first series of lectures for the Lowell Institute, where he considered various mental states, among them a number of freakish conditions that would have drawn a curious crowd. 17

Although the topic of pragmatism is decidedly less sensational than those earlier lectures, James promotes his product energetically, seeking to identify and fill a market need. “We philosophers,” he suggests, “have to reckon” with the feelings of the public (20). Without a market for philosophy, without giving satisfaction, the philosopher cannot convince his public of the relevance of his method. This opening lecture is permeated with the pragmatist’s sense that value is not inherent but conferred by context, and that in this case, the context – the vital context of approval or disapproval – will be established by James’s audience. What does the “philosophic amateur” want, asks James, “what does he find his situation to be . . . ? He wants facts; he wants science; but he also wants a religion” (11). “Now what kinds of philosophy do you find actually offered to meet your need?” he inquires (12). The implied answer, of course, is that until the arrival of pragmatism, there had been no philosophy able to meet the high (and yet reasonable) expectations of the amateur philosopher. “What you want is a philosophy that will not only exercise your powers of intellectual abstraction, but that will make some positive connexion with this actual world of finite human lives. You want a system that will combine both things, the scientific loyalty to facts and willingness to take account of them, the spirit of adaptation and accommodation, in short, but also the old confidence in human values and the resultant spontaneity” (13). Until pragmatism, James suggests, we philosophical consumers have been offered but a poor choice. Like any bold new product, James’s pragmatism appears just in time to “satisfy both kinds of demand” (18). James is immodest about appealing to market demands, about inventing a desire in order to satisfy it. He concludes this first lecture with the hope that he “may lead to you find [pragmatism] just the mediating way of thinking that you require” (21). The “thunderous ovation” that greeted the end of his last lecture fell on closing words that returned attention to these market needs emphasized in the first lecture. “Between the two extremes” of religious disposition he had been outlining, James told his audience, “you may find that what I take the liberty of calling the pragmatistic or melioristic type of theism is exactly what you require” (134).

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For James, philosophy belonged in the street as well as the lecture hall. He would not have been troubled by P.T. Barnum’s characterization of the local barber shop as “Philosopher’s Hall” because of the informal gatherings held there – assemblies that Barnum called “a literary nucleus unequalled in intelligence.”<sup>32</sup> Likewise, a lecture hall should be filled in part with landladies, barbers and other amateur philosophers. To signal his appreciation for the modes of entertainment and instruction valued by such people, James fills out his lectures with astonishing moves, what his brother Henry called “intellectual larking.”<sup>33</sup> Watch, for instance, as he attempts to dismantle the rationalist’s assertion that reality is a complete state of affairs, which true ideas copy:

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I have honestly tried to stretch my own imagination and to read the best possible meaning into the rationalist conception, but I have to confess that it still completely baffles me. The notion of a reality calling on us to “agree” with it, and that for no reasons, but simply because its claim is “unconditional” or “transcendent,” is one that I can make neither head nor tail of. I try to imagine myself as the sole reality in the world, and then to imagine what more I would “claim” if I were allowed to. If you suggest the possibility of my claiming that a mind should come into being from out of the void inane and stand and copy me, I can indeed imagine what the copying might mean, but I can conjure up no motive. What good it would do me to be copied, or what good it would do that mind to copy me, if further consequences are expressly and in principle ruled out as motives for the claim (as they are by our rationalist authorities) I can not fathom. When the Irishman’s admirers ran him along to the place of banquet in a sedan chair with no bottom, he said, “Faith, if it wasn’t for the honor of the thing, I might as well have come on foot.” So here: but for the honor of the thing, I might as well have remained uncopied. (104-5)

Posing not as a hostile antagonist to rationalism but rather as a humble enquirer earnestly trying to see its logic, James invites us to view rationalism from a patently absurd vantage point. While the imagination may indeed help us to consider the points of view of other sentient beings, it is illogical, even downright silly, to impute a motive or any other human disposition to an abstraction. James of course knows better. He knows that a creature does not need a motive to be born with a deformity. The deformity may be useful for the creature’s survival or reproduction, in which case it may be passed on to another generation, may be selected by a population, and may eventually become part of that population’s evolutionary development. But to say that the development “works” – or, as a pragmatist might put it, that it “pays” – one need not insist on an original motive. A proposition may be true without our finding a motive for its being true. By animating and humanizing an abstraction, James caricatures it, asking his audience to see it as a preposterous notion. For a finale, and to seal his success with his audience, he rounds off his performance with a joke – “Faith, if it wasn’t for the honor of the thing, I might as well have . . . remained uncopied.”

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James’s professional critics may well have missed the joke. In 1891, Alice James recorded a conversation she and Henry had had about the reviews of their brother William’s *Principles of Psychology*. The critics, Alice reported, “reprobate his mental pirhouettes and squirm at his daring to go lightly amid the solemnities.” Henry explained

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their opposition as the inability to take a joke: “They can’t understand intellectual larking.”<sup>34</sup> But the enthusiastic ovation that William James received at the conclusion of his lectures on pragmatism suggests that the economically and intellectually mixed crowd he so eagerly courted appreciated his antics and delighted in his exposure of humbugs.<sup>35</sup>

James sought to assure his audience that his philosophy would suit them perfectly, that pragmatism was an agreeable intellectual companion. “[W]illing to take anything, to follow either logic or the senses and to count the humblest and most personal experiences,” pragmatism “has in fact no prejudices whatever, no obstructive dogmas, no rigid canons of what shall count as proof. She is completely genial” (38). As the temperament most hospitable to the pragmatist, pluralism was likewise easygoing: while “absolute unity brooks no degrees,” he noted, pluralism “is amply satisfied” provided “you grant . . . some real novelty or chance, however minute” (73). James’s sales pitch seems to come from a man with genuine regard for ordinary people, their limitations and their requirements. In distinguishing himself from rationalists and from dogmatic empiricists, James worked to win over his audience, to please them. It might be tempting to dismiss William James as an elitist who drew on the idioms of popular culture in order to make easy money from his unsuspecting audiences. And indeed his brother’s wounded complaints about his own unappreciative audience in the wake of the *Guy Domville* fiasco might indicate that the novelist expected his philosopher-brother to share his hostility and contempt for the masses.<sup>36</sup> But in this one hundredth anniversary of the publication of *Pragmatism*, we should take William James seriously and consider fully the complexity of that tangled, muddy street that he persisted in seeing as the real world. John Fiske reminds us that while popular culture is made up of “resources” that “carry the interests of the economically and ideologically dominant,” these same resources also “carry contradictory lines of force that are taken up and activated differently by people situated differently within the social system.”<sup>37</sup> The “cultural function” of commodities – commodities that of course make profit for those who produce and distribute them – nevertheless is “not adequately explained by their economic function, however dependent it may be on it” (4). What this means for our reading of William James is that, when we remove him from the marble temple that he so emphatically rejected, returning him instead to the street that gave him both anxiety and pleasure, we should not only take note of the other figures sharing that public space with him, but we should consider their influence on his thought.

Amy Kittelstrom has recently called on scholars of James to consider the wide amateur audiences James reached in his lectures and in their later publication as pamphlets. While “James was unquestionably an elite,” she notes, the “social contexts” of his thought – the people who were affected by it and the populist social work they undertook by means of it – are also worthy of our attention.<sup>38</sup> The original historical meaning of James’s lectures was “typically conflicted and plural,”<sup>39</sup> and Kittelstrom is right to refuse to choose between James’s affiliation with elitists and his identification with underdogs. Whatever James’s class identity, we should recognize in his lectures both the profit-making motive and the more oppositional energies contained in them. Reading James in the context of the showman whom he both admired and disdained, the entertainer who, Irmscher contends, successfully blended “the seemingly opposed identities of the cynical showman and the devoted museum curator,”<sup>40</sup> we see a philosopher who not only ardently wished to change public opinion – and who, as Robert Dawidoff illustrates, embraced this responsibility in ways that his brother Henry did not<sup>41</sup> – but who also looked to populist forms of entertainment and instruction for models of how best to do so. That James earnestly hoped his lectures would sell – that, in fact, his appeals to his audience drew on the moneymaking strategies of P.T. Barnum, the “wily storekeeper” who built his own museum from the remnants of less successful collections<sup>42</sup> – does not undermine the oppositional forces in these lectures.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> William James to George Holmes Howison, 5 April 1897, in Ignas K. Skrupskelis, Elizabeth M. Berkeley, and John J. McDermott, eds., *The Correspondence of William James* 12 vols. (Charlottesville and London: The University of Virginia Press, 1992-2004). Vol. 8, 256. All further references will be to *CWJ*.

<sup>2</sup> William James to Henry James, 17 May 1896, in *CWJ* vol. 2, 398.

- <sup>3</sup> William James to Henry James, 3 May 1903, in *CWJ* vol. 3, 233.
- <sup>4</sup> Linda Simon, *Genuine Reality: A Life of William James* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1998), 351.
- <sup>5</sup> William James to Henry James, 9 December 1906, in *CWJ* vol. 3, 330.
- <sup>6</sup> Henry James to William James, 9 January 1895, in *CWJ* vol. 2, 337.
- <sup>7</sup> Reported to Leon Edel and quoted in *The Complete Plays of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 477.
- <sup>8</sup> Henry James to William James, 9 January 1895, in *CWJ* vol. 2, 338.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid, 346.
- <sup>10</sup> In the months before his death, Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes averred that “No nobler or more helpful institution exists in America than Boston’s Lowell Institute.” Quoted in Harriette Knight Smith, *The History of the Lowell Institute* (Boston: Lamson, Wolfe, and Co., 1898), x.
- <sup>11</sup> William James to Henry James, 15 August 1896, in *CWJ* vol. 2, 406.
- <sup>12</sup> Henry James to William James, 17 November 1906, in *CWJ* vol. 3, 328.
- <sup>13</sup> Philip B. Kunhardt, Jr., Philip B. Kunhardt III, and Peter W. Kunhardt, *P.T. Barnum: America’s Greatest Showman* (NY: Knopf, 1995), 247.
- <sup>14</sup> William James to Alice James, 14 June 1891, in *CWJ* vol. 7, 170.
- <sup>15</sup> William James to Frederick George Bromberg, 30 June 1894, in *CWJ* vol. 5, 505.
- <sup>16</sup> William James, *Pragmatism*. 1907 (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1981), 14.
- <sup>17</sup> Ross Posnock charts the different reactions of William and Henry James to modernity, claiming that the novelist was much more open-minded and “animated by restless curiosity” (21) than his brother the philosopher. We can see in William James’s lecture the same desire to attain the theatrical, anti-hierarchical, and restless disposition that, for Posnock, Henry James embodied in the works he was writing during the years adjacent to the publication of *Pragmatism*. *The Trial of Curiosity: Henry James, William James, and the Challenge of Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).
- <sup>18</sup> Kunhardt, 247.
- <sup>19</sup> Christopher Irmscher, *The Poetics of Natural History from John Bartram to William James* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 107.
- <sup>20</sup> Henry James reminisces about their childhood visits to Barnum’s museum in *Notes of a Son and Brother*.
- <sup>21</sup> Posnock, 142.
- <sup>22</sup> Kunhardt, 39.

<sup>23</sup> In a 30 July 1890 letter to Alice, William promises to take her to see *The Fall of Babylon*, identified by editors of *CWJ* as the “magnificent spectacle” (theater playbill) produced by Barnum and Bailey for the Oakland Garden. *CWJ* vol. 7, 76-77.

<sup>24</sup> Irmscher, 116.

<sup>25</sup> Barbara Packer still has the best account of the difficult composition history of *Nature*; she wonders whether “the hope we are offered” at the end of *Nature* represents “the Jerusalem in which we will someday live, or the Promised Land we will never be permitted to enter.” Barbara L. Packer, *Emerson’s Fall: A New Interpretation of the Major Essays* (New York: Continuum, 1982), 84.

<sup>26</sup> In this conviction, too, James resembled Barnum, whose many autobiographies took the same provisional view of truth that James would later promote. As Irmscher notes, “Because Barnum’s autobiography was so relentlessly cast as a work-in-progress whose temporary manifestations in print just failed to tell it all, every one of its versions became obsolete the minute it appeared” (120).

<sup>27</sup> To Henry James, 10 April 1898. In *CWJ*, vol. 3, 24.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 24-5.

<sup>29</sup> Robert D. Richardson details the economic results of *Varieties* in *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 421.

<sup>30</sup> *Washington Square*. 1881 (London: Penguin Books, 1986), 39.

<sup>31</sup> The year after he finished delivering his lectures on pragmatism, James was again preparing a series of lectures, this time the Hibbert Lectures to be delivered in Oxford, and complaining that the assignment forced him “to relapse into the ‘popular lecture’ form just as I thought I had done with it forever.” Letter to Théodore Flourney, 3 January 1908. In *CWJ* vol. 11, 502.

<sup>32</sup> Kunhardt, 35.

<sup>33</sup> Alice James, *Diary of Alice James*. 15 July 1891, 217.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Once again Barnum may have been a source for the tone if not the effect of some of James’s intellectual stunts: the showman’s 1865 book, *The Humbugs of the World: An Account of Humbugs, Delusions, Impositions, Quackeries, Deceits, and Deceivers Generally, In All Ages* might almost have supplied an advertisement for the philosopher’s lectures on pragmatism.

<sup>36</sup> The novelist concluded that “the regular ‘theatrical public’ of London, . . . of all the vulgar publics London contains, is the most brutishly & densely vulgar. . . . The stupid public is the big public, & the perceptive one the small.” 2 February 1895 letter to William James. In *CWJ* vol. 2, 344.

<sup>37</sup> John Fiske, *Reading the Popular* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 2.

<sup>38</sup> Amy Kittelstrom, “Against Elitism: Studying William James in the Academic Age of the Underdog.” *William James Studies* 1 (2006), paragraph 35.

<sup>39</sup> The phrase is Cary Nelson’s, drawn from his study of leftist modernist poetry. See *Revolutionary Memory: Recovering the Poetry of the American Left* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 1.

<sup>40</sup> Irmscher, 113.

<sup>41</sup> Robert Dawidoff, “Introduction” to *CWJ* vol. 3, xxiv.

<sup>42</sup> Irmscher, 103.

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## Metaphysics with a Human Face: William James and the Prospects of Pragmatist Metaphysics

Sami Pihlström

*Abstract.* This essay contributes to the debate over whether there is, or can be, any place for metaphysics in pragmatism, in William James's pragmatism, in particular. The paper defends the possibility of pragmatist metaphysics, seeking to show how interesting forms of such metaphysics with a grounding in key Jamesian texts can, pragmatically, be put to work. This task is interesting from the perspective of both James scholarship and the ongoing re-evaluation and critical transformation of the pragmatist tradition. Furthermore, we need metaphilosophical discussion of the possibility and prospects of metaphysics in a situation in which many philosophers believe metaphysics to be dead and buried, partly thanks to the classical pragmatists and their followers. Thus, the present paper examines critically the widespread idea that pragmatism is an inherently non- or even anti-metaphysical philosophy (a view held not only by radical neopragmatists like Richard Rorty but also by scholars of classical pragmatism such as Charlene Haddock Seigfried).

### 1. Introduction

This essay engages in the debate over whether there is, or can be, or should be, any role for *metaphysics* to play in pragmatism – in William James's pragmatist philosophy, in particular. The recent exchange between Charlene Haddock Seigfried and William Myers is one of the backgrounds of my inquiry, though their controversy focuses more on John Dewey's pragmatism than on James's.<sup>1</sup> More generally, I will critically defend the possibility of "pragmatist metaphysics", articulating it in a way slightly different from its usual articulations. Instead of arguing, against Seigfried, in any detailed historical manner about James's or Dewey's commitments to metaphysics, I will try to show how interesting forms of pragmatist metaphysics – with a grounding in key Jamesian texts – can, pragmatically, be put to work. Thus, this paper is a contribution both to James scholarship and to the ongoing re-evaluation and critical transformation of the pragmatist tradition, as well as to the metaphilosophical discussion of the possibility and prospects of metaphysics in a situation in which many people believe metaphysics to be dead and buried (partly thanks to the classical pragmatists and their followers).

It is frequently claimed that pragmatism is an inherently non- or even anti-metaphysical philosophy. Such allegations are not only found in the radical neopragmatism advanced by Rorty.<sup>2</sup> Seigfried, a much more reliable guide to the pragmatist tradition, urges pragmatists to reject metaphysics and to base their reflections on lived experience. According to her, the classical pragmatists (especially James and Dewey) "didn't just reject the traditional subject areas of metaphysics" but by grounding their analyses "in the concrete conditions of everyday life" offered a "genuine alternative to metaphysics".<sup>3</sup> James, in particular, contrasted metaphysical systems (especially rationalist ones) with "the world of *facts* of empiricism", emphasizing the "concreteness" of those facts.<sup>4</sup>

There are thus reasons to believe that pragmatism in general and Jamesian pragmatism in particular are anti-metaphysical philosophical orientations. Yet, given both classical and contemporary pragmatists' deep interest in metaphysics and innovative work in that field, nothing could be further from the truth. Of course, the pragmatist tradition contains numerous views and arguments – many of them due to James – highly critical of metaphysics (and epistemology) as traditionally conceived. For example, pragmatists are typically *anti-essentialists* and *anti-*

*foundationalists*; moreover, standard *metaphysically realistic* conceptions of reality and truth have been attacked by pragmatists, early and late – with good reason. James was a vigorous critic of metaphysical realism, as will be noted below. It would, however, be a mistake to conclude that metaphysics as such has been, or would have to be, entirely abandoned on the basis of such legitimate criticisms. On the contrary, this paper tries to show how a *humanized* form of metaphysics emerges from Jamesian pragmatism. The world, according to the “pragmatic realism” to be developed and defended, is a humanly structured world; metaphysics ought to be understood as an inquiry into the fundamental (yet revisable) categories of such a human reality.

My inquiry will proceed as follows. Section 2 will outline two different conceptions of metaphysics, proposing that pragmatism is closer to “Kantian” than “Aristotelian” metaphysics. This proposal will be substantiated in sections 3-7, which offer examples of Jamesian pragmatist metaphysics at work, both in his own philosophy and in the work of some more recent thinkers influenced by him. Section 8 briefly returns to the dispute between Seigfried and Myers, further elaborating on the idea that pragmatist metaphysics is “transcendental”, before final conclusions in section 9.

I should note that I am *not* going to discuss in any detail James’s own metaphysical system, radical empiricism.<sup>5</sup> I am more interested in the picture of metaphysics that can be based on his *pragmatism* than on his own metaphysical beliefs. I am not even convinced that radical empiricism, claiming that reality ultimately consists of “pure experience”, is consistent with pragmatism, which rejects all such ultimate accounts of the fundamental constituents of the world. I will, however, leave this issue aside here, in order to be able to focus on the pragmatic conception of metaphysics James helps us to defend.

## 2. Different conceptions of metaphysics

There are two chief rival views of general metaphysics<sup>6</sup> to be found in the history of recent philosophy. I simply call these the “Aristotelian” and the “Kantian” conception. The *Aristotelian* metaphysician, starting from Aristotle’s famous view of “first philosophy” as a science of “Being *qua* Being”, an inquiry into “first principles”, tries to identify the basic ontological categories of Being itself, of a world ontologically independent of human conceptual categorization. In contrast, the *Kantian* thinker – the transcendental philosopher – rejects such a claim, urging that we cannot know anything about Being as such, or about the things in themselves. The world’s or Being’s “own” categorical structure is forever, necessarily, beyond our cognitive reach. Thus, when studying ontological categories, we study the forms of our thought about reality, our conceptual schemes, the basic features of our experiencing and talking about the world, and so on. We cannot directly examine the world itself, but we can examine the way(s) we take the world to be.

Both Aristotelian and Kantian metaphysicians, despite their enormous differences, are convinced that metaphysics is vitally needed, because the most basic categories in terms of which we inevitably experience reality cannot be adequately accounted for by means of the specialized vocabularies of the diverse special sciences. A more general inquiry is required. The crucial difference between the two camps of metaphysicians (which, obviously, can here be described only in extremely broad strokes) is the difference between the assumption that such fundamental categories are provided by the world as it is in itself, independently of our experience, and the contrasting view that such a postulation of *an sich* metaphysical categories of being makes little sense.<sup>7</sup>

The contemporary debate over the nature and possibility of metaphysics can largely be situated within the area defined by these two poles. For example, Michael J. Loux sets what he calls *transcendent metaphysics* and (Kantian) *critical metaphysics* against each other, describing the latter as an attempt to delineate “the most general features of our thought and knowledge” and to identify “the most general concepts at work in our representation of the world, the relationships that obtain among those concepts, and the presuppositions of their objective employment”.<sup>8</sup> Thus, according to the Kantian conception, metaphysics seeks to characterize our conceptual scheme or framework rather than the world itself.<sup>9</sup> This project is *transcendental*, having to do with the conditions required for our cognitions to be about reality at all; no *transcendent* reality beyond our cognitive capacities is, however, a possible object of experience.

Loux defends traditional Aristotelian metaphysics against Kantian, in his view anti-realist, alternatives. Another leading recent metaphysician, E.J. Lowe, similarly includes the “neo-Kantian” view among the anti-metaphysical positions he criticizes.<sup>10</sup> Peter Loftson, in turn, suggests that “[o]ne of the very deepest and most important divisions in post-Kantian philosophy” lies between “those who regard as viable, at least in principle, an essentially unitary project of theorizing about the world and its diverse constituents (including middlesized physical objects, such things as quarks and fields, abstract entities, and free rational conscious agency), and those who think otherwise”, labelling these positions “unitarianism” and “anti-unitarianism”, respectively.<sup>11</sup>

I could give several other examples. Indeed, if one browses recent metaphysical literature, including textbooks and anthologies intended for classroom use,<sup>12</sup> one finds an almost unanimous commitment to Aristotelianism, as contrasted to the Kantian picture. Accordingly, most contemporary metaphysicians seem to be metaphysical realists – to use Hilary Putnam’s expression, without any explicit commitment to the meaning(s) Putnam used to attach to this notion.<sup>13</sup> For example, such leading analytic thinkers as D.M. Armstrong and David Lewis are, quite clearly, metaphysical realists. As they theorize about the basic ontological categories they find necessary to postulate – whether these are universals and states of affairs, as in Armstrong’s case, or concretely existing possible worlds, as in Lewis’s case<sup>14</sup> – they see themselves as “limning the true and ultimate structure of reality” (to use W.V. Quine’s appropriate phrase). In Putnamian terms, they attempt to adopt a “God’s-Eye View” on the world, seeking to formulate an “absolute conception” of reality, a non-perspectival conception given from a perspective which is no genuine perspective at all.<sup>15</sup> The ontological categories these metaphysicians postulate are, clearly, intended as the world’s, Being’s, or Nature’s own, although any reasonable philosopher admits that our attempts to categorize transcendent reality in terms of its own categories are as fallible as any other human cognitive projects. Even the strongest metaphysical realists admit that we can only more or less reasonably hope to be able to represent the ontological structure of the world as it is in itself, never claim to be sure of having succeeded in our efforts.

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William James, obviously, was no Kantian; he saw his own pragmatism as continuing the tradition of empiricism, going “round” Kant rather than “through” him. However, pragmatism, I believe, can be (re)interpreted as a way of emphasizing the practice-ladenness of ontological commitments and thus, in Kantian terms, the transcendental role that *practices* of various kinds play in enabling our categorizations of reality.<sup>16</sup> It is only within purposive human practices that reality is, for us, in a way or another. It is only within such practices that objects (or entities falling under any ontological categories) can be identified and reidentified. Practices, or human habits of action – which can be seen as analogous to Wittgenstein’s language-games or forms of life – do not, of course, construct the world (only a *very* radical pragmatist would claim they do), but their role in the constitution of the world of experienceable objects is transcendental in a manner analogous to Kant’s categories, or perhaps roughly in the way in which phenomenologists’ transcendental ego or consciousness functions as the necessary background for the emergence of a meaningfully experienceable objective reality.<sup>17</sup>

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Pragmatism, then, ends up with a conception of the mind-dependence, or better, conceptualization-dependence and (therefore) practice-dependence, of ontological categories. Ontology is, for pragmatists as much as for Kantians and Wittgensteinians, essentially a human project of categorizing the world, *not* (as in traditional Aristotelian metaphysics) a project of discovering the categories that are already there, embedded in the structure of the world itself, independently of human categorization. The central pragmatist novelty in this discussion is the insight that this categorization and conceptualization contain an irreducibly *practical* dimension: it is in and through our practices of coping with the world that the world gets structured by us. It is the task of ontology, general metaphysics, to examine the transcendental conditions for the possibility of the various structures reality may receive through our categorizing activities. It is clear that pragmatists should reject metaphysics in the strongly realist sense taken for granted in most contemporary works in this field. But it does *not* follow that metaphysics in the Kantian sense ought to be rejected, too. Metaphysics in general ought to be carefully distinguished from a specific (though extremely wide-ranging) metaphysical commitment, the commitment to metaphysical realism. Pragmatism rejects, or should reject, the latter – though not all (Peircean) pragmatists seem to do so<sup>18</sup> – but not the former.

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These preliminaries help me to reflect on the tension between the “return” of metaphysics, especially in analytic philosophy after the collapse of logical empiricism,<sup>19</sup> and the conviction among several authors that we are in our postmodern, neopragmatist philosophical culture living “after metaphysics”. This is a curious situation in the “history of ontology” (to adopt a Heideggerian and/or Foucaultian expression).<sup>20</sup> The pragmatist construal of transcendental reflection in ontology can settle this tension: there is a sense in which metaphysics is over (namely, as metaphysical realism – and good riddance), but in another sense it is well and alive, as we can still go on ontologizing about the way(s) the world for us is, or might be, in a pragmatist-cum-transcendental sense. Our situation in the history of ontology is thus *both* “post-metaphysical”, as neopragmatists, especially Rorty, might put it, *and* (genuinely) metaphysical. Now, I want to argue that, among the pragmatist classics, James saw this very clearly, and that we still have a lot to learn from him.

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What I will propose, with James, also builds a bridge between the conception of metaphysics found in the analytic tradition, on the one hand (viz., ontology as category theory),<sup>21</sup> and in the Heideggerian or more generally phenomenological tradition, on the other. In the latter, metaphysical views are usually put forward with reference to human perspectives, especially what Heidegger called *Dasein*, thus rejecting the metaphysically-realist absoluteness of ontological categories, that is, the idea of a uniquely given ontological structure of the

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independent, pre-categorized world. This, ultimately, amounts to a synthesis of realism and idealism – and this, it seems, is pretty much what pragmatist metaphysics is all about. However, here we do need to employ these traditional terms in order to offer an intellectual cartography of our field of dispute; *pace* Seigfried, the pragmatist cannot entirely avoid employing such standard terminology, although s/he should not simply define her/his position in such potentially misleading terms. As so often, pragmatism can build bridges, seek a middle way, strive for a synthesis between implausible extremes.

### 3. James's pragmatic method: extracting the ethical core of metaphysical disputes

It is clear that Charles Peirce was a great speculative metaphysician, engaged in his vast project of cosmological system-building.<sup>22</sup> To this extent it is trivially true that the tradition of pragmatism has not, as a whole, been hostile to metaphysics. Dewey, in turn, developed a metaphysics of non-reductive pragmatic naturalism, which might, somewhat controversially, be interpreted in terms of the recently debated concept of *emergence*.<sup>23</sup> Instead of reviewing these classical pragmatists' ideas or recent attempts to revive them, I will, however, offer examples of James's *tolerance toward metaphysics*.<sup>24</sup> By this phrase we may mean his distinctive use of the pragmatic method, understood as a method of "distilling" or "extracting" the core of a metaphysical dispute, pragmatically interpreted. This method was applied by James to metaphysical issues such as free will vs. determinism, theism vs. naturalism (materialism, atheism), the absolute, and – most importantly – pluralism vs. monism. In an important way, my interpretation and appropriation of James's strategy is different from the views traditionally attributed to him.

Several James scholars recognize that Jamesian pragmatism was by no means a method thoroughly dismissive of metaphysics. James was not a proto-positivist aiming to get rid of metaphysics for good, although he did sharply criticize traditional metaphysical systems, especially the absolute idealist and monistic Hegelian philosophies popular in his days. On the contrary, he was a philosopher most profoundly interested in perennial metaphysical questions, including the ones regarding monism and pluralism, determinism and freedom, and (of course) the reality of God and immortality. What his pragmatic method was designed to do was to lead us to an increased appreciation of the pragmatic content of these issues. According to this famous maxim, "[t]o attain perfect clearness in our thoughts of an object, then, we need only consider what conceivable effects of a practical kind the object may involve – what sensations we are to expect from it, and what reactions we must prepare. Our conception of these effects, whether immediate or remote, is then for us the whole of our conception of the object, so far as that conception has positive significance at all."<sup>25</sup>

James was not only tolerant in his metaphysical views, emphasizing a pragmatic pluralism and recognizing the equal acceptability of several alternative metaphysical perspectives, each good for its own underlying purposes, each to be evaluated pragmatically in terms of the experiential "goods" (potentially) delivered by it. He was also tolerant toward metaphysics itself, attempting to explicate, reinterpret, and eventually resolve metaphysical questions by means of his pragmatic method, always tracing the (conceivable) concrete, practical consequences our metaphysical concepts or conceptions may have in our lives.<sup>26</sup> This procedure requires a piecemeal approach to metaphysical issues in their wide variety, instead of a wholesale treatment within an all-inclusive system. Throughout our investigations, it remains an open issue whether the problems examined are in the end genuine or not; yet at the initial stage of inquiry, we must see them as "legitimate" worries:

The serious work of metaphysics is done over the separate single questions. If these should get cleared up, talk of metaphysics as a unified science might properly begin. [...] These problems are for the most part real; that is, but few of them result from a misuse of terms in stating them. 'Things,' for example, are or are not composed of one stuff; they either have or have not a single origin; they either are or are not completely predetermined, etc. Such alternatives may indeed be impossible of decision; but until this is conclusively proved of them, they confront us legitimately, and some one must take charge of them and keep account of the solutions that are proposed, even if he does not himself add new ones. The opinions of the learned regarding them must, in short, be classified and responsibly discussed.<sup>27</sup>

Of course Jamesian pragmatism, as pragmatism in general, rejects a number of traditional metaphysical doctrines and assumptions, such as essentialism, immutable "timeless truths", "first philosophy" prior to empirical inquiry, and metaphysical realism postulating a built-in structure of the world as it is "in itself". Obviously, pragmatists should not simply formulate their ideas in terms of pre-given metaphysical concepts or oppositions (e.g., realism vs. idealism). However, we should *not* conclude that standard metaphysical terminology, such as "realism" and its alternatives, is to be rejected altogether. James (in the company of many other pragmatists) offers us a novel,

pragmatic form of metaphysics, one deeply grounded, in Seigfried's words, "in the concrete conditions of everyday life"<sup>28</sup>

However, it is not enough to say that James was tolerant toward metaphysics and tried to understand the true pragmatic meaning of metaphysical problems and disputes. It is also essential to note that the core of this pragmatic effort was, for him, *ethical*. The substantial meaning of metaphysical views the pragmatist aims at uncovering is moral, or more generally valuational.<sup>29</sup> The true pragmatic insights into the structure and content of metaphysical disputes are to be achieved, according to Jamesian pragmatism, by means of an ethical evaluation of the rival metaphysical positions in terms of their potential humanly significant outcome. What will our human life in this human world be like, if we conceptualize our world in terms of a particular metaphysical position? This is the core pragmatic question. It is by no means ethically indifferent to us whether or not, say, the world is such that freedom or immortality is real.<sup>30</sup> This constant pragmatic need for the ethical evaluation of metaphysical concepts, problems, disputes, and theories is, on my reading, the heart of James's pragmatic method – though certainly not Peirce's, who was interested in narrower, scientific applications of the pragmatic maxim.

As John P. Murphy explains, the human worth of a philosophical view is, for James, a (or even *the*) crucial criterion for its acceptability:

[I]t is a basic principle of James's philosophy [...] that the conditions of acceptability of a philosophy are just as important (perhaps even more important) as its truth conditions. James's point is that, in the last analysis, it is always our nature – human nature – not the nature of reality in general, which must decide what we are to think about the nature of reality in general. So, philosophies that do not satisfy these human demands [...] will not be accepted; and, hence, the question of their truth or falsity will be beside the point.<sup>31</sup>

Two corrections, however, are needed to this important passage. First, it is, from the perspective of Jamesian pragmatism, impossible to distinguish the "truth conditions" of a philosophical view from its humanly – ethically – significant acceptability conditions. To find out that a metaphysical view about, say, freedom or immortality is humanly acceptable, or satisfies some of our deepest natural human needs, is *eo ipso* to find out that it is pragmatically true, in James's sense. Conversely, to find out that a metaphysical position is such that we cannot *live* on the basis of it, or cannot *really believe* it to be true while continuing to engage in the world in the habitual ways we simply cannot give up (e.g., for ethical reasons), is to find out that it is pragmatically false. This sounds radical but is in fact a direct consequence of the basic pragmatist view that beliefs, including metaphysical beliefs, are habits of action and must be critically evaluated in terms of their potential consequences for action.

Secondly, the Jamesian pragmatist should not be committed to the view that the concept of "the nature of reality in general", as standardly employed, even makes sense. The nature of reality in any humanly meaningful sense is always subordinated to the (transcendental) categorizing and conceptualizing activities we engage in within our practices, seeking to satisfy our pragmatic needs. Indeed, the pragmatic method, in its Jamesian employment, should lead us to doubt all appeals to the nature of reality in general, precisely because it is our "human nature" that is always already implicated in any pragmatically meaningful attempt to say something about reality (cf. section 7 below). This is to embrace a thoroughly "humanistic" pragmatism, though not necessarily in the sense of F.C.S. Schiller's "humanism", which was a radicalization of James's pragmatist ideas.<sup>32</sup>

The ethical construal of the pragmatic method opens up the possibility of articulating Jamesian pragmatism in Kantian transcendental terms. We may say that the human worth or acceptability of a philosophical view, e.g., a metaphysical statement about freedom or immortality, is *transcendentally* grounded in our human nature, in the needs and interests we attempt to satisfy in engaging in our practices.<sup>33</sup> These natural human needs amount to a "naturalized" transcendental condition for the possibility of any genuine commitment to the way the world is, or can be, taken to be (by us). However, as any particular need can always be questioned or overrun by another need, James's metaphysics offers us continuous ethical challenge instead of any simple harmony with the world. We will have to go on living our insecure lives in the fragile circumstances we find ourselves in, with no final metaphysical guarantees.

James's conception of metaphysics does not, then, liberate us from the responsibility of evaluating, over and over again, the pragmatic needs our practices or forms of life satisfy. The pragmatic evaluation of metaphysical views the Jamesian pragmatist encourages us to engage in is a *holistic* process, taking ethical aspects into account at every stage.<sup>34</sup> No ethically neutral truth conditions can determine the acceptability of a metaphysical belief; no ethically neutral method of pragmatic evaluation can do so, either. Nor can (allegedly) metaphysically neutral ethical needs or principles decide what the world is like. It is always, in Jamesian terms, the "whole man" in us that

engages in the holistic examination of beliefs and practices, being always already committed, as an inseparable mixture, to a whole bunch of (revisable and challengeable) ethically loaded factual-valuational beliefs about the way the world, for her/him/us, is.

My account of the place of metaphysics in Jamesian pragmatism is very different from the reading of James recently defended by Wesley Cooper, which begins from a sharp distinction between James's "two levels": the metaphysical and the empirical.<sup>35</sup> While Cooper views radical empiricism, the metaphysics of pure experience, as James's metaphysical basis for pragmatism, the underlying conception of the ultimate nature of reality that pragmatism is based on, I insist that a truly Jamesian pragmatist must reject any such grounding of pragmatism in an allegedly more fundamental metaphysical theory. *Any* metaphysics, even James's preferred radical empiricism, must be a pragmatic construction, satisfying certain "human demands" or needs. *No* metaphysics can be more basic than the ethically engaged evaluation of the conceivable practical results, in terms of future experience, that the pragmatic method urges us to pursue.<sup>36</sup> It is pragmatism itself, then, that is required for any metaphysics, including radical empiricism (or James's metaphysical speculations about freedom, immortality, and other vital topics), to be humanly possible and meaningful. If this interpretation – or, rather, reconstruction – leads us to uneasiness because there is no firm bedrock upon which pragmatism could be erected, then we can only turn to pragmatism itself in attempting to live with such uneasiness.

Except for my somewhat unorthodox (and to some extent admittedly un-Jamesian) willingness to employ the Kantian transcendental vocabulary in my characterization of pragmatist metaphysics, I am not *merely* offering a rational reconstruction of James's views. There is textual support to be found for my contention that he was (i) tolerant toward metaphysics and (ii) analyzed metaphysical disputes by means of the pragmatic method whose essence is ethical. When James tells us *expressis verbis* that the pragmatic method is "a method of settling metaphysical disputes that otherwise might be interminable",<sup>37</sup> he clearly assumes that those disputes *are* significant, even terminable, when treated pragmatically. When James informs us that the "whole function of philosophy ought to be to find out what definite difference it will make to you and me, at definite instants of our life, if this world-formula or that world-formula be the true one",<sup>38</sup> it is virtually impossible to read his words without assuming that both "difference" and "instants of our life" are intended in an ethically pregnant sense. In contrast, the "Absolute Mind" James attacks remains "indifferent" to the particular facts of our world.<sup>39</sup>

Furthermore, consider the opposition between materialism (atheism) and theism.<sup>40</sup> This dispute could hardly be more relevant ethically, as it is about whether the world is "guided" by its "higher" or "lower" elements,<sup>41</sup> whether our need for an "eternal moral order" is satisfied or not.<sup>42</sup> The analysis and resolution of the dispute in terms of (possible) future experience<sup>43</sup> – a paradigm case of James's pragmatic method at work – only reinforces the point. James's question, "what does the world *promise*?"<sup>44</sup> is deeply ethical, demonstrating his conviction that metaphysics, the attempt to theorize about the way(s) the world is (for us), would be blind without ethics, or ethical reflection on the way(s) the world ought to be (though it would perhaps be empty without our scientific and everyday experiences putting us in touch with natural, worldly facts). For James, "[t]he absolute things, the last things, the overlapping things, are the truly philosophic concerns" that "all superior minds feel seriously about".<sup>45</sup> The ethical core of James's pragmatism, or pragmatic pluralism, is also explicit in *The Meaning of Truth*: "Ethically the pluralistic form of [humanism] takes for me a stronger hold on reality than any other philosophy I know of – it being essentially a *social* philosophy, a philosophy of 'co' [...]"<sup>46</sup> The evidence for my reading of pragmatism as an investigation of metaphysical issues grounded in ethical considerations is, then, clear enough.

#### 4. The pragmatist "middle path" and the antinomial conflicts of reason

Nothing I have said is meant to deny that James was *also* a critic of a number of traditional metaphysical theses and problems, sometimes of their very intelligibility. The force of his criticism can be highlighted by briefly comparing his approach to Kant's resolution of the "Antinomy of Reason" in the "Transcendental Dialectic" of the First Critique.<sup>47</sup>

After having introduced his pragmatic method, James goes on, in the third lecture of *Pragmatism*, to explore pragmatically "some metaphysical problems". The first of these is the problem of *substance*. James applauds Berkeley's criticism of the concept of a material substance and Locke's and Hume's equally pragmatic criticism of the notion of a spiritual substance. In each case we ought to give up Cartesian and other metaphysical assumptions of fundamental substances underlying experiential reality (e.g., "souls" as spiritual substances), since the work for which such a notion of substance seems to be needed can be done with the characteristics or attributes in terms of which the substance is "known as".<sup>48</sup> James seems to be saying that we need not reject the notion of substance completely, if we are prepared to understand it in terms of such experiential attributes merely. This is, then, a case in which a reconciliation of extremes – that is, traditional substance metaphysics, on the one hand, and a

thoroughgoing elimination of whatever job the substance was needed to perform, on the other – is required and pragmatically achieved.

James's second example is the one already taken up above: the dispute between *materialism* (or *atheism*) and *spiritualism* (or *theism*). When the pragmatic method is applied, this problem will not be treated in a "stagnant intellectualist fashion" but dynamically, with an eye to the future of the world: "What do we *mean* by matter? What practical difference can it make *now* that the world should be run by matter or by spirit?" Here James notes: "It makes not a single jot of difference so far as the *past* of the world goes, whether we deem it to have been the work of matter or whether we think a divine spirit was its author".<sup>49</sup> Accordingly, the mistake of both extremes, atheistic materialism and traditional theism, is the assumption that the world is "finished", complete as it is. The dispute is "purely verbal", if there is no future, no experiences to expect: "[I]f no future detail of experience is to be deduced from our hypothesis, the debate between materialism and theism becomes quite idle and insignificant. Matter and God in that event mean exactly the same thing – the power, namely, neither more nor less, that could make this completed world [...]."<sup>50</sup> The middle path, the pragmatic position, can be reached only when the assumption of completeness is given up and it is realized that the merits of the rival standpoints must be investigated with reference to the future they promise, the experiences that may result, if one of them is true and the other false.

James moves on to his third example, the "*question of design in nature*".<sup>51</sup> Here the metaphysician who inquires into "design" (or the lack thereof) in an abstract way, having in mind a general principle of design, is led astray. "Pragmatically", we are told, "the abstract word 'design' is blank cartridge. It carries no consequences, it does no execution. What sort of design? and what sort of a designer? are the only serious questions, and the study of facts is the only way of getting even approximate answers."<sup>52</sup> The analysis is thus similar to that of the previous problem.<sup>53</sup> Again, the pragmatist, as James emphasized throughout his writings, turns her/his gaze away from abstract principles and toward concrete facts of experience.

Finally, James turns to his fourth problem – the most Kantian of the problems he discusses – the problem of *free will*.<sup>54</sup> Again, things go wrong if the problem is stated as a metaphysically realist question about the fundamental structure of reality, considered apart from human experiences and interests. The problem of freedom must rather be tied to our human points of view, particularly to how we are oriented to the future, in order to find out its true pragmatic significance.<sup>55</sup> Determinism "assures us that our whole notion of possibility is born of human ignorance, and that necessity and impossibility between them rule the destinies of the world", but the free will theory "pragmatically means *novelties in the world*" and is thus "a general cosmological theory of *promise*", "a doctrine of *relief*",<sup>56</sup> and is therefore connected with a broader religious – for James, essentially "melioristic" – metaphysics in which the world is governed by genuine aims and purposes and in which human beings can do their share in the world's "moral salvation".

Proceeding to the conclusion of his chapter, James recapitulates his main point:

See then how all these ultimate questions turn, as it were, upon their hinges; and from looking backwards upon principles, upon an *erkenntnistheoretische Ich*, a God, a *Kausalitätsprinzip*, a Design, a Free-will, taken in themselves, as something august and exalted above facts, – see, I say, how pragmatism shifts the emphasis and looks forward into facts themselves. The really vital question for us all is, What is this world going to be? What is life eventually to make of itself? The centre of gravity of philosophy must therefore alter its place. The earth of things, long thrown into shadow by the glories of the upper ether, must resume its rights.<sup>57</sup>

When the pragmatist performs this turning around, or shift of emphasis, s/he, however, lets the opposing traditional viewpoints each have their say. The Jamesian pragmatist employs the insights of the old metaphysical disputes, drawn from both sides, in order to locate the weak points of the opposing theses. The reason why this is possible is precisely the future-oriented, dynamic procedure of pragmatist inquiry. The metaphysical puzzles are not viewed as conflicts between two views complete and finished as they stand. Rather, the metaphysical problem is always an individual human being's – in the end, my – attempt to come to terms with the different considerations reason offers in favor of the antinomically conflicting positions in the midst of experience. It is such a concrete, individual inquirer who asks, "What is life eventually to make of itself?", and in the process of such an inquiry there is no permanent stopping place. The dialectics between opposing theses cannot simply go on forever, because one must live forward, encounter new experiential facts. It is for this reason that the original conflict can be transcended and the pragmatic middle ground may gradually (or suddenly) emerge. Typically, such a middle ground is opened when it is realized that the conflict has been premised on misleading background assumptions.

Now, the four metaphysical disputes James examines are not identical to the four antinomial conflicts of reason Kant examines in his chapter on the “Antinomy of Pure Reason”. Even the one also explicitly taken up by Kant, the problem of freedom vs. determinism,<sup>58</sup> is discussed by James in a loose, informal manner very different from Kant’s strictly argumentative presentation following the thesis/antithesis structure.<sup>59</sup> James, moreover, was generally critical of, even outright hostile to, many of Kant’s in his view unnecessarily complex ideas,<sup>60</sup> some of which he found paradigmatic examples of abstract principles oblivious of concrete experience and facts. Yet, it must be noted that Kant, no less than James, wanted to liberate philosophy from the supposed “glories of the upper ether” which his pre-critical, especially rationalist (Leibnizian-Wolffian), predecessors had believed to be able to reach. 35

In their different ways, both Kant and James insist on the need to locate and abandon a mistaken assumption – i.e., metaphysical realism, or what Kant called “transcendental realism” – that sets the kind of metaphysical issues we have examined on the wrong track from the very beginning. This is, as we have seen, the assumption that there is a prior, metaphysically fundamental fact of the matter about, say, the world as a totality or about freedom. Although reason entirely naturally falls into “transcendental illusion” by seeking the “unconditioned” ground of conditioned phenomena,<sup>61</sup> harmful metaphysical errors result only when this tendency of reason is connected with transcendently realistic assumptions, particularly the assumptions that there is an absolutely independent world *an sich* with its ready-made, pre-categorized ontological structure, that it makes sense to talk about such a fundamental reality, and that it could even be an object of human representation and cognition. These assumptions, closely resembling the ones Putnam later rejected under the label of “metaphysical realism”, are attacked equally forcefully, though by means of quite different arguments, by Kant and James alike. 36

James’s criticism of traditional metaphysical problems and theories and his ethical seriousness about metaphysical problems, when pragmatically considered, are, we may now observe, parts of the same essentially Kantian attempt to avoid dogmatic extremes in metaphysics, to pragmatically occupy the humanly habitable middle ground by giving up the presuppositions that lead the disputes astray. This criticism of pre-critical metaphysics is in fact closely connected with the ethically oriented attempt to bring to the fore the true pragmatic core of metaphysical issues. 37

## 5. Pragmatic pluralism in Jamesian neopragmatism

Turning for a moment from James himself to later philosophers influenced by him, we might read a neo-Jamesian pragmatist like Putnam as similarly challenging the standard divisions between and the order of priority among philosophical subdisciplines, especially metaphysics (which Putnam now rather calls “ontology”) and ethics.<sup>62</sup> As James argued, our ethical needs may legitimately influence our metaphysical commitments. Again, if we really pragmatically *need to* commit ourselves to a certain worldview, then that view may, because of such a need, be held as (*prima facie*) true. In a Jamesian spirit, Putnam urges that we need to develop “moral images of the world” in which metaphysical and ethical elements are entangled.<sup>63</sup> 38

In a recent book, he claims, with Emmanuel Levinas, that there is something seriously wrong with the ontological pursuit as such, especially with the attempt to ground ethics in “being”, because of the “totalizing” nature of such attempts.<sup>64</sup> Yet, it may be suggested, *contra* Putnam’s “ethics without ontology”, that ontology *can* be retained within a more inclusive and more fundamental ethical framework, that is, that ontology can – with some help drawn from James – be pragmatically reoriented in a manner that turns it less totalizing. Arguably, a Jamesian conception of metaphysics, given its ethical basis, can avoid the charge sometimes made against Western metaphysics (or ontology) more generally, namely, that ontologizing – about, say, the notion of substance or the relation between the self and the world – opens the doors to injustice, even murder and genocide, by failing to account for genuine “otherness”.<sup>65</sup> 39

While the Jamesian pragmatist should applaud Putnam’s “ethics without ontology” as an articulation of a key pragmatist theme, the autonomy and irreducibility of serious human practices, especially ethics,<sup>66</sup> s/he should *not* entirely reject ontological theorizing, when interpreted in a Kantian-like transcendental sense. Ethics, and more generally philosophical inquiry into human values, may be a fundamental part of such a non-metaphysically-realist conception of metaphysics “with a human face”.<sup>67</sup> Values *are* a crucial aspect of the human reality (transcendentally) investigated in such a pragmatist ontology. The pragmatist may, for example, maintain that values “exist” as cultural entities irreducible to physical or mental entities. Part of saying that tables, chairs, or semantic entities need not be seen as “occult”, as Putnam often says, *is* to say that these entities do exist as genuinely as electrons and magnetic fields, though in a pragmatic sense. (Even electrons and other theoretical entities postulated in science exist in a pragmatic sense, as elements of the highly workable scheme of physics.) The same holds for values, whose existence is irreducibly cultural. 40

As an example of pragmatist metaphysics that even Putnam – or James himself, for that matter – *might* be able to endorse, we may take a brief look at Sandra Rosenthal’s “speculative pragmatism”, a metaphysical system inspired by classical pragmatism. Whereas traditional metaphysics deals with “categories of being”, as explained above in section 2, the speculative pragmatist (not unlike Kant) understands categories as “the most fundamental principles of ordering by the mind”, “deeply embedded – though nonetheless alterable – a priori structures that reflect the purposive attitudes in terms of which we approach the independent element [of reality]”.<sup>68</sup> The reality we “produce” by imposing our categories is not independent of the “projected meanings” we use to classify experience; it is a “*worldly reality*” that “emerges from the projection of meanings upon that which is independently there and which reveals itself through such meanings”.<sup>69</sup> Rosenthal defines metaphysics as “a description of the basic contours or delineations made within our lived experience”.<sup>70</sup> This characterization would undoubtedly be available to James, so why not to Putnam, too? Moreover, Rosenthal’s struggle with realism is closely reminiscent of James’s and Putnam’s: while our categories must be applicable to an “independently real” universe, “[w]e cannot get outside our intentional relatedness to the independently real to examine it in its character as independent. The characterization of the features of independent reality as independent of human experience can itself be only a categorization within experience to make experience more intelligible.”<sup>71</sup> The independence of reality, the fact that we cannot just make up the way things are, is part of the way *we* pragmatically structure the world, part of the way the world is for us.

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Accordingly, the “independent reality” is independent in the empirical, factual, or causal sense, yet transcendently constituted by our categorization of it *as* independent (though this is not Rosenthal’s way of expressing herself). The Jamesian pragmatist can, and should, agree. Putnam, as a pragmatist, should also endorse the view that the “independent reality” is a pragmatic postulation. He, as any Jamesian philosopher, should and probably would agree with Rosenthal that no metaphysical knowledge transcending the “meaningfulness that can emerge only through some interpretive structure” is available because the “radically nonspectator position” of speculative pragmatism cannot be abandoned.<sup>72</sup> Hence, even a pluralist neopragmatism such as Putnam’s, apparently strictly anti-metaphysical, is compatible with a suitably understood, pragmatized metaphysics of human reality.

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Putnam, then, is as ambiguous as James himself between rejecting ontology altogether and rejecting only “Ontology” (with a capital “O”) and preserving less metaphysically-realist, less hubristic ontological inquiry into the pragmatically constituted human world. This ambiguity may have something to do with what might be regarded as his more fundamental ambiguity – which I see as analogous to the “divided self” of his pragmatist hero, James.<sup>73</sup> This is the tension between, on the one side, constructive philosophical theorizing, including ontological theorizing (which, in Putnam’s case, results in pragmatic realism and pluralism), and, on the other side, the wish to write an obituary not only for Ontology<sup>74</sup> but for constructive, systematic philosophy in general, with a therapeutic appeal to the “ordinary” along the lines of the later Wittgenstein and his followers. It is not clear that such appeals to the ordinary are philosophically neutral or “ordinary” (everyday) matters; they may, even ontologically, amount to something quite extraordinary.<sup>75</sup> In any case, Putnam’s tension resembles the one Gale perceives in James’s inner division between “Promethean” pragmatism and religious mysticism – which is not to say that we should simply endorse Gale’s reading of James.

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## 6. Functionalism, emergence, and the metaphysics of truth(making)

Following Rosenthal, we may see emergence as a fundamental metaontological category in pragmatist metaphysics: all reality – not just mental or cultural entities – that is *for us* in a way or another is an emergent construct arising out of our transcendental-pragmatic constitutional activities. Equipped with the concept of emergence, though unable to define it with any precision here, we may return to James, especially some metaphysical aspects of his notorious conception of truth. I find it useful to compare James’s position to the *functionalist* theory of truth defended by Michael P. Lynch in his book, *True to Life* (2004),<sup>76</sup> and other recent publications. Lynch’s functionalism says that truth is a functional second-order property of beliefs, roughly in the sense in which functionalists in the philosophy of mind treat mental properties as functional properties of an organism. Just like a functional mental property can be realized by different physical states (even in very different physical organisms), without being identical to any physical property, different “first-order” properties of beliefs can play the functional role of truth, which cannot be reduced to any of those first-order properties. This idea is attractive in many ways, but with James I want to go further, proposing that truth is not only a functional property of beliefs but, more strongly, a particular kind of functional property: an *emergent property*. The truth of beliefs or theories<sup>77</sup> *emerges from* the natural properties of thought and inquiry grounding those beliefs and theories. Truth, then, is a dynamic property, requiring practices of inquiry as its base.

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The reason I am invoking these ideas is that they may quite naturally be seen as rearticulating James's pragmatism. While truth-theorists, including Lynch, understandably avoid formulating their views in controversial Jamesian terms, we should perceive that James's pragmatism about truth is (*pace* Lynch) in many ways close to the functionalist position. For instance, both emphasize the phenomenon of *multiple realizability*. Truth, according to James, is not "satisfaction" or workability *in abstracto* but in a variety of concrete different ways. The pragmatist, James says, "observes truth at its work in particular cases"; truth, then, "becomes a class-name for all sorts of definite working-values in experience", instead of being an "abstraction", as in "rationalism" or "intellectualism".<sup>78</sup> Sure, there are also differences between pragmatism and functionalism, e.g., regarding the Jamesian view that truth "*happens* to an idea" instead of being "a stagnant property inherent in" an idea (or some other truthbearer).<sup>79</sup> But again, this suggestion comes close to functionalism, if we keep in mind that this "happening" can be realized in many different ways in our truth-seeking practices. James's theory is "an account of truths in the plural, of processes of leading, realized *in rebus*"; "truth" is "simply a collective name for verification-processes", comparable to the way in which "health" or "wealth" are collective names for quite a variety of things that realize them or play the relevant roles.<sup>80</sup> The "workableness" of truth "means particular workings, physical or intellectual, actual or possible", inside concrete experience.<sup>81</sup> Truth "in the singular" is just a "collective name for truths in the plural", which consist of "series of definite events".<sup>82</sup> In order to "*define what you mean* by calling [statements and beliefs] true", you must refer to their "functional possibilities", or "functional workings", which may "differ in every single instance".<sup>83</sup>

Not only multiple realizability but more specifically the "emergence theory" of truth I am here outlining was anticipated by James: "Truths emerge from facts; but they dip forward into facts again and add to them; which facts again create or reveal new truth [...]"<sup>84</sup> If facts, as James thinks, are partly constituted by our human (habits of) action, by our purposive practices in terms of which we structure reality, the Jamesian view comes close to the claim that truth is an emergent property of our truth-seeking practices, as those practices constitute "the facts" (or things) our truths are true about.<sup>85</sup> Moreover, pragmatic truth is always "true for him who experiences the workings",<sup>86</sup> within one or another practice or experiential context.

Not only truth, functionally conceived, but perhaps even the concept of *truthmaking* – an increasingly popular methodological weapon among realist metaphysicians – can be accommodated within Jamesian pragmatism.<sup>87</sup> If so, a full-blown metaphysics of truth very different from metaphysical realists' and correspondence theoreticians' accounts could be based on James's central views. James, as noted, famously argued for a dynamic conception of truth according to which truths are "made" rather than found, i.e., made in the course of human experience: truth "*happens* to an idea", instead of being a timeless, abstract, unchanging relation eternally obtaining between a true idea and something that exists independently of it (and which the truth, according to the most naive versions of realism, simply "copies"). Thus, ideas or beliefs (or other truthbearers) are not eternally true but "*become true just in so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience*".<sup>88</sup> "Truth is *made*, just as health, wealth and strength are made, in the course of experience".<sup>89</sup> Even the regulative notion of "absolute truth" designates something that "will have to be *made*, made as a relation incidental to the growth of a mass of verification-experience, to which the half-true ideas are all along contributing their quota".<sup>90</sup>

In passages like this, the notion of truthmaking is at least metaphorically employed, albeit within an overall position very different from, say, Armstrong's metaphysical realism in which truthmaking is a core methodological concept.<sup>91</sup> James, seeking the "cash-value" of truths "in experiential terms",<sup>92</sup> has little patience with the view, held in his days by Bertrand Russell, among others, that truths correspond to or are made true by objects or states of affairs that exist independently of those truths. Instead, the making of truths in and through experience amounts to the making of reality: the world – as experienced and understood by us humans – is a human construction, at least up to a point.<sup>93</sup> The direction of determination is not, or not merely, from the world to the true beliefs that are about it; human subjects of (true) belief, with their pragmatic needs and habits of action, partly determine what the world is like.

Let us – turning from the concept of truth to the other pole of the truthmaking relation, the concept of reality (the world) – take a look at a few other key passages in which James employs the concept of "making". In *A Pluralistic Universe*, he claims, with Henri Bergson, that "[w]hat really *exists* is not things made but things in the making" and talks about "put[ting] yourself *in the making*" of things "by a stroke of intuitive sympathy".<sup>94</sup> In this sense, reality is something we help to create, to which we always inevitably make an "addition" – in a word, something "still in the making".<sup>95</sup> Anything we may call a *thing* is "carved out" by us.<sup>96</sup> Here, of course, the relevant "making" relation is not the Armstrongian realist truthmaking relation obtaining between a true proposition and the independent piece of reality which necessitates its truth.<sup>97</sup> Yet, the "making" of reality James talks about seems to be something the "world" itself does, too, insofar as we, as experiencers and cognizers of reality, are parts of the world we help to structure. Truth- or worldmaking would be impossible without our

transcendental contribution to the way(s) the world is, but empirically speaking we are undeniably parts of the world as well.

The world can thus be said to make truths true, but only through us, *for whom* there is a world (or truth) in the first place. There is, perhaps, some sort of primary reality independently of us, but *that* reality makes nothing true, any more than Kant's *Ding an sich* does; it is a mere abstraction of thought, or, in James's words, something "absolutely dumb and evanescent, the merely ideal limit of our minds".<sup>98</sup> From James's point of view, one might argue that if realist (Aristotelian or Armstrongian) metaphysicians regard that kind of metaphysically primary reality as the source of truthmakers, they erroneously claim something about a reality which can have no structure for us at all. Any structured reality – any reality whose elements could make anything true – must, according to pragmatism, be a humanly categorized reality. (This, again, is a transcendental "must", stating a condition of intelligibility we cannot overlook.) All categorization, moreover, arises as a response to specific needs (to be further analyzed along pragmatist lines); accordingly, if the world or reality is to make any truths true, it must already have been "made", and must be continuously remade, by us world-categorizing concept-users whose categorizing activities are themselves constrained by and oriented toward certain human needs, goals, interests, or purposes. The world which makes our truths true is itself continuously "in the making".

Jamesian pragmatists, thus, *can* (though need not) employ *a* concept of truthmaking, although such a concept must, in pragmatism, be employed within an overall metaphysics very different from metaphysical realism – a more processual, dynamic, practice-embedded metaphysics that refuses to draw any principled dichotomies between the world as it is in itself and the world as it is experienced by humans engaging in their unending diversity of practices and habits of action. Such a metaphysics can still be realist, though only *pragmatically realist*, insofar as it does not reject the claim that there is something "out there" that we never made up *ex nihilo*. Pragmatists, emphasizing our need to struggle with the concrete facts of worldly existence, should be the first to note that truthmaking is not, naively, a "making up" of truths. We live in a concrete natural world, shaping the world through our experiences, and it is this very world, to some extent shaped by us but irreducible to our contingent and changing structurings of it, that makes true whatever we claim to be true, insofar as our claims to truth are (pragmatically) justified.

## 7. Scientific realism within Jamesian pragmatism?

I will take up one final example of the tension between metaphysics and anti-metaphysics, as it emerges in James. Pragmatist philosophy of science, though often seen as *instrumentalist* and therefore essentially anti-metaphysical (with some justification for this interpretation in James's and Dewey's writings), can be (re)interpreted as a form of *pragmatic scientific realism*, again to be clearly distinguished from metaphysical realism.<sup>99</sup> Science does not, according to this view, describe the world as it is in itself, but scientific theories are not mere instruments for the prediction of observable phenomena, either.

Peirce, given his account of truth as the "final opinion" of an idealized research community using the scientific method, is a classic of what is known as scientific realism. The same can hardly be said about James. On the contrary, it is easy to see James as a precursor of instrumentalism, one of the major anti-realist orientations in twentieth century philosophy of science. In *Pragmatism*, we find, for instance, the following remarks:

[A]s the sciences have developed farther, the notion has gained ground that most, perhaps all, of our laws are only approximations. The laws themselves, moreover, have grown so numerous that there is no counting them; and so many rival formulations are proposed in all the branches of science that investigators have become accustomed to the notion that no theory is absolutely a transcript of reality, but that any one of them may from some point of view be useful. Their great use is to summarize old facts and to lead to new ones. They are only a man-made language, a conceptual shorthand [...], in which we write our reports of nature [...].<sup>100</sup>

[W]e are witnessing a curious reversion of the common-sense way of looking at physical nature, in the philosophy of science favored by such men as Mach, Ostwald and Duhem. According to these teachers no hypothesis is truer than any other in the sense of being a more literal copy of reality. They are all but ways of talking on our part, to be compared solely from the point of view of their *use*. The only literally true thing is *reality*; and the only reality we know is, for these logicians, sensible reality, the flux of our sensations and emotions as they pass.<sup>101</sup>

Scientific theories, then, are for James essentially "*instruments, not answers to enigmas*".<sup>102</sup> They enable us to cope with the world; their purpose is not to "copy" the facts. Their truth lies in their usefulness. Scientific ideas "agree" with

their objects only in the more or less operationalist sense of a practical process of conduction leading from a present idea to a future one: “The term ‘energy’ doesn’t even pretend to stand for anything ‘objective.’ It is only a way of measuring the surface of phenomena so as to string their changes on a simple formula.”<sup>103</sup> James does talk about “approximation”, but he does not seem to have in mind the scientific realists’ view of the approximation of truth by means of successive theories increasing in verisimilitude.<sup>104</sup> Rather, contrasting approximation with truth as a “literal copy”, he rejects the realist idea that our theories could represent the way things theory-independently are. James’s empiricism, influenced by Mach, Ostwald, Duhem, Poincaré, and others,<sup>105</sup> thus led him at least close to the anti-metaphysical position usually called instrumentalism. Another major factor that led James to pursue these ideas was undoubtedly his need to acknowledge both science and religion as equally legitimate, and equally well experientially anchored, perspectives on reality.

However, immediately after the second of the above-quoted passages, James points out that the view he discusses “seems to be too economical to be all-sufficient”, because “[p]rofusion, not economy, may after all be reality’s key-note”.<sup>106</sup> He also rejects Berkeleyan phenomenalism on pragmatic grounds, emphasizing that “the category of trans-perceptual reality is now one of the foundations of our life”,<sup>107</sup> even though (as we saw in section 4 above) he celebrated Berkeley’s attack on material substance. Hence, in James we can observe, instead of a clear acceptance of instrumentalism, a *tension* between instrumentalist and realist ideas, pretty much as we find in his works a tension between idealist and realist viewpoints, and between scientific and religious perspectives.

James was definitely *not* a scientific realist, if scientific realism is defined as the thesis that scientific theories provide us with the only true (or truthlike) picture of reality, or that the “scientific image” is ontologically prior to, and may eventually replace, the “manifest image” we are acquainted with in our ordinary experience.<sup>108</sup> But his views are compatible with scientific realism in the sense of the rejection of unnatural skeptical doubts about the existence of theoretical entities postulated in the actual course of scientific theorization, as long as such theorization is firmly rooted in its humanly natural practical background in which the postulation of theoretical entities plays a pragmatically relevant role in terms of future experience. Of course, all pragmatists should admit that the specific postulations of unobservable entities in (current) scientific theories may turn out to be ill-founded. But as fallibilists we should adopt such a critical, open attitude to any human claims whatsoever. The key pragmatist move is to liberate not only science but also scientific realism – and other philosophical interpretations of science – from foundationalist pursuits of certainty, essences, and other remnants of “first philosophy”. Again, metaphysics is here saved in one (critical) sense though abandoned in another. There is no reason to suppose that Jamesian pragmatism would necessarily be at odds with scientific realism acknowledging the pursuit of truth (also about unobservables) as a key aim of science, provided that this pursuit is given a pragmatic interpretation rather than a metaphysically realist one.

Just as in the case of Putnam’s worries about ontology, the issue may here be partly terminological: we are seeking a proper way to use the notion of “scientific realism”. However, again, such a seemingly innocent terminological choice may have wide-ranging pragmatic effects on how we construe some of the central problems in the philosophy of science.

## 8. James and transcendental pragmatism: Seigfried vs. Myers revisited

If the examples discussed in sections 3-7 are plausible, it emerges that Jamesian pragmatism can very well accommodate metaphysics, though not metaphysical realism. It can, in particular, accommodate a transcendental metaphysics, understood as an inquiry into a humanly categorized reality. Indeed, pragmatism yields an important species of transcendental metaphysics, or of transcendental philosophy understood as ontologically relevant. Here, an interesting parallel not only between James and Kant but also between James and Wittgenstein can be noted. Both have been read as leading anti-metaphysicians, but both have also offered us resources for a humanized, pragmatically transcendental metaphysics.<sup>109</sup>

Let us briefly return to the debate between Seigfried and Myers referred to at the beginning of this essay. I hardly need to repeat my claim that the kind of pragmatic reflection on the concreteness of lived experience Seigfried recommends is not incompatible with a transcendental-pragmatic metaphysics of the human world. It remains to be noted, however, that Seigfried’s own allegedly anti-metaphysical appeals to, say, the fact-value entanglement, the reality of relations, or the anti-metaphysically-realist view that reality is not “ready-made” but capable of being approached from multiple perspectives,<sup>110</sup> are themselves clear examples of the kind of pragmatically responsible metaphysics I have defended. This has been shown in detail by Myers,<sup>111</sup> so I need not dwell on the point here. Myers is, in my view, correct in stating that the pragmatist “not only can but must do metaphysics”, although the traditional ways of engaging in metaphysics must be rejected as misguided first-philosophical pursuits of foundations, absolutes, and timeless truths.<sup>112</sup> Where I would like to go beyond Myers,

while agreeing with his basic criticism of Seigfried, is in my suggestion of situating pragmatist (primarily Jamesian) metaphysics in the tradition of Kantian transcendental philosophy. This, however, by no means makes pragmatist metaphysics foundationalist or anti-fallibilist. All the virtues of naturalized metaphysics can be maintained.

One of my specific proposals at this point is that Myers's case against Seigfried's anti-metaphysical construal of pragmatism can be more convincingly formulated, *if* (i) pragmatism – both old (e.g., James's) and new (e.g., Putnam's) – is interpreted transcendently, as I have suggested, though in a “naturalized” sense,<sup>113</sup> and (ii) both Jamesian pragmatism and its transcendental rearticulation are compared to the parallel issue of whether Wittgenstein (especially in his later philosophy) engaged in metaphysics. This, ultimately, goes back to the question of whether Kant, the father of modern transcendental philosophy and (arguably) a grandfather of pragmatism, engaged in metaphysics or, alternatively, in the critique of metaphysics.<sup>114</sup> Although I am unable to deal with such interpretive issues here, my answer is that he did, of course, both – as did Wittgenstein. The key novelty in the Jamesian pragmatist's way of doing both things is her/his attempt to perceive the core of metaphysical issues in their ethical import (as briefly discussed above in section 3).

It is often suggested that pragmatism is a *mere method*, instead of being a metaphysical system. This is right to the extent that James abhorred all closed “systems”. However, it is the pragmatic method itself that makes pragmatism *more* than a mere method – in a word, as we have seen, a metaphysics of the human world as practice-laden, as a reality possessing a “practical character”, as a “reality-of-use-and-in-use” (as Dewey put it).<sup>115</sup> We may express this idea by saying that pragmatism provides us with, or *is*, a *philosophical anthropology*.<sup>116</sup> As the pragmatic method encourages us to look and see what kind of conceivable practical results follow from our philosophical views, the metaphysics vs. methodology dichotomy collapses practically from within, through our use of the pragmatic method. This distinction may serve, locally and contextually, various pragmatic purposes and may, accordingly, be of genuine heuristic value. But as a general (meta)philosophical distinction, its pragmatic value is virtually non-existent.<sup>117</sup>

Furthermore, the philosophical anthropology that both Jamesian pragmatism and its transcendental rearticulation lead us to – i.e., a metaphysical account of the possible objects of a human world – is, in a word, a *transcendental anthropology*.<sup>118</sup> This form of philosophical anthropology is not naively empirical; nor is it “pure” or aprioristic in the sense in which naturalists are cautious about claims to pure philosophy. It is empirically informed, metaphysically concerned, and methodologically self-reflective. It is, in short, a true mixture of metaphysical and methodological insights, governed by the use of the pragmatic method.

I need to address one final worry. Insofar as the pragmatic method can be employed in order to destroy unhelpful dichotomies, such as the one between metaphysics and methodology, or between the world in itself and the world for us, why not also use it to attack the key Kantian distinction between the *transcendental* (i.e., a *method* of inquiry or argumentation seeking the necessary conditions for the possibility of some given actualities) and the *transcendent* (i.e., an illegitimate *metaphysics* exceeding the limits of cognitive experience set by the use of the transcendental method)?<sup>119</sup> Isn't even my pragmatic defense of metaphysics, my Jamesian attempt to establish a pragmatist metaphysics, in the end committed to the original sin of metaphysics, the aspiration toward transcendent truth and essences? Here we must remember that one of the basic points of Jamesian pragmatism is that the acceptability of any concept or conception, including any conceptual dichotomy, must be evaluated on the basis of its (conceivable) pragmatic effects in particular humanly relevant situations. Now, is a *general* distinction between metaphysics and methodology helpful in such a pragmatic manner, when applied to cases such as the pragmatic method? My answer is *no*. But this does *not* mean that no *particular* metaphysics vs. method distinction could ever be helpful. The Kantian distinction between the transcendental and the transcendent does, by pragmatic standards, important work by helping us to keep apart the legitimate concern with the conditions for the possibility of experience and the illegitimate attempt to transcend the limits set, however temporarily, pragmatically, and historically contingently, by some particular constellation of such conditions. Therefore, we need not abandon the Kantian distinction, even if we admit, as I have done, that there is a metaphysical element involved in transcendently reconceptualized pragmatism and pragmatic transcendental anthropology in addition to, and inseparably tied up with, pragmatic methodology.

This is one example of the way in which we can *reflexively* apply the pragmatic method of concept-explication to examine the relevant conceptual contexts of the legitimate uses of this method itself. Jamesian pragmatism, unlike metaphysical realism, is above all a self-reflective enterprise. Such a reflexivity ought to be seen as one of the most urgent themes to be explored by Jamesian philosophers.<sup>120</sup> The self-reflection demanded by the pragmatist approach may, and should, lead to a transformation of our concepts of transcendentality, metaphysics, and methodology themselves – and, even more reflexively, to a reconceptualization of pragmatism, the pragmatic method, and the ideal of reflexive philosophical thinking. Such continuous openness to conceptual transformation is especially needed in metaphysics, if metaphysical questions are pursued in a Jamesian pragmatic spirit.

## 9. Conclusion

I conclude that pragmatist metaphysics, as an inquiry into the categorial yet always already humanly categorized nature or basic structure of reality, should be understood as a form of philosophical (transcendental) anthropology. This, as we have seen, is a Kantian way of understanding the basic task of philosophy. James turns out to be a pragmatic philosophical anthropologist *par excellence*, and this is something that makes him *both* a Kantian *and* a metaphysically oriented thinker, though “metaphysically oriented” only in a critical, post-Kantian sense. For James as much as for Kant, philosophy culminates in the question, “What is man?” (or more politically correctly, “What is a human being?”), that is, the key question of philosophical anthropology, which is the starting point for any pragmatically conceivable metaphysical inquiry. This question, instead of, say, “What is Being?”, is the heart of James’s pragmatist metaphysics, which must, therefore, wear a “human face”.<sup>121</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Charlene Haddock Seigfried, “Pragmatist Metaphysics? Why Terminology Matters”, *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 37 (2001), 13-21; William T. Myers, “Pragmatist Metaphysics: A Defense”, *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 40 (2004), 39-52; and Seigfried, “Ghosts Walking Underground: Dewey’s Vanishing Metaphysics”, *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 40 (2004), 53-81.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1982), and Rorty, *Truth and Progress* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Seigfried, “Pragmatist Metaphysics?”, p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> Seigfried does not even regard this part of James’s thought as a metaphysical system. She claims that radical empiricism, because restricting philosophical discussion to “things that are or can be experienced”, does not need metaphysical explanations. (*Ibid.*, p. 16.) Most commentators have, however, read James’s essays on radical empiricism as outlining his own preferred metaphysics. For Seigfried’s earlier discussions of James’s ideas, including radical empiricism and its relation to pragmatism, see Charlene Haddock Seigfried, *William James’s Radical Reconstruction of Philosophy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> In this paper, I use “metaphysics” and “ontology” more or less interchangeably, meaning by both “general metaphysics” (*metaphysica generalis*), which must be distinguished from the special areas of metaphysics (*metaphysica specialis*), such as the metaphysics of the mind (or soul), metaphysical cosmology, and the metaphysical speculations about God’s existence.

<sup>7</sup> Therefore, it is slightly misleading to describe the “Kantian” metaphysician’s categories as “fundamental” (in a metaphysical sense), because they are not categories of an independent, fundamental reality.

<sup>8</sup> Michael J. Loux, *Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2002 [1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1998]), p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>10</sup> E.J. Lowe, *The Possibility of Metaphysics: Substance, Identity and Time* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001 [first published 1998]), pp. 3-8.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Loftson, *Reality: Fundamental Topics in Metaphysics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), p. x.

<sup>12</sup> Cf., e.g., Loux, *Metaphysics*; as well as Jaegwon Kim and Ernest Sosa (eds.), *Metaphysics: An Anthology* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> I am not here concerned with the twists and turns in Putnam's treatments of metaphysical realism. See, e.g., Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), and Putnam, *Words and Life*, ed. James Conant (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1994); as well as Sami Pihlström, *Structuring the World: The Issue of Realism and the Nature of Ontological Problems in Classical and Contemporary Pragmatism*, Acta Philosophica Fennica 59 (Helsinki: The Philosophical Society of Finland, 1996), and Pihlström, *Pragmatism and Philosophical Anthropology: Understanding Our Human Life in a Human World* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998). It is quite clear that Loftson's "unitarianism", for instance, is a close relative of metaphysical realism, because the metaphysical realist insists that the world can in principle be accurately described in one total theory from a "God's-Eye View".

<sup>14</sup> See D.M. Armstrong, *A World of States of Affairs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), and Armstrong, *Truth and Truthmakers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); as well as David Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).

<sup>15</sup> These metaphorical notions have been widely used in recent philosophy. On the "absolute conception of the world", see Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985); on the possibility of a "view from nowhere", see Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). The notion of a "non-perspectival", absolute representation has been criticized by Putnam in a series of works in the 1980s and 1990s (see note 13 above) – and by many others; cf. also Sami Pihlström, *Naturalizing the Transcendental: A Pragmatic View* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus/Humanity Books, 2003), ch. 5.

<sup>16</sup> See *ibid.*, as well as Sami Pihlström, "Synthesizing Traditions: Rewriting the History of Pragmatism and Transcendental Philosophy", forthcoming in *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 23 (2006).

<sup>17</sup> On this ontological interpretation of pragmatism, see Pihlström, *Structuring the World*; for some comparisons to Wittgenstein and phenomenology, see Pihlström, *Naturalizing the Transcendental*, ch. 2. Here I make no claims to interpreting any of the classical or contemporary pragmatists, apart from James, but it should be clear that Putnam's views on realism are close to the position I am aiming at – although it should be noted that Putnam would not accept the transcendental vocabulary I help myself to. (For some further remarks on Putnam's neo-Jamesian pragmatism, see section 5 below.)

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, the realistic versions of pragmatism defended in Susan Haack, *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate: Unfashionable Essays* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), and in Nicholas Rescher, *Realistic Pragmatism: An Introduction to Pragmatic Philosophy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000).

<sup>19</sup> For an illuminating discussion of this phenomenon, see the "Introduction" to Robert C. Stalnaker, *Ways a World Might Be: Metaphysical and Anti-Metaphysical Essays* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>20</sup> The potential connections between pragmatism and the "historical ontology" defended in Ian Hacking's *Historical Ontology* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2002) would deserve a separate treatment.

<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., the works by Loux and Lowe cited above.

<sup>22</sup> In her recent defense of an essentially Peircean approach to metaphysics, Susan Haack quotes the following remark by Peirce, noting that this leads to a "reformed, scientific metaphysics": "[I]nstead of merely jeering at

metaphysics, [...] the pragmatist extracts from it a precious essence, which will serve to give life and light to cosmology and physics.” See Haack, “Not Cynicism, but Synechism: Lessons from Classical Pragmatism”, *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 41 (2005), 239-253 (the quote is on p. 244). For the original source, see Charles S. Peirce, *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, 8 vols, eds. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (vols 1-6) and Arthur W. Burks (vols 7-8) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931-58), 5.423 (1905). While I sympathize with the idea that pragmatism “extracts” the “essence” of metaphysical disputes, I will cite James rather than Peirce as my favorite philosopher showing how this can be done. And though I agree that pragmatism should not discard metaphysics and should, as Haack argues later in her paper (p. 248), steer clear of both apriorism and scientism, I find Haack’s metaphysical project – just as Peirce’s own – too realistic, metaphysically realistic, in comparison to Jamesian pragmatism.

<sup>23</sup> For an historical overview of the relations between pragmatism and emergentism, see Charbel Niño El-Hani and Sami Pihlström, “Emergence Theories and Pragmatic Realism”, *Essays in Philosophy* 3:2 (2002), online: [www.humboldt.edu/~essays](http://www.humboldt.edu/~essays). It might be noted that, among Dewey’s followers, Sidney Hook in particular was interested in metaphysics: see Hook, *The Metaphysics of Pragmatism* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1996 [first published 1927]). Another, more recent application of pragmatic naturalism and emergentism in metaphysics is Sandra Rosenthal’s system entitled *Speculative Pragmatism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986). I will briefly get back to her views.

<sup>24</sup> See, for this notion of tolerance, Robert G. Meyers, “Meaning and Metaphysics in James” (1971), in Doris Olin (ed.), *William James: Pragmatism, in Focus* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 143-155 (especially pp. 149-151).

<sup>25</sup> William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, eds. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1975 [first published 1907]), p. 29. The background of James’s formulation was Peirce’s account in the 1870s. (The relevant essays, “The Fixation of Belief” [1877] and “How to Make Our Ideas Clear” [1878] can be found in Peirce’s *Collected Papers*, vol. 5.) For a discussion of these two pragmatists’ interpretations of the pragmatic maxim, see Sami Pihlström, “Peirce’s Place in the Pragmatist Tradition”, in Cheryl Misak (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Peirce* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 27-57.

<sup>26</sup> For an excellent recent discussion of James’s pragmatic view on metaphysical problems, see Ludwig Nagl, “The Insistence on Futurity: Pragmatism’s Temporal Structure”, in William Egginton and Mike Sandbothe (eds.), *The Pragmatic Turn in Philosophy: Contemporary Engagements between Analytic and Continental Thought* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2004), pp. 11-29. See also Meyers, “Meaning and Metaphysics in James”.

<sup>27</sup> William James, *Some Problems of Philosophy: A Beginning of an Introduction to Philosophy*, Bison Books edition, ed. Ellen Kappy Suckiel (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1996 [first published 1911]), p. 32. Two pages later (p. 34), James concludes: “There must in short be metaphysicians. Let us for a while become metaphysicians ourselves.”

<sup>28</sup> Seigfried, “Pragmatist Metaphysics?”, p. 14. That this pragmatist way of taking “concrete experience” as a starting-point need not lead to a wholesale rejection of metaphysics – and that Seigfried’s own paper is full of metaphysical statements – is demonstrated in Myers, “Pragmatist Metaphysics: A Defense”. In particular, I agree with Myers that pragmatist metaphysics, even in the transcendental rearticulation I am proposing, is revisable, fallible, and non-foundationalist. See, however, also Seigfried’s response to Myers in her 2004 paper focusing on Dewey, “Ghosts Walking Underground: Dewey’s Vanishing Metaphysics”; and cf. section 8 below.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. also H.S. Thayer, *Meaning and Action: A Critical History of Pragmatism* (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968), pp. 420-421.

<sup>30</sup> This is not to say that there are no metaphysical disputes that are empty from such a pragmatic perspective. For instance, the problem of whether to accept universals or tropes might be such a dispute. But even such overly

abstract metaphysical problems *may* turn out to have pragmatically significant ethical bearings, and whenever confronting such a problem, the pragmatist should be alerted to carefully look for its possible ethical relevance.

<sup>31</sup> John P. Murphy, *Pragmatism: From Peirce to Davidson* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990), p. 35.

<sup>32</sup> For a discussion of the similarities and differences between James's and Schiller's pragmatism, in relation to the realism issue, in particular, see Pihlström, *Pragmatism and Philosophical Anthropology*, ch. 1.

<sup>33</sup> For related reflections on the Kantian aspects of James's philosophy of religion, see Sami Pihlström, "William James on Death, Mortality, and Immortality", *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 38 (2002), 605-628, and Pihlström, "On the Reality of Evil: A Jamesian Investigation", *Streams of William James* 4:2 (2002), 12-21.

<sup>34</sup> For the holistic epistemology of pragmatism, see Morton White, *A Philosophy of Culture: The Scope of Holistic Pragmatism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), as well as my review of White's book in *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 39 (2003).

<sup>35</sup> Wesley Cooper, *The Unity of William James's Thought* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2002).

<sup>36</sup> Cooper, however, correctly notes that James's conception of God is tied to his pragmatism and ethics in the sense that the pragmatic meaning of "God exists" lies in the ways in which this belief or idea leads believers to make the world better (*ibid.*, p. 21). The pragmatic rationality of theistic belief is, thus, a form of its epistemic justification with both practical and cognitive elements, without assuming any sharp dichotomy between these two (*cf. ibid.*, pp. 21, 195; see also Pihlström, *Pragmatism and Philosophical Anthropology*, ch. 6).

<sup>37</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, p. 28.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 48-56.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 50 ff.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56. Compare the discussion of free will in terms of its "promise" of "relief" (*ibid.*, pp. 59-62, especially p. 61), or the issue of "the one and the many" (*ibid.*, ch. 4), "the most central of all philosophic problems, central because so pregnant" (p. 64), or the melioristic religion defended in *ibid.*, ch. 8. For James's last formulations of what metaphysics meant for him, how it is related to science (and religion), and what its central problems are, see his posthumously published *Some Problems of Philosophy*, chs. 1-2; for James's Schopenhauerian wrestling with the "problem of being", the question of why there is anything at all, see *ibid.*, ch. 3. "The question of being is the darkest in all philosophy", James concludes (p. 46).

<sup>46</sup> William James, *The Meaning of Truth*, eds. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1978 [first published 1909]), p. 72.

<sup>47</sup> See Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1781 = A, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1787 = B), ed. Raymund Schmidt (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1990), A405 / B432 ff.

<sup>48</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, pp. 46-48. Thus, James writes (p. 47): “Berkeley’s criticism of ‘matter’ was consequently absolutely pragmatistic. Matter is known as our sensations of colour, figure, hardness and the like. They are the cash-value of the term. The difference matter makes to us by truly being is that we then get such sensations; by not being, is that we lack them. These sensations are its sole meaning. Berkeley doesn’t deny matter, then; he simply tells us what it consists of. It is a true name for just so much in the way of sensations.”

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., pp. 51-52.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., pp. 56-59 (original emphasis).

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>53</sup> James does sympathize with the theistic idea of design, though not with any of the traditional arguments for God’s existence (including the “argument from design”), when he writes (ibid., p. 59): “If not a blind force but a seeing force runs things, we may reasonably expect better issues. This vague confidence in the future is the sole pragmatic meaning at present discernible in the terms design and designer.”

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., pp. 59-62. In addition, the fourth lecture is entirely devoted to yet another metaphysical problem, “The One and the Many”, which James famously considered “the most central of all philosophic problems, central because so pregnant” (p. 64). I will neglect that issue here, because it is not a particularly good example of James’s concern with a “middle path” in metaphysics. James, after all, resolutely affirmed pluralism, rejecting monism. This indicates that his attempt to find a *via media* in metaphysical disputes was itself undogmatic: in some cases he strived for a middle path, in others he did not.

<sup>55</sup> Notably, the pragmatist is not only interested in short-term future but, “so far from keeping her eyes bent on the immediate practical foreground, as she is accused of doing, dwells just as much upon the world’s remotest perspectives” (ibid., p. 62).

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., pp. 60-61.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>58</sup> This, of course, is Kant’s Third Antinomy (see A444-451/B472-479).

<sup>59</sup> Henry E. Allison, in ch. 13 of his *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism: An Interpretation and Defense – A Revised and Enlarged Edition* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2004 [1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1983]), offers a clear outline of Kant’s arguments, particularly of the First and Third Antinomies.

<sup>60</sup> See my above-cited paper, “Synthesizing Traditions”, for some documentation.

<sup>61</sup> See Allison, *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism*, and especially Michelle Grier, *Kant’s Doctrine of Transcendental Illusion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>62</sup> It is unclear whether Putnam uses, or has ever used, the terms “ontology” and “metaphysics” interchangeably. He might view himself as doing metaphysics (in some pragmatically acceptable sense) even when attacking the very project of “Ontology”. Thus, my criticism of his position in this section is partly terminological – but terminological issues tend to be quite substantial in philosophy.

<sup>63</sup> See especially Hilary Putnam, *The Many Faces of Realism* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1987).

<sup>64</sup> Hilary Putnam, *Ethics without Ontology* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 23-24. Cf. Sami Pihlström, “Putnam’s Conception of Ontology”, forthcoming (with Putnam’s reply) in *Contemporary Pragmatism* 3 (2006).

<sup>65</sup> See, e.g., David Patterson, “The Philosophical Warrant for Genocide”, in John K. Roth (ed.), *Genocide and Human Rights: A Philosophical Guide* (Basingstoke and London: Palgrave, 2005), pp. 95-104.

<sup>66</sup> For a more comprehensive account, see Sami Pihlström, *Pragmatic Moral Realism: A Transcendental Defense* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2005).

<sup>67</sup> See Hilary Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face*, ed. James Conant (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1990).

<sup>68</sup> Rosenthal, *Speculative Pragmatism*, pp. 93-94.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>73</sup> As James scholars know, this tension has been excitingly analyzed in Richard M. Gale, *The Divided Self of William James* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>74</sup> For Putnam’s “obituary” for Ontology, see his *Ethics without Ontology*, Part I, ch. 4.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. here also Sami Pihlström, “Putnam and Rorty on Their Pragmatist Heritage: Re-reading James and Dewey”, in Elias L. Khalil (ed.), *Dewey, Pragmatism, and Economic Methodology* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 39-61.

<sup>76</sup> Michael P. Lynch, *True to Life: Why Truth Matters* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2004).

<sup>77</sup> Technically, we might treat sentences or propositions as the primary truthbearers, but for the purposes of my emergentist formulation, it is more natural to talk about beliefs and theories, as well as the processes and/or practices within which these are formulated. James usually speaks about “ideas” as true or false.

<sup>78</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, p. 38.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>81</sup> James, *The Meaning of Truth*, p. 7.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 118, 122, 129. One of the differences between James’s and Lynch’s views is undoubtedly the difference between James’s strong pragmatic pluralism and Lynch’s insistence on truth’s being, nonetheless, an

“objective kind” whose instantiation does not depend on our using the corresponding concept. From a Jamesian pragmatist perspective, Lynch, like so many other metaphysical realists, relies on a too strongly realistic distinction between *concepts* (that we invent) and *properties* (that we seek to identify and describe by means of those concepts), failing to pay due attention to the fact that any properties we are able to identify are already deeply shaped and structured by our conceptualizing practices. If metaphysical realism in this sense is rejected generally, it ought to be rejected in the case of the property of truth (and the corresponding concept) as well.

<sup>84</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, p. 108.

<sup>85</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, ch. 7. While Lynch relies on a metaphysically realist distinction between concepts and properties, the (Jamesian) pragmatist might – both in the case of truth and more generally – claim that properties and concepts emerge together from our discursive practices.

<sup>86</sup> James, *The Meaning of Truth*, p. 97.

<sup>87</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this point, see Sami Pihlström, “Truthmaking and Pragmatist Conceptions of Truth and Reality”, *Minerva* 9 (2005), 105-133, online: [www.ul.ie/~philos/](http://www.ul.ie/~philos/).

<sup>88</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, p. 34.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>91</sup> See Armstrong, *Truth and Truthmakers*.

<sup>92</sup> See James, *Pragmatism*, p. 97.

<sup>93</sup> This transcendental constitution of the categorial structure of reality in and through human practices was already discussed in sections 2-3 above.

<sup>94</sup> William James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, eds. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1977 [first published 1909]), pp. 117-118 (emphases in the original). It was already noted by Ralph Barton Perry in his path-breaking volume, *The Thought and Character of William James* (Briefer Version, New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, 1964 [first published 1948, 2-volume ed. originally 1935]), pp. 329-330, that there is a two-way relationship between *Pragmatism* and *A Pluralistic Universe*, or between pragmatism and metaphysical pluralism: James defends pluralism (and attacks monism) pragmatically, but conversely pragmatism “affords a special case of pluralistic metaphysics” (p. 329). As Perry says (p. 330): “Pragmatism does not merely provide a method which can be employed in metaphysics – it provides a metaphysics of truth which is consistent with that general metaphysics which James advocates [viz., pluralistic radical empiricism], through bringing the entire process of knowledge within the field of experience.”

<sup>95</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, pp. 121-123.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>97</sup> Cf. Armstrong, *Truth and Truthmakers*, ch. 2.

<sup>98</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, p. 119. Even so, James did not deny the existence of a “standing reality independent of the idea that knows it” (James, *The Meaning of Truth*, p. 88). Clearly, he wanted to save the minimal rational core of realism (and the correspondence theory), while defending a picture of truth richer and pragmatically more nuanced than the one he found in his realist rivals’ theories.

<sup>92</sup> For some elaboration on this idea, see Sami Pihlström, “How (Not) to Write the History of Pragmatist Philosophy of Science?”, forthcoming in *Perspectives on Science*.

<sup>100</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, p. 33.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 93. Compare: “There are so many geometries, so many logics, so many physical and chemical hypotheses, so many classifications, each one of them good for so much and yet not good for everything, that the notion that even the truest formula may be a human device and not a literal transcript has dawned upon us. We hear scientific laws now treated as so much ‘conceptual shorthand,’ true so far as they are useful but no farther. Our mind has become tolerant of symbol instead of reproduction, of approximation instead of exactness, of plasticity instead of rigor.” (James, *The Meaning of Truth*, p. 40.)

<sup>102</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, p. 32; original emphasis.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>104</sup> See, e.g., Ilkka Niiniluoto, *Critical Scientific Realism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>105</sup> See the editors’ notes to James’s *Pragmatism*, pp. 153-154.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>107</sup> James, *The Meaning of Truth*, p. 43.

<sup>108</sup> For such a strong conception of scientific realism, see Wilfrid Sellars, *Science, Perception and Reality* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963); and Raimo Tuomela, *Science, Action and Reality* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1985); for some criticism, see Pihlström, *Structuring the World*, ch. 4.

<sup>109</sup> See also, for a comprehensive discussion of the relation between these two great thinkers, Russell B. Goodman, *Wittgenstein and William James* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>110</sup> Seigfried, “Pragmatist Metaphysics?”, pp. 15-19. See also Seigfried, “Ghosts Walking Underground”, p. 60. I do agree with Seigfried that James criticized both rationalist and empiricist metaphysics (ibid., p. 64), but not with her stubborn insistence that he wanted to dispense with metaphysics altogether.

<sup>111</sup> For example, Myers notes that Seigfried’s way of speaking about “what ‘can be’ experienced” in her discussion of James’s radical empiricism is itself metaphysical (Myers, “Pragmatist Metaphysics”, p. 43).

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., pp. 49, 42.

<sup>113</sup> Cf. Pihlström, *Naturalizing the Transcendental*.

<sup>114</sup> This is what David Carr argues; see Carr, *The Paradox of Subjectivity: The Self in the Transcendental Tradition* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). See also Allison, *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism*.

<sup>115</sup> John Dewey, *Philosophy and Civilization* (New York: Milton, Balch & Company, 1931), pp. 39-41.

<sup>116</sup> See Pihlström, *Pragmatism and Philosophical Anthropology*; see also Sami Pihlström, “On the Concept of Philosophical Anthropology”, *Journal of Philosophical Research* 28 (2003), 259-285. Note, however, that philosophical anthropology need not, and should not, be committed to essentialist assumptions about an ahistorical, immutable “human nature”; our “nature” can be as variable and transformable as our practices or forms of life are. We should also not forget that the pragmatic method, far from being a proto-positivist anti-metaphysical weapon, is tolerant to metaphysics, interpreting metaphysical positions in terms of their potential pragmatic outcome, as was

suggested in section 3 above. This tolerance applies, specifically, to metaphysical views about what kind of an entity a human being or a person is, i.e., to philosophical anthropology.

<sup>117</sup> For a detailed discussion of this issue, see Sami Pihlström, “Methodology without Metaphysics? A Pragmatic Critique”, *Philosophy Today* 48 (2004), 188-215.

<sup>118</sup> On the notion of transcendental anthropology, see Jonathan Lear, *Open Minded: Working Out the Logic of the Soul* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1998). Lear’s context is Wittgenstein scholarship.

<sup>119</sup> I do not mean to imply that Kant himself always draws this distinction consistently.

<sup>120</sup> Cf. here also Pihlström, *Pragmatism and Philosophical Anthropology*, ch. 10.

<sup>121</sup> I am greatly indebted to Peter H. Hare’s advise regarding many of the issues raised in this paper. I also wish to thank an anonymous referee for helpful comments.

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## William James and the Promise of *Pragmatism*

Mathew A. Foust

*Abstract.* In this article, I address the matter of what James's *Pragmatism* has to offer someone today, a full century after its publication. Toward this end, I underscore the theme of meliorism present in the text, focusing on notions of "promise" employed by James at several points therein. James's emphasis on "promise" is predicated upon a deeply intimate relationship between humans and the world, such that our relationship to the universe is much like that which exists between promising parties. I argue that this aspect of James's discussion undergirds his conception of pragmatism as a method of inquiry and theory of truth capable of improving the human condition. I conclude that the "promise" of *Pragmatism* is the basis for at least one worthy response to the question of what James's century-old text has to offer someone today.

Whether by students, old friends, or new acquaintances; the skeptical, the curious, or the fascinated; it is with great frequency that I find myself asked some variation of the question, "What does a philosophical text written over a hundred years ago have to offer to *me*, someone living today?" For those whose livelihoods are bound up in reflecting on, teaching, and writing about such thought, few questions could resonate as more significant. The centennial anniversary of William James's *Pragmatism* seems a perfect opportunity to reflect upon this issue. After all, "the present dilemma in philosophy" addressed in James's opening lecture is that between "tender-minded" rationalism and "tough-minded" empiricism, a debate that may very well still hold considerable weight in philosophy today, but will likely mean little to those who press the question to us.<sup>1</sup> In this article, I address the matter of what James's *Pragmatism* has to offer someone today, a full century after its publication. Toward this end, I underscore the theme of meliorism present in the text. James regards pragmatism as a method of inquiry and theory of truth capable of improving the human condition. As long as we are interested in such improvement, it seems that we ought to be interested in what James has to say to us. Of course, various philosophers put forth theories intended to improve the human condition; what, our interlocutor may ask, is so special about James and *Pragmatism*? My response to this question centers upon the notion of "promise" employed by James at several points throughout the text. As I will show, James's emphasis on "promise" is predicated upon a deeply intimate relationship between us and the world. James's view of our relationship to the world as like that which exists between promising parties is, to my mind, both compelling and inspiring. Thus, it is my belief that the "promise" of *Pragmatism* is the basis for at least one worthy response to the question of what James's century-old text has to offer someone today.

### 1: Progress and Promise

Addressing the "present dilemma in philosophy" in the first of his *Pragmatism* lectures, James acknowledges that few individuals are truly rationalist "tenderfoot Bostonians" or empiricist "Rocky Mountain toughs," pure and simple. Most often, one takes on both temperaments, each to varying degrees. This leads James to encourage fulfilling one's "hankering for the good things on both sides of the line"; toward this end, James offers the "oddly-named thing pragmatism."<sup>2</sup> Pragmatism has conciliatory power, James believes, because it "unstiffens theories"<sup>3</sup> as

a method of inquiry and is a “smoother-over of transitions”<sup>4</sup> as a theory of truth. Pragmatism limbers theories such as rationalism and empiricism by regarding them not as crystallized solutions to ancient philosophical riddles, but as active instruments implemented toward intelligent engagement with an ever-changing world. The vicissitudes of this world include revolutions in both individual and social thought; pragmatism mediates the transition from old truth to new in its simultaneous recognition of the deep imprint of previous experience and the jarring effect of the novel.

What is more, David W. Marcell suggests that James’s pragmatism had the effect of making “man’s will to believe in a better future its philosophical ideal.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, Marcell views James’s pragmatism as melioristic, promoting the improvement of the world through human effort. Indeed, James himself describes the pragmatic method as “looking towards fruits, [and] consequences”<sup>6</sup> and the pragmatic theory of truth as “bound up with” leading experience “towards other moments which it will be worth while to have been led to.”<sup>7</sup> For James, pragmatism is an orientation and a guide; it eschews the quest for first principles and necessities supposed to be knit in the fabric of the universe independent of us, in favor of a search for ideas with practical value for beings entrenched in the particulars of experience, here and now.

Marcell notes, however, that “James’s melioristic conception of progress involved a continuing element of risk,” for “progress was uncertain, contingent.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, James cites the “restlessness”<sup>9</sup> of the conflict between theoretical temperaments and describes the world as “unfinished”<sup>10</sup> and our experience of and within it as “tangled, muddy, painful and perplex[ing].”<sup>11</sup> There is, for James, no guarantee that the contradictory forces run up against in everyday life will be overcome. To trace neat outlines around the world with polished principles of reason is to be unfaithful to experience. In fact, the world often confronts us as foreign. It is not unusual to find ourselves struggling to make sense of and cope with the unforeseen or unknown.

This struggle is recognized by Patrick Dooley, who describes the world in words consonant with those of James, but who also offers the consolation that, “*promises* can hold in the face of a world of change, risk, uncertainty and unpredictability.”<sup>12</sup> When one makes a promise, one does not mean that all things being equal, he or she will do whatever it is that is being promised.<sup>13</sup> On the contrary, the act of promising carries with it a special force. As Dooley suggests, promises may be viewed in much the same light as James regards belief in his claim that “belief creates its verification [and] becomes literally father to the fact.”<sup>14</sup> To promise that one will do *x* is (quite typically, at least) to already begin to ensure the doing of *x* before it is done, in much the same way that “misgivings and doubts augur failure.”<sup>15</sup> When promises are taken seriously by both the promising agent and the person(s) to whom the promise is issued, a mutual sharing of expectations and common responsibilities is acknowledged. Moreover, because the obligations of promises foster “fidelity, accountability, steadfastness, and trustworthiness,” they “make possible a humane and a humanizing environment.”<sup>16</sup>

I wish to keep this humanistic nature of promising in view as I consider James’s use of “promise” in *Pragmatism*. Examining salient portions of this text will go a long way in fleshing out the heuristic value of promise in an account of James’s meliorism, at least as it presents itself in this series of lectures.

## 2: Swimming in the Sea of Sense: The Promise of Meliorism Pragmatically Considered

The humanistic power of promising described above seems to not be at play for James when he compares humans to “fishes swimming in the sea of sense, bounded above by the superior element, but unable to breathe it pure or penetrate it.”<sup>17</sup> But, James elaborates, “We get our oxygen from it, however, we touch it incessantly, now in this part, now in that, and every time we touch it, we turn back into the water with our course re-determined and re-energized.”<sup>18</sup> The air being touched incessantly now here, now there, providing us with oxygen, is that of “abstract ideas, indispensable for life, but irrespirable by themselves, and only active in their re-directing function.”<sup>19</sup> James’s claim is that theories, in and of themselves, are incapable of providing us with sustenance, yet they retain critical nutritive power insofar as they are “an effective determinant of life elsewhere.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, much like one’s belief in the value of that which one promises, one’s belief in the value of a theory instills in one an animating energy to be extended in future action. The act itself, be it the fulfilling of one’s promise or the renewing of one’s swim, is the sum of the preceding nourishing conditions and the agent’s active will to carry out the act.

The simile of the fish in the sea of sense is employed by James at the start of “The One and the Many,” as part of a recapitulation of what has proceeded in the preceding lecture, “Some Metaphysical Problems Pragmatically Considered.”<sup>21</sup> “Design, free-will, the absolute mind, spirit instead of matter, have for their sole meaning,” James reviews, “a better *promise* as to this world’s outcome. Be they false or be they true, the meaning of them is this meliorism.”<sup>22</sup> Here, James explicitly links the notion of promise with that of meliorism. The remainder of this section will be concerned with seeing how this connection is made in James’s previous discussion.

One metaphysical problem that James endeavors to pragmatically consider is that of “materialism or theism?”.<sup>9</sup> James inquires as to the practical differences that come with holding that “the facts of experience up to date are purposeless configurations of blind atoms moving according to eternal laws, or that on the other hand they are due to the providence of God.”<sup>23</sup> James asserts that retrospectively, no practical difference obtains; “those facts are in, are bagged, are captured; and the good that’s in them is gained, be the atoms or be the God their cause.”<sup>24</sup> But, James stipulates, prospectively, there is a difference. When considering future facts of experience, we ask, as James puts it, “what does the world *promise*?”<sup>25</sup> In other words, what sort of experience will be brought into effect if materialism and theism make good on their solemn pronouncements?

James believes that materialism and theism offer strikingly different answers to this question. Materialism has it that the stuff of the world is transient and that eventually, all will decay with nothing remaining to represent that which was. “This utter final wreck and tragedy,” states James, “is of the essence of scientific materialism as at present understood.”<sup>26</sup> Theism, on the other hand, has it that “tragedy is only provisional and partial, and shipwreck and dissolution not the absolutely final things.”<sup>27</sup> According to James, this is because although the perishing of objects of the world is acknowledged by theism, theism makes an assurance that materialism never could, namely, that of an eternal preservation of moral order. Because he regards the “need of an eternal moral order” as “one of the deepest needs of our breast,”<sup>28</sup> James characterizes theism as offering “a world of *promise*, while materialism’s sun sets in a sea of disappointment.”<sup>29</sup> That is to say that in its affirmation of an eternal moral order, theism promises a world of promise, or hope, while in its denial of an eternal moral order, materialism promises the opposite. Settling this question pragmatically consists in deciding which promise one wishes to accept.<sup>30</sup>

Another metaphysical problem taken up by James is that of “determinism or free-will?”. James characterizes free-will as “*amelioristic doctrine*,” for it “holds up improvement as at least possible; whereas determinism assures us that our whole notion of possibility is born of human ignorance.”<sup>31</sup> For James, the difference between these doctrines just is that determinism denies the existence of possibility, citing one narrative of the universe as that which necessarily obtains,<sup>32</sup> while free-will entails that this narrative is one of a myriad that could potentially be told, and is continually being authored by our volitions and actions. Because this narrative appears thus far to be far from “a lubberland of happiness,” free-will is “a general cosmological theory of *promise*” that “has no meaning unless it be a doctrine of *relief*.”<sup>33</sup> Like that of theism, the promise of free-will is promise; the possibility that free-will affirms is “the possibility that things may be *better*.”<sup>34</sup> This possibility of a better world through the effects of human effort is what motivates James to accept the promise of free will.<sup>35</sup>

### 3: Minimum Jolt and Maximum Continuity: Pragmatism’s Conception of Theory and Truth as Remedies for the Wayward

James would attribute the choice to accept or reject the promise of a theory to philosophical temperament.<sup>12</sup> James describes this phenomenon as one’s way of “seeing and feeling the total push and pressure of the cosmos.”<sup>36</sup> The history of philosophy, James claims, is “to a great extent that of a certain clash of human temperaments.”<sup>37</sup> In this section, I wish to dwell on James’s use of words such as “push,” “pressure,” and “clash,” for these are indicative of conflict or strife, precisely what meliorism aspires to overcome in its quest to better the human condition. James’s view is that the universe impinges upon us in a multitudinous number of ways, and the fashion in which we interpret and respond to these vicissitudes brings into relief our characteristic temperaments. “Tender-minded” rationalists tend toward principles, intellectualism, idealism, optimism, religiousness, free will, monism and dogmatism, while “tough-minded” empiricists tend toward facts, sensationalism, materialism, pessimism, irreligiousness, fatalism, pluralism and skepticism.<sup>38</sup> The differences between tender and tough are not, however, merely theoretical; “the tough think of the tender as sentimentalists and soft-heads” while “the tender feel the tough to be unrefined, callous, or brutal.”<sup>39</sup> Thus, clash in temperament is, beyond a difference in worldview, a personal antagonism of some intensity.

Tender and tough alike, “all our theories,” James asserts, amount to “remedies and places of escape.”<sup>40</sup> While a theory may purport to give an “*explanation* of the concrete universe,”<sup>41</sup> James believes that at bottom, theories are devised toward the aim of transcending or retreating from the “crassness of reality’s surface.”<sup>42</sup> Thus, a world that may appear chaotic is rendered more reasonable to the tender-minded rationalist when conceived, for instance, as a place of free will, while this same world is made more rational to the tough-minded empiricist when cast as a place void of such freedom. This is pragmatism’s unstiffening in action. Theories are “limbered up” and “set to work,” serving as “*instruments, not answers to enigmas, in which we can rest*.”<sup>43</sup> That is, although the confusions that these views attempt to mitigate seem to carry on incessantly, both tender and tough achieve some sense of satisfaction or relief in their respective conceptions of the universe.<sup>13</sup>

This notion of relief is well captured in James's description of inquiry as the seeking of "escape" from the "disturbance" of "an inward trouble" encountered when one is confronted by a new experience that "puts a strain" on one's stock of old opinions.<sup>44</sup> The inquirer attempts to execute this escape by modifying the previously held mass of opinions, though "he saves as much of it as he can," for as James insists, "in this matter of belief we are all extreme conservatives."<sup>45</sup> That is, when a novel experience jars our faith in long-held beliefs, we construct the account for it that is most coherent with, and thus casts the least doubt upon, the set of previously held beliefs. James describes this process as the marrying of "old opinion to new fact so as ever to show a minimum of jolt, a maximum of continuity."<sup>46</sup> This is pragmatism's smoothing-over in action. New truth is a "go-between,"<sup>47</sup> filling in the gaps that separate the old and the new, the stable and precarious.

Consistent with its commitment to continuity, another motivation of the pragmatist pursuit of truth is the search for clues as to what type of reality we might expect in the future. Because "we live in a world of realities that can be infinitely useful or infinitely harmful," this quest is, for James, "a primary human duty."<sup>48</sup> As an illustration of this point, James imagines himself lost in the woods and starved, but fortunate enough to happen upon what looks like a cow-path. "It is of the utmost importance that I should think of a human habitation at the end of it," James urges, "for if I do so and follow it, I save myself."<sup>49</sup> The true thought (that there is a house at the end of the cow-path) carries with it an expectation about the future (if James follows the path, he is likely to find nourishment and be able to reorient himself). For James, then, "the practical value of true ideas is thus primarily derived from the practical importance of their objects to us."<sup>50</sup> Although the true idea of the house that exists at the end of the cow-path might in most cases not prove particularly useful, when it does, "it passes from cold-storage to do work in the world."<sup>51</sup> Transitioning from latency to the forefront of our minds, our belief in the idea "grows active."<sup>52</sup>

This notion of truth as "eventual verification" is described by James as "manifestly incompatible with waywardness on our part."<sup>53</sup> Thus, for James, a true thought is that which acts as a useful guide to the otherwise disoriented or lost. This account of truth is clearly melioristic, for it suggests that as much as we are concerned with truth, we are concerned with fruitful action. "True ideas," James remarks, "lead to consistency, stability, and flowing human intercourse."<sup>54</sup> Put another way, at the core of James's pragmatist theory of truth is the promise of progress.

#### 4. Turning-Places and Growing-Places: Pragmatism, Humanism, and Religious Meliorism

"Distinctions between the lawful and the unlawful in conduct, or between the correct and incorrect in speech, have grown up incidentally among the interactions of men's experiences in detail," James writes, "and in no other way do distinctions between the true and the false in belief ever grow up."<sup>55</sup> Such is James's case for the analogousness of truth to law and language. The pertinence of such a comparison comes in the fact that each of these is, as it were, made by us as we go. In the case of truth, "human motives sharpen all our questions, human satisfactions lurk in all our answers, all our formulas have a human twist."<sup>56</sup> James considers this humanism of a piece with his melioristic pragmatism. "We receive in short the block of marble," James states, "but we carve the statue ourselves."<sup>57</sup>

This presupposes, of course, that our attempts to carve make an impression. One of the last questions taken up by James in *Pragmatism* is the possibility of the salvation of the world. Eschewing pessimism and optimism, James embraces meliorism, which regards salvation as neither impossible nor inevitable, but as "a possibility, which becomes more and more of a probability the more numerous the actual conditions of salvation become."<sup>58</sup> But what are these conditions? Live possibilities must be upheld as ideals, striven for, and finally, realized. Complementary to this is the presence of "such a mixture of things as will in the fullness of time give us a chance, a gap that we can spring into, and finally, *our act*."<sup>59</sup> We create our salvation with our acts, for they are "the actual turning-places and growing-places which they seem to be, of the world."<sup>60</sup> While higher powers may exist and be "at work to save the world," they may do so, says James, "on ideal lines similar to our own."<sup>61</sup> Thus, insofar as the religious may be conceived of as melioristic in this way, James's pragmatist meliorism may also be described as religious.<sup>62</sup>

Reading the letter of a member of his audience, James witnesses an embodiment of the melioristic pragmatism for which he has been arguing. The correspondent claims to "believe that in our search for truth we leap from one floating cake of ice to another, on an infinite sea, and that by each of our acts we make new truths possible."<sup>63</sup> Moreover, "each man is responsible for making the universe better, and that if he does not do this it will be in so far left undone."<sup>64</sup> Indeed, this individual recognizes with great acuity one of the most important insights of James's *Pragmatism*, an insight that endures a full century after its first appearance in print; "the world

stands ... malleable, waiting to receive its final touches at our hands.”<sup>65</sup> That it will remain so is its promise to us. That we will create of it a thing of beauty we must promise to it.<sup>66</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> James, William. *Pragmatism*. (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1991 [1907]), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>5</sup> Marcell, David W. *Progress and Pragmatism*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1974), 190.

<sup>6</sup> James, 27.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>8</sup> Marcell, 190.

<sup>9</sup> James, 86.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>12</sup> Patrick Dooley, “Promises and Self-Fulfilling Prophecy,” *Religious Humanism*, 14, (SPR 1980): 87-90 (90, emphasis mine). Dooley goes on to furnish a James-inspired account of conditions for a successful promise, a project akin to at least part of what John Searle was up to sans Jamesian influence in his seminal work in the philosophy of language, *Speech Acts*. See: Searle, John R. *Speech Acts*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), especially 57-62.

<sup>13</sup> ”The fact that I have promised,” Dooley explains, “implies that all things are no longer equal” (Ibid., 88).

<sup>14</sup> James, “The Will to Believe” in his *The Will to Believe and other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (1896), quoted in Dooley, 87-88.

<sup>15</sup> Dooley, 88.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>17</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, 57.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 57-58.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>21</sup> The latter lecture is that in which the term “promise” appears most prominently.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 57 (emphasis mine).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 46 (emphasis James’s).

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 48. James alludes to the materialism of Balfour, quoting him to this effect (47).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 49 (emphasis James’s).

<sup>30</sup> James takes up this question in a variety of other places, the most famous of which is “The Will to Believe” (1896), with which his audience was likely familiar. Of course, John Dewey would accuse James of accepting a false disjunction here, for Dewey finds promise in human inquiry, with or without an eternal moral order. This claim is made most explicitly in Dewey’s *A Common Faith* (1934).

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 54 (emphasis James’s).

<sup>32</sup> James seems to tend to conflate determinism with fatalism, but a full demonstration and critique of this would take me beyond the scope of my aims in this paper.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 54 (emphasis James’s).

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 54 (emphasis James’s).

<sup>35</sup> James gives a much more intricate treatment to this question in “The Dilemma of Determinism” (1884), with which his audience was likely familiar.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 26 (emphasis James's).

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 126 (emphasis James's).

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>62</sup> Indeed, there is a parallel between James's discussion here and his discussions of the (optimistic) healthy-minded and (pessimistic) sick-souled religious temperaments in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). There, James claims sympathies with each of the opposed temperaments, opting for a decidedly melioristic middle position. Referring to this aspect of the *Varieties*, Doug Anderson states that "both moods lead to the possible bettering of a risk-filled world. Moreover, both have disclosed their effects in biography and history: the healthy-minded by direct engagement with human possibility and the reborn soul through self-revision and the empowerment of an ideal." See: Anderson, Doug, "Respectability and the Wild Beasts of the Philosophical Desert: The Heart of James's *Varieties*," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 17(1), 2003, 1-13 (quoted passage from p. 9).

<sup>63</sup> *Pragmatism*, 122.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 112-113.

<sup>66</sup> I would like to thank Mark Johnson, whose advice regarding an early draft of this essay was nothing short of invaluable. I would also like to acknowledge two anonymous reviewers for this journal, whose comments were very helpful. Finally, I wish to express especial gratitude to Elizabeth Segars McRae, who first introduced to me the promise of pragmatism.

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## Pragmatism, Radical Empiricism, and Mounce's Account of William James

Charles A. Hobbs

*Abstract.* According to H.O. Mounce, James's pragmatism is a failure simply for being inconsistent with that of C.S. Peirce. Mounce also dismisses James's radical empiricism as involving phenomenalism. There are significant inaccuracies with such a view of James, and, accordingly, this paper is a response to Mounce. The two themes of radical empiricism and pragmatism constitute the heart of William James's philosophical project, and at least for this reason alone I think it important to correct Mounce. In short, his indictment of James for having paved the way for the Richard Rortys of our community both fails to sufficiently engage James on his own terms and fails to present pragmatism in a sufficiently pragmatic manner.

Mounce's *The Two Pragmatisms*, meant as a kind of history of the American pragmatist tradition, has as one of its main goals to demonstrate "...that if we reflect on its development we shall find that Pragmatism has not had a single form."<sup>1</sup> In short, he seeks to demonstrate that pragmatism, once closely aligned with Peirce, became changed into something he (Peirce) was actually battling against. So far, so good, but, it is James who gets the ultimate blame from Mounce for pragmatism's ultimate degeneration which culminates, as Mounce well recognizes, in the work of Richard Rorty. As indicated by his title, Mounce speaks of what he calls *the two pragmatisms*, the second of which is viewed as "...in conflict with the first Pragmatism, not at incidental points, but in its essentials."<sup>2</sup> Peirce's realist account of pragmatism is portrayed as being the true and worthy version of pragmatism, whereas the other well known philosophers associated with pragmatism are portrayed as degenerate, with the degeneration being initiated by James and ultimately further distorted, especially, by Rorty.<sup>3</sup> It is in these terms that Mounce seeks to map out the significant movements found in the pragmatist tradition.

Mounce portrays James as egregiously misunderstanding Peirce, or at least as influenced primarily by Peirce's 1878 essay "How to Make Our Ideas Clear", and thus failing to take into account Peirce's later modifications to his articulation of pragmatism. His exploration of James's pragmatism does not go much further than this. I will return to this aspect of the discussion, but it is worth noting for now that Mounce appears to assume that *pragmatism* had its more or less perfect articulation later in Peirce's career, and also that any deviation from such a gold standard is necessarily undesirable.

First, let us turn our attention to Mounce's account of James's radical empiricism, an account according to which James is a phenomenalist. Mounce declares that James "...never did attain an entirely coherent view of the mental."<sup>4</sup> Here James's later work, such as his well known essay "Does 'Consciousness' Exist?," is viewed as lacking the acumen and greatness of the 1890 *Principles of Psychology*. Yet even just a cursory discussion or précis of portions of only a few of the essays making up the 1912 *Essays in Radical Empiricism* reveals that the situation is quite the contrary. In any case, James's later philosophy appears not, as Mounce puts it, namely as lacking in *high standards*, but rather maintains a certain rigor while bringing more focus to bear, than did the *Principles*, on such phenomenological themes as *relations*.<sup>5</sup>

The heart of Mounce's interpretation of James's radical empiricism is, again, the view that James is putting forth a phenomenalism. By this term, we refer of course to empiricist epistemological doctrines according to which

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everything that one knows about the (external) world is data conveyed to one through sensory experience, and, moreover, according to philosophers such as Rudolph Carnap and A.J. Ayer, that statements and beliefs are intelligible only insofar as they can be reduced to statements and beliefs about such *sense-data*. Now, there is no debate that James is an empiricist. Yet while James certainly does denounce and reject dualism, he is no phenomenalist, as Ellen Kappy Suckiel, for example, has shown fairly persuasively.<sup>6</sup> James is, rather, a self-styled radical empiricist.

Mounce's rather blunt view here, in any case, is that James's view in his article "Does 'Consciousness' Exist?" (1904) rests upon a fallacy. James is likened to Berkeley. In this vein, Mounce says that James's view "...is hardly distinguishable from Berkeley's...", and Jamesian radical empiricism, supposedly just like Berkeley's phenomenism, is said to consist "...essentially in identifying experience with the object which is experienced."<sup>7</sup> Such a view of James's radical empiricism is not so different from the view about James that Ayer put forward in his 1968 *The Origins of Pragmatism*, in which Ayer too argues that James's position comes to one of phenomenism.<sup>8</sup>

Now, Suckiel has pointed out a few places in which James perhaps leaves himself open to some form of phenomenist interpretation.<sup>9</sup> This does not appear, however, to be the case with regard to the *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. It may be that James's use of the term *experience* might tempt one to regard his radical empiricism as some kind of idealism, but regarding this late work of James at least, I do not think a phenomenist interpretation of James will work, and, in any case, it is certainly not one that encourages a constructive, appropriately nuanced, and correctly sympathetic approach to understanding James. A theme running throughout James's writings is one of countering dualistic tendencies as opposed to strongly asserting any form of phenomenism. That is, a prominent goal of James involves the repudiation of any epistemological and/or metaphysical "divide" between an objective *external world* and a subjective *knower*. As Suckiel has said, he aimed "...to demonstrate that there is no epistemological or metaphysical gap between the knower and the known, and hence no need for either constructing bridges or lamenting their absence."<sup>10</sup> It is also worth noting that the varied thoughts of James, taken together, are rarely if ever reducible to just any one philosophical position regarding metaphysics, epistemology, and/or ethics as well.<sup>11</sup> Finally, I believe here with at least several others that James is, if anything, not a phenomenist in the *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, but rather a kind of phenomenologist, if we are to give him the label.<sup>12</sup> In any case, James uses his term "radical empiricism" to talk about a *way* of doing philosophy.<sup>13</sup>

Let us now look a bit at the somewhat provocatively entitled 1904 essay "Does 'Consciousness' Exist?,"<sup>14</sup> and also at "The Notion of Consciousness."<sup>15</sup> In "Does 'Consciousness' Exist?," James, not surprisingly, discusses his radical empiricism in terms of implications regarding what we typically call *consciousness*. Of course, the answer to the question of the essay's title is *no*, that is, at least in the manner in which it is most often understood, consciousness does not, properly speaking, exist.<sup>16</sup> This is because consciousness, in the sense of some witness to experience, is never found within experience itself.

On the contrary, it is, as James suggests, a function or act, and not some substantial thing persisting as independent of one's experience and, indeed, one's body. He says that the essay's thesis "...is that if we start with the supposition that there is only one primal stuff or material in the world, a stuff of which everything is composed, and if we call that stuff 'pure experience,' then knowing can easily be explained as a particular sort of relation towards one another into which portions of pure experience may enter."<sup>17</sup> James argues that distinctions between body and mind can be seen as presupposing *pure experience*. Also, James's pluralism required him to assert that pure experiences are in some sense foundational, and the *radical* nature of radical empiricism lies in its insisting that relations are just as significant a part of experience as the things being experienced.

James contends that experiences are *pure* before being subjected to analysis or conceptualization. He says that "The instant field of the present is at all times what I call the 'pure' experience."<sup>18</sup> It is only in retrospect that such pure or primary reality can be dichotomized or even reflected upon. In seeking to overcome the mind-body dualism that is so prevalent in the history of philosophical discourse, James advocates the bringing of attention to bear on life *as it is lived*, and the theme of pure experience involves the abandonment of those theories exemplified by their emphasis on the terms *mind* and *body*, as if these are separate and substantial entities.

We ought, for James, to suspend such traditional interpretation in order to renew the sense of life as *lived*, for we are mistaken if we suppose that such terminology indicates metaphysically different entities, whereas Mounce seems at times to himself come close to postulating such entities. On the contrary, for James, such terminology indicates various *functions* or aspects found within experience. Also, in "The Notion of Consciousness," James writes that "...in the light of the great variety of its relations, one and the same experience can play a role in several fields at the same time."<sup>19</sup> As such, within one context an experience may be considered as a kind

of *mental* happening, and in a different context that same experience may be considered as a kind of *physical* happening.

Also, James's contention that the *radical* part of his radical empiricism is such that it necessitates that philosophy be reconstructed as independent of any unifying or supporting (but non-experienced) entities, that is, metaphysical entities like categories, egos, substance, matter, "soul," or any kind of absolutes.<sup>20</sup> We get from radical empiricism, instead, an indication that there is only *pure experience*; this is the basic datum of philosophy. This constitutes, contrary to Mounce's position, a rejection of dualism as opposed to an affirmation of phenomenalism. 11

Moreover, phenomenalism is a reductive enterprise, again, in which somewhat complex statements regarding physical objects can be *translated* into various statements regarding basic sensory experience. The phenomenalist advocates a particular form of atomism in which "sensory atoms" constitute the only real content for any kind of meaningful statement, and, more importantly, that meaningful statements about experience must be *constructed* from such atomistic components. Such atomistic tendencies are, of course, in serious conflict with what James says about relations, particularly conjunctive relations, which do not require such construction. 12

Also, as I have mentioned, one of Mounce's other contentions is that James's *Pragmatism* is a failure for not being more in line with Peirce. As part of this, Mounce emphasizes the theme of nominalism in James, saying that "In innumerable passages, James has insisted that modality is simply a shorthand device for referring to the actual and that the abstract really exists only in particulars."<sup>21</sup> All of this and more is to emphasize how different James's project is from the realist pragmatism of Peirce. Of course, Peirce's scholastic brand of realism involves the view that there exist real natural laws, which clearly contrasts with nominalism, for which such generals are figments as opposed to realities. That being said, one might hope that Mounce would also discuss some of the other salient and more significant aspects and themes of James's pragmatism. Yet he never really gets around to seriously doing this. Accordingly, let us review by briefly looking at a couple of the important Jamesian elements missing from Mounce's account. 13

First, there is the issue of what, for James, pragmatism *is*. In his second lecture on the philosophy or method of pragmatism ("What Pragmatism Means"), James famously says that *the scope of pragmatism* is "...first, a method; and second, a genetic theory of what is meant by truth."<sup>22</sup> As a *method*, it may be employed by people of widely varying philosophical persuasion and sentiment. Additionally, it has to be demonstrated, according to James, that if a given concept or notion is to be considered meaningful, it must in fact make, or should make, some difference in our conduct. One should be able to demonstrate what the respective consequences would be for one position or view versus some other to be correct, and one may choose, based upon this, between competing notions, and a given dispute might very well be *interminable* if one cannot determine the practical meanings of the competing views. Of course, the point here is that different philosophies, if they truly are different, should involve different consequences for practice. If it turns out that there really is no difference in the practical consequences, then the alleged different philosophies are not *truly* different, and thus there is really nothing at stake, and there is thus no real problem with which to contend. 14

In any case, James indicates that to make philosophy pragmatic, the initial move is to focus on practice, indeed on *power*, and situate it as central to our endeavor.<sup>23</sup> Also, citing his agreement with John Dewey and F.C.S. Schiller, James contends "...that ideas (which themselves are but parts of our experience) become true just in so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience..."<sup>24</sup> That is, ideas are true as instrumental. They are instruments for action, with practice providing the criterion for the truth of a theory. For James, true beliefs, notions, or philosophies are those that work when in practice and not just in theory. False ones do not work or do not work as well. 15

According to James, therefore, truth is not something *discovered* by philosophers. Rather, it is constituted by the practitioners of truth. Action creates it. The point is not one of discovering truth through actions, experiments, and practices. Rather, actions, experiments, and practices create, or at least construct, truth. As such, truth is not something existing apart from or independent of such action. Instead, we are to speak of ideas as *becoming* true.<sup>25</sup> 16

There are at least two well known examples that James employs to illustrate what is meant by this formulation of pragmatism. Returning here to pragmatic method, the second of these, drawn from the Italian thinker Giovanni Papini, is meant to illustrate how this method is compatible with a number of varying results, that is, how this method is one of pluralism.<sup>26</sup> With a remarkable illustration of the meaning of pragmatism, we are asked to understand James's pragmatic method as being like a hotel corridor, one whose doors lead to numerous rooms in which there are thinkers involved with numerous types of projects and pursuits. There could, for example, be a metaphysical idealist in one room and a committed *anti*-metaphysical thinker in another, both in the same hotel. In any case, James holds that his pragmatic method remains neutral with regard to the various types of thought taking place within the rooms.<sup>27</sup> 17

The hotel represents a great deal of the world of thinking.<sup>28</sup> The various rooms represent individual philosophies. Of course, the corridor represents pragmatism, which is the connection between these, the philosophical method of choice and action. We might also say that pragmatism affords us our one chance at escaping the isolation of the individual rooms. This *corridor method* allows one to move from one concept or theory to another concept or theory. It does so insofar as it offers a concrete manner in which to comprehend, enter, or “penetrate” a given theory, and in which to step outside of the theory so to test and contrast it with other theories. That is, to enter or leave their various rooms, the varying occupants must employ the pragmatic method.

Accordingly, we see that, for James, pragmatism is not a set doctrine. Again, it is a method, one that allows for a great many differing views to co-exist under the same umbrella, for pragmatism “...has no dogmas, and no doctrines save its method.”<sup>29</sup> As such, there can be a widely varying group of individuals within the pragmatic family. There can be rationalists and empiricists, idealists and materialists, monists and pluralists, etc. So, James’s pragmatism is a big-tent kind of pragmatism, loathing exclusion and thereby allowing for both *tough-minded* and *tender-minded* thinkers from many philosophical traditions.

The preceding sketch of the nature of James’s pragmatism review is warranted in that Mounce acknowledges but a glimmer of recognition of the fundamental significance of such themes in James. I venture along these lines to suspect that James would likely recognize Mounce as a kind of enemy of pragmatism. If not an outright enemy, his project nevertheless does little to establish connections between thought and our concrete lives. Yet the very establishment of such connections constitutes one of the most significant aspects of pragmatism, whether this is in the form of Peirce *or* James (or Dewey, for that matter).

Of course, it is clear enough where Mounce’s allegiances lie in terms of the most recognized philosophers of the pragmatist tradition. He has, simply put, a fundamentalist commitment to the writings of Peirce. Indeed, the little of James’s pragmatism discussed by Mounce is approached mainly in terms of how it deviates from Peirce, and particularly the later Peirce. Yet it should hardly need saying from me that this is no excuse for simply ignoring what it is, for James, for pragmatism to be considered as a method, as pluralistic, and embracing of concrete life, not to mention the creative significance of the metaphors involved in showing us such themes.

In summary then, (1) Mounce misunderstands James’s radical empiricism. As we have seen, James constantly battled against dualistic tendencies, but this hardly makes him a phenomenalist. Also, (2) Mounce demonstrates a rather severe limitation with regard to his general understanding of the themes and purpose of James’s own version of pragmatism. Of course, Mounce’s general project is one of seeking to demonstrate the truth of the so-called *first* pragmatism and how the so-called *second* one came to be. That is, we are offered a kind of genealogy of the pragmatist tradition. Yet it is a reductive one in which the hero is always Peirce and Peirce only.<sup>30</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> H.O. Mounce, *The Two Pragmatisms: From Peirce to Rorty* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 231.

<sup>3</sup> Such a portrait of there being these *two pragmatisms* is also defended, in various ways, by Susan Haack in her “Philosophy/philosophy, an Untenable Dualism” in *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* (Vol. XXIX, Summer 1993), as well as by the ever prolific Nicholas Rescher in his *Realistic Pragmatism: An Introduction to Pragmatic Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000). Among other things, they both seem to be concerned with demonstrating that Rorty completely distorts Peirce and, in so doing, conceals what they take to

be the realist origins of pragmatism. More trivially, I also note having heard/read somewhere that Haack is sometimes called a *grand-daughter* of Peirce.

<sup>4</sup> *The Two Pragmatisms*, p. 84.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid* for Mounce's phrase. Of course, it is hardly new for me to point out the importance of the theme of relations within James's thought.

<sup>6</sup> See Chapter 7 ("James's Conception of Reality") of Suckiel's *The Pragmatic Philosophy of William James* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982).

<sup>7</sup> *The Two Pragmatisms*, p. 85. Mounce continues by saying the following:

"For example, my visual experience is not what I see but that whereby I do so. James's view rests on the same fallacy [as Berkeley's]. Thus if my visual experience of the room is identified with the room I see, this entails that what I see is my visual experience.

An example will further clarify the point. Suppose my optician asks me to tell him what I see on his chart. I describe the first few lines and then tell him the rest is blurred. Now it seems evident that this is not an objective description of the chart. I am not claiming for example that the chart is blurred in the sense that the surface of a pond is blurred when the wind blows across it. It would, in any case, be difficult to understand why I should in that sense describe the chart to my optician, when he knows very well what it contains and when I know very well that he does so. I am not, it is true, describing some object other than the chart which I see instead of it. But that is because I am not in that sense describing any object; rather I am describing *how* I experience the chart. If it is a confusion to identify this with some object other than the chart, it is equally a confusion to identify it with the chart itself. Indeed both confusions rest on the same fallacy, namely that of supposing that my visual experience is some object that I see." *Ibid*.

<sup>8</sup> A.J. Ayer, *The Origins of Pragmatism: Studies in the Philosophy of Charles Sanders Peirce and William James* (San Francisco: Freeman, Cooper & Company, 1968). Ayer contended that James would have been better served by a weaker version of phenomenalism, one according to which a physical object is understood as nothing more than a theoretical construct that one employs in explaining and organizing experience. See p. 291-293 of *The Origins of Pragmatism*. On the other hand, there are those, such as Andrew Reck, who argue that James is to be considered as a realist. See Reck's *Introduction to William James* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967), p. 64-65.

Of course, Ayer's work on the pragmatists preceded Mounce by quite a few years, and, in this regard, it is interesting to note that Mounce does not provide any indication that he is aware of this work of Ayer. It is true that he does briefly mention Ayer in terms of the infamous *Language, Truth and Logic*, but that is all (see p. 175-176 of *The Two Pragmatisms*). In any case, Ayer had claimed that James's position is one of "strong phenomenalism," that is to say a view according to which any meaningful statement regarding physical objects can be translated into a statement about some possible or actual experience. It is, of course, widely recognized that Ayer had very little understanding of pragmatism, and I thank Larry Hickman for pointing out to me exactly how far off the mark Ayer really was.

<sup>9</sup> *The Pragmatic Philosophy of William James*, p. 125-126.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p. 124. Of course, James also repudiated any fact/value dualism according to which objects and values are considered as ontologically separate entities.

<sup>11</sup> Charlene Haddock Seigfried has done a fine job of characterizing this situation in her *William James's Radical Reconstruction of Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

<sup>12</sup> I deal with the issue of whether James can be understood as a phenomenologist in "Was William James a Phenomenologist?" (*Streams of William James* Vol. 5, Issue 3, Fall 2003) For much more outstanding treatments of

this theme in James, see especially the following works: John E. Drabinski's "Radical Empiricism and Phenomenology: Philosophy and the Pure Stuff of Experience" (*The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* Vol. VII, No. 3, 1993), James M. Edie's *William James and Phenomenology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), Hans Linschoten's *On the Way Toward a Phenomenological Psychology: The Psychology of William James* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1968), and Bruce Wilshire's *William James and Phenomenology: a Study of "The Principles of Psychology"* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968).

<sup>13</sup> As it is put in the preface of *The Meaning of Truth*, James uses the term as a kind of general way of referring to a process of postulating, stating facts, and offering generalized conclusions. However, he first mentions "radical empiricism" in his preface to *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*. See *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition*, ed. John J. McDermott (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977) p. 104.

<sup>14</sup> Originally published in the *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods*, Vol. I, No. 18, September 1, 1904.

<sup>15</sup> Of course, these essays were published together, along with ten others, as a collection in 1912, two years after James had died, as the *Essays in Radical Empiricism*.

<sup>16</sup> The contention that consciousness is nonexistent does not, of course, mean that one does not have thoughts. That would obviously constitute a quite odd and even self-contradictory kind of assertion. Rather, what is at issue is that we should not understand consciousness to be some substance, thing, or entity.

<sup>17</sup> *The Writings of William James*, p. 170. This essay was originally published in the *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods* Vol. I, No. 18, September 1, 1904.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p. 177.

<sup>19</sup> *The Writings of William James*, p. 191. This essay was originally delivered in French at the Fifth International Congress of Psychology (in Rome) on April 30, 1905. "La Notion de Conscience" was translated into English by Salvatore Saladino, and the essay is a kind of simplified and condensed version of the themes from "Does 'Consciousness' Exist?" and "A World of Pure Experience".

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, p. 195. James writes as follows: "To be radical, an empiricism must neither admit into its construction any element that is not directly experienced, nor exclude from them any element that is directly experienced. For such a philosophy, *the relations that connect experiences must themselves be experienced relations, and any kind of relation experienced must be accounted as "real" as anything else in the system.* Elements may indeed be redistributed, the original placing of things getting corrected, but a real place must be found for every kind of thing experienced, whether term of relation, in the final philosophic arrangement." *Ibid*.

<sup>21</sup> *The Two Pragmatisms*, p. 48-49.

<sup>22</sup> *The Writings of William James*, p. 384.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p. 379. Along these lines, James says the following:

"A pragmatist turns his back resolutely and once for all upon a lot of inveterate habits dear to professional philosophers. He turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad *a priori* reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins. He turns towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action and towards power." *Ibid*

<sup>24</sup> *The Writings of William James*, p. 382.

<sup>25</sup> Of course, this is all congruent with comments James had made earlier in his career, as far back as his early essay “The Sentiment of Rationality” (1879, 80, 82), and James says more on this issue in his sixth lecture on pragmatism (“Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth”).

<sup>26</sup> *The Writings of William James*, p. 380.

<sup>27</sup> Following Papini, James says that pragmatic method “Lies in the midst of our theories, like a corridor in a hotel. Innumerable chambers open out of it. In one you may find a man writing an atheistic volume; in the next some one on his knees praying for faith and strength; in a third a chemist investigating a body’s properties. In a fourth a system of idealistic metaphysics is being excogitated; in a fifth the impossibility of metaphysics is being shown. But they all own the corridor, and all must pass through it if they want a practicable way of getting into or out of their respective rooms.” *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Not included would be dogmatists such as dictators and/or theocrats, for they are fundamentally closed to inquiry.

<sup>29</sup> *The Writings of William James*, p. 380.

<sup>30</sup> As I have already mentioned in endnote #3, Mounce is by no means alone in viewing James strictly through the prism of Peirce. Nicholas Rescher holds a quite similar view that, like Mounce’s story, involves placing blame on James for leading to a blasphemous “destruction” of what is taken to be the original and true pragmatism.

Along these lines, in his *Realistic Pragmatism: An Introduction to Pragmatic Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), Rescher has said that with James pragmatism was “...well beyond its inaugurating ideas and interests to develop in very different, and decidedly less objectivistic directions...”, and, moreover, “Nor did this process stop with William James.” He adds the following: “...pragmatism has been transformed step-by-step with postmodern theorists from William James to Richard Rorty into a means for authorizing a free and easy ‘anything goes’ parochialism that casts objectivity to the winds. We have here a total dissolution—a deconstruction or indeed destruction—of the Peircean approach that saw the rational validity of intellectual artifacts to reside in the capacity to provide effective guidance in matters of prediction, planning, and intervention in the course of nature.” (*Realistic Pragmatism*, p. 63-64) See also, for some similar remarks, Rescher’s “Pragmatism at the Crossroads” in *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* Vol. XLI, No. 2, Spring 2004.

## William James's Love of Life in the Consciousness of Impotence

Henry Samuel Levinson

George Santayana characterized religion as “the love of life in the consciousness of impotence.”<sup>1</sup> But he might as well have been characterizing the life of his one-time mentor and sometime colleague, William James. For James, indeed, had led such a life marked by incidents of various kinds of powerlessness, including the ones made famous by Clifford Geertz, but actually conceived by Max Weber.<sup>2</sup> In other words, James had both personally contended with, and written about, physical impotency or *suffering*, mental impotency or *absurdity*, and moral impotency or *evil*.<sup>3</sup> All this made James a quintessentially religious thinker, one whose love of life demanded allaying these predicaments.

James had expressed this love of life in the consciousness of impotence in his narrative *Principles of Psychology*<sup>4</sup>; in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays*<sup>5</sup>; in his religious study, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*<sup>6</sup>; and in his piece of culture criticism, “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings.”<sup>7</sup>

But, neither with James’s ‘love of life’ nor with his ‘consciousness of impotence,’ should we get too restrictive. To the contrary, we should appreciate the capaciousness of these notions. Regarding James’s love, sometimes we’ll focus on the *raucous* fun he had with his family as well as the *vinacity* he displayed with them and others; other times, we will be concerned with the *intimacy* he enjoyed with colleagues both at home and abroad. In both his early works and in *The Varieties*, we’ll find him aiming, as was his Darwinian d’ruthers, for “the *survival of the humanly fittest*.”<sup>8</sup> Survival *per se* hardly involved love; neither did survival of the fittest; but survival of the humanly fittest was something else again, for it actually aimed at all that was loving, lovable, and lovely in human life, and it did so full in the face of suffering, absurdity, and evil.

Let’s begin with James’s psychology. *The Principles of Psychology*, the first text of its kind, was famous for its novelistic form. Indeed, its “Contents”<sup>9</sup> reads in part like an autobiography: Having gathered together the elements of an emotional intellectual life, and the methods and snares of his art, James turned to “THE STREAM OF THOUGHT” (which would come to epitomize modern literature and the writing of *PP* itself). Following these processes, he turned next to “THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF SELF” which gave a tour of James himself, as he traveled, *serialim*, to

“The Empirical Self or Me,” “Its constituents . . . The material self . . . The Social Self . . . The Spiritual Self . . . Difficulty of apprehending Thought as a purely spiritual activity . . . Emotions of Self . . . Rivalry and conflict of one’s different selves . . . Their hierarchy . . . What Self we love in ‘Self-love’ . . . The Pure Ego . . . The verifiable ground of the sense of personal identity . . . The passing Thought is the only Thinker which Psychology requires . . . Theories of Self-consciousness: 1) The theory of Soul . . . 2) The Associationist theory . . . 3) The Transcendentalist theory . . . The mutations of the Self . . . Insane delusions . . . Alternating selves . . . Mediumships or possessions . . . Summary . . .”<sup>10</sup>

We might as well have been peering into James’s diary! The inventory of James’s ups and downs and ins and outs showed how he thought things along and, then, through; identified his diverse, changing, and oft-times conflicting

‘selves’; searched for ways to ground his sense of personal identity; invented the stream of consciousness as processing the only ‘Thinker’ he was; developed his combative theories of self-consciousness; descended into madness; sought relief from mediums; and, then, summed it all up! The loves James ranged over, by the way, included not only his selves, but “ALL THE THINGS *which have power to produce in a stream of thought excitement of a particular sort.*”<sup>11</sup>

He went on, then, to assert the following:

6

The most palpable selfishness of a man is his bodily selfishness; and his most palpable selfishness is the body to which that self relates. Now I say that he identifies himself with this body because he loves it; and that he does not love it because he finds it to be identified with himself. Reverting to Natural history psychology will help us to see the truth in this . . . .

When I am led by self-love to keep my seat whilst ladies stand, or to grab something first and cut out my neighbor, what I really love is the comfortable seat, is the thing for which I grab. I love them primarily, as the mother her babe, or a generous man his heroic deed . . . .

*Its own body, then, first of all, its friends next, and finally, its spiritual dispositions MUST be the supremely interesting OBJECTS for each human mind . . . .*

This sort of interest is really the *meaning of the word ‘my.’* Whatever has it is *eo ipso* a part of me. My child, my friend dies, and where he goes I feel that part of myself now is and evermore shall be:<sup>12</sup>

“For this losing is true dying;  
This is lordly man down lying;  
This his slow but sure reclining.  
Star by star his world resigning.”<sup>13</sup>

So much for ‘me’ ‘mine,’ and *The Principles of Psychology*.

Following publication of the *Psychology*, James wrote his Lectures on “Exceptional Mental States,”<sup>14</sup> which Eugene Taylor did so much to see published. There, he presented his lectures on “Dreams and Hypnotism,” “Hysteria,” “Automatisms” “Multiple personality,” “Demoniacal Possession,” “Witchcraft,” “Degeneration,” and “Genius.”<sup>15</sup> What did James make of it all?

7

He was offended by the vulgarity and scandal which frequently attended mediumistic and spiritist ‘manifestations.’ He was perfectly aware of the imposture that was commonly practiced and regarded the greater part of the alleged revelations as ‘rubbish’. And yet, in spite of it all, he ‘found himself believing’ that there was ‘something in it’ -- a residuum of supernormal knowledge, a pattern of mentality not admitted by orthodox science.<sup>16</sup>

In all of this, both in the *Principles* and in the ‘Lectures,’ James found more than a little suffering, absurdity, and evil.<sup>17</sup> But he had also shown that “[h]is freedom from prejudice, against theories or sects of dubious repute, was converted into something more positive by his chivalry. He not only tolerated, but *preferred*, the despised and rejected—in movements as well as in men.”<sup>18</sup> He was ready to embrace virtually any and every person of marked economic, social and cultural difference from himself in his efforts to make mutual understanding matter and commonplace.

8

Regarding earlier essays, collected later in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* and other places (e.g., *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life’s Ideals*), the same intent informed his works: To enrich our understanding of his love of life in the consciousness of impotence, let’s read an essay taken from *The Will to Believe*. In “The Dilemma of Determinism,” James presented a scene that was so dastardly that it involved suffering, absurdity *and* evil all together. Read this:

9

Even from the point of view of our own ends we should probably make a botch of remodeling the universe. How much more then from the point of view of ends we cannot see. Wise men therefore regret as little as they can. But still some regrets are pretty obstinate and hard to stifle,—regrets for acts

of wanton cruelty or treachery, for example, whether performed by others or by ourselves. Hardly can anyone remain *entirely* [italics in the original] optimistic after reading the confession of the murderer at Brockton the other day: how, to get rid of the wife whose continued existence bored him, he inveigled her into a desert spot, shot her four times, and then, as she lay on the ground and said to him, ‘you didn’t do it on purpose, did you dear,’ replied, ‘No. I didn’t do it on purpose,’ as he raised a rock and smashed her skull . . . .<sup>19</sup>

Grim. Suffering, absurdity, and evil brought to new heights!

We have already surveyed James’s concern for the love of life in the consciousness of impotence in his *Psychology* and in one of his earlier essays collected in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays*. 10

Now let’s turn to *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. In my own study of that book, I had summed up, in part, the significance of it this way: 11

On the basis of his investigation of in *Varieties*, James had concluded that religion at its best had been mankind’s most important function because it provided motives, methods, and emotions for strenuously enacting community in ways that overcame debilitating anxieties and offered acceptance to those who were other and different: People were better off, even now, believing that the best things were the more eternal things, even when they could not verify that belief. But James had also concluded that the varieties of religious experience tended to confirm that the best things are the more eternal things by demonstrating the experience of divinity.

James’s efforts in *Varieties* exemplified what he called “the marriage function” of new truth in *Pragmatism*. His psychological theory of identity-transformation “preserved the older stock” of religious truths “with a minimum of modification, stretching them just enough to make them admit the novelty, but conceiving that in ways as familiar as the case makes possible” (*Prag*, 35). James’s theory of “the wider self” maintained the dualism manifested by traditional, common, or crass supernaturalism, but widened the natural world in order to do it. His theory of religious experience transformed the ontological distinction between natural and supernatural into a functional one, one accountable in terms of distinct behaviors. His crucial conclusion in *Varieties* was that the upshot of traditional supernaturalism —the chance of salvation—was both vindicated and made more intelligible by his analysis of religious experience.

James’s account of religious experience in the language of subliminal behavior led him to believe that he had helped heal the historical breach that had left a gap between science and religion. As he put it in his theological lectures in 1902, his theory gave dignity and backbone to reports of religious experience, rehabilitating the ‘individual’ as the locus both of religious problems and solutions, and left room for general science by opening up avenues of understanding and explanation of religious phenomena.

His work in *Varieties* left James satisfied that present information supported the notion that salvation was a grounded possibility because there were actually superhuman forces promoting human welfare: In point of fact, James concluded, “the conscious person is continuous with a wider self through which saving experiences come” (*VRE*, 515). This opinion was not true for James because it was convenient, because it brought him satisfaction, or because he wanted to believe it. It was true for him because events accountable within the limits of current theory made it so.<sup>20</sup>

Towards the end of the “Conclusions” in *Varieties*, W. James endorsed James Leuba’s assertion that “[n]ot God but life, more life, a larger, richer, more satisfying life, is, in the last analysis, the end of religion. The love of life, at any and every level of development, is the religious impulse.”<sup>21</sup> So ‘the love of life’ blared out to James’s readers. But anyone who had read, or now is reading, James’s account of his own anhedonia knows better: The catatonia portrayed there is simply too gruesome to evade.<sup>22</sup> 12

And as for James’s “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings,” read what I had to say in *The Religious Investigations of William James*: 13

James wanted to diagnose “the blindness with which we all are afflicted in regard to the feelings of creatures and people different from ourselves.” Many opinions about aliens suffered from stupidity and injustice because of this blindness; even so, the blindness was normal. Because humans are practical beings, James argued, “each is bound to feel intensely the importance of his own duties and the

significance of the situations that call these forth. But this feeling is in each of us a vital secret, for sympathy with which we vainly look to others. The others are too much absorbed in their own vital secrets to take an interest in ours." So long as a person stuck to his own personal "responsibilities," his ability to feel what aliens felt was undercut. In such cases, James suggested, "the subject judged knows a part of the world of reality which the judging subject fails to see, knows more, while the spectator knows less; and whenever there is a conflict of opinion and difference of vision, we are bound to feel that the truer side is the side that feels the more, and not the side that feels the less" (*TT*, 229,230, 231).

If the world of practical relations in which people lived made them prone to blindness from the "more," however, there was a sort of "irresponsibility" that could open their eyes to the inner life of others sufficiently to catch sight of "the impersonal world of worths as such." If "the clamor of our own practical interests" made people blind and dead to "all other things," then it was necessary to "become worthless as a practical being" in order to be receptive. This was the task of philosophy in liberal education. It was also the message of Robert Louis Stevenson and Richard Jeffries and Whitman. James said that "only your mystic, your dreamer, or your insolent tramp or loafer, can afford so sympathetic an occupation" (*TT*, 247). But these prophets and seers could constantly remind the rest that the "more" was there, sacred and acceptable as such.

Whenever one achieved this "high vision of an inner significance," James said, "the whole scheme of our customary values gets confounded, then our self is riven and its narrow interests fly to pieces, then a new centre and a new perspective must be found." This claim prefigured one of the major themes in James's Gifford Lectures: the "more" constantly knocked persons off balance, once they noticed it. It displaced an old self-centeredness with a simple, but not simplistic, openness to humanity in its great and never-ending variety, an openness that "absolutely forbids us to be forward in pronouncing on the meaninglessness of forms of existence other than our own; and it commands us to tolerate, respect, and indulge those whom we see harmlessly interested and happy in their own ways, however unintelligible these may be to us. Hands off: neither the whole of truth nor the whole of good is revealed to any single observer, although each observer gains a partial superiority of insight from the particular position in which he stands."<sup>23</sup>

Within this context, James told the following yarn:

14

Some years ago, while journeying in the mountains of North Carolina, I passed by a large number of 'coves', as they call them there, or heads of small valleys between the hills, which had been newly cleared and planted. The impression on my mind had been one of unmitigated squalor. The settler had in every case cut down the more manageable trees, and left their charred stumps standing. The larger trees he had girdled and killed, in order that their foliage should not cast a shade. He had then built a log cabin, plastering its chinks with clay and had set up a tall zig-zag fence around the scene of his havoc, to keep the pigs and cattle out. Finally, he had irregularly planted the intervals between the stumps and the trees with Indian corn, which grew up among the chips; and there he dwelt with his wife and babes—an ax, a gun, a few utensils, and some pigs and chickens feeding in the woods, being the sum total of his possessions.

The forest had been destroyed; and what had 'improved' it out of existence was hideous, a sort of ulcer, without a single element of artificial grace to make up for the loss of Nature's beauty. Ugly, indeed, seemed the life of the squatter, scudding, as the sailor's say, under bare poles, beginning again, away back where our ancestors started first, and by hardly a single item the better off for all the achievements of the intervening generations.

Talk about going back to nature! I said to myself, oppressed by the dreariness as I drove by. Talk of a country life for one's old age and for one's children! Never thus, with nothing but the bare ground and one's bare hands to fight the battle! Never without the best spoils of culture woven in! The beauties and commodities gained by the centuries are sacred. They are our heritage and birthright. No modern person ought to be willing to live a day in such a state of rudimentariness and denudation.

Then I said to the mountaineer who was driving me, "What sort of people are they who have to make these new clearings?" "All of us," he replied. "Why we ain't happy here unless we are getting one of

those coves under cultivation.” I instantly felt that I had been losing the whole inward significance of the situation. Because to me the clearings spoke but nought of denudation. I thought that to those whose sturdy arms and obedient axes had made them they could tell no other story. But when *they* looked on the hideous stumps, what they thought of was personal victory. The chips, the girdled trees, and the vile split rails spoke of honest sweat, persistent toil, and final reward. The cabin was a warrant of safety for self and wife and babes. In short, the clearing, which to me was a mere ugly picture on the retina, was to them a symbol redolent with moral memories and sang a very paean of duty, struggle, and success. I had been as blind to the peculiar ideality of their condition as they certainly would also have been to the ideality of mine, had they had a peep at my strange indoor academic ways of life in Cambridge.<sup>24</sup>

James gave this yarn, and developed his ‘Certain Blindness’ doctrine, in a particular historical context. The United States was engaging in its first imperialist campaign, remembered awkwardly and deceptively, as the Spanish-American War, charging into Spanish colonies including Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines, provoked by ‘yellow journalism’ in this country. James was dumfounded and angry enough to preside over the Anti-imperialist League. He was unable or unwilling to accept the fact that his country was perpetrating hyped-up military engagements; and in this context, he began writing what came to be known as “the Philippine Tangle” to the Boston *Evening Transcript*.

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When it comes to memoirs, Ralph Barton Perry’s *The Thought and Character of William James*<sup>25</sup> is still both unique and superlative. Perry showed that James’s “love of life”<sup>26</sup> included his friends, his teaching, his family, and his relationship with Josiah Royce.

16

As to James’s love of family, as well as the raucous and humorous goings-on in his house, listen to E. L. Godkin, editor of the *Nation*, writing in Perry’s pages:

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there could not be a more entertaining treat than a dinner at the James house. They were full of stories . . . and discussed questions of morals or taste or literature with a vociferous vigor so great as sometimes to . . . leave their seats and gesticulate on the floor. I remember, in some of these heated discussions, it was not unusual for the sons to invoke humorous curses on their parent, one of which was, that ‘his mashed potatoes might always have lumps in them’!<sup>27</sup>

Perry gave his characterization of James’s love for friends by noting

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The curious quality of James’s friendships, as of his human relations generally, was not a temperamental accident, but sprang from that truth which was his life. He believed mankind was one and divine, and that the weakness of mortals constituted a phase in their moral progress. Though he might see the individual’s weakness with a discerning eye and describe it with telling epithets, he also saw beyond it to the mankind which he loved. All of his quarrels were family quarrels. Hence he could combine reprobation with indulgence—with jolly and warm affection, and even with respect. Such was his magnanimity that he could reconcile passionate loyalty to his ideas with a most delicate avoidance of pressing them either intrusively or despotically on others. He had uncompromising convictions and an unusual power both of advocacy and of denunciation, but so strong was his humanity that nothing aroused real hostility in him—except inhumanity . . .<sup>28</sup>

Perry also said this of James’s vivacious family life:

19

His sister Alice once said of him that “he seemed to be born afresh every morning.” “He came down from his bedroom *dancing* to greet me,” said his father . . . He was an overflowing and inexhaustible fountain . . . not a channeled stream . . . That which was so striking about James was not his capacity for work, though this was responsible, but his capacity for play. Whatever he did, he did with good measure, and with no nice calculation of its utility. It was this more than any trait that gave the impression of genius. There was a fecundity, a prodigality, an upward rush from hidden depths, that suggested a prime source rather than an artifact or instrument.<sup>29</sup>

Nauheim, Sept. 26, 1900

Beloved Royce, --

Great was my . . . pleasure in receiving your long and delightful letter last night . . . I need not say, my dear old boy, how touched I am at your expressions of affection, or how it pleases me that you have missed me. I too miss you profoundly. I do not find in the hotel waiters, chambermaids, and bath-attendants with whom my lot is chiefly cast, that unique mixture of erudition, originality, profundity and vastness, and human wit and leisureliness, by accustoming to me to which during all these years you have spoiled me for inferior kinds of intercourse. You are still the center of my gaze, the pole of my mental magnet. When I write, 'tis with the design exclusively of overthrowing your system, and ruining your peace. I lead a parasitic life upon you, for my highest flight of ideality is to become your conqueror, and go down into history as such, you and I rolled in one another's arms and silent (or rather loquacious still) in one last death-grapple of an embrace. How then, O my dear Royce, can I forget you, or be contented out of your close neighborhood? Different as our minds are, yours has nourished mine, as no other social influence ever has, and in converse with you I have always felt that my life was lived importantly. Our minds, too, are not different in the *Object* which they envisage. It is the whole paradoxical hysic-moral-spiritual Fatness, of which most people single out some skinny fragment, which we both cover with our eye. We "aim at him generally"—and most others don't. I don't believe that we shall dwell apart forever, though our formulas may . . . Love to you all,

W.J.<sup>30</sup>

When it came to James's morbid side, it is astonishing how honest Perry was for a disciple bent on characterizing, perhaps caricaturing, his master as a "moralist"<sup>31</sup> without any genuine sense of grace. Of James's catatonic breakdown—the devastating disease anonymously characterized in *The Varieties of Religious Experience, A Study in Human Nature*<sup>32</sup>—he 'outed' the anonymous figure in *Varieties* who

. . . went one evening into a dressing room in the twilight to procure some article that was there; when suddenly there fell upon me without any warning, just as if it came out of the darkness, a horrible fear of my own existence. Simultaneously there arose in my mind the image of an epileptic patient whom I had seen in the asylum, a black-haired youth with greenish skin, entirely idiotic, who used to sit all day on one of the benches, or rather shelves against the wall, with his knees drawn up against his chin, and the coarse gray undershirt, which was his only garment drawn over them, inclosing his entire figure . . . This image and my fear entered into a species of combination with each other. *That shape am I*, I felt potentially. Nothing that I possess can defend me against that fate, if the hour for it should strike for me as it struck for him . . . After this the universe was changed for me altogether. I awoke morning after morning with a horrible dread at the pit of my stomach, and with a sense of the insecurity of life that I never new before, and that I have never felt since. It was like a revelation; and although the immediate feelings passed away, the experience has made me sympathetic with the morbid feelings of others ever since.<sup>33</sup>

To be sure, Perry dropped James's references to scripture, excluding such passages as "the Eternal God is my refuge," "I am the resurrection and the life," "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy-laden," as well as James's surmise that had he "not clung [to such texts] 'I think I should have grown really insane.'"<sup>34</sup>

But then Perry went on to sum up James "sense of black despair and morbid fear" and told us that the experience made James 'sympathetic with the morbid feelings of others'; and that both James's melancholy and his emergence from it had 'a religious bearing.'<sup>35</sup> All of this was fairly striking stuff for the man who eventually characterized James as both "healthy-minded" and a "moralist."<sup>36</sup>

Now let's turn to another of the earlier (though nearly forty years past Perry) interpreters of James's work, William Clebsch<sup>37</sup>:

After dealing with James's bouts of *acedia*<sup>38</sup> and *Grubelsucht*,<sup>39</sup> Clebsch noted James's imperative that "I *must* get well now or give up,"<sup>40</sup> and then baldly stated: "He got well . . ."<sup>41</sup> Indeed. Then he interpreted James this way:

He would often be concerned over bodily health; but he had conquered the spiritual paralysis rendering him unable to hope and believe, think and act, feel and will. He aimed his career toward psychology and philosophy, studies he called liberal because they cultivated ‘the habit of always seeing an alternative’, of not taking the usual for granted, of making conventionalities fluid again, of imagining foreign states of mind . . . . <sup>42</sup>

This was a man eager for life’s adventures, its risks and pleasures, its demands and satisfactions. But, again, his flip side exhibited *Grubelsuchte* or “querulousness of Mind”<sup>43</sup> or the “questioning mania”<sup>44</sup> which stopped him fast in his tracks. Read this: 26

. . . conceive yourself, if possible, suddenly stripped of all the emotion with which your world now inspires you, and try to imagine it as it exists, purely by itself, without your favorable or unfavorable, hopeful or apprehensive comment. It will be almost impossible for you to realize such a condition of negativity and deadness. No one portion of the universe would then have importance beyond another; and the whole collection of its things and series of its events would be without significance, character, expression, or perspective. Whatever of value, interest, or meaning our respective worlds may appear endowed with are thus pure gifts of the spectator’s mind. The passion of love is the most familiar and extreme example of this fact. If it comes, it comes; if it does not come, no process of reason can force it . . . . So with fear, with indignation, jealousy, ambition, worship. If they are there, life changes. And whether they shall be there or not depends always on the non-logical, often on organic conditions. And as the exciting interest which these passions put into the world are our gift to the world, just so are the passions *gifts*, --*gifts* to us, from sources sometimes low and sometimes high; but almost always non-logical and beyond our control. <sup>45</sup>

Was belief in God a help? Read Clebsch again: 27

The gift, having a religious bearing, that shook James’s own acedia and enabled him to change his life by a act of will, was not love but panic fear. Believing in some reality—any reality that elicited action, even the negative reality of simply resisting evil without good brought that reality into James’s experienced life and cured his pathological condition. The fundamental belief was belief in the spirit’s ability to believe.<sup>46</sup>

(It is important to note Clebsch’s justified claim here: James, in fact, did recover from his psychosis by way of fear, not from a love for life and not by believing in God. But once James did recover his breathtaking personal, family, social, and professional life took off in ways fully expressive of such a love.) 28

But then, later: 29

James rejected the canard that every object of a man’s deep loyalty became his God. A God must also be *other* than ourselves, the profoundest power in the universe (and therefore capable of commanding *loyalty*), and He also must *belike* us enough to be in commerce and communion with us (therefore capable of *commanding* loyalty). He must a power not ourselves . . . which not only makes for righteousness, but means it , and recognizes us.<sup>47</sup>

Or again, Clebsch said of James that God and man must differ enough for each to “hear the other’s call, yet resemble one another so far that each cares for purposes the other could share.”<sup>48</sup> 30

In sum, according to Clebsch, WJ affirmed a love for life he hoped other powers in the universe could and would maintain and sustain. But that he did so was all too motivated by that horrid disease which had stripped him of human quality, indeed, any quality. 31

When it comes to interpreters in my generation (including my teachers), here are a few examples who wrote significant interpretations of James’s affirmations and incapacities: 32

Bruce Kuklick quoted WJ’s famous notebook entry of 30 April, 1870, first noted by Perry:

Not in maxims, not in *Anschauungen*, but in accumulated acts of thought lies salvation. *Passer outré*. Hitherto when I have felt like taking a free initiative, like daring to act originally, without carefully waiting for contemplation of the external world to determine all for me, suicide seemed the most manly form to put

my daring into; now, I will go a step further with my will, not only act with it, but believe as well, believe in my individual reality and creative power.<sup>49</sup>

This certainly pointed to both James's consciousness of impotence and his love of life. Kuklick also noted James's famous diary entry pointing to James's love of life, particularly his realization that "There belongs to mind, from its birth upward, a spontaneity, a vote. It is in the game, and not a mere on-looker . . ." <sup>50</sup> This entry helped to characterize James's readiness to make a difference; in particular, to engage his eventual profession with zest and playfulness. Simultaneously, James displayed a breathtaking capacity to lecture for publication, traveling through New England, down to Providence, and eventually, across the country to Stanford in Palo Alto. 33

But, as for Kuklick, that's about it. There's little more, if anything, on James's consciousness of impotence. 34

Ben Ramsey's *Submitting to Freedom: The Religious Vision of William James*<sup>51</sup> provided us with a fabulous and furious attack on any and every effort to romanticize James. The book focused primarily on " . . . the contingency of the human person." <sup>52</sup> It presented a case for both a self, and a sort of religious life that could be lived, "without foundations" <sup>53</sup> And in the doing, Ramsey characterized James's times as saddled with an "historical romance of the self . . . a call to frenzied action" that "amounted to little more than a means of forgetfulness and escape." <sup>54</sup> As to James himself, he found a figure "who saw through this illusion" and "took a major step . . . away from notions of a strong, assertive, romanticized self toward an essentially converted self who lived religiously—that is, with a sense of responsibility to rather than control over the free play of forces by which it was bound." <sup>55</sup> 35

Within the context of this account of an anti-romantic James, Ramsey provided his readers with a singular portrait of him; one that paints him as utterly loveless. Indeed, the term 'love' or its cognates —apart from its appearance in the title of a book—occurred five times in his text, one that is one hundred forty-four pages long, all in quotations from other authors. <sup>56</sup> In any case, Ramsey chose to omit any reference to Leuba's definition of religion as "the love of life," <sup>57</sup> in the *Varieties of Religious Experience*, or to James's agreement with it. 36

All the while, *Submitting to Freedom* was chock full of references to impotence. Regarding theological or religious studies, Ramsey wrote that "Theological definitions of the self were even blamed for the general melancholia of the era. As John Girdner wrote in an article titled "Theology and Insanity": "[A] careful study of the history of mental diseases amply proves that . . . the theologies of man have caused so many minds to give way and settles delusions and hallucinations of a so-called religious type." <sup>58</sup> [29] 37

*Submitting to Freedom* went on to show how "[p]ersonal and communal religiosity . . . also disintegrated . . . What appeared to be left was a religious heart without imagination, patterns of piety without convincing expression or authority." <sup>59</sup> In this regard, J. Baldwin Brown wrote that 38

God's love, we are now taught, is no more than a mere yearning of the sad human heart to find a living expression . . . while the hope of immortality, by the same rule, is the vain effort of that faculty of nature which looks 'before and after' to construct a future which may smooth its imagination, but which is baseless and fruitless as its wildest dream. <sup>60</sup>

Ramsey's understanding of James's comprehension of impotence, however, didn't stop there. First, he recognized that James's "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings" taught that people were unable to understand others who were 'different,' or alien. (Though, in that piece, James had prepared a remedy for that blindness, as well.) <sup>61</sup> 39

Second, Ramsey dealt with a variety of cultural collapses: 40

Better, [sic] put, he took a science and philosophy and turned them to the service of the human questions raised by a readership caught in the grip of the cultural collapse: how to get out of the spellbinding morbid mindedness caused by the recognition that to be an American was not to be particularly well founded; how to regain a sense of purpose and vitality and identity when these had all been drained of their myth; how to restore control and individuality in an incorporating, deterministic age.

When James offered a cure for these problems, which was the purpose of the text, <sup>62</sup> he did so without skirting them. That was why, for example, he tried to build a psychology without a soul, because the notion of such a thing had been seen through. And that was why he offered what he called only a theatre of possibilities, because he took seriously the recognition that all human action might be no more than theatrics. . . . <sup>63</sup> 41

And then, again, Ramsey presented James's dismissal of *erkenntnisstheorie*, or the emerging discipline in philosophy known as epistemology. James blocked "the quest for certainty" that Dewey would make famous <sup>64</sup> right out of its starting gate. This or that belief, James claimed, was a plan of action. We people were 42

impotent when it came to realizing the Cartesian dream of attaining certainty in its game of ‘justifying true beliefs.’ Hence, James’s fallibilism and his corrigibilism.<sup>65</sup>

How about Paul Conklin’s *William James: Public Philosopher*? As to the slummy side, he immediately pointed out “James wrestling matches with the inner demons of his life history (depression, illness, doubt) | . . . .”<sup>66</sup> He went on to show how “James’s problems—inability to decide upon a vocation, difficulties with decision-making, metaphysical uncertainty, and nagging physical ailments—were common to many young men of James’s social, intellectual, and economic class.”<sup>67</sup> And even more important, he placed James’s consciousness of impotence in the context of the Civil War, the conflagration that saw more loss of life than all of our other wars combined. For James stood idly by while two of his brothers fought and shed blood, both going on to suffer devastating lives. That made James one of those figures who was “judged not to have lived”<sup>68</sup>: Conklin said that “[t]he stigmata of James’s depressive years—the divided self, intense and numbing doubt, philosophical and physical problems—anticipated attitudes that would come to dominate the form and content of certain segments of late-nineteenth-century America.”<sup>69</sup> He went on to canvass the ways James’s sense of impotence and morbid-mindedness permeated his private, public, and academic lives.

On the sunny side, Conklin described James variously as “exuberant but tentative;”<sup>70</sup> and “strenuous;”<sup>71</sup> he also noted “the warm light of his personality.”<sup>72</sup> But that’s as far as he went.

And in my own 2000-01 *William James Lecture on Religious Experience*, I cited James’s judgment that

The moralist must hold his breath and keep his muscles tense; and so long as this athletic attitude is possible, all goes well—morality suffices. But the athletic attitude tends ever to break down, and it does break down even in the most stalwart when the organism begins to decay, or when morbid fears invade the mind. To suggest personal will and effort to one all sicklied o’er with the sense of irremediable impotence is to suggest the most impossible of things. What he craves is to be consoled in his very powerfulness, to feel that the spirit of the universe recognizes and secures him, all decaying and failing as he is. Well, we are all such helpless failures in the last resort. The sanest and best of us are of one clay with lunatics and prison inmates, and death finally runs the robustest of us down. And whenever we feel this, such a sense of the vanity and provisionality of our voluntary career comes over us that all our morality appears but as a plaster hiding a sore it could never cure, and all our well-doing as but the hollowest substitute for that well-being that our lives ought to be grounded in, but, alas! are not.

“Not a pretty picture.”<sup>73</sup> But, still, it was one sufficiently horrid to motivate sufferers to create or originate whatever they could to make their lives and surrounds better than they were.

Richard Gale has structured *The Divided Self of William James*<sup>74</sup> as an investigation of “The Promethean Self,” bent on power; and an “Anti-Promethean Mystic” yearning for divine help when he (James) could not help himself. He signaled James’s sense of impotence by suggesting that “the best way to characterize James’s philosophy is that it is rooted in the blues.”<sup>75</sup> But then he qualified this judgment when he claimed that “His is not a nihilistic V.D. blues, but rather of the ‘I can get well and have my fun’ sort.”<sup>76</sup>

And then Gale banked on James’s love of life even more. He asserted that James’s life was lived “with maximal richness and variety . . . the ultimate hipster, a veritable experience junkie.”<sup>77</sup> He claimed that “[t]he thesis of this book is that James’s underlying quest was to find a philosophy that would enable us, as the beer commercials enjoin, to have it all, to grab for all the gusto we can.” Then he said succinctly that James had a “wild passion for everything life had to offer.”<sup>78</sup> And then Gale ended up his portrait of James by quoting the latter, urging us to live “a life not correlated with death, a health not liable to illness, a kind of good that will not perish, a Good in fact that lies beyond the goods of nature.”<sup>79</sup>

Along the way, Gale quoted Kallen to the effect that James “gave an expression of what was noblest in the life and labor of the pioneer generation that in the nineteenth century brought into growth the arts and sciences of industrial revolution.”<sup>80</sup> and called “the central tenet of James’s beloved religion of meliorism: the conditionalized prediction that that if we collectively exert our best moral effort, good will win out over evil in the long run.”<sup>81</sup>

H. S. Thayer commented that James, “in a moment of personal crisis,” characterized humankind “as a mechanism doomed from the start to action in a mechanically closed universe. From the idea, like the universe itself, there seemed no escape. The prospects of suicide and madness apparently hung equally in balance for James.”<sup>82</sup> Thayer followed this with quotes from *VRE* and *WJ*’s diary that revealed his sense of beleaguered finitude. But he was just as quick to underscore James’s sense of beauty. Among other things Thayer claimed that James, as a painter, was “an articulate observer of color and shape.”<sup>83</sup> Later, Thayer noted that James “made colorful and crisp use of the ordinary language of the man on the street.”<sup>84</sup> And finally, Thayer gave note to

James's appreciation for the beauty of humankind, when he quoted James's credo, and concluded his chapter on him, this way:

Once, in stating his credo—willingness to live and let live—William James wrote: “no outward changes of condition in life can keep the nightingale of its eternal meaning from singing in all sorts of different men's hearts.” That bird sang sweetly and easily in James's age that closed with World War I. And perhaps in no other man did it sing more keenly or with such discerning notes. <sup>85</sup>

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Let's return, at this point, to James's “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings”. Recall that James had written that piece in the context of the American invasion of the Philippines. Indeed, among other things, James called our invasion of Manila “[a] national infamy” in the *Boston Evening Transcript*. He castigated President McKinley and his administration for having “swept us into . . . an adventure that in sober seriousness and definite English speech must be described as literally piratical . . . . Our President's bouffe-proclamation was the only thing vouch-safed: ‘We are here for your own good; therefore unconditionally surrender to our tender mercies, or we'll blow you into kingdom come.’”<sup>86</sup> James went on, literally in tears, to write that

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We are now openly engaged in crushing out the sacredest thing in this great human world—the attempt of a people long enslaved to attain to the possession of itself . . . . We are destroying down to the root every germ of a healthy national life in these unfortunate people, and we are surely destroying for one generation at least their faith in God and man . . . .

We are cold-bloodedly, wantonly and abominably destroying the soul of a people who never did us an atom of harm in their lives . . . .

[L]et every American who still wishes his country to possess its ancient soul—soul a thousand times more dear than ever, now that it seems in danger of perdition—do what little he can in the way of open speech and writing.<sup>87</sup>

We can see how ‘the Philippine Tangle’ paved the way to James's ‘Certain Blindness Doctrine.’ We can see the parallels between his care for the Carolina settlers on the one hand and his care for Filipino Islanders on the other. The fact is that James was capacious enough not just to love his own life, or life more generally; he was magnanimous enough to love entire nations of people initially unfamiliar to him, even when—especially when—they fractured his old self and made it “fly to pieces.”<sup>88</sup> And I myself can do little more than imitate James's new found openness and insight when it comes to comprehending his own love of life in the consciousness of impotence.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>George Santayana, *Winds of Doctrine* (Charles Scribners: New York, 1913), 43.

<sup>2</sup>Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (Beacon Press: Boston, 1963).

<sup>3</sup>Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, “Religion as a Cultural System” (Basic Books: New York, 1973), 100.

<sup>4</sup> William James, *The Principles of Psychology in Three Volumes* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 1981). Hereafter cited as *PPI*, *PPII*, *PPIII*.

<sup>5</sup> William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Psychology* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 1979). Hereafter cited as *WTB*.

<sup>6</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 1985). Hereafter cited as *VRE*.

<sup>7</sup> William James, "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," *Talks to Teachers on Psychology: and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals* (Longmans. Green, and Co.:39 Paternoster Row, London, 1907). Hereafter cited as *TT*.

<sup>8</sup> H. S. Levinson, *Science, Metaphysics, and the Chance of Salvation* (Scholars Press: Missoula, MT, 1976) in the section, "The Chance of Salvation."

<sup>9</sup> *PPI*, 9.

<sup>10</sup> *PPI*, 10.

<sup>11</sup> *PPI*, 304.

<sup>12</sup> *PPI*, 308.

<sup>13</sup> Emerson, *Essays and Poems* (First Library of America College Edition [Penguin Books USA Inc.]: New York, 1983), 1171.

<sup>14</sup> Eugene Taylor, *William James on Exceptional Mental States: The 1896 Lowell Lectures* reconstructed by Eugene Taylor (Scribners: New York, 1984).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, iv.

<sup>16</sup> Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James* (Vanderbilt University Press: Nashville, 1996):206. Hereafter cited *TCWJ*.

<sup>17</sup> cf. also Henry Samuel Levinson, *The Religious Investigations of William James* (University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, 1981): 59-60. Hereafter cited as Levinson.*RI* .

<sup>18</sup> *TCWJ*, 204.

<sup>19</sup> *WTB*, "The Dilemma of Determinism,"125.

<sup>20</sup> Levinson.*RI*, 219-220.

<sup>21</sup> *VRE*, 551.

<sup>22</sup> *VRE* (1960), 150-151.

<sup>23</sup> Levinson:*RI* , 62-63.

<sup>24</sup> "On in Certain Blindness in Human Beings," in William James, *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals* (Longmans, Green, and Company: 39 Paternoster Row, London, 1907): 231-234. Hereafter cited *TT*.

<sup>25</sup> *The Thought and Character of William James* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 1935). Page citations noted this way: [*TCI* or *TCII*

<sup>26</sup> *TCII*, 703.

<sup>27</sup> *TCII*, 121.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *TCI*, 686.

<sup>30</sup> *TCWJ*, 165.

<sup>31</sup> *TCI*, 703.

<sup>32</sup> *VRE*

<sup>33</sup> William A. Clebsch, *American Religious Thought* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1973): 139-140. Hereafter cited as *ART*.

<sup>34</sup> *TCII*, 324.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *TCII*, 203 on 'healthy-mindedness'

<sup>37</sup> *ART*

<sup>38</sup> *ART*, 138.

<sup>39</sup> *ART*, 145.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *ART*, 145.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *ART*, 147.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> ART, 158-9.

<sup>48</sup> ART, 159.

<sup>49</sup> Bruce Kuklick, *The Rise of American Philosophy*. (Yale University Press: 1977):165. Hereafter cited as Kuklick.

<sup>50</sup> Kuklick, 171.

<sup>51</sup> Bennett Ramsey, *Submitting to Freedom: The Religious Vision of William James* (Oxford University Press: New York, 1993) Hereafter cited as Ramsey.

<sup>52</sup> Ramsey, 6.

<sup>53</sup> Ramsey, 7.

<sup>54</sup> Ramsey, 7.

<sup>55</sup> Ramsey, 7.

<sup>56</sup> Ramsey: 25, 28 , 31, 67, 110. “*Lover*” appears in the title of a text on 61.

<sup>57</sup> See VRE, 399.

<sup>58</sup> Ramsey, 29.

<sup>59</sup> Ramsey, 30.

<sup>60</sup> J. Baldwin Brown, “The Roots of the Present Unbelief, *Christian Union* 24 (1881):268 in Ramsey: 31

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Ramsey, 35.

<sup>62</sup> Ramsey: 36. The ‘text’ refers to *PP*.

<sup>63</sup> Ramsey, 36.

<sup>64</sup> John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty* (Capricorn Books Edition 1960, G.P. Putnam’s Sons: New York).

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Ramsey, 51.

<sup>66</sup> Paul Conkin, *William James, Public Philosopher* (University of Illinois Press: Campaign Urbana, 1994). Hereafter cited as Conkin.

<sup>67</sup> Conkin, 6.

<sup>68</sup> Conkin, 19-39.

<sup>69</sup> Conkin 7.

<sup>70</sup> Conkin, 1.

[71](#) Ibid.

[72](#) Ibid.

[73](#) Henry. S. Levinson, Festive Naturalism and “the Legends of the Jews,” *The William James Lecture for 2000-01*, *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, volume 30, Number 2, Summer/Fall 2001.

[74](#) Richard Gale, *The Divided Self of William James* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK: 1999),. Hereafter cited as Gale.

[75](#) Gale, 1.

[76](#) Ibid.

[77](#) Gale, 3.

[78](#) Gale,15.

[79](#) Gale, 17-18.

[80](#) Gale, 8.

[81](#) Gale, 10.

[82](#) H.S. Thayer, *Meaning and Action*, 133.

[83](#) Ibid.

[84](#) Thayer, 144.

[85](#) Thayer, 164.

[86](#) *A William James Reader*, edited by Gay Wilson Allen (Houghton Mifflin Company: Boston, 1971): 223. Hereafter cited as *WJR*.

[87](#) *WJR*, 224, 225, 226.

[88](#) *TT*, 241.

## Strenuous Moral Living

Todd Lekan

*Abstract. In this paper I seek to make sense of James's account of strenuous moral living, and the role that theological belief plays in the strenuous life. I will show that some of his arguments for the moral necessity of belief in the "theological postulate" are not tenable, and that his case is stronger if his conclusion is weakened to the claim that theological belief may be necessary for some, but not all serious moral agents. I suggest that by drawing on the rich insights about ethical attention in works such as James's Talks to Teachers, we can make better sense of the theological postulate as strategy for attending to one's agency in a way that unleashes strenuous moral action.*

### I) Introduction

In his only sustained work on moral theory—"The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life"—James claims that there is a fundamental difference between those who live moral lives in a strenuous mood and those who take a more "easy-going" approach. He writes, "the deepest difference, practically, in the moral life of man is the difference between the easy going and the strenuous mood. When in the easy-going mood the shrinking from present ill is our ruling consideration. The strenuous mood, on the contrary, makes us quite indifferent to present ill, if only the greater ideal be attained."<sup>1</sup> James claims that any system of ethics that offers us obligations to promote finite human good will fail to energize the strenuous mood. James asserts that "the chief of all reasons why concrete ethics cannot be final is that they have to wait on metaphysical and theological beliefs."<sup>2</sup> He also says that the "the stable and systematic moral universe for which the ethical philosopher asks is fully possible only in a world where there is a divine thinker with all-enveloping demands."<sup>3</sup> James thinks strenuous moral living requires a belief in a God, who is a kind of "divine demander." As he puts it, "... in a merely human world without a God, the appeal to our moral energy falls short of its maximal stimulating power."<sup>4</sup> James is not entirely clear about why finite human well-being is an insufficient goal to awaken moral energy. His main reason appears to be that the future well being of humans is "too finite." As he says, we "see too well the vacuum beyond."

James's assertion that theological beliefs are necessary for the most strenuous moral life is, on the face of it, somewhat puzzling given other things he says about morality. For example, he seems to adopt a naturalistic account of the ontology of value which maintains that the good is whatever satisfies demands. His moral epistemology seems empiricist because he maintains that ethical principles and ideals are revisable as they are tested by experience. Thus, James's moral theory may appear to sit uneasily with any appeal to transcendent theological realities.

In this paper I seek to make sense of James's account of strenuous moral living, and the role that theological belief plays in the strenuous life. I will show that some of his arguments for the "theological postulate" are not tenable, and that his case is stronger if his conclusion is weakened to the claim that theological belief may be necessary for some, but not all serious moral agents.

I proceed as follows. Strenuous moral living is only as good as the conception of morality upon which such a life is based. Therefore, in section I, I briefly address James's own normative theory centered on his casuist rule. In

section II, I argue that even though there are several competing interpretations of James's casuist rule, any plausible version will take the rule to be a second-order principle which advocates the promotion of the most inclusive good possible. Moreover, any plausible interpretation of the rule implies tolerance and respect for multiple values and conceptions of the good. James's casuist moral rule is a second-order moral principle that constrains the pursuit of a variety of first order moral ideals. In section III, I develop James's rich suggestions about ethical attention, making use of some of his psychological ideas and the practical discussions of training attention in *Talks to Teachers*. James's approach to ethical attention is crucial for developing the most adequate understanding of strenuous moral living and the role that theological belief plays in such living. In section IV, I argue that James need not be committed to the strong claim that theological beliefs are necessary for the strenuous mood. The weaker claim that theological beliefs *may* be necessary for the strenuous mood is much more plausible and consistent with Jamesian pluralism. Moreover, acceptance of theological postulate is more plausible when understood as a possible mode of cultivating ethical attention.

A few caveats are in order before we proceed. The first is that the interpretive approach taken in this paper seeks to make the most sense of James's claims in the "Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" by drawing on a wide range of his corpus including writings that come later than his essay on moral theory. My claim is that, taken on its own terms, "Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" neither adequately clarifies nor supports the theological postulate. Nevertheless, the postulate can be made plausible by drawing on ideas developed in other works by James.

The second caveat is a clarification of the notion of "moral strenuousness." James frequently uses the phrase "strenuous mood." I think that it is safe to say that James means to apply the notion of "strenuous mood" to *lives* as much as he does to dramatic moments of life-altering decisions, let alone to some sort of "state of mind." As Brown puts it, the strenuous mood is "a possible property that the moral life may possess, if it is conducted under certain conditions."<sup>5</sup> Brown later makes the point that for James the strenuous mood is a "distinctive character which the divestment of self-interest acquires when the moral life involves religious terms of reference."<sup>6</sup> It is unfortunate that James uses the term "mood" since that typically connotes some sort of affective inner state. The strenuous mood does involve affective states, but it is clear that it is not reducible to these. Strenuousness is thus a kind of "second-order" disposition analogous to integrity in that both strenuousness and integrity take other moral commitments as their object. Strenuousness and integrity are only as morally valuable as the ethical ideals with which they engage. Therefore, we need to examine James's own ethical ideal or what some call his "casuist rule."

## II) James's Casuist Rule

The one safe claim to make about James's casuist rule is that it is a maximizing principle. It enjoins us to seek to realize the most inclusive good possible. James arrives at this casuist rule by establishing that normative terms like "good" and "bad" are only possible on the condition that sentient beings exist. A world with thirty rocks is no better or worse than a world with fifty rocks. It is only when some sentient being cares about a world, or portions thereof, that it makes sense to say the world is good or bad. James uses this metaphysical analysis to support the claim that "the essence of good is simply to satisfy demand."<sup>7</sup> From this claim he argues that we are obligated to maximize as many demands as possible. His basic intuition seems to be that given that it makes no sense to speak of some abstract obligation independently of a sentient being who cares about some good, then obligation must be in some sense grounded in that sentient being's demands. James seems to be giving an analysis of the conditions under which it is intelligible to apply moral terms rather than an account of the meanings of such terms. In any case, James's claim seems to be that there is deep conceptual link between "good" and "demand."

James alternates between speaking of "demands" and claims." For example, he writes "*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 wherever there is a claim.* Claim and obligation are, in fact, coextensive terms"<sup>8</sup> Here James seems to be asserting a conceptual connection between the notions "obligation" and "claim." James's view would suffer blatantly obvious counter-examples if he held that moral agents had obligations to satisfy any and every claim. To make his view more plausible, his thesis can be read as "x has a *prima facie* obligation to y if and only if y asserts some claim." Thus, James means something weaker by "claim- linked obligations" than what moral philosophers mean when they speak of binding moral obligations. Micah Hester calls these "pre-critical *de facto* obligations."<sup>9</sup> *De facto* obligations are the *inputs* of moral deliberation. The goal of moral deliberation is to arrive at binding moral obligations after sorting through the conflicts and ambiguities associated with *de facto* obligations. The moral philosopher's goal is to provide some criterion for adjudicating conflicts between such pre-critical obligations. James's casuist rule tells us to satisfy as many of these claims or demands as possible.

James does not explain what he means by “claim,” but it is hard not to get the impression that he means something that could be verbally articulated as in “I claim the right to have healthcare.” Claims, read this way, would be demands expressed in *speech acts*, whether by the being making the demand or some other proxy. Some support for this reading of James can be found when one considers the fact that he formulates his rule in terms of the maximization of ideals. He writes, “. . . those ideals must be written highest which prevail at the least cost, or by whose realization the least number of other ideals are destroyed.”<sup>10</sup> James offers a more detailed analysis of ideals in other essays.<sup>11</sup> Minimally, he seems to think of ideals as purposes or goals that order decisions over time.

But the text is not clear. At other points, James speaks not of maximizing ideals or claims but rather of satisfying *demands*. Taken this way, James’s ethical rule would be telling us to maximize desire satisfaction. For example he writes, “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.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, James’s ethical rule might be interpreted as telling us to do whatever will maximize as many demands as possible, or at least what which frustrates the fewest demands. He writes “that act must be the best act, accordingly, which makes for the best whole, in the sense of awakening the least sum of dissatisfactions.”<sup>13</sup> In light of this passage, animals, children, and the insane could make obligating claims insofar as we (rational beings) could comprehend their demands through non-verbal means.

The interpretive issues here are complex, leading to considerable debate in the secondary literature about how best to read James’s casuist rule.<sup>14</sup> Obviously, the question of which interpretation of James’s casuist rule is superior must be settled in order to arrive at a complete interpretation of the moral theory that James actually held. To be sure, if our goal is to develop a reconstructed neo-Jamesian position, we might favor a different interpretation than the one most consistent with James’s writings. My aims in this paper are more limited than an interpretation of James’s actual view or a comprehensive neo-Jamesian moral theory. Therefore, we need not settle this interpretive dispute before we can understand the role that strenuousness plays in James’s philosophy. Any plausible development of Jamesian ethics must accept some view of strenuous moral agency. Jamesian moral agents are committed to creating universes filled with as much good as possible whether “good” here means “satisfied desires,” “moral ideals,” or “the good of an individual.” Even if, as Cooper argues, deontological considerations can be squared with James’s casuist rule, his theory retains the consequentialist aim of maximizing good. Jamesian deontology will patently not regard morality as simply abiding by constraints on action so as to avoid violating rights or dignity of individuals. James recommends the strenuous striving for a more inclusive moral good. Although James recommends that we pay some respect to the moral consensus of our times, he does challenge his readers to be willing to be prepared to rebel against that consensus in order to realize the more inclusive good. (Like utilitarian thinking, it is not obvious that his theory would allow for a meaningful distinction between obligatory and supererogatory actions.)

It would be wrong to conclude that James’s view would advocate that those who live strenuously should *focus* on the energetic pursuit of the inclusive good. James’s pluralism suggests that different individuals might strenuously pursue moral ideals with substantially different contents. Consider the saints that James describes so well in the *Varieties*. Undoubtedly, their religious ideals involve moral conceptions of one sort or the other— but different saints may have different moral conceptions. Furthermore, it is doubtful that anything like James’s casuist rule is an explicit part of many of these conceptions. To be sure, saints devoted to God may strenuously offer charity to others, and thereby help make possible a greater inclusive good. But it is hardly the case that these lives are based in a Jamesian casuist rule with its liberally tolerant injunction to make room for as many ways of life as possible. Is Ruth Anna Putnam correct when she writes, “that in advocating the most inclusive ideal, James, the philosopher, has in fact imported an ideal of his own.”<sup>15</sup>

I think we need to make some careful distinctions here. As has been mentioned, strenuousness is a quality of the pursuit of *any* ideal or way of life. As such, it may attach to any number of ideals be they inclusive or non-inclusive. We might then read James’s casuist rule as a second-order ideal precisely because its function is to offer a philosophical criterion to resolve conflicts amongst first-order ideals. The casuist rule satisfies the philosopher’s demand for some sort of unifying principle in moral life. But it would be misleading to this means that James’s casuist rule is of purely theoretical significance and of no bearing on our practical life. He is quite clear that the moral philosopher and the rest of us should do our best to realize an inclusive whole. This moral project engages the most practical dimensions of our rationality. James points out that the “casuistic question is . . . most tragically practical”<sup>16</sup> because we will never be able to perfectly reconcile all conflicting ideals and goods. This means that the casuist rule is plausibly interpreted as a regulative ideal that guides our efforts to continually make the best, not the perfect, inclusive whole. Thus, James seems to recommend that his casuist rule figure in our moral self-conceptions, presumably, as a regulative constraint on our first-order ideals. Yet it has to be conceded that most people have various first-order ideals with content *different* and more *specific* than James’s casuist rule.

The Jamesian ideal of strenuous moral living must, therefore, incorporate the casuist rule in conjunction with more specific ideals. So, in addition to a commitment to inclusivity, I may have a first-order commitment to some religion such as Christianity or Buddhism. My first-order ideals may also include important aesthetic, scientific, or vocational pursuits which may not typically be objects of moral concern. Presumably, the casuist rule would minimally constrain the pursuit of such first-order ideals from thwarting others' goods. Even if the agents who adopt relatively inclusive first-order ideals do not think of themselves as committed to anything like James's casuist rule, we might, nevertheless, encourage and praise such ideals on Jamesian grounds. Indeed James offers an optimistic interpretation of social evolution when he claims that the human race is attempting to decide "through actual experiment by what sort of conduct the maximum amount of good can be gained and kept in this world"<sup>17</sup> (here James is close to Mill). Thus, looking back over history, we might praise Martin Luther's innovations in Christianity on the grounds that these made for a more inclusive good for all of Christendom. We do not need to assume that Luther was guided by anything like James's casuist criterion. We need only assume that some ideals do a better job in promoting inclusivity than others in a given time and context.

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With these refinements in place, James view of strenuous moral living amounts to this: "Strenuously pursue your first order ideals. However, be on guard lest this pursuit inhibit the ideals of others—especially when these ideals promote or at least do not threaten greater inclusivity. Take care to adopt first order ideals that promote inclusivity. When possible, strive to help others promote their ideals, especially when those ideals are themselves conducive to inclusivity." In sum, tolerance and respect are fundamental components of James's account of strenuous moral living.<sup>18</sup> With these refinements in place, we can turn to James's cautions about abstraction in ethics—cautions that are consequences of his commitment to moral individualism.

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### III) The Priority of Experience

Notwithstanding his efforts to develop a moral theory centered on the casuist rule, James's writings about ethics caution us about the limits of theorizing, and they express an outlook towards the moral life that we call James's *moral individualism*. Moral individualism is more of an outlook or attitude than it is a normative theory in the sense with which most moral philosophers are concerned.<sup>19</sup> James describes his "individualistic philosophy" in the following way: "the truth is too great for any one actual mind, even though that mind be dubbed 'the Absolute,' to know the whole of it. The facts and worths of life need many cognizers to take them in. There is no point of view absolutely public universal . . . The practical consequence of such a philosophy is the well-known democratic respect for the sacredness of individuality."<sup>20</sup> For James this sense of the other's inner reality is conveyed in the effort to sympathize with the standpoint of others—their feelings, hopes, dreams, and fundamental commitments.<sup>21</sup>

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Moral individualism has two sides; one is the appreciation of the "inner reality" of others, the other involves a serious commitment to the improvement of one's capacity to attend to the inner reality of others.<sup>22</sup> A strenuous moral life committed to moral individualism involves the deliberate effort to improve ethical attention—to cultivate the right sorts of moral ideas about self and others.<sup>23</sup>

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Moral individualism emphasizes the importance of moral *seeing*, in part because it recognizes the limits of abstract theories or principles. This does not mean that there is no place for theorizing. Rather, for James the moral philosopher and the moral life should nourish each other. Theories, ideals, and principles arise out of experience and they are tested in light of their function in future experience. We need to be willing to revise conceptions in light of fresh experience. James's arguments imply that some notion of "realizing an inclusive good" will be the core regulative ideal in any acceptable moral philosophy; however, the pragmatic approach would recommend that we be willing to revise, or perhaps even reject, this fundamental rule. Even though they are necessary parts of moral life, principles and ideals are not sufficient. They need to be supplemented by attentive sensitivity to the textures of experience. James writes,

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For every real dilemma is in literal strictness a unique situation; and the exact combination of ideals realized and ideals disappointed which each decision creates is always a universe without a precedent, and for which no adequate previous rule exists.<sup>24</sup>

James goes on to claim that the moral philosopher is not especially qualified to determine how best to realize an inclusive good in some problematic situation. That task requires receptivity to the "cries of the wounded." Sympathetic, imaginative and perceptual sensitivities are vital for discerning how to bring about the most inclusive good. Focusing too much upon abstract moral conceptions—even James's own casuist rule—may end up distracting us from developing such sensitivities, stunting their growth. James suggests that ethical treatises need to

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be supplemented by other methods of reflection which are better suited to honing our ethical sensitivities. These include “novels and dramas of the deeper sort, with sermons, with books on statecraft and philanthropy and social and economical reform.”<sup>25</sup> James’s claim here is congruent with Martha Nussbaum’s view that literature can have moral significance when it portrays nuanced, context-sensitive deliberation.<sup>26</sup> If we turn to James’s *Talks to Teachers*, we find some concrete suggestions about training ethical attention. It will be useful, first, to examine James’s notion of a “full fact” in order to better understand the bi-directional structure of ethical attention.

Near the end of *Varieties of Religious Experience*, James analyzes experience into subjective and objective parts which together comprise what he calls a “full fact.” He says that experience consists in “a conscious field plus its object as felt or thought plus an attitude towards the object, plus the sense of a self to whom the attitude belongs—such a concrete bit of personal experience may be a small bit, but it is a solid bit as long as it lasts; not hollow, not a mere abstract element of experience, such as the ‘object’ when taken alone.”<sup>27</sup> James’s “full facts” have a “bi-directional” intentional structure; they are simultaneously directed at self and world. This does not mean that every experience involves reflective awareness of self and world. Prior to analysis, the “sense of self” and the “attitude towards an object” are rolled together. When things are working well in the moral life, we simply attend to others and respond appropriately. These kinds of moral response are species of “simple attention.” There are times when people need to deliberately cultivate attention. In these instances, the full fact is reflectively decomposed into its constituents: the sense of self, the attitude, and the object. These are instances of “complex attention.”

James uses attention to analyze belief and will, apparently identifying these three concepts. Such identification has some initial plausibility once one accepts James’s assumption that consciousness itself is not a passive recording of ideas but an active agency, attending to features that hold its interest. Attention is a filtering process undertaken by animals with limited cognitive resources. In the *Psychology* James writes that attention is “the focalization” of consciousness . . . it implies withdrawal from some things in order to deal effectively with others, and is a condition which has a real opposite in the confused, dazed, scatterbrained state which in French is called distraction . . .”<sup>28</sup> James’s uses this account of attention to understand volition. He writes that “volitional effort is the effort of attention.”<sup>29</sup> Successful volition requires sufficient efforts of attention. In the simple case, we attend to the ideas produced by our brains and, if there are no obstacles, the idea discharges in some behavior. James refers to this as ideo-motor action. James also maintains that psychologically considered “*Will and Belief, in short . . . (mean). . . a certain relation between objects and the Self. . . (they) . . . are two names for one and the same PSYCHOLOGICAL phenomenon.*”<sup>30</sup> Even if, as Gale maintains,<sup>31</sup> James is wrong to *identify* attention, will, and belief, at the very least James makes a convincing case that attention is crucial for inducing volition and belief in at least a range of some important instances of complex attention.

Strenuous moral living requires that agents take responsibility for what they attend to—be these moral images of the self or images of others. Given James’s psychological assumptions, what we attend to affects moral belief and action. For James, morally praiseworthy acts involve effortful attention to the right sorts of ideas. Strenuous moral living is about continuously arousing the right sorts of ideas that will enable the agent to pursue the most inclusive good.

James talks about the process of cultivating ethical attention in his *Talks to Teachers*. He writes:

If, then, you are asked, ‘In what does a moral act consist when reduced to its simplest and most elementary form?’ you can make only one reply. You can say that it consists in the effort of attention by which we hold fast to an idea which but for that effort of attention would be driven out of the mind by the other psychological tendencies that are there. To think, in short, is the secret of will just as it is the secret of memory.<sup>32</sup>

James goes on to remark that the moral educator would do better to focus on “inhibition by substitution” than she would by “inhibition by repression.” The former offers a positive alternative idea, whereas the latter repressively curbs a troubling idea. James says that frequently moral problems involve “finding the right name for a case.” He uses the example of an alcoholic struggling with the decision of whether to take a drink. James says that “his choice of the wrong name seals his doom.”<sup>33</sup> Is this a case of “celebrating Christmas with friends?” or is it a case of “giving into the temptation that continues to undermine my life?” The key to the alcoholic’s success lies not simply in repressing a desire, but in training his mind on appropriate case descriptions. He needs to see his situation *as* “giving into an undermining temptation.” However, he also needs to train his attention on other ideas that replace the drinking ideas so that these eventually no longer grab his mind. For James, the change in what he attends to will likely result in a change in his actions.

Consider another example. I have certain impulsive ideas of my relative as being overbearing, self-absorbed and unsympathetic. Such impulsive ideas might manifest in my behavior, perhaps in the form of argumentative bad-mouthing. But they may be inhibited by other impulsive ideas from the fringe of consciousness—ideas such as fear of disapproval or fear of the unpleasant consequences of open conflict. Over time, through a deliberate effort of attention, I strive to re-configure my hostile attitudes. How do I do it? I might use what James calls *inhibition by repression*.<sup>34</sup> In that case, “both the inhibited idea and the inhibiting idea, the impulsive idea and the idea that negates it, remain along with each other in consciousness, producing a certain inward strain or tension there.” In this case, I might formulate a second-order negative evaluation such as “impatience is wrong here—give that up and strive to be tolerant and loving.” I might also try another route called *inhibition by substitution*, in which “the inhibiting idea supersedes altogether the idea which it inhibits, and the latter quickly vanishes from the field.”<sup>35</sup> Instead of focusing on repressing my own impatient or disgusted responses, I might visualize myself as a kind person. After I have modified self-descriptions, I cast attention back out on the relative. A substitution may be appropriate here. I may think of him as a boy who was abused by his father. Such an imaginative exercise, over time, may lead me to see him differently as he is now—an insecure person who over compensates. I may try to focus on some of his good qualities—perhaps he is struggling to be helpful, in his own way. So the description “former abused child who has problems with intimacy but who is trying in his own way” comes to replace the description “overbearing jerk.” Notice the bi-directional structure of a “full fact” comes into full in these cases of complex ethical attention. Sometimes it is useful to re-describe the “sense of self” that accompanies our responses to certain individuals. Sometimes it is more important to forget the self and focus on the other.

At base, what we attend to—especially habitually over time—shapes the kind of person we become. In the *Psychology*, James writes,

... the energy par excellence has to go farther and choose which interest out of several equally coercive, shall become supreme. The issue here is of the utmost pregnancy, for it decides a man's entire career. When he debates, Shall I commit this crime? Choose that profession? Accept that office, or marry this fortune? – his choice really lies between one of several equally possible future Characters. What he shall *become* is fixed by the conduct of the moment.<sup>36</sup>

Efforts to improve ethical attention, then, are efforts to select those ideas that will, given their impulsive nature, possibly give birth to a new “me” in the future.

Sometimes moral decisions require the risk of condemnation and disapproval from my peers. The opinions of others threaten to derail ethical attention, so special efforts are necessary to sustain attention. In such cases, James says that it is useful to appeal to “other and better possible social judges than those whose verdict goes against me now.”<sup>37</sup> James says that I may never meet examples of this ideal social self in my lifetime, but this “possible judging companion” is “the true, the intimate, the ultimate, the permanent me which I seek. This judge is God, the Absolute Mind, the ‘Great Companion.’”<sup>38</sup> James claims that specific individuals may play an inspirational role similar to the “ideal social self.” There he says,

... just as our courage is so often a reflex of another's courage, so our faith is apt to be some one else's faith. We draw new life from the heroic example. The prophet has drunk more deeply than anyone of the cup of bitterness, but his countenance is so unshaken and he speaks such mighty words of cheer that his will becomes our will, and our life is kindled at his own.<sup>39</sup>

Intensive reflection upon moral exemplars may, over time, shape a person's habits so that when in the thick of deliberation they are able to more spontaneously sympathize with the interests of others. Imagining what self I may become, judging my actions by an ideal social self, and contemplating moral heroes are ways that an agent may improve attention by way of what James calls “inhibition by substitution.” That is, agents re-describe their characters and actions by reference to some imagined characters. Such imaging methods are more about attending to the part of the full fact of moral experience that involves the “sense of the self” than they are about attending to the inner realities of other persons.

I think that James's theological postulate can be best understood as an instance of this effort to re-describe agency so as to energize moral effort when difficulties arise.<sup>40</sup> I will develop this claim in the concluding section. But first, we need to reject some bad arguments for James's theological postulate. We will also need to weaken James's conditional claim so that it reads theological belief *may* be necessary for the leading maximally strenuous moral lives.

#### IV) The Theological Postulate

James asserts that theological beliefs are necessary to *energize* the pursuit of his ethical ideal. He says, “the chief of all reasons why concrete ethics cannot be final is that they have to wait on metaphysical and theological beliefs.”<sup>41</sup> Later he clearly favors the view that “the stable and systematic moral universe for which the ethical philosopher asks is fully possible only in a world where there is a divine thinker with all-enveloping demands.”<sup>42</sup> James thinks that strenuous pursuit of his normative criterion requires a belief in a God, who is a kind of “divine demander.” As he puts it, “. . . in a merely human world without a God, the appeal to our moral energy falls short of its maximal stimulating power.”<sup>43</sup> Let’s call this view James’s “theological postulate.” 31

While James is not very explicit about his reasons for endorsing the theological postulate, three arguments may be reconstructed from the essay. 1) James appears to accept the claim that the “larger” the demand the more obligatory it is.<sup>44</sup> Given this assumption, God’s demands would be the most obligatory. 2) James appears to endorse the claim that believing that God’s divine mind is contemplating the correct solution to a moral dilemma offers encouragement to us during difficult deliberations. Such a belief reminds us that what we think is hopeless may only be a function of our own limited view of the matter, and that perhaps we simply need to work harder at getting closer to the way that the divine being views the situation. Finally, 3) at times, James seems to argue that the belief that a divine being is assisting our efforts to realize a more inclusive good provides confidence and energy that our efforts have a good chance of succeeding. Of the three arguments, I think a weak version of this third argument will withstand scrutiny. This argument will also fit nicely with the approach to ethical attention developed in the last section, thereby pointing the way to a compelling reconstruction of James’s notion of strenuous moral living. 32

Let’s begin with the first argument. How is it that I am motivated by God’s demands in virtue of the size of these demands? If we follow Deborah Boyle, and interpret James’s God as demanding that we maximize the most inclusive arrangement of ideals or demands, then belief in God would supply an additional reason to maximize the most demands possible. If we believe that God’s demand is virtually endless in scope, then presumably we will never be able to rationalize resting on our laurels. His large demand awaits our efforts, and presumably, given his infinite nature,<sup>45</sup> we will never be able to fully satisfy him.<sup>46</sup> To be sure, a universe with a quite large number of finite demanders requires less of us than a universe in which God’s large demand is added into the mix. But why would belief in the existence of this extra-large demand energize us in the pursuit of the inclusive good? It seems just as likely that we would become disheartened at the frustrating thought that no matter how much better they made their finite human communities, a voracious infinite being was demanding that they do more? 33

To address this motivational question, we might interpret James as holding the assumption that forceful demands create forceful motives in those that “hear” or contemplate them. Since God’s demand will be the most forceful, then it will supply the strongest motive possible. But a forceful demand may provoke aversion in me (as when I rebel against someone “yelling” at me). Forceful demands might motivate me to fearfully withdraw, finding ways to ignore or shut out the loud voice. 34

Even if big and loud demanders can *cause* moral agents to care about obligations, it hardly seems like this is a moral motive for action. We might address this worry by allowing that the motives that cause one to act morally might be quite divergent from the actual standard that justifies action. (This result is common in utilitarian ethics, in which motives and justifications can come apart). So, an agent might be caused to pursue the inclusive good because of fear without thinking of inclusivity as her moral goal. The cause is irrelevant, so long as she strenuously promotes inclusivity. We have already allowed that James’s theory could have a two-tiered structure with specific religious ideals functioning on the first order and the casuist rule on the second order. Why couldn’t the moral conceptions that motivate on the first level be quite different from the second-order conceptions that justify the first order ideals? 35

This approach has the disadvantage of estranging moral theory from everyday moral practice. I take the “and” in James’s essay title “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” to be referring to a relatively intimate conjunctive relation. James is clear that the philosopher’s task of finding some authoritative criterion to adjudicate conflicts is a practical task. That is to say, the philosophical proposal is supposed to be something that agents can actually use to improve moral life. What else would one expect from a pragmatist approach to moral theory? If pragmatists agree about anything, it is that theories should be used by moral agents to improve their habits and practices. 36

Consider the idea that it will be helpful to consider the divine demander’s perspective as we struggle to realize an inclusive whole. On this interpretation a belief in God energizes the pursuit of the moral ideal because the 37

belief provides us with some grounds for hoping that we can approximate God's knowledge of what will best realize the inclusive good.<sup>47</sup> James writes,

... the stable and systematic moral universe for which the ethical philosopher asks is fully possible only in a world where there is a divine thinker with all-enveloping demands. If such a thinker existed, his way of subordinating the demands to one another would be the finally valid casuistic scale; his claims would be the most appealing; his ideal universe would be the most inclusive realizable whole. If he now exist, then actualized in his thought already must be that ethical philosophy which we seek as the pattern which our own must evermore approach.<sup>48</sup>

The point here is not that we could decide morally correct actions by appeal to what "God thinks." James asserts that the moral philosopher is like the rest of us; since we cannot know God's mind, we simply use him as a postulate in order "to let loose in us the strenuous mood."<sup>49</sup> If I am committed to James's ethical ideal, I may find myself in discouraging, possibly tragic, situations in which it seems like no satisfactory harmony of demands can be found. Whatever I do, much butchering (to use James's metaphor) of demands will result. The hope that perhaps someone has a better perspective on the conflict situation may encourage me not to give up deliberating as soon as I might otherwise.<sup>50</sup> But do I need to believe that God *exists right now*, contemplating the correct solution to a moral problem, in order to be inspired to cultivate a more inclusive self? We need to distinguish between two possible claims:

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- 1) There exists right now a divine mind that comprehends the best possible harmony of satisfied demands.
- 2) There is some possible perspective that might be attained, which will discern the best possible harmony of satisfied demands.

Even though it might be encouraging to imagine that God is somewhere pondering the best way to realize the most demands, my real motivation to strive harder in the pursuit of the ethical ideal is my conviction that *I* can get closer to that better perspective. This conviction is plausibly tied to an aspiration to strive to become an "inclusive self"—a self better able to understand and act upon the ethical ideal. James's notion of an "ideal social self" helps here; that self might be identified with some existent divine being. However, this ideal might simply be understood as a "better version of me." Pragmatically, it may matter little which we choose. The crucial point is that given the connections that James makes between attention, will, and belief, imagining an inclusive may be a sensible motivational strategy. We will return to this point, shortly, after considering James's third argument for belief in the theological postulate.

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James scoffs at moral commitment to merely human improvement. He writes, "We do not love these men of the future keenly enough; and we love them perhaps the less the more we hear of their evolutionized perfection."<sup>51</sup> Obviously, whether "finite humanity" could inspire moral effort will depend to a great degree on personal inclinations. Even if historically humans have appealed to supernatural beliefs for moral inspiration, it hardly follows that this will continue to be desirable or necessary. But what seems to really bother James is less the boring character of evolutionized humans than the fact that promoting such evolution is "all too finite" and that "we see too well the vacuum beyond."<sup>52</sup> These remarks suggest that the real worry here is one about the puny efficacy of our own efforts. We are more likely to strenuously pursue the inclusive good if we believe that our contributions will be continued by God after we are gone. Belief that I have *help* from a divine demander encourages my zeal in pursuing the ethical ideal. How does that thought help to motivate me? On the one hand, it may actually make me somewhat morally lax because I may assume that someone stronger than me will pick up any of my moral slack. James, of course, is well aware of this particular danger. He never tires of cautioning us about the ways that belief in an absolute being serves as an excuse to go on "moral holidays." On holiday, we ignore evil because we believe an absolute being will take care of it. James's theistic solution to such holiday temptations is to downgrade God's powers just enough so that he needs our help. He may be stronger than us but he alone will not necessarily be able to alleviate evil. He needs our help. This approach may work to motivate but it obviously depends on knowledge claims about God that we can hardly validate (James would admit as much). But even setting aside worries about how we can know that God is like this, there is a larger problem: why should the belief in a divine helper motivate us to try to work for the ethical ideal? James might reply by pointing out that if I start with the assumption that I already care deeply about the realization of as many demands as possible, then belief in some stronger (but not all powerful) divine demander supplies additional encouragement in the pursuit of

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my project. After all, most people that take up life projects want them to succeed. Although there may be a great degree of variability regarding how much risk one is willing to take, it is generally true that the less likely the prospect for success the less motivated we are to undertake a life project. James is saying that we would be more motivated to pursue the project of maximizing demands if we simply believed that we are contributing to that inclusive whole of satisfied demands that includes God's help.

But given that we can't know whether the divine demander exists, and given that we are already committed to a project of creating an inclusive whole, why would we be more motivated to pursue this project by believing in him? Consider an analogy: I am a resident physician in an emergency room and am committed to saving as many patients as possible tonight. I know that if the attending doctor shows up in another room there is a greater possibility more patients will be saved tonight. But given my commitment, it would seem that I would be as motivated to save my patients regardless of whether I believed the doctor shows up. To be sure, as a resident, the presence of a more experienced doctor will be encouraging. I may lack confidence in my skills. But if I care about saving lives and I believe that the other doctor may not show up I may be even be more motivated. If *any* patients are going to be saved tonight, it is up to *me* to do it! I may be more motivated to pursue this project if I believed it really depended on me (and my cohorts). 41

Still, in the spirit of pluralism, we could concede that some people may not find strenuous motivation without some belief in the help of a divine being. James may have overestimated the psychological necessity for belief in such a being when he writes, "the capacity of 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 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."<sup>53</sup> However, this observation is certainly true for some moral agents. Would it be rational to deny an over-belief in a divine demander if such a belief did provide significant moral energy to some? Let's grant that such an over-belief would pass the tests for epistemic permissibility set out in James's essay "Will to Believe." That is, this over-belief is a forced, living, momentous option which appeals to a person's passionate nature, and which does not violate evidence. Condoning such beliefs seems reasonable so long as the content of this over-belief is not morally dubious, as it is when, for example, a person is morally motivated for the sake of God-given rewards. A morally acceptable content of such a belief might be some notion that the moral project of pursuing the most demands will never cease. Although it may wax and wane depending on the efforts of finite beings, it will never completely wane because God will continually take up the cause.<sup>54</sup> Notice that the position advocated here is more pluralist than James seems willing to allow. The claim is that the theological postulate may be necessary to let loose energy in some, but not all. It all depends on what it takes for *you* to let loose the strenuous mood. However, James does not succeed in offering reasons that show *anyone* must accept his theological postulate. Nevertheless, a weaker version of James's claim is defensible. The claim might work like this. If you are the sort of person whose "sense of moral agency" is flagging because of doubts about the efficacy of your will, then you should consider adopting the appropriate theological belief. 42

As has been emphasized, James's account of moral motivation revolves around deliberate efforts to cultivate attention. The theological postulate is not mere intellectual assent to a proposition about facts disconnected from the agent. Rather, the postulate is part of a person's attempt to vividly portray his or her own agency in a theological context that inspires hope that moral effort can succeed. Such a postulate is particularly useful when things get difficult. 43

Spelled out in more detail, the decision to adopt the theological postulate could be put in the form of the following complex conditional.

**If** you are the sort of person who is

- i) having skeptical doubts about the efficacy of your will in the pursuit of the inclusive good and,
- ii) these skeptical doubts threaten to inhibit your ability to live a morally strenuous life and,
- iii) these doubts about efficacy are based in the belief that your own powers are miniscule relative to the evil in the universe and,

iv) you have a propensity to have a religious belief in some higher power that helps our moral efforts (which belief would help to unblock the obstacles to a strenuous moral life) and,

v) this religious belief meets the requirements of any religious hypothesis as set out in James's "Will to Believe" essay

**then,**

vi) you have good reason to adopt a religious belief in some higher power or divine being that helps you in your quest to realize an inclusive good.

Interpreted in this weaker way, James's theological postulate is one among several ways that people may attempt to re-describe their agency so as to inspire more effort. The postulate is therefore on par with James's notions of the ideal social self and moral exemplars. Attention to these notions can be a useful strategy for energizing moral life. 44

Much more needs to be said to offer a complete picture of James's moral philosophy. But no picture of this philosophy will be complete without due consideration of the moral relevance of attention, strenuousness, and religious belief. These three ideas form the core of James's moral individualism. It is clear that James himself regarded moral individualism as the animating insight of his approach to moral philosophy, even though it cannot be denied that his elaboration and defense of the casuist rule is his most explicit theoretical statement. Nevertheless, what moral individualism may lack in terms of a developed philosophical articulation is made up for by the rich insights it afforded James. It is up to us to develop these insights more completely, whether by developing a tighter conceptual connection between moral individualism and the casuist rule, or by replacing the casuist rule with a plausible surrogate. 45

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> James (1977) p. 627.

<sup>2</sup> James (1977) p. 626.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 628.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 627. My concern is not to evaluate James' epistemological justifications of our "right" to hold religious beliefs, but to throw into question his claim that a theistic postulate *energizes* the pursuit of his normative ideal.

<sup>5</sup> Brown (2000), p. 99.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>7</sup> James (1977), p. 621.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.* p. 617.

<sup>9</sup> Hester (1999).

<sup>10</sup> James (1977) p. 623.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, “What Makes Life Significant” and “On A Certain Blindness in Human Beings” in James (1977).

<sup>12</sup> James (1977) p. 617.

<sup>13</sup> James (1977) p. 623.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Gale interprets James as a desire-satisfaction utilitarian. James’ casuist rule, in this view, tells us to maximize demand satisfaction. See also, Roth (1969) pp. 66-70 and Myers (1986) pp. 398-400 who discuss the tension in James’ apparent commitments to some sort of maximizing consequentialism and his commitment to deontic considerations. Wesley Cooper takes James to be offering us what he calls “ideal-maximizing consensualism” Cooper (2002), p. 225. On this interpretation, the casuist rule enjoins us to maximize those ideals which have survived, and will continue to survive, public scrutiny and rational reflection. The virtues of Gale’s approach are that the theory would include non-rational beings and it would offer us a fairly well-defined procedure for resolving practical ethical questions. Of course, the price that Gale’s interpretation must pay is the same as that of any act utilitarian position. Utilitarianism strains our intuitions about respecting the dignity and rights of individuals since it seems to allow rights violations for the sake of maximizing desire satisfaction. Gale’s interpretation has the added price of charging James with inconsistency, since James clearly advocates deontological constraints on action. The virtue of Cooper’s approach is that it accommodates James’ moral pluralism, allowing that some of the ideals to be maximized will parse deontological considerations. Cooper’s approach also allows for genuine qualitative differences between goods. One problem with Cooper’s approach is that it would seem to rule out non-rational beings. At best such beings could be counted if their well-being figured in the ideals of those who articulate moral ideals. A promising third alternative interpretation of James’ rule would be to take “claims” to be referring to an individual’s own good, as defined in terms of what it would take for it to flourish over a life time. An individual’s own good may include his or her considered moral ideals, but if the individual is incapable of holding ideals, then its “own good” may be defined more in terms of species-typical flourishing. Thus, the good of a sheep or dog need not make reference to articulated claims or ideals but rather by reference to some species-specific account of what it is for such an animal to do well over a lifetime. Thus, “claim” would not refer to simply any desire that an individual had at any time but it would not necessarily refer to something an individual could formulate in a speech act.

<sup>15</sup> Rorty (1990), p. 84.

<sup>16</sup> James (1977), p. 621.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 624.

<sup>18</sup> For a nuanced discussion of the variety of ways that an ideal might be inclusive see Putnam, “The Moral Life of a Pragmatist,” pp. 84-89.

<sup>19</sup> The phrase “moral individualism” comes from Ralph Barton Perry.

<sup>20</sup> Perry (1996) p. 222.

<sup>21</sup> This is the central theme of his essay “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings.” In that essay, James laments the fact that so much of our lives are spent in sheer blindness to ways of life different from our own. Sympathetic awareness of the other need not imply that we come to share the same values as the other. But it ought to issue forth in a certain respect for the fact that other lives are animated by values quite different from our own. Even when we cannot sympathetically enter into another life, we may still appreciate the fact that this life possesses some significance for itself.

<sup>22</sup> Commenting on his essay “On A Certain Blindness in Human Beings,” James says that this essay represents “the perception on which my whole individualistic philosophy is based.”<sup>22</sup> Jamesian scholarship has, understandably, focused much attention on the normative standpoint reflected in his maximization principle or casuist rule in his essay “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life.” But James himself would probably argue that individualism’s core perception of the worth of the individual is more important than any more detailed philosophical doctrine to which it might be attached.

<sup>23</sup> James’ views bear an affinity with Iris Murdoch. See Brown (200).

<sup>24</sup> James (1977), p. 626.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example Nussbaum (1990).

<sup>27</sup> James (1990) p. 447.

<sup>28</sup> James (1950b) p. 404.

<sup>29</sup> James (1977) p. 709.

<sup>30</sup> James (1950b) p. p. 404.

<sup>31</sup> See Gale (1999) chapter 2, “The Willfulness of Belief.”

<sup>32</sup> James (1929) pp. 186-187.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 188.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 193.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> James (1950a) p. 288.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 315.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., pp. 315-316.

<sup>39</sup> James (1950b) p. 579.

<sup>40</sup> To be sure, ethical attention is not exclusively concerned with self. We also need methods to cultivate sympathetic attention to others. Meditation practices, contemplation of stories in film, literature or in memoirs are just a few examples of concrete methods that might help agents hone their capacity to attend to the reality of others.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 626.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. p. 628.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. p. 627. My concern is not to evaluate James' epistemological justifications of our "right" to hold religious beliefs, but to throw into question his claim that a theistic postulate *energizes* the pursuit of his normative ideal.

<sup>44</sup> See Boyle (1998) for an excellent discussion of this point.

<sup>45</sup> In this essay James speaks of an "infinite demander." Later, he seems to hold a view of God as finite, or at least as fallible. Probably, James' views of the nature of God evolved.

<sup>46</sup> Boyle (1998)

<sup>47</sup> Gale (1999) calls this version of the postulate "God as the knowingest kid on the block."

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. p. 629.

<sup>50</sup> This understanding of the motivating function of the divine demander resembles the impartial spectator device used in much utilitarian moral philosophy. Nevertheless, James' use of such a device need not imply the attempt to attain a perfect comprehension the perspectives of all sentient beings—or even of those beings who are likely to be affected by a particular act. Besides being too demanding, such a totalizing perspective runs the risk of falling into the incoherent position of trying to simultaneously combine finite and infinite perspectives. (James criticizes this sort of faulty combination in many of his attacks against absolute idealism).

<sup>51</sup> James (1977) p. 627.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 628

<sup>54</sup> It is not clear one need even accept a monotheistic deity in order to generate a similar sort of moral inspiration. For example, those Buddhists who believe that buddhas and bodhisattvas never give up on helping sentient beings, and that every sentient being is a potential Buddha, might be motivated to live strenuously according to the belief that the moral cause will always have the support of these sorts of beings.

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## Ethical Naturalism and Religious Belief in “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life”<sup>1</sup>

Michael R. Slater

*Abstract.* In this paper I offer a re-reading of “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” William James’s most well known work on ethics. I show that while James defends a naturalistic account of the basis of morality in the essay, he also makes a practical argument for religious faith, one that closely connects the piece to such works as “The Will to Believe” and *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. After discussing some of the strengths and weaknesses of James’s moral theory and metaethical views, I argue that the religious aspect of the essay—which has tended to be either ignored or downplayed by previous interpreters—is of crucial importance for understanding James’s ethics, and that his practical argument is valid and worthy of serious consideration.

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“The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” (1891) is probably the most well-known and oft-cited of William James’s moral writings, and with good reason.<sup>2</sup> It presents a bold, empiricist and consequentialist vision of the moral life, and sets that vision in sharp relief from rationalist and deontological approaches to ethics. And unlike the great majority of James’s moral writings, it not only explicitly addresses a number of fundamental issues in moral philosophy, but also offers a clearly defined—though insufficiently developed—moral theory. It should therefore come as little surprise that *The Moral Philosopher* is usually the first source to which scholars interested in James’s moral philosophy turn when inquiring into James’s views on that subject. What is surprising, however, is that the religious dimension of an otherwise naturalistic essay has gone virtually unnoticed by most James scholars.<sup>3</sup> The one exception, to my knowledge, is Richard Gale, who has offered a rigorous and illuminating treatment of this dimension of the essay. In this paper I tackle the issue from a somewhat different perspective than Gale, and try to show how James’s turn to religious ethics in *The Moral Philosopher* functions to shore up certain deficiencies in the naturalistic dimension of his moral theory.<sup>4</sup> Having done so, I then assess the merits and demerits of James’s account, focusing in particular on James’s provocative argument for the ineluctability of religious beliefs in the moral life.

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Before going any further, however, I should first clarify my use of the terms “ethical naturalism” and “religious ethics.” Strictly speaking, James uses neither of these terms in *The Moral Philosopher*. Then again, James does not use any single term to denote the operative distinction which he makes between, on the one hand, a “concrete ethics” which acknowledges no grounds for ethics beyond those provided by the mere existence of sentient beings and the claims that they make on one another (James also calls this “the religion of humanity”), and on the other hand ethical views and theories which involve certain “metaphysical and theological beliefs.” Since James only elaborates on the role that “theological beliefs” play in the moral life (presumably he has in mind belief in free will when he mentions metaphysical beliefs—but this is only a conjecture), I shall confine my analysis accordingly. Using terminology that is standard in my own field, Religious Studies, I propose to use the generic term “religious ethics” to refer to the religious turn that James’s ethics takes in the concluding section of *The Moral Philosopher*. I shall use the terms “ethical naturalism” and “naturalistic ethics” interchangeably to refer to the moral theory that James develops in the earlier sections of the essay, a theory which sees the basis of morality as independent of religion, and which (as we saw above) holds that morality can be accounted for in purely human terms—that is, in terms drawn from human nature and human experience. Using this broad definition, humanistic accounts such as

James's as well as reductively materialist accounts of ethics qualify as naturalistic.<sup>5</sup> Whether—and if so, how—the naturalistic and religious accounts of ethics that James defends in *The Moral Philosopher* cohere is the primary subject of this article.<sup>6</sup>

That James connected ethical and religious issues should come as no surprise. Other essays in WB deal at length with issues in the philosophy of religion and philosophical theology, especially the ethics of religious belief. As James make clear in the Preface to WB, the first four essays in the collection “are largely concerned with defending the legitimacy of religious faith” (WB, x). Indeed, James defends not only the legitimacy of religious belief in these essays, but its *superiority* to other modes of belief (such as atheism and agnosticism). James continues to defend and modify this basic view in such works as VRE and PU, where he grounds religious belief in religious and mystical experience and develops a pluralistic interpretation of religion (indeed, a worldview) capable of accounting for a plurality of religious overbeliefs. Perhaps the most important difference between the “theological beliefs” that James describes in *The Moral Philosopher* and the more generic religious beliefs described above is that the latter are not explicitly theistic in nature, whereas the former are. Another important difference is that in *The Moral Philosopher* (as in WB more generally) James makes no explicit appeal to religious or mystical experience. A number of commentators have studied this shift in James's religious thought, from a “finite” version of theism to a more pluralistic and experiential religious outlook in which “God” simply names one possible “overbelief” among many.<sup>7</sup> For our purposes, it should be enough to note that while James has a recognizably Christian (albeit heterodox) version of theism in mind in *The Moral Philosopher*, this should not be taken as his settled religious view. If, however, James sees religious belief as playing an indispensable role in the moral life, as section V suggests, and if James's religious views change over time (as is evident in such works as VRE and PU), it is possible—though not, of course, necessary—that James's ethical views change to some degree as well. If this turns out to be the case, then scholars who are interested in understanding James's ethics will need to read his ethical and religious writings in conjunction with one another; indeed, it may be that there is more ethical content to James's religious writings than has heretofore been appreciated.<sup>8</sup> In any case, a fuller treatment of James's religious views will be required if we are to make sense of James's religious turn in *The Moral Philosopher*. This article aims to make a limited but nonetheless needful contribution towards that end.

A brief summary of James's argument in the essay may be helpful at this point, before we proceed any further. In *The Moral Philosopher*, James presents a consequentialist theory of morality, and develops that theory against the background of a broadly naturalistic view of the nature of moral properties and relations. According to James, we both can and should understand moral properties and relations as natural in kind. We *can* do so, insofar as moral properties and relations are *conceivable* in purely human terms—that is, both are conceivable without reference to such things as God, Platonic Forms, or other supernatural concepts. And we *should* do so, because adopting such an approach will help us to arrive at the only empirically grounded and testable moral theory.<sup>9</sup>

Interestingly, however, James devotes the final section of the essay to a discussion of the reasons why a “bald” form of ethical naturalism is ultimately *unsustainable* in the moral life in the long run.<sup>10</sup> Here, James roughly claims that certain non-naturalistic metaphysical and religious beliefs are necessary (though not sufficient) for leading the highest sort of moral life attainable, which he calls the “morally strenuous” life. The morally strenuous life, as James describes it, is a life characterized by faith: faith in moral objectivity, and faith in the ultimate success of our ethical endeavors. Morally strenuous persons, on James's view, are the persons who are least susceptible to moral pessimism, skepticism, relativism, and other moral pathologies; and the reason why they are the least susceptible to these pathologies is because they are religious persons: that is, they confidently believe (truly or falsely) that their moral judgements and actions are variously grounded in and assisted by such things as supernatural agents, objects, events, and states of affairs.<sup>11</sup> Thus, James holds that even though morality is a basically human and naturalistic affair, it is nonetheless the case that some form of religious faith is practically *required* for achieving the most stable and capable form of moral agency.<sup>12</sup>

One of the more curious features of *The Moral Philosopher* is that until virtually the final section of the essay James gives the impression that he aims to offer a purely naturalistic account of morality.<sup>13</sup> Yet, while James does indeed develop a naturalistic account of the basis of morality, and of moral properties and relations besides, he also goes on to argue that the demands of leading a moral life are such that we can scarcely avoid adopting certain metaphysical and religious beliefs to sustain it—that is, to sustain us as moral agents over time in a tragic, finite world. While James defends a naturalistic approach to ethics that is similar in a number of respects to those advanced by many moral philosophers today, he also holds that ethical naturalism fails to provide a motivationally sufficient and sustainable ethical outlook. In doing so, and without advocating a religious moral theory, James nonetheless comes to recognize an indispensable role for religious postulates in the moral life.<sup>14</sup>

The outline of the essay is as follows. In section one (§1), I analyze the naturalistic portion of James's account of the moral life. Then, in section two (§2), I examine the religious dimension of James's account, wherein James

develops his view that ethical naturalism stands in need of religious supplementation. Finally, in section three (§3) I discuss some of the strengths and weaknesses of James's arguments in *The Moral Philosopher*, especially his argument for a "religiously supplemented" version of ethical naturalism.

## 1. James's Ethical Naturalism

James's stated purpose in *The Moral Philosopher* was "to show that there is no such thing possible as an ethical philosophy dogmatically made up in advance" (WB, 184). What this statement reveals, in addition to James's rejection of *a priori*ism in ethics, is his commitment to epistemic fallibilism. James believed that while a genuine science or objective account of ethics is possible, "there can be no final truth in ethics any more than in physics, until the last man has had his experience and said his say" (WB, 184).<sup>15</sup> If there is to be a final truth in ethics, then it must await a complete analysis of human moral experience and judgment. This is, to say the least, a tall order, and arguably much taller than an *a posteriori* and fallibilist account of ethics needs to be. Rather than providing such an analysis, however, *The Moral Philosopher* should be seen as sketching the lines along which such an account of ethics might proceed. Whatever the fate of James's claim might be, it is nevertheless the case that much of what James has to say about the nature of morality and the ethical enterprise is highly interesting (not to mention provocative), and foreshadows a number of later developments in 20<sup>th</sup> century Anglo-American moral philosophy. I shall have more to say about these features of James's account as we proceed.

As he will later insist in "The Will to Believe," James asserts that one of the pre-conditions for doing moral philosophy, or for having a moral philosophy at all, is the rejection of *moral skepticism* (WB, 184). The would-be moral philosopher, as well as one who simply seeks to live by a moral philosophy, must resolve at the outset that she will not be a moral skeptic. With that commitment assumed, James thinks that the basic aim of moral philosophy is to arrive at a unified account or system of ethics. It is, namely, "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 of the world what one may call a genuine universe from the ethical point of view" (WB, 184-85). The basic aim of moral philosophy, then, is to provide us with a moral picture of the universe, or a moral worldview. The subject-matter of moral philosophy, furthermore, is both normative and descriptive in nature: normative, in that it aims to provide us with an account of how we should act; and descriptive, in that it studies those *ideals* which the moral philosopher finds "existing in the world" (WB, 185). While James takes an empirical approach to moral philosophy, he also recognizes that moral philosophy can never be a purely descriptive enterprise, since the aim motivating moral philosophy is itself an ideal, and "a factor in ethical philosophy whose legitimate presence must never be overlooked; it is a positive contribution which the philosopher himself necessarily makes to the problem" (WB, 185).

Having laid down his methodology, James devotes the greater part of *The Moral Philosopher*, and virtually the entirety of what I have termed the "naturalistic" portion of his account, to analyzing what he takes to be the three basic kinds of questions in moral philosophy. These are the *psychological*, the *metaphysical*, and the *casuistic* questions of ethics (WB, 185). The first, James tells us, deals with the historical *origins* of our moral ideas and judgments; the second with the "very meaning of the words 'good,' 'ill,' and 'obligation'"; and the third with "the *measure* of the various goods and ills which men recognize, so that the philosopher may settle the true order of human obligation." As I have said, James devotes the majority of the essay to an elucidation of these questions, and in doing so he lays out his own moral theory. For reasons of space, I shall only treat James's discussion of the metaphysical and casuistic questions of ethics. Fortunately, it is here that the sharpest contrast between James's naturalistic and religious ethical views is to be found.

While James is not very clear about what he means by "metaphysics," he seems to have in mind both metaphysical and semantic issues in ethics. For James, the metaphysical questions of ethics have principally to do with what we might call the *meaningfulness* of ethical concepts, claims, and theories: that is, the conditions under which ethical concepts, claims, and theories might be meaningfully said to 'fit' or apply to our moral experience. On James's view, ethical terms and claims can have no meaning apart from certain prior metaphysical conditions having been met, and the most basic of these is the existence of sentient beings (for the sake of convenience, let us call this an *existential condition for ethics*—if ethical ideas are to have any purchase on reality, there must be sentient beings who can think and use them).<sup>16</sup> James asks us first to imagine a brute, material world in which no sentient life exists, a world which has existed "from eternity without a God, without even an interested spectator" (WB, 189). He then asks us to consider on the one hand whether or not in such a world evaluative concepts would have any *meaning*, and on the other whether or not such things as goods, evils, and obligations could be said to *exist*. For James, the answer on both counts is clearly 'No.' James writes:

Neither moral relations nor the moral law can swing *in vacuo*. 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 (WB, 190).

Not only can we not sensibly conjecture the existence of values in a purely physical world; we also cannot sensibly hold that goods and obligations exist independently of minds, or minded beings. This last point is crucial, for it rules out not only reductively materialist accounts of ethics, but also transcendental accounts which purport to ground ethics in an *a priori*, extra-human moral law. Yet, James holds, “[t]he moment one sentient being is made a part of the universe, there is a chance for goods and evils really to exist” (WB, 190). With the existence of at least one mind or minded being, moral relations can sensibly and possibly arise. But if only one sentient being exists, James observes, value judgments will have a subjective character, because they will be relative to its preferences alone. This sort of moral universe is what James calls a *moral solitude* (WB, 191). Beyond that single being’s value judgments, there are no moral facts or truths. Even if we introduce a second thinker into the universe, James thinks, the situation does not necessarily make value judgments any more objective—for in this case the two beings might go on forming value judgments independently of each other, but with incommensurable and equally subjective results. Nor is the problem of moral subjectivism solved by pluralizing matters further still, for it is possible that in such a world only a multitude of subjective standpoints exist (WB, 192). Objectivity enters the picture—at least at the level of assertion—only when moral subjects begin to assert that some standpoints are better or truer than others, and *ought* to be recognized as such. Objectivity, then, can only arise with the advent of the concept of *obligation* (WB, 192).<sup>12</sup> But if there are no extra-human (or better, mind-independent) grounds for ethics, if “nothing can be good or right except so far as some consciousness feels it to be good or thinks it to be right” (WB, 192-3), then moral subjectivism would still seem to be an ineliminable fact. Neither recourse to a divine standard nor agreement among individuals can undo the fact that the putative objectivity of moral judgments ultimately devolves to *authority*, and is really at best subjective or intersubjective in nature.

To this point, James has said nothing about what it is about sentient beings that might make them concerned about one another’s welfare or flourishing. Consequently, to this point James’s account seems rather underdeveloped. A few pages later, however, James uses the qualifier “loving” (WB, 197) to mark a potential difference between a moral universe *à deux* and the non-moral universe comprised of two moral subjectivists that we encountered above. Is the differentiating condition between them that in the former the two subjects *recognize* each other’s claims as obligating, whereas in the latter they do not? If so, a moral sentiment like affection or benevolence shared between two minded beings would then be the necessary condition for the possibility of morality, and not merely the existence of two minded beings alone. If the beings are and remain disinterested in one another, then presumably a moral universe does not exist, and never comes to be. James’s ethical naturalism would have been more adequate and compelling, I submit, if he had been clearer about and had devoted more space to a discussion of the place of the moral sentiments. (Indeed, as we have seen, his account seems to presuppose the existence of shared moral sentiments.)

James’s attempt to account for moral objectivity is thus far unsatisfactory. James recognizes and indeed insists that we can have no recourse to a mind-independent ground of ethics, or the idea of “an abstract moral order in which the objective truth resides” (WB, 194). He thinks that we cannot sensibly appeal to a mind-independent, *de jure* moral order “which antedates and overarches the mere facts, and would make it right that we should conform our thoughts to God’s thoughts, even though he made no claim to that effect, and though we preferred *de facto* to go on thinking for ourselves” (WB, 194). In short, *The Moral Philosopher* asserts that *moral realism* is not a plausible theory of moral properties and relations. Rather, only *moral anti-realism* is plausible, in which we understand moral properties and relations as ontologically mind-dependent (rather than mind-independent) in nature. If moral anti-realism is true, and if not all moral agents agree on which moral claims are obligating, then how can one account for moral objectivity? Rather than abandoning the notion of moral objectivity or attempting to redefine it in intersubjective terms (thus reducing objectivity to intersubjectivity), James instead tries to locate moral objectivity in the very *act* of making claims: that is, by equating *ethical claims* with *ethical obligations*. He writes:

But the moment 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 wherever there is a claim. Claim and obligation are, in fact, coextensive terms; they cover each other exactly (WB, 194).

There are a number of problems with James’s argument. To begin with, we have two separate claims here, and one can grant the truth of the first without granting the truth of the second.<sup>13</sup> Secondly, if it is true, as James

asserts, that claims and obligations are logically equivalent, then all claims are morally obligating. There can be no such thing as a non-morally obligatory claim.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the very distinction between *moral and immoral* claims seems to break down, since all claims become “valid” or morally obligating simply by virtue of being made. But if there are any invalid or non-morally obligating claims, as most people believe, then it cannot be the case that “every de facto claim creates in so far forth an obligation” (WB, 195); the mere *act* of asserting a claim cannot be what makes it valid. As Roth, Gale, and other commentators have argued, James’s attempt to account for moral objectivity along these lines appears to strike out.

Suppose, though, that we interpret James’s claims about obligation in *prima facie* terms, instead? (While this would admittedly be revisionary—the notion of *prima facie* obligation was developed by W.D. Ross several decades later—it might possibly allow us to salvage this aspect of James’s account.) Even this strategy does not fare very well, though, because it seems to undo James’s key claim that obligations and claims cover each other exactly. If claims are *prima facie* obligating, then there are at least some (and perhaps many) claims which effectively cease to be obligating under certain conditions. On a *prima facie* interpretation, claim and obligation cease to cover each other exactly, which is precisely what James cannot allow if his account is to work.

Let us set aside these problems for the time being, though, and take stock of the overall trajectory of James’s account. Up to this stage of *The Moral Philosopher*, James has presented ethics as a purely human affair. But in making ethics humanistic, James is not thereby making ethics a-religious. For a few lines later, we find James entertaining the possibility of our being in moral community with *God*. While James recommends (presumably for economical reasons) that we not personalize the universe unless we happen to believe “in a universal or divine consciousness which actually exists” (WB, 196), he recognizes the legitimacy of holding such a belief. “If there be such a consciousness,” James writes, “then its demands carry the most of obligation simply because they are the greatest in amount” (WB, 196).<sup>20</sup> James does not want to rule out God’s participation in the moral life; but he does want theists to understand God’s obligations in the same terms in which he thinks we should understand our own. Our moral obligations inhere in the structure of our actual moral relationships on James’s view, and not in an extra-relational, *a priori* order. As James forcefully puts the matter:

[T]he 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 human hearts, as they happen to beat responsive and not irresponsible to the claim. So far as they do feel it when made by a living consciousness, it is life answering to life (WB, 196).

If God exists, neither God nor we are bound by an extra-empirical, transcendental moral order. And more tellingly, if God exists, then any claims that God makes on us are binding only insofar as *we* respond to those claims. This puts ethics on a decisively humanistic—and highly subjective—footing. Indeed, it seems to involve a more general claim on James’s part that moral reasons are internal reasons: that is, in order for an appeal to be a reason for action, it must be “internal” to the agent by according with that agent’s motives.<sup>21</sup> Yet, James’s assertion that claims are binding on us only insofar as we *choose* to recognize them as binding undercuts his earlier assertion that claims *ipso facto* entail obligations. James cannot have his cake and eat it too: either claims and obligations are logically equivalent (which is absurd), or they are not (in which case James’s account of moral objectivity goes to ruins, because it makes the validity of a claim depend on its being actually recognized by a subject, who may always in principle *choose* not to recognize it as binding, or may not *feel* obliged to meet it).

In any case, the larger point that James aims to make in his discussion of the metaphysical questions of ethics is that morality is autonomous. Its existence does not require God’s existence. James writes:

We, on this terrestrial globe, so far as the visible facts go, are just like the inhabitants of such a rock. *Whether a God exist, or whether no God exist, in you blue heaven above us bent, we form at any rate an ethical republic here below. And the first reflection which this leads to is that ethics have as genuine and real a foothold in a universe where the highest consciousness is human, as in a universe where there is a God as well. ‘The religion of humanity’ affords a basis for ethics as well as theism does.* Whether the purely human system can gratify the philosopher’s demands as well as the other is a different question, which we ourselves must answer ere we close (WB, 198; emphasis added).

When we read these last two quotes in conjunction, we find James claiming that so long as there are sentient beings that recognize and vitally respond to one another’s claims, we have a moral universe.<sup>22</sup> Following Auguste Comte and J.S. Mill, James now asserts that ‘*the religion of humanity*’ is as adequate a basis for ethics as theism.<sup>23</sup>

The last kinds of questions that James considers are the *casuistic*, which James roughly takes to consist in questions concerning the decision procedures of ethics, or those concerning the nature of ethical reasoning. We inhabit a world where moral agreement is often lacking, where competition for goods and conflicts of ideals all too frequently occur. Indeed, ethical conflict and incommensurability are such basic facts of our existence that moral philosophy itself can come to seem a doomed enterprise. Our conflicts “all form a maze of apparently inextricable confusion with no obvious Ariadne’s thread to lead one out” (WB, 198). In this state, however, we must not become moral skeptics, believing that moral truth does not exist; but neither must we be moral subjectivists, assuming that moral truth is relative to individual belief or preference (WB, 199).

This last qualification is especially difficult, James recognizes, because he has ruled out the possible existence of abstract moral truth (*qua* ruling out abstract *orders* of moral truth) and made moral truth relative to beliefs (indeed, *preferences*) actually held by sentient beings. Consistent with his general view of ethics, James affirms that the moral philosopher must strive for impartiality in her moral judgments, and bracket her individual values as far as possible, but this seems to be an impossible demand in light of the subjective ground of ethics that James thinks is the fact of the matter (WB, 199).<sup>24</sup> James muses that if only we could develop a method or procedure for discerning the *essence of the good*, we could then hope to settle our evaluative conflicts in a non-subjective fashion (WB, 199-200). Many such attempts have been made historically by philosophers, James observes, but “no one of the measures that have been actually proposed has, however, given general satisfaction” (WB, 200). James thinks that the best candidate for disclosing the essence of the good, and for constituting the supreme principle of morality, is *the satisfaction of demand*; that is, on James’s view “*the essence of good is simply to satisfy demand*” (WB, 201). For better or worse, this move ties James’s answer to the casuistic questions of ethics to his answer to the metaphysical questions of ethics, and in particular, to his account of the nature of moral obligation.

James recognizes, however, that his is a hopelessly broad claim, one that permits what seems to be anything under the sun (WB, 201). And of course, the demands to be satisfied will obviously not all be of the same kind, nor will they necessarily share the same underlying motives. This leads James to admit that, even though this is his best candidate for specifying the basic principle of morality, it can hardly pretend to encapsulate all ethical actions and judgments. Moral philosophy thus proves exceedingly difficult to do, and its task is made even harder by the fact that not all ideal moral orders or systems will fit the empirical facts (WB, 202). Our world, James thinks, displays a pattern that does not cohere with such ideal orders. James takes it as a consequence of this fact that moral theory must always give way to actual, practical demands. He writes:

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. There is hardly a good which we can imagine except as competing for the possession of the same bit of space and time with some other imagined good. Every end of desire that presents itself appears exclusive of some other end of desire (WB, 202).

According to James, the plurality of goods and ends that we hold and the potential conflict between them entails that compromise is an ineluctable feature of the moral life.<sup>25</sup> Though we should take the achievement of a stable, unified system of ethics as our regulative ideal, or the goal which guides inquiry, in actuality we should be prepared for the possibility that we shall have to settle for less.

A further difficulty facing the moral philosopher, James observes, is that she is born “into a society whose ideals are largely ordered already” (WB, 203), and tends to have her own ideals shaped in large part for her by the society of which she is a member. “In other words,” James tells us, “our environment encourages us not to be philosophers but partisans” (WB, 203). For James, however, the moral philosopher should seek to transcend her own ideals and those of her society in the attempt to arrive at an objective moral point of view. Faced with the prospect of moral philosophers becoming partisans of particular ideals—and what is worse, *moralists* dogmatically espousing those ideals—James recoils. He writes:

Better chaos forever rule than an order based on any closet-philosopher’s rule, even though he were the most enlightened member of his tribe. No! if the philosopher is to keep his judicial position, he must never become one of the parties to the fray (WB, 204).

Thus, doing moral philosophy from within a *moral tradition*, or on the basis of one’s reflective moral commitments, should be rejected. But what options, exactly, does this leave James?

The only way to escape these difficulties, James thinks, lies in adopting the maxim that *we should always strive to satisfy as many demands as we can* (WB, 205). “That act must be the best act, accordingly,” he writes, “which makes

for the *best whole*, in the sense of awakening the least sum of dissatisfactions” (WB, 205). The casuistic principle that James thus recommends takes the best ideals as those which “*prevail at the least cost*, or by whose realization the least possible number of other ideals are destroyed” (WB, 205). James thinks, then, that the best ethical ideal to adopt is the one most inclusive of other ideals, and he keenly recognizes that this principle has had great success historically in eliminating social strife and cruelty. What is unclear from James’s discussion of this issue, however, is whether we should interpret James as claiming that we should seek to maximize the *desires* of individuals (which surely motivate their demands) or rather their *ideals*. On the basis of these passages, James can be—and has been—interpreted as either a “desire-satisfaction” utilitarian, or as an “ideal-satisfaction” utilitarian.<sup>26</sup> The difficulty facing James is that these forms of utilitarianism potentially conflict, and he appears to endorse both. Insofar as James equates obligations with demands or claims, he seems bound to honor a desire-satisfaction principle; and insofar as he aims to recognize the greatest number of ideals at the least cost, he seems bound to honor an ideal-satisfaction principle. In order to resolve this dilemma James would need, at minimum, to assign a priority either to demands or ideals in cases of conflict (this would be to pursue a *prima facie* approach, which as I mentioned earlier, was not available to James). It is simply not clear how James himself might have resolved this dilemma, though given the emphasis that he will later place upon the philosophical significance of ideals and over-beliefs (see TT, VRE, *Pragmatism*, and PU), and the relative lack of emphasis that he will subsequently place upon maximizing demands, it would seem to be the case that the latter was the less important of the two concerns. Perhaps the larger point to be made here, however, is that no matter which horn of the dilemma one decides to break, James’s moral theory still stands in need of serious modification.

James concludes his discussion of the casuistic questions of ethics by declaring that “ethical science is just like physical science, and instead of being deducible all at once from abstract principles, must simply bide its time, and be ready to revise its conclusions from day to day” (WB, 208).<sup>27</sup> James’s is a decisively empiricist and humanist vision of the moral life, and it calls for doing the best we can with what resources we have. “There is but one unconditional commandment,” he declares, “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” (WB, 209). Our task, as moral philosophers and agents, is to muddle through as best we can, enlisting sources of moral inspiration from wherever we can (WB, 210). This, effectively, concludes James’s discussion of the naturalistic dimensions of ethics. And yet, his account of ethics remains incomplete.

## 2. James’s Turn to Religious Ethics

“The chief of all the reasons why concrete ethics cannot be final,” James proclaims, “is that they have to wait on metaphysical and theological beliefs” (WB, 210). This remark represents a watershed in James’s argument, for with it he begins to modify his earlier claims regarding a humanistic version of ethical naturalism, or what he at one point calls “the religion of humanity.” James’s view up to this stage has been that ethical relations are possible in a purely human world.<sup>28</sup> Now, however, we find James claiming that religious beliefs are somehow indispensable in leading a moral life. What, exactly, does James mean by this claim?

James begins this portion of his account by drawing a distinction between what he calls *the easy-going* and *the strenuous mood* (WB, 211). What James basically has in mind by such a distinction is the difference between ethical indifference, cowardice, and weakness of will on the one hand, and ethical concern, courage, and volitional resolve on the other. “The capacity for the strenuous mood,” James writes, “probably lies slumbering in every man, but it has more difficulty in some than in others in waking up” (WB, 211). Strong passions such as fear, love, and indignation, in addition to higher ideals like justice, truth, and freedom are required to awaken the strenuous mood, for “[s]trong relief is a necessity of its vision; and a world where all the mountains are brought down and all the valleys are exalted is no congenial place for its habitation” (WB, 211-12).<sup>29</sup> The next lines are revealing, and worth quoting in full. James writes:

This is why in a solitary thinker this mood might slumber on forever without waking. His various ideals, known to him to be mere preferences of his own, are too nearly of the same denominational value: he can play fast or loose with them at will. *This too is why 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 such 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* (WB, 212; emphasis added).

For James, personal preferences—which constitute the basic unit of moral value and calculation, insofar as they are expressed as demands—exist independently of God’s existence. Purely individual preferences, however, are

incapable of either awakening or sustaining the strenuous mood. Why does James believe this to be the case? James unfortunately does not provide an argument in support of his claims, but the basic idea seems to be that without an infinite, divine commander (or “infinite demander,” to use James’s formulation) our moral ideals lack *objective grounds* (they remain mere subjective preferences, James suggests) and fail to be *sufficiently motivating*. This represents an important qualification on James’s moral theory, since James now seems to be suggesting that while a moral universe can exist without a God, it cannot remain in existence for very long or reach its most developed stage without one. Belief in God and God’s infinite scale of values is—to use a term from “Is Life Worth Living?”—a “supplemental fact” or over-belief which provides the moral life with the objectivity and motivation it putatively lacks on purely naturalistic grounds (WB, 212-13). While the religion of humanity may provide as adequate a basis for morality as theism, it fails to be as motivationally sufficient as theism, presumably because it is *not religious enough*.

For James there exists a conflict, then, not only between the easy-going and strenuous moods, but also between 32  
finite and infinite ethical ideals. The former admits only of purely naturalistic and humanistic perspectives on the good, and an ethics grounded in that mood remains tied to “prudence and the satisfaction of merely finite need” (WB, 213). The latter mood, however, locates the ground of ethical obligation in an extra-human, divine source: that is, a divine good. James’s assumption throughout section V seems to be that the moral life lacks objectivity and long-term motivational sufficiency without acquiring a strenuous mood, which in turn can only be gained through the adoption of certain religious and metaphysical over-beliefs (James will later speak of the inevitable failure of the “athletic attitude” towards the moral life in VRE, even though he grants that it can sustain moral strenuousness for a short while; see VRE, 44-46). While non-religious moral agents seem to be capable of realizing the strenuous mood (James refers to it as a natural human capacity on WB, 213), they seem to be ultimately incapable of sustaining it in the face of life’s hardships.<sup>30</sup>

It would seem that for James the strenuous mood is in fact a *religious* mood, and that acquiring it means thereby 33  
acquiring certain “supplemental” metaphysical and theological beliefs (if this is true, then the “religion of humanity” cannot in principle realize the “strenuous mood,” which seems to be a case of defining one’s way to a conclusion). This equation is made clearer when James writes:

The capacity of 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. Our attitude towards concrete evils is entirely different in a world where we believe there are none but finite demanders, from what it is in one where we joyously face tragedy for an infinite demander’s sake. Every sort of energy and endurance, of courage and capacity for handling life’s evils, is set free in those who have religious faith. For this reason the strenuous type of character will on the battle-field of human history always outwear the easy-going type, and religion will drive irreligion to the wall (WB, 213).<sup>31</sup>

Thus, not only does the strenuous mood lead us to adopt metaphysical and religious beliefs as a support for 34  
morality and an impetus to moral action; it also seems to be the case that those who variously lack or reject such beliefs are not genuinely capable of living morally strenuous lives.<sup>32</sup> And one of the reasons why irreligious moral agents lack the strenuous character, James further suggests, is because their conceptions of the good and of moral obligation have a finite rather than an infinite ground. Moral objectivity *is* a plausible notion, then, on James’s considered view—but it is only plausible as a *religious postulate*, or an article of faith. This faith, in turn, is seen to consist minimally in the belief that God’s infinite scale of value; moral legislation; and participation in the moral life jointly put morality on an *objective* footing, and in turn provide us with the *hope* that our moral aspirations will not go unfulfilled.<sup>33</sup>

In the final section of “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” James brings his account of ethics to a 35  
close by modifying his earlier claims for the sufficiency of a purely naturalistic account of ethics. His final conclusion is that:

The stable and systematic moral universe for which the ethical philosopher asks is fully possible only in a world where there is a divine thinker with all-enveloping demands. If such a thinker existed, his way of subordinating the demands to one another would be the finally valid casuistic scale; his claims would be the most appealing; his ideal universe would be the most inclusive realizable whole. If he now exist, then actualized in his thought already must be that ethical philosophy which we seek as the pattern which our own must evermore approach. In the interests of our own ideal of systematically unified moral truth,

therefore, we, as would-be philosophers, must postulate a divine thinker, and pray for the victory of the religious cause. Meanwhile, exactly what the thought of the infinite thinker may be is hidden from us even were we sure of his existence; so that our postulation of him after all serves only to let loose in us the strenuous mood. But this is what it does in all men, even those who have no interest in philosophy. The ethical philosopher, therefore, whenever he ventures to say which course of action is the best, is on no essentially different level from the common man (WB, 214).

While the basis of ethics may be naturalistic, James thinks, if we want to have a maximally stable and systematic account of ethics (including, presumably, an account of the ultimate grounds and final ends of ethics), then we need to hold certain religious postulates: namely, and minimally, those concerning God's existence, goodness and assistance. Truly or falsely, James believes that exclusively naturalistic accounts of ethics 1) cannot provide objective grounds or sufficient motivation for the moral life, and 2) inevitably require us to attenuate the scope of moral agency (i.e., what can be reasonably achieved in the moral life). The demands of leading a morally strenuous life, however, are such that we cannot reasonably accept such limitations. It is here, at the practical level, that religious postulates become necessary. Consequently, James's account of ethics does not so much call for abandoning ethical naturalism as it does call for placing limit-conditions upon it. James finally settles, then, on a "piecemeal supernaturalist" account of ethics, in which his otherwise naturalistic ethical outlook is supplemented by a form of religious faith.<sup>34</sup> While James thinks that our *reasons* for adopting supernaturalistic commitments are of a natural kind (insofar as it is our human moral needs and aspirations which lead us in this direction), he also thinks that our ethical judgments can have no truly objective basis, and our highest ethical aspirations no rational hope of fulfillment, apart from the postulation of supernatural standards and assistance in the moral life.

In developing such an account, however, James never affirms that we possess *knowledge* of God's existence or nature.<sup>35</sup> That is, the postulation of a morally helpful and supremely good God plays a practical role in James's account, and serves as an object of faith rather than knowledge. James arrives at his position instead through reflecting on what he takes to be the limits of ethical naturalism and our native moral capacities. And this, in turn, leads him to postulate God's existence and legislative role in the moral life as a way of addressing those shortcomings.<sup>36</sup> Rather curiously, James never considers the possibility that the natural reasons which he thinks impel us to adopt certain religious beliefs in the moral life might be implanted in our nature by a supernatural author, such as would be the case if God were our *creator* in addition to being our moral commander or guide. Were this the case, then presumably our "natural" moral reasons would have an ultimately supernatural source or origin, and our decision to call our ethical theory basically naturalistic rather than supernaturalistic would be somewhat arbitrary. But James clearly rejects this more traditional theistic view, and only endorses a piecemeal as opposed to a robust or thoroughgoing version of supernaturalism in ethics, presumably because he thinks that more traditional forms of religious faith carry too much doctrinal baggage.<sup>37</sup>

### 3. Concluding Observations

Having concluded the interpretive portion of this essay, we now need to consider the philosophical adequacy and relevance of James's account of ethics in *The Moral Philosopher*. We should begin by addressing some of the problems with James's account. First, it is undoubtedly the case that James fails to demonstrate the major claims of the essay, namely that there can be no such thing as an ethical philosophy "dogmatically made up in advance" and "no final truth in ethics; ½until the last man has had his experience and said his say" (WB, 184). In the first case, James fails to show conclusively why *a priori* accounts of ethics are untenable. At best, James only provides reasons for thinking that moral concepts make no *sense* apart from the existence of sentient, evaluating beings. This is, I think, an important (indeed, a truthful) insight; but it is insufficient by itself for showing that ethical *a priorism* is a false view.

Second, James's equation of ethical claims and obligations is simply untenable, since it does not allow us to make qualitative distinctions between claims, and has the absurd consequence of making all claims morally obligating. James would have done better if he had confined himself to saying that *claims and obligations presuppose or entail one another*; but this, however, does not do the philosophical heavy lifting that James has in mind. Given that James equates ethical claims and obligations in an attempt to overcome the problem of moral subjectivism raised by his account, and given the failure of that attempt, it follows that James does not manage to overcome that problem. Indeed, it seems to be the case that James's argument for the necessity of certain religious beliefs is occasioned by the inadequacy of his naturalistic (and perhaps more importantly, subjectivist) account of moral obligation. If so, James's religious turn in *The Moral Philosopher* could be seen as a kind of "*deus ex machina* strategy": that is, an attempt to solve a philosophical problem—in this case, the problem of moral subjectivism which

plagues his account—through supernatural means when naturalistic means appear insufficient.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, most contemporary naturalists in ethics will likely see James's view of morality as a contest of subjective preferences as problematic in itself, especially insofar as its focus on preferences occludes recognition of other important features of the moral life, such as the moral sentiments and the virtues. If the naturalistic portion of James's account is either deficient or mistaken, then the contemporary ethical naturalist will not be prepared to grant that a turn to religion is somehow inevitable in ethics. Instead, she will very likely (and quite reasonably) insist that the solution to James's worries about ethical naturalism can be satisfied along naturalistic lines.

With that said, however, James's account nonetheless has a number of strengths, and affords a number of important insights which are worthy of our attention. I have already mentioned James's insight that moral concepts seem to make no sense apart from the existence of sentient, evaluating beings. Concepts like "good" and "bad," and indeed, *the very idea of a moral law*, do seem to be nonsensical outside of this context. Over sixty years before G.E.M. Anscombe made the same point in "Modern Moral Philosophy," James argued that the idea of a moral law presupposes the idea of a moral legislator.<sup>39</sup> We should also add to the list James's *fallibilism* (a doctrine that he shared with his friend C.S. Peirce) and *ethical pluralism*, or recognition that there exists an irreducible plurality of values. While fallibilism is now a commonplace view among contemporary philosophers (so much so, perhaps, that it has become virtually unquestioned), it was a radical philosophical view in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and certainly not one associated with the philosophical school which dominated in British and American universities at the time: Absolute Idealism. The very idea that our ethical knowledge might be uncertain, not to mention empirically and progressively acquired, was widely viewed as scandalous. While James was arguably wrong to think of ethics as a science, he was undoubtedly right to think that ethical knowledge is not and cannot be apodictically certain in character. Similarly, James was aware of the fact that an irreducible plurality of values exists, and responded to that fact by counseling tolerance (see p. 11). A half-century before Isaiah Berlin, and nearly a century before John Rawls, James grasped both the theoretical and practical significance of what Rawls calls "the fact of reasonable pluralism."<sup>40</sup>

These insights are admirable enough, one might object, but what are we to make of James's argument for religious ethics? This, I think, is by far the most controversial aspect of James's account of the moral life, and one that even James's most admiring supporters may have difficulty accepting. While James's argument is unquestionably controversial, it is also probably the most philosophically challenging and relevant portion of James's account. Indeed, unlike much of what else James has to say about the moral life in *The Moral Philosopher*, this argument somewhat surprisingly has legs.

The reader will recall that for James we find ourselves with moral needs and hopes which are not easily met, if met at all, under the terms of a naturalistic account of ethics. We live in a tragic, finite moral world where moral failure and disappointment are inevitable, and wherein we find ourselves constantly encountering our limits as moral agents. Likewise, we find ourselves in need of providing an account of moral objectivity, and find it difficult to do so on strictly naturalistic grounds. In the face of these problems, it might well seem unreasonable to believe that our moral agency can make an ultimate difference in the outcome of events; that our moral obligations might be imposed by anyone or anything other than human beings; or even to believe that there can be such a thing as an objective moral point of view. How should one respond to these difficulties? One answer is to concede defeat; this is what James calls moral pessimism, and he rejects it as an unviable option. Another answer is to reject those of our moral needs, aspirations, and hopes which seem to point in a religious or broadly metaphysical direction. James rejects this answer, too—we might call it the "moral ironist" view—because it attenuates the moral life in an unsatisfactory way and fails to provide a stable basis for ethics and moral agency. This, incidentally, is perhaps James's strongest reply to the convinced and unalloyed ethical naturalist. The only alternative, James thinks, is to move in a metaphysical and religious direction: that is, to adopt some metaphysical and religious *postulates* that shore up the deficiencies and limitations which we encounter in the moral life.

While one could, I think rightly, object that metaphysical and religious postulates need not take a theistic form (James simply takes this for granted), James's account does manage to cover all of the bases which he identifies: namely, the need to account for *moral objectivity*, and the need for a form of *assistance* in the moral life which other human beings cannot provide.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, the argument that James advances turns out to be valid. Taking "moral strenuousness" (S) to denote the highest degree of moral agency; "moral hopefulness" (H) to denote the hope that the two moral needs listed above can be satisfied; and "religious" (R) in terms of belief in such things as supernatural objects, events, or states of affairs, James's argument can be expressed as:

If S, then H.

If H, then R.

If S, then R.

James's argument thus takes the form of a hypothetical syllogism. While one might doubt the truth of James's premises, there is—or so it seems to me—nothing demonstrably false about them, and this should give the would-be critic pause, even if it does not ultimately satisfy her. In any event, James's practical argument for the necessity of metaphysical and religious postulates in the moral life will be compelling for anyone prepared to grant the truth of his claims. 44

Does accepting James's argument entail acceptance of his account of the moral life as a whole? The answer to this question is pretty clearly 'No,' and the reasons for this are several. Firstly, acceptance of James's argument for religious ethics does not require wholesale endorsement of his ethical naturalism. For example, one might reject James's consequentialist moral theory; indeed, we might do well to reject (or at least, significantly modify) that aspect of James's account, given the serious problems we discussed above. All that would seem to be required is acceptance of James's claim that naturalistic accounts of ethics have *limits*, and that our moral needs *exceed* those limits.<sup>42</sup> Secondly, one might accept his argument for religious ethics while substituting a different set of religious beliefs for the ones which James himself holds. That is, one could plausibly substitute different metaphysical and religious beliefs for the ones that James prescribes, while still formally satisfying the conditions of his argument. James's argument does not necessarily require that we postulate the existence of a monotheistic, omnipredicating God, for example; some version of polytheism or pantheism would seem to satisfy our moral needs equally well, it seems (see footnote 35). 45

Similarly, one might accept James's claim about the practical necessity of belief in *moral objectivity*, while rejecting his claim that belief in some sort of supernatural *assistance* is practically necessary in the moral life. This would seem to be the case, as these are separate issues. At the most minimal level, belief in moral objectivity only seems to presuppose some sort of metaphysical belief in the existence of properties or objects which ground morality: if not transcendent in kind, then at least "non-natural" according to the physicalist standards of the modern natural sciences. Platonists, Kantians, and contemporary moral realists would all appear to believe in the existence of non-natural properties which provide for moral objectivity: the Form of the Good, the moral law, or metaphysically real and supervenient properties like "good" and "bad." If this is so, then all of these accounts of ethics are formally similar to the degree that all of them postulate at least one metaphysical belief in developing an account of moral objectivity. They do not, however, involve holding any further beliefs regarding supernatural assistance or agency in the moral life. 46

If, however, we have a perfectionist streak (as both Kant and James did) and frame our actions and characters in accordance with some ideal, regulative end (say, world peace, or the achievement of a kingdom of ends), we quickly discover that we cannot attain it through our own agency. The realist in us tells us so, yet the perfectionist in us demands that we keep pursuing that end. What are we to do? Pursuing the regulative end with the knowledge that our moral acts are ultimately futile is perhaps noble, and can accomplish much good, but nonetheless tends to be a psychologically unstable attitude, and hence tends to break down over time (as we have seen, James calls this the "athletic attitude"). While some individuals may be capable of sustaining such an attitude throughout the course of their lives, most eventually fall prey to one or more of James's moral pathologies. If, however, we find ourselves committed to believing that the regulative end *must* be attainable—that "ought" implies "can," to use Kant's language—then some additional metaphysical and religious beliefs would seem to be rationally required for the satisfaction of that demand. Either the demand is impossible, in which case it is unreasonable and should be rejected, or it is not, in which case some sort of religious account is rationally required if it is to be met. The rub, as James sees it, is that giving up these kinds of demands is not so easy to do, and neither is it *good* for us to give them up, in light of the moral pathologies which tend to set in once they have been rejected. Even if it is possible for some people to lead morally strenuous lives without holding any metaphysical or religious beliefs (though James doubts this), most people are naturally led to adopt them over the course of their lives as moral agents.<sup>43</sup> What James's argument for religious ethics does, then, is to justify our holding certain metaphysical and religious beliefs on moral grounds. Even if such a view fails to compel our assent, it would nonetheless seem to be a reasonable and warranted candidate for belief. 47

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I thank Philip J. Ivanhoe and Erin M. Cline for their many helpful comments and suggestions, as well as two anonymous reviewers for WJS for their constructive criticism of a previous draft of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> All parenthetical citations (abbreviated *WB*) are from "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" in *The Will to Believe and other essays in popular philosophy* [1897] (Dover Publications, 1956), pp. 184-215. The abbreviations "TT," "VRE," "MT," and "PU" refer, respectively, to *Talks to Teachers* (1899), *The Varieties of Religious*

*Experience* (1902), *The Meaning of Truth* (1909) and *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909). For the full bibliographic entries for these works, please refer to the reference section at the end of this article.

<sup>3</sup> There is an unfortunate scarcity of literature on James's ethics, and only two treatments to have appeared in the last fifty years which could reasonably claim to be comprehensive, namely Bernard P. Brennan's *The Ethics of William James* (1962) and John K. Roth's *Freedom and the Moral Life: The Ethics of William James* (1969). Both accounts, unfortunately, are now dated in a number of respects, and have long been out of print. One of the most recent but less comprehensive treatments of James's account of morality is Graham Bird's essay, "Moral philosophy and the development of morality" (1997). While all of these works deal with "The Moral Philosopher" and rightly recognize its importance in James's account of ethics, none of them accounts for the supernaturalistic turn which occurs in section V of the essay, and consequently none of them accounts for the impact of that turn on James's discussion of the moral life, or his subsequent religious approach to the moral life in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Among recent interpretations of James, both Richard Gale's *The Divided Self of William James* (1999) and Wesley Cooper's *The Unity of William James's Thought* (2002) treat James's ethics at some length, though to a lesser extent than Brennan and Roth. Of these, only Gale's treatment of *The Moral Philosopher* takes section V into account.

<sup>4</sup> I am sympathetic to Gale's overall reading of James as a philosopher divided by his "promethean" and "mystical" selves, as well as his reading of *The Moral Philosopher* in particular. What I would like to suggest here, though, is that like Kant, James took his moral theory in a religious direction in order to shore up certain deficiencies in it which could not be remedied on strictly moral grounds. If I am right about this, there may be more unity in James's ethics than Gale has allowed. This is not to say, however, that there are no incommensurable claims and themes in James's ethics.

<sup>5</sup> Unlike the former, the latter type of moral theory necessarily *denies* the existence of religious or supernatural objects, events, and states of affairs. James's naturalistic views are of the former type, insofar as they merely hold that we can (and to some degree should) account for morality in naturalistic terms—that is, as an empirical, human phenomenon. Given James's general philosophical rejection of materialism and defense of religious faith, however, it is safe to assume—though he does not explicitly do so in *The Moral Philosopher*—that he would reject the latter type of moral theory on the grounds that it illegitimately rules out a possible religious or supernatural dimension to morality (and to reality more generally).

<sup>6</sup> In framing the distinction in this way, I have self-consciously bracketed the issue of epistemic *justification* potentially involved in these accounts. I have done so because while naturalistic accounts do not appeal to religious or supernatural warrants as justification for their claims, it is not always or necessarily the case that religious accounts *do* appeal to such warrants. Indeed, as we shall see, one of the more distinctive features of James's account in *The Moral Philosopher* is that he offers *naturalistic* warrants for his religious claims. In arguing for the necessity of religious belief in the moral life, James builds his case upon what he takes to be our human moral needs, and not upon putative supernatural evidence. While other versions of religious ethics may derive warrant from the latter, James's account in *The Moral Philosopher* does not—though, I should add, James will later modify his views on this issue in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. I am indebted to Philip J. Ivanhoe for helping me to clarify my position on this issue.

<sup>7</sup> See especially Henry S. Levinson, *The Religious Investigations of William James* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1981) and David C. Lamberth, *William James and the Metaphysics of Experience* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999). I offer my own interpretation of this shift in James's religious views in *The Metaphysician and the Moral Life: Religion and Metaphysics in William James's Ethical Thought* (Unpublished dissertation, Brown University, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Thus, for example, one of the central issues explored in WB (especially in such essays as "The Will to Believe," "Is Life Worth Living?" and "The Dilemma of Determinism") and which receives extended treatment in VRE is the connection between religion and ethics. Not only does James think that our attempts to lead "morally strenuous" lives require certain religious and metaphysical beliefs; he also believes that our supreme good lies in our harmonious adjustment to an unseen order (VRE, 51) or "wider self" through which saving experiences come (VRE, 405). While I do not have space to demonstrate such a claim here, I believe that a truly comprehensive

understanding of the religious dimension of *The Moral Philosopher* can only be had by bringing James's views in that essay into relation with the religious dimension of his thought as a whole.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout *The Moral Philosopher*, James assumes that among our available moral theories only some version of consequentialism could be suitably naturalistic, in the sense that it alone (or rather, some version of it) could provide us with a purely humanistic or humanocentric account of moral properties and relations. This assumption seems to be false, for it overlooks not only the possibility of a naturalistic deontological moral theory (such a notion is hardly inconceivable), but also various virtue ethical theories (such as Aristotle's, e.g.).

<sup>10</sup> In using the term "bald" to describe a form of ethical naturalism which makes no reference to any non- or supernatural concepts (much less to any non- or supernatural objects, events, or states of affairs), I draw upon John McDowell's discussion of "bald naturalism" in *Mind and World* (1994). The term "bald," as McDowell uses it, is roughly synonymous with "reductive."

<sup>11</sup> As James makes clear in other essays in WB, particularly in "The Will to Believe" and "The Sentiment of Rationality," religious belief occupies a class of beliefs (viz., overbeliefs) which are crucial to questions of human flourishing, and which, rather than having an evidential basis, are articles of faith which "bring forth their own verification." While James does not explicitly mention "overbeliefs" or "supplemental facts" in *The Moral Philosopher* or engage in a defense of the ethics of religious belief, he does defend the view (as he would later do in the above-mentioned essays) that faith is practically unavoidable in the business of living.

<sup>12</sup> We shall examine exactly what *sort* of requirement James has in mind later on in this paper. To tip my hand, I think we would do well to reject the idea that James has anything approaching *logical* necessity in mind. Rather, the sort of "necessity" that James has in mind is broadly *practical*—and specifically *psychological*—in nature. James's view, *in nuce*, is an empirically grounded psychological claim.

<sup>13</sup> The one exception is a hint that James gives at the close of section II; see WB, 198.

<sup>14</sup> Thus, while James makes a *space* for religion in the moral life (indeed, at the practical level he sees it as required for achieving the highest and most stable form of moral character), he does not *base* morality on religion, as, for instance, divine command and natural law accounts of ethics do. In VRE, however, James will argue that religion and morality fulfill essentially the same function (which James characterizes as the achievement of the good life for human beings), but that religion fulfills this function better because it provides a more meaningful and hopeful way of viewing the world. This is an overarching theme in VRE, but James discusses these issues most clearly in Lecture II, "Circumscription of the Topic."

<sup>15</sup> James makes an almost identical claim in an earlier essay, "The Sentiment of Rationality" (1880), where he writes of moral inquiry and commitment that "in a question of this scope, the experience of the entire human race must make the verification, and that all the evidence will not be 'in' till the final integration of things, when the last man has had his say and contributed his share to the still unfinished *x*" (WB, 107).

<sup>16</sup> While he is perhaps not as clear as he might have been, James seems entitled to use the term "metaphysics" here, since the existence of sentient beings and moral properties are metaphysical issues. James is interested in what conditions need to obtain in order for morality to exist and in the basis of morality, questions which traditionally fall under the province of the metaphysics of morals.

<sup>17</sup> One can understand James as claiming here that the moral point of view is brought into being when another person makes a claim or demand on us. This intersubjective way of characterizing the moral point of view places James in company (though not necessarily full agreement) with philosophers as various as Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, and Stephen Darwall. I thank Philip J. Ivanhoe for bringing this point to my attention.

<sup>18</sup> James seems to run two very different assertions together here: namely, the assertion that claims and obligations *conceptually entail one another*, and the assertion that claims and obligations are *equivalent*. The former is the

more innocuous (and strictly semantic) of the two, though James's argument in this section of the paper also—and quite problematically—requires the latter. I thank Erin M. Cline for helping me to clarify this point.

<sup>19</sup> Roth, for example, has argued that the major problem with James's moral theory is its inability to account for qualitative distinctions between claims. See his *Freedom and the Moral Life: The Ethics of William James* (op. cit.), pp. 66-71. As Roth rightly recognizes, "James's principles can allow some highly questionable consequences. As his principles stand, it is possible for force of numbers to dictate what is right without any serious consideration of the qualities of the choices and demands that are being made" (p. 68). The basic problem with James's principles, Roth notes, is that "they do not have qualitative distinctions built into them from the beginning" (p. 69).

<sup>20</sup> What James means when he claims that God's demands are "greatest in amount" is not entirely clear. Does he mean this in a strictly numerical sense, i.e., that God makes more demands than any other being, or perhaps all other beings combined? Does James perhaps mean that God's desires and preferences are *stronger* or *weightier* than those of any other being, or perhaps all other beings combined, in which case we have a very different utilitarian calculus? Whatever James means, it remains unclear on his account why individuals would have a reason to recognize God's demands, or to assign those demands greater weight than the demands of other moral agents.

<sup>21</sup> My use of the term 'internal reason' is drawn from Bernard Williams's discussion in "Internal and external reasons," reprinted in *Moral Luck* (1981).

<sup>22</sup> As we saw earlier (p. 6), this state of affairs also presupposes the rejection of moral skepticism. James does not presume that skepticism is the sort of problem that one can defeat on argumentative grounds. He chooses to see it as a moral pathology, rather than as a moral problem. This is a highly significant move on James's part, I think, and it puts him in the company of a number of contemporary philosophers, including such notable names as Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam (both of whom have been influenced by James in many respects, and perhaps in this one as well).

<sup>23</sup> The most comprehensive study to date of Mill's "religion of humanity" is Linda C. Raeder's *John Stuart Mill and the Religion of Humanity* (2002). Mill's use of the phrase can be found in his posthumously published essay, "The Utility of Religion," published in *Three Essays on Religion* (1998); pp. 69-122.

<sup>24</sup> James's view that ethics can and should be a science on par with the natural sciences, and that the moral philosopher can and should "bracket" her moral ideals and commitments (see WB, 184-85), are both assumptions that many contemporary ethicists would seriously question, if not disavow. Moreover, such a view of inquiry conflicts with another of James's metaphilosophical views: namely, that inquiry has an irreducibly personal or "temperamental" dimension (see, e.g., "The Sentiment of Rationality" and "The Will to Believe" in WB, as well as *Pragmatism*).

<sup>25</sup> As James will later argue in such works as "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings" and "What Makes Life Significant," coming to grips with the fact of ethical pluralism should lead us to recognize the importance of *tolerance* as both an individual virtue and a social principle. Both essays are found in TT (1899).

<sup>26</sup> Richard Gale defends the former interpretation, and Wesley Cooper the latter. For Gale's view, see *The Divided Self of William James* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 25-49. For Cooper's, see *The Unity of William James's Thought* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2002).

<sup>27</sup> James (sensibly enough) seems to associate the *fallibilism* of the modern natural sciences with their claims to *objectivity*. But it is not clear why ethics would be any more *scientific* simply by virtue of being fallible, unless there are (as in the natural sciences) real, objective facts of the matter to be discovered. James seems to overlook this crucial condition.

<sup>28</sup> James actually reiterates this theme a few lines later, now insisting that ethical relations are possible not only wherever there exist two loving souls, but also in a "moral solitude"—that is, in a world where only a single thinker exists (WB, 210-11). This is intended as a summary, and yet it represents another reversal of James's prior claims, for here James maintains that obligation "can ... exist inside a single thinker's consciousness" (WB, 211).

This is apparently because that single thinker can feel constrained by her *conscience*, and feel such emotions as regret and guilt over her moral failings. But exactly who has been wronged in such a solitary universe, or how this solitary thinker came to be a developed moral agent, are details which remain thoroughly obscure. James appears to be undecided between two incompatible “humanistic” accounts, the first of which sees the moral point of view as subjectively grounded, and the other as intersubjectively grounded. The latter view is, I think, clearly the more defensible of the two.

<sup>29</sup> In passing, I note here that James’s claims regarding the necessary conditions for developing a “strenuous mood” bear at least a formal resemblance to Charles Taylor’s concept of “strong evaluation.” Roughly, and in brief, Taylor’s concept of strong evaluation involves the claim that our capacities for practical reasoning and ethical agency are neither fully developed nor rightly ordered unless they are oriented around and motivated by what Taylor variously calls *hypergoods* or “Great goods.” These, in turn, impose an ordered structure on one’s total set of goods and ethical priorities, and provide the substance, standards, and criteria for practical reasoning and/or ethical judgment. Such strongly valued goods, then, are constitutive features of fully developed ethical agency, and a necessary condition for having a coherent sense of self. See Taylor’s *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (1989), especially Part I.

<sup>30</sup> In order to understand James’s comments here, it may be helpful to place them in relation to such works as “Is Life Worth Living?” (1896) and VRE (1902). In the former piece, James argues that temperamental pessimism (which he describes as an essentially “religious disease,” and which he further identifies with *Weltschmerz*) can be overcome in one of two ways: either by rejecting the religious needs which cause it (and becoming a heroic sort of atheist), or by adopting certain religious over-beliefs about human beings and the world which satisfy those needs. In VRE, however, James seems to have arrived at a somewhat different view, insofar as he now denies that non-religious persons are capable of sustaining the moral life in the long term (VRE, 45-46), and now distinguishes between different types of overbeliefs, the twice-born and once-born types. Equally importantly, James evaluates the twice-born experience more highly than the once-born, on account of its recognition (rather than denial) of the causes which produce human suffering and a pessimistic attitude towards life (see VRE 137-38, 385). James’s later view, expressed in VRE, seems to be that the “prometheanism” which characterizes the humanistic “athletic attitude” is ultimately inadequate in the moral life because it inevitably breaks down, and because—as James colorfully puts it—we are all “helpless failures in the last resort” without religious faith, which comes to our rescue (see VRE, 45-46; 49). While James allows in VRE that the athletic attitude of the atheist and agnostic is a form of moral strenuousness, he does not believe that moral strenuousness can be sustained—or complete human *well-being* and *happiness* achieved—apart from religious faith (this is a dominant theme in Lecture II; see VRE, 30-50).

<sup>31</sup> Compare to the following passage from “The Sentiment of Rationality” (1880): “Man needs a rule for his will, and will invent one if one not be given him” (WB, 88). James seems to expand upon this claim here, taking it in a definitely religious direction.

<sup>32</sup> This is an assertion on James’s part, and he does not mount an argument for it. Undoubtedly James’s personal experience plays some role in his holding such a view, and it may even be the case that James is making a universal statement on the basis of his particular experience. For James’s well-known description of his recovery from depression (in which an overbelief—in this case, belief in free will—plays a crucial role), see the journal entries from 1870 reprinted in *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition*, ed. John J. McDermott (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977), pp. 6-8.

<sup>33</sup> The question might arise as to whether James’s notion of an “infinite scale of values” contradicts his overbelief in a finite God. There is no contradiction here, though, because James’s God is only finite with respect to *power* (i.e., God is not omniscient), and not with respect to knowledge or goodness. On a more historical note, James gives no indication in *The Moral Philosopher* that his own personal over-belief (at least at the time WB was published in 1896) was in a finite God, a view which he took to be morally as well as rationally superior to the traditional theistic belief in an omnipredicate God. Whether or not James held such a belief when he wrote the essay in 1891 is a matter for intellectual history, which is not the subject of this article, and is beyond the range of my expertise. Readers interested in this issue should consult Levinson, 1981 and Lamberth, 1999. I should note, however, that James’s religious views gradually shifted away from theism during the last decade of his life towards

a pluralistic version of panpsychism (see Lamberth, 1999 on this issue). As Levinson, Lamberth, Gale, and a number of other commentators have observed, James's religious views were anything but static.

<sup>34</sup> "Piecemeal supernaturalism" is the name that James will later give to his "philosophic outlook" in the philosophy of religion. See the "Postscript" to VRE, 409-14.

<sup>35</sup> This does not, however, rule out the possibility of our acquiring such knowledge. While James seems to give no credence to revealed theology, he does leave open the possibility that empirical knowledge of God might be gained. In subsequent writings (and most prominently in VRE), James will come to affirm that religious and mystical experiences are avenues to supernatural knowledge of a limited but nonetheless important sort.

<sup>36</sup> One interesting and potentially disturbing consequence of this view is that even if it were to turn out that God does not exist, we should on James's view continue to postulate God's existence for exigent moral and other practical reasons. James could offer, however, a basically Kantian reply, to the effect that God's existence or nonexistence is not susceptible either to proof or disproof; and this being the case, we needn't worry about falling into this sort of "bad faith" in satisfying our moral psychological and agential needs.

<sup>37</sup> James expresses this concern explicitly in later works such as VRE and PU (1908-09).

<sup>38</sup> Let me be clear, however, that I am not claiming that what I call "*deus ex machina* strategies" are somehow fallacious or unreasonable *per se*. There may be cases where a strategy of this kind provides our only way of proposing an answer to a given question (say, concerning the ultimate origin of matter). My point is that these answers are not empirically testable hypotheses (to cut James off at the pass, I should add "in the usual sense of that term"). As such, they seem to exceed the scope of natural scientific inquiry altogether. If this is right, then scientific and philosophical naturalists will be justified in rejecting such strategies and the answers they generate, even if those answers are not demonstrably false.

<sup>39</sup> For Anscombe's well-known criticism of Kantian ethics, as well as the state of moral philosophy in her day, see "Modern Moral Philosophy" (1958), reprinted in *Virtue Ethics*, edited by Roger Crisp and Michael Slote (1997).

<sup>40</sup> James develops his ideas on this subject further in essays such as "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings" and "What Makes a Life Significant" in TT (1899).

<sup>41</sup> Incidentally, Kant also took theism for granted in developing his own ethical account of the metaphysical and religious postulates in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. Why our practical reason should lead us to belief in God, specifically—as opposed to the kinds of beings and entities which one finds in other religious traditions—is an issue that Kant neglects altogether. James, on the other hand, seems to provide at least a partial response in such works as *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and *A Pluralistic Universe*, where he specifies that his belief in God is his own "overbelief," and allows that the ultimate powers or realities in the universe can be conceived differently. James also indicates that his preference for theism is due largely to the *personalistic* character of this way of conceiving what he calls "the wider self." Presumably (though James does not say so), a personal God can sensibly provide *assistance* in the moral life in addition to providing objective grounds for ethics, whereas metaphysical entities like the Platonic Forms can only provide the latter. This does nothing to settle the matter decisively in favor of *monotheism*, however, since a plurality of gods or other helpful and powerful beings would seem to work equally well (as, for instance, in Hinduism, or in popular Daoist and Buddhist cosmology). I suspect that cultural inheritance plays the largest part in both Kant's and James's postulations of God's existence and assistance in the moral life, though economy may also play a role: it is, after all, more economical to postulate the existence of one deity than many. Then again, there is nothing logically necessary about Occam's Razor.

<sup>42</sup> One might object that it is problematic to attribute a *realist* understanding of either a moral order or an unseen religious order to James; indeed, as we have seen in *The Moral Philosopher*, James seems to reject the very idea of a mind-independent moral order as implausible. Yet, while James does not clearly endorse a realist position in *The Moral Philosopher*, he does clearly defend a realist interpretation of the objects of religious and mystical experience in VRE, and understands the source of our moral ideals to lie in an unseen order. James's pronounced religious realism extends to a version (but not necessarily a full-blown version) of moral realism here, insofar as he believes

that values and ideals have a *sense of reality* which is not merely imagined by moral agents (see Lecture III, VRE, 51-70). James is quite explicit on this point; indeed, one of his conclusions in VRE is that

The further limits of our being plunge, it seems to me, into an altogether other dimension of existence from the sensible and merely “understandable” world. Name it the mystical region, or the supernatural region, whichever you choose. So far as our ideal impulses originate in this region (and most of them do originate in it, for we find them possessing us in a way for which we cannot articulately account), we belong to it in a more intimate sense than that in which we belong to the visible world, for we belong in the most intimate sense wherever our ideals belong. *Yet the unseen region in question is not merely ideal, for it produces effects in this world.* When we commune with it, work is actually done upon our finite personality, for we are turned into new men, and consequences in the way of conduct follow in the natural world upon our regenerative change. But that which produces effects within another reality must be termed a reality itself, so I feel as if we had no philosophic excuse for calling the unseen or mystical world unreal (VRE, 406; emphasis added).

James is too often interpreted as a thorough-going anti-realist, by both his critics and his defenders. There are, however, a number of passages in his philosophical corpus where he explicitly denies this charge, and affirms his commitment to realism (in addition to the passage quoted above, see also MT, [106]-272, which is especially telling because it clarifies his views in *Pragmatism*).

<sup>43</sup> James will later argue in VRE (Lectures IV-VIII) that natural goods, while necessary, are ultimately insufficient in the moral life and require supplementation by (indeed, grounding in) supernatural goods acquired through religious experience. Indeed, he will claim that we are all “helpless failures in the last resort,” by which he means that we all face limitations as moral agents which can only be overcome, if at all, through a form of religious faith which is grounded in religious experience (see VRE, 45-46). In *The Moral Philosopher*, however, James confines himself strictly to a discussion of the practical necessity of religious beliefs, and says nothing of religious experience or its epistemic status. James’s religious views increasingly move in a realist direction, however, with the consequence that James will eventually argue that we are warranted in holding that some religious beliefs—including belief in supernatural goods—are true. In the process James’s moral views move in a realistic direction as well, to the point that in the Postscript to VRE James is willing to characterize both his religious and moral views in “piecemeal supernaturalist” terms. This represents a modification of James’s ethical theory along “piecemeal supernaturalist” lines, a fact which previous interpreters of James have failed to notice. For an extended account of the religious dimension of James’s ethics, see my *The Metaphysician and the Moral Life: Religion and Metaphysics in William James’s Ethical Thought* (unpublished dissertation).

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## Book Review

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*Clearings in the Forest: on the Study of Leadership.* By Nathan Harter. West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2006. Pp. 218. \$29.95

According to Nathan Harter, leadership is a difficult concept to understand, but William James can help in the endeavor. Harter is a professor of Organizational Leadership and is part of a new and emerging discipline, called leadership studies, which is struggling to define itself. According to Harter, "leadership studies is not a distinct field, like a sub-discipline, so much as it is an application of existing fields to a particular set of predicaments" (p.1). In *Clearings in the Forest*, Harter describes a journey through the study of leadership, using the metaphor of a forest to depict the terrain. The journey begins by descending to the base or valley where he focuses on the experience of leadership and then ascends upwards towards an attempt to understand the meaning of leadership. Harter contends that leadership must be understood as part of a complex world of social relations, and to help explicate this he draws upon the pragmatic ideas of William James.

In the second chapter entitled, "Pragmatism in Leadership Studies," Harter claims that pragmatism offers a suitable framework within which to understand leadership, and within the framework of pragmatism, he focuses on James. He lists what he takes to be the five central features of pragmatism: radical empiricism, a pluralistic universe, antecedents and consequents, the method, and oscillations. Setting aside the question of how correct or exhaustive these features are, the importance and centrality of James should be apparent. Harter captures the essence of James's open-ended pragmatism and applies it to understanding leadership when he says, "The goal is not to discover the one immutable truth about leadership . . . According to pragmatism, the goal is to make continual progress toward a more complete and realistic understanding that makes a difference." (p. 30). He also offers a succinct and pragmatic definition of leadership when he says, "Leadership exists where people infer that one person brought about change in another person or persons in a specific direction." (p. 68). Such a definition clearly captures James's idea of a "difference that makes a difference."

Harter also discusses additional pragmatists including Peirce, Rorty and Bernstein, as well as thinkers from other disciplines, to help explain the study of leadership. He proposes blending pragmatism, phenomenology, and perspectivism. The result is a way of thinking about leadership that he attempts to illustrate with his metaphor of the journey through the forest. One must descend to the valley, into the thick of the forest and be an involved participant in the intricacies of the complex social relationships that constitute leadership. One must also ascend to the summit of the mountain in order to survey the expansiveness of the meaning of leadership. Harter argues that a proper understanding of leadership requires multiple perspectives. Here he echoes Bernstein's warnings against a relativism which takes perspectivism to mean that we can all go our own way, content with our own perspective. Instead the goal is to bring our various perspectives into accord with one another as much as possible.

In the attempt to define leadership, Harter returns again and again to the thesis that leadership is about relationships. Harter finds it useful to think of leadership not as one thing, but as an idea comprised of many facets intersecting at different places in different and interesting ways. However the intersection or relationship between leader and follower is one that gives rise to difficulties. The biggest challenge for Harter revolves around the issue of elitism, in that the notion of leadership seems to be inherently elitist. He concedes that both leadership and elitism rely on the notion of inequality and differences in individual abilities. However according to Harter, elite theory reinforces this inequality, while leadership attempts to minimize the differences. Harter argues that an elite attempts to distance himself or herself from the masses, while a leader tries to relate to the masses. While this distinction is helpful, it cannot completely overcome the inherent inequality in the idea of leadership. This becomes clear when Harter discusses the relationship between democracy and leadership. He ends the section by saying that we need to examine ways to reconcile democracy and leadership, but he does not make any substantive suggestions about how to accomplish this. The book ends on an open-ended, pragmatic note, claiming that the ambivalence and uncertainty surrounding the nature of leadership itself can not be resolved, but this view is subject to change in the future.

While James is only the focus of one chapter of the book, his influence is discernable throughout. To this extent, Harter's book will be engaging for those interested in seeing how Jamesian pragmatism can be applied in a new and emerging field of study that seeks to understand the complex and practical relationships between people in society.

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### Book Review

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*Contemporary Varieties of Religious Experience*. By Lynn Bridgers. Lanham MD: Lanham, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2005. Pp. 227. \$65.00.

The study of William James's views on religious experience is difficult to separate from an examination of his views on psychology, yet such overtly psychological examinations of James's religious ideas are rare. This is what Lynn Bridgers, trained in divinity, attempts.

Her approach involves two aspects of modern psychology. First there is resiliency, the idea that many of us are able to bounce back from life's difficult experiences, rather than be humbled by them. She links resiliency to the response to trauma: for some trauma leads to illness, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); for others even the possibility of trauma produces anxiety and pain (some have called it pre-traumatic stress disorder); yet, in the most resilient, trauma actually leads to new experiences and transformation in one's personality that makes one stronger and, in some healthier, i.e., post-traumatic growth. Bridgers sees some of James's descriptions in *Varieties* to be of such persons who experienced personal trauma, through conversion experiences, as religiously transformative events, to their own benefit and the benefit of mankind.

The other major concept is, of course, the idea of temperaments. Here James was perhaps at his most original, dividing religion into the two types of the healthy-minded and the sick soul. After all the many varieties of religion that one could define based on dogmas and doctrines, James cut through the confusion by describing the two basic psychological types. Bridgers relies on the work of Jerome Kagan to relate James's typology to more recent work. James's thoughts about both types remain insightful and consistent with the ideas of Kagan. For instance, James himself received the mind-cure treatment, though he grew skeptical of its claims; Bridgers gives a good deal of attention to James's views on the mind cure and Christian science.

James observation that the key to the religion of the healthy-minded is the deliberate minimalization of evil takes on new meaning when one sees the popularity and persistence of the kind of honey-soaked preaching that tops our bestseller lists. All the world is fine, and you are fine too, and God loves you, and that is all there is to it. We all feel good with this kind of preaching, if we are healthy-minded, but James leaves us the impression that this kind of thinking is based on illusions. Only the sick souls have drunk of the pain of reality, and even if they recover, they can never again become healthy-minded.

James invented the concept of being born again, or twice born as he put it, but not in today's sterilized evangelical version, where Christ does all the suffering and we reap all the benefits, but rather in the real-world suffering of the traumatized individual, who bounces back through transformation by faith. Real religion, James implies, is the twice born kind, though he does not deny the strength and value, for many, of simple positive once-born healthy-minded faith (Emerson is his exemplar). Bridgers discusses the connection between despair and faith, the benefits of trial by doubt, a perspective influenced by James Fowler's concept of stages of faith (Fowler wrote her foreword).

Perhaps the greatest influence of James's view of the sick soul is in the rise of 12 step programs. Bridgers briefly examines this link, including the view that Bill Wilson, the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), may have directly consulted James; it is at least likely that Wilson was influenced indirectly by James's ideas. The souls of few are more sick than those of down and out alcoholics, and to this day, no approach has been as successful as AA's decidedly non-positive, twice-born approach to spirituality.

Overall, despite overly simple juxtaposition of James's thoughts with selected modern psychologists, some useful 7  
analogies are made, some new territory is explored, and the reader is left wanting more. A hundred years later, we  
have yet to fully plumb the psychological depths of James's insights into religious faith.

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### Book Review

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*Philosophy Americana: Making Philosophy at Home in American Culture*. By Douglas R. Anderson. New York: Fordham University Press, 2006. Pp. xi, 294. \$24 (paper)

*Philosophy Americana* is written and organized in the American tradition of essays, talks and lectures collected into a single volume. As such, the collection has not a main argument so much as a generic, organizing theme that loosely unifies the various essays. That theme is the ongoing, forever intriguing relationship between American philosophy and other aspects or features of American culture, including music, literature, religion, politics and pop culture. For Anderson such cultural expressions both instruct and inform American philosophy and vice versa. In effect, this book asks, in a variety of ways and settings, what it means to be thinking and doing philosophy in the United States given its unique history and cultural influences. 1

Anderson establishes a baseline for *Philosophy Americana*, to be found in the maintenance (for each of us) of our own experiential home while opening ourselves to “others”—other perspectives, languages, ethnicities and gender. In other words, how can each of us build out from our experiential base to become truly inclusive, not exclusive? As John J. McDermott would have it, how can American philosophy and philosophers approach the fundamental task of “humanizing” our experience, our world? Anderson makes clear that in addressing these fundamental challenges, the objective is to somehow, imaginatively keep philosophy (in America) alive beyond the limitations of its increasingly invisible academic setting. 2

The alignment of the essays in this volume reveal bookends—the first and last essays dealing with features of pragmatism in its origins as well as future import and possibilities. In between are pieces that elaborate on philosophical experience in relation to wilderness; practical wisdom and political action; religiosity; philosophy and teaching; and American philosophy’s engagement with American music and literature. Each of these encounters highlights in its own way our “experience of risk, loss, possibility, failure and hope” (x). Anderson concedes that he has not made up his mind fully of any of these issues and that in this book he simply tells the reader what he thinks for now. Of one fundamental assumption, however, he is certain—“Philosophy cannot be effective if it merely tries to oversee culture. At some point it must come to close quarters with the other dimensions of culture if it hopes to become visible and to make any difference at all. “(18). 3

The essays here collected have numerous antecedents both historical and contemporary. Anderson identifies his debt to early exemplars of *Philosophy Americana* such as Emerson, Fuller and Thoreau. William James, Thomas Davidson and John Dewey play important roles. More recent influential philosophers include Henry Bugbee and John Anderson. A host of contemporary writers and musicians have their impact—from Annie Dillard to Robert Pirsig, Jack Kerouac to Bruce Springsteen. Leading contemporary practitioners of American philosophy include John E. Smith, Bruce Wilshire, Crispin Sartwell, and perhaps, more than anyone, John J. McDermott who, according to Anderson, epitomizes the passion for philosophical enquiry with no loss of intellectual integrity and with the “finest attention to the thickness of experience” (xi). 4

Students and scholars of William James will find some engaging chapters, references and connections to James in this volume. Examples include the evocation of James in a chapter (“‘Born to Run’: Male Mysticism on the Road”) that includes an interpretation of Springsteen’s legendary anthem. Readers of Stanley Cavell will be stimulated by a chapter (“American Loss in Cavell’s Emerson”) in which Anderson makes the strong claim that Cavell regrettably 5

overlooks or dismisses James and Dewey as important resources for better understanding Emerson. Yet another impressive and beautifully written chapter (“Philosophy as Teaching: James’s ‘Knight Errant,’ Thomas Davidson”) offers a meditation on James’s views concerning the intimate relation between philosophy and teaching. Here Anderson elaborates on James’s attempt to redeem “a knight errant of the intellectual life” (156)—the itinerant Scot, Thomas Davidson who, as a wandering scholar, was always essentially a teacher in the Socratic mode. For some readers the most significant James chapter in this collection will be “William James and the Wild Beasts of the Philosophical Desert” which provides a spirited explanation and defense of James’s treatment of religion as essential to human experience, as when he wrote, “ $\frac{1}{2}$  a man’s religion is the deepest and wisest thing in his life.” In examining James’s “wild beasts”—descriptive psychology, religion, even psychical experience—Anderson works with pride to keep James the “unrespectable” philosopher.

*Philosophy Americana* is the fruit of years of expansive interdisciplinary and cultural enquiry on the variety of ways American philosophy is a reflection and extension of American history, art, culture and pedagogy. It’s an eminently readable book, conceived and written with style and intellectual passion. It provides a much-needed, wider context for better understanding the substance and contributions of American philosophy. 6

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### Book Review

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*Ghost Hunters: William James and the Search for Scientific Proof of Life after Death.* By Deborah Blum. New York: Penguin, 2006. Pp. 384. \$25.95.

Each person who writes a book on William James contributes some new nugget to the vast store of information and interpretation already accrued. But it is also true that if a rhinoceros had a God he would look like a rhinoceros. This is to say that each author looks into the James material and sees James in his or her own image and that is what each projects into what it is that they write. Gerald Myers looked into James and saw a critique à la Wittgenstein and Russell because he himself comes out of a tradition of analytic philosophy. Charlene Haddock Seigfried looks into James from a radical feminists' point of view and hence interprets James's cases of multiple personality accordingly. Similarly, Linda Simon's biography emphasizes James's relationships with some of the more prominent women in the Jamesian circle. Meanwhile, Richard Rorty looks into James and sees only Peirce and Dewey. 1

Deborah Blum's tidy little volume is no exception. Blum is a journalist interpreting science to the public. Her subject is spiritualism, defined by what the newspapers said and what was publicly reported, as compared to the attitudes of normative science toward the same phenomena. An incredulous public in the 19th century believed everything they read and millions were convinced that science had established communication with the dead. Meanwhile, most scientists believed that spiritualism was bunk, perpetuated by charlatans, and any attempt to take it seriously was misguided. Into this breach between complete credulity and outright claims of fraud stepped a band of courageous investigators around William James and the British and American Societies for Psychical Research, beginning in the early 1880s, who were determined to apply the methods of science to all claims paranormal. 2

In James's case, Blum makes it personal. One of James's children, Herman, lived only four months, and, grief stricken, James turned to the séance as a means to ameliorate his pain and to assure himself and his family that their newest little one was safe on the other side. But rather than unquestioned acceptance, at the risk of one's professional reputation, James felt that science, at least, was the appropriate means of investigation. Its proponents had a duty to apply its methods, which might provide at least a partial answer. 3

What is it, then, that Blum's book uniquely contributes to the body of James literature? Making nimble use of the college students in her classes, and after visits to the James Papers at Harvard and the archives of the American Society for Psychical Research in New York City, we get new information on specific examples of psychics, spiritualists, and mediums of the time, and also correlations with James's correspondents on these subjects, encompassing family, friends and his professional colleagues, including what James had to say himself about his own on-going investigations. More than other works on James and the same subject, here and there we also get greater detail about the exchanges that went on between the American Society for Psychical Research and the Society for Psychical Research in England. 4

A large body of specific archival sources has been left out, however, because the work is marketed as a trade book and not meant to be part of the scholarly peer reviewed literature. So we get what they all said to each other, but no documentation as to where and when they said it. There is also a tendency to take common stereotypes as absolutely true—spiritualists are frauds, scientists think they know the real truth, and grief drives some to seek 5

communication with the other side. All very plausible, but scholarship on James that Ms. Blum did not take into account paints a quite different picture. The great unanswered question that Blum does not even broach is, beyond her quasi-psychoanalytic interpretation of the grieving father—why was James interested in these phenomena in the first place, and to what end did he pursue them?

It is a question left unanswered by most authors who write on James. He was a great philosopher; He was a great psychologist, but they cannot fathom why James persisted in investigating psychic phenomena, other than his father (and mother) believed in it.

In this, which would seem to be the purpose of her book, Blum completely missed the mark. First of all, other than his yearnings for the by-gone little Herman, James knew well the Swedenborgian doctrine of spirits from an early age, which Blum acknowledges, although she misspells Swedenborg's name and misunderstands his metaphysics. She also misses the spiritual context that was much wider than mere occultism, a context that pointed toward a generic process of spiritual self-realization within each person, about which James was keenly aware from an early age. When he was thirteen, James witnessed trance mediums first hand at the home of Dr. James John Garth Wilkinson doing automatic writing. Later James would use automatic writing as an experimental tool in the Harvard Psychological Laboratory. When he was 25, James published a review of Sargent's *Planchette: The despair of science*, and then went on to pioneer in the field of psychical research as a corrective to rampant scientism, becoming also a champion of the powerful phenomenological effects of belief. And he wasn't that interested in life after death. He says as much in his Ingersoll Lectures on Immortality in 1899. These facts suggest that there is much more to the story than Blum tells.

On this point, modern scholarship in the history of psychical research, which Ms Blum never looked at, has clearly established that the Society for Psychical Research in Britain foundered on the question of scientific evidence for the afterlife, while the American Society for Psychical Research stated more modest goals—that of at least establishing “consistent laws of mental action.” Modern scholarship in the history of the ASPR indicates that the experimental committees looking into hypnosis, mediumistic trances, spontaneous mental imagery, and dissociated states of consciousness made a major contribution to the development of the then new field of experimental psychopathology, at Harvard, Tufts, and Clark, and also had a major impact on the delivery of clinical services in the treatment of the ambulatory psychoneuroses in local hospitals and asylums. Examples of mediumship and multiple personality became a scientific paradigm for almost a quarter of a century before the Clark Conference in 1909.

Internationally, figures such as William James, FWH Myers, Theodore Flournoy, Pierre Janet, even the young physician Carl Jung, and others, constituted a French-Swiss-English-and American psychotherapeutic axis that was at the center of developments in scientific psychotherapy in the English speaking world from about 1881 to 1917. This informal axis, before Freud, fielded a cross-cultural, comparative psychology of subconscious states. In this, James led in the development of the so-called Boston School of Psychopathology, facts consistently ignored even by contemporary James scholars who purport to interpret James in the context of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In other words, parapsychology is still around precisely because it provided one of the cornerstones for the emergence of modern ‘psychotherapeutics’ after 1900. But the skeptical scientists of which Blum writes had the same attitude toward psychotherapy and psychoanalysis as they did toward psychic phenomena, so the historical connections still remain wholly obscured.

James himself extended the results of these investigations in several important ways. In his first presidential address to the American Psychological Association in 1894 (he was president twice), he indicated that the work of the psychical researchers and the so-called French Experimental Psychology of the Subconscious provided the scientific evidence for the germ of what later became his doctrine of radical empiricism. He was also encouraged by this work to articulate a growth oriented dimension to personality—where, as any Asian scholar worth their salt and certainly most occultists already knew, regardless of the evidence for or against life after death, that human beings are capable of developing extraordinary abilities beyond the norm, and that the spontaneous appearance of such abilities is but a mere epiphenomenon in the process of self realization. From this line of thinking, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), James called for a cross-cultural comparative psychology of mystical states across different world religions. This he believed was psychology's most important contribution to the development of a science of religions.

As a popular science writer, we may forgive Ms Blum for these oversights, for she has at least propped open the door leading to a further discussion of such topics.

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### Book Review

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*William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism*. By Robert D. Richardson. New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 2006. Pp. xiii, 622. \$30.00.

Robert Frost once remarked that the poet E. A. Robinson “remained content with the old-fashioned way to be new,” and the same could be said of the intellectual figure Frost admired most as a student at Harvard, William James. Indeed, this willingness to be new in the most old-fashioned of ways no doubt continues to obscure James’s legacy for many modern readers. As with Robinson (and even more so with Frost), James’s modernity is too often lost in the fog of intellectual mannerisms that “read” as late-Victorian: his commitment to experience (as opposed to theory or a theoretical model of experience), his interest in addressing popular audiences, his fascination with and defense of varieties of religious experience, and perhaps above all, his strenuous individualism.

Thankfully, James has long had his defenders who have, especially since the mid-1960s, steadily pointed to the singular modernity of the man and his work. Robert D. Richardson’s new intellectual biography is a welcome addition to this body of work. Full of insight and written with impressive command of the astonishingly wide range of materials that went into the peculiar and truly lifelong education of William James, Richardson’s *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism* may well provide the best one-stop introduction to James’s life and work we now have. If Richardson’s volume lacks some of the added breadth of R.W.B. Lewis’s magisterial *The Jameses*, it makes up for that by providing unexpected depth in its tracking of the many sources that fed the Jamesian stream and by offering an impressively detailed account of the fascinating relationship between James’s decidedly unstable emotional life and the zig-zag development of his thought.

The book is probably best suited for the kind of audience that James addressed in what Richardson describes as James’s “third style,” written for a broad but informed audience in a style “at once vivid, personal, comprehensible, and without a shred of condescension.” While Richardson does often offer new insight into dynamics that have been recognized by others (he is especially good, for example, on James’s relationship with Pauline Goldmark and other similarly fascinating women), much of the story of James’s life told here will be familiar to those who have read one or more of the major biographies. Still, Richardson interweaves his narrative of the life with that of the emerging work as skillfully and engagingly as any before him. His short summaries of James’s major themes are always concise, accurate, and well-proportioned. As in his equally superb biographies of Emerson and Thoreau, Richardson offers capsule accounts of what James was reading and who he was most directly engaged with at any given time, showing how the work emerged in a kind of ongoing dialogue with teachers, colleagues, family, friends, and others whose work he encountered along the way, both allies and adversaries (some of them, like his Harvard colleague Josiah Royce, both). While he is careful to delineate between the different aspects of James’s thought, he is also very perceptive about the ways in which the various parts form a whole (if still a decidedly pluralistic whole). He does not much engage with later scholarship on James, but if the reader does not come away with much sense of the ensuing debates surrounding James’s work, that reader does get an unusually clear and focused sense of how that work was immediately received.

Building on his previous biographies of Emerson and Thoreau, Richardson’s James is another singularly idiosyncratic American voice, dancing on the precipice of a profoundly unnerving modernity. Richardson’s James steered an often precarious middle course between many polar opposites: science and belief, skepticism and faith, popular and technical modes of inquiry, an emphasis on the individual will and an attraction to marginal states that

transcend or otherwise obviate that will, faith in the individual and fascination with the trans-personal, a patriot's love of America and a sense that his ideal America has gone astray. No doubt such vacillation helps explain why James could seem old-fashioned. His most daring innovations were often cast in home-spun cloth, and his unwavering defense of ordinary experience and forms of expression set him apart from most leading champions of the modern, especially as the twentieth century wore on.

James walked a very fine line in this regard, and Richardson recognizes the challenge James faced in attempting to mount a full-scale critique, grounded in ordinary experience, of leading work in psychology, religion, and philosophical method. He effectively captures the many ironies and tensions of James's career, underscoring throughout those aspects of James's life at odds with the popular myth of the man: his frequent sense of inadequacy and failure, his constant physical ailments, his occasional bad temper and emotional philandering. Still, the story he tells is largely triumphant. The James presented in these pages stands against the encroaching empire of system, state, industry, science, professionalism, and the like, champion of the marginal, individual, eccentric, even esoteric, all of the latter harbingers of a pluralistic multiverse that will not be contained or otherwise limited. While Richardson links James to the fully emergent modernisms of psychology, physics, and new forms of social analysis represented by the likes of such students as W.E.B. DuBois, Gertrude Stein, and Horace Kallen, what is perhaps most convincingly modern about James is the sense that even as he greeted the new century with a psychology and philosophical method appropriate to it, the new century was already poised to pass him by. Reading through the last pages of this volume, with the sad tale of leading philosophers' opposition to James's late work (the story of which runs parallel here to that of his brother's failure to find an audience for his painstakingly assembled New York Edition), one senses that the forces unleashed by the new century had at once nurtured these great figures and abandoned them. William did achieve popular success with his late lectures and publications, but apart from the support of his close allies and friends, professional resistance set the tone for his reception over the next half century. Both Henry and William pointed the way forward as forcefully as anyone born, as they were, in the early/mid-nineteenth century, as this book and others like it have amply documented, but at the same time, one can't help but feel that once this new modernism emerged from the maelstrom, its partisans would immediately seek to reinvent everything in forms that bore less resemblance to the products of an earlier age than Henry's novels or William's lectures and books.

Of course, Richardson's intellectual biography is itself testimony to James's enduring appeal (as well as to that of his brother Henry, who is well represented in its pages). Ours is a moment of renewed interest in James and pragmatism, at least in some quarters, as well as in the kind of physiological approach to cognition that James pioneered in the *Principles of Psychology*. And perhaps the revolution James believed he had worked in philosophy, or at least in philosophical method, has become so commonly accepted as no longer to bear the clear sign of its partial origins in James: who today does not believe that knowledge is necessarily wed to experience, or, whatever one believes about "truth" in the abstract, that ideas are ultimately measured by their visible effects in the world? Admittedly, there does remain significant controversy in these claims (especially among those professionally vested in these controversies), but these attitudes are nevertheless now so commonly held that they hardly need to be traced to any point of origin, whether in James or anyone else, and James himself might well regard that as a kind of victory.

Full of keen insight into both the making of William James and the ultimate significance of the works he in turn made, Richardson's intellectual biography should find a broad and various audience. He brilliantly captures the perversely wide range of influences that shaped the Jamesian imagination, as well as the intensely generous curiosity on display throughout James's public and private writings. We take the pluralism of our world for granted, and this exceptionally well-researched, well-written volume offers an invaluable reminder that our ability to do so was historically won, in no small measure thanks to the inspired labors of this distinctive American genius.

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### Book Review

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*Experience as Philosophy: On the Work of John J. McDermott*. Edited by James Campbell and Richard E. Hart. New York: Fordham University Press, 2007. Pp. ix, 322. \$60.00.

This book is a much deserved celebration and exploration of the work of John J. McDermott. The essays in the book were originally presented at a conference at Southern Illinois University—a celebration of McDermott’s seventy years of living and fifty years of teaching. I had the honor of attending this conference and witnessing first hand the love, admiration, and respect expressed by the many people whose lives McDermott has challenged and influenced—including my own.

The editors of this volume provide a very useful introduction that serves to situate McDermott’s work in the rich tradition of American philosophy. This means, in part, that it is a philosophy that is “open and growing,” seeks “cultural renewal and transformation,” and recognizes the “sacred task of pedagogy” (2). They point to the influence of Emerson, James, Royce, Dewey, Peirce, Whitehead, Santayana, and Mead on McDermott’s thought. Some of the central ideas taken from their thinking include a focus on our embodiment, our relationality, and our ongoing attempts to make meaning in a changing world. These themes are developed and expanded in the various essays in this volume, including a very provocative afterward by McDermott himself. The result is a volume that will be very useful to students of American philosophy and existentialism. It is a treat for those interested in McDermott himself—as a scholar, a teacher, and an interesting human being. Specific essays could easily be used in specific courses such as medical ethics (Kegley), ethics (Thompson), existentialism (Allen), aesthetics (Hart) and pragmatism and/or American philosophy (Gavin, Campbell, Fontinell).

The editors provide a nice summary of each essay at the end of their introduction, so I see no need to repeat that here. Their summaries serve as a nice guide to anyone wishing to dip into specific aspects of McDermott’s thought and to those looking for essays to supplement specific course material. I will try, instead, to give a few general impressions of the collection.

For me, one of the most important impressions I came away with was of a gifted and passionate teacher. As Lothstein so colorfully expresses it, “John McDermott, the Johnny Appleseed of philosophers, manures his classes with this most un-postmodernist Yeatsian wisdom, as if his teaching were a kind of gardening, and as if his students were clipped buds desperately in need of recultivation. My own experience persuades me of the cogency of the gardening metaphor, having found myself repeatedly seeded, mulched, composted, weeded, irrigated and greened by his teaching” (18). He is able to convince his students that the questions and problems really do matter to them. He participates *with* his students in the process of creating a meaningful relationship with the universe. As Ryder suggests, he is so powerful in his pedagogy because of his commitment to meliorism and his “faith in the capacity of people to examine their circumstances, explore possible alternatives, and take the action, individual or collective, to recreate their lives, to reconstruct their individual and social circumstances in ways that better meet the needs and more adequately supply the condition necessary for rich and satisfactory life” (212). This commitment and faith is an important antidote in a world too easily seduced by simple and totalizing approaches that can engender a passivity of mind and body. I take inspiration from pictures drawn of McDermott’s continuing battle to live out the teaching of philosophy as a personal and world transforming activity. I hope others will as well.

This picture of a passionate teacher carries over to a second general impression from the book—that of a scholar committed to exploring the problem of being an individual who lives with commitment and purpose in a world that may have no purpose of its own. As many of the authors point out, McDermott addressed the very important question of how to live as a self-consciously terminal creature. Refusing to deny death, taking pleasure in the journey itself, and making relations as own goes are all part of his response to the human situation. But, as Gavin points out “the nectar seems to be in the journey. But in some texts, the nectar seems to be in danger of turning sour” (26). Or as Allen puts it “From the side of pragmatism, his thought takes seriously the notions of situation and meliorism, while his existentialist sensibility stresses tragedy and courage. As a result, McDermott’s philosophy is characterized by two core concepts, what I will call “situational tragedy” and “courageous meliorism.” (86). Further, as Campbell makes clear, McDermott takes seriously Dewey’s “metaphysics of transiency” and concludes that “(i)n such a world, it should be obvious that there is no ultimate salvation nor need there be despair” (51). And here we return to education as a key to living with purpose instead of despair. 5

The two most critical essays belong to Kegley and Fontinell and they offer some interesting critiques of McDermott on this issue of death and hope. Kegley thinks McDermott may be too pessimistic about death and dying and challenges him to see more possibility for amelioration here. In contrast, Fontinell notes that while McDermott stresses that “(t)here is no one, “nothing,” other than ourselves and other members of the human community who can help us to render life meaningful, who can participate with us in the struggle to achieve “salvation” (127) he responds with a call for democratic nihilism. “He hopes for an increasingly wider participation in the creation of the human community. Unlike Nietzsche, he hopes for a mode(s) of living available to more than a few isolated, idiosyncratic, and heroic individuals. The participants in the kind of creative activity desired by McDermott will live consciously and fully in the present while hoping that at the same time and thereby they are contributing to an ever richer community” (128). Fontinell suggests, however, that McDermott at times loses faith in this possibility and wonders if in fact nothingness may loom before us. 6

McDermott’s afterward not only responds to each essay in turn, but also further explores the general themes raised throughout the book. In doing so he notes that “(h)uman creatures are an androcentric intrusion on a cosmic ecosystem that is innocent of our aspirations” (241). This means “I am encumbered to provide a grounding for both meaning and action” (244). Again, one of the most important ways to do this is to teach. “To teach is to help others move through the vestibule and into the feast. The generational continuum of teacher and student is an ennobling lifeline and perhaps, at times, a lifeboat on a fractured, contentious planet earth” (271). 7

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## Book Review

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*A Natural History of Pragmatism: The Fact of Feeling from Jonathan Edwards to Gertrude Stein.* By Joan Richardson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Pp. ix, 327. \$28.99.

Joan Richardson's *A Natural History of Pragmatism* will come as a revelation for many contemporary readers whose only acquaintance with Pragmatism stems from tracing its early course through the *natural science* inclinations of Pierce, James, and Dewey. Richardson centers her text on the reciprocal relationship of language and perception for American thinkers from Jonathan Edwards and Ralph Waldo Emerson to William and Henry James to Wallace Stevens and Gertrude Stein. She places this lineage in a doubly unsettling context of the untamed American landscape and the on-going scientific advances that impelled these thinkers to invent a new relationship between language and perception. These authors explore the new territory of their eras through experiments in speaking and writing aimed at finding ways to illuminate "the fact of feeling" as a vibratory membrane between embodied persons in the new world and the legacy of linguistically encoded meanings.

She examines selected works of each of these explorers of human experience, and drawing on some recent discussions in cognitive science, provocatively demonstrates the sense in which they worked the pragmatic vein. Central to her argument is the Vygotskian-inspired view that language, in addition to being a means for social exchange, is critical as a *tool for thinking*. The artist, at his or her best, gives form to dimly perceived structures in experience, and through linguistic devices (in case of the writers) brings those structures within reach of our conceptual grasp. In this way, language becomes a tool for perceiving and thinking. The authors Richardson examines take the scientific theories of their days, which have made the world strange to received modes of being, and they transmute them through imaginative language into ways of apprehending and living in that world.

Richardson proposes that the challenge of engagement with the structures of experience became particularly pressing for early settlers of the New World. The Old World categories of thought proved to be less than adequate to capture the novelties, change, and palpable uncertainties they confronted in North America. In this respect, Richardson views Jonathan Edwards' writings as a concerted effort personally to come to grips with this discontinuity between old and new, while also attempting to develop forms of expression that would bind a community in the face of new beginnings. She shows that in his searching examination of experience in the New World, Edwards drew on Newton's experiments with light as a model for "making the invisible visible." Newton's shuttered room admitting only a ray of light, which after passing through a prism reveals previously hidden properties, serves as a metaphor for Edwards who creates conceptually a "room of the idea" permitting close scrutiny of experience. This infusing of science, language, and aesthetics is seen simultaneously as an effort to take account of the natural order, while also serving a ministerial function for communities taking root in their new land. These dual purposes, to varying degrees, will mark the writings of all of the individuals examined.

Richardson describes Emerson as turning his focus outward to experiences of nature. From the opening line of his essay "Experience" ("Where do we find ourselves?"), Emerson is presented as trying to naturalize religion by transforming regnant categories of thought through new forms of expression. In this undertaking, he was inspired in part by discoveries in science, such as Faraday's notions of electromagnetic fields, as signs of an underlying, undulating reality. His explorations were also leavened with a Swedenborgian aesthetic, which "gave to science a beating heart" inspired by the wonder and beauty of crystals, whose complexities and varieties arise from the repetitive, iterative growth from simpler structures.

Richer understanding of self and world require forms of expression that incorporate the scientific imagination and in turn enable a fuller human experience of the world in which neither man nor god is the center. At the same time, language as a device for rendering experience more concrete can itself highlight subtler aspects of experience. In *The Principles of Psychology*, William James's attention to language and to the stream of thought, and specifically, to the transitions between objects of experience, laid bare the foundational place of feelings in experience.

"There is not a conjunction or a preposition, and hardly an adverbial phrase, syntactic form, or inflection of voice, in human speech that does not express some shading or other of relation which we at some moment actually feel to exist between the larger objects of our thoughts. . . . We ought to say a feeling of *and*, a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *but*, and a feeling of *by*, quite as readily as we say a feeling of *blue* or a feeling of cold." (James, 1890, p. 238)

James's insistence on the significance of the relations between objects of experience, developed more fully in his radical empiricism, critically contributes to the abandonment of old object and image-centered categories of thinking that are bleached of activity and feeling. While our concepts provide us with a second-hand, detached assessment of the world, immediate experience is *of* a world of dynamic structure, aesthetics, and feelings. *The Varieties of Religious Experience* is James's exploration of the fact of feeling, and with that he carries forward the Emersonian project of naturalizing religion. The structure and style of his writing itself, Richardson argues, embodied his ideas as much as described them by involving the reader in the affect-laden work of having a particular thought, a project later taken up and vastly expanded by Gertrude Stein. Richardson's analysis of language as a tool for exploration and discovery within experience gathers momentum in her treatment of Henry James, Wallace Stevens, and Gertrude Stein. The thread linking all of these individuals is the use of linguistic forms as a tool for rendering what is invisible in experience visible. Richardson's principle focus in her treatment of Henry James is his novel, *The Ambassadors*, which he considered to be among his best. Her explication of the book's title, that she suggests was inspired by Holbein's painting of the same name, is intriguing. This painting is perhaps best known today for its exemplary use of anamorphic representation, which appears as a blurred image from a conventional viewing point and is only recognizable as a *memento mori* after adopting an eccentric angle to the canvas. Typically, the language and plot of Henry James's fiction leads the reader to the proper elliptical vantage point from which narrative events can be understood. In doing so, James opens up new ways of comprehension in times of ever-emerging complexity in the face of modernity.

Wallace Stevens's often opaque and challenging poetry is understood as a linguistic effort to apprehend and convey the unstable and barely imaginable reality described by the physics of Einstein's relativity principle, Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, and other early 20<sup>th</sup> quantum physicists. Stevens' use of language in part mirrors this unfamiliar realm and the feelings it engenders "to provide satisfactions of belief within paradox and perplexity" (p. 213). Gertrude Stein's early exposure to biological thought, first at Harvard, where she encountered William James, and later at Johns Hopkins investigating morphological structure and the transmission of inherited traits, sensitized her to replicating processes and repetitive structures that underlay the variety and unity of life. The recursive, iterative quality of natural processes is mirrored by a prose style intended to capture the feeling of thinking -- linguistic form as an homology of nature's process of becoming. The result, as Richardson puts it referring to all three of these writers, "a new vulgate for experience in a post-Darwinian creation (p. 166)."

What is new and exciting about this work then is Richardson's tracing out of a different path for pragmatism that leads the reader through the humanities rather than philosophy. In the process, the influence of the shifting scientific ground on the literary imaginations of these artists cannot be overstated. These connections between the sciences and the humanities have the effect of narrowing the gulf between them that was anticipated and lamented by William James. Richardson too is inspired by contemporary developments in cognitive and neuro-science; and those connections are vital for understanding why this study indeed is a "natural history of pragmatism." Acts of writing, more than devices for communicating, are practices of exploration and discovery, the fruits of which may provide the reader with a temporary foothold for structures of reality as they become revealed and transformed in each age.

On a slightly critical note, Richardson occasionally draws connections that without elaboration seem rather speculative, such as Edwards' recursive style resembling the structure of Bach's Art of the Fugue, and in turn anticipating the coding and transmission processes of RNA molecules. Her interdisciplinarity sometimes leads her to borrow ideas from fields when, within these fields, some of those ideas function at odds to her point. For example, when she borrows from recent psychology she uncritically uses language that splits apart cognition and feeling, vision and the other senses, and reinforces a sort of parsed and isolated version of psychological processes. Yet the gist of her argument unites them. As psychologists, we also found it jarring for her to cite the influence of James on evolutionary psychologists such as Tooby and Cosmides who seem influenced only by

James' chapter on instincts in *The Principles*, and little else. In general, she does not place her use and understanding of science in the empirical but anti-positivist tradition pioneered by the James, Peirce, and Dewey. However, she takes great pains to substantiate the influence of particular scientific theories on each of the authors she examines in detail. Here, the case for the role of specific scientific advances in "the natural history of pragmatism" is convincingly made.

In many places, the writing seems to be unnecessarily dense and convoluted. Too many references to too many sources often impede rather than ground the development of an idea. In spite of this, we urge readers to push ahead, for many very worthwhile insights await them. Much in the spirit of William James, Richardson reminds us "that we feel things before we think them, and that following the complicated harmony that we make of what we think, back to what we feel, gives pleasure, the strain of being" (p. 231). 11

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