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EDITOR'S PREFACE

ROBERT D. RICHARDSON

You don't often go to a conference and get to hear four first-rate papers one right after another in a single session, but the March 2012 meeting of the Nineteenth Century Studies Association produced just such a fine harvest on Saturday, March 24 in its section VIII-D on "The Religion of William James: Mind and Body."

Lynn Bridgers drew a deft and lucid comparison between James and Evelyn Underhill on mystical states, concluding that even though Underhill disagreed with and meant to discredit James's ideas about mystical experience, she ended up sharing broad areas of agreement with James. Underhill's book on mysticism is still standard, but so is James's description of the same subject in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, and there are still people--and people for whom religion is real—who will prefer James. (James is hard to refute. A noted theologian at Duke delivered a set of Gifford Lectures a few years ago arguing that James was wrong about religion because he had failed to start his discussion by assuming the truth of Trinitarian Christianity. The same writer also delivered an attack on the entire Gifford Lecture project—natural theology—by claiming that the only possible natural theology, that is the only one that gives us the world as it is, is that same Trinitarian Christianity. Many, perhaps most students of William James will not consider his work demolished by such arguments.)

Norris Frederick's paper on James and Vivekananda brings out a clear distinction between the two men. Frederick shows persuasively how Vivekananda simply denied the existence of evil, calling it just an illusion. James gives us a fuller, richer world; he acknowledges the felt presence of evil and noted that whether it really exists or not, we *feel* it to exist and our life *feels* like a fight against it.

Richard Hall's careful, detailed, and extensive paper compares William James with Jonathan Edwards; it is the best such discussion I know of. James read Edwards carefully and early and grappled actively with Edwards' ideas. Hall's fine analysis concludes that James, like Edwards, focused on religious *experience*, on the emotional quality of such experience, and on

the fruits rather than the roots of religious life. Perhaps students of American thought should consider moving on from the “Edwards to Emerson” argument given us by Perry Miller to concentrate a bit more on the Edwards to William James connection.

The last paper in this exemplary set is Paul Croce’s intricate and thoughtful exploration of what he calls “spilt mysticism.” Croce takes considerable pains to show how William James’s ideas about religious experience do not privilege some elite group of certified religious figures, but instead provide a broad, democratic endorsement of the religious experience of the individual—that is of *every* individual.

The four papers so briefly summarized here constitute a rousing endorsement of James’s treatment of religion, a vote—four votes really—that Jamesian religious experience is still very much a live option, a practical choice for ordinary people outside as well as inside our religious institutions. There may or may not be a universal or perennial religion—as there is a perennial philosophy—and there may or may not be even a generally accepted taxonomy of religious experience. But we are free to believe and to act as if such a thing exists, and William James’s work shows the first firm step in that direction. That step is to accept as real the religious experience of the individual and that means accepting as real the religious experience of *each* individual.

SPILT MYSTICISM: WILLIAM JAMES'S DEMOCRATIZATION OF RELIGION

PAUL CROCE

ABSTRACT

James's approach to religious experience has a reputation for appealing only to the spiritual elite. After all, he set aside average churchgoers in favor of those with "direct personal communion with the divine"; not many live up to that lofty standard. But his approach to this "personal religion," in The Varieties of Religious Experience and in less direct ways throughout his work, shows another side to his religion. Within church structures and even without institutions, he maintained, there is spiritual potential in all humanity. While traditional Western religion looks for the deepest meaning in realms transcendent, James suggested the significance of depth psychology within each person, a kind of "inscendent" realm, the beyond within—he even subtitled The Varieties itself as "A Study in Human Nature." His insights into religion also leached into his other philosophical ideas as he approached even science with humility. He was eager to engage in the scientific method, and deeply respectful of scientific facts, but unwilling to accept the claims of scientific enthusiasts ready to reduce religion to materialist phenomena; yet he welcomed their focus on naturalistic ways to understand religious experiences, since their physical focus presented a first step toward understanding the life of the spirit. The "mystical germ," so dramatic among religious founders, is widely available, deep within every human consciousness. Just as he wrote his psychology for practical use, and his pragmatism as a philosophy of use, so he maintained that spirituality is ready for use.

Our ... respectability keeps us from exercising the mystical portions of our nature freely.

William James¹

The role of William James in leading a psychological turn for the study and practice of modern religion is well known. The democratic qualities of spiritual life that his innovations both reflected and promoted, however, are rarely appreciated.² In his *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), he distinguishes religion lived at first hand, which would include direct personal encounter with spiritual forces, from religion at second hand, based on traditions derived from those first-hand experiences. By focusing on personal religion, he redrew the religious map as historian James Turner puts it, turning religious attention away from historical traditions, institutional affiliations, and theological positions, and toward an emphasis on personal experience that would become central to the modern field of religious studies and serve as the way many contemporary believers comprehend their religious life. James's own seeming turn away from the religion of the average citizens, who in the American context have generally remained content with traditions, and his role in establishing an academic field of study, have contributed to a reputation for his elitism in religious life. If Rick Santorum, a candidate for the Republican nomination for President in 2012, had paused from campaigning to read James, he might have said of him, as he said of President Barack Obama's hopes to increase college enrollments: "What a snob!"³

Within James's focus on first-hand experiences of religion, he paid attention not only to the religion of the few, but also to the spiritual potential within every person, in the subliminal realm deep within every consciousness. In addition, his whole philosophical stance included a fundamental humility, in the form of skepticism about the human ability to comprehend the world with any completeness, which shaped both his recognition of mystery in religion and of uncertainty in science or any human enterprise. This pointed him to respect for mysticism, which despite its elusiveness, James found personally compelling and central to the character of religion; while it is most clearly evident in the intense religious commitment of institutional founders and trendsetters, it is widely available and deep within every consciousness, even as habits prevent its more frequent manifestation. This article explores three dimensions in James's democratization of religion: his evaluation of who engages in personal religion and the increasing popularity of that approach; his recognition of the limits of human understanding in religion and other fields; and his proposition that the mysteries of religion place every human being on essentially the same plane, with recognition of degrees of mystical potential in every person.

THE RELIGION OF THE FEW OR THE RELIGION OF THE PEW?

William James clearly emphasized the role of personal experience in religion. His “Will to Believe” offers a “defense of our right to adopt a believing attitude,” not for welcoming any belief at all, but for endorsement of beliefs in response to deeply personal choices full of complexity and ambiguity, in situations whose issues cannot be answered readily with empirical or scientific inquiry. The climber searching for confidence, in James’s vivid parable of the leap of faith, relies not on fellow believers in community, but on one’s own inner resources before taking that “leap in the dark.” James is even more explicit in *The Varieties* with his avowed intention to focus on “personal religion,” the experience of individuals in “direct personal communion” with the “spiritual structure of the universe,” including the divine. This personal experience, or religion at “first-hand,” as he proposed, is “more fundamental than ...theology or ecclesiasticism.” These collective and institutional structures always refer back to a founding figure whose personal experiences established the tradition; then “when once established [the churches] live at second-hand.” This would be the focus of his study of religion, “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual[s] ... in their solitude,” and by implication, he suggested that these religious experiences are more authentic than church life. In fact, James even argued that after extraordinary personal experiences generate a following, and as the disciples organize and “become ecclesiastical institutions, ... corporate ambitions” take over; “the spirit of politics and the lust of dogmatic rule are then apt to enter and to contaminate the originally innocent thing.” For James, the religion of the founding few is “the primordial thing,” and other religious forms are at best derivative.⁴

The admiration James clearly felt for religion seemed to center on its individual not its community dimensions. At least in these passages, he bypassed the believer in the pew, the mass of people in congregations. Charles Taylor, in *Varieties of Religion Today*, has recently highlighted these dimensions of James’s work in critiquing him for not attending to the role of churches as the “locus of collective connection.” Taylor then credits (or blames) James for the close attention in our time to “deeply felt personal insight,” which has now become “our most precious spiritual resource.” History, Taylor argues, has caught up with James, the original observer and advocate of an expressive individualism which has become a dominant form of religion by the twenty-first century (and a major factor in other parts of culture). By neglecting

its community dimensions, religion under the star of James has become the affairs of isolated individuals, individuals in limited interaction with the communities of those around them, blithely ignoring traditions, which are after all communities of people across time. Even the increasing popularity of personal religion, and with its growing numbers of supporters beyond elites, actually shows an extension of James's focus on the rarefied few, with his same attention to personal religion now having become the orientations of the self-professed rarefied many. Like "affordable luxuries" in mass consumption of high-priced brand names, James's personal religion at first-hand has become the religion of unaffiliated seekers.⁵

Whether considered with James's formulation about the few charismatic "religious geniuses" or in the popular formats of mass individual seeking, the religion of the Jamesian turn displays a focus on the psychological experience of individual believers. Taylor's critique of James is really a critique of the whole trend in recent religion toward unchurched spirituality. This form of religion has indeed challenged traditions, especially in their respect for the transcendent. These are the aspects of religion, especially in its Western varieties, that emphasize the distance of the divine from worldly realms: an awesome God inspires a following; the believers assemble in community for their devotions and establish traditions for their beliefs. But there is another immanentist side of even traditional religion, about the divine relationship with the world and in interaction with believers.⁶ James was interested in both the transcendent and immanent aspects of religion, and their connection; humanity experiences religion both as distant mystery and as intimate relation. He did not seek to deny either dimension, or to defy tradition or community; instead, he pointed out that all these aspects of religion begin with a primal point of contact in the depths of human psychology available within every human being.

Each experience of religion, for the founding few or the person in pew, with reverence for awesome transcendence or in intimate immanent relations, begins in some human contact with an extraordinary spiritual insight. Within any one person, such an experience of religion happens at a depth of human consciousness beyond normal everyday mental functioning. Following the research of Frederick Myers and Pierre Janet, James called this depth the "subliminal" realm, or the "subconscious." This realm is part of our natural psyche, present in all, but not so awake in most people. When James refers to the beliefs of the average churchgoer as religion at second hand, he is observing that while the residents of the pew are spiritually capable of some degree of religion at first hand themselves, in effect they choose to

outsource their spirituality to the experiences of others, the founders, leaders, and mystics, who can inspire them beyond the constraints of their own normal waking state. And indeed, as the history of religions amply shows, every other-worldly truth travels through some wordly person, or as James puts it, for most believers, “our faith is faith is someone else’s faith.”⁷

When anyone’s subliminal is actually stirred in the experiences of personal religion, this subconscious realm serves as “a doorway” to something more. The “more” connects on its “hither side” with the subliminal, the “subconscious continuation of our conscious life”; and on its farther side it is a mystery whose identity is answered differently by different traditions and by different people, each supplying a distinctive “over-belief” that is “absolutely indispensable” for providing “various directions” in life—for the spiritually adept and for the average religious citizen alike. Each over-belief will appeal to some, if “congruous with our personal susceptibilities,” James observes, but will “appear a sorry under-belief” to others. Yet each belief is a helpful clue in the human cosmological puzzle. “The existence of so many religious types and sects” may be confusing, but as the title of his book had already suggested, James actually welcomed this variety. Because religion deals with a mystery that is ultimately beyond human ken, each human resolution of that farther side of the subliminal serves as a “syllable in human nature’s total message,” and it will take “the whole of us to spell the meaning out.” Moreover, even within the “great variety” of religious thoughts and actions, the truly outstanding “saints are practically indistinguishable” across religious traditions.⁸ There is a cosmopolitan commonality of spiritual enlightenment, which parallels the transnational setting of the philosophes of the secular eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Both forms of enlightenment hold out hope for encouraging democracy by fostering the untrammelled potential in each citizen.

WORKING WITHIN THE GLORIOUS LIMITS OF THE HUMAN FRAME

In these subliminal depths, at the roots of religion, the transcendent and immanent dimensions mingle. Depth consciousness is a kind of “inscendent” realm, as mysterious as the advocates of transcendence claim and as intimate as those seeking immanence crave; these depths are not in defiance of tradition and community, but serve as their well of life, not always tapped, yet always ready to refresh second-hand behaviors and beliefs.

James’s turn to the psychological realm of religion was not in defiance of churches and theologies; their structures and ideas have proposed ways to deliver humanity from its mortal

frailties, and have done so with their own mix of human achievements and shortcomings. In the face of perennial human uneasiness, religion presents solutions in transcendent and immanent forms: religions make “connexion [sic] with ... higher powers,” and that connection is through a “higher part of [our own] self.” Religion is the energy that emerges when the subliminal becomes “continuous with a more ... in the universe outside” the believer.⁹ James presents the psychological roots of these religious beliefs, and the subliminal serves as the transcendent within, with other-worldly mystery, while deeply embedded within human nature.

Just as James did not segregate religions from human psychology, so he did not regard religion as a distinctively mysterious dimension of the human experience. In his first professional work in psychology, James portrayed experience as “one great blooming, buzzing confusion.” His research in scientific psychology had shown him that when the mind encounters the world, it discerns a vast array of undifferentiated data; out of this “whole experience-chaos,” the mind with its powers of “attention carves out objects, which conception ... names and identifies.” Just as human imagination discerns constellations of patterns from a sea of stars, so “out of time we cut ‘days’ and ‘nights,’ ‘summers’ and ‘winters.’” And the “discernment of man” generates many more subtle “formations” for whole “universes of thought,” for different uses in life, different disciplinary insights, and different cultural purposes. The resulting names and concepts, very useful and indeed the lynchpins of our intellectual life, are “all abstracted and generalized” from the perceptual flux, based on its own tangible leadings; the “primal stuff ... of pure experience” is at once the raw material for conceptions and in itself so generally overlooked because its sheer abundance and mysteries are less commonly appealing than our much-clearer but simpler conceptions about that stuff. By contrast, traditional empiricists portray the world already “disconnected” in its parts, so perception to them merely involves identification of discrete sensible units already present before any role for the mind; the mind’s encounter with these perceptions organize and unify them into ever more complex conceptions. According to this outlook, the mind does the unifying of the simple experiential parts; according to James, however, the mind, with an array of concepts, breaks apart the abundant experiential whole that greets our initial perceptions.¹⁰ Like traditional empiricists, he insisted on reckoning with natural facts; unlike them, he did not think they were readily available with distinct clarity, because of the vastness and complexity of reality.

This work of the human mind creating concepts to organize the world of experience involved mental selection, James argued, with attention paid to parts of experience. The distinctive trait of the human mind, in contrast with non-human “brute intellect,” is the abundance of voluntary choices that guide the selection. People choose to pay attention to parts of experience based on criteria of curiosity, effectiveness, esthetic pleasure, beliefs, and passions. These constitute the interests that focus the attention of the human mind in operation. This process of selection provides the human mind with spontaneous variations, constantly surging and competing for attention, with some concepts more adaptive and fit to endure, for various purposes, in a kind of mental natural selection. These human mental abilities turn “originally chaotic experience ... into ... orderly” sets of ideas. Thus “the intellectual life of man”—theories and beliefs, reasoning and feeling: the whole mental work that selects portions of experience according to significance and interest—transforms the perceptual world, generating the “substitution of a conceptual order” for the “aboriginal sensible muchness” of our initial encounters with the world. This portrait of concepts sorting through the deep enigmas of pure experience would be a starting point for his psychology of religion. Original mystery and its transformation would also be an important ingredient in pragmatism, a philosophy based on the “practical consequences” of ideas, or in other words, their usefulness for selection out of the abundance of experience.¹¹

James set this portrait of the mind selecting from vast tracks of experience into a broad metaphysical framework during the opening paragraphs of his first public declaration of pragmatism. Within the “trackless forest of human experience,” the total “fulness [sic] is elusive,” but “the human intellect” supplies “spots, or blazes” which “give you a direction and ... place[s] to reach”; the “formulas” and “conceptions,” including some quite “technical,” signal that “we can now use the forest”—it is “no longer a place merely to get lost.” Such theories, or “philosopher’s phrases,” however useful, still leave “unexpressed almost everything” in original experience, or in the words of his original metaphor, “they do not give you the integral forest with all its ... wonders.” That mystery, he suggests, may be at least vaguely accessible to poets, as he blurted out, “Happy they without need of blazes!” But he warns most philosophers, including pragmatists (and also scientists and religious believers), to avoid mistaking their own blazes for the whole of the forest; theories after all are not the whole of experience. With this supportive but chastened approach to our conceptual worlds, James maintained that theories

serve as “instruments, not answers to enigmas.”¹² Theories will improve with self-correcting inquiry, but they will always leave some enigmas beyond comprehension, especially in the relation of parts and for understanding of the whole.

Each of the varieties of religious traditions also offers such instruments, serving as clues into enigmas of the world, even though no one of them provides a complete answer, despite the claims of true believers. Even with his openness to religion and his enthusiasm for a will to believe in the face of limited evidence, James was skeptical of the tendency to “follow faith unreasoningly.” For religions of exclusiveness and intolerance, which promote division and violence, he declared that these “faiths should be broken up and ventilated” and the “northwest wind of science should blow their sickliness and barbarism away.” For religion, James endorsed what historian David Hollinger has called “tonic destruction,” with modern secular challenges offering a bracing chance to separate the wheat from the chaff of traditional beliefs.¹³

James maintained a similar posture for science, insisting that its methods offer tools for insights, but that its frequent commitment to materialism has restricted its ability to enrich our world, and even restricted inquiry into some primal mysteries. James began *The Varieties* with a jarring oxymoron, in the words of his first lecture “Religion and Neurology.” He did so to address directly the reductionist challenge to religious belief, the tendency to treat the “exalted soul-flights” of religion as “‘nothing but’ expressions of our organic dispositions.” He took issue with the confident “medical materialism” of secular and scientific critics of religion: Saint Paul’s “vision on the road to Damascus” as a “discharging lesion of the occipital cortex”; Saint Teresa, “an hysteric”; George Fox’s “pining for spiritual veracity, ... a symptom of disordered colon.” With such views, religion then becomes a matter of “mental over-tensions ... due to the perverted action of various glands.” And some of the scientific scorn is even based upon the enlistment of material insights that “physiology will yet discover”; so ironically, this scientific criticism of religious faith is sometimes itself based on faith in the future discoveries of science.¹⁴

The reductionist discrediting of religious states by their association with medical conditions is an argument from origins, which James identified as a form of dogmatism. While medical materialists use the argument from origin to suggest falsehood, religious dogmatism presents “tests for truth” by identifying origins based upon religious authority or revelation; whether the “criterion of origin” is used in a “destructive or an accreditive way,” it closes off “appealing to

the future.” He called this opening to the new information of future experiences the “empiricist criterion” based on the empiricism of experiential wholes, with some experiences understood with human concepts (selecting from the mysterious whole), some subject to further inquiry, and some remaining enigmas, but all in need of further clarification. In each case, the posture of our questions (which direct attention to parts of the whole) will play a role in the resulting types of answers. The right question is the “right one for your purpose,” following any of the human motivations he identified in his psychology, with the best questions directed to the “essential qualities” needed to address particular issues.¹⁵ The questions from most scientists, often in laboratory settings with controlled variables and specialized settings, will result in answers generally well suited to the discrete sensible units of traditional empiricism. The questions from most religious believers, generally guided by church doctrines, will result in narratives that provide broad direction for steering through values choices. Surveying the array of human questions and answers, James remained aware that each begins in an encounter with abundant and elusive experiences. In light of that awareness, he remained fully open to the exact type of answers that laboratory science could provide, even as he reminded readers that the control in these settings limited their purview. He was also open to propositions about human experiences based on orientations that mainstream scientists generally call wholly unempirical ranging from religious beliefs to idealistic claims, volitional choices, motivations to extraordinary levels of energy, the therapeutic impact of intangible elements of mind, heart, and spirit, and even psychic experiences. These all show the tangible effects of non-material ingredients on material conditions, and whether endorsed or not, they are part of human experience, and call for scrutinizing inquiry. With his radical empiricism as his standard, he evaluated experience, initially chaotic, and needing discerning minds to understand into patterns for human interests, use, and problem solving.

By these empirical standards, religious positions, like scientific ones—or even any other non-scientific ones—would be judged, not by their origins, but by the consequences they bring; or as he summarized in the more evocative language of the Bible, “by their fruits ye shall know them, not by their roots.” And yet, even with his defense of religion against reductionist scientific skepticism, he was not ready to dismiss the medical materialists either. Their critiques offer helpful reminders not to treat religious experiences “as if they were outside of nature’s order altogether.”¹⁶ The materialist reduction of religion is actually a good first step, a reminder to

look at the psychological settings of beliefs, but not to mistake that step as the last word, while James explored spirituality as it circulates within the natural world.

EVERY PERSON HIS OR HER OWN MYSTIC

For all James's emphasis on the limits of human abilities, he also gave credit to human potential. The complexities of nature set limits on scientific insights, but the accomplishments have been many; religion faces deep cosmic mysteries, but its beliefs bring much insight, hope, and motivation. The whole forest may be trackless, but the trails of human construction are significant in themselves, especially for those living with their use, and with potential for still more insights. The human potential in religion is most clearly expressed in "mystical states of consciousness," because he proposed that mysticism sits at the "root and centre" of "personal religious experience." While these states of consciousness in their most explicit and dramatic forms are august and rare, he offers clues about their wider availability. The hither side of mysticism in depth psychology means that, although deep, it is a feature of human psychology. And so, "religious melancholy, whatever peculiarities it may have *qua* religious, is at any rate melancholy. Religious happiness is happiness. Religious trance is trance."¹⁷ The continuity with everyday consciousness suggests that mystical states reside in potential throughout humanity.

James's own relation with mysticism offers illustration of its degree of availability. He admitted that "my own constitution shuts me out from [mystical experiences] almost entirely." The "almost," however, indicates a small degree of mysticism: he asserted that "there is *something in me* which *makes response* when I hear utterances from that quarter." He called this "my mystical germ," which is after all a seed, small but with great potential; and then he generalized: "it is a very common germ." Enlisting his philosophical objections to absolutism, he observed that such thinking applied to religion has meant that many observers assume that "mystical deliverances must be infallible revelations in every particular, or nothing." This all-or-nothing approach feeds both religious absolutism with its hierarchy of religious adepts, and secular absolutists with their charge that mystical experiences really "are nothing" but perhaps the imaginative outcropping of physiological peculiarities. James the pluralist was content to observe small steps wherever they appeared; "why may they not be *something*, although not everything?"¹⁸ Hence, the mystical germ.

And that something, in James, in mystics, and in ordinary folks, is by definition ineffable; it “defies expression,” but “must be directly experienced.” Moreover, “it cannot be imparted or transferred to others.” In fact, even having a ready particular description is a sure sign of its lack of presence; by contrast, James’s own hesitancy to claim his own mystical states actually offered a mark in favor of his mystical authenticity, albeit in degrees. No wonder this religion at first hand is so much less frequent than religion at second hand, with its theologies and institutions; like conceptions compared to the abundance of experience, those rational and social structures are so much easier to communicate and organize. Just as different people tap mystical sensibilities in different amounts, so too do mystical experiences emerge in any one life in degrees, ranging from “phenomena which claim no special religious significance” to “those of which the religious pretensions are extreme.” He called this the “mystical ladder.” The smallest germs resemble everyday psychology; “the simplest rudiment of mystical experience would seem to be that deepened sense of the significance of a maxim.” It may even be something heard many times but which on one particular hearing commands new attention, to which we might blurt out, “I never realized its full meaning until now.” As with his “Will to Believe,” these insights are not new, but there is a newly awakened sense of their “living,” even “momentous” significance. Some places on the mystical ladder, James admits, lead to “dreamy states,” disconnected with waking reality, and may even suggest insanity. And there are artificial mystical states from intoxicants; alcohol and drugs have the “power to stimulate the mystical faculties,” and under their influence they offer “one bit of the mystic consciousness.” Less artificial sources include “certain aspects of nature,” which have “a peculiar power of awakening such mystical moods.”¹⁹

With mysticism’s array of intersections with normal psychology, James was sure that “even the least mystical” of his audience would be “convinced of the existence of mystical moments as states of consciousness” within human experience, even as he also admitted that in full flower, “the deliciousness of some of these states seem to be beyond anything known in ordinary consciousness.” No matter their degree, “mystical conditions ... render the soul more energetic,” and of course such enrichments of life occur in degrees as well. All these states of mind, from the most religious to the least, including both the “classic mysticism and [the] lower mysticisms[,] spring from the same mental level, from the great subliminal ... region,” available to all.²⁰

For all his eagerness to promote mystical possibilities more democratically to a wider pool of the population, James still regarded the most profound mystical experiences as worthy of greater degrees of attention. Such people may serve as leaders of communities, just as the truly extraordinary have been founders of religious movements. They “point in directions to which the religious sentiments even of non-mystical men incline.” If religion at its best draws out the best in humanity, those with the deepest experience of personal religion remind the rest of us, so often distracted, “of the supremacy of the ideal.” Those possibilities “we may voluntarily ignore,” but we cannot erase because they are within us, in germinal form.²¹ They remain mere seedlings for most because of personal habits or the power of traditions, which serve as the collected habits of a cultural community. Even James’s attention to religious elites has had democratic implications to the degree that the extraordinary few have served not just as distant icons but also as models for all to follow.

In his religious texts, for all of the democratic possibilities of the mystical germ in all of us, it is not very common in practice. James does not much explore this gap in practice, except for his implication that the belief states are available if they just be willed; the mystical germ remains present if fostered or not. In his other writings, however, he does explore traits that make it rare in daily practice. Habits offer great stability, serving as “the enormous fly-wheel[s] of society”; but they can also inhibit innovation and critical thinking. No wonder he supported a tonic winnowing of religious traditions to identify their richest, healthiest parts. Moreover, in his own life, he cultivated assertions of will as ways to deepen his expression of the “spiritual self,” and an impulse to live “without any guarantee” as a way to remain open to life’s possibilities. Although he said that prayer made him feel “foolish and artificial,” during his youthful troubles, he found “one fine prayer” that he recorded in his diary for frequent reference: “Now God help me through this! for you know that I am in the right and you see that I am trying to help myself.”²² Rather than a supplication for pious guarantees, this was a prayer to boost his willful motivations.

When James did have his few dramatic spiritual experiences, he simply let their array of insights “whirl ... inexplicably together”—after all, “the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance.” For himself, he could not discern any immediate direct message, but the insights remained a “boulder of impression,” and they confirmed and amplified his vocational drive do his writing and speaking. He acknowledged that having any great impact was “well nigh

impossible,” but “to attempt is *my* religious act.” Even with such efforts, and even with this personal commitment to their significance, James crucially added the importance of not staking too much on the final accomplishments of any such effort: the “results sh[oul]d not be too voluntarily aimed at or too busily thought of.” This would be his own guiding spiritual path, the expression of his own mystical germ: act in life true to one’s purpose, and don’t expect results; this resolution, he declared, has had a “potent effect in my inner life.”²³ That’s a spiritual habit that can foster a little bit of mysticism in everyone.

Just as James proposed that pragmatism offers “an alteration in ‘the seat of authority’ that reminds one almost of the protestant reformation,” so his religious thought offers a kind of modern reformation, not a protesting one, but an affirming one. In place of the Protestant cry, “every man his own priest,” James offers the inspiration that every person is, in degrees, potentially, his or her own mystic. Protestantism sought to take religious devotion out of the monasteries and bring it into everyday life, and James suggests that a universal religious potential offers the chance for mystical inspiration in all. British poet and critic T. E. Hulme coined the phrase “spilt religion” to characterize romantic thinking as a humanistic substitute for religion; Hulme’s insight offers a way of thinking about modern secularity not as religious decline, but as its expansion into everyday secular life.²⁴ In the same way, James’s psychological focus can enable religious seekers to take on the insights of mystics, to elevate even everyday personal experiences with the energy and hopefulness of mysticism.

With great spiritual powers and their great possibilities also come great responsibilities. These depth experiences of the subliminal and in mysticism can enlighten, but they can also include the dangers of misdirected and hurtful messages. James offers some wise guidance for sorting out the swirls at these depths: authentic religion “favors gravity”; it “says ‘hush’ to all vain chatter and smart wit”; it provides “a new zest which adds itself like a gift to life”; it takes the form of “lyrical enchantment” or “earnestness”; it offers “an assurance of safety and a temper of peace”; and it comes with “a preponderance of loving affections.”²⁵ These can serve as standards for separating the spiritual wheat from the depth psychology chaff. Whether one agrees with James’s high hopes for democratized spilt mysticism, or remains skeptical of its possibilities or merits, a less structured and more personal approach to religion has been on the rise ever since James’s time, and this religion of spirituality has become a particularly powerful

force in recent decades. Often breaking with tradition or demanding renewal within church structures, a personal approach to spirituality has been dispersing within this generation of seekers; the religion of the few is ready to become the religion of the pew—or spirituality beyond church walls. In the recent religious landscape, the mystical germ has sprouted. The challenge of our time will be to rise to the demands, welcome the possibilities, and scrutinize the illuminations posed by the call of the mystic within that William James forecast a century ago.

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NOTES

¹ James, “The Energies of Men” (1906), ERM, 131.

² There are rich resources for understanding James’s approaches to religion. Bixler, *Religion in the Philosophy of William James*; and Clebsch, “The Human Religiousness of William James,” emphasize his connection to liberal and humanist religion, a theme scrutinized by Kittelstrom, “Too Hidebound”; Schmidt, *Restless Souls*; and White, *Unsettled Minds*. Vanden Burgt, *Religious Philosophy of William James*; Suckiel, *Heaven’s Champion*; and Slater, *William James on Ethics and Faith*, assess his religion in terms of his pragmatism. O’Connell, *William James on the Courage to Believe*; Evans, *Subjectivity and Religious Belief*; Hollinger, “James, Clifford, and the Scientific Conscience”; and Christian, “Lessons from James’s Debate with Clifford,” evaluate his “will to believe.” Lamberth, *William James and the Metaphysics of Experience*; and Frankenberry, *Religion and Radical Empiricism*, study the role of radical empiricism in his religion. Ruf, *The Creation of Chaos*; and Ramsey, *Submitting to Freedom*, present James’s religion, especially his *Varieties*, in relation to his psychology. Levinson, *The Religious Investigations of William James*; and the essays in Proudfoot, ed., *William James and a Science of Religion*, evaluate the psychology of his social scientific study of religion. Niebuhr portrays the “inarticulate feelings of reality” (222) in “William James on Religious Experience.” Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, evaluates James’s mysticism in philosophical and secular

terms; and Barnard *Exploring Unseen Worlds*; and Johnson, “James’s Concept of Mystical Consciousness” provide more sympathetic readings of his spirituality; while Gale identifies James’s mysticism as one side of the deeply *Divided Self of William James*. A number of scholars point to James’s application of pluralism and his metaphysics of field theory to religion for a portrait of a finite divinity, including Fontinell, *Self, God, and Immortality*; and Lamberth, “Interpreting the Universe.” Eugene Taylor, *William James on Consciousness*; and Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions*, depict James’s religion in relation to his depth psychology. Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today*; and Bridgers, *Contemporary Varieties of Religious Experience*, present recent uses of James’s ideas. Questions about the democratic qualities of James’s religion have led to a key question of this article, To what extent were the resources of James’s religious insights, so thoroughly evaluated in these works, available to the average religious citizen?

³ Turner, *Religion Enters the Academy*; Santorum in Caldwell, “Without Reference to ‘Snobs’.”

⁴ WB, 13-14 and 80; VRE, 33-34, 269, and 268.

⁵ Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today*, 25, 100. On spiritual dimensions of religion away from institutional structures and toward individual exploration, see Catherine Albanese, ed., *American Spiritualities*; Wuthnow, *After Heaven*; Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace*; and A *Generation of Seekers*; and Schmidt, *Restless Souls*. On the cultural appetite for affordable luxuries, see Twitchell, *Living it Up*; and Frank, *Luxury Fever*, for critique of the trend.

⁶ VRE, 268. The distinction between transcendence and immanence is so widely used that it is often assumed or mentioned in passing; it receives more attention in Eliade, *The Sacred*

and the Profane; and Pelikan, *What Has Athens to do with Jerusalem?*; and Kim, in “Transcendence and Immanence,” emphasizes that the orientations are not mutually exclusive, even as some religious beliefs emphasize one or the other.

⁷ VRE, 170, 402; WB, 19. On James and the subliminal, see Eugene Taylor, *William James on Consciousness*, 87-88; Trochu, “Investigations into the William James Collection at Harvard”; and Taves, “Religious Experience and the Divisible Self.”

⁸ VRE, 404, 405, 384, and 397.

⁹ VRE, 400. Berry, in *The Dream of the Earth*, coined the term “inscendence,” to remind humanity of its “pre-rational, ... instinctive resources,” which provide a “genetic imperative” for integrity with nature. However, with this term, he does not draw upon the theory of the subliminal, which provides a psychological prelude to his search for inner resources to increase humanity’s environmental “survival capacity” (207-208). On James’s views of the objective truth of the objects of religious beliefs encountered in the subliminal, see Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions*, 269-95 and 255-60; and Johnson, “James’s Concept of Mystical Consciousness”; and see Oppenheim’s contrasting depiction of James whose investigations have “rendered otiose any appeal to something beyond”; *Reverence For the Relations of Life*, 79.

¹⁰ PPS, 462; ERE, 17; SPP, 32-34; and ERE, 4. John Dewey called the belief of traditional empiricists (and earlier philosophers) in discrete units of sensation that the mind could perceive in the world with immediacy and directness, the “spectator theory of knowledge”; Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, 19. Myers, in *William James*, offers the reminder that the human organization of sensations into concepts takes a long time beyond infancy, and the proposition that James viewed concepts as mental action on elements of reality already

somewhat disclosed in sensation (84). And indeed, James declared “whilst part of what we perceive comes through our senses from the objects before us, another part (and it may be the larger part) always comes ... out of our own head” (PPS, 747). Unlike empiricists he did not think natural facts were readily available to the senses, because of the vastness and complexity of reality; this is what Myers calls his almost “mystical conception of sensation,” his awareness of its uncharted abundance (86). James’s insistence on the part of perception derived from the objective world was a feature of his decided reaction against philosophies of abstraction; his philosophy demanded evaluation of the tangible world despite its elusiveness.

¹¹ ERE, 17 and 18; SPP, 33 and 32. James explained the distinctive role of diverse interest and mental selection in the human mind in “Brute and Human Intellect,” EPS, 1-37; “Spencer’s Definition of Mind as Correspondence,” and “The Sentiment of Rationality,” EPY, 7-22 and 32-64, essays from 1878-1879 that, along with Charles Peirce’s “Fixation of Belief” and “How to Make Our Ideas Clear,” published in *Popular Science Monthly* in 1877 and 1878 respectively (*Writings of Charles Peirce*, 3:242-257 and 257-276), are widely regarded as the first statements of pragmatism; see Thayer, *Meaning and Action*, 143; Smith, *Purpose and Thought*, 195-197; McDermott, *The Writings of William James*, 817; and Myers, *William James*, 89 and 270.

¹² James, “Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results” (1898); and “What Pragmatism Means,” PRG, 258 and 32. James’s own emphasis on mystery provides a way to steer through debates about whether James himself was (and whether pragmatism in general is) relativistic on objective reality and in epistemology; see for example the debate between Diggins, *The Promise of Pragmatism*, 136, 144, and 131 ; and “Pragmatism and the Historians” versus

Kloppenbergs, “The Authority of Evidence” and Westbrook, “The Authority of Pragmatism”; and between Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*; versus Misak, ed., *New Pragmatists*. James’s awareness of mystery was a check on his confidence in our grasp of objective reality even as his commitment to the human achievements within the mystery served as a check on any turn to subjective relativity; and the awareness of human limitation compared to tracts of mystery shows a significance for religion in philosophical thought; factoring mystery into philosophy offers the reminder of the presence of what is absent in our knowledge, our beliefs, our virtues, our abilities, or any of our achievements.

¹³ WB, 7; and Hollinger, “Tonic Destruction.”

¹⁴ VRE, 20.

¹⁵ VRE, 24 and 25; “The Sentiment of Rationality” (1879), EPH, 35; and PPS, 956.

¹⁶ VRE, 25 (quoting Matthew, 7:20, King James version) and 28. Myers offers the surprised analysis that, after the *Principles of Psychology* (1890), James simultaneously turned “to a metaphysics congenial to religion” while also “intensifying [his] physiological analysis” (*William James*, 254). His interest in religion and science and in spirituality within psychology explain the apparent paradox.

¹⁷ VRE, 301 and 28.

¹⁸ VRE, 301; and James to James Leuba, April 17, 1904, Perry, *Thought and Character*, 2:350-351 (portions of letter also in LWJ, 2:211-212, and CWJ, 10:395-396).

¹⁹ VRE, 302, 301, 327, 303, 304, 303, 305, 307, and 312. On James’s own mystical experiences and his experimentation with drugs, see Barnard, *Exploring Unseen Worlds*, 25-34; and Nelson, “The Artificial Mystic State of Mind.” James not only showed interest in “drug-

induced states,” especially the dulling of “discriminative and analytic power” that they induce, but also detected a resemblance between these states of consciousness and pure experience; Myers called this position evidence of his almost “mystical conception of sensation” (*William James*, 86).

²⁰ VRE, 316, 327, 329, and 337-8.

²¹ VRE, 339.

²² PPS 125 and 283; James to Alice Howe Gibbens [the future Alice Gibbens James], June 7, [18]77, CWJ, 4:571; James, response to James B. Pratt, “Questionnaire” (1904) on personal religious beliefs (also in LWJ, 2:214); Diary 1, May 1, 1868, 48, James papers.

²³ James to Alice Gibbens James, July 9, 1898; to Frances Morse, April 12, 1900; to Thomas Ward, Jan[uar]y, [18]68; to Ward, April [1869], CWJ, 8:390; 9:186; 4:250; and 4:371; and VRE, 303.

²⁴ PRG, 62; Hulme, *Speculations*, 118; on secularity as expansion of religion into worldly life since the romantic era, see Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*.

²⁵ VRE 39, 382-3.

THE HEAD AND THE HEART: WILLIAM JAMES AND EVELYN UNDERHILL ON MYSTICISM

LYNN BRIDGERS

ABSTRACT

*Two books, published in 1902 and 1911, continue to shape our understanding of mysticism today. William James's landmark study *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, published in 1902, elevated him to a leading authority on the study of religious experience. This detailed phenomenological study focused on conversion and the value of saintliness, but James also devoted 123 pages to his analysis of mysticism (including his oft-cited four marks of mystical experience) and mysticism's relationship to theology, psychology, symbolism and magic. While James's work was acclaimed, Evelyn Underhill dismissed it, feeling that James had misunderstood the nature of mysticism and the subsequent path, the mystic way. She responded by writing *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*. This paper undertakes an examination and comparison of these two towering figures' understandings of the nature of mysticism, framed through the lens of their methodology.*

Two volumes, published in 1902 and 1911, have significantly contributed to our understanding of mysticism over the last century. William James's (1842-1910) landmark study *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, published in 1902, elevated him to a position as a leading authority on the study of religious experience. This detailed phenomenological study focused on conversion and the value of saintliness, but James also devoted 123 pages to his

analysis of mysticism, including his oft-cited four marks of mystical experience, and mysticism's relationship to theology and psychology. While James's work was acclaimed, Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941) dismissed it, feeling that James had fundamentally misunderstood the nature of mysticism and the subsequent path, which she termed "the mystic way." She responded by writing what is arguably her own best known work, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*. Ironically, James did not live to see the critique of his methods implicit in Underhill's book. It was first published in 1911, a year after James's death. This paper undertakes an examination and comparison of these two towering figures' understanding of the nature of mysticism, framed through the lens of their methodology. With James's study informed by biological, phenomenological and philosophical perspectives, and Underhill's study informed by a heartfelt engagement with the mystic, and the centrality of love, their contrasting views on mysticism serve as a means to chart the distance between the head and the heart in the study of mysticism.

Fundamentally, William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* is a phenomenological study of religious experience. James himself would not identify as a phenomenologist, as in his day it was associated with the thought of Hegel, but from today's distant shore we can easily recognize him as one. James M. Edie explained James's phenomenology of religion after addressing the work of more widely recognized phenomenologists, such as: Mircea Eliade:

There is another phenomenological approach possible in this area....It would be a phenomenology not of *religion* – in some or all of its manifestations – but of *religious experience as such*. It would be not a study of historical and philosophical origins of religious meanings and symbols but of the foundations of such meanings in consciousness itself....less a hermeneutic of texts and institutions than a turn to naïve, unreflective experience, as we find it prior to any theory or doctrine about it. This is the orientation of William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*, and this is what radically distinguished him from other phenomenologists of religion.¹

This phenomenological method, grounded in James's understanding of the biological aspects of experience, is also employed in his treatment of mysticism. But James ascribes a central role to mysticism, writing, "One may truly say, I think that personal religious experience has its root and centre in mystical states of consciousness."²

James proposes a definition of mysticism based on four marks that, for him, characterize all mystical experience; ineffability, noetic quality, transiency and passivity.³ His next step is to provide some examples of such experience, including the effects of alcohol, nitrous oxide, and chloroform, before turning to first person accounts of mystical experience. James casts a wide net, looking not just at Christianity but other faith traditions, noting that in the study of mysticism, "We must next pass to its methodical cultivation as an element of the religious life. Hindus, Buddhists, Mohammedans, and Christian all have cultivated it methodically."⁴ After providing examples from these traditions for the reader he concludes that mystical experience "resembles the knowledge given to us in sensations more than that given by conceptual thought."⁵

What James does not address is anything resembling a progression in mystical states. In fact, he indicates he give little credence to such, writing, "I cannot pretend to detail to you the sundry states of the Christian mystical life....I confess that the subdivisions and names which we find in the Catholic books seem to me to represent nothing objectively distinct."⁶ He skips lightly through John of the Cross's *Dark Night of the Soul*, straight to Teresa of Avila's description of the prayer of union, and darts through Ignatius of Loyola's transcendent experience on the banks of the river Cardoner in Manresa. He reflects at some length on what his diverse accounts have in common and notes "This overcoming of all the usual barriers between the individual and the Absolute is the great mystic achievement. In mystic states we both become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness."⁷

As to the authority granted by mystical experience, James is reserved. He treats the question in three parts:

- (1) Mystical states, when well developed, usually are and have the right to be absolutely authoritative over the individual to whom they come.
- (2) No authority emanates from them which should make is a duty for those who stand outside of them to accept their revelations uncritically.

- (3) They break down the authority of the non-mystical or rationalistic consciousness, based on the understanding and the senses alone. They show it to be only one kind of consciousness. They open out the possibility of other orders of truth, in which, so far as anything in us vitally responds to them, we may freely continue to have faith.⁸

James concludes that mystical experiences offer a kind of hypotheses. “They offer us hypotheses, hypotheses which we may voluntarily ignore, but which as thinkers we cannot possibly upset. The supernaturalism and optimism to which they would persuade us may, interpreted in one way or another, be after all the truest of insights into the meaning of this life.”⁹

In *The Varieties* James provides a phenomenological study of religious experiences in themselves. Grounded in his own physiological understanding of psychology, he sees them as almost a form of sensation. But when it comes to the implications of these collective experiences, James takes a turn back to the cognitive, to the head. James sees them as foundational for developing a philosophy of religion. “Philosophy has always professed to prove religious truth by coercive argument; and the construction of philosophies of this kind has always been one favorite function of the religious life, if we use this term in the large historic sense.”¹⁰ He proceeds from his chapter on mysticism to one simply entitled “Philosophy.” There he clarifies but reasserts the importance of mystical consciousness, “I do believe that feeling is the deepest source of religion, and that philosophies and theological formulas are secondary products, like translations of a text into another tongue.”¹¹

James’s lecture on mysticism gives us a snapshot of the complexities of James thought as a whole. He uses a prescient phenomenological method, which will be developed more fully by and more often credited to Edmund Husserl and his students in continental philosophy. He retains a physiologically-based understanding of sensation and feeling that privileges feeling over the “secondary products” of theological and philosophical thought. And he recognizes that while any of these voices and visions may not hold authority for us as individuals, we ignore them at our peril, for they might provide “after all the truest of insights into the meaning of this life.”¹²

Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941) showed little patience for the nuances of James’s methodology. She strongly disagreed with his methods and conclusions. But if the greatest

compliment you can pay a thinker is to carefully and eloquently dispute with that person, then the production of her 1911 book *Mysticism* ranks as high praise indeed. In discussing the characteristics of true mysticism, she dismisses James's four marks of mysticism, writing "I think that we have already reached a point at which William James's celebrated 'four marks' of the mystic state, Ineffability, Noetic Quality, Transiency and Passivity, will fail to satisfy us. In their place I propose to set out, illustrate, and I hope, justify four other rules or notes which may be applied as tests to any give case which claims to take rank amongst the mystics."¹³ Underhill then proceeds to detail her own assumptive framework about the nature of true mystical experience.

The fist of these is that "True mysticism is active and practical, not passive and theoretical. It is an organic life-process, a something which the whole self does; not something as to which its intellect hold an opinion."¹⁴ Secondly, in true mysticism, "Its aims are wholly transcendental and spiritual. It is in no way concerned with adding to, exploring, rearranging or improving anything in the visible universe. The mystic brushes aside that universe....his heart is always set upon the changeless One."¹⁵ The heart will play a primary role in her approach, for as the third note clarifies, "This One is for the mystic, not merely the Reality of all that is, but also a living and personal Object of Love; never an object of exploration. It draws his whole being homeward, but always under the guidance of the heart."¹⁶ Finally, she proposes that process by which one achieves the higher states of mysticism is what she terms "The Mystic Way." Underhill writes:

Living union with this One – which is the term of his adventure – is a definite state or form of enhanced life. It is obtained neither from an intellectual realization of its delights, nor from the most acute emotional longings. Though these must be present, they are not enough. It is arrived at by an arduous psychological and spiritual process – the so-called Mystic Way – entailing the complete remaking of character and the liberation of a new, or rather latent form of consciousness; which imposes on the self the condition which is sometimes inaccurately called "ecstasy," but is better named the Unitive State.¹⁷

As to the relationship to philosophy, Underhill is clear. "Mysticism, then, is not an opinion: it is not a philosophy. It has nothing in common with the pursuit of occult knowledge." Rather, "It is the name of that organic process which involves the perfect consummation of the Love of God: the achievement here and now of the immortal heritage of man. Or if you like it better – for this means exactly the same thing – it is the art of establishing his conscious relation with the Absolute."¹⁸

To support her assertions, Underhill divides her text into two distinct parts, "Part One, The Mystic Fact," and "Part Two, The Mystic Way." In Part One, Underhill clarifies the relationship of mysticism to vitalism, psychology, theology, symbolism and magic, as well as outlining the four characteristics noted above. In Part Two she describes the stages of the Mystic Way, the organic process by which individual mystics proceed in the love relationship with the Divine. These include the awakening of the self, purification, illumination, recollection and quiet, contemplation, ecstasy and rapture, the dark night of the soul and the unitive life.

Underhill's method is much more grounded in history. She had read history and botany in her student life at King's College London. One of the most helpful aspects of the book is a 29-page bibliography of primary writings by mystics, detailing texts, translations, biographies and monographs.¹⁹ Additionally in an Appendix she provides what she terms "a historical sketch of European mysticism from the beginning of the Christian era to death of Blake."²⁰

Part Two of Underhill's book examines each of the stages she ascribes to the Mystic Way. In an introductory section she clearly states her purpose in doing so, writing:

Our business, then, is to trace from its beginning a gradual and complete change in the equilibrium of the self. It is a change whereby that self turns from the unreal world of sense in which it is normally immersed, first to apprehend, then to unite itself with Absolute Reality: finally possessed by and wholly surrendered to the Transcendent Life, becomes a medium whereby the spiritual world is seen in a unique degree operating directly in the world of sense.....The completed mystical life, then, is more than intuitional; it is theopathic. In the old frank language of the mystics, it is the *deified life*.²¹

Although traditional treatments of mysticism have limited those stages generally to three – the illuminative, the purgative and the unitive – Underhill expands her stages to five. She recognizes that this is a deviation from the classical stages of mysticism. She writes, “This method of grouping means, of course, the abandonment of the time-honoured threefold division of the Mystic Way and the apparent neglect of St. Teresa’s equally celebrated Seven Degrees of Contemplation; but I think that we shall gain more than we lose by adopting it.”²² To the threefold division of illumination, purgation and union, she adds two more stages, the Awakening of the Self and the Dark Night of the Soul.

Underhill sees the Awakening of the Self as the initial conversion experience that marks the beginning of the Mystic Way. “This awakening,” she explains, “from the psychological point of view, appears to be an intense form of the phenomenon of ‘conversion’ and closely akin to those deep and permanent conversions of the adult type which some religious psychologists call ‘sanctification.’”²³

Although not initially cited, the Dark Night of the Soul is offered in recognition of St. John of the Cross’s masterful work of the same name. She explains the Dark Night as:

The most intense period of that great swing back into darkness, which usually divides the “first mystic life” or Illuminative Way, from the “second mystic life” or Unitive Way, is generally a period of utter blankness and stagnation, so far as mystical activity is concerned. The “Dark Night of the Soul,” once fully established, is seldom lit by visions or made homely by voices. It is of the essence of its miseries that the once-possession power of orison or contemplation now seems wholly lost. The self is tossed back from its hard won point of vantage. Impotence, blankness, solitude are the epithets by which those immersed in this dark fire of purification describe their pains.²⁴

The Dark Night serves as the gateway to the final state, the Unitive State, and so, in a sense, marks the final abandonment of selfhood, or ego, before full union with the Divine can be achieved. In the Unitive Life, “Here all teasing complications of our separated selfhood are transcended. Hence the eager striving, the sharp vision are not wanted anymore. In that

mysterious death of selfhood on the summits which is the medium of Eternal Life, heights meet the deeps: supreme achievement and complete humility are one.”²⁵

Thus we can see a significant difference in the methods by which these two towering figures’ approach the study of mysticism itself. James is more interested in specific religious experiences or first person accounts as a part of his larger phenomenology and in the service of his philosophy of religion. Underhill, after clarifying her positions, undertakes what could be considered a developmental study of the parallels and stages the mystic experiences in a process of growth. In all fairness, one must remember that James cannot detail the study of mysticism is his 123 page treatment which is, after all, only part of a larger scope. Underhill has the luxury of devoting her attention solely to mysticism, and of having 519 pages to do so. Both default to their earlier training – James in philosophy, psychology and medicine (in terms of his physiological foundations) and Underhill in her historical and botanical studies. Her studies in botany may have influenced her in presenting the development of the mystic as an “organic process” or a process of ongoing growth in the “art” of “establishing conscious relation with the absolute.”²⁶

At the end of James’s *Varieties*, James reflects “The whole drift of my education goes to persuade me that the world of our present consciousness is only one out of many worlds of consciousness that exist, and that those other worlds must contain experiences which have a meaning for our life also; and that although in the main their experiences and those of this world keep discrete, yet the two become continuous at certain points, and higher energies filter in.”²⁷ In words that provide a small glimpse into the work he will undertake in *A Pluralistic Universe* he notes the importance of over belief, finishing with a question. “Who knows whether the faithfulness of individuals here below to their own poor over-beliefs may not actually help God in turn to be more effectively faithful to his own greater tasks?”²⁸ So it would seem that, despite their many differences, both James and Underhill both end up with a focus on the unique relationship that the believer, or the mystic, has with their chosen God. Underhill closes her work with the following reflection on what we learn from mysticism about our capacity for relationship with the Divine.

According to the measure of their strength and their passion, these, the true lovers of the Absolute, have conformed here and now to the utmost test of divine

sonship, the final demands of life. They have not shrunk from the sufferings of the cross. They have faced the darkness of the tomb. Beauty and agony alike have called them: alike have awakened a heroic response. For them the winter is over: the time of the singing of birds is come. From the deeps of the dew garden, Life – new, unquenchable, and ever lovely –comes to meet them with the dawn.”²⁹

While recognizing the differences in these two landmark works, one should not fail to realize that their ultimate conclusions also bear strong similarities. For both James and Underhill, the human capacity for relationship to the Divine, whether understood by the head or swept forward by the heart, lies at the core of mysticism, and subsequently at the core of religion.

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NOTES

¹ James M. Edie, “William James’s Phenomenology of Religion,” *William James and Phenomenology*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 51.

² William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1902) 379.

³ James, *Varieties*, 380-381.

⁴ James, *Varieties*, 400.

⁵ James, *Varieties*, 405.

⁶ James, *Varieties*, 408.

⁷ James, *Varieties*, 419.

⁸ James, *Varieties*, 422-423.

⁹ James, *Varieties*, 428.

¹⁰ James, *Varieties*, 429.

¹¹ James, *Varieties*, 431.

¹² James, *Varieties*, 428.

¹³ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism*, New York, New American Library, 1974, 81.

¹⁴ Underhill, 81.

¹⁵ Underhill, 81.

¹⁶ Underhill, 81.

¹⁷ Underhill, 81.

¹⁸ Underhill, 81.

¹⁹ Underhill, 475-504.

²⁰ Underhill, 453.

²¹ Underhill, 174.

²² Underhill, 168.

²³ Underhill, 176.

²⁴ Underhill, 381.

²⁵ Underhill, 443.

²⁶ Underhill, 81.

²⁷ James, *Varieties*, 519

²⁸ James, *Varieties*, 519.

²⁹ Underhill, 450-451.

WILLIAM JAMES AND SWAMI VIVEKANANDA: RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND VEDANTA/YOGA IN AMERICA

NORRIS FREDERICK

ABSTRACT

William James was known to his colleagues as being remarkably open to new ideas and an amazing variety of people. One of those persons to whom he was drawn, Swami Vivekananda, had come from India to the World's Parliament of Religions in 1893 to educate the West about his religion. James met him twice and called him "the paragon of Vedantist missionaries." Like James, Vivekananda had studied Western philosophy, logic, and science; saw great strength in multiple approaches to religion; and had in some ways a pragmatic approach. However, James described Vivekananda's Vedantist philosophy as a monistic view of reality, while writing that his pragmatism "must obviously range upon the pluralistic side." While Vivekananda's clearly had mystical experiences, James wrote that "my own constitution shuts me out from their [mystical experiences] enjoyment almost entirely, and I can only speak of them only at second hand." For reasons of both philosophy and temperament James ultimately rejects key tenets of Vivekananda's philosophy.

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1893 two people who would prove extremely important to the discussion and practice of religion arrived at their destinations in the United States: Swami

Vivekananda via the Pacific Ocean, and William James via the Atlantic. James, a professor of philosophy and psychology at Harvard, was returning from a year's sabbatical in Europe. Vivekananda – born Narendranath Datta to a well-to-do family from Calcutta, India – came to Chicago to the World Parliament of Religions in order to spread to America the doctrine of Vedanta, the universal truth found in the Vedas of Hinduism.

James's fame was beginning to grow in America, thanks to the success of his 1890 publication of *The Principles of Psychology* (the “James”) and the 1892 publication of *Psychology: Briefer Course* (the “Jimmy.”) Although he had been publishing philosophical articles since at least 1878, he was known to the public primarily as a psychologist and had yet to write what would be recognized as his great works on religion and philosophy.

Vivekananda -- and Hinduism of any sort -- was virtually unknown in the United States. But from the moment that Vivekananda spoke on September 11, 1893, he received enthusiastic standing applause from his audience¹ and widespread newspaper coverage in the many cities in which he spoke and taught before he returned to India in late 1896. Many educated people, quite a number of them women, became his disciples. As Louise Bardach has written, Vivekananda was in effect “the first missionary from the East to the West.”²

James had the opportunity to meet him in 1894 and then again in 1896 when Vivekananda lectured at Harvard, first on the religions of India and then on comparative religions. In addition, some of James's colleagues at Harvard and his neighbors in Cambridge were powerfully attracted to Vivekananda. James found Vivekananda and his thought fascinating, and included long quotations from Vivekananda in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James's 1902 work which immediately gained a level of readership and admiration that continues until the present time. James called him “the paragon of Vedantist missionaries.”³ For his part, Vivekananda is reported to have said after his first meeting with James “A very nice man! A very nice man!”, and James called his new friend “an honor to humanity”⁴ and “master.”⁵

Vivekananda's followers have recounted these statements of James numerous times, and they do indeed capture James's interest in him. However, his followers do not discuss the context of these utterances, nor the differences that James had with Vivekananda's philosophy.

For reasons of both philosophy and temperament, James ultimately rejects key tenets of Vivekananda's philosophy.

JAMES'S ENTHUSIASM FOR VIVEKANANDA: EXPERIENCE, SCIENCE, AND PRAGMATISM

Vivekananda was only 29 at the time of his address in 1893. His biographer Swami Nikhilananda writes that Vivekananda had completed a university education in India, had studied Western philosophy, logic, and science, and saw the benefit of all these lines of thinking. However, unlike some of his university colleagues who wanted to leave religion behind, Vivekananda felt dissatisfied until he met the man who was to become his master, Ramakrishna. Ramakrishna was not formally educated, but he possessed a Vedantic wisdom and charisma which drew to him many disciples. Vivekananda took Ramakrishna's Vedantic truths to heart, felt he had been enlightened, and tried to live the reclusive life of a monk. But in the monastic life too Vivekananda felt something missing, and as he looked around his native India he saw an impoverished nation that needed a revival of the truths of its religion, not to continue the stultifying rigidity of the caste system but to give energy to its people. India also needed technology and science to lift it out of its poverty. Over time his mission became clear to him: to bring the truths of the Vedas to the Western world, where he would win converts, and to bring back to India Western knowledge and science.⁶

Thus he was the perfect person to speak to the World Parliament of Religions: impeccably and deeply educated, sympathetic to many Western ways, and a handsome and powerful orator who knew exactly how to simplify Vedantic thought for his audience while keeping its power and universal appeal.

In his opening address, Vivekananda set the tone for his speeches that would follow, establishing both the authority and universal appeal of his religion: "I thank you in the name of the most ancient order of monks in the world; I thank you in the name of the mother of religions; and I thank you in the name of millions and millions of Hindu people of all classes and sects.... I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true." He quoted a familiar Hindu thought: "As the different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their water in the sea, so, O Lord, the different paths which men take through

different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee.” Vivekananda did not identify the Vedas with the common meaning of the great later works of Hinduism: “By the Vedas,” he says, “no books are meant. They mean the accumulated treasury of spiritual laws discovered by different persons in different times.”⁷

His brief speech came to a powerful ending, “The present convention, which is one of the most august assemblies ever held, is in itself a vindication, a declaration to the world of the wonderful doctrine preached in the Gita: ‘Whosoever comes to Me, in whatsoever form, I reach him; all men are struggling through paths which in the end lead to me.’ I fervently hope that the bell that tolled this morning in honour of this convention may be the death-knell of all fanaticism, of all persecutions with the sword or with the pen, and of all uncharitable feelings between persons wending their way to the same goal.”⁸

The talk was brilliant. It was unifying, it talked about past hindrances of religious bigotry, and it acknowledged progress, which was after all the overarching theme of the Columbian exposition. In thanking his audience in the “name of the mother of religions,” he subtly declared the legitimacy of his view.

He received overwhelming applause and an enthusiastic audience for each of his subsequent speeches in the remaining two weeks of the Parliament. His popularity then gave him an opportunity to talk in a number of cities, including Iowa City, Des Moines, Memphis, Indianapolis, Minneapolis, Detroit, Buffalo, Hartford, Boston and Cambridge, New York, Baltimore, and Washington.⁹ His call for unity was both appealing to many in his audience and also gave him the intellectual base from which to be sharply critical of those Americans who sent missionaries to India to convert the “heathens” practicing their false religion:

You train and educate and clothe and pay men to do what? — to come over to my country and curse and abuse all my forefathers, my religion, my everything. They walk near a temple and say, ‘You idolaters, you will go to hell.’ But the Hindu is mild; he smiles and passes on, saying, ‘Let the fools talk.’ And then you who train men to abuse and criticize, if I just touch you with the least bit of criticism, but with the kindest purpose, you shrink and cry: ‘Do not touch us! We are

Americans; we criticize, curse, and abuse all the heathens of the world, but do not touch us, we are sensitive plants.¹⁰

No doubt such comments offended those who believed that the only path to salvation was through Christianity, but those people were not potential converts, anyway. And to people drawn to Vivekananda and his Vedantism, those statements would be seen as evidence of his honesty and courage.

While still in American in 1895, Vivekananda wrote his *Raja-Yoga*, which focused on union with God by way of the methods of meditation. Swami Nikhilananda (later to be the teacher of Joseph Campbell) wrote that *Raja-Yoga* “attracted the attention of the Harvard philosopher William James.”¹¹ The book translated the aphorisms of the 2nd century BCE Patanjali, to which Vivekananda added his explanations and introductory chapters. Nikhilananda writes that Vivekananda held “that religious experiences could stand on the same footing as scientific truths, being based on experimentation, observation, and verification. Therefore genuine spiritual experiences must not be dogmatically discarded as lacking rational evidence.”¹²

There was so much in Vivekananda to appeal to James. Like Vivekananda, James had a mission that involved religion. While Vivekananda’s mission is explicit toward gaining converts and spreading the truth of his Vedantism, James’s mission is more implicit but can be seen in his famous 1896 essay, “The Will to Believe,” which is an examination and justification of religious belief, an attempt to show that at least certain types of religious belief are rational.

In addition, Vivekananda stated that religious experiences should be judged pragmatically. His argument that Vivekananda’s argument that religious experiences, like scientific truths, are based on “experimentation, observation, and verification,” must have appealed greatly to James. Vivekananda’s description in *Raja-Yoga* of a method of meditation whose practice should be judged by how well it works is consistent with James’s claim in *The Varieties* that religion is to be judged not by its roots (its origins), but by its fruits (its consequences).

Finally, Vivekananda’s statements seem to fit well with James’s insistence both that religion is primarily based on first-hand experience, rather than on the teaching of religious institutions, and also that an analysis of those experiences shows that the truths of religion must be pluralistic. James’s temperament and philosophy was not to reject any idea without

investigation; much of *The Varieties* is a brilliant account of first hand experiences (culminating in the chapters on mysticism), which James steadfastly refuses to judge until the last chapters of the book.

Vivekananda closes his preface to *Raja-Yoga* with principles for those who practice meditation. Each of us can find the divine within us, and thus we can control our nature and at least some events. The closing two principles speak loudly to what will be James's themes in the *Varieties*: "[1] Do this either by work, or worship, or psychic control, or philosophy — by one, or more, or all of these — and be free. [2] This is the whole of religion. Doctrines, or dogmas, or rituals, or books, or temples, or forms, are but secondary details."¹³ The first principle is Vivekananda's version of a truth that is found in the Bhagavad-Gita: any of the four disciplines (*yogas*) can lead one from delusion to enlightenment, and different people are temperamentally suited for different paths. The paths that individuals follow -- work (*karma yoga*), worship (*bhakti yoga*), psychic control or meditation (*raja yoga*), or knowledge (*jnana yoga*) – are the ones that work best for their natures, and the paths are equally good for the goal of becoming enlightened.¹⁴ This surely must have resonated with James's chronicles in the *Varieties* of the many forms of religious experience. Even the content (if not the tone) of Vivekananda's outbursts about America's religious ethnocentrism would have appealed to James, later to be a founder of the Anti-Imperialist League.

The second principle, that "Doctrines, or dogmas, or rituals, or books, or temples, or forms, are but secondary details" could as well be a quote from James in the *Varieties* as from Vivekananda.

James knew something of Hinduism at least by the 1870's. As Robert Richardson has written, religion first became real for James with the religious experience and struggle of his dying dear friend Minnie Temple, and as James struggled to understand and deal with her death in 1870, he wrote in his journal a line from the Upanishads, *tat tvam asi*, "that thou art," expressing the idea that individual and Being are the same¹⁵ As the year went on, James read more of Buddhism and Hinduism.¹⁶ So James certainly knew of Hinduism before he met Vivekananda, but Vivekananda's presence and words beginning from their first meeting in 1894 may have influenced James's thoughts as he prepared for the 1901-1902 Gifford Lectures which were published as the *Varieties*.

James was so impressed by Vivekananda that he even agreed to write the introduction for the publication of *Raja-Yoga*. But an impatient Vivekananda, who by 1896 was in London, wrote to Mrs. Sara Chapman Thorp Bull (a Cambridge neighbor of James), “What are we to do? Is the book going to be published or not? Prof. [William] James’s introduction is of no use in England. So why wait so long for that; and what use are those long explanations about him?”¹⁷

James never did write that introduction. That seems odd for a man who was unbelievably prolific, whose correspondence alone comes to twelve volumes. Perhaps he did not write the introduction because despite the ways in which he agreed with Vivekananda’s approach and some of his ideas about religion, James had strong philosophical and temperamental differences with Vivekananda.

PHILOSOPHICAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN JAMES AND VIVEKANANDA

Not only Nikhilananda’s biography, but many current websites have Nikhilananda’s quotation that “William James of Harvard ... referred to him [Vivekananda] in *Varieties of Religious Experience* as the ‘paragon of Vedantists.’”¹⁸ But Nikhilananda is in error: that quotation is not from *The Varieties*, but in the later book *Pragmatism* (1907), where the full quotation is “The paragon of all monistic systems is the Vedanta philosophy of Hindostan, and the paragon of Vedantist missionaries was the late Swami Vivekananda who visited our shores some years ago.”¹⁹ When viewed in context, James uses Vedanta and Vivekananda as “the very best example” (the meaning of “paragon”) of a philosophical conception which James strongly opposes. Vivekananda’s views ultimately don’t fly with James, for several reasons, including James’s pragmatism and pluralism.

James’s pragmatism is a philosophy which maintains that ideas are to be judged by their consequences. James writes that, “Grant an idea or belief to be true,” it says, “what concrete difference will its being true make in anyone’s actual life?”²⁰ Ideas are tools. True ideas are states of mind that provide “a leading [back to experience] that is worth while.”²¹ Ideas are inspired by experiences, and true ideas are those that guide us back into the “Particulars of experience again and make advantageous connexion with them.”²²

There are a multitude of ways in which ideas can connect beneficially with experiences. Thus for James conceptions of the universe are radically pluralistic, a view that can be seen in the entire historical span of his published writings: “A single explanation of a fact only explains

it from a single point of view” (1878, “The Sentiment of Rationality”)²³; “There is no possible point of view from which the world can appear as an absolutely single fact”(1896, *The Will To Believe*)²⁴; and “For the philosophy which is so important in each of us is not a technical matter....it is our individual way of just seeing and feeling the total push and pressure of the cosmos” (1907, *Pragmatism*)²⁵.

Noting that “The history of philosophy is to a great extent that of a certain clash of human temperaments,”²⁶ James discusses at the beginning of *Pragmatism* two types of temperament, the tender-minded and the tough-minded. Among the traits of the tender-minded are Rationalist, Idealistic, Optimistic, Religious and Monistic, while the corresponding traits of the tough-minded are Empiricist, Materialistic, Pessimistic, Irreligious and Pluralistic.²⁷ James conceived of his philosophy of pragmatism as a mediating philosophy between the two temperaments of tender-minded and tough-minded; pragmatism incorporates some of the traits of either side, sometimes by giving what James takes to be a middle way between the two opposing traits. In terms of monism versus pluralism, James writes that his pragmatism “must obviously range upon the pluralistic side.”²⁸

James argues that Vivekananda’s views are clearly monistic. James writes, “Mystical states of mind in every degree are shown by history, usually tho not always, to make for the monistic view....The method of Vedantism is the mystical method. You do not reason, but after going through a certain discipline *you see*, and having seen, you can report the truth.”²⁹ James goes on to quote at length from a lecture in which Vivekananda describes the truth seen by the person who has achieved *samadhi*, enlightenment:

Where is any more misery for him who sees this Oneness in the Universe...this Oneness of life, Oneness of everything? ...This separation between man and man, man and woman, man and child, nation from nation...is the cause really of all the misery, and the Vedanta says this separation does not exist, it is not real. It is merely apparent, on the surface. In the heart of things there is Unity still.Where is any more delusion for him? What can delude him? He knows the reality of everything, the secret of everything. Where is there any more misery for him? What does he desire? He has traced the reality of everything unto the Lord,

that centre, that Unity of everything, and that is Eternal Bliss, Eternal Knowledge, Eternal Existence. Neither death nor disease, nor sorrow nor misery, nor discontent is there ... in the centre, the reality, there is no one to be mourned for, no one to be sorry for.³⁰

Vivekananda's account of the One opposes James's pluralism, in which no point of view has absolute priority over other points of view: "A single explanation of a fact [or the totality of facts] only explains it from a single point of view." In his opening remarks at the Parliament, Vivekananda appeared to be a pluralist in saying "all religions are true." But he says this from his perspective that the Vedantic monism expressed in the quotation above is *the* true understanding of all religions. However, it follows that those who have a different understanding of their religion must have a false view of religion. For example, if I am a Christian who thinks that God's sacredness lies in God being totally other than humans, then according to Vivekananda, my belief is false. James, on the other hand, in keeping with his pluralism believes that many different views of religion may be true in the pragmatic sense that they make advantageous connections with experience for different people. Vivekananda's understanding of truth seems to be both rationalistic and ultimately mystical, while James's understanding of truth is empiricist and pragmatic.

James also rejects Vivekananda's monism on pragmatic grounds. He notes that the monist must resort to a timeless reality:

The mutable in experience must be founded on immutability....The negatives that haunt our ideals here below must be themselves negated in the absolutely Real. This alone makes the universe solid.... *This is Vivekananda's mystical One of which I read to you. This is Reality with the big R, reality that makes the timeless claim, reality to which defeat can't happen. This is what the men of principles, and in general all the men whom I called tender-minded in my first lecture, think themselves obliged to postulate.*³¹ [emphasis mine]

James points out that in this timeless reality, all evil disappears, again quoting Vivekananda:

When man has seen himself as one with the infinite Being of the universe, when all separateness has ceased, when all men, all women, all angels, all gods, all animals, all plants, the whole universe has been melted into that oneness, then all fear disappears. Whom to fear? Can I hurt myself? Can I kill myself? Can I injure myself? Do you fear yourself? Then will all sorrow disappear.³²

James comments on this monistic view, "...surely we have here a religion which, emotionally considered, has a high pragmatic value; it imparts a perfect sumptuousness of security."³³ James's word choice indicates that this sense of security is indeed sumptuous (lavish), far beyond what the experiences of evil and tragedy allow. For James, ideas are guides to experience, and nothing that is directly experienced must be excluded in formulating adequate ideas. However, the monism of Vivekananda *does exclude* experiences that are both central to humans and also have the consequences of leading us to want to make the world better. The feeling of struggle, that there is a real fight in which one is engaged in this world of good and evil, of better and worse, and the experience of tragedy are not explained by Vivekananda's philosophy that holds, "Neither death nor disease, nor sorrow nor misery, nor discontent is there ... in the centre, the reality, there is no one to be mourned for, no one to be sorry for." James writes, "The peace and rest, the security desiderated at such moments is security against the bewildering accidents of so much finite experience. Nirvana means safety from this everlasting round of adventures of which the world of sense consists. The hindoo and the buddhist, for this is essentially their attitude, are simply afraid, afraid of more experience, afraid of life."³⁴

While the tender-minded monist offers an unwarranted optimism, and the tough-minded pluralist offers an unsustaining pessimism, James's pragmatism offers what he calls "meliorism," the view that the world *may* ("may," not "will") become better, and that it becomes so through our will and efforts.

The problem with Vivekananda's monistic Vedanta, writes James, is that "it is indeed not a scientific use, for we can make no particular deductions from it. It is emotional and spiritual altogether."³⁵ James means, I think, monism only gives the *feeling* of security, but calls for no sort of *action* at all.

TEMPERAMENTAL DIFFERENCES FROM VIVEKANANDA

Since James opened *Pragmatism* with an account of temperament, it surely would not be out of place to include thinking about his own temperament as a complementary explanation of his differences with Vivekananda.

First, James – as fascinated as he was with religious experience and as important as he saw religion to be – remained somewhat outside of those experiences. While Vivekananda's life clearly included the reality of mystical experiences (including meditative trances so deep that he supposedly in advance told his disciples words that would bring him out of the trance), James himself claimed that “my own constitution shuts me out from their [mystical experiences] enjoyment almost entirely, and I can speak of them only at second hand.”³⁶

A letter from James to a correspondent librarian Henry Rankin captures well how James saw his role, “I envy you the completeness of your Christian faith, and the concreteness of association between your abstract theism and the Christian symbols. Historic Christianity, with its ecclesiasticism and whatnot, stands between me and the imperishable strength and freshness of the original books. For you they fuse (more or less) into a harmonious whole. I shall work out my destiny; and possibly as a mediator between scientific agnosticism and the religious view of the world (Christian or not) I may be more useful than if I were myself a positive Christian.”³⁷

James's temperament was decidedly pluralistic, and led him away from any one view of reality, any one intellectual or religious resting place. The world James apprehended from the beginning of his inquiring life included both the reality of the physical world and also the real effects of ideas on our lives. As an artist, James tried to draw and paint that world. His account of his depression in his late 20s and his escape from that depression is that it came from reading about an idea, an idea which had the effect of lifting him from that depression and guiding him to a better relation with experience. As a medical student and physiologist and psychologist, he investigated the connections between the physical world and ideas. The first sentence of his *Principles of Psychology* is that “Psychology is the science of mental life, both of its phenomena and their conditions.”³⁸ Both the immediate phenomena of experience and the conditions that lead up to and are connected with them are real. No single fact can ever be a complete explanation, nor can any viewpoint explain all. James is a pluralist to the bone. That pluralist temperament may have been a factor in keeping him from mystical experiences.

Second, as open-minded and experimental as James was, he was also temperamentally resistant to “mind-cure.” Throughout his life, James suffered from depression, nervous conditions, and a host of physical ailments. He was open to a wide variety of treatments, including mind-cure, electrotherapy, lymph-compound injections, and chloral hydrate.³⁹ Despite having tried these treatments, James described himself as someone who was not a suitable subject for things like meditative enlightenment. In a 1900 letter from Paris, where he was at the home of the Leggetts (New Yorkers who had become disciples of Vivekananda), where James may have seen Vivekananda again, James mentions twice that he is not “suggestible enough to be a good subject for any wonder-cure whatever.”

A year later, James writes from Edinburgh, where he is giving the Gifford lectures, that he happened to meet on the train his Cambridge neighbor, Sara Chapman Thorp Bull, who was accompanied by Margaret Elizabeth Nobel, an English woman who had become a follower of Vivekananda. (She later took the name of Sister Nivedita, and she has a prominent position in Nikhilananda’s biography of Vivekananda.⁴⁰) Describing her as “an extraordinarily fine character and mind,” James states that she has been

converted by Vivekananda to his philosophy and lives now for the hindu people. *These free individuals who live there [sic] own life, no matter what domestic prejudices have to be snapped, are on the whole a refreshing sight to me, who can do nothing of the kind myself.* And Miss Noble is a most deliberate and balanced person – no frothy enthusiast in point of character, though I believe her philosophy to be more or less false. Perhaps no more than any one else’s!⁴¹
[emphasis mine]

A large part of James would love to be free like Miss Noble, not only to be able to escape “domestic prejudices,” but I think also to be able to have a conversion experience that would bring him to a resting place as she has done. She has been converted and yet still is “deliberate and balanced,” as James would like to be had he had such an experience.

In 1905 letters to a correspondent who reported a great improvement in his health by practicing Hatha Yoga,⁴² James writes

Your Yoga discipline and its effects are interesting, I have read Vivekananda's...book⁴³ and looked through the Hatha Yoga.⁴⁴ But my temperament seems rebellious to all these disciplines, and I fear I shall have to die unsaved. At least I could only be saved by a very laborious process, and under a Guru with first-rate paedagogic powers⁴⁵ I knew Vivekananda, when he was here, have read both his book and the one on Hatha Yoga, and did then try (some 6 or 7 years ago) to practice some of the breathing exercises. But I am a bad subject for such things, critical and indocile, so it soon stopped.⁴⁶

It is most interesting that James mentions both that his temperament is "rebellious," "critical," and "indocile," and that he could be "saved" only by a Guru who was an excellent teacher. Surely James would have remembered what Vivekananda wrote in his preface to *Raja-Yoga*: "With few exceptions, Raja-Yoga can be safely learnt only by direct contact with a teacher."⁴⁷

CONCLUSION

For reasons of pluralism and pragmatism, as well as temperament, James ultimately rejects Vivekananda's philosophy. Although his *Raja-Yoga* had the initial appeal of saying that there are many paths to enlightenment, Vivekananda ultimately takes his own over-beliefs to be the only true expression of reality, and James as a pluralist and pragmatist cannot go there with him.

James could have examined other forms of Hinduism which argue not for monism but for distinct realities for God, individual souls, and the physical world.⁴⁸ Whether a close examination of dualistic Hinduism would escape James's criticism remains to be seen. However, in a sense those other interpretations are beside the point for James, who in *Pragmatism* is looking for a genuine religious and philosophical view that can clearly be identified with the tender-minded type which is rationalistic, monistic, and optimistic: Vivekananda's philosophy and statements perfectly fit the bill. If what Vivekananda says is true, James argues, the experiences of sorrow, regret, evil and tragedy make no sense; we should be tough-minded enough to not accept a philosophy that denies the reality of such experiences.

In *Pragmatism*'s last chapter, "Pragmatism and Religion," James writes "On pragmatistic principles, if the hypothesis of God works satisfactorily in the widest sense of the word, it is true. Now whatever its residual difficulties may be, experience shows that it definitely does work, and that the problem is to build it out and determine it, so that it will combine satisfactorily with all the other working truths."⁴⁹ James makes it clear that he does not believe "that our human experience is the highest form of experience extant in the universe."⁵⁰ Thus he rejects the extreme tough-minded view (which is irreligious) just as he rejected the extreme tender-minded view (which is religious, but monistic). Pragmatism seeks to account for all human experiences (including religious experiences) and is pluralistic and melioristic.

Ultimately, having argued strongly against the tender-minded view exemplified by Vivekananda, James returns to his pluralism and his consideration of temperament. In the end, he tells his audience, the form of religion "is a question that only you yourself can decide."⁵¹

"Pragmatism has to postpone dogmatic answer, for we do not yet know certainly which type of religion is going to work best in the long run."⁵² The totally tough-minded person may need no religion at all; the radically tender-minded may choose a monistic religion; the person who is mixed in temperament may find "the pragmatic or melioristic type of theism"⁵³ what they need.

This conclusion may be very unsatisfactory for someone who wants *the* answer. However, James's answer is consistent with his pluralism. Having examined religious experience and truths, analyzed the way those truths fit with other working truths⁵⁴, and argued vigorously for his views, James then backs off enough to leave room for other views and other arguments, as we search to see what view of religion will work best in the long run.

We're now over a century past James's writing of *Pragmatism*, and it may not be any clearer at all which religious view is going to work best in the long run. Two trends are of interest to our current topic. First, a growing number of Americans practice more than one religion: an increasing number of people are religious pluralists. Using polling from 2009, The Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life reports that about a quarter of Americans hold Eastern or New Age beliefs, and a quarter "believe in yoga not just as exercise but as a spiritual practice."⁵⁵ Roughly a fifth of Christians also believe in yoga as a spiritual practice. The pluralism in this trend would appeal to James, while the growing practice of yoga

as a spiritual practice would appeal to Vivekananda (although he saw the physical exercise of yoga as a rather unimportant preliminary to its spiritual practice). At the same time, however, fundamentalist religion – with a loathing of pluralism -- is strong among many in the U.S. and world.

The second trend is that a growing number of Americans say they have had a religious or mystical experience. Half of Americans reported having had a religious or mystical experience, more than double the amount who reported this in 1962.⁵⁶ This trend supports the position of both James and Vivekananda on the centrality of first-hand experience for religion.

James would be most interested in both these trends, and would want to inquire into the *fruitfulness* of the beliefs and practices in the lives of their practitioners, in order to seek the forms of religion which are going to work best in the long run.

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NOTES

¹ Swami Nikhilananda, *Vivekananda: A Biography*, 133.

² Ann Louise Bardach, "How Yoga Won the West," New York Times.

³ Nikhilananda, 212. I first learned of this quotation and the connection between Vivekananda and James from Philip Goldberg's *American Veda*, 79.

⁴ Bardach.

⁵ Nikhilananda, 212.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 113 – 114.

⁷ Swami Vivekananda, "Response to Welcome at the World's Parliament of Religions, Chicago," *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol.I,
http://www.ramakrishnavivekananda.info/vivekananda/volume_1/vol_1_frame.htm.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Nikhilananda, 140.

¹⁰ Vivekananda, quoted in Nikhilananda, 141.

¹¹ Nikhilananda, 171.

¹² *Ibid.*, 171 - 172

¹³ Swami Vivekananda, "Preface," *Raja-Yoga*.

¹⁴ Huston Smith, *The World's Religions*, 28.

¹⁵ Robert Richardson, *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism*, 113.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 126.

¹⁷ Swami Vivekananda to Sara Chapman Thorp Bull, May 8, 1896, in *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Appendices,
http://www.ramakrishnavivekananda.info/vivekananda/appendices/appendices_frame.htm.

¹⁸ Nikhilananda, 212.

¹⁹ William James, *Pragmatism*, 74.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 97.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 98.

²² *Ibid.*, 99.

²³ James, "The Sentiment of Rationality," in *Essays in Philosophy*, 52.

²⁴ James, *The Will to Believe*, 6.

²⁵ James, *Pragmatism*, 9.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 74.

³⁰ Vivekananda, quoted in James, *Pragmatism*, 74 -75. The editorial notes in *Pragmatism, The Works of William James*, 167, attribute the quote to “God in Everything,” in *Speeches and Writings of Swami Vivekananda*, 3rd edition, (Madras: G. A. Natesan, n.d., 336 – 337) and also state that “A somewhat different version of the same lecture can be found in Vivekananda’s *Jnana Yoga*, (New York: The Vedanta Society, 1902), 154-155.

³¹ James, *Pragmatism*, 126.

³² Vivekananda, quoted in James, *Pragmatism*, 75. The editorial notes in *Pragmatism, The Works of William James*, 167, attribute the quotation to Vivekananda, *On “The Atman”* (n.p., circa 1896), p.13.

³³ James, *Pragmatism*, 75.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 140.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 131.

³⁶ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 301.

³⁷ William James to Henry William Rankin, June 21, 1896, in *The Correspondence of William James*, Vol. 8, 155.

³⁸ James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 15.

³⁹ Richardson, 420.

⁴⁰ Nikhilananda, 198: “But the Swami's greatest acquisition in London was Miss Margaret E. Noble, who later became his disciple, consecrating her life to women's education in India. She also espoused the cause of India's political freedom and inspired many of its leaders with her written and spoken words.”

⁴¹ William James to Frances Rollins Morse, May 15, 1901, in *The Correspondence of William James*, Vol. 9, 483.

⁴² James quotes the account of the correspondent Wincenty Lutoslawski in the “The Energies of Men,” *Essays in Religion and Morality*, 137-39.

⁴³ Vivekanda’s book referenced here is *Yoga Philosophy*, 1896, according to editors Ignas K. Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, *The Correspondence of William James*, Vol. 11, 105.

⁴⁴ The book referenced here may be Yogi Ramacharaka, *Hatha Yoga: or, The Yogi Philosophy of Physical Well-Being* (Chicago, 1904), according to editors Ignas K. Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, *The Correspondence of William James*, Vol. 11, 106.

⁴⁵ William James to Wincenty Lutoslawski, Oct. 25, 1905, in *The Correspondence of William James*, Vol. 11, 105.

⁴⁶ William James to Wincenty Lutoslawski, Nov. 24, 1905, in *The Correspondence of William James*, Vol. 11, 114.

⁴⁷ Vivekananda, *Raja-Yoga*, 5.

⁴⁸ Smith, p. 69.

⁴⁹ James, *Pragmatism*, 143.

⁵⁰ James, *Pragmatism*, 143.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, 144.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁵⁵ Pew Research Center, “Many Americans Mix Multiple Faiths,” The Pew Research Center Forum on Religion & Public Life, December 9, 2009, <http://www.pewforum.org/Other-Beliefs-and-Practices/Many-Americans-Mix-Multiple-Faiths.aspx>.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

JONATHAN EDWARDS & WILLIAM JAMES ON RELIGION

RICHARD HALL

ABSTRACT

Jonathan Edwards and William James were preoccupied with religion, and both responded in print, and profoundly, to religious crises in their own cultures: Edwards wrote his Treatise on Religious Affections in response to the hysteria and factionalism spawned by the Great Awakening, and James his Varieties of Religious Experience in reaction to the crisis in faith afflicting his generation. Edwards in Religious Affections provides a model of emotional religion that is neither anti-intellectual nor fanatical, whereas James in Varieties reveals that religion is intellectually respectable and occupies a rightful place in the economy of life. Though disagreeing as to the letter of religion, both agree as to its spirit. Both understand religion to be essentially experiential and emotional, though not excluding the intellect. They alike assign an important role to reason in the religious life. And, significantly, they concur that religion is ultimately validated by the behavior of its adherents.

After this my sense of divine things gradually increased, and became more and more lively, and had more of that inward sweetness. The appearance of everything was altered: there seemed to be, as it were, a calm, sweet cast, or appearance of divine glory, in almost everything. God's excellency, his wisdom, his purity and love, seemed to appear in everything; in the sun, moon and stars; in the clouds, and blue sky, in the grass, flowers, trees; in the water, and all nature; which used greatly to fix my mind.

Jonathan Edwards, *Personal Narrative*

William James Studies
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Bringing Jonathan Edwards and William James into conversation is appropriate and fruitful. Their fellow-countryman and philosophical peer, Josiah Royce, regarded them together as representative American philosophers, which he explains as follows:

The philosopher who can fitly represent the contribution of his nation to the world's treasury of philosophical ideas must first be one who thinks for himself, fruitfully, with true independence, and with successful inventiveness, about problems of philosophy. And, secondly, he must be a man who gives utterance to philosophical ideas which are characteristic of some stage and of some aspect of the spiritual life of his own people.

Such, thought Royce, are Edwards and James. Other than their being representative they are similar with respect to their education from experience. According to Royce, Edwards “actually rediscovered some of the world's profoundest ideas regarding God and humanity simply by reading for himself the meaning of his own religious experience”; and James “rediscovered whatever he has received from without; because he never could teach what he had not himself experienced.”¹ And the experience of particular interest to them and that they sought to interpret is religious experience which they identified as the essence of religion. Their remarkably similar interpretations and evaluations of religious experience are the focus of this paper.

“There is no question whatsoever, that is of greater importance to mankind,” declared Jonathan Edwards, than, “What is the nature of true religion?” He continued, “it is a subject on which my mind has been peculiarly intent, ever since I first entered on the study of divinity.”² More than a century later, William James wrote his sister Alice, “Religion is the great interest of my life.”³ Their preoccupation with religion was due in part to temperament and background.

The youthful Edwards was prone to mystical raptures and given much to soul searching, agonizing over whether he was among God's elect. He was engaged in “testing the spirits” native to his Puritan heritage. Like Edwards James was steeped in religion, as might be expected of one raised in the household of his father, Henry James,

Sr., a deep and radical religious thinker of a Swedenborgian caste who published widely on religious and theological topics. James was much exercised by theodicy, finding it impossible to reconcile the evil in the world with the existence of the sovereign God of Calvinism, his ancestral religion, from the trammels of which both he and his father sought to escape—James would abandon the Calvinist God for a finite deity.

Their books about religion, moreover, reflect crises in their respective cultures. In Edwards' case the crisis was precipitated by the Great Awakening. A bitter fruit of this great religious revival was outbreaks of virulent "enthusiasm" (fanaticism) which manifested itself in bizarre and even dangerous behavior. Philosopher and churchman alike joined in inveighing against the pathology of enthusiasm, which Locke explained as "rising from the conceits of a warmed or overweening brain."⁴ Edwards' own uncle, Joseph Hawley, for instance, slit his own throat in a fit of religiously induced melancholia during the time of revival. Even Edwards, because of his leadership in the revival, did not escape the charge of enthusiasm, which he vigorously denied. He was branded an enthusiast from the press by Charles Chauncy, a Boston minister, a charge he vigorously denied, contending that he was as much opposed to enthusiasm as Chauncy. Out of this controversy Edwards penned *Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, his apologia for "experimental" or "heart" religion, that is, one that is experiential and emotional without being "enthusiastic." He steadfastly insisted that the affections (emotions) are the core of true religion because, among other reasons, they motivate our actions; without them, religion would be a dull, lifeless, and ineffectual contradiction of itself.

In James' case the religious crisis was wider and deeper. God seemed to have been eclipsed. Darwin's *Origin of Species* had struck a decisive blow against the teleological argument for God's existence by showing that the apparent design in nature could just as well be explained by the blind and aleatory forces of natural selection as by the intelligent design of God. Such cultural prophets as Comte, Nietzsche, and Freud had variously pronounced the death of God and confidently predicted that as science waxed religion would wane. Matthew Arnold believed that poetry would fill the spiritual vacuum left by religion. In opposition to the cultured despisers of religion, James sought to find a respectable place once again for it within an increasingly secularized and scientific worldview. James showed that it was possible for one to be both scientifically

enlightened and authentically religious without suffering cognitive dissonance. Indeed, he assimilated religion to science: like scientific beliefs, religious beliefs ought to be treated as inductive hypotheses the truth of which could be validated by their beneficial effects when applied. He took to task men like Freud who sought to reduce religion to pathology—"medical materialists" he called them—and he argued that to evaluate religion on the basis of its presumed roots in the mind's nonrational or irrational processes was to commit the genetic fallacy—religious experience is to be judged not by its roots but by its fruits. The result was his compendious *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study of Human Nature*, which joined Edwards' *Religious Affections* as a profound study in both the psychology and philosophy of religion. Significantly, James quotes Edwards in his *Varieties*.

Both Edwards and James, then, were great mediators engaged in the larger and perennial task of reconciling faith with reason. Edwards demonstrated that heart religion does not necessarily mean irrational enthusiasm, and James that religion and science do not have to be in conflict but are complementary. Moreover, their common interest in religion is matched by their common conception of it, the subject of the remainder of this paper.

Edwards and James have remarkably similar ideas about religion, though this is not to discount their large and undeniable differences. For instance, James rejects Edwards' monarchical God and his unflinching determinism. But their differences are more theological than not; Edwards had a theology, James none. At the deeper levels of philosophy and psychology, though, they are kindred spirits. Thus they agree (1) that personal religion has primacy over and is the source of its institutional forms; (2) that religion is essentially experiential in nature, and the particular kind of experience defining and determining it represents a fusion of thought and feeling; (3) that religious experience is not wholly subjective—it is objective, being an experience *of* something exterior to ourselves; (4) that reason plays two indispensable roles in the economy of the religious life—making possible a knowledge inaccessible outside of religious experience, and providing a critique of religion; and (5) that the ultimate test of the truth of religion lies in the actual behavior or good works of its votaries. I shall now amplify each of these points.

“True religion, in great part, consists in holy affections [emotions],” affirms Edwards in *Religious Affections*. A truly religious person necessarily undergoes the gamut of emotions of a peculiar kind such as “fear, hope, love, hatred, desire, joy, sorrow, gratitude, compassion and zeal”—the chief and root of them being love.

Edwards locates true religion mainly in the affections because, among other reasons, they furnish the “the spring of men’s actions”; without their motivation, religion would be a dull, lifeless, and ineffectual contradiction of itself—true religion “does not consist in weak, dull and lifeless wouldings [i.e. weak inclinations].”⁵

However, the phrase “in great part” implies that true religion consists in some as yet unspecified part, which is the understanding: “Holy affections are not heat without light; but evermore arise from some information of the understanding, some spiritual instruction that the mind receives, some light or actual knowledge.”⁶ The light of understanding is as intrinsic to true religion as the heat of emotion. Genuine religion is cognitive as well as affective. To see how, we need first to explain what Edwards means by “reason” and “understanding.” In discussing them, he makes a pair of crucial distinctions informing his epistemology.

First, Edwards tacitly distinguishes between two senses of “reason.” In its loose sense it is, in his words, “the faculty of mental perception in general,”⁷ a synonym for “understanding.” This he defines as the soul’s capacity for perception by which “it discerns and views and judges of things,”⁸ typically exercised in our grasping immediately the meaning of a proposition or apprehending a state of affairs. “Reason” in its strict or discursive sense is, as he puts it, “ratiocination, or a power of inferring by arguments.”⁹ I shall hereafter refer to them as the perceptive and ratiocinative senses of “reason” respectively.

Second, Edwards makes a distinction between “notional” understanding and the “sense of the heart,” and a distinction between both of these and “spiritual” understanding. Notional understanding is “wherein the mind only beholds things in the exercise of a speculative faculty.” It is our capacity for awareness and judgment. The object of notional understanding, what is thereby understood, is what he calls “speculative” or “notional” knowledge which, for example, makes up the body of science. By contrast, the sense of the heart is “wherein the mind don’t only speculate and

behold, but relishes and feels”;¹⁰ it is to be emotionally affected by what we understand or know. Edwards’ sense of the heart is not merely the capacity to realize something, but to feel an emotional pang or twinge, like delight or disgust, at the very moment of its realization. What essentially distinguishes this sense of the heart from the purely notional understanding is that, as an affective cognition, it engages equally the understanding and the will, of which the affections are an expression. The object of the sense of the heart, what it uniquely grasps, is what Edwards identifies as “sensible” knowledge. Edwards aptly compares these two ways of knowing, viz. notional and by the sense of the heart, to the ways honey might be known. One may know the chemical composition of honey or the manner of its production, and know *of* its sweetness, but never have tasted it. She has merely speculative knowledge of it. But another has actually tasted honey and knows *that* it is sweet—she has acquaintance with its sweetness *and* has savored it. It is she, according to Edwards, who sensibly knows the most important thing about honey. Speculative (notional) knowledge, then, is abstract and theoretical, whereas sensible knowledge involves not only an intuition but also an affective or emotional response triggered by the thing sensibly known. Edwards’ distinction between speculative and sensible knowledge is recognizable as that between knowledge by description and knowledge by acquaintance.

Spiritual understanding, on the other hand, is a distinctive form of the sense of the heart, “a new spiritual sense,” analogous to the five natural senses—a “sixth sense,” as it were, “a principle of new kind of perception or spiritual sensation, which is in its whole nature different from any former kinds of sensation of the mind, as tasting is diverse from any of the other senses.” This sixth sense has as its object a new simple idea of God’s beauty or holiness. What is uniquely known through this spiritual sense is nothing that can be simulated by the natural understanding: it is not propositional knowledge or anything expressible in language; neither is it an image conjured by the imagination; nor is it any esoteric meaning that might be divined in a passage of scripture. Rather, it is a tacit knowledge of the reality of God’s surpassing excellence or holiness as it really is: “the beauty of holiness is that thing . . . , which is perceived by this spiritual sense, that is so diverse from all that natural men perceive.”¹¹ What makes this spiritual understanding wholly new and so radically distinct from natural understanding is that it results from a

supernatural infusion of saving grace in the soul, thereby making it a capacity denied the natural or unregenerate man. For spiritual understanding, in Edwards' view, is vouchsafed to us only upon the foot of an act of saving grace. In one place he explains spiritual understanding in terms of the influx of "a spiritual and divine light, immediately imparted to the soul by God, of a different nature from any that is obtained by natural means."¹²

These different ways of knowing, viz. speculatively, sensibly, and spiritually, together with their correspondent objects of knowledge, may be illustrated in the knowledge of God. One may know *that* God is holy and fully understand its meaning (Satan knows as much), but he has nothing more than speculative knowledge. But the saint or the regenerate, actually "tastes" of God's transcendent excellence or holiness, and savors it, thereby having a poignant and sensible knowledge of it. Edwards deems this sensible knowledge of God superior to the merely speculative kind because it is of God's beauty or holiness, by far his most important attribute, and insofar as it is affective knowledge, it has the power to affect us emotionally and so motivate us to action.

Reason has a dual role in Edwards' philosophy of religion, corresponding to its two types he distinguishes: (1) Perceptive reason, *qua* understanding, makes possible that unique experience marked off as peculiarly religious. The truths of divinity are revealed in scripture, which means they initially need to be heard or read, requiring that they at least be understood notionally and thought through rationally. Perceptive reason or understanding is the proper subject of spiritual illumination. Once illuminated, by receiving an entirely new, sensible idea of God's holiness) it determines the specifically spiritual quality (in Edwards' language, the "graciousness") of the religious affections. The understanding is the portal to personal religion and the locus of religious conversion. Perceptive reason, though necessary to give us a speculative knowledge of revealed truths, is not sufficient to give us a sensible knowledge of them. Speculative knowledge may leave us indifferent. It is the spiritual sense infused by grace that alone can impart that knowledge. Edwards explains the purely propaedeutic role of perceptive reason and compares it to the new sense of the heart as follows: "'tis not a thing that belongs to reason, to see the beauty . . . of spiritual things; it is not a speculative thing, but depends on the sense of the heart. Reason indeed is necessary in order to it, as 'tis by reason only

that we are become the subjects of the means of it; . . . Reason's work is to perceive truth, and not excellency."¹³

(2) Ratiocinative reason, *qua* criticism, is the means to assaying the genuineness of our personal religion, of detecting hypocrisy and quashing enthusiasm. *Religious Affections* is intended to equip its readers with the means of assessing their own spiritual estate: "the laying down good rules may be a means of preventing such hypocrites, and of convincing many of other kinds of hypocrites" and "may be of use to the true saints, to detect false affections, which they may have mingled with true. And be a means of their religion's becoming more pure, and like gold tried in the fire." These rules take the form of certain marks or characteristics, or "signs" as Edwards calls them, such that if exhibited in our affections and behavior certify them as genuinely holy and so constitutive of true religion. Of these Edwards considers the quality of behavior the most important. "Christian practice is the chief of all the signs of saving grace." To emphasize its importance, he waxes hyperbolic: "Christian practice is the most proper evidence of the gracious sincerity of professors, to themselves and others; and the chief of all the marks of grace, the sign of signs, and evidence of evidences, that which seals and crowns all other signs."¹⁴ The sign of Christian practice was singularly important for Edwards. Introspection may be deceptive; our own feelings may deceive us and our words others, but not our actions. They speak the truth about our innermost being, about our real beliefs. The deception people are vulnerable to as to the truth of their spiritual estate would have been brought home to Edwards by the excesses of the Great Awakening.

Incidentally, the importance of behavior in the religious life provides another reason as to why the affections are essential to true religion. As Edwards explains, "And as true religion is of a practical nature, and God has so constituted the human nature, that the affections are very much the spring of men's actions, this also shows, that true religion must consist very much in the affections."¹⁵

Unlike Edwards, James does not pretend to give us anything like the nature of true religion; he does not stipulate what religion ought to be. Rather he is concerned only with telling us the truth about religion in general—the truth about its origins, its relation to science and ethics, its metaphysical claims, and its value. Whereas *Religious Affections* is an apologia for a particular kind of religion, i.e. evangelical Calvinism,

Varieties of Religious Experience is an apologia for religion in general. James tentatively and provisionally defines personal religion as “*the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.*” Religion for him is fundamentally and largely a matter of feeling and a kind of quasi-sensory experience. It is not conceptual, intellectual, or discursive: “We may now lay it down as certain that in the distinctively religious sphere of experience, many persons . . . *possess the objects of their belief, not in the form of mere conceptions which their intellect accepts as true, but rather in the form of quasi-sensible realities directly apprehended* [italics mine].” (In the italicized passage James seems to presuppose something like Edwards’ distinction between sensible and speculative knowledge.) The psychological source of our religious propensities, experiences and feelings, thinks James, is the subconscious or nonrational part of the mind: “in religion we have a department of human nature with unusually close relations to the transmarginal or subliminal region.” The subconscious is, in James’ words, “the fountain-head of much that feeds our religion.”¹⁶

Given James’ understanding of religion as being essentially affective and experiential in character, and as welling up from the subconscious, what function does James assign reason (as represented paradigmatically by philosophy and theology) in the religious life? Reason for James is neither the source nor stuff of religion. Its position is secondary, coming only after the fact of experience. What is primary is feeling: “feeling is the deeper source of religion, and that philosophic and theological formulas [rationality] are secondary products, like translations of a text into another tongue.” Indeed, without the impetus of religious feeling, philosophy of religion and theology would scarcely exist. Philosophical theology, not to mention creeds, dogmas and doctrines, contains nothing more than “over-beliefs, buildings-out performed by the intellect into directions of which feeling originally supplied the hint.” Moreover, traditional philosophical theology, according to James, has typically misused and abused reason because of its reliance on overly speculative *a priori* methods and its consequent obliviousness to facts: “The intellectualism in religion which I wish to discredit . . . assumes to construct religious objects out of the resources of logical reason alone, or of logical reason drawing rigorous inference from non-subjective facts.”¹⁷ And proof of

rational theology's illegitimacy is the fact that instead of inducing universal assent to its arguments and so establishing the objectivity of religious claims—which is its main justification—it incurs endless disputes and so no consensus. In brief, reason is impotent to prove the objective existence of that divine milieu to which mystical experience and religious feeling testify.

Reason's proper function in religion, according to James, is, "To redeem religion from unwholesome privacy, and to give public status and universal right of way to its deliverances, has been reason's task." In fact, it must be, for James understands that "we are thinking beings, and we cannot exclude the intellect from participating in any of our functions. Even in soliloquizing with ourselves, we construe our feelings intellectually."¹⁸ We can glean from James what specific tasks may, and must, be undertaken in religion.

First, reason furnishes the necessary medium for communicating our religious beliefs and experiences. To discuss them with others, or even to reflect upon them ourselves, we must use language and engage in discursive thought. In James' own words, "we must exchange our feelings with one another, and in doing so we have to speak, and to use general and abstract verbal formulas." Second, reason allows us to harmonize our religious experiences and beliefs with our rational life by enabling us to interpret them in terms of the prevailing philosophical world-view: "Both our personal ideals and our religious and mystical experiences must be interpreted congruously with the kind of scenery which our thinking mind inhabits. The philosophic climate of our time inevitably forces its own clothing on us." Third, "By confronting," as James says, "the spontaneous religious constructions with the results of natural science, philosophy [reason] can also eliminate doctrines that are now known to be scientifically absurd or incongruous"—that is, the perennial task of reconciling faith and reason. Fourth, reason is indispensable to demythologizing scriptures, separating the husks of cultural context from the marrow of spiritual meaning, thereby extracting what is universal and valid from the world's great religions. "Both from dogma and from worship," writes James, philosophy "can remove historic incrustations," discriminate "the common and essential from the individual and local elements of the religious beliefs which she compares," and distinguish "between what is innocent over-belief and symbolism in the expression" of

religious doctrines “and what is to be literally taken.” Fifth, reason can treat religious beliefs as hypotheses, “testing them in all the manners, whether negative or positive, by which hypotheses are ever tested. She can reduce their number, as some are found more open to objection. She can perhaps become the champion of one which she picks out as being the most closely verified or verifiable.” Thus, by performing these several tasks, reason “can offer mediation between different believers, and help to bring about consensus of opinion.”¹⁹ In other words, reason can arbitrate religious disputes and differences, and act as a broker among diverse faiths in a religiously pluralistic world.

In his prescription of reason’s rightful role in religion, James envisions what he calls the “science of religions,” or what today is known as the comparative study of religions. Its contributors would typically be social scientists—psychologists, anthropologists, and sociologists. Its function would be purely taxonomic, critical, comparative, interpretative, and mediatory. James conceives of reason as a meta-activity or sorts in relation to religion, the business of which is to establish, not the so-called truths *of* religion, but truths *about* religion. As James says, “all these intellectual operations, whether they be constructive or comparative and critical, . . . are interpretative and inductive operations, operations after the fact, consequent upon religious feeling, not coordinate with it, not independent of what it ascertains.”²⁰

Reason for James, then, performs the same indispensable critical (in its broadest sense) role as Edwards’ ratiocinative reason, although James gives it greater scope than Edwards. James, moreover, does allow, at least implicitly, reason a role other than criticism in the life of religion, one corresponding to that of Edwards’ perceptive reason, in his important discussion of mysticism.

“Personal religious experience has its root and centre in mystical states of consciousness,” James claims. Mysticism, then, is the paradigm of religious experience. He identifies two essential characteristics qualifying a state of consciousness as mystical. One is its “noetic quality,” which he describes as follows:

Although so similar to states of feeling, mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are

illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain.

In brief, through mystical experience one comes to know something otherwise unknowable. This mystical knowledge resembles Edwards' sensible knowledge issuing from the new spiritual sense of the heart. In a passage reminiscent of Edwards' distinction between the person who knows (speculatively) about honey, but has never tasted it, and the one who knows (sensibly) it because he has tasted it, James remarks,

Knowledge about a thing is not the thing itself. . . . A science might come to understand everything about the causes and elements of religion, . . . ; and yet the best man at this science might be the man who found it hardest to be personally devout. . . . Knowledge about life is one thing; effective occupation of a place in life, with its dynamic currents passing through your being, is another.²¹

The second characteristic qualifying a conscious state as mystical is its "ineffability," i.e., "it defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words."²² Mystical knowledge must be experienced directly by the subject; it beggars description and cannot be communicated verbally to others. At best, it can only be hinted at metaphorically and analogically. Mystical knowledge is as ineffable as the "beauty of holiness" as perceived by Edwards' spiritual sense of the heart.

James concurs with Edwards that the best validation of the truth of religion is the behavior of its professors; James calls this the "empiricist criterion," and actually cites Edwards in its defense: "By their fruits ye shall know them, not by their roots. Jonathan Edwards's *Treatise on Religious Affections* is an elaborate working out of this thesis. The *roots* of a man's virtue are inaccessible to us. No appearances whatever are infallible proofs of grace. Our practice is the only sure evidence, even to ourselves, that we are genuinely Christians." He continues, "If religion is true, its fruits are good fruits."²³ Edwards and James alike insist on a pragmatic test for the truth and worth of faith.

In summary: Significantly, two of America's greatest thinkers agree as to the psychology of religion. Both understand it as essentially experiential and emotive, though not excluding the cognitive. They agree also as to the philosophy of religion. Edwards and James both assimilate the knowledge of the objects of religious experience to a form of direct perception, of quasi-sensation. Edwards' new spiritual sense, a sense of the heart, is "a principle of new kind of perception or spiritual sensation." According to James, persons undergoing religious experience "possess the objects of their belief. . . in the form of quasi-sensible realities directly apprehended." Furthermore, both assign reason an indispensable double role in the religious life: In its perceptive sense, as Edwards' sense of the heart and James' mystical apprehension, of providing access to certain metaphysical truths accessible only through religious experience. In its ratiocinative sense of making possible the interpretation and critique of religious experience—of imposing a check on false religiosity and an antidote to fanaticism for Edwards; for James, of opening it up to public scrutiny and objective evaluation, and of helping to effect accord and understanding in a religiously pluralistic world. Finally, they are both pragmatists insisting that the best vindication of the truth and worth of religion is the beneficial difference it makes in the world when put into practice as the good works of the religious.

Edwards' and James' thoughts on religion are as relevant today as they have ever been. James' call for a science of religions has been amply heeded given the large number of departments of religious studies that have sprung up in American universities and colleges since his time. Related to this, his conception of the mediatory office of reason with its promise of arbitrating religious disputes involving conflicting truth-claims, and of its fostering understanding among different creeds and sects, is especially urgent now given the contemporary rise of militant fundamentalisms of all stripes. And Edwards, with his antidote for the manifold evils of fanaticism, obscurantism, pathological self-absorption, and anti-intellectualism in the religious sphere speaks urgently to our own generation still afflicted with superstition and self-righteous demagoguery. These men, with different emphases, remind us that true religion, which is heat but not without light, fosters open-mindedness, tolerance, intellectual integrity, and a capacity for self-criticism—perennial virtues we neglect at our peril.

It is evident from the above that Edwards and James are truly the representative American philosophers Royce describes insofar as they gave “utterance to philosophical ideas which are characteristic of some stage and of some aspect of the spiritual life of his own people.” One such characteristic is their uncompromising empiricism; an empiricism, indeed, encompassing the broadest range of human experience, even the preternatural experiences of mystics. Another is pragmatism with their emphasis on religious practice as the ultimate validation of religion. Their profound speculations on religion befit “a nation with the soul of a church.”

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NOTES

¹Josiah Royce, "William James and the Philosophy of life," *William James and Other Essays on the Philosophy of Life* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1911), pp. 3-4, 7.

²Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. by John E. Smith, II (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 84.

³Henry James, ed., *The Letters of William James*, II (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1926) 58, quoted in Edward C. Moore, *William James*, The Great American Thinkers Series (New York: Washington Square Press, Inc., 1965), p. 5.

⁴John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by Alexander Campbell Fraser, II (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1959), p. 432.

⁵Edwards, *Religious Affections*, 95, 102, 100, 99. John E. Smith provides the definition of "wouldings" in n. 2, 99.

⁶*Ibid.*, 266.

⁷Jonathan Edwards, "A Divine and Supernatural Light," in *A Jonathan Edwards Reader*, ed. by John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 121.

⁸Edwards, *Religious Affections*, 96.

⁹Edwards, "A Divine and Supernatural Light," p. 121.

¹⁰Edwards, *Religious Affections*, 272

¹¹*Ibid.*, 205-206, 260.

¹²Edwards, "A Divine and Supernatural Light," p. 107.

¹³*Ibid.*, pp. 121-122.

¹⁴Edwards, *Religious Affections*, 197, 450, 443.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 101.

¹⁶William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, in *The Works of William James* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985), 34. 59.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 341, 342.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 341, 342.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 342, 359.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 342.

²¹*Ibid.*, 301, 302, 385-86.

²²*Ibid.*, 302.

²³*Ibid.*, 25, 300.

CHASING THE BEAR: WILLIAM JAMES ON SENSATIONS, EMOTIONS AND INSTINCTS

ANNA STOKLOSA

ABSTRACT

William James's account of emotions is frequently categorised as a feeling theory of emotions. Consideration of James's views about sensations, however, reveals that this categorisation is untenable. Instead, many of James's emotions are more appropriately categorised as instincts. The categorisation of emotions as instincts entails that emotions do have a function – contrary to a criticism often levied against James's account.

I. INTRODUCTION

William James's account of emotions has now largely fallen out of vogue. As Barbalet (1999) notes, James's account is rarely discussed anymore – and when it is discussed, it is usually invoked only to be dismissed or ridiculed. Golightly's view can be taken as an exemplar of this trend, in noting that “the argument is practically over; [James's] theory generally has been abandoned” (Golightly, 1953, 287; see also Feinstein, 1970). Where the attitude towards James's account is more charitable, it is valued only insofar as it marks a starting off point for emotion-research– nearly all texts on emotions published in the past 100 years begin with a discussion of the James-Lange theory (Lang, 1994).¹

The fortunes of James's theory of emotions seem to be somewhat improving of late, however, as several recent articles – largely by psychologists – have defended the

continuing relevance of James's account. Ellsworth (1994), for example, argues that James's work anticipates many of the current questions and ideas in emotion research, and more recently, Palencik (2007) defends the view that several of James's ideas are indispensable to the contemporary study of emotion.² Barbalet (1999) defends a narrower version of this claim, arguing that James's account is of particular importance to the social psychology of emotions. On the empirical side, Laird and Bressler (1990) argue that much contemporary research supports James's theory.

While at least some scholars thus seem to be amenable to the idea of reconsidering the merit of James's account of emotions, the philosophers of emotions, for the most part, continue to treat it like the ugly duckling of emotion theories. This is because they generally categorise James's account of emotions as a feeling theory,³ which emphasises 'the actual feel' of an emotion – the physiological changes and disturbances we feel when we are angry, for example (Calhoun and Solomon, 1984). That is, feeling theories of emotions assimilate emotions to bodily sensations (Deigh, 1994).

While a 'feeling theory' label sounds *prima facie* innocuous, this label is the last nail in the coffin of a theory so labelled, since feeling theories of emotions are viewed as unable to adequately capture a key property of emotions – their intentionality (Hatzimoysis, 2003). Although 'intentionality' is a notoriously slippery concept, it is usually described as the property of being about, for, of, at or towards someone or something (Deigh, 1994; Solomon, 1993). Mental states such as beliefs are paradigmatically intentional; it seems, however, that emotions, too, are intentional. One's anger, for example, is generally directed *at* someone or something – the unruly child who relentlessly kicks one's seat on a 14 hour flight, say. Sensations, on the other hand, are not thought to be intentional in this way. In labelling William James's theory of emotions a feeling theory, philosophers thus ascribe to him the view that emotions are intentionality-less sensations, and consequently consign his account to the dustbin of intellectual history, along with the four humours and the like.⁴

I think, however, that ascribing to James the view that emotions are sensations – and labelling James's account a feeling theory – rests on a misunderstanding of James's views. Instead, I will argue, many of James's emotions are more accurately categorised as instincts. This classification, moreover, entails that emotions *do* have a function, contrary

to a criticism frequently levied against James's account. To this end, I will proceed in the following manner. In section 2, I will offer a brief exegesis of James's account of emotions. I will then discuss James's account of sensations and perceptions in section 3, and argue against the view that James's emotions are sensations (in section 4), thus undercutting the tenability of labelling James's account a 'feeling theory.' I will then outline James's view on instincts in section 5, and, in section 6, I will argue that many of James's emotions are actually instincts. I will close by devoting some space to elaborating what the function of Jamesian emotions might be in section 7.

II. EMOTIONS

The ignominiously labelled 'feeling theory' begins innocuously enough, with a division of emotions into coarse and subtle.⁵ Subtle emotions (which will be largely set aside here), are defined as those "feelings of pleasure and displeasure, of interest and excitement, bound up with mental operations, but having no obvious bodily expressions for their consequence" (James, 1884, 189; James, 1890, 449).⁶ James's account, however, focuses primarily on the coarse emotions "in which a wave of bodily disturbance of some kind accompanies the perception of the interesting sights or sounds, or the passage of the exciting train of ideas" (James, 1884, 189; James, 1890, 449). Coarse emotions include the usual suspects – grief, fear, anger, love (James, 1884, 189; James, 1890, 449) – as well as some of the less frequently encountered ones, such as surprise, curiosity, rapture, lust and greed (James, 1884, 189).

Prior to elaborating his own views on emotions, however, James first outlines his *bête noire* – what he calls our 'natural way' of thinking about coarse emotions. According to him, we naturally think of emotions as occurring in the following sequence: a mental perception of a fact excites an emotion, which in turn gives rise to a bodily expression (James, 1884, 190; James, 1890, 449). On this 'natural way' of thinking about emotions, a loss of fortune, for example, excites the emotion of sadness, which in turn gives rise to tears, or an encounter with a bear precipitates the emotion of fear, subsequently causing one to run away (James, 1884, 190; James, 1890, 449).

According to James, however, this 'natural' view of emotions is inverted. James thinks that the proper way to think about the emotion-sequence is to view "the bodily

changes [as following] directly the perception of the exciting fact; [...] our feeling of the same changes as they occur is the emotion” (James, 1884, 190; James, 1890, 449). On James’s view, then, we are sad because we shed tears over our lost fortunes, or fearful because we are shaking; it is *not* the case that we shed tears or shake because we are sad or afraid, respectively.

James remained consistently committed to this view of emotions. The claim that when we perceive some exciting fact, our feeling of bodily changes that follow that perception *is* the emotion is reiterated several times in the Jamesian corpus. First, it appears in the 1884 article “What is an emotion?”⁷ James then restated it in 1890, in the *Principles of Psychology*. As Barbalet (1999) notes, the *Principles*’ Emotions chapter was retained (albeit in a somewhat condensed form) for re-publication, in 1892, as chapter 24 of *Psychology: Briefer Course*. The final restatement of this view can be found in 1894’s “The Physical Basis of Emotion.”⁸

James’s unwavering commitment to his view on emotions, moreover, manifests itself in the absence of disagreement in the literature regarding what James’s position *is*. In discussions of James’s theory, what is referred to – invariably – is his view that “the bodily changes [follow] directly the perception of an exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur is the emotion”⁹ (James, 1884, 190; James, 1890, 449). Where the controversy *does* arise, therefore, is with respect to the *tenability* of James’s account. Four types of criticisms are typically levied against James’s view (Barbalet, 1999). First, it is argued that Jamesian emotions lack function, *pace* contemporary neuroscientific findings on emotions. Second, James’s account is charged with failing to recognise the import of experience in emotion. The third set of criticisms accuses James of overstating the importance of the body in emotion and, finally, the fourth charges James with proffering a theory that is empirically false.¹⁰

It is beyond the remit of this paper to consider all of these charges in an adequate detail. I will therefore focus only on the charge of functionlessness. Two members of the cavalry leading the charge against James, here, are Keith Oatley and Antonio Damasio. Oatley charges Jamesian emotions with being “at best a kind of froth on top of the real business of behaviour” (Oatley, 1992, 133), and, in a similar vein, Damasio (1994) accuses James of saying little about the possible function of emotions. An account of

emotions that fails to award any type of function to emotions is in tension with the findings of contemporary neuroscience, which suggests that emotions *do* have a function (Damasio, 1994; Carroll, 2001). Therefore, if, as critics charge, Jamesian emotions are functionless entities, then his account is rightly dismissed. I think, however, that a dismissal of James's account – at least on the grounds of emotions' functionlessness – is premature. This is because for James, many emotions are actually instincts, which entails that Jamesian emotions *do* have a function. To show this, however, let us first consider James's account of sensations and evaluate the feasibility of ascribing to James the view that emotions are sensations.

III. SENSATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS

In contrast to his voluminous writings on emotions, James's writings on sensations are quite scarce, comprising only two chapters in *Principles of Psychology*. This dearth of attention may be due to James's dislike for sensations as an area of study in psychology (Boring, 1942). The consequence of this inattention, however, is that James's views on sensations lack the impact of his writings on emotions (Dember, 1990).¹¹

Lack of attention notwithstanding, James *does* make some claims about the sensations and perceptions, from which his views can be gleaned. For edification on the subject matter of natural history and classification of sensation, more generally, he encourages the reader to turn to physiology textbooks (James, 1890, 3).¹² The focus in the chapters that James actually devotes to the discussion of sensations and perceptions is rather narrow, consisting largely in juxtaposing sensations and perceptions.

In order to convey what a sensation is, James offers the following example. In schools for the blind, numerous *conceptual* facts about light are imparted on the students: the light's refraction, reflection, spectrum properties, and so forth. None of these facts, however, constitute *sensible* knowledge about light (James, 1890, 5). A sensation is the extremely simple content of our experience of the world (James, 1890, 2), the 'what-it's-like-ness' of having our sense organs affected (James, 1890, 77). According to James, sensations include, for example: hot, cold, colour, noise, and pain (James, 1879, 11; James, 1890, 1).

Sensations, moreover, appear to have two functions, for James.¹³ Their *direct* function is to acquaint us with the “bare immediate natures” of the objects we encounter in the world (James, 1890, 2; also 3 and 6). Their *indirect* function is first hinted at by the headings of a sub-section in chapter 17, “The Cognitive Function of Sensation” (James, 1890, 3). There, James approvingly discusses Locke’s view that sensations are the first, most foundational building blocks of our consciousness and no amount of creative thought would be able to generate an idea of a taste never tasted or a scent never smelled (James, 1890, 7). In other words, the indirect function of sensations appears to be the provision of fodder for our cognitive endeavours.

While *sensations* are characterised in terms of their extreme simplicity, Jamesian *perceptions* are significantly more complex. The more an object is something that is “located, measured, compared, assigned to a function, etc., etc.; the more unreservedly do we call the state of mind a perception” (James, 1890, 1, original punctuation). Perceptions include, for example, gradations of distance, shape, position, and size (James, 1890, 79, also 93, 103).¹⁴ Just like sensations, perceptions’ function is to acquaint us with the outside world (James, 1890, 1, also 2), however, perceptions are not quite as foundational as sensations are, since “before perceptions can come, sensations must have come” (James, 1890, 6).

Although differences between sensations and perceptions are therefore quite evident, James notes that the two terms do not carry very discriminate meanings in psychology (James, 1890, 1). This is because the two cannot – in practice – be differentiated in adult life (James, 1890, 79). Pure, simple sensations are possible only in infancy; in adulthood, no sensations are had without cotemporaneous perceptions (James, 1890, 1, also 7 and 76). That is, in adulthood, our experiences of the outside world are so complex, that it is difficult to ascertain which parts of those experiences are due to sensations and which are due to perceptions (James, 1890, 79). Sharp distinction between the two is difficult to draw and the various experiential aspects “shade gradually into each other, being one and all products of the same psychological machinery of association” (James, 1890, 77). Thus, what we *commonly refer to* as a simple sensation – a visual sensation, for example – is, in fact, according to James, a complex amalgam of a

sensation of colour and numerous perceptions intricately interwoven with it (James, 1890, 77).

IV. EMOTIONS AS SENSATIONS?

Because feeling theories assimilate emotions to sensations (Deigh, 1994), in labelling William James's theory of emotions a feeling theory, philosophers ascribe to him the view that emotions are sensations. Martha Nussbaum (2001), Robert Solomon (1976, 1993), Anthony Kenny (1963) and John Deigh (1994), for example, are among some of the philosophical champions of this view. The grounds on which this view rests are not entirely clear, since – as previously noted – James's account of sensations is almost never discussed in the literature. *Some* support for the view that Jamesian emotions are sensations is lent by James's statement that "our feeling of the changes as they occur is the emotion" (James 1890 449; James 1884 190). Nevertheless, there are several good reasons to resist this interpretation.

First, recall that on James's view, we may have pure sensations only in childhood. In adulthood, pure sensations can no longer be had – as a sensation "never takes place [...] without perception also being there" (James, 1890, 1). In other words, for James, the multitude of stimulations from the external world fuses into an undifferentiated experience (Dember, 1990). Given that James holds that it is impossible to tell which part of that experience is a sensation, and which part is a perception (James, 1890, 77), at most, one could claim that Jamesian emotions are an amalgam of perceptions and sensations.¹⁵ It is, of course, possible, that those who accept the 'feeling theory' interpretation of James's account of emotions simply rely on a *contemporary* (rather than *Jamesian*) understanding of sensations. If this is the case, however, the point would need to be made explicitly, and would require both a discussion of the particular account of sensations that underpins the claim, and an argument for the identity between that account of sensations and James's conceptualisation of emotions. Absent that, the ascription to James of the view that emotions are sensations is insufficiently grounded.

The second reason to refrain from labelling James's emotions sensations, is that *James himself* does not do so. What appears to lend credence to the view that Jamesian emotions are sensations is the claim that "the bodily changes follow directly the

perception of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur *is* the emotion” (James, 1890, 449; James, 1884, 190). Interestingly enough, despite using the term ‘perception’ here, James does not use the term ‘sensation’ – although one would have expected him to do so, given that he treats the two concepts together in the *Principles*. Moreover, he repeatedly *describes* the various bodily changes that occur in emotions – the shaking (in fear), the tears (in grief) (James, 1890, 450; James, 1884, 190) and the many other changes that occur (James, 1890, 462; James, 1884, 197) – but at no point does he use the term ‘sensations’ to refer to these changes.¹⁶

There is yet another – even stronger, I think – reason to resist the view that James’s emotions are sensations: namely, that James explicitly labels many emotions as states *other than* sensations. To clarify this, however, we must first briefly consider James’s discussion of instincts.

V. INSTINCTS

Although Harlow (1969) once asserted that James’s insights on instincts constitute one of his greatest contributions to the study of psychology, little scholarship on this topic was produced among the many publications celebrating the centennial of the publication of *Principles of Psychology*, in 1990 (Dewsbury, 1992). Since then, James’s work on instincts has received some attention from many prominent scholars in the field of evolutionary psychology – including Pinker (1994) and Tooby and Cosmides (1992).¹⁷ Outside of that particular niche, however, James’s writings on instincts generally appear to garner as much attention as do his writings on sensations: that is to say, very little.

There is some indication that the topic of instincts was important to James himself. As Dewsbury (1992) points out, the topic recurs throughout the *Principles*, and when the book was abridged, the chapter devoted to the topic of instinct was shortened less than other chapters. What, then, are James’s views on the subject matter? James defines instincts as those actions which “produce certain ends, without foresight of the ends, and without previous education in the performance” (James, 1887a, 355; James, 1890, 383). He further divides instincts into two types. First, he counts among instincts those actions which “go no further than our own bodies” – for example, the facial expression generated when observing a novel object. Second, he also includes among instincts those actions

which “take effect upon the outer world”, such as a flight from a wild beast, or mimicry of a friend’s actions (James, 1890, 403).

James holds that humans possess the largest number of instincts of any creature, since we possess all of the instincts that lower creatures possess, and great many instincts in addition to those (James, 1887b, 666; James, 1890, 390). Some of the human instincts include: sucking, biting, chewing, spitting, grasping objects, pointing, swallowing, alimentation, locomotion, etc (James, 1890, 403). Among the lower animals, James considers egg-laying (James, 1890, 388), silk-worm’s winding of her cocoon and hawk’s use of talons against her prey (James, 1890, 383) to be instinctive.

James charges his contemporaries with an undue preference for describing instincts by reference to their function (James, 1887a, 355; James, 1890, 383). James’s own description of instincts emphasises their physiology because he thinks this approach yields more clarity – as many of the relevant creatures lack the abstract concepts invoked in functional description of instincts. Thus, typical in his discussion is a statement that “*instinctive actions* are called forth by determinate *sensory stimuli* in contact with the *animal’s body*, or at a distance in his environment” (James, 1890, 384, *emphases added*) which highlights the physical nature of the instinct, rather than what it does – or does not – accomplish.

The emphasis on the physiological rather than functional description of instincts, however, ought not to be interpreted as a *denial* that instincts have functions. On the contrary, James’s very definition of instincts – as actions that produce particular ends – suggests that instincts *do* have a function for James. While James’s preference for physiological rather than functional descriptions precludes him from engaging in an extended discussion on the subject-matter of instincts’ functions, his views can be gleaned from several remarks he *does* make. It seems that for James, the function of instincts is related to self-preservation or, in other words, survival. This is suggested, for example, by his claim that the truth of evolution requires that since “the destruction of prey and of human rivals must have been among the most important of man’s primitive functions, the fighting and the chasing instincts must have become ingrained” (James, 1890, 412, *emphasis added*).¹⁸

In “What is an instinct?” (1887a) James offers several examples that help to shed additional light on what he takes the function of instincts to be. He notes, for example, that a bird “knows instinctively how to press oil from a gland and apply it to the feather”. A snake knows without being taught how to utilise his poison against his enemies, while a silk-worm winds a cocoon, which “forms a safe abode for herself in the period of transformation” and a hawk instinctively knows how to use her talons against her prey (James, 1887a, 355). All of these instinctive actions – instances of protection of bodily integrity, defence from attack, construction of shelter and self-nourishment, respectively – are survival-oriented actions. To charge Jamesian instincts with the function of ensuring survival, therefore, does not seem implausible.

VI. EMOTIONS AS INSTINCTS

Given instincts’ survival-oriented function, if it can be shown that emotions are a species of instincts for James, then emotions will *ipso facto* have a function – contrary to the aforementioned charges of functionlessness levied against James by Damasio and Oatley. There are three reasons in favour of adopting the view that emotions are instincts for James. An important caveat must be added here – not *all* emotions are instincts for James – but *many are*.

The first reason in favour of adopting the view that many Jamesian emotions are instincts is his claim that “instinctive reactions and emotional expressions [...] shade imperceptibly into each other” (James, 1890, 442). James’s point here is that in some cases the boundary between what is an instinct and what is an emotion is difficult to draw (James, 1890, 77). Thus, if we take seriously James’s injunction that in cases where it is difficult to draw an exact line “on the whole, it is best to be catholic”¹⁹, this tells in favour of identifying at least some emotions as instincts.

Further support for the claim that some emotions are instincts can be derived from James’s identifying several states as both emotions and instincts. Anger, for example, is implicitly identified as an instinct by its inclusion in the section of *Principles*’ Chapter 24 (“Instinct”), which focuses on enumerating human instincts (James, 1890, 409). In numerous locations elsewhere in the Jamesian corpus, anger is explicitly identified as an emotion (e.g. James, 1890, 409 & 474; also James, 1894/1994, 206). In many other cases

the states explicitly identified as emotions, are also explicitly identified as instincts. For example, fear, is said by James to be “one of the three most exciting *emotions* of which our nature is susceptible” is also identified – only two lines later – as “*a genuine instinct*, and one of the earliest shown by the human child” (James, 1890, 415, emphases added). Elsewhere in the chapter, the “utterly blind *instinctive* character” of fear is said to be demonstrated by reason’s inability to control it (James, 1890, 418, emphasis added).²⁰ James also identifies sympathy as both an emotion and an instinct (James, 1890, 410). Love (James, 1890, 411; James, 1887b, 678) and hate (James, 1890, 411) are, too, labelled as both instincts and emotions (James, 1890, 474 and James, 1890, 448, respectively). Finally, shame – an “*instinctive* impulse²¹ to hide certain parts of the body” (James, 1887b, 676) – is also elsewhere identified by James as an emotion (James, 1890, 474).

In short, James clearly identifies at least 6 states – anger, fear, sympathy, love, hate and shame – as both emotions and instincts. It is worth noting that in his initial statement of the definition of emotion – as the feeling of bodily changes – James offers three examples: grief (upon loss of fortune), fear (upon encountering the bear) and anger (towards a rival who insults us) (James, 1890, 449). It is therefore quite suggestive that of his three paradigmatic emotions, two – namely, anger and fear – are also labelled instincts.

Finally, the third reason in favour of adopting the view that many of Jamesian emotions are instincts, is James’s statement identifying the two, at the beginning of *Principles*’ Chapter 25, “The Emotions”:

Emotional reactions are often excited by objects with which we have no practical dealings. A ludicrous object, for example, or a beautiful object are not necessarily objects to which we *do* anything; we simply laugh, or stand in admiration, as the case may be. *The class of emotional, is thus rather larger than that of instinctive, impulses*, commonly so called. Its stimuli are more numerous, and its expressions are more internal and delicate, and often less practical. *The physiological plan and essence of*

the two classes of impulse, however, is the same. (James, 1890, 442; emphases added)

James makes three important claims here. First, he points out that ‘emotions’ are a larger class than ‘instincts’. This precludes us from claiming that *all* emotions are instincts for James, for, as the above quote implies, some emotions are not instincts.²² Nevertheless, as identified above, many *are* – including two of the three states he identifies as emotions in his discussion of the definition of emotions. Second, James also notes here that the ‘essence’ of emotions and instincts is the same. What, precisely, James means by ‘essence’ is not entirely clear – he does not define the term. This suggests that he may be using the term in its conventional sense – to mean the very nature of a thing (Johnson, 1755-56). Third, he points out that emotions and instincts share a ‘physiological plan.’ Recall, James emphasises that instincts ought to be discussed in terms of physiology (rather than function) in order to yield the most clarity. The significance of James’s claim that emotions and instincts are identical with regard to what he considers to be one of their most salient properties – their physiology – therefore cannot be overemphasised.

The connection between Jamesian emotions and instincts has thus far not merited much attention in the literature – perhaps obscured by the dominant interpretation of his account of emotions as sensations. Occasionally, however, the link between emotions and instincts *has* been tentatively suggested. Dewsbury (1992), for example, notes that James viewed emotions as intimately linked to instincts, but takes the significance of this to be that instincts are therefore at the centre of Jamesian psychology, much like emotions are. Golightly (1953), similarly, points out that Darwin’s influence caused James to link emotions and instincts, and to emphasise the biological aspect of the former. Barbalet (1999), finally, points out that James’s chapter on instincts *does* discuss several emotions, but falls short of drawing the conclusion about what this suggests.²³

Although the claim that some Jamesian emotions are instincts thus appears plausible and is, moreover, not entirely without precedent, two challenges may nevertheless be raised in response to this claim. First, one may object to classifying one set of states as another set of states. However, those who categorise Jamesian emotions as

sensations – by labelling his account of emotions a ‘feeling theory’ – adopt the same move: categorising one class of states as another.²⁴ In other words, if there is nothing improper about categorising emotions as sensations, there ought to be nothing improper about categorising emotions as instincts. In light of James’s claims about emotions and instincts, such categorisation is, in fact, obligatory. Second, one may challenge that it is rather peculiar to categorise emotions as brute instincts, since many emotions are quite sophisticated. To this, however, one may respond by noting that *James’s* understanding of ‘instinct’ is quite broad. In Chapter 24 (“Instinct”) of the *Principles* alone, James counts among human instincts such varied states as: biting, pointing at objects, smiling, turning the head aside, holding head erect, standing, pugnacity, hunting, kleptomania, playing, sociability and shyness, secretiveness, cleanliness, jealousy, and parental love, among others (James, 1890, 403-440). While one may, perhaps, be reluctant to categorise emotions as instincts on a *contemporary* account of instincts, within *Jamesian* taxonomy, it is permissible to do so.

VII. EMOTIONS’ FUNCTIONS

What yet remains to be shown is the significance of the categorisation of Jamesian emotions as instincts. What is most salient here, I think, is the *implication* of this categorisation. Given that instincts clearly do have a function for James, categorising emotions as instincts entails that those emotions, too, have a function. Because James focuses on the *physical* nature of emotions rather than their *function* – the same approach he adopts in his discussion of instincts – one of the criticisms levied against his account is that on James’s view, emotions are functionless (Oatley, 1992; Damasio 1994).²⁵ Showing that James’s emotions have a function would therefore not only undercut this criticism, but also place James’s account of emotions in line with contemporary research which suggests that the function of emotion consists in “and motivating an organism to contend with challenges in its environment” (Palencik, 2007, 776).

But what is the nature of this function? If Jamesian emotions are instincts, then the emotions’ function must also centre on self-preservation.²⁶ While the dearth of discussion about the emotions’ function precludes establishing with absolute certainty that this is, in fact, the case, some claims made by James in chapter 10 of the *Principles*

(“The Consciousness of Self”) suggest exactly that. In this chapter, James defines self-seeking as “providing for the future [self] as distinguished from maintaining the present” one (James, 1890, 307), further differentiating between bodily self-seeking and social self-seeking²⁷. Although James does not explicitly define either sub-category of self-seeking, the definition of self-seeking itself suggests that the bodily self-seeking would require providing for the future self’s *physical* well-being, and *mutatis mutandis* for *social* self-seeking. And, while successful social self-seeking seems *prima facie* less important to self-preservation than successful bodily self-seeking, the import of social self-seeking may not be underestimated on James’s view, as for him, our fellow human beings – that is, our *social* milieu – are the most important part of our environment (James, 1884, 195).

Is it possible that those emotions that are also identified as instincts function in either of these two ways? In his discussion of bodily self-seeking, James notes that fear and anger are useful in the same way as acts of alimentation and defence (James, 1890, 307). Moreover, he points out, that “we must class both anger and fear with the hunting, the acquisitive, the home-constructing and the tool-constructing instincts, as *impulses to self-seeking of the bodily kind*” (James, 1890, 307; emphases added). That is, fear and anger – two of the six states identified as both emotions and instincts – are here, first, clearly identified here as *having functions*, and, second, they are said to function in providing for our future physical well-being.

What of social self-seeking, which is centred on providing for our future *social* well-being? James identifies our “amativeness and friendliness, our desire to please and attract notice and admiration, our emulation and jealousy, our love of glory” as conducive to our social self-seeking (James, 1890, 308). Thus, it appears that of the four remaining states that James classifies as both emotions and instincts – sympathy, love, hate and shame – not one is straightforwardly invoked here. However, a species of love is mentioned – the love of glory – and, at the conclusion of the paragraph, James implicitly points to the role of hate in social self-seeking, noting that many a person will “take a deal of trouble to dazzle some insignificant cad whose whole personality they heartily despise” (James, 1890, 309). Moreover, all four emotion-instincts seem to fit rather well

with what James seems to want to convey here, as all four focus on our interactions with our fellow human beings (under normal circumstances).

Thus, it seems plausible to accept that the function of Jamesian emotions centres on preserving our well-being – which is consistent with James’s understanding of many emotions as instincts. This includes both our *physical* well-being (centred on our natural environment) and *social* well-being (centred on our social environment). Far from being the froth on the business of behaviour – to borrow Oatley’s phrase – Jamesian emotions *do* have a function – and a rather fundamental one at that.

One potential worry for this view is that, according to James, emotions “usually terminate in the subject’s own body, whilst the instinctive reaction is apt to go farther and enter into practical relations with the exciting object” (James, 1890, 442). This claim seems to undermine the functional reading of emotion, for if emotion fails to enter into practical relations with the world, then how is it to function in self-preservation?

To this, however, one can respond by making two points. First, it must be noted that the claim here cited effectively compares apples to oranges. This is because the claim that is made with respect to emotions is *ontological* – it describes what emotions are, viz. states that usually terminate in the body. The claim pertaining to instincts, on the other hand, is *functional* – it describes what instincts do, namely enter into relations with their causes. Thus, the juxtaposition between the emotion claim and the instinct claim fails to imply that emotions do not enter into practical relations with the world.

Second – let us suppose that it *were* the case that the claim made here implied that emotions usually fail to enter into practical relations in the world. We must note that the qualification ‘usually’ suggests that not all emotions are thought to be problematic here. Running away from a bear in fear for one’s life certainly *does* seem to enter into practical relations with the world. What could be considered more problematic here, perhaps, are emotions like shame or sympathy. However, here we can advert to James’s distinction between physical self-seeking and social self-seeking. Even emotions like shame or sympathy, whose interactions with the world appear more muted than the running away from a bear, can advance social self-seeking. This could be accomplished if, for example, they serve to communicate a shared moral code. Subtleness of the interactions with the

world – which *may* be termed a failure to interact with the world in a *practical* way – need not, therefore, preclude emotions from fulfilling their function.

VIII. CONCLUSION

William James's theory of emotions thus seems overdue for a re-evaluation. While some re-evaluation of the tenability of James's theory appears to be taking place, philosophers generally continue to dismiss James's theory, on account of its being classified as a feeling theory of emotions. A closer examination of James's (generally neglected) account of sensations, however, shows this categorisation to be questionable. A similar examination of his (likewise generally neglected) account of instincts, moreover, reveals that for James, many emotions are actually instincts. This re-categorisation of Jamesian emotions as instincts undercuts an oft-levied charge against James's account, that his emotions are functionless. James's emotions indeed *do* have a function – a self-preservative one. Thus, far from deserving dismissal or recognition as valuable only as a starting point for research on emotions, James's account of emotions merits bringing back into the fold of legitimate inquiry.²⁸

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NOTES

¹James's theory of emotions is often referred to in the literature as the James-Lange theory. James himself was aware of the similarities between his and Lange's views, acknowledging them in "The Physical Basis of Emotion" (1894/1994). C.f. Lang (1994) and Mandler (1990), who argue that James's and Lange's accounts have different emphases.

²See also Mandler (1990) for a version of this argument.

³See, e.g.: Deigh (1994), Yanal (1999), Dixon (2003), Lyons (1980), Kenny (1963), Damasio (1994) and Nussbaum (2001). Calhoun and Solomon (1984) identify James's theory as a "physiological theory" while defining physiological theories much like feeling theories are defined here, and thus should be counted here, as well. Cf. Ellsworth (1994) who ascribes to James a cognitive theory of emotions.

⁴Philosophers of emotion have now generally abandoned feeling theories for cognitivist theories of emotions. Briefly, cognitivist theories hold that our emotions are just like other mental states which are intentional. See Deigh (1994) for a discussion of cognitivist theories, and some of the problems underlying feeling theories of emotions.

⁵In "What is an emotion?" (1884) this distinction is drawn in terms of 'standard' and 'intellectual' emotions. The definitions of each are identical to 'coarse' and 'subtle' emotions, respectively.

⁶James offers identical (or nearly identical) accounts of emotion in “What is an emotion?” (1884) and Chapter 25 (“The Emotions”) of *Principles of Psychology* (1890). References to both sources are therefore given where applicable.

⁷Feinstein points out that some evidence exists that James was committed to this view even prior to his 1884’s “What is an emotion?”, as James wrote on his copy of Lotze’s *Medicinische Psychologie* (which he is thought to have read in 1867-68): “emotions due to bodily reverberations” (Feinstein, 1970, footnote 10)

⁸In other words, James was committed to this view for at least a decade, and possibly for as long as 27 years, if Feinstein’s speculation is correct.

⁹These lines are cited, for example, by Palencik (2007), Laird and Bressler (1990), Feinstein (1970), Golightly (1953), Ellsworth (1994), Cannon (1927), Deigh (1994), Myers (1969), Ratcliffe (2005), Barbalet (1999).

¹⁰For the first type of criticism, see Damasio (1994) and Oatley (1992). For the second type of criticism, see Damasio (1994). For the third and fourth types of criticisms, see Cannon (1927).

¹¹See, however, Dember’s (1990) argument that James’s writings on sensations and perceptions manifest themselves in several strands of contemporary psychological research.

¹²He refers the reader specifically to Martin’s “Human Body,” Bernstein’s “Five Senses of man,” Wundt’s “Physiological Psychology” or Hermann’s “Handbuch der Physiologie” volume 3 (James, 1890, 3, footnote 3).

¹³The terminology used here is mine; James does not discuss sensations’ function as either direct or indirect. It is worth noting, however, that this entails that even if emotions *were* sensations for James (as it is commonly understood), Jamesian emotions *would* have a function, *pace* Oatley and Damasio.

¹⁴Ellsworth (1994) goes as far as to argue that when James used the term ‘perception’ he meant to convey something more akin to a cognitive appraisal than to a sensation. Palencik (2007), similarly, attributes to James the view that perception is an evaluative understanding of a situation.

¹⁵Admittedly, James concedes that we *do* refer to our complex experiential amalgams as sensations. However, according to him, this is simply a shorthand (James, 1890, 77).

¹⁶Moreover, interpreting ‘feeling’ to be synonymous with Jamesian ‘sensation’ would be problematic since, as Myers (1986) notes, James’s use of the term ‘feeling’ is inconsistent in his writings.

¹⁷Cf. Suplizio (2007), who argues that evolutionary psychologists lack basis for positive comparisons between their own views on instincts and James’s views.

¹⁸James thinks that this is the case *generally* but not *always*. In other words, he thinks that some instincts cannot be explained by adverting to survival. For example, our fear of heights is instinctive but not survival-related; he thinks it is “a mere incidental peculiarity of the nervous system” (James, 1890, 419). The example seems to be rather poorly chosen, as avoiding precipices and heights *does* seem rather relevant to increasing one’s odds of survival, but James’s general point is well taken – some instincts may have outgrown their evolutionary utility in modern times.

¹⁹In context of his consideration of the two types of actions that James classifies as instincts, he notes that “on the whole it is best to be catholic, since it is very hard to draw an exact line” between the actions that go no further than our bodies and ones that take effect upon the outer world (James, 1890, 403).

²⁰Fear is also identified as an emotion at (James, 1887b, 672), and as an instinct at (James, 1887b, 666).

²¹James uses here the term ‘impulse’ rather than ‘instinct.’ James thinks that the two terms are equivalent, pointing out that “*every instinct is an impulse*. Whether we shall call such impulses as blushing, sneezing, coughing, smiling, or dodging, or keeping time to music, instincts or not, is *a mere matter of terminology*. *The process is the same through-out*” (James, 1890, 385, emphases added).

²²It is beyond the remit of this paper to establish which of James’s emotions, precisely, are *not* instincts, and why. One possible explanation here is that James is adverting to his distinction between coarse and subtle emotions.

²³Although these suggestions are consistent with the argument I am here putting forth, none benefit from an expanded discussion, and none draw out the conclusion that (many) emotions are instincts for James.

²⁴Although whether they categorise James's emotions as *Jamesian* sensations or as sensations on some type of a *contemporary* account of sensations, is difficult to discern due to the dearth of discussion on this point.

²⁵Ratcliffe (2005) goes as far as to claim that James's failure to elaborate an explicit account of the functions of emotions *justifies* the interpretation of Jamesian emotions as functionless.

²⁶I am here in agreement with Barbalet who notes that for James the function of emotions is evolutionary in that they "prompt particular types of actions, especially actions associated with self-seeking and self-preservation" (Barbalet, 1999, 260). As far as I can tell, Barbalet is the only one who takes his view of James's emotions; Barbalet cites no other secondary literature sources in agreement with his claim. Where we do differ, however, is in the emphasis on the instinctive nature of emotions. Barbalet notes that the import of James's claim that "the emotional reaction usually terminates in the subject's own body" is that emotion is *not* like instinct (Barbalet, 1999, 254). Given James's division of instincts into those that "go no further than our own bodies" and "those which take effect upon the outer world" (James, 1890, 443), I do not think that Barbalet's interpretation is tenable. Unfortunately, the focus of Barbalet's article is primarily on the relationship between emotion and consciousness, and this point does not benefit from an expanded discussion.

²⁷James also includes here spiritual self-seeking as the third category. Because spiritual self-seeking centres on our psychic or religious progress, it will be set aside here.

²⁸Thanks are due to Paul Griffiths, Charles Wolfe, Tobias Cheung, Marga Vicedo, and Mark Solovey, for their very helpful comments and suggestions on earlier versions of this paper.

JAMES'S CRITIQUES OF THE FREUDIAN UNCONSCIOUS – 25 YEARS EARLIER

ERIC THOMAS WEBER

ABSTRACT:

In The Principles of Psychology, William James addressed ten justifications for the concept of the unconscious mind, each of which he refuted. Twenty-five years later in The Unconscious, Freud presented many of the same, original arguments to justify the unconscious, without any acknowledgement of James's refutations. Some scholars in the last few decades have claimed that James was in fact a supporter of a Freudian unconscious, contrary to expectations. In this essay, I first summarize Freud's justification for the unconscious to highlight the arguments he used in 1915, before then demonstrating how clearly James had undercut these same argument in the Principles, published in 1890. Interpreters of James's thought should resist the claim that he would or did support Freud's idea of the unconscious, even if he at times spoke generously about other scholars. We also have reason to wonder about Freud's inattention to James's remarkable early work in psychology, especially given James's critiques of the concept of the unconscious.

INTRODUCTION

Giants of early psychology, William James and Sigmund Freud disagreed about a central idea, the concept of the unconscious. It is generally understood that James rejected the idea, yet some scholars, such as Joel Weinberger and Gerald Myers, have read him in an effort to find sympathy for the Freudian unconscious. Weinberger argues that James's references to unconscious mental processes and the "subconscious" are evidence that he believed in the unconscious.¹ This is a

mistake since “unconscious,” for James, is at most an adjective referring to that to which we are not conscious, whereas *the* unconscious, for Freud, refers to a portion of, or an entity within, the mind, one which desires objects while remaining invisible to the conscious mind. These two things are quite different. James explains that practices or processes can become strengthened in the pathways of behavior through habituation such that a person no longer needs to think about them. These become subconscious, or in a simple sense unconscious, inasmuch as we no longer need to think about them in the focus of our conscious attention. This does not make the habits and processes at work desired. In fact, bad habits can form purposefully or accidentally, which people must fight to stop given the powerful force of habit.

In a 1990 essay, Gerald Myers addressed the relationship between James and Freud on the centennial of the publication of the *Principles of Psychology*.² Like Weinberger, Myers claims that although “James disliked the dogmatism that he found in Freud’s dream symbolism and antireligiosity... he commended his insistence on the reality of unconscious mental processes.”³ Myers tries to show that there was more agreement between James and Freud than people often acknowledge. Again I would caution against reading too much into this, given that what James and Freud each meant by “unconscious” was quite different.

There has been surprisingly little study of the comparison of James’s and Freud’s ideas about unconscious processes and *the* unconscious, respectively. The reason to study this topic is simple: some clinicians treat patients’ on the basis of the concept of the unconscious. Therefore, it is vital that concepts like these and our justifications for them are considered carefully. To this end, I aim to make a narrow contribution in this paper. In studying James and Freud, I found it truly remarkable that Freud would not have studied James more closely than he appears to have done. Had Freud studied James’s *Principles of Psychology*, he would have encountered James’s devastating criticisms of an unconscious portion of the mind. James challenged key justifications for the concept of the unconscious in *The Principles of Psychology*, twenty-five years before Freud made use of those same justifications in his “Justifications for the Concept of the Unconscious.”⁴ Freud did not acknowledge or address James’s criticisms. This leads me to think that he was unaware of them, though they were featured in the most influential publication on psychology published in the United States at the time.

In this essay I will examine two texts: James's "Mind-Stuff Theories" chapter of the *Principles* and Freud's "Justification for the Concept of the Unconscious" in *The Unconscious*. It seems in comparing these texts that the kinship that Weinberger and Myers want to read into Freud and James ignores just how opposed James and Freud were about arguments justifying the concept of the unconscious. I believe that the common view is more justified, namely that James rejected the concept of a hypostatized unconscious, and that his arguments against justifications for the concept are strong and worth revisiting today.

In what follows, I will start with an examination of Freud's "Justification for the Concept of the Unconscious" before then showing how profoundly James had challenged these same arguments a full twenty-five years earlier. I hope that it will be clear, in the end, that James's interest in "unconscious processes" is quite distinct from an appreciation of a Freudian conception of an unconscious mind.

I. FREUD'S "JUSTIFICATION FOR THE CONCEPT OF THE UNCONSCIOUS"

In 1915, Freud published his famous essay, *The Unconscious*, in which he devoted a key early section to "Justification for the Concept of the Unconscious." In that short but densely packed passage, he presented key arguments for the unconscious. In this section I will outline those arguments.

Freud breaks up his justification for the concept of the unconscious into two sections. The first concerns his reasons why the concept is *necessary*. The second explains the *legitimacy* of the inference to an unconscious. For the sake of clarity, I will divide Freud's arguments following two further categories, namely his empirical reasons for the unconscious and then his conceptual reasons.

Freud gives three principal empirical reasons for the *necessity* of the concept of the unconscious. These take the form of sorts of behavioral or experienced phenomena we encounter, but for which we have no immediate explanation. The first argument Freud gives is what he calls "gaps in consciousness."⁵ These "not only include parapraxes and dreams in healthy people, and everything described as a psychical symptom or an obsession in the sick."⁶

Parapraxes, or slips, might well be the most famous of Freud's concepts: "You dropped your penis ... I mean PENCIL!" These phenomena commonly invoke allusions to Freud and his theories of our repressed, unconscious sexual desires emerging in odd ways in consciousness. How can we explain slips of the tongue? The lack of an immediate explanation is precisely what Freud deems to be a "gap" in consciousness.

Freud also claims that our dreams can present us with this same sort of gap. How can we explain the remarkably odd experiences we seem to have in dreams, such as the dream of our brother's head on a scorpion's body, or of a melting ice cube crying for help? When we discover patterns, especially, in our dreams – such as the recurring presentation of a certain individual or a repeated reference to water – what can possibly explain them? One might explain these, as does Freud, through an account of desires and fears of which the conscious mind is unaware. And, the appeal of this story is obvious. We have desires. Others have desires. We often infer, interpret, and analyze the patterns of their behavior, so why not analyze our own dreams similarly? In this way, Freud inverts the common way we explain the patterns of other people's behavior. When one finds patterns, it is not uncommon to see in them some sort of meaning.

In our waking lives we experience thoughts in odd ways. Asking a loved one "what are you thinking about?" can often reveal the strangest of answers. The oddity of consciousness to which Freud is pointing here involves the progression from one idea to another that seems entirely disconnected. For instance, a parent progresses from thoughts about their reports to be turned in at work, to sudden memories of sandy beaches or sexual fantasies. Where do these oddly progressing ideas *come from*? How can we understand this remarkably strange jump in thought that suddenly *came to mind*? Freud believes our inability to understand the link between thoughts is yet another of these "gaps" in consciousness which necessitate a theory of the unconscious. Of course, his argument assumes that thinking is only understandable as a series of thoughts which are connected directly and with logically implicative reasons. There may have been an evolutionary advantage to a certain amount of randomness in thinking, rendering human beings less predictable and more varied, biologically and behaviorally speaking. As a final example of these gaps, Freud also raises the fact that often we arrive at "intellectual conclusions [but] we know not how."⁷ An instance of this might be the solving of puzzles or paradoxes. We

sometimes stare at puzzles for hours. Some paradoxes have been contemplated for millennia. Sometimes these problems are resolved all of a sudden, and we have no idea what brought the solution, nor why this new understanding was not previously obvious. How can we understand such odd phenomena in consciousness? Freud answers that we need the concept of the unconscious to do so. He claims that "All these conscious acts remain disconnected and unintelligible if we insist upon claiming that every mental act that occurs in us must also necessarily be experienced by us through consciousness."⁸

The second sort of empirical reason Freud gives for the *necessity* of the concept of the unconscious is that we have "ideas in a state of latency."⁹ Without justification, he claims that for the most part, at any one moment, consciousness only has present to itself a "small content."¹⁰ So, there must be something psychical that connects these disparate conscious thoughts, allowing some thoughts to be present to consciousness while others are put on hold. Where else can these thoughts go? Yet again, Freud's answer is the unconscious mind.

Freud's third empirical reason for the concept of the unconscious is what he calls "the effectiveness of hypnotism."¹¹ Many, including Freud and William James, have recognized hypnotism.¹² If hypnotism is effective, Freud believes there needs to be some sort of explanation for how it is these patients can exhibit the behavior they do *without* being aware of their hypnotism.

Freud also gives conceptual justifications for the *necessity* and *legitimacy* of the concept of the unconscious. The reasons he gives here are numerous. We can classify these arguments under four main headings.

First, Freud claims that if the assumptions of the unconscious allow us to "construct a successful procedure by which we can exert an effective influence upon the course of conscious processes, this success will have given us an incontrovertible proof of the existence of what we have assumed."¹³ I place this argument in the conceptual category, even though it refers to empirical evidence and verifications. In effect, this argument looks like one half of a *modus ponens* argument, presuming the antecedent is true. His point is conceptual: If a procedure can be constructed based on an imagined object, and this procedure proves effective, we would have

proof of the object. Unfortunately, Freud does not address the problem of the “placebo effect,” a significant counterexample to his claim.

Next, Freud points out to critics of the unconscious that they must not simply assume there is no such thing. Such an assumption would beg the question against Freud. *Why* not believe there to be an unconscious? Freud further claims that to fail to adopt the theory of the unconscious is to “prematurely abandon the field of psychological research without being able to offer us any compensation from other fields.”¹⁴ Rightly so, Freud demands that we curb unnecessary psychological assumptions, particularly against his theory. This claim does not truly justify the concept of the unconscious, however.

Freud’s third conceptual argument for the unconscious claims that the question begging equation of consciousness with the mental and vice versa “disrupts psychical continuities ... [plunging] us into the insoluble difficulties of psycho-physical parallelism.” He claims that it “overestimates the part played by consciousness.”¹⁵ One way to interpret Freud’s claim here is to say that a simple denial of the unconscious ignores the “gaps” in consciousness. It is unclear what else he might mean by “disrupt[ing] psychical continuities.” It is also unclear, however, why one ought to believe that consciousness is overestimated. One interpretation might be that Freud was answering a claim that all these psychical “discontinuities” were explainable in terms of consciousness. What makes this claim an overestimation? Freud does not say.

All the above conceptual arguments primarily support Freud’s view that the unconscious is *necessary*. The fourth conceptual argument given is a reason to believe the inference to the unconscious is *legitimate*. As such, this argument does not serve as a reason to believe a theory of the unconscious is correct, but rather that it is worthy of consideration in the first place. Freud’s argument unfolds as follows. We rely on inferences about mental states all the time. When we believe there to be other minds “inside” or related somehow to the bodies of friends and others, we are inferring that because they look like us and seem to exhibit the same sorts of behavior we do, by analogy, we can infer that they too have minds. Freud claims that “psychoanalysis demands nothing more than that we should apply this process of inference to ourselves also.”¹⁶ In so doing, we might infer there to be some other mentality, this time not externally, but *within* ourselves. In fact, Freud believes this inference to be *less* assuming than is

the inference to *other minds*. At the same time, the similar move of inferring intelligence is evident in the world or universe, a religious claim, is to Freud wrongheaded and childish.¹⁷

An element worth noting in this conceptual argument is that Freud recognizes a complication. When we infer there to be another mind somehow related to another body, we are concluding there to be another *consciousness*. I am aware of another body, and infer that that body, like mine, is related to a consciousness in quite the same way as is mine. This inference, when applied to oneself should – if it is considered a proper analogy – have the result of concluding there to be another *consciousness* within oneself. While Freud recognizes this issue, he says that it does seem odd to think of another consciousness in oneself of which the conscious mind is not aware. There would be two consciousnesses, unaware of each other, within one and the same mind. But how can this be? What would we say one has “in mind?” I have in mind the subject of my writing. Some other consciousness somehow within my mind would really have its own mind. In the ordinary language sense “it would have a mind of its own.” This language confirms Freud’s suspicion that an inference of another conscious mentality within our own, of which we are unaware, is not very appealing.

Freud correctly concludes that “those who have resisted the assumption of an unconscious *psychical* are not likely to be ready to exchange it for an unconscious *consciousness*.”¹⁸ Furthermore, if we are to assume there to be other conscious mentality of which our consciousness is unaware, we must “be prepared ... to assume the existence in us not only of a second consciousness, but of a third, fourth, perhaps of an unlimited number of states of consciousness, all unknown to us and to one another.”¹⁹ It is interesting that these difficulties with the inference Freud proposes do not lead him to abandon it. Instead, he explains that given these problems, “we have grounds for modifying our inference about ourselves and saying that what is proved is not the existence of a second consciousness in us, but the existence of psychical acts which lack consciousness.”²⁰ He concludes that

... in psycho-analysis there is no choice for us but to assert that mental processes are in themselves unconscious, and to liken the perception of them by means of consciousness to the perception of the external world by means of the

sense-organs ... so psycho-analysis warns us not to equate perceptions by means of consciousness with the unconscious mental processes which are their object ... [and in effect,] internal objects are less unknowable than the external world.²¹

Depending on how one categorizes Freud's justifications here, we might say either that he offered seven or ten arguments, some of which are more properly explanations for the possibility of an unconscious mind, rather than justifications. In the next section, I will present James's challenges for ten alleged proofs for the unconscious, which he published in the *Principles* twenty-five years before Freud's *The Unconscious*. Of course, Freud was not only aware of James before 1915. As Jacques Barzun has pointed out, Freud and James met in 1909, shortly before James's death.²²

II. WILLIAM JAMES'S EARLIER REPLIES TO THEORIES OF THE UNCONSCIOUS

James's critiques of justifications for the concept of the unconscious are found in his "The Mind-Stuff Theory" chapter of *The Principles of Psychology*.²³ He hoped to show that the various theories attempting to divide the content of the mental make a serious mistake. After clarifying his general doubts about "mind-stuff theories," James analyzes the unconscious in terms of two questions: "Can states of mind be unconscious?" and "Do unconscious mental states exist?"²⁴ James writes that some

...try to break down distinctness among mental states by *making a distinction*. This sounds paradoxical, but it is only ingenious. The distinction is that *between the unconscious and the conscious being of the mental state*. It is the sovereign means for believing what one likes in psychology, and of turning what might become a science into a tumbling-ground for whimsies. It has numerous champions, and elaborate reasons to give for itself. We must therefore accord it due consideration.²⁵

James believes that defenders of the unconscious “will hardly try to refute our reasonings by direct attack.”²⁶ Sadly, James’s prescient suspicion here turned out to be true also of Freud. Since the concept was so popular, and since so many alleged proofs had been given for it already, he accords it considerable attention.

James evaluates ten alleged proofs for the unconscious. Since he lays out each proof and reply side by side, I will do the same. It bears repeating that James was not replying directly to Freud in these critiques of the unconscious, since Freud’s “Justification for the Concept of the Unconscious” in *The Unconscious* was not published until twenty-five years later. James speaks instead to the slew of authors who seem to have taken the theory for granted.²⁷ James answers what he believes to be the most common and strongest of the proofs.

1. The first proof James calls “the *minimum visible*, the *minimum audible*.”²⁸ This proof asks how it is we can claim that we are affected by an aggregate, such as in the case of the sound of ocean waves crashing, without claiming each part individually affects our mentality unconsciously. Since we are not conscious of every wave distinctly, it must be that we are unconsciously affected by each and every sound wave, and our unconscious then sums up the individual causes and presents the aggregate to consciousness. We are not aware of each individual crashing wave. We only hear the whole. This proof resembles Freud’s later claim that there are gaps in conscious functioning. According to some, such as Leibniz,²⁹ the aggregate of the waves cannot be the cause of our awareness of the whole, since the aggregate is caused by the individual waves crashing.

James answers this proof by reminding us of the fallacy of division. Simply because the whole affects our mentality, we cannot conclude that all the parts do individually. Such an inference would bear the same structure as the claim that because the Mona Lisa is beautiful, it must be the case that each brush stroke is beautiful. James also reminds us of a point raised by John Stuart Mill. Mill tells us that a certain quantity of the cause may be necessary in order to bring about its effect. James provides the analogy of a rusty scale that is completely unmoved by the unbalance of a single pound to one side. It may indeed require a certain number of pounds to be added before any movement or impact is caused. The same could be said of each individual wave. We need not believe that we hear each individual wave when we hear the aggregate. It

may take a certain *quantity* of waves in order for any of the sound to bring about mental effects. So, we need not believe that certain mental content is summed first in the unconscious. We may simply believe that nothing enters mentality until it does so in consciousness, which can require a certain *amount* of the cause in order to be perceived.

Another point can be made about this first proof. Sound provides a useful example for studying the effects of parts and wholes. When we take the example of the ocean as above, an analysis of the summation of sound waves will serve to refute this proof. When we examine visually the recording of multiple sounds, a very common practice today with popular sound editing software, what we find *is an aggregate*. A wave is simply a linear fluctuation in amplitude of a certain kind – it is the whole, singular combination of a wide spectrum of frequencies and oscillations in amplitude. If we examine a concurrent set of recorded sounds, we will always be left with a single line whose amplitude consists of the summation of all the sounds' frequencies and amplitudes. What should be noted, however, is that the signal recorded and heard *already is the aggregate* (see figures 1, 2 and 3 below).

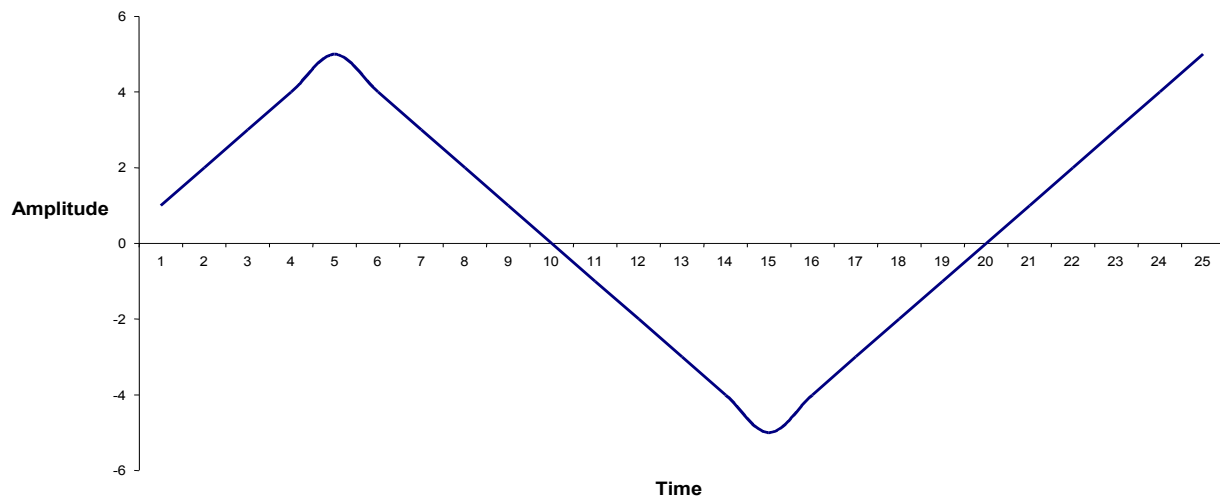


Figure 1: Sound Wave 1.

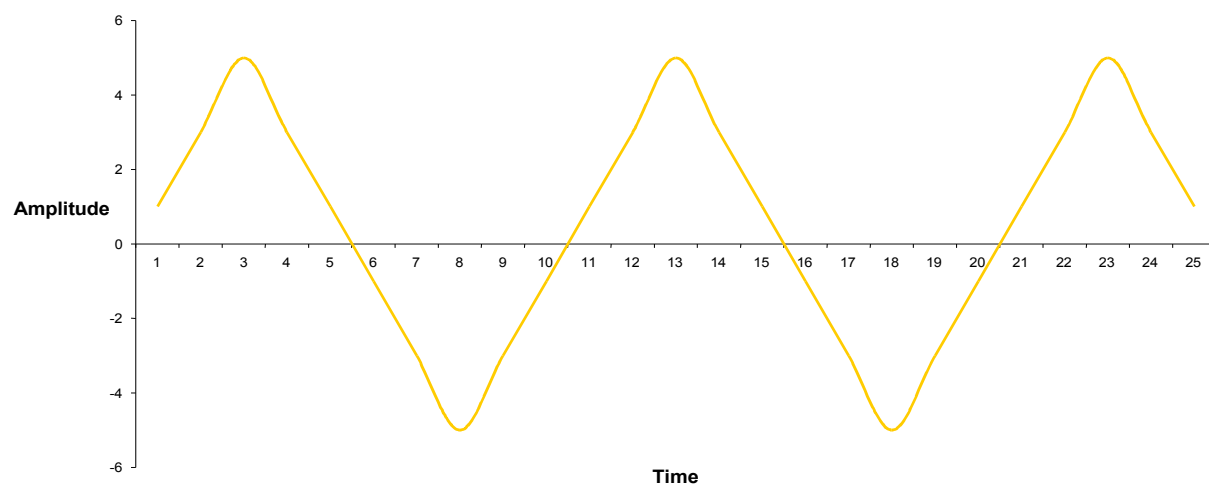


Figure 2. Sound Wave 2.

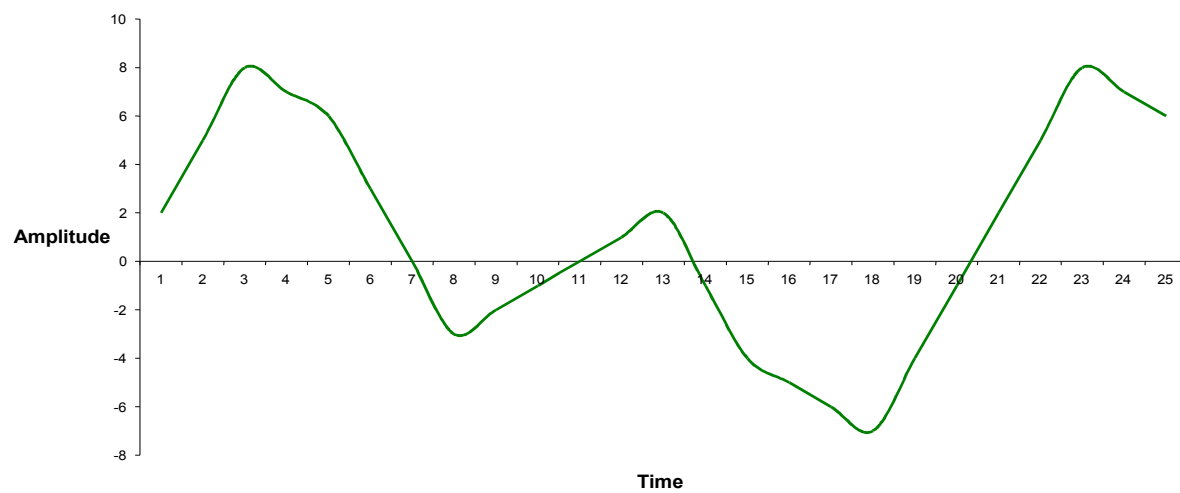


Figure 3: Combined Waves.

Were one to hear each of two different sound waves separately – one at a time – each one would be graphically represented as in figures 1 and 2. But, when these sounds are recorded together, the result is not some sort of image of two separate lines. We still only have *one* line represented by the fusing of the two different sounds, as we see in figure 3. These graphs demonstrate that conscious perception *presents us with a unity that we call an aggregate*.³⁰ This unity is perceived by consciousness. What is interesting is not something unconscious, but rather the question of how it is *in consciousness* that we can perceive a unity, a singular sound wave, and yet distinguish within it distinct sound sources. This happens through education, experience, and habituation, such as when master chefs learn to recognize the many flavors in a dish, which at an earlier time tasted like a unified whole when he or she was a non-specialist. In similar fashion, James's theories of habituation, attention, and focus in consciousness offer explanations for the ways in which different sounds are distinguished from an audible totality.

2. The second proof that James evaluates involves habit. Every day we perform countless tasks automatically. Some of them are complex. A factory worker can learn a set of complex maneuvers that eventually become nearly automatic, much in the way that musicians practice until they no longer have to think about certain movements. After strong habituation, if we observe the worker or the musician, we might be stunned to see him or her performing the very same task with eyes closed, or while in an engaged conversation with a co-worker. They can seem to pay no attention to their work, and yet complete more or perform better than the novices who give the work their full attention. How can we explain this odd phenomenon? The complex activities with which they are engaged require a certain comprehension, perception and volition which seem to be entirely absent from consciousness.

James believes that there are several ways to explain complex automatic behavior. One is that consciousness relating to these behaviors merely passes so rapidly that our consciousness neither focuses attention on it, nor remembers it later. Another possibility is that our consciousness can be “*split-off* from the rest of the consciousness of the hemispheres.”³¹ One way to understand this handling of several tasks at once, in terms of “splitting” consciousness happens all the time. The modern term, “multitasking,” refers to this phenomenon. Some joke that those who cannot multitask “can’t walk and chew gum at the same time,” because it is odd

when people are incapable of attending to more than one action at a time. Someone, for instance, who learns to play guitar at first can do little else at the same time. Eventually, she becomes adept at singing while strumming. What is achieved with practice is a certain *balance of attention*. James writes, "either lack of memory or split-off cortical consciousness will certainly account for all the facts."³²

It may be helpful to note that computers only very rarely multitask, contrary to popular language on the matter. Windows based machines have given us the ability to perform multiple tasks at once. Our computer processors, however, each only performed one calculation at a time.³³ They simply made calculations incredibly quickly, such that we perceived these tasks as being computed simultaneously. I mention this example for those who believe James's first possibility here is fanciful.

3. The third proof that James evaluates also resembles one of Freud's justifications in 1915. When "thinking of A, we presently find ourselves thinking of C. Now B is the natural logical link between A and C, but we have no consciousness of having thought B."³⁴ In this event, it must be that thought B was present *unconsciously*, thereby providing the missing link.

James deals with this proof quickly. He provides two simpler alternatives to explain this phenomenon. First, it could be that B was indeed present in consciousness, but was forgotten.³⁵ Or second, B's "*brain-tract* alone was adequate to do the whole work of coupling A with C, without the idea B being aroused at all, whether consciously or unconsciously."³⁶ Moreover, why must we believe that logic is the director of consciousness. The mind's ideas need not progress necessarily according to logic. John Dewey believed there to be a sort of "interconnectedness ... [and] points of contact and mutual bearings"³⁷ in the realm of ideas. Why believe that idea A cannot bring about the thought of idea C? It might only be the case that idea A cannot alone *imply* idea C, but the difference between implication and the arousing of consciousness is substantial.

4. The fourth proof points to oddities of sleep. Somnambulists can perform complex actions while in a sleep state. When they awake, they do not remember their actions performed while asleep. Others can awaken precisely at a specific target hour. Still others find the previous

night's problem solved when they awake. How can this be, except through the presence of unconscious mentality?

James answers that we must forget when we awaken from sleep the conscious activities we performed. He likens this sort of forgetting to the kind we experience when we awaken from hypnosis. Because James's reply is brief, we might also add that we experience a similar phenomenon when inebriated. In all three instances of affected consciousness, states of sleep, hypnosis and inebriation, our ordinary capacities of consciousness are skewed. Why would the faculty of memory be different? We make choices differently, we see differently, and our coordination is different. In fact, particularly in the case of dreams, it seems that our conscious imaginations are most uninhibited. It could simply be that our control over memory is simultaneously diminished.

5. The fifth proof that James evaluates is similar to the fourth, except that the sort of altered consciousness is "an attack of epileptiform unconsciousness."³⁸ In this case, it is upon "coming to" from the trance, rather than waking up, that the patient has forgotten all the complex actions they performed, and the forms of reasoning that must have been required for them. James compares the "rapid oblivescence of common *dreams*"³⁹ to the present phenomenon. We can awaken from dreams and *immediately* forget what they were about.

6. The sixth proof is also short. It claims that in "musical concord the vibrations of the several notes are in relatively simple ratios. The mind must unconsciously count the vibrations and be pleased by the simplicity which it finds."⁴⁰ James replies that the response of the brain to the vibrations might be what is agreeable. It may simply be a physical reaction of the body to stimulus that is the agreeable element in our experience of musical "concord." Adding to this, I would again appeal to evolutionary causes. In a converse case, consider that human beings were more likely to survive if they found children's discordant cries unappealing, and similarly with the growl of animals and the cacophony of friction.

7. The seventh proof asks how it is we seem to "know more than we can say."⁴¹ When children are capable of inference they cannot verbalize, there must be some explanation. James refers to an example given by the author of this proof, J.E. Maude. Maude claims that often we cannot even remember which way a door opens when asked about it. Nevertheless, we open it

every day without fail. How can this be? There must be some repository of stored knowledge of which we are not conscious to account for it.

Here again, James's reply gives an important place to the brain in automatic functions. When one knows a friend's voice because of its overtones, this does not mean there need be any knowledge of the overtones. Rather, the "particular collocation of the molecules in certain tracts of the brain" may serve the same function of triggering the idea of the friend.⁴²

The present proof is a version of 2 above – in saying that with all action that at one time was conscious and deliberate, it must somehow remain in the mind, but have been pushed into the unconscious. This need not be the case. Either the body or consciousness is conditioned over time to respond to stimuli in a certain repetitive, simple fashion – such that the answer that individuals will give is "I never think about it!" when asked, for example, how their front door opens – to the right or to the left. This does not imply unconscious knowledge. It implies an ability whose explanation is *not conscious*.⁴³ Again James looks to the power of habituation, therefore. When breaking in a new baseball glove with oil, pressure, a baseball, and time, we do not create an unconscious mind in the glove, yet we leave in it an impression and behavioral inclination that has a purpose and a shape.

8. The eighth proof is also answered in terms of the brain, with the inclusion of the whole nervous system. The proof alleges that instincts are signs of intelligence whose ends are unknown to us. The intelligence must imply a sort of mentality, but we are not conscious of it, so it must imply the unconscious. James replies by referring to his chapter on instinct in volume 2 of *The Principles of Psychology*.⁴⁴ He writes, "Instinct is usually defined as the faculty of acting in such a way as to produce certain ends, without foresight of the ends, and without previous education in performance."⁴⁵ The question to ask of the defenders of the unconscious, is *why believe all these faculties are mental?* We have already said here above that we can grow accustomed to certain behavior to the point at which it can become non-cognitive. The body performs these actions in a sense *for us*. Any wrestler having engaged in the sport for several years knows how much one forgets from year to year. Nevertheless, as training begins again in the new year, somehow the body performs the actions even though we ourselves do not remember them. Why believe this involves unconscious mentality? In fact, the phenomenon to

which I refer here is metaphorically called “muscle memory.”⁴⁶ The metaphor may seem to ignore the mind/body problem, but this need not be. First, it is only a metaphor to call what is done to the body “memory,” which could instead be called “conditioning” or “habituation.” If we bend a straight piece of metal of a certain sort, and in a certain way, we will produce a spring. It would be incorrect to claim that we have given the spring memory in a mental sense, and yet the spring will react in a purposeful way when stimulated. That reaction was not possible before the spring was conditioned. The mistake in calling attention to instinctual responses involves the interpretation of actions of the body in mental terms only because of the similarity between the body’s tendencies and similar mental functions and decisions. What we have are body capacities, tendencies, or faculties that somehow inhere in a given organ. Mentality need not enter the picture.

It may be objected that instincts are not simple motions or muscle memory. They involve imitation (as in the behavior of small children), love, belligerence, fear, shame and curiosity, to name a few.⁴⁷ They are not simple motions. They are tendencies of human actions. James explains them in an evolutionary way, dealing with the nervous system. The answer James would give to this objection, the claim that the important human instincts are more abstract, regards all instinct. James claims that “every instinct is an impulse.”⁴⁸ Curiosity serves as a helpful tendency that is often interpreted as mental. Curiosity involves a sort of attentiveness. Given one’s nervous system, certain stimuli will necessarily seem more interesting than others. With dogs, it is usually relating to scent, for example. Impulses are all driven by the way our nervous systems receive stimuli. James explains the variation in our instincts with the example of a cat, attracted to mice and fearful of dogs. He writes, “His nervous system is to a great extent a preorganized bundle of such reactions – they are as fatal as sneezing, and as exactly correlated to their special excitants as it is to its own.”⁴⁹ James gives other examples, such as the hamster’s inclination to store food. This does not seem dramatically different in kind from the sorts of human instincts listed above. What we are referring to involves a certain inclination of our actions. The most complex of these are human, but they are all inclinations of a similar kind. In the case of the hamster, James explains that when the hamster sees an ear of corn, his nervous impulse is to immediately go fill his mouth with kernels. Once filled, he has the impulse to rush off

somewhere that becomes his store, and once in safety, he releases the corn. This complex instinctual action does not require human mentality, nor a theory of the unconscious. So its human correlate need not either.

9. The ninth proof pertains to sense perception. We often perceive objects in one way, and interpret them in another. On similar grounds, Descartes claims that the intellect is more trustworthy than the senses, for it lets us know that distant objects are not *actually* small. They are only far away.⁵⁰ When we see a white rabbit in low lighting, we don't necessarily assume the animal is gray, but assume or infer that it is white. Why is it we jump to these more correct conclusions from the empirical data we are given from the senses? These inferences happen so immediately, *and* we are not conscious of them, so they must be unconscious inferences.

James replies by claiming that all these alleged inferences are merely sensational phenomena.⁵¹ In fact, in volume 2 of the *Principles*, James dedicates a chapter each to sensation, imagination, perception of things, and perception of space. When we see the small image of a man, interpreted as a person at a distance, it is simply false that some spatial inference is at play. The eye adjusts its focus when changing from looking at close objects to those far away. In this sense, we *feel* the difference between looking at objects that are close and at those at a distance. Of course, this sort of distinction depends on the relation of our visual perception of one thing to seeing others. The authors of this proof would likely point to the fact that we do not *see* space. But, this seems to discount the importance of focus. When attending to one object we see, an entire field is in focus, while others go out of focus as a consequence. So, at the least, what we can generally do simply with our senses is to determine whether an object is in the same planar field of focus. In sum, though we can see similarities between what in other instances could involve an inference, here we only have sense perception and its relation to consciousness.⁵²

10. The tenth proof that James evaluates is to him "less obviously insufficient than those which we have reviewed." He continues, "there is a great class of experiences in our mental life which may be described as discoveries that a subjective condition which we have been having is really something different from what we had supposed."⁵³ We sometimes find ourselves in love with the least likely of persons, just like Lord Benedick and Lady Beatrice of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*.⁵⁴ The proof also points to discoveries of other kinds. At culinary

school, one learns a great deal of information on how we can distinguish and blend certain flavors. But, those who are unschooled have a general sense for a number of these differences. We discover things about ourselves, about our sense of taste, about our likes and dislikes. We can be shocked to learn that in fact *we would* like certain vegetables, for example. Concerning these matters of taste that we can in some sense distinguish, but cannot explain, “the elements must exist, for we use them to discriminate by; but they must exist in an unconscious state, since we so completely fail to single them out.”⁵⁵ In matters of love, we find a particularly difficult challenge. How can we explain the discovery that Benedick loves Beatrice? He must have loved her all along, particularly given all the attention he paid her. How could he have missed it? His love must have resided in his unconscious.

Though James offers a lengthy reply to this kind of proof, the main element to be drawn from his answer is succinct. He explains the misguided proof as follows

Two states of mind which refer to the same external reality, or two states of mind the later one of which refers to the earlier, are described as the same state of mind, or ‘idea,’ published as it were in two editions; and then whatever qualities of the second edition are found openly lacking in the first are explained as having really been there, only in an ‘unconscious’ way ... The psychological stock-in-trade of some authors is the belief that two thoughts about one thing are virtually the same thought, and that this same thought may in subsequent reflections become more and more *conscious* of what it really *was* all along from the first. But once, make the distinction between simply *having an idea* at the moment of its presence and subsequently knowing all sorts of things *about it* ... one has no difficulty in escaping from the labyrinth.⁵⁶

In the example of Benedick and Beatrice, each throws the other harsh, biting words with regularity, and greatly enjoys the challenge of wit. With as much as each desires to mock and embarrass the other, these would be impossible when they are apart. So, whether they seek each other out as a game or for love, they at least seek each other out. In the passage above, James

first alludes to “*having an idea*,” such as the thought that Benedick enjoys being with Beatrice – to battle with poisoned tongues. The later thought – that Benedick loves Beatrice – need not have *been* the former thought. Rather, it is a new, interpretive *idea*, different from the first one. There need not *have been* love in the former. Nevertheless, the idea that Benedick enjoys the company of Beatrice was there. To James the fallacy of inferring there to have been love in the first idea is remarkable. He explains, “it would be difficult to believe that intelligent men could be guilty of so patent a fallacy, were not the history of psychology there to give the proof.”⁵⁷ The claim that Benedick loves Beatrice from the very beginning of the story is wrong. Their attention tends toward each other, and later, love is fostered with some friendly prodding. In sum, in matters of discovered love, perhaps it is not so different from learning one loves broccoli. Until the thought has arisen, one does not love. Nevertheless, one can later think longingly about past circumstances previously deemed unpleasant, as with Benedick and Beatrice. There is no need for a theory of the unconscious here. We suddenly come to have new feelings and thoughts about previous ideas, of which we had thought differently. I’ll conclude this point with James’s thoughts on the matter of discovered love:

When I decide that I have, without knowing it, been for several weeks in love, I am simply giving a name to a state which previously *I have not named*, but which was fully conscious; and which, though it was a feeling towards the same person for whom I now have a much more inflamed feeling, and though it continuously led into the latter, and is similar enough to be called by the same name, is yet in no sense identical with the latter, and least of all in an ‘unconscious’ way.⁵⁸

This tenth challenged proof concludes what James had to say about the unconscious and sends a clear message that he did not accept theories of the unconscious mind, even if James noted that there are indeed mental habits and conditioning, which pass below the level of focused attention in consciousness.

CONCLUSION

It is important to think carefully about concepts like the unconscious, distinguishing it from processes and practices that have been habituated. Today, psychology is studying important related ideas, such as stereotype threat, a phenomenon whereby women and minorities perform worse on tests when they are asked to state their gender, race, or ethnicity at the beginning of tests, for example. The Implicit Associations Test is used to check the extent to which certain ideas and assumptions have been internalized, including undermining personal attitudes or assumptions which undercut persons' self-respect. These phenomena are often not matters that people believe explicitly or consciously, yet culture and behavior can be patterned in such a way that prioritizes dominant groups. Therefore, it is vital to look at patterns and behaviors that are not conscious and that cause people harm, consciously or unconsciously. At the same time, James is right that it is vital not to muddy the waters with overstated ideas, used to justify whichever view one cares to hold. This accusation James leveled against earlier theorists of the unconscious can be raised against elements of Freud's theory. At least it should be clear that James paid considerable attention to the concept of the unconscious, arguing against key justifications for it, and despite this, Freud rehashed many of the same arguments that James had already taken apart. Given this analysis, James's generous academic spirit should not be interpreted too strongly as a serious appreciation for Freud's ideas about the unconscious, contrary to Weinberger's view. It is certainly vital that we consider the crucial role of habit and of culture in shaping the patterns of people's behavior, which can clearly bolster or undermine their sense of self-respect and their pursuit of happiness. When we take these things seriously, furthermore, we see why we ought to be concerned about those elements of behavior and consequences of our actions that conflict with our conscious intentions. Nevertheless, we can consider these matters without depending on Freud's questionable concept of the unconscious.

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NOTES

¹ See Joel Weinberger, "William James and the Unconscious: Redressing a Century-Old Misunderstanding," *Psychological Science* 11, Issue 6 (2000): 439-445.

² Gerald E. Myers, "James and Freud," *The Journal of Philosophy* 87, Issue 11 (1990): 593-599.

³ Ibid., 593.

⁴ Sigmund Freud, "Justification for the Concept of the Unconscious," in *The Unconscious*, as collected in *The Freud Reader*, edited by Peter Gay (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), 573-577. Hereafter referred to as Freud, "J.U."

⁵ Freud, "J.U.," p. 573.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Freud, "J.U.," p. 573.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., p. 574.

¹⁰ Ibid. It would have been more precise to say that at one point in time we only have a limited content as the focus of our attention. Attention, however, is not equivalent with consciousness – as we will see in the section that follows, on William James.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 575.

¹² James mentions the effectiveness of "any good hypnotic subject" in his work, *The Principles of Psychology*, p. 65.

¹³ Freud, "J.U.," p. 574.

¹⁴ Freud, "J.U.," p. 574.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Freud, "J.U.," p. 575.

¹⁷ Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*. He presents this sort of view in other works as well, of course.

¹⁸ Freud, "J.U.," p. 576. Given the context of Freud's point, we can interpret the term "unconscious *psychical*," as most likely the sort of mentality that is unconscious and that lacks consciousness. This he would be contrasting with an "unconscious *consciousness*," which would instead be a consciousness of which one's ordinary, current, or primary consciousness is unaware.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., p. 576-577.

²² Jacques Barzun, *A Stroll with William James* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 232.

²³ James, *P.P.*, chapter 6, p. 145.

²⁴ James, *P.P.*, p. 162-176.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 164.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 163.

²⁷ James specifically mentions E. von Hartmann, E. Colsonet, T. Laycock, W.B. Carpenter, F.P. Cobbe, F. Bowen, R.H. Hutton, J.S. Mill, G.H. Lewes, D.G. Thompson, and J.M. Baldwin. James, *P.P.*, p. 164.

²⁸ James, *P.P.*, p. 164.

²⁹ On page 164 of *P.P.*, James cites Leibniz's "Nouveaux Essais, Avant-propos."

³⁰ The important point to note here is that we do not need a concept of the unconscious to make some sort of conversion between aggregates and parts. This claim does not rule out the possibility, however, that the unconscious could experience the unity that is also an aggregate. Rather, the point here is to correct a misunderstanding that originates at least as early as with Leibniz concerning the way we experience wholes and parts. This understanding explains how it is consciousness can account for the problem of wholes and parts.

³¹ James, *P.P.*, p. 165. By "hemispheres," James refers in part to the portion of the brain that relates to conscious deliberation. So, automatic action, he is suggesting, need not be understood as action that involves deliberation. For a clear explanation of James's use of the term "hemispheres," see his *P.P.*, p. 20-23, "General Notion of Hemispheres." He explains that animals without the deliberative hemispheres cannot "deliberate, pause, post-pone, nicely weigh one motive against another, or compare," on page 21.

³² Ibid., p. 165. Though James does not mention it here, we should understand this "splitting-off" as a division of attention, not of the mind.

³³ This was at least true in early computers, if it is no longer true today.

³⁴ James, *P.P.*, p. 165.

³⁵ This sort of forgetting, it should be noted, does not demand a theory of repression. The theory of repression adds a great deal of assumptions to the commonplace phenomenon of forgetting to which James is referring here.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 166. By "brain-tract," James might be interpreted as referring to the relevant physical portion of the brain that might in some way connect certain ideas. But these connections, then would clearly not involve unconscious desires, but rather simple physical and biological connections.

³⁷ Dewey, *D. E.*, p. 163.

³⁸ James, *P.P.*, p. 166.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 168.

⁴³ Note well that unconscious and not conscious are *not* equivalents. I am not conscious of a great many things that I simply don't know – the melting point of Helium, for instance. The unconscious, according to Freud is something that houses desires, fears, and more.

⁴⁴ James, *P.P.*, vol. 2, p. 383.

⁴⁵ James, *P.P.*, vol. 2, p. 383.

⁴⁶ For just one of many possible sources for learning more, see Chris Chafe and Sile O'Modhrain, "Musical Muscle Memory and the Haptic Display of Performance Nuance," *ICMC Proceedings* (1996): 1-4.

⁴⁷ Though some of these examples may not in every occasion be instinctual, these behaviors could be encompassed by James's definition of instinct.

⁴⁸ James, *P.P.*, vol. 2, p. 385.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 384.

⁵⁰ Descartes, René, *Meditations*, in *Readings in Modern Philosophy, Volume 1*, Roger Ariew, and Eric Watkins, eds. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Group, Inc., 2000), p. 28.

⁵¹ By sensational I mean ‘relating to the senses,’ not the sense which means ‘exaggerated.’

⁵² James provides us a reminder here that should be noted. He explains that even if there were an inference involved in this process, there may be reason to believe it is a conscious inference that is quickly forgotten, because it seems common and ordinary.

⁵³ James, *P.P.*, p. 170. We must not read James too liberally here, as saying this proof is acceptable. It is “insufficient,” but more subtly than the others.

⁵⁴ William Shakespeare, *Much Ado about Nothing* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

⁵⁶ James, *P.P.*, p. 172. It is worth noting as an aside at least that John Dewey’s ideas about what is at first inchoate in inquiry and becomes definite through the progress of inquiry can also explain the case here. Dewey called the mistake of believing an idea or phenomenon existed in the inchoate phase *the philosopher’s fallacy*, a thought which James appears to have anticipated here. He wrote, “The commonest of all philosophical fallacies is the fallacy of converting eventual outcomes into antecedent conditions thereby escaping the need (and salutary effect) of taking into account the operations and processes that condition the eventual subject-matter.” See John Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, in *The Collected Works: Later Works, 1925, Vol. 1* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981), 352.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ James, *P.P.*, p. 174.

WILLIAM JAMES ON THE HUMANITIES

RICHARD HALL

ABSTRACT

William James's conception of the humanities and their value opens a way to restoring them to the center of the academic curriculum but without compromising other disciplines. He does this by showing that any discipline, whether the natural and social sciences, or even the various branches of engineering and other technical fields, qualify as one of the humanities or liberal arts if studied historically. The immediate aim of a humanistic or liberal education, in James's historical conception of it, is to acquaint students with the best achievements in all fields of human endeavor so that they might emulate, equal and even surpass them. Its ultimate aim is to sharpen students' discernment of real quality wherever and whenever they encounter it, particularly among rival politicians and their policies. Implicit in James's ideal of a liberal education are some of his most distinctive philosophical ideas, viz. evolutionism, functionalism, pragmatism, individualism, and personalism.

There is properly no history, only biography.

R. W. Emerson

The humanities are in crisis, their value and role being questioned as never before. They have been increasingly shunted aside by the sciences and technical fields. Vocational programs in areas like engineering and business administration now dominate the curriculum, enjoying the lion's share of prestige and funding once enjoyed by classics, philosophy, and history, and attracting students intent on lucrative careers. A grim sign of the times is that the philosophy department at England's Middlesex University, not to mention other philosophy departments at British universities, has been

threatened with closure. Ironically, this crisis has been exacerbated by the humanists themselves who sharply disagree over the nature, role, and worth of humanistic or liberal education:

Now the humanities have become the Ottoman Empire of the academy, a sprawling, incoherent, and steadily declining congeries of disparate communities, each formed around one or another credal principle of ideology and identity, and each with its own complement of local sultans, khedives, and potentates. And the empire steadily erodes, as colleges and universities eliminate such core humanities departments as classics . . . , and enrollment figures for humanities courses continue to fall or stagnate.¹

The humanistic disciplines or liberal arts began to lose ground early in the twentieth century, particularly in the United States, when science, engineering, and technology began to dominate the curriculum in American colleges and universities to meet the needs of a newly emergent and vibrant industrial and commercial society. Describing the state of American higher education then, Jacques Barzun writes:

The American college had been topped, if not crowned, by the graduate and professional schools. The physical sciences had taken over a large slice of the undergraduate curriculum and forced a new standard upon intellect everywhere—specialization. Out of the bits and pieces of the college “electives” a student was supposed to educate himself and acquire or prepare for a specialty.²

In his short and engaging lecture of 1907, “The Social Value of the College-Bred,” William James spiritedly addressed this incipient crisis in humanistic education. He here gives as succinct and cogent an *apologia* for a broad education in the humanities or liberal arts—classics, history, philosophy, and literature—as one could hope for, and speaks to the condition of humanistic education today as he did to that of his own time. James’s lecture, though, is more than a *pièce d’occasion*, giving expression as it does to

some of his most distinctive ideas and bringing them to bear in defense of a liberal education. In what follows, I shall give a brief exposition of the lecture, explicate the philosophy underlying it, and show how it meets our current crisis head on.

James begins disarmingly with the common-place observation that seasoned artisans have naturally developed through their own expertise and experience a sure sense of what counts as good work and bad:

Whether his trade be pleading at the bar or surgery or plastering or plumbing, it develops a critical sense in him for that sort of occupation. He understands the difference between second-rate and first-rate work in his whole branch of industry; he gets to know a good job in his own line as soon as he sees it; and getting to know this in his own line, he gets a faint sense of what good work may mean anyhow, that may, if circumstances favor, spread into his judgments elsewhere.³

He believes that development of this “critical sense” should be the chief end and benefit of a more general education in the humanities. It should aim to give us “a general sense of what, under various disguises, *superiority* has always signified and may still signify. The feeling for a good human job anywhere, the admiration of the really admirable, the disesteem of what is cheap and trashy and impermanent—this is what we call the critical sense, the sense for ideal values.”⁴ And the ultimate object of this critical sense is the quality, not so much of workmanship, but principally of persons. “The best claim that a college education can possibly make on your respect,” says James, is “that it should *help you to know a good man when you see him.*”⁵ The good man, or woman, James undoubtedly intends is the expert in whatever field; but perhaps most importantly, the one he has in mind is the exemplary political leader. A desirable effect and even a goal of a liberal education is endowing its beneficiaries with the spirit of political discernment so that they can distinguish a true statesman from a political hack or demagogue, something crucial to maintaining a free and just society: “Our colleges ought to have lit up in us a lasting relish for the better kind of man, a loss of appetite for mediocrities, and a disgust

for cheapjacks. We ought to smell, as it were, the difference of quality in men and their proposals when we enter the world of affairs about us.”⁶

Now to be able to tell who or what qualifies as genuinely good we need to have in mind certain models of human excellence in all fields of human endeavor to which we can compare them to see whether they measure up. Those models are found in the past. There we find arrayed, as in some vast museum, all sorts of human creations—philosophies and religions; scientific theories and technology; political, legal and economic systems; works of fine and practical arts—each representing the pursuit of perfection in all its variety. From them we can learn which have met the test of time and so proven their superiority thereby setting standards by which we can more accurately assess the merits of our current endeavors and of those who engage in them. From them too we can learn something of the qualities of mind, traits of character, and ideals belonging to those who succeeded in their undertakings, and also of their struggles, the obstacles they had to overcome and the vicissitudes they had to face. Consequently, maintains James, higher education, in its quest for touchstones of human excellence in all fields, must have as its focus the human agent. A liberal education, then, is essentially historical in character; its real subject being biography. Here in outline is James’s conception of it:

The sifting of human creations!—nothing less that this is what we ought to mean by the humanities. Essentially this means biography; what our colleges should teach is, therefore, biographical history, that not of politics merely, but of anything and everything so far as human efforts and conquests are factors that have played their part. Studying in this way, we learn what types of activity have stood the test of time; we acquire standards of the excellent and durable. All our arts and sciences and institutions are but so many quests of perfection on the part of men; and when we see how diverse the types of excellence may be, how various the tests, how flexible the adaptations, we gain a richer sense of what the terms “better” and “worse” may signify in general. Our critical sensibilities grow both more acute and less fanatical. We sympathize with

men's mistakes even in the act of penetrating them; we feel the pathos of lost causes and misguided epochs even while we applaud what overcame them.⁷

James here provides an historical criterion of worth. Time determines what is "better" or "worse." For example, the scientific method, democracy, capitalism, and common law have emerged from the crucible of history as superior to their rivals. Incidentally, we have here an implicit argument against moral and cultural relativism: certain things have proven themselves *objectively* superior to others by dint of actually surviving and beating out the competition in the ongoing cultural struggle for existence. Values are not arbitrarily dictated from above or conceived *a priori*, but emerge spontaneously over time. Contributing to a thing's value is its usefulness, or the benefits it yields for individuals and society. This, by the way, is an aspect of James's pragmatism, briefly discussed below.

A significant implication of James's conception of the humanities as historical inquiry is that any academic discipline whatsoever is grist for the humanistic mill if it is studied historically:

You can give humanistic value to almost anything by teaching it historically. Geology, economics, mechanics, are humanities when taught with reference to the successive achievements of the geniuses to which these sciences owe their being. Not taught thus, literature remains grammar, art a catalogue, history a list of dates, and natural science a sheet of formulas and weights and measures.⁸

Furthermore, all subjects, even the most technical and abstract and apparently least suitable for such treatment, ought to be studied historically since the human factor is inexpugnable from them. "Let in every modern subject," James urges, "sure that any subject will prove humanistic, if its setting be kept only wide enough."⁹

Developing a critical sense of what is genuinely good is, for James, equally indispensable for the well-being of both the individual and society. For the individual, it

results in freedom of thought, independence of judgment, and moral autonomy. But failing to develop it is nothing short of catastrophic—James’s language could not be stronger in its denunciation—because it marks a failure of one to think for one’s self about the good by abdicating that prerogative to others. “But to have spent one’s youth at college, in contact with the choice and rare and precious, and yet still to be a blind prig or vulgarian, unable to scent out human excellence or to divine it amid its accidents, to know it only when ticketed and labeled and forced on us by others, this indeed should be accounted the very calamity and shipwreck of a higher education.”¹⁰

A citizenry possessed of a critical sense of the good is the *sine qua non* of a flourishing democracy. James notes that democracy is reputed by its critics to have a baneful leveling effect on its populace and tends to breed a stultifying mediocrity that smothers merit. In 1907, James believed that the American Republic was at a crossroads, and warned (echoing de Tocqueville):

Democracy is on its trial, What its critics now affirm is that its preferences are inveterately for the inferior. . . .Vulgarity enthroned and institutionalized, elbowing everything superior from the highway, this, they tell us, is our irremediable destiny; and the picture-papers of the European continent are already drawing Uncle Sam with the hog instead of the eagle for his heraldic emblem.¹¹

If democracy is to survive and flourish, insists James, the people must be wise enough to pick and follow the best leaders. James adheres to Carlyle’s “Great Man” theory of history; human progress is made by individual geniuses who establish patterns of action and thought thence to be appropriated and followed by the multitude:

Mankind does nothing save through initiatives on the part of inventors, great or small, and imitation by the rest of us—these are the sole factors active in human progress. Individuals of genius show the way, and set the patterns, which common people then adopt and follow. *The rivalry of the patterns is the history of the world.* Our democratic problem thus is

statable in ultra-simple terms: Who are the kind of men from whom our majorities shall take their cue? Whom shall they treat as rightful leaders?¹²

However, James thinks that this choice of leaders properly devolves on those possessed of a critical sense, the liberally educated, who can judiciously discern who is best and why. They have not only the capacity, but the obligation no less, to help identify the superior leaders. They constitute a natural aristocracy, whose motto should be noblesse oblige, who ought to act disinterestedly for the common good. Identifying himself with them, James remarks, “we stand for ideal interests solely, for we have no corporate selfishness and wield no powers of corruption.”¹³ Ever the optimist, his faith and hope is that these ideal interests in time must prevail thereby enabling democracy to flourish: “The ceaseless whisper of the more permanent ideals, the steady tug of truth and justice, give them but time, *must* warp the world in their direction.”¹⁴

However, if seats of higher learning, as repositories of ideals, fail to inculcate in their students a critical sense of what is truly good so they can set the “tone” for society as a whole, then, James warns, the populace will be left to the predations of the popular press and the mass market. He speaks here as a future historian reflecting ruefully on what had come to pass:

By the middle of the twentieth century the higher institutions of learning had lost all influence over public opinion in the United States. But the mission of raising the tone of democracy, which they had proved themselves so lamentably unfitted to exert, was assumed with rare enthusiasm and prosecuted with extraordinary skill and success by a new educational power; and for the clarification of their human sympathies and elevation of their human preferences, the people at large acquired the habit of resorting exclusively to the guidance of certain private literary adventures, commonly designated in the market by the affectionate name of ten-cent magazines.¹⁵

To see how prescient James unfortunately was, for “certain private literary adventures” substitute “privately owned mass media,” media that now form a spider-web of multinational conglomerates whose only ideal, if it can be called that, is profit. Who sets the tone of popular culture today? Is it the university with its “ideal interests”? The answers, I fear, are too obvious.

For Plato, the principal aim of education, particularly in philosophy, is statesmanship so that the rulers (guardians) might rule justly; for James, its principal aim is citizenship so that citizens might choose wisely their own leaders. Like Dewey, James believes in education for an enlightened democracy. He is calling for a meritocracy open to all comers where admissibility is based, not on social or economic class or blood, but on possession of a “critical sense” motivated by what Matthew Arnold called “a disinterested endeavor to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world.”¹⁶ James’s plea for an educated electorate recalls Thomas Jefferson’s admonition: “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.”¹⁷ For James, then, the liberal arts are not effete and ornamental offerings with a whiff of the finishing school about them, designed at best to enable us to make polite and clever conversations at cocktail parties. They are not “soft” subjects, but rather, eminently muscular and practical ones that should convince even the most intransigent skeptics and cynics of their worth.

James ends his lecture with a profile of the truly cultured (liberally educated). They are not cynics who know the price of everything but the value of nothing, nor so jaded that they are incapable of enjoying anything; their tastes are not at the mercy of the winds of fashion, and neither do they try to lord it over others by flaunting their “superior” culture. They are not among those who are “unable to know any good thing when they see it, incapable of enjoyment unless a printed label gives them leave.”¹⁸ By contrast, says James, “Real culture lives by sympathies and admirations, not by dislikes and disdains—under all misleading wrappings it pounces unerringly upon the human core.”¹⁹ Cultured persons know the good when they see it, and rejoice in it. They can distinguish infallibly the tinsel from the silver, the fool’s gold from the gold.

Now how might James’s program for a liberal arts education based upon an historical search for standards of human excellence, and for the human core at the heart

of any field, practically pan out if actually implemented in an academic curriculum? Consider, for example, how it might transform evolutionary biology into a humanistic discipline. Students would study, together with the traditional biological sciences, the history of biology; more specifically, the history of evolutionary theory, from the earliest speculations of Anaximander down to Darwin's theory of natural selection right on to current theories. They would consider how and why Darwin's theory eventually prevailed over rival evolutionary theories like Lamarck's. Moreover, they would look into Darwin's habits of thought and temperament such as his empirical rigor and legendary caution, and their influence on the formulation and publication of his theory. Students would become aware of the personal conflicts Darwin faced, even at home with his wife Emma, when he contemplated the implications for religion of natural selection. However, their historical investigations would not be confined to the science of evolutionary theory. They would concern themselves with the theory in its broadest cultural context and inquire into its impact on society, politics, and economics and its implications for religion, philosophy, and art. As a result of their historical inquiries into the origins of their science, students would come to understand, among other things, why the theory of natural selection qualifies as the best explanation for the origins and development of life and thus serves as a model scientific theory; what qualities of mind and temperament, such as Darwin's own, best serve the interests of science and so worthy of their emulation; and how science necessarily affects the larger culture of which it is inescapably a part.

As indicated above, James's "The Social Value of the College-Bred" embodies some of his most fundamental and distinctive ideas; among them are evolutionism, functionalism, pragmatism, individualism, and personalism, to which I shall now turn.

The massive influence of Darwin on James's thought is evident in his characterization of history as "the rivalry of the patterns" of thought and action, suggesting the competitive struggle for acceptance among ideas analogous to the struggle for existence among organisms. The Darwinian impact is further evident in the following passage from his "Talks to Teachers" where James describes the evolutionary function of consciousness as simply an adaptation abetting the survival of the human organism:

Man, we now have reason to believe, has been evolved from infra-human ancestors, in whom pure reason hardly existed, if at all, and whose mind, so far as it can have had any function, would appear to have been an organ for adapting their movements to the impressions received from the environment, so as to escape the better from destruction. Consciousness would thus seem in the first instance to be nothing but a sort of superadded biological perfection—useless unless it prompted to useful conduct, and inexplicable apart from that consideration.²⁰

In his account here of the human mind (consciousness) as having evolved in our prehistoric hominid ancestors specifically as “an organ for adapting their movements to the impressions received from the environment, so as to escape the better from destruction,” James gives expression to the psychological theory of functionalism, which James originated and upon which his reputation in psychology partly depends. In his seminal essay, “Does Consciousness Exist?,” James argues parsimoniously that consciousness (mind) is not a substance or thing but rather a “function” or process facilitating the adaptation of the organism to its environment.

This imperative of survival dictated by natural selection justifies James’s preference for the practical man or woman over the purely theoretical one. In the above-mentioned “Talks to Teachers,” he contrasts the two human types. On the classical view of Plato and Aristotle, “‘Man’s supreme glory, . . . , is to be a *rational* being, to know absolute and eternal and universal truth.’”²¹ This viewpoint counsels our withdrawal from the tumultuous scene of life into solitude thereby better to contemplate disinterestedly the nature and causes of things and so achieve what Aristotle calls “theoretical wisdom.” But in the best of all possible worlds, says James, “the man of contemplation would be treated as only half a human being, passion and practical resource would become once more glories of our race, a concrete victory over this earth’s outward powers of darkness would appear an equivalent for any amount of passive spiritual culture, and conduct would remain as the test of every education worthy of the name.”²² James demands that we enter the hurly-burly of life and strenuously engage the world. The very practical ideal of a specifically liberal arts education should be the

cultivation in its beneficiaries of the ability to discern true worth in its various manifestations, particularly in the political realm, and to distinguish it from the false and meretricious. James believed fervently in the possibility of amelioration—his educational ideal is nothing less than the material and moral improvement of the human race. Note that James’s esteeming the practical type over the theoretical is grounded in his functional and evolutionary psychology, in his understanding of the human mind as an adaptive instrument—“man, whatever else he may be, is primarily a practical being, whose mind is given him to aid in adapting him to this world’s life.”²³

James’s conception of the aim of a specifically liberal arts education as making us more discriminatory with respect to values—those qualities which, among other things, improve our multiple adaptations and make for survival—is grounded in his conception of the aim of education in general. He defines “education” as such as “the organizing of *resources* in the human being, of powers of conduct which shall fit him to his social and physical world. . . . *the organization of acquired habits of conduct and tendencies to behavior.*”²⁴ A liberal arts education contributes to this organization as it bears ultimately on our capacity to select the best leaders.

James’s insistence that the ultimate aim and value of education lie in practice, particularly in its facilitating the adaptation of human beings to their social and physical environments, is clearly an expression of another of his fundamental ideas, namely, pragmatism. Pragmatism stipulates that beliefs and theories are ultimately validated by their utility. The hallmark of truth is the practical benefits which flow from its application to the world, of the positive difference it makes in human affairs. The ultimate test of “every education worthy of the name,” then, is the improvements it makes in the lives of individual persons and the life of the community in which they are members—in brief, its contribution to a flourishing democracy whose citizens are responsibly engaged in civic affairs.

Central to James’s conception of humanistic education as the study of historical biography is his belief that superior individuals do in fact play a decisive role in determining the course of human events, though in tandem with forces in the larger social and physical environments such as described in Marx’s economic determinism. This is an expression of James’s philosophical individualism, another fundamental and recurrent

theme of his thought. In the following passage, taken from his essay “Great Men and Their Environment,” he contrasts his own position with the environmental determinism of Herbert Spencer: To the question, “What are the causes that make communities change from generation to generation?” James answers:

The difference is due to the accumulated influences of individuals, of their examples, their initiatives, and their decisions. The Spencerian school replies, the changes are irrespective of persons, and independent of individual control. They are due to the environment, to the circumstances, the physical geography, the ancestral conditions, the increasing experience of outer relations.²⁵

James takes a middle position between the extremes of environmental determinism and individual initiative signaling their reciprocal influence. According to James, great human individuals are in a reciprocal relationship with their environment, both physical and social. Geniuses occasionally emerge, though their origins are obscure, and if they happen to be born into a propitious cultural environment in which their talents can develop and flourish then they stand to significantly influence their society. On the other hand, if they are born into an environment that denies them any opportunity and scope for the cultivation and exercise of their talents then these will atrophy and die and so have no impact on their social environment. Thus, had Beethoven been born on the American frontier he would not have become Beethoven. James, yet again showing the influence of Darwin, compares great individuals and their cultural environment to the spontaneous variations in organisms and their natural environment. Those organisms that have traits well adapted to their habitat will, as it were, be “selected” by it to survive, prosper and reproduce, and, through their progeny, will in turn alter their environment by becoming dominant in it. By contrast, those organisms lacking these adaptive traits will not be selected for survival and reproduction and will eventually face extinction. As James puts it, “the relation of the visible environment to the great man is in the main exactly what it is to the ‘variation’ in the darwinian philosophy. It chiefly adopts or rejects, preserves or destroys, in short *selects* him.”²⁶ Expanding on this reciprocation between individuals and their environment, with natural selection as his key, James affirms:

The mutations of society, then, from generation to generation, are in the main due directly or indirectly to the acts or the example of individuals whose genius was so adapted to the receptivities of the moment, or whose accidental position of authority was so critical that they became ferments, initiators of movement, setters of precedence or of fashion, centres of corruption, or destroyers of other persons, whose gifts, had they had free play, would have led society in another direction.²⁷

He thus neatly explains the distinct but complementary roles of individuals and their environment in terms of production and preservation respectively: “The environment *preserves* the conception which it was unable to *produce* in any brain less idiosyncratic than my own.”²⁸

On James’s view, moreover, the superiority of certain individuals lies not only in their decisive alteration of the course of human events—either for better or worse—but also in their unique and irreplaceable insights into things. They made possible what we all can now know and enjoy, though without them we could not. Thus, “Rembrandt must teach us to enjoy the struggle of light with darkness, Wagner to enjoy peculiar musical effects; Dickens gives a twist to our sentimentality, Artemus Ward to our humor; Emerson kindles a new moral light within us.”²⁹ If, for example, Rembrandt and Wagner had not lived, then the former’s particular chiaroscuro and the latter’s peculiar chromaticism would never have been. However, though James extols the ideas and deeds of great individuals as the proper object of study in a liberal arts education, he, in the spirit of Emerson, encourages neither blind hero worship nor mindless imitation but emulation. “Individuals of genius” only “show the way, and set the patterns, which common people then adopt and follow.” They are mentors and guides who kindle and lead our own ideas and actions. As he says in another essay, “The Importance of Individuals,” in “picking out from history our heroes, and communing with their kindred spirits—in imagining as strongly as possible what differences their individualities brought about in this world, whilst its surface was still plastic in their hands, and what

whilom feasibilities they made impossible—each one of us may best fortify and inspire what creative energy may lie in his own soul.”³⁰

Related to James’s individualism is his affirmation of, in a variety of ways, the reality, integrity, inviolability, and supreme importance of the individual person—what I call his “personalism.” (Though James does not officially belong to the philosophical school of Personalism as such, his affirmation of the personal in his philosophy is sufficient to characterize it as personalistic.) By recommending that the study of history should properly be biographical, James intended restoring persons to their rightful place in the scheme of things. But in so doing James was swimming against the intellectual tide of his day and, for that matter, our own.

During James’s lifetime, science, in the interest of parsimony and quantification, had become hyper-reductionist, a trend evident early on in the physics of Galileo and continuing to gather steam to the present. According to the strictures of modern science, the description of the world, whether the human world described by the social sciences or the physical world described by the natural sciences, should be as impersonal as possible, rigorously expunging any reference to persons and their subjectivities. It was thought that describing the world in terms of personal attributes, desires and purposes was intolerably atavistic, superstitious and subjective and so a distortion of reality. Science should cleanse itself utterly of anthropomorphism and aim instead at a perfectly objective description of things. James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* describes science as “utterly repudiating the personal point of view. She catalogues her elements and records her laws indifferent as to what purpose may be shown forth by them, and constructs her theories quite careless of their bearing on human anxieties and fates.”³¹ Scientists seek to quash the personal element, and believe, in James’s characterization of their attitude, that “the less we mix the private with the cosmic, the more we dwell in universal and impersonal terms, the truer heirs of Science we become.”³²

And not even psychology, the one domain where the person should be paramount as the principal object of study, was exempt from this rampant reductionism. In James’s time, positivist psychologists and philosophers came increasingly to deny the reality of persons, regarding them instead as merely transient and illusory epiphenomena thrown up willy-nilly as accidental byproducts of an impersonal evolutionary process. In James’s

characterization of this psychological reductionism in his *Varieties*, “personality, so far from being an elementary force in nature, is but a passive resultant of the really elementary forces, physical, chemical, physiological, and psycho-physical, which are all impersonal and general in character.”³³ James likens persons thus reduced to “bubbles on the foam which coats a stormy sea” which are “made and unmade by the forces of the wind and water.”³⁴ At a further extreme, behaviorists consigned the very concept of the person to the dustbin of history, believing it an obsolete and redundant vestige of “folk” psychology, an unwholesome mixture of religion, superstition, and metaphysics.

Now James, significantly, though himself a ‘scientific’ psychologist who, following Wilhelm Wundt’s example in Leipzig, established the first experimental psychology laboratory in America, nevertheless plumped for the fundamental and inexpugnable reality of persons against the strident reductionists. For James, the subjective or personal factor in our experience of the world is not negligible and certainly not dismissible. Indeed, our affective and volitional response to reality, the way it “feels” to us at the personal level and the sense we have that it is we ourselves who feel it, provides us the best and most immediate access to what is real; it gives us a tacit knowledge of things which science, with its abstract concepts, is once removed from. A scientific account of reality is once-removed and incomplete since it has to do with only the symbols of reality, not the reality itself, which is accessible only to personal experience. “So long as we deal with the cosmic and the general,” observes James, “we deal only with the symbols of reality, but *as soon as we deal with private and personal phenomena as such, we deal with realities in the completest sense of the term.*”³⁵

James analyzes our experience of the external world as an indivisible fusion of both objective and subjective parts: “the objective part is the sum total of whatsoever at any given time we may be thinking of, the subjective part is the inner ‘state’ in which the thinking comes to pass.” Objects of our thought, or ideas, are “but ideal pictures of something whose existence we do not inwardly possess but only point at outwardly,” whereas “the inner state is our very experience itself; its reality and that of our experience are one. A conscious field *plus* its object as felt or thought of *plus* an attitude towards the object *plus* the sense of a self to whom the attitude belongs.” Moreover, the subjective part of our experience is no abstraction like a concept, nor reducible to an idea or mental

picture, and certainly no mere epiphenomenon; it is real—"a *full fact*." "The axis of reality," says James tellingly, "runs solely through the egotistic places—they are strung upon it like so many beads."³⁶ Omitting this subjective part of our experience from our descriptions of the world, as does science, leaves us with a desiccated view, much like substituting a menu for a real meal, or a map for the place it represents. James locates the core of our subjectivity or personality in our "passional" or emotional nature. "Individuality is founded in feeling," James maintains, "and the recesses of feeling, . . . , are the only places in the world in which we catch real fact in the making, and directly perceive how events happen, and how work is actually done. Compared with this world of living individualized feelings, the world of generalized objects which the intellect contemplates is without solidity or life."³⁷

Little wonder, then, that James should exalt the individual as the chief determiner of history and turn history into biography. A biography to have depth, to be complete and well rounded, must plumb the "subjective part" of a person's experience since it is "a *full fact*" through which the "axis of reality" runs. For James, a philosophy is the result of the reciprocation between a person's temperament and the world. In his *A Pluralistic Universe*, he states, "A philosophy is the expression of a man's intimate character, and all definitions of the universe are but the deliberately adopted reactions of human characters upon it."³⁸ The same is true of science, art, and religion. It is not enough for the student of biographical history to be conversant with the "objective part" of an individual's experience, with her ideas, beliefs and theories, but as well to know her emotional and volitional reactions to life—that is, to enter empathetically into her life and vicariously experience it as she lived it and so experience reality as she did. James suggests as much in saying, "We sympathize with men's mistakes even in the act of penetrating them; we feel the pathos of lost causes and misguided epochs even while we applaud what overcame them."³⁹ Thus, liberally educated students of evolutionary biology would have read not only *The Origin of Species* for the fundamentals of Darwin's theory, but also *The Voyage of the Beagle* for Darwin's graphic account of his raw experience of the wildernesses of South America and the Pacific islands, of his actual encounter with the exotic flora and fauna of these regions, and of the wonderment and fascination they inspired in him. In so doing, students would come to appreciate that the theory of natural

selection is more than an abstract theory, and not the product of a disembodied mind, but instead the creation of a whole man who was emotionally as well as intellectually engaged with the world. They would come to see the theory in the round, so to speak, and how it emerged from the larger context of Darwin's personal life and times.

James's linked theories of evolution, functionalism, pragmatism and personalism, implicit in his *apologia* for liberal education, give it the more cogency. The most fundamental of them, evolutionary theory with its imperative of adapt or die, explains the functionality of consciousness in enabling the human organism to react optimally to its environment; and a philosophical corollary of functionalist psychology is that the products of consciousness like beliefs, theories, and ideas are ultimately validated by their utility. That James's thoughts on humanistic education are firmly grounded in the biological and psychological sciences makes them authoritative; that they are informed by his high esteem and deep appreciation for persons in their wholeness and irreducibility renders them humane.

James's program of liberal education, if implemented, would mitigate the current crisis in the humanities in the following ways: First, it would restore the humanities to pride of place in the academic curriculum, not at the expense of the sciences and the technical and vocational disciplines, but by the simple expedient of teaching them historically. These latter subjects would lose nothing in the bargain but have everything to gain in the way of increased depth and breadth. This would have the further merit of bridging C. P. Snow's "two cultures"—the humanistic and scientific.

Second, James's program would provide an antidote to overspecialization in the academy that James warned against but continues unabated to the present. In his essay, "The Ph.D. Octopus," which, incidentally, should be required reading for all candidates for the doctoral degree, James laments the constriction of the mind resulting from the increasingly narrower specialization occurring in the universities of his day. James wryly remarked somewhere that in overly specializing students learn more and more about less and less until they know a lot about nothing. Narrow specialization now has even fragmented the liberal arts themselves thereby defeating the cultivation of well-roundedness that is their hallmark. James's remedy for the narrowness of mind bedeviling overspecialization in the sciences and liberal arts is to study them historically.

Third, James's program, by restoring the humanities to the center of the curriculum, would serve to check reductionism because their irreducible subject matter is the meaning and value of the human person. As a methodological principle reductionism is indispensable to the work of the natural sciences and, to a lesser degree, the social sciences. However, it has no place in the humanities since it diminishes them and threatens their integrity by reducing the human or the personal, which is their sole and proper object, to something less than itself. In the humanities, an unapologetic nonreductionism should be the rule, otherwise the very idea of the human is lost. Our current crisis in the humanities, James suggests, can only be resolved if persons are accorded primacy and value. James understands very well that a truly liberal and well-rounded education must include the human factor—it must put the *human* back into “humanities,” thereby justifying its etymology.

Fortunately, James's conception of history as the master discipline integrating the sciences with the humanities has not gone unnoticed. Barzun, himself an apostle of James, was long exercised over the conflict between the sciences and humanities and believed that the history of science might serve as the *via media* between them. Reading James's “The Social Value of the College-Bred” confirmed him in this belief. In his *A Stroll with William James*, Barzun writes that the history of science is now firmly entrenched as an indispensable discipline, fully vindicating James's view of history as the queen of the sciences and the lynchpin of the academic curriculum:

Since the crusade which some of us launched five decades ago, the history of science has become part of the curriculum in many colleges, and the monumental *Dictionary of Scientific Biography*, recently completed under the editorship of an historian of science, has proved that James's grasp and statement of the point still holds a lesson for culture. It will continue to do so as long as intellectual provincialism rules any discipline or profession.⁴⁰

Barzun notes also that James's conception of a liberal arts education anticipated James B. Conant's program for the historical teaching of science to Harvard undergraduates described in his *On Understanding Science, An Historical Approach*. What needs doing

now is an expansion of the work already begun by the *Dictionary of Scientific Biography* and Conant.

James's conception of the goal and value of a liberal education, though, is by no means unobjectionable. I shall here consider some possible objections to his view and reply to them.

First, James's hope that a liberal education would promote the cause of an enlightened democracy by enabling its citizens to make more discerning judgments regarding the relative merits of its leaders has not always been vindicated as is found in the bitter experience of the twentieth century. One need only think of Nazis like Joseph Goebbels who held a doctorate in the humanities, or those fellow travelers like Heidegger and Emanuel Hirsch, the disgraced but distinguished theologian. There can be no doubt that these men enjoyed a humanistic education of the highest order but in their cases it failed to produce political or even moral enlightenment—as the saying goes, one may lead a horse to water but not make it drink. On the other hand, citizens lacking a liberal arts education are no more likely to become civically enlightened. Cultivating a liberally educated citizenry is a better option than not, as Jefferson well understood. And it cannot be supposed that the Roman Republic, the demise of which Cicero so lamented, was built upon ignorance.

Second, James's putting biographies at the center of humanistic education should not be supposed to mean that this all there is to the study of the humanities. Obviously a large part of that study, as the New Critics in literature rightly insisted though perhaps overstated, is considering historical works, whether of literature, art, philosophy or science, strictly on their own terms and explicating their meanings independently of the personal lives of their creators or the wider cultural environment in which they were created. However, their creators' biographies need to be studied in the interest of providing a context which might help explain the genesis of and illuminate their creations. A case in point is Beethoven's Third Symphony (*Eroica*). A study of this work must begin with its theoretical analysis, perhaps a Shenkerian one, to better understand its formal features and harmonic structure. However, a complete *contextual* understanding of the work would require knowledge of some details of Beethoven's personal life: that he was a committed republican who initially sympathized with

Napoleon and dedicated this symphony to him; but when Napoleon became a dictator bent on conquering Europe, an enraged Beethoven erased Napoleon's name from the title-page of the score.

A third objection to James concerns the practicability of humanizing scientific education and thus making it truly liberal by either infusing the traditional courses in the sciences with history or introducing separate courses in the history of science in either the departments of science or of the humanities. The teachers of science might rightly complain that there is scarcely time to cover the scientific curriculum let alone introducing "extracurricular" subjects. And those teachers in the humanities may regard the sciences as an unwelcome intrusion on their time or an imposition on their expertise. This objection, though well taken, may be answered. So as not to impose on the time or patience of scientists and humanists in the classroom, courses in the history of science might be taught by those trained specifically in that discipline. Conant's program for the historical teaching of science at Harvard mentioned above provides a model of such an undertaking. Such courses may be required or elective. Alternatively, the history of science need not be confined to a specific course under that title. It could be taught in the conventional survey of history courses; indeed, it is unavoidable since any discussion of the seventeenth century would have to mention the scientific revolution of that period. Finally, education is not confined to the classroom. Students might be encouraged and provided with relevant bibliographies to study the history of science independently; much of a student's learning in any discipline takes place outside the class setting. In brief, neither the sciences nor the humanities risk losing anything with respect to the integrity of their disciplines by introducing the historical study of science either as part of the curriculum or as an extra-curricular course of independent study.

Finally, James's warning against over-specialization should not be taken to mean that James opposed specialization as such but only its excess, specializing to the neglect of the rest of the intellectual life. Certainly, and James would have assuredly understood this, specialization is inescapable in the sciences and their application to technology, just as the division of labor is necessary to the productivity of industry. James's program of a liberal arts education does not preclude specialization—the broad-based liberal arts education he is advocating is not incompatible with specialization. One may be deeply

specialized in one field and venture fruitfully in others. There are many examples of this. Alexander Borodin was by profession a practicing chemist who contributed importantly to the study of aldehydes, but today he is best remembered as the composer of the opera, *Prince Igor*, among other musical works. Adolf von Harnack, the eminent church historian and theologian, was conversant enough with the sciences to be elected the first president of the Kaiser Wilhelm Gesellschaft, an academy established for the advancement of science. Francis Crick trained in physics yet went beyond the narrow confines of that field to investigate the field of biology for which efforts he was awarded the Nobel Prize, along with James Watson, for discovering the structure of the DNA molecule. Had these men been narrowly specialized posterity would have been the poorer. Moreover, over-specialization in the humanities, of all subjects, is counterproductive since the principal object of their study is the human being in the round. A humanist by definition must be well rounded. For example, an art historian innocent of music history, philosophy, literature and other relevant disciplines would be a poor specimen in his/her field indeed. But it is not just others who are beneficiaries of such polymaths as Borodin, Harnack, and Crick; they themselves benefit by realizing their latent talents. Beyond these mutual benefits, as Kant insists, it is our duty no less to exercise whatever aptitudes we might have.

In summation, James's locating the value of a liberal education in sharpening our discernment as to what has true value—whether cognitive, moral, aesthetic or political—if that is not its *chief* end, or even an end, might be its effect which cannot but be beneficial.

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NOTES

¹ Wilfred M. McClay, "The Burden of the Humanities," *The Wilson Quarterly* 32 (2008): 37.

² Jacques Barzun, *A Stroll with William James* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1983), 183.

³ William James, "The Social Value of the College-Bred," in *Writings from 1902-1910* (New York: The Library of America, 1987), 1243.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1244.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1242.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1244-45.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1243-44.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 1243.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1247.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1244.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1245.

¹² *Ibid.*, 1246. Here are Carlyle's words as to the influence of "great men" which anticipate James's: "Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here. They were the leaders of men, these great ones; the modellers, patterns, and in a wide sense creators, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain; all things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realization and embodiment, of Thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world." (From Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (Teddington, Middlesex: Echo Library, 2007), 4.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1247.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1248-49.

¹⁶ Matthew Arnold, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," in *Selections from the Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. W. S. Johnson, The Riverside Literature Series (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1913), 50.

¹⁷ Dumas Malone, *Jefferson and His Time*, Vol. VI: *The Sage of Monticello* (Norwalk, Connecticut: The Easton Press, 1981), 248.

¹⁸ James, "The Social Value of the College-Bred," 1247-48.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1248.

²⁰ William James, "Talks to Teachers," in *Writings from 1878-1899* (New York: The Library of America, 1992), 726-27.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 726.

- ²² *Ibid.*
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 727.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 730.
- ²⁵ William James, "Great Men and Their Environment," in *Writings from 1878-1899* (New York: The Library of America, 1992), 619.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 625.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 626.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 643.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 628.
- ³⁰ William James, "The Importance of Individuals," in *Writings from 1878-1899* (New York: The Library of America, 1992), 651.
- ³¹ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: The Modern Library, 2002), 534.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 542
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 134.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 537-38.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 542.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 542-43.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 545.
- ³⁸ William James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, ed. H. G. Callaway (New Castle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 12.
- ³⁹ James, "The Social Value of the College-Bred," 1244.
- ⁴⁰ Barzun, *A Stroll with William James*, 5.

A RECONSTRUCTION OF JAMES'S NORMATIVE ETHICS

TODD LEKAN

INTRODUCTION

William James wrote only one systematic essay on ethics: “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” (hereafter, MPML)¹. Yet that one essay is arguably the best early statement of pragmatic ethics by any philosopher. It is also highly suggestive, much of its argument structure presupposed as scaffolding the reader must reconstruct. My aim in this paper is to expose what I regard as a key, overlooked, aspect of that scaffolding that makes sense of the relationship between James’s meta-ethics and normative ethics.² James’s meta-ethics is, at first glance subjectivist and pluralist. Values only exist as objects of demands. There is no one object demanded by all sentient beings. Therefore, value pluralism is true—there are as many values as there are demands. His normative ethics is based on an inclusivity principle that enjoins us to maximize the satisfaction of as many demands as possible. This principle coheres with other related claims that James makes about the moral life including the importance of sympathetic tolerance for alien ideals and a fallibilistic humility about what actions, practices, and institutions promote demand satisfaction.³

Nevertheless, James’s ethics faces a deep challenge. The connection between meta-ethical value pluralism and his normative principle is not clear. If value pluralism is true, how does James respond to those who hold intolerant values? A religious fundamentalist, for example, does not simply want a place at the table of plural values. She thinks at least some values should not even get into the door. Her ideal demands the destruction of at least some other values. What makes for the best inclusive arrangement of values would, for her, be an arrangement that excluded fraudulent ideals. Essentially, this is one of the challenges to James’s ethics offered by Scott Aikin and Robert Talisse (A/T hereafter) in their recent paper “Three Challenges to Jamesian Ethics.” A/T do a good job in spotting the gap between James meta-ethical value pluralism and his

normative inclusivity principle. How can James justify the claim that the IP has authority over other ideals?

James raises this question explicitly, but his answer is not as clear as it might be. My intention is to fill out his argument with the necessary missing detail. James's answer is *not* that value pluralism *logically entails* the inclusivity principle. Nor is it right to understand James's argument as a non-circular moral justification of the inclusivity principle. James's argument is best read as demonstrating that there is a psychological connection between the sympathetic awareness of value pluralism and IP. In other words, sympathetic awareness of plural and conflicting values tends to lead moral agents to want to adopt something like an inclusivity principle.

I proceed as follows. In section I set out the central pieces of James argument. I clarify a few ambiguities in his presentation, which will help rebut some obvious objections. In section II I review A/T's three challenges to James's ethics. Two of the challenges highlight vividly the question about the relation between meta-ethical pluralism and James's normative ideal. Section III elucidates James's account of moral skepticism and dogmatism so that these concepts can be utilized to demonstrate, in section IV, a reflective procedure I call "Royce's Fork." I claim that the Fork is the best interpretation of the dialectical moves James makes to clarify the relationship between meta-ethical pluralism and his normative ethics. Section V musters ideas from James's psychological writings on the self that help to bolster his ethics.

I) THE CENTRAL PIECES OF JAMES'S NORMATIVE ETHICS

There is the one "unconditional commandment" in James's ethics. About it, James writes,

There is but one unconditional commandment, 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. Abstract rules indeed can help; but they help the less in proportion as our intuitions are more piercing, and or vocation is the stronger the moral life. 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 rule exists.⁴

This commandment can be formulated as James's inclusivity principle:

IP: The Inclusivity Principle: We are morally obligated to satisfy as many demands as possible. Or, among our available actions, we should take the one that frustrates the fewest demands.

James's pragmatist ethic is experimental and fallibilist. He says quite clearly at the outset of MPML that the "main purpose of this paper is to show that there is no such thing possible as an ethical philosophy dogmatically made up in advance." Nevertheless, it is clear that we can know some things in advance, namely that we should be seeking to bring about the universe with the most good in it. Presumably, our experimental attitude is needed for determining what, in a particular unique moral situation, will realize the most good. We should be careful to avoid being blinded by abstract rules to what in fact will realize the most inclusive good. As James says in this passage, each moral situation is *unique*. What it takes to satisfy as many demands as possible requires careful inquiry guided by "piercing intuition." Of the moral philosopher, James says,

"His books upon ethics, therefore, so far as they truly touch the moral life, must more and more ally themselves with literature which is confessedly tentative and suggestive rather than dogmatic—I mean with novels and dramas of the deeper sort, with sermons, with books on statecraft and philanthropy and social and economical reform. Treated in this way ethical treatises may be voluminous and luminous as well; but they can never be *final*, except in their abstractest and vaguest features . . ."⁵

Thus, James can say that IP, as an abstract feature of his ethics, is a kind of final truth. Nevertheless, it is important to adopt a fallible and non-dogmatic about what actions, practices, or institutions will promote the most inclusive arrangement of demand

satisfaction. IP is a formal principle, best understood as a second-order regulative ideal. As a second-order ideal, it is meant to be a guide for moral reflection on the acceptability of various more substantive first-order moral ideals. IP tells us to continuously make sure that the pursuit of our ideals does not infringe on the others' ideals.

The question before us is whether James has any sort of argument for IP. James certainly thinks that the main goal of moral philosophy is to find some impartial method for adjudicating the conflicts amongst values and ideals. He seems to think IP is just such justified method.⁶ It looks like James's argument for IP occurs at the culmination of the meta-ethical section of MPML. In that section James offers two theses that he seems to think make it reasonable to accept IP:

EG: The Essence of Good: Whatever satisfies a demand is a good.

DOT: Demand-Obligation Thesis: Some sentient being' S demanding F is necessary and sufficient to generate an obligation for satisfying S's demand for F.

Since people demand many different kinds of goods, EG implies value pluralism. The pursuit of these different goods frequently leads to conflict. Given finite lives, resources, and opportunities, it is not always possible to conjointly realize them. Pluralism and conflict are enduring features of moral life. James's ethics thus accepts two further claims as fundamental facts about moral life:

Pluralism (P): People are committed to a plurality of moral ideals. These provide the terms in which questions about good and bad, right and wrong can be answered.

Conflict (C): Ideals frequently provide contradictory answers to value questions, and subsequently give rise to potential and real conflict.

Does James offer any reasons for accepting EG and DOT? His first move in support of both theses is to motivate the intuition that moral concepts like "good" and "obligation" exist only in a world of sentient beings with desires. James asserts that a world without

sentient beings would be a world in which such value terms such as good and bad could not apply. It makes no sense to say that a world with 20 rocks is better than a world with 10, or that a world with no rocks is a bad world. The only sense it makes to say that some state of affairs is “good” is to say that some sentient being desires that state of affairs. Further, “obligations” are only possible if some sentient being makes demands. But James goes further, claiming that there is a moral obligation to satisfy every desire (DOT). Consider this passage, “. . . (W)ithout 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.”⁷

Although he could be clearer about it, James suggests that the concept of “obligation” only arises when there are conflicts between goods. There are no obligations in a world where demands are automatically satisfied, say in some hedonist utopia. It is only when demands become thwarted that claims are made, and obligations created. I’ll say a bit more about DOT later. Let’s look at EG in more detail.

It is one thing to say that there would be no goods without sentient beings that care about the way the world goes. It is quite another thing to say that *the essence* of the good is to satisfy demand. James’s own argument for EG seems to be that it is “the most universal principle.” He seems to think that other proposals suffer from either being too narrow in scope or too vague. For example, a principle that says, “do no harm” is not relevant to every moral situation. He is also critical of principles such as “obey God’s will” on the grounds that they are too vague.⁸ He needs a moral value that is general enough to capture something common to all moral ideals. He asserts that “the most universal principle (is) that *the essence of good is simply to satisfy demand.*”⁹ It is crucial to remember that the context of inquiry that leads James to propose this definition of good is the philosopher’s quest to find some impartial or objective way of adjudicating conflicting goods.¹⁰ James’s position would be inconsistent if he held that EG was true independent of anyone’s demands. EG cannot be an “abstract moral truth” because, for James, there are no such things. It seems, then, that it is moral philosophers—in search of a normative standard—that demand such a universal essence.

In sum, James’s normative ethics amounts to the following moves:

- 1) Everything that is demanded is a good (EG).
- 2) Some demands conflict with others (P and C).
- 3) There is a moral obligation to satisfy every demand (DOT).
- 4) There exists a conflict among moral obligations (DOT and C).
- 5) The moral philosopher demands an impartial method for determining which obligations should be satisfied.
- 6) IP satisfies the philosopher's demand.

The connection between EG, DOT and IP is reasonable enough. After all if everything demanded is a good, and we are obligated to satisfy demands, what else would our supreme moral obligation be but to satisfy as many demands as possible?

Let's assume that James is correct in asserting that EG is the most universal account of "the good." Let's assume that although not logically entailed by them, IP plausibly is a reasonable ideal to adopt once we accept EG and DOT. Still, one might reasonably ask why we ought to scorn an ideal for its *vagueness* and *narrowness*? Is James able to do nothing other than dogmatically affirm his penchant for "universality" and dogmatically reject those ideals that do not value it? If the ultimate basis for IP is nothing other than a moral philosopher's demand for a normative method, why should that demand be given any authority over others, especially those who reject it? James might reply that the authority comes from the fact that moral philosophers are capable of isolating the essence of the "good" by finding the "most universal principle." But this only shuffles problem to another assumption. Even assuming that James is correct in asserting that EG is the most universal account of "the good," one might reasonably ask why we ought to scorn an ideal for its vagueness and narrowness? Is James able to do nothing other than dogmatically affirm his penchant for "universality" and dogmatically reject those ideals that do not value it? The basic question remains. How can Jamesian moral philosophers offer any authoritative ideal, when many reject their goal of finding some non-sectarian impartial procedure for resolving conflicts among demands?

I believe that this last question takes us to the heart of James's ethics. Although, he might have been clearer about it, James himself is cognizant that this is the

fundamental question for any moral philosophy that seeks to offer an impartial method for resolving real moral conflicts, while resting on a meta-ethics that eschews any objective moral truth beyond the demands of sentient beings. I will return to this question in section IV, after sharpening the potentially fatal criticisms to which James might fall prey if he cannot adequately address it.

I conclude the presentation of the essential elements of James normative ethics by considering two problems pertaining to DOT. First, as many commentators have pointed out, it seems wildly implausible to say that every demand generates an actual moral obligation that it be fulfilled. The second problem is that James is unclear about what it is that generates obligations. Is it a mere desire or is it a claim articulated in language?

Consider the first problem. It seems obvious that we have plenty of desires that we judge should not be satisfied. I might have a desire to cheat on my income taxes but hardly think that anyone has an obligation to satisfy that desire. Alternatively, it seems that there are plenty of cases in which we do not have a desire that we ought to have. I may not want to help people in need, but still have an obligation to do so. I think it will be best to read DOT as talking about *prima-facie* obligations, that is, “all things being equal,” we should satisfy demands. Read this way, James can easily acknowledge that many demands should not be satisfied because the obligations they generate are outweighed by other more important demands.¹¹

The second problem with DOT is an ambiguity in terminology. James slides between at least three terms: desire, demand, and claim. The text does not speak unambiguously in favor of one rendering over another. Read one way, DOT would point to a utilitarian ethic that holds we are obligated to satisfy *desires*. Presumably all sentient beings would be fit candidates for moral obligation, on this interpretation. If we read DOT as applying to *claims*, then it is more plausibly about promoting moral ideals held by rational beings. This would make James’s ethics less likely to be a simple species of utilitarianism because at least some of the claims made sentient beings will be moral ideals that involve non-utilitarian values such as justice. I think it is best to give an expansive reading of what generates obligations for James. The term “demand” seems suitable for this purpose. Consider the range of states that might be called “demands: a cat’s hunger, a baby’s desire for a toy, a child’s desire to take up musical instrument, a

woman's judgment that she should become a lawyer, a family's decision to move to a new country, and a man's demand for the rights of his oppressed culture. This expansive reading of the sources of moral obligation fits well with the pluralistic emphasis in James's philosophy. With these clarifications in place, we can turn to the A/T's objections to James's ethics.

II) THE AIKIN/TALISSE OBJECTIONS TO JAMES'S ETHICS

A/T offer three arguments against Jamesian ethics. The first is that James's reduction of the "good" to an "object of demand" cannot accommodate the obvious fact that many demands are immoral. The second is that James's pluralism is naïve. It assumes that all moral conflict arises from "practical" limitations on our capacity to conjointly realize all values. This assumption completely ignores the fact that some moral conflict arises from the fact that some values entail the rejection of others. The third objection follows on the heels of the second. We need a principle of toleration that says: "we should tolerate those who hold ideals that we do not even recognize as ideals." This principle of toleration would have to exist outside of the existing economy of desires and demands. But, according to James, there is no such thing as a demand independent desire. Therefore, James is barred from acceptance of the very principle that would help make sense of IP. The third objection, thus, is that James's ethics requires a principle inconsistent with a claim that is the central plank of his moral theory. The second objection leads directly to the third, so they can be treated of a piece.

The second and third objections are the most important, whereas the first objection can be met fairly easily. The example that A/T use to make their point is Betty Hood who robs only from the really rich. They write, "Betty's activities therefore help to satisfy the demands of the poor and they do nothing to frustrate the demands of the super rich. It seems, then, that James could have no objection to Betty's activities; in fact, James might have to take the view that Betty's actions are morally right, and possibly obligatory."¹² A/T go on to claim that "Betty Hood's activities are morally wrong simply because they are instances of stealing. We might insist that the wrongness of stealing is independent of the calculation of the cost of stealing in the economy of demands."¹³ Indeed, A/T might insist on this point, and in doing so they are following commonsense

moral commitments. Presumably the “commonsense” commitment is that stealing is wrong independently of whether more overall good comes from stealing. Obviously, these commonsense moral commitments are deontological in nature. Can James accommodate them?

The first thing to note is that both James and A/T run the risk of begging the question against each other on this example. James’s meta-ethics denies the existence of “abstract moral truths.” The claim that *x* is wrong because it is an instance of some moral property such as “being an act of stealing” is an example of such an abstract moral truth. Absent further argument, the score is A/T 0, James 0. The second thing to note is that James does in fact parse commonsense deontological commitments in his ethics (although perhaps unlike some commonsense belief, James holds that such deontic principles are expressions of demands, not abstract truths). In the section of his essay treating the “psychological” question, he clearly states that some moral attitudes are innate or “brain born.” These attitudes tend to express deontological commitments such as the judgment that it is wrong to save lives or promote happiness at the expense of one individual life. James gives the example of a kind of devil’s bargain in which a utopia could be realized only on the condition that “lost soul on the far-off edge of things should lead a life of lonely torture. . .” He thinks it is clear that this bargain would be experienced by many, if not most, as “hideous.” The repulsion experienced upon the contemplation of this example is clearly reflective of a deontological attitude. Finally, it is clear that at least some of the first-order demands that would be considered by the IP would be demands for ideals that have a deontological content.¹⁴ James could consistently argue that some moral agents would respond to the Betty Hood example with condemnation (presumably, A/T count themselves among the moral agents with this kind of response). No doubt, the existence of ideals with deontological content considerably complicates the application of the IP to the conflict of ideals. My point, for now, is that James’s ethics has a place for deontological considerations.

With their first objection dispensed, we can turn to the second and third challenges. The complaint, recall, is that James has no way of responding to the intolerant fundamentalist. Some moral conflict arises because resources do not allow the conjoint realization of incommensurable ideals. However, another kind of moral conflict “is due

to the fact that some moral commitments involve a *rejection* of other moral commitments.”¹⁵ In other words, “we are confronted not just with conflicting demands, but with conflicting views about what is morally tolerable.”¹⁶ There are two ways of framing this objection. The first is that the IP is empty. It allows virtually any arrangement to count as an inclusive good. As A/T point out, we are “often divided precisely over the question of which states of affairs should count as good.”¹⁷ They claim that absent some further, more substantive account of the good, IP is “vacuous.”¹⁸ IP might be interpreted more substantively as ruling out intolerant demands (surely James means a more substantive interpretation). This leads us to a second objection: IP seems in tension with the meta-ethical value pluralism meant to give it support. After all, what gives a substantive ideal of toleration priority over other intolerant ideal if all demands have equal status? Recall the central moves in James’s argument:

- 1) Everything that is demanded is a good (EG).
- 2) Some demands conflict with others (P and C).
- 3) There is a prima-facie moral obligation to satisfy every demand (DOT).
- 4) There exists a conflict among moral obligations (DOT and C).
- 5) The moral philosopher demands an impartial method for determining which obligations should be satisfied.
- 6) IP satisfies the philosopher’s demand.

It should be clear by now that the suppressed premise is that the “philosopher’s demand ought to be satisfied, even at the expense of other demands that conflict with it.” This is necessary to get to the conclusion that “IP ought to govern our choice of first order ideals.” A/T’s fundamentalist can always ask, “Why should I respect *that* demand? I hardly share it!”

James’s moral philosopher is thus faced with what seems like an insurmountable dilemma. On the one hand, she can regard her own favored ideal of IP dogmatically as an expression of her particular demand. But then, how can this ideal claim any authority for those who reject it? A dogmatic proposal can be met with a dogmatic refusal. On the

other hand, the moral philosopher can conclude that there is no overarching moral truth. She can regard any ideal of her own as simply one among many. But such skepticism is to give up the enterprise of normative ethics, as James understands it. James is quite aware of this dilemma and, in fact, it is central to the dialectical structure of the essay. He asks, “But how then can we as philosophers ever find a test; how avoid complete moral skepticism on the one hand, and on the other escape bringing a wayward personal standard of our own along with us, on which we simply pin our faith.”¹⁹

So, James asks the right question, but does he have a coherent answer? I think he does, but it only becomes apparent only after some careful reconstruction of his account of skepticism and dogmatism. In the next section, I will supply such reconstruction by linking James’s account to Josiah Royce’s approach to moral skepticism, dogmatism, and what Royce calls the “moral insight.” (Royce’s moral insight is very close to James’s IP). Royce develops this argument in the chapter entitled “The Moral Insight” from *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy*. Whether or not James is explicitly drawing on Royce, I think the argument strategy I shall reconstruct makes sense of what is implicit in James. In honor of that fact, I’m going to call the strategy “Royce’s Fork.”²⁰ Royce’s Fork is an account of why IP would appear attractive to moral agents who undertake a certain kind of reflection on the plurality of conflicting demands. Agents who engage in this reflection will find that skepticism and dogmatism are unstable second-order attitudes to take towards the pluralism of demands. Such agents will prefer IP as the best way to attain an honest and stable second-order attitude to take towards first-order moral ideals. To be clear, Royce’s Fork is not a rational demonstration that pluralism entails IP. It is not one abstract moral truth entailing another. Rather, Royce’s Fork is meant to show that once agents engage in a certain kind of reflection, they will come to adopt IP. This is a psychological account of what second-order attitude one will adopt in response to real skeptical doubt about one’s first-order moral attitudes. Once moral agents adopt this second-order attitude, they will find intolerant ideals to be “wrong” or “false.”

Nevertheless, it is true that a person cannot be proven wrong if she does not undertake a Royce Fork style reflection, or if she does not, for whatever reason, find IP attractive after undertaking such a reflection. Whether this is somehow damning to James’s ethics is far from clear. I’ll say something briefly about that at the end of this

paper. Let's now turn to a closer analysis of the dialectic of skepticism and dogmatism that constitutes Royce's Fork.

III) MORAL SOLITUDE

Royce's Fork has three prongs: dogmatism, skepticism, and the perspective of the moral philosopher as defined by a commitment to IP. The Fork shows how a certain kind of moral skepticism involves a degree of sympathetic identification with alien ideals that provides the hook by which to motivate agents to accept IP. Royce's Fork is not a logical disjunction of the form: P, Q, or R; neither P nor Q, therefore R. Rather, it lays out the core psychological elements of three second-order moral attitudes. Once these elements are laid bare, IP will likely become more compelling or attractive, given that moral agents have an interest in exercising moral agency in self-aware and sympathetic fashion. Thus, the answer to our central question, "why should I accept the demands of the moral philosopher?" James answers, "Because this is the perspective you want to adopt when you engage deep reflection on moral skepticism." In order to understand the particular way James's moral theory makes use of Royce's Fork we have to explore, briefly, his conception of moral skepticism. His conception of moral solitude is key for understanding both dogmatism and skepticism. James's discussion of "moral solitude" is abbreviated, packing into it at least three types of solitude that must be distinguished.

James considers a universe in which only one sentient being exists. In such a universe there really would be no moral distinctions of good and bad, or right and wrong. He then claims that if we introduced two or more such sentient beings we would have what he calls a "moral dualism" not a "moral universe." James uses terms like "moral universe," "ethical unity" or simply "truth" but hardly clarifies these. He compares the pluralism of thinkers, indifferent to each other's ends, to the "antique skeptics" who said that "Individual minds are the measures of all things, and in which non one 'objective' truth, but only a multitude of 'subjective' opinions, can be found."²¹

Moral solitaries unaware each other's ends could live blissful subjective lives dedicated to their personal goals. Let's call this the *solitude of ignorance*. The solitude of ignorance cannot sustain dogmatic or skeptical second-order attitudes. For example, an isolated tribe that was completely unaware of any other values or ideals would not

cultivate a dogmatic, righteous attitude towards their own values nor would they become skeptical about values. Skepticism and dogmatism arise only when there are competing values about which the agent cares to contrast.

Consider a second sort of moral solitude—call it the *solitude of apathy*. A tribe that becomes aware of, but simply does not care about, the alien values of other's lives in the solitude of apathy. Such a tribe would neither be dogmatic nor skeptical because, again, she does not regard these ideals as in competition. Real or potential conflict over the resources required to pursue favored ideals is what likely generates dogmatism and skepticism. This of course is the first type of moral conflict that A/T distinguishes from the conflict between intolerant values. I think that much, if not all, conflicts of the latter sort stem from the lack of security. That is, intolerant, dogmatic attitudes arise in the face of threats (real or perceived). The intolerance that leads to the attacks of 9/11 is not best explained by the simple fact that “they hate our values” (an explanation Bush administration continually offered). Rather, as some pointed out, part of the explanation had to do with outrage about American military presence in the Gulf—particularly the existence of bases on the soil of Saudi Arabia. (Such explanations, of course, are not justifications).

We might describe the solitude of ignorance and apathy as kinds of moral skepticism, what James would call “moral dualisms.” But really, this is a skepticism formulated from *our point of view*—from the perspective of those who are aware of the clash of ideals, and who care about that clash. The ignorant or apathetic would not ascribe “skepticism” or “dogmatism” to their conceptions of the moral life. One can be dogmatic or skeptical towards moral ideals only because one cares about their clash. Let's say that such dogmatists and skeptics live in the *solitude of aversion*. Both the skeptic and the dogmatist reject the idea that there is, to use James's phrase, any “system of moral truth” that could adjudicate the conflict of values. The dogmatist reacts with willful dismissal of all alien ideals, imposing her own. The skeptic reacts to the plural values with a troubled aversion to the imposition of any ideal. Unlike those who live in the solitude of ignorance or apathy, both the skeptic and the dogmatist care about the clash of ideals. The difference between them is that the dogmatist scorns alien ideals, championing her own, whereas the skeptic is averse to the rule of any single ideal.

The dogmatist prong is a dead end. The recalcitrant dogmatist, who either is incapable or unwilling to sympathetically identify with alien demands, cannot move to any further insight. From the perspective of James's moral philosopher, such a dogmatist does not require some argument appealing to an abstract moral truth, which she erroneously denies. All that can be done is to try to engender sympathy in such a person—to cause her to feel for others. Let's turn now to Royce's Fork in order to see how the solitude of aversion gives rise to the moral philosopher's perspective.

IV) ROYCE'S FORK

Royce makes a reasonable hypothesis that, at least in many cases; the difference between a skeptic and dogmatist is that former has a high degree of sympathy for various ideals whereas the latter suffers a sympathy deficit. It is the existence of sympathetic identification in the skeptic that provides the hook by which to pull the skeptic to the third prong of Royce's Fork—James's IP.

Royce asserts that the agent who vividly reflects on the conflict of ideals will come to internalize both ideals.²² She will, at least momentarily, identify with them and, to some degree, desire that they be realized. This leads to a provisional skeptical state. Royce asserts that, "this skepticism expresses an indifference that we feel when we contemplate two opposing aims in such a way as momentarily to share them both."²³

Royce claims that this type of skepticism "is itself the result of an act, namely, of the act by which we seek to realize in ourselves opposing aims at the same time"²⁴ No doubt Royce's claim is too strong here. Royce moves hastily from the claim that *vivid representation of an ideal carries with it a desire* for the realization of said ideal. No doubt, Royce's argument is informed by a volitional account of consciousness and mental states. Following Bain, Royce and the pragmatists like Peirce and James, think of beliefs as dispositions to act. Royce and James also seem to think that acts of consciousness involve some kind of motor discharge. We need detain ourselves with a prolonged discussion of this account of mind in order to properly assess the argument for the moral insight. Royce is on to something.

Instead of claiming that agents arrive at skepticism only after *seeking to realize* opposing aims, he might simply assert that skepticism arises in agents when they

sympathetically identify with opposing aims. It is enough for his argument to assert that a modicum of sympathetic awareness of conflicting ideals is a psychological requirement for an agent to entertain moral skepticism. Thus, Royce's idea can be pressed into a more modest suggestion: sympathetic identification with alien ideals tends to naturally engender the ambivalence that constitutes moral skepticism. Royce makes the further point that once such skepticism takes hold; it is likely that one will come to adopt some principle of harmony. That is, it is likely that one will adopt, as a second-order moral attitude, a principle like James's IP. Thus, the third prong of Royce's fork shoots off, so to speak, from the skeptical prong in the following steps: First, agents cultivate a sympathetic awareness of conflicting values. The result tends to be an appreciation of the blindness of human beings to one another's values. This leads, secondly, to a skeptical ambivalence towards plural and conflicting values. This skepticism is, Royce suggests, an unstable attitude that tends to lead to the desire for as much harmony as possible between the plural and conflicting values. The third step channels this desire for harmony into a demand for a second-order ideal, IP. This demand defines the second-order attitude of the moral philosopher.

The capacity to sympathetically identify with others is, of course, a matter of degree, dependent on both training and temperament. But it is enough, for James's purposes, that a modest degree of sympathetic awareness can motivate the second-order attitude defined by IP.²⁵ Once this attitude is adopted, agents will want to cultivate the habit of sympathetic identification. They will become sensitive to the moral blindness in themselves and others, and continually seek to overcome such blindness.

It should be clear now that the question "why should the moral philosopher's demands be respected?" is not answered by James by appeal to some further value or principle. In this respect, IP is normatively primitive. To any further skeptical doubts about IP, all that James can say is something like this: "I can tell you that should you reflect on the diversity of values with sympathetic awareness you will come to see the attraction of such a principle." The reflective process that leads to IP is thus partly constitutive of the moral philosopher's perspective as such. It is a second-order perspective potentially available to all moral agents. This fact about IP neutralizes the

worry that some special group—the moral philosophers—are dogmatically setting themselves up as authorities over the rest of us.

When A/T's hypothetical fundamentalist says that it is better to have a universe in which Muslim ideals are destroyed, rather than harmoniously accommodated, the Jamesian reply is to find ways to get this fundamentalist to sympathetically identify with the hated Muslim.²⁶ James does not try to show that a fundamentalist is wrong by appealing to any abstract moral truth. He does not, for example, attempt to show fundamentalists are wrong because they are inconsistent when they do not respect the relevantly similar interests of others. A fundamentalist can always hunker down and assert that the supposed similar interest—religious devotion, for example—is not legitimate similar because such alien values are not true religion. Nor does James's ethics appeal to some normative account of human nature that builds into it values like tolerance or respect such that those who fail to cultivate such values fail to be “fully human.” Such accounts assume abstract moral truths about “human nature,” and James rejects all abstract moral truth. Nor is his account best read as some sort of ideal observer theory that would say we should choose those ideals or values that would be chosen by an ideal observer (or by us were we be to ideally situated). James's moral philosophers might seem to be the functional equivalent of an “ideal observer” but such appearances are misleading. James is saying that the perspective of the moral philosopher would be grounded in the desire for harmony among conflicting ideals. However, James is not saying that there is an objective obligation to perform those actions that would be approved by an ideally situated moral philosopher. Nor is he arguing that we have an objective obligation to seek to attain the perspective of an ideally situated moral philosopher. As I have suggested his argument is *if* we undertake to reflect on moral life by way of Royce's fork, we *will* come to adopt the perspective of the moral philosopher. But James can offer no further normative reason for why we *ought* to reflect on moral life in this particular way.

V) SOME PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT FOR IP

I want to conclude in this section by showing that certain plausible psychological facts about the nature of the self and intra-subjective conflict could be mustered by James

to make IP even more compelling. In short, James can argue that IP fits well with a psychologically realistic portrayal of moral selfhood. IP will then be compelling for those agents who want to lead moral lives that are based on a deep self-understanding of the conditions of their agency.

Consider intra-subjective conflicts. Even the most committed fundamentalist is familiar with the experience of not knowing which of her demands to satisfy. She might recall that there was a time, for example, when she was not devotee. She can remember that her acceptance of a fundamentalist way of life involved rejecting other possible selves she might have become, be these other possible religious selves or non-religious selves altogether. As James points out in “Will to Believe,” some options are completely dead to individuals, but in most normal human lives there are a range of selves one might become. Even after, the fundamentalist has chosen to be devoted to say, a certain radical version of Hinduism, there are still choices about how to be such a Hindu. “Should I be the kind of Hindu that murders on behalf of her ideal, or should I reject the path of violence?” Conflicting demands arise even in those moral agents who are devoted with purity of heart to one ideal. Intra-subjective conflict gives rise to questions about obligations in a way similar to inter-subjective conflict. James makes this point in MPML, although he obscures this by first suggesting that the moral solitary who experienced conflicts of demands would have no “outward obligation” and that his only trouble will “be over the consistency of his own several ideals with one another.”²⁷ However, later he clearly tempers this claim by asserting that “ethical relations” would exist even in moral solitude. Ethical relations “would exist even in what we called a moral solitude if the thinker had various ideals which took hold of him in turn. His self one day would make demands on his self of another; and some of the demands might be urgent and tyrannical, while others were gentle and easily put aside. We call the tyrannical demands imperatives. If we ignore these we do not hear the last of it. The good which we have wounded returns to plague us with interminable crops of consequential damages, compunctions, and regrets. Obligation can thus exist inside a single thinker’s consciousness; and perfect peace can abide with him only so far as he lives according to some sort of a casuistic scale which keeps his more imperative goods on top.”²⁸

James's point here is that even those agents living in solitudes of ignorance, apathy, or aversion experience internal conflict among various demands. This experience of conflict gives rise to the questions about which should or should not be satisfied.

James's influential account of the consciousness of the self in his *Principles of Psychology* provides psychological support for his conception of intra-subjective conflict. James asserts "The same brain may subserve many conscious selves, either alternate or coexisting. . . ." ²⁹ James gives detailed psychological descriptions of a variety of phenomena that support the idea that brains can give rise to many conscious selves. These include the phenomena of insane delusions, alternating personalities, and possessions. ³⁰ These many selves do not always co-exist peacefully. Sometimes they become rivals. James's account of this "rivalry and conflict of the different selves" is particularly relevant for the focus, in his ethics, on plural and conflicting values. James distinguishes three types of self: material, social, and spiritual, as well as what he calls the "pure ego." ³¹ This discussion, selves are defined in terms of the objects that interest them. At times, we are forced to choose between cultivating one possible self and destroying others. James writes "I am often confronted by the necessity of standing by one of my empirical selves and relinquishing the rest." ³² James's discussion of the conflict of selves seems exactly parallel to his discussion of the "self of one day making demands on the self of another day" in the MPML.

With some exaggeration we might say that the very structure of human selfhood is tragic insofar as the choice to become a particular self involves the destruction of other possible selves. I might have been that person, but instead I let "him" die in order to become another.

Still, one might doubt ethical relevance of these psychological observations. Is it so bad that when I convert to Islam, after being raised Christian, I have "killed the Christian self?" Or, I have also eliminated the possibility of becoming a Buddhist self? How can those selves complain? The Buddhist self never existed. The former Christian self is no longer definitive of me. The demands of that self cease to exist, so how can we say there is some sort of tragic frustration of them? Or, more directly, what is so tragic about destroying those selves that hate other people or engage in compulsive lying?

Surely some selves should be destroyed or never be given the opportunity to see the light of day?

These questions miss the point, which is not that we have a moral obligation to realize every potential self, nor that all possible selves are of equal worth. The point is rather that appreciation of these psychological facts about human selfhood reflects an honest self-understanding. Moreover, an agent with such honest self-understanding is less likely to take a dogmatic attitude towards first-order ideals. They are more likely to respect alien ways of life because they are more likely to appreciate the idea that the contingency of their own selfhood.

Finally, consider James's analysis of religious conversion, which suggests the self now attained is always in some degree of tension with other possible selves just outside the margins of consciousness. In the chapter entitled "Conversion" James makes a claim very similar to the *Psychology's* idea that a person is made of many selves only he more explicitly identifies the different selves with different aims or values. He writes,

. . . a man's ideas, aims, and objects form diverse internal groups and systems, relatively independent of one another. Each 'aim' which he follows awakens a certain specific kind of interested excitement, and gathers a certain group of ideas together in subordination to its associates; and if the aims and excitements are distinct in kind, their groups may have little in common.³³

James goes on to note that the dominant aims that define the self tend to change over time. This is sometimes so gradual that we take no notice. However, from time to time the change is so dramatic that we describe it as a complete transformation. Religious conversion often follows that pattern. James develops a rich field theory of consciousness in order to account for conversion experiences. According to this theory, our consciousness contains an "extra-marginal" fringe "outside of the primary consciousness altogether."³⁴ James maintains that some exceptional individuals have a wider access to this extra-marginal domain. They are more prone to "incursions" from

this field in the form of radical transformations of personality, such as is present in religious conversion.³⁵

If James is right, at any given a time a person is made of many selves. Some of these selves may grow dominant and destroy the others such that these are no longer “living options”—real possibilities. But it is rarely, if ever, possible for consciousness to seize on just one self and its dominant interest. There are always potential selves peering in from the extra-marginal fringe of consciousness. In some cases, these potential selves burst through this fringe, transforming us into new people.

In light of these facts, there is something psychologically dishonest about the person who believes that the self they have attained is the only possible self they might have been. Even if they believe it is the only possible self that is desirable, they still must concede that it could have been otherwise—that other selves have been destroyed. This might lead them to see that from the perspective of those selves—a perspective they might still be able to glimpse—a kind of tragedy has happened. These possible selves might return from the dead, in moments of honest reflection, to haunt the self that has destroyed them. Once this fact is acknowledged, it is fairly easy to feel compelled by the tragedy of destroying other people and their ideals. After all, the self I might have been—a religious Muslim instead of a religious Hindu—would be much like the selves that I know regard as them. In short, James's philosophy suggests that there might not be such a massive difference between inter- and intra- subjective moral conflict after all. This phenomenon of intra-subjective conflict makes plausible the Jamesian moral philosopher's fallible, sympathetic attitude towards first-order commitments. Even the most rigid fundamentalist might be brought to see that her life contains multiple values that represent different kinds of selves.

Let's be clear. These psychological reflections do not logically entail IP, nor will they always compel moral agents to adopt the second-order attitude defined by IP. However, the psychological reflections do form a coherent account of why IP is reasonable. We might say that the psychological reflections, together with Royce's fork, bring IP into reflective equilibrium with plausible background theories and considered moral particular moral judgments. Once one has adopted IP, one seeks strategies of harmony and accommodation among conflicting first-order ideals. This in turn will mean

that those who have adopted IP will reject dogmatic ideals, that is, those ideals whose conception of moral agency involves the outright rejection of other first-order moral ideals. They will cultivate a certain pragmatic ideal of character that emphasizes the virtues of sympathy and fallibilism.

Nevertheless, the decision to adopt this sort of character, however motivated by Royce's fork and James's psychological reflections on the self, is in the strictest sense itself a demand that has no abstract validity to it beyond the fact that moral agents find it attractive. Is this damning? It all depends on what one expects from philosophy. If one expects that moral philosophy will somehow rationally demonstrate the existence of a demand-independent obligation to accept IP, then James's ethics falls short. Presumably, this is the expectation that philosophers like A/T foist on James's philosophy. However, James would be the first to acknowledge the limits of rational concepts in all areas of philosophical inquiry, especially the moral.³⁶

To return to the central question, "why should I accept the moral philosopher's demand?" James answers: "because you are the moral philosopher with this demand. You may not think of yourself as a moral philosopher but that may because you think of philosophy as separate from moral living." James would go on to say that in its broadest sense philosophy is "not a technical matter; it is our more or less dumb sense of what life honestly and deeply means. It is only partly got from books; it is our individual way of just seeing and feeling the total push and pressure of the cosmos."³⁷ James is not naïve. There are people whose individual way of "seeing and feeling" the moral universe involves hateful dismissal of the ideals of others. But their problem is not one that can be solved by "technical matters" set out in books. Their problem is a poverty of sympathy, and the roots of which are biological, familial, social, and political.

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NOTES

¹James (1979).

²James divides philosophical ethics into three kinds of inquiry: the psychological, metaphysical, and casuist. The first concerns moral psychology, in particular, the question of whether or not some moral beliefs are innate. The second concerns the meanings of moral terms, what we today would call meta-ethics. The third is about the criterion of right and wrong action, or what we would call “normative ethics.”

³James’s pluralistic ideal seems to fit well with the liberal tradition of the likes of John Stuart Mill who claimed that liberty was a vital good, in part, because it is conducive for “experiments in living” that help humanity learn what makes for the most happiness.

⁴MPML, p. 158.

⁵MPML, 159.

⁶Although James would agree with much moral philosophy since the twentieth-century that meta-ethics as the study of the status of moral statements is conceptually distinct from normative ethics as the theory about the correct standards of right and wrong, he stresses that overarching goal of all ethical theory is normative. This goal is to find a “system” that impartially orders conflict moral obligations.

⁷MPML, p. 148.

⁸MPML, p. 152.

⁹James (1979), p. 153

¹⁰Although James’ meta-normative account of “good” is, in a sense, anti-realist, it does not follow that he must offer a subjectivist account of all the various values that are objects of demands. That is to say James account does not imply that when I make a demand to protect non-human nature my moral belief is that this is worth protecting for the reason that protecting it would satisfy my demand.

¹¹This might help make plausible the claim that demands are sufficient for obligation, but what about the claim that they are necessary? James has to say that judgments of the form “he should have a desire that he does not” are really expressions of someone’s desire, presumably, the person making the judgment.

¹²Aikin/Talissey, p. 9.

¹³Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁴Cooper (2002) develops this reading of James, in opposition to Gale (1999) who reads James a desire-satisfaction utilitarian.

¹⁵Aikin/Talissey, p. 11.

¹⁶Ibid. p. 12.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸ibid.

¹⁹MPML, p. 151.

²⁰In his 1889-1890 course notes for "Philosophy 4—Recent English Contributions to Theistic Ethics" James explicitly mentions Royce's moral insight. There he says that Royce's moral insight is the answer to the question of the best method for resolving moral conflict. I take this to be some evidence that Royce influences James in the way he sets up the basic problem of philosophical ethics. The solution to the question of which test of right and wrong we should adopt is "by Royce's 'moral insight'—consider every good as a real good, and *keep as many as we can*. That act is the best act, *which makes for the best whole*, the best whole being that which prevails at least cost, in which the vanquished goods are least completely annulled." James (1988), p. 185.

²¹MPML, p. 147.

²²For an excellent presentation of Royce's argument strategy, that has influenced my discussion here, see Fuss (1965) chapter two.

²³Royce (1885) p. 133.

²⁴Ibid., p. 134.

²⁵James does not make an explicit link between his normative ethical inclusivity principle and his observations about the need to overcome blindness to alien ways of life in his essay "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings" in James (1983). But he does think that appreciation for alien ways of life will lead agents to value respect and tolerance.

²⁶Rorty (1998) makes a similar argument in his "Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality."

²⁷MPML, p. 146.

²⁸MPML, p. 1509.

²⁹James (1981), p. 279.

³⁰See James (1981) pp. 352-378.

³¹See James (1981) pp. 280-314.

³²See James (1981) p. 295.

³³James (1985), p. 160.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 190.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 191.

³⁶A/T's last two challenges would count as a decisive refutation only if moral philosophers need what James' moral philosopher does not even want, namely, a demand-independent standpoint by which to criticize intolerant demands. Whether such a standpoint is necessary or possible for moral theory is itself a difficult and complex question. It should be noted, at the outset, that such neutrality is, in some sense, rejected by much contemporary moral and political theory. John Rawls' later theory of justice, for example, explicitly claims that the liberal ideals that guide his theory of justice are relative to a certain moral and political tradition. At the very least, James is in good company with a great deal of moral and political philosophy in the last one hundred or so years.

³⁷James (1975), p. 9.

A REPLY TO AIKIN AND TALISSE

MARK UFFELMAN

ABSTRACT

In “Three Challenges to Jamesian Ethics,” Aikin and Talisse develop a critical analysis of the two central features of James’s ethics, pluralism and meliorism. They conclude that James’s ethics cannot accommodate certain basic moral intuitions. Moreover, it is alleged to foster conflict by overlooking demands that call for the suppression of other demands and by its inability to provide a substantive conception of toleration. I will suggest that James’s answers to the psychological and casuistic questions in “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” offer a plausible response to the counter-intuition criticism. Secondly, the opposition of two versions of moral absolutism constitutes a problem for relativism, but not James’s pluralism. As a pluralist, he is not committed to the thesis that every moral belief is as good as any other. Even detached from his pluralism, James’s meliorism should not be understood to endorse religious warfare as part of a conception of improvement. Lastly, if this interpretation is correct there is no reason his pluralistic ethics is obligated to accept the intolerant.

“For pluralistic pragmatism, truth grows up inside of all the finite experiences...Nothing outside of the flux secures the issue of it. It can hope salvation only from its own intrinsic promises and potencies” (WWJ 457).¹

In “Three Challenges to Jamesian Ethics,” Aikin and Talisse call upon pragmatists to move beyond the critical application of pragmatism and “strive to make their positive views relevant” in order to ultimately “supply a viable ethics.”² This exhortation is echoed in the introduction to their recent anthology, *The Pragmatist Reader*, in which they insist that pragmatists have the right to engage in metaphilosophical critique only after “pragmatist answers to first-order philosophical problems are viable.”³ Because Jamesian pragmatists draw upon the

pluralism and meliorism he developed in “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life”⁴ and elsewhere, A/T develop a critical analysis of this text that focuses on these central features of his ethics. What they conclude is that James’s ethics fails in practice because it cannot accommodate certain basic moral intuitions; it fosters conflict by overlooking demands that call for the suppression of other demands; and it further fosters conflict by its inability to provide a substantive conception of toleration.

On James’s account, a plurality of goods characterizes the moral universe. They cannot therefore be encompassed in a single abstract principle. Even his claim that “the essence of good is simply to satisfy demand,” is referred to in comparative terms as the *most* universal principle rather than as *the* universal principle, implying that it could be overridden (WWJ 621). Because a plurality of goods characterizes the moral realm, James enjoins us to seek to maximize as much and as many of these goods as possible. His meliorism is an injunction to improve the world by seeking to produce ever greater satisfaction of demands through the realization of ideals geared toward evermore inclusive and therefore harmonious states of affairs. While this Jamesian statement may be somewhat vague, it is surely provides sufficient ground for ruling out scenarios in which certain groups or individuals aim to violently impose their theological beliefs on others.

A/T indicate that they themselves take seriously the pragmatist methodological injunction to make philosophy relevant to life.⁵ Thus rather than seeking to defend pragmatism explicitly, I will assume it and attempt to show that a coherent, reasonable reply to their criticisms is possible from within that perspective. I propose to respond to the criticisms in the following manner. To the first, I appeal to the psychology and casuistry, developed by James in the first, third, and fourth section of “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” to address the apparent counter-intuitive conclusions that follow from his pluralistic meliorism. Though James is committed to the claim that *x*’s being demanded is sufficient for the good of *x*, this does not entail equal advocacy of all demands, nor in particular must one accept the demands of a tyrant at this point in history.

The second criticism focuses on James’s meliorism. I will argue that the conflict of two distinct versions of religious exclusivism is a pseudo-problem for James’s meliorist ethics because he is not a relativist. Because relativism provides no way of critiquing a moral position outside of its cultural context, it is vulnerable to this criticism. However, James is a pluralist. As Eldridge has stated, “[P]ragmatic pluralism does not entail the vulgar relativism that holds that

any belief is as good as any other. For a pragmatic pluralist, what is crucial is not necessarily the equal validity or legitimacy of all value claims, but rather the validity or legitimacy of conflict, dissent, and contestation in general.”⁶ As Eldridge goes on to point out, recognition of this legitimacy should not be a goad to violence, but rather to the need for communication among alternative and even competing views. James’s meliorism and his exhortation for strenuous living should not be interpreted as a call to violence. Clearly James himself denounced violence as evidenced by his stance on social issues of his day and in scholarly works such as “What Makes a Life Significant” and “The Moral Equivalent of War.”⁷ More to the point, I believe his meliorist ethics can account for such absolutist positions by arguing for the fallibility of metaphysical and theological beliefs as expressed by James in the opening statement of the fifth section of “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life.” Here he stated, “The chief of all the reasons why concrete ethics cannot be final is that they have to wait on metaphysical and theological beliefs” (WWJ 626). And again in his explicit writings on pragmatism, James stated, “Pragmatism has to postpone dogmatic answer, for we do not yet know certainly which type of religion is going to work best in the long run. The various overbeliefs of men, their several faith-ventures, are in fact what are needed to bring the evidence in” (WWJ 472). Even though this fallibility applies to a belief in moral pluralism itself, it severely weakens the legitimacy of moral absolutist calls to violence and the accompanying claim that this is somehow improving the world. As Ruth Putnam suggested in her reply to A/T, “one could read [religious] demands as exhortations to proselytize rather than as commands to commit mass murder” and by incorporating James’s notion of “the most inclusive ideal, however vague that notion may be, it is easy to see that an ideal according to which [religious exclusivists] tolerate each other at last minimally is ‘better’ from a Jamesean objective point of view than any ideal that includes ideals of religious warfare.”⁸

James advocated working to bring about the very largest total universe of good because he did not believe it to be practically possible to pin down a monistic theory of value or singular definition of the good. His meliorism is a response to his pluralism. Even if James’s meliorist injunction is divorced from his pluralism, any definition of improvement that incorporates religious warfare as means to an end courts a counter-intuitive notion of the good since it practically annihilates other intuitively compelling demands, such as demands for freedom, compassion, safety, and security. Such domination would require compelling evidence of the

correctness of the comprehensive doctrine. An appeal to sacred text and revelation would require universal or nearly universal assent, which is precisely what is lacking. Moreover, I doubt other moral principles will fare any better than James's when attempting to practically deal with individuals or groups committed to imposing their beliefs on others by whatever means necessary. I echo Putnam's claim that, "In fact, nothing follows concerning the adequacy or inadequacy of a moral philosophy from the fact that combined with false beliefs or a general lack of good will it leads to horrific conclusions or no conclusion at all."⁹

Lastly, if the preceding interpretation of James's ethics is correct, there are no compelling reasons Jamesian pragmatists are obligated to accept the intolerant within the framework of his pluralistic ethics. The criticism of pluralism's lack of a substantive conception of toleration can be addressed by again arguing that the burden is on absolutists to conclusively demonstrate the correctness of their doctrine. Moreover, a viable conception of toleration can be constructed from within the existing economy of diverse demands and desires through a pragmatic recognition of the limits of knowledge, a concomitant fallibilist attitude, and a mutual respect for the value of civility and peace.

THE REPLIES

A/T direct their first criticism at James's claim that "everything which is demanded is by that fact a good" (WWJ 623). They indicate this claim is tied to James's pluralism and that any additional qualifications for a good would put James on a path toward monism. The upshot of their interpretation is that while certain demands strike us as immoral (on their account this is so because certain demands are inherently or intrinsically immoral) and should not be met, James's ethics must regard their satisfaction as goods. The counter-intuition this elicits is the essence of the first criticism. To illustrate their point, they present tyranny and theft as examples. As I take tyranny to be the more forceful of the two, I will focus my reply to the first criticism on it. However, I will first offer a brief reply to the thievery example.

In similar fashion to Ruth Putnam's reply to the Betty Hood example,¹⁰ I think one can argue pragmatically that it may be not only permissible, but possibly even obligatory for Betty to steal from the super rich, particularly because they would experience no frustration of their demands. If the divide between the rich and the poor were severe enough, it may be that she ought to steal from the super rich even if it *would* frustrate some of their demands because of the

act's propensity to satisfy so many other demands, including not only the demands of the desperately poor to eat, be clothed, and have shelter, but also demands for justice and equality if the social structures that permitted the king's accumulation of mass wealth are ethically flawed. One could even argue that it is bourgeois to claim that all theft is wrong, if those who possess wealth achieve or maintain it through corrupt means. Is all this really as counterintuitive as the criticism by A/T would suggest? After all, doesn't the praiseworthiness of Robin Hood's thievery underpin the moral of the famous fable and provide the reason for his protagonist status and the perceived villainy of the Sheriff of Nottingham and the King?

A Jamesian reply to this first line of criticism is initiated by A/T themselves. They anticipate James's reaction by citing a central idea from the third section of "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" that addresses what James calls "the casuistic question" (WWJ 619). "In the casuistic scale, therefore, those ideals must be written highest which *prevail at the least cost*, or by whose realization the least possible number of other ideals are destroyed" (623). But, A/T argue, this reply misses the point because the real reason "we may justifiably dismiss the tyrant's demands is not that they conflict with other, more easily realized demands, but rather because the tyrant makes demands that it would be *immoral* to meet."¹¹

As an initial point, I would note that a distinction is required between the descriptive expression "demands of a tyrant" and the normative expression "tyrannical demands."¹² The fact that a tyrant makes a demand does not mean it is immoral. The tyrant may wish to go to bed at 10:00 PM instead of midnight, but the association of the demand with the tyrant is irrelevant to its moral status. Surely A/T are referring to tyrannical demands. But to call a demand tyrannical requires explanation since this ascription games the system by building the normative element into the expression itself. This is not hair-splitting. The essence of their criticism rests on the intuition that tyrannical demands are immoral, and some explanation of what makes a demand tyrannical is needed. However to facilitate discussion, I will provide a functional definition by borrowing from Locke and stipulate that a ruler's exercising power according to will, not the law, for the ruler's private separate advantage and not the good of the governed as the basis of rule constitutes the exercise of a tyrannical demand.¹³

One can pragmatically regard the nearly universal condemnation of tyranny as reflective of its history as a form of social organization. The meanings attached to it have been born out of the consequences of its historical manifestations and the moral revulsion these consequences

produce. There is little need to test tyranny's practical consequences and the moral perceptions they evoke. These consequences and the associated moral intuitions have become attached to its very meaning. A functionally objective or practical condemnation of it operates in the existing moral universe due to tyranny's propensity to butcher other ideals like freedom, compassion, safety, and security and the fairly thoroughgoing moral aversion this induces.

It is true that certain demands appear to be "in themselves immoral," as A/T suggest with respect to those that are tyrannical. I think it is clear that such demands are immoral. This is so due to the conceivable practical effects of tyranny and the prevailing moral perception that these effects are bad. This moral aversion qualifies as one of those moral perceptions that deal, in James's words, with "directly felt fitnesses between things" (WWJ 612). In her reply to A/T's first criticism, Putnam attempts to defend James by appealing to this element of moral intuitionism that appears in "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life." As it has already been suggested, it hardly seems necessary to test tyranny for its consequences. History and the funded experience it offers have already thoroughly established what they are. Unfortunately examples abound. What makes oppression, violence, and genocide morally wrong? What but an appeal to the moral aversion felt in response to their consequences can justify judgments against tyrannical demands? Certain moral judgments, like those pertaining to tyranny's immorality, no longer appear to be connected to their source in collective human experience. Consequently we may come to regard them as, in A/T's words, "valid independently of who demands what" on some sort of static, *a priori* grounds. Their practical objectivity, having been established, tempts an intellectualist tendency toward finality. One might say with James, "There never was a more exquisite example of an idea abstracted from the concretes of experience and then used to oppose and negate what it was abstracted from" (WWJ 440). The upshot of James's view is not to render moral claims subjective, but to regard objectivity as grounded in a claim's functionality in the moral realm. The mysteriousness of a *prioricity*, with its absolute, universally-binding decrees that are supposed to stipulate once and for all what is right and wrong, is circumvented without succumbing to relativism, subjectivism, or skepticism.

The probable reason pragmatists tend not to posit their positive views (as A/T suggest they should) is because a pragmatist is likely to regard the content of one's own ideals as less important than the method by which one came to hold them. Consequently, so long as theorists attempt to defend moral views on some kind of *a priori* ground or otherwise seek to establish an

absolute good or singular moral principle, it is likely that criticism will continue to be the primary mode of pragmatist ethical discourse. This engages the experimentalism of pragmatism and its primary function “as a method only” that stands for no special results, in this case in the realm of ethics. While James may have said little about moral epistemology, his general epistemological approach provides some guidance for interpreting his ethical position and formulating plausible replies to his critics.

Lastly on a more critical note, A/T conclude their first criticism by arguing that tyranny and theft are in themselves immoral, because, they claim, “certain moral claims are valid independently of who demands what.”¹⁴ It is unclear how these moral claims would establish such independent objectivity if not from their functional role, roles that derive from human attitudes toward them. If objectivity does not arise functionally through the collective experiences of the actual inhabitants of the moral universe, from what would it be derived? If one were to regard acts themselves as inherently good or bad, from whence would they derive their intrinsic ethical properties. Intuitionism only goes as far as intuitions are mutually recognized. Without a sentient being to regard an act as good or bad, it is difficult to see how it could be imbued with moral significance. If the answer is reason and this is interpreted to convey a universal status to certain moral acts, claims or principles, this objectivity is *a priori* and we are now in the realm of the intellectualism James (and Dewey, for that matter) criticized for artificially imposing absolutes on experience which is wrought with contingency that makes moral finality impossible. In his “Comment on Talisse and Aikin,” Cormier echoes James’s position regarding the mysteriousness of deriving conceptions of goodness or badness apart from “concrete satisfactions or dissatisfactions.”¹⁵ In a passage quite relevant to the current debate, James commends moral intuitionists for carefully attending to the psychological facts, but criticizes them for mixing their insights with “that dogmatic temper which, by absolute distinctions and unconditional ‘thou shalt nots,’ changes a growing, elastic, and continuous life into a superstitious system of relics and dead bones” (WWJ 625).

The coupling of reason and past experience yields principles that inform the moral life, much like precedents function in jurisprudence.¹⁶ This stability and objectivity in the moral (and legal) realm, however, should not be understood as final. Ethics, as with the law, is a growing, evolving system that remains subject to revision. In this way both are dynamic and fallibilistic in their constitution. Demands for revision will emerge in the course of experience. Ventures into

new forms of moral and social organization should be evaluated experimentally. As James stated, “these experiments are to be judged, not a priori, but by actually finding, after the fact of their making, how much more outcry or how much appeasement comes about” (WWJ 624). The inherited wisdom of past experience must be kept in the fore when considering such ventures. For James the right orientation is always toward the more conventional, for it is so much funded experience. But we must not turn these inherited insights into a priori absolutes. James referred to T. H. Green to capture the essence of this idea: “Rules are made for man, not man for rules” (WWJ 624). Principles offer substantial guidance and direction. To this extent, they offer great value. They should not, however, be transformed into mandates. Capturing the essence of this criticism James stated, “think of Zeno and of Epicurus, think of Calvin and of Paley, think of Kant and Schopenhauer, of Herbert Spencer and John Henry Newman, no longer as one-sided champions of special ideals, but as schoolmasters deciding what all must think,—and what more grotesque topic could a satirist wish for on which to exercise his pen?” (WWJ 622).

The target of the second challenge is James’s meliorist injunction to bring about the largest total universe of good. Combined with his pluralism, this entails that we seek to maximally satisfy demands while minimizing dissatisfactions. The best act is the one that on the whole awakens “the least sum of dissatisfactions,” and accordingly the higher ideal is the one “by whose realization the least possible number of other ideals are destroyed” (WWJ 623). A/T claim that this unwittingly prompts violence because it overlooks an important fact of the moral life. Some demands do not merely compete for the same resources, but rather are in opposition to each other. Pluralism denies a single intrinsic value by means of which values may be rank ordered. The disagreement that ensues with respect to what constitutes the good leads to disagreement over what improvement entails. Thus without a means of arbitration, this disagreement breeds rancor and inevitably leads to violence.

To develop this second line of criticism, A/T present religious exclusivism as an example to show that James’s hortatory meliorist injunction is practically vacuous and ultimately prompts violence. Their illustration pits fundamentalist Christians and radical Hindus against each other. While both parties embrace James’s exhortation to bring about “the very largest total largest universe of good,” their disagreement over what constitutes the good and therefore over what actually counts as an improved state of affairs leads to war since violence represents the sole means for realizing each party’s ideal outcome.

Given the pluralistic ground of James's meliorism, there is some irony in the use of religious exclusivism to critique it. As presented, I believe this criticism presents less of a challenge for James's ethics and more as an effective illustration of the potential danger of absolutist views. The irony stems from the fact that while the challenge targets James's meliorism—which derives from his pluralism—it elicits the very trepidation some pluralists have toward monism and its potential to become absolutist. Clearly both parties in the religious conflict believe in a single standard of the good. Thus for each side, not only is the other party in conflict with one's own view, for the absolutist this is so because one's own view is unequivocally right as the other's is wrong. Taken to these extremes, monism becomes the basis of absolutist justifications for imposing a view on others by whatever means necessary. The historic inability to produce a satisfactory singular standard of the good is why for James, "pragmatism...must obviously range herself upon the pluralistic side...and turn its back on absolute monism, and follow pluralism's more empirical path" (WWJ 417). This does not conclusively disprove monism, but this apparent inability lends empirical support to pluralism. Moreover, absolutism represents part of the conceivable practical consequences of monism. The potential consequences of absolutism are the very ones A/T associate with James's meliorism in their example—namely, discord and violence.

Because we tend to adopt the role of the spectator and dogmatically impose our own standards on others, we typically fail to sympathetically understand them. As Seigfried has indicated, James took this to be the chief barrier to morality.¹⁷ A conflict over what constitutes the good calls for the casuistry James presents in "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life." The moral philosopher must vote always for the richer, more inclusive social order (WWJ 626). In James's system, a view that produces discord, antagonism and hostility by calling for the suppression of other views faces a difficult challenge. While neither of two competing views can be vindicated outright (this would be monism), we can still critique views according to the amount of outcry and dissatisfaction they produce. As Gale has indicated, it is the net aggregate of demand satisfaction less demand dissatisfaction that matters when characterizing James's melioristic injunction to strive for an improved state of affairs.¹⁸

Both the fundamentalist Christian and the radical Hindu defend suspect moral positions. Views that call for the elimination of others are, to that extent, endorsing a state of affairs that runs counter to James's call to satisfy desire. Now while the absolutist need not accept James

pluralism (his theory of value that posits a plurality of goods) when adopting his meliorist injunction to maximize the good, the burden is on the absolutist to conclusively show the absolutist doctrine is correct in order to legitimize mass violence or other forms of intolerance toward alternative views, religious or otherwise. Appeals to intuition, revelation, or the authority of sacred texts fail to the extent that others are unconvinced by them. Moreover, extensive demand dissatisfaction in both quantity and quality will occur if the religious exclusivist violently imposes her or his view on others. It is hard to see how one group or individual's conception of religion, assuming it is devoid of the violent streak associated with fundamentalist and other absolutist views, could be conclusively refuted by another, even if it is regarded as incorrect. "Whoever claims absolute teleological unity, saying that there is one purpose that every detail of the universe subserves, dogmatizes at his own risk" (James WWJ 410). Because the truth of such views is not self-evident or otherwise universally justifiable, the burden is on the absolutist to show why it is nonetheless. Short of universal assent, it is difficult to conceive what form such proof would take. Failure to do so in conjunction with violent attacks on competing world views can be denounced by other Jamesian meliorists as immoral on the basis of the extensive damage inflicted on others' demands and the absolutist's failure to conclusively refute competing theories of the good.

For their final challenge, A/T isolate and target pluralism. Pluralism's lack of a uniform essence of the good leads to disagreement over what is morally tolerable. A/T claim the resulting disagreement cannot be overcome by James's pluralistic ethics because a substantive conception of toleration cannot come from within the existing economy of demands and desires. An account of toleration that enjoins us to tolerate others demands even when those demands frustrate our own ideals, A/T claim, must come from outside of the existing economy of demands and desires. Thus it would appear that his position will either once again unwittingly countenance violence, in this case because it is unable to provide the kind of account of tolerance that is needed to prevent war, or it will betray its pluralistic essence by stipulating a singular moral principle, which would begin to imply a comprehensive doctrine.

Apparently caught on the horns of a dilemma, how might one respond on James's behalf? One possibility is to try to go between the horns and claim a third alternative exists. James himself took this route in "Pragmatism and Religion" in which he developed meliorism as an alternative to both optimism and pessimism (WWJ 466–467). Encapsulating the challenge for

the pragmatic pluralist, Eldridge stated, “This is part of the pluralistic paradox, that as a pluralist, one must be open to all viewpoints and yet in order to maintain this ability to be open to all viewpoints, one must also maintain a view which favors this openness over views that seek to limit viewpoints.”¹⁹

As the reply to the second criticism has indicated, James’s meliorism enjoins us to strive to make the world better. The question is how we should seek to improve things when there is often extensive disagreement over what amelioration actually entails. The apparent paradox this suggests can best be approached through the development of a conception of toleration that acknowledges and does justice to a plurality of goods and values. The fifth section of “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” stipulates that the reason “concrete ethics cannot be final is that they have to wait on metaphysical and theological beliefs” (WWJ 626). A final account is wanting. While a descriptive account of the plurality of goods does not entail a corresponding normative theory, the former does empirically tilt the normative scale toward moral pluralism. As Eldridge pointed out, James himself inclined toward pluralism because of its connection to concrete experience and its associated pragmatic value: “James accepts pluralism, and thinks that others should as well, because it is more practically useful for solving ethical problems. Pluralism allows us to deal more effectively with practical problems, because it coheres more with the world of science, common sense, and allows for free will.”²⁰ The fact that people meaningfully organize their lives around alternative views of the good life empirically suggests that again the burden is on the intolerant to show the correctness of their exclusive moral theory. In the absence of such proof, pluralists may denounce intolerance as arbitrary, unnecessary, and unjustifiable on the basis of a lack of conclusive support. At a minimum, it provides pluralists with a means to denounce absolutist attempts to forcibly impose their beliefs on others.

Pluralism allows for the possibility of the organic emergence of a demand for a shared account of tolerance, the kind that is needed to prevent war in a world of disparate goods and values. Just as, in Hilary Putnam’s words, “access to a common reality does not require access to something preconceptual,” but only “that we be able to form shared concepts,”²¹ so it is that we do not require a singular moral theory to form a robust conception of toleration, but only the ability to form shared moral concepts. Toward this end, Eldridge emphasized the importance of communication and a willingness to seek to understand the values around which others organize their lives by stating, “Valuing the ability to move past conflicts in some way by seeing the

validity of other viewpoints, with the goal of facilitating communication and reaching practical agreement, can help us get to the real work of transforming experience and start charting the practical consequences of our actions.”²² Recognition of the limits of knowledge, a concomitant fallibilist attitude, and an existing demand for civility and peace create the need for a shared view of tolerance among conflicting accounts of the good. The confluence of pluralism and meliorism should prompt us to do what A/T demand of James’s ethics, viz, “tolerate some of those who embrace ideals that are not merely *different from* our own, but are, from our point of view, not *moral* ideals at all.”²³ In this way, it is possible that a viable account of tolerance can begin to emerge organically from an existing economy of disparate demands and desires. Moreover, not only would this account remain connected with concrete experience, it is difficult to see in what other way a more practical conception of toleration could emerge, be justified, and be applied to a world in which competing views of the good operate synchronically.

This account of toleration may not satisfy A/T in that it neither specifies a substantive account nor mandates one. However it is difficult to imagine a monistic theory of value that will elicit universal or practically universal consent such that it may be used to produce a functional substantive account. James pointed out that although “[v]arious essences of good have thus been found and proposed as bases of the ethical system...[n]o one of the measures that have been actually proposed has, however, given general satisfaction” (WWJ 620). Without this sort of recognition, the stipulation of a singular ethical criterion becomes an arbitrary imposition on reasonable people of good will who are unable or unwilling to recognize it as all-encompassing.

CONCLUSION

Central to James’s pragmatic grounding of moral principles are dynamism and continuity. Over the course of history, tyranny has produced vast dissatisfactions. The prevailing present day judgment that it is immoral is a product of its historically dire practical consequences and the ongoing moral perceptions elicited by them. Most reasonable, well-intentioned people regard oppression, exploitation and genocide as morally deplorable. These are some of the most salient elements of tyrannical individuals, institutions, and regimes. For a Jamesian pragmatist, tyranny is immoral. As Gerald Myers explained the Jamesian distinction, “True judgments are those that can be included within the objective, impartial philosopher’s most inclusive moral system, while false ones are rejected.”²⁴ The judgment that tyrannical demands are immoral can be so included;

its antithesis cannot. With respect to the second criticism, I have argued that violent religious exclusivism does not meet the standards of Jamesian meliorism in that it crushes other intuitively compelling moral demands like demands for freedom, compassion, safety, and security and it fails to offer conclusive evidence for its violently exclusive orientation toward alternative worldviews. Lastly, on the basis of a shared demand for civility and peace, a viable conception of toleration can emerge organically from within the existing economy of demands and desires. Its realization would be the product of a novel, shared account of tolerance derived from the discourse of diverse moral orientations and the cooperative effort of reasonable, well-intentioned parties holding differing and even competing views of the good.

Because flux is an essential part of experience, transition is a central part of being. If this is so, rationality cannot develop absolute moral principles because the principles it produces derive from the ongoing and evolving synthesis of moral intuition and experience. Through rationality, we detect patterns in the moral realm. But these patterns and the moral principles derived from them should not be interpreted as final since the ethical considerations that themselves underpin the principles are not ultimate or final. A moral principle's value is always contingently derived from the practical benefits of applying it to the particulars of concrete experience and its vagaries. How could it be otherwise in ethics if we are, in fact, dynamic beings in a dynamic world? As James stated, “[E]very 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” (WWJ 626). This is what motivates James to claim that “no philosophy of ethics is possible in the old-fashioned absolute sense of the term. Everywhere the ethical philosopher must wait on facts...and the question as to which of two conflicting ideals will give the best universe then and there, can be answered by him only through the aid of the experience of other men” (WWJ 625).

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NOTES

¹ To facilitate comparison with the paper by Aikin and Talisse, like them I will use *The Writings of William James*, ed. John J. McDermott (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1977), and the abbreviation "WWJ" in parenthetical references to James. Hereafter I will use the abbreviation "A/T" to refer to Aikin and Talisse.

² Scott F. Aikin and Robert B. Talisse, "Three Challenges to Jamesian Ethics," *William James Studies* 6 (2011): 3, 9, <<http://williamjamesstudies.org/6.1/ta.pdf>>.

³ Scott F. Aikin and Robert B. Talisse, introduction to *The Pragmatist Reader*, ed. Scott F. Aikin and Robert B. Talisse (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 1–11.

⁴ William James, "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," in *The Writings of William James*, ed. John J. McDermott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 610–629.

⁵ Scott F. Aikin and Robert B. Talisse, "Relies to Our Critics," *William James Studies* 6 (2011): 28, <[http:// http://williamjamesstudies.org/6.1/tareplies.pdf](http://http://williamjamesstudies.org/6.1/tareplies.pdf)>.

⁶ Michael Eldridge, "In Defense of Pragmatic Pluralism," Dept. of Philosophy, The University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Web, 5 Jan. 2013, <<http://www.philosophy.uncc.edu/mleldrid/SAAP/TAMU/P43G.htm>>.

⁷ William James, "What Makes a Life Significant" and "The Moral Equivalent of War," in *The Writings of William James*, ed. John J. McDermott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 645–660 and 660–671 respectively.

⁸ Ruth Anna Putnam, "Response to Talisse and Aikin, 'Three Challenges to Jamesian Ethics,'" *William James Studies* 6 (2011): 26, <<http://williamjamesstudies.org/6.1/putnam.pdf>>.

⁹ Ruth Putnam, "Response to Talisse and Aikin," 26.

¹⁰ Ruth Putnam, "Response to Talisse and Aikin," 24–25.

¹¹ Aikin and Talisse, "Three Challenges," 7.

¹² This distinction derives from an anonymous reviewer's recommendation on the first draft of this paper.

¹³ John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, in *Classics of Moral and Political Theory*, ed. Michael L. Morgan (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1992), 801–802.

¹⁴ Aikin and Talisse, "Three Criticisms," 7.

¹⁵ Harvey Cormier, "Comment on Talisse and Aikin," *William James Studies* 6 (2011): 12–13, <<http://williamjamesstudies.org/6.1/cormier.pdf>>.

¹⁶ Dworkin indicates that while general theories of law must be abstract, "for all their abstraction, they are constructive interpretations" so that "no firm line divides jurisprudence from adjudication or any other aspect of legal practice" (90). Laws are objectively binding, but that does not prevent them from being processual and subject to possible future revision. The adjudication process of judges is constructive of the law, which is why Dworkin describes a judge's opinion as being "itself a piece of legal philosophy" (ibid.). See Ronald Dworkin, *Law's Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).

¹⁷ Charlene Haddock Seigfried, "James: Sympathetic Apprehension of the Point of View of the Other," in *Classical American Pragmatism: Its Contemporary Vitality*, ed. Sandra B. Rosenthal et al. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 91.

¹⁸ Richard M. Gale, "Comments on 'Three Challenges to Jamesian Ethics,'" *William James Studies* 6 (2011): 18, <<http://williamjamesstudies.org/6.1/gale.pdf>>.

¹⁹ Eldridge, "In Defense."

²⁰ Eldridge, "In Defense."

²¹ Hilary Putnam, *Pragmatism: An Open Question* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1995), 21.

²² Eldridge, "In Defense."

²³ Aikin and Talisse, "Three Challenges," 9.

²⁴ Gerald E. Myers, *William James: His Life and Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 404.

A New Look at New Realism: The Psychology and Philosophy of E.B. Holt. ed Eric P. Charles. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2011. 272 pgs. \$44.95.

William James had an emotional impact on many of his students who became prominent in all regions of American culture. Teddy Roosevelt, Boris Sidis, George Santayana. Gertrude Stein and Walter Lippmann. Horace Kallen and Morris Cohen. Alain Locke and W. E. B. Du Bois. James's academic ideas are more at issue in his apprentices who had professional careers in philosophy: for example, G. Stanley Hall, Robert MacDougall, Ralph Barton Perry, Robert Yerkes, and C. I. Lewis. Of this large latter group one of the most talented is regularly overlooked, Edwin Bissell Holt – E.B. Holt.

A number of reasons account for the comparative lack of appreciation of Holt. At the core was that he was a homosexual at a time in American university life when such a preference could easily be devastating to a calling. Holt got his doctorate from Harvard in 1901 at age 28, and taught there until he left in 1918. In 1926 a friend persuaded him to teach one-half time at Princeton, where he remained until 1936. Rumor and innuendo shadowed him for years, and his less eccentric peers were more than happy to ignore and forget him. Holt was also a difficult personality, cynical, sarcastic, and withering in his intellectual scorn for those of lesser ability, and for the pretence so common in higher education. The words of his letter of resignation to Harvard President Abbott Lawrence Lowell in January, 1918, still smoke on the page: "Professors /Ralph Barton/ Perry and /William Ernest/ Hocking are moderately talented young men with whom philosophy is merely a means for getting on in the world. I do not respect them; I will not cooperate with them; and I am happy to be in a position now to wipe out the stigma of being even nominally one of their 'colleagues'."

Of the many tributes we may pay to William James one is that he recognized Holt's more-than-rough edges, but at the same time befriended Holt when he was a graduate student on the strength of what James accurately identified as the power of Holt's systematic philosophical vision.

A New Look at New Realism does not follow all of trails that Holt took, but it is the first attempt in many years to recall the man to the attention of scholars. The editor,

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Eric Charles, has written an ample introduction that provides biographical information about Holt, and locates him in the speculative debates of his era, now a century old. Charles also supplies some primary sources to give us a more immediate sense of Holt and his connections. Just as important, Charles has given free rein to ten contributors to talk about their understanding of Holt and what they make of his work. Overwhelmingly psychological in orientation, these essays concentrate on Holt's commitment to a generous and theoretical experimental psychology. Their strength is that they collectively display Holt continued magnetism in attracting interlocutors.

James and Hugo Münsterberg trained Holt as a philosophical psychologist in the early days of the twentieth century, when the lines between what are now two separate areas of inquiry were indistinct. As James and later Münsterberg moved away from experimentalism and to what I would describe as epistemology and metaphysics, they charged Holt with running the Harvard psychological laboratory. He stayed more a laboratory person than either of his two teachers, although he had a baggy sense of the discipline, most on display in a famous *Social Psychology* course that he developed at Princeton in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

The writers in this volume in some respects display a welcome diversity of views. Some report on experimental research that supports Holtian ideas. Some outline Holt's place in the history of psychology. Of especial interest to me are those authors who trace the influence of Holt on his successors. The favored and most significant psychologist here is James Gibson. Formidable arguments are made to demonstrate how Gibson's "ecological realism" is indebted to Holt. In addition, Samuel Alexander and John Anderson, two thinkers with Australian backgrounds, valued Holt's publications and created a crucial tradition of realism in Australia.

Although consideration of Holt's more strictly philosophical ideas is not absent, they receive less notice than the philosophical psychology. Around 1910, as a member of the band of so-called New Realists in philosophy, Holt took direction from two impulses in James's later thought, and again we see how the liberal bent of James's own deliberations stimulated others. Holt took to heart James's onetime allegiance to neutral monism, which premised that mind and matter were constructs from a directly-encountered pure experience. Although Holt eschewed James's pragmatism, the younger

man also imbibed an allied Jamesean notion that cognition did not substantively link mind and the world, but was a form of behavior with which an organism engaged its environment. James and the other pragmatists focused not on cognition, a noun, but on the cognitive, an adjective modifying action; so did Holt.

The philosophical realism of Holt and his collaborators including Perry was labeled new to distinguish it from the old realism, which they attributed to Descartes and Locke. This older Representative Realism postulated that material objects caused images *in* our minds -- the causal theory of perception. From these images we inferred our world; it was “represented” to us by what was in our heads. The reigning Absolute Idealists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century had profitably examined the deficiencies of this Representative Realism to credit their own monistic, and mentalistic, stance on reality. The Pragmatists, like Charles Peirce and James, shared many of the opinions of the Absolute Idealists, but were far less certain that human beings could obtain truth. Instead, Peirce and James -- and later John Dewey -- stressed individual methodical knowers, and not a trans-temporal god-like knower. Unlike the Absolute Idealists, the Pragmatists were content with the relative, temporary claims to truth made by scientific practitioners. The New Realists didn’t like the relativism of Pragmatism, but also did not like the mentalism of the Absolute Idealists. In elaborating a third position alternative to Representative Realism, Holt and his then colleagues contended that we had immediate, and not indirect, contact with the real world in perception, and that this world was not ideal in nature. In knowing, object and percept were one. So we got to truth, and it was neither relative to individuals nor in the mind.

The New Realists with proclivities in psychology like Holt thought that experiments would sustain their theories about perception, and that we need not assume an internal intermediary between objects and our bodies. Most of the scholars writing in this volume agree with that New Realist assurance. They -- like the Absolute Idealists, the Pragmatists, and the old New Realists -- find Representative Realism more than suspect. The articles in this volume together effectively delve into Holt’s philosophical position as a New Realist.

Nonetheless, while this position was certainly fundamental to Holt, his grand scheme, expounded in *The Freudian Wish and its Place in Ethics* (1914) and *The*

Concept of Consciousness (1915) was not limited to epistemology and physiological psychology. *The Concept of Consciousness* begins with a seventy-five page section on the symbolic logic of E.V. Huntington, A. B. Kempe, Josiah Royce, Bertrand Russell, and Henry Scheffer. Holt had had at least carefully read if not mastered the logical writing of these men when he finished the book in 1908. I do not think he effectively demonstrated how the logic led to the priorities of his New Realism, but at this period in American thought, logic promised dramatic advances in systemic thinking. Aware of the promise, Holt put logic front and center; unfortunately it is hardly touched on in *A New Look at New Realism*.

The first book in print, *The Freudian Wish*, also developed Holt's epistemology, but as the title intimated, the man adhered to a speculative – not to say wild – analysis of rationality. Yet again, we can see the bearing of James on Holt. Holt attended the 1909 conference at Clark University that introduced Freud to the United States and that allowed James to throw his considerable weight behind a less than empirical set of proposals for exploring the human soul. Holt incorporated these proposals into his own thinking, and used them to build a moral philosophy – an ethic of self-realization that claimed objectivity for morality. Holt the moral philosopher is also not investigated in the book under review.

There is a final short-coming, perhaps a hobby-horse of mine, which I want to address. The New Realism was not triumphal. The group of New Realists could not stick together. More significantly, in the ensuing dispute, their scheme was tested. It was not just that they had trouble keeping pace with Dewey's Pragmatism. They were challenged by another kind of realism. The contributors to *A New Look at New Realism* don't spend much time on the virtues of Representative Realism, and imply that what came later was not much different from Descartes and Locke. But this is not so. By 1920, a further company of young doctorates had set themselves in opposition to the New Realism, and these *Critical* Realists made an effective response to Holt. In Roy Wood Sellars and Arthur O. Lovejoy, Holt had perhaps not met his match, but at least he made no effective answer to their assessments. These men, and their companions, reckoned that the outside world caused our experience -- what they designated character complexes, essences, logical entities, or perceptions. But such experiences were not what we perceived, as the

Representative Realists maintained; the experience was rather *the means through which* we gained knowledge of the outside world. Although Critical Realism was a form of indirect realism, its proponents denied the Cartesian-Lockean view of Representative Realism that we perceived only “our ideas.” The New Realists – according to people like Sellars and Lovejoy -- accepted this mistaken outlook but went on to argue, also mistakenly, that these ideas were identical to (a part of) the outside world.

It is not my business as an historian to say who was correct in this discussion, but contemporaries at least awarded some of the laurels to Sellars and Lovejoy. The tradition of Critical Realism remained strong in the work of Wilfrid Sellars, son of Roy Wood; and in today’s followers of Wilfrid Sellars himself. None of these opponents of New Realism in philosophy is recognized in the book, and neither are the experimentalist adversaries of New Realism. Indeed, one might think that Holt was the unacknowledged originator of conquering movements in psychology and philosophy. He may have been the originator, but the movements have been much contested.

Eric Charles has done students of American thought a major service in allowing us to bring back into clearer spotlight the genius who was E. B. Holt. He was not a William James, but Holt did come closest among James’s many devotees to showing the breadth of concern and capacious range of his mentor. My grumble with *A New Look at New Realism* is that its several authors have not valued enough this Jamesian dimension of Holt’s.

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Pragmatic Modernism. By Lisi Schoenbach. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. ix + 197 pp. Hardcover. \$45.00

Lisi Schoenbach's *Pragmatic Modernism* will disabuse any reader of the notion that a book's brevity indicates intellectual slightness. Synthesizing strands of pragmatist philosophical and cultural history from Ross Posnock and Stanley Clavell to Richard Rorty, *Pragmatic Modernism* takes the intellectual history of pragmatism in fresh directions by redefining its relationship to modernist "shock" aesthetics. Schoenbach writes against the grain of scholarship that has characterized modernist aesthetics as antithetical to habit by representing modernism's dialectical engagement with a pragmatist understanding of habit as a force for change through time and as a necessary basis for social cohesion. Such "pragmatic modernists" from William and Henry James and John Dewey to Walter Benjamin, Andre Breton, Gertrude Stein, and Marcel Proust, Schoenbach argues, highlight how the conservative and socially-cohering forces of habit are necessary to sustain meaningful political transformation. Schoenbach entirely reconceptualizes long-standing narratives of the relationship between modernist revolutionary aesthetics—its seeming desire to overturn tradition and habit—and pragmatist politics steeped in a progressivist reform agenda. The result is a transformational work of literary and cultural history that will undoubtedly set the terms for future debate on modernist aesthetics and politics for decades to come.

The book's elegant two-part structure neatly embodies Schoenbach's dialectical understanding of pragmatist "habit" and modernist aesthetic "shock" in which "two opposing positions" are co-constitutive, remaining in dynamic "tension and mutual interdependence" (7). Part I, on "Habit," traces the deep history of a pragmatist understanding of habit from Aristotle, Edmund Burke, and Walter Pater to Victor Shklovsky and the Frankfurt School, delving into John Dewey's and William James's writings on habit as an aesthetic and a social force. Chapter two goes on to explore Stein's process of making habit visible. More provocatively, Schoenbach suggests, Stein's recontextualization of habit as a sustaining force for new ideas "points the way toward a new possibility within contemporary academic discourse: that of the recontextualizing mode of criticism" (64). Part II, on "Institutions," represents habit's codification within both unofficial and official institutions, developed in two chapters on Henry James and a concluding epilogue on Proust. In these chapters, Schoenbach identifies habit as a key concept mobilizing

individual freedom and risk against insurance and probability; habit balances uncertainty and contingency against institutions that codify and organize experience in ways that sustain ongoing revolutionarily creative efforts.

Of particular interest to William James scholars is the book's first chapter on "Modernist Habit," in which Schoenbach turns to James's concept of "plasticity," from his chapter on "Habit" in *Principles of Psychology*, to theorize a "pragmatic modernist" understanding of the psychological and social processes of change through time. Following C.S. Peirce's understanding of beliefs as "habits of mind," Dewey and James offer "a post-Darwinian conception of the dialectic of habit, in which continuity and adaptation to the environment are continually balanced with positive actions and constantly changing reactions" (24). In this sense, James's and Dewey's pragmatism represents not so much a stodgy understanding of habit as static tradition, but as a dynamic process by which individuals and groups can both adapt to and transform modernity's systems and mechanized routines. A refrain throughout this chapter and the book's subsequent chapters is that habit is neither "good" nor "bad," but "inevitable," and looked upon by pragmatic modernists from vacillating optimistic and pessimistic points of view—an "intellectual balancing act" (24) that necessitates ongoing engagement with, and transformation of, personal and cultural habits, rather than a settling into static tradition.

In Part II, chapter five, "A Jamesean State," teases out fundamental differences between William James and his novelist brother, Henry James when it comes to their attitudes toward national civic institutions. William reviled them. Schoenbach calls attention to William's correspondence with Sarah Wyman Whitman and others, in which he claims that individuals, and only *the* individual, could transform society for the good. Close readings of Henry James's novels *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Ambassadors*, and *The Princess Casamassima* in the context of his meditations on American civic institutions in *The American Scene*, conversely, demonstrate Henry's understanding of the potency of institutions for safeguarding "sociability" as a means for cultivating genuine intellectual commerce between individuals in order to sustain a sense of collective civic responsibility.

Schoenbach's narrative dialectic sustains this intellectual balancing act between various modernist dualisms, deftly tracing the internal contradictions within pragmatist understandings of habit and modernist aesthetics, thereby preserving the complexity of this dialectic, but also enacting the very "recontextualizing" mode of "pragmatic modernism" and creative scholarship

she hopes to inspire with her work. *Pragmatic Modernism* internationalizes pragmatism by highlighting the numerous exchanges between American, British, German and French intellectuals and their philosophical traditions. This, to my mind, is what makes this book groundbreaking and suggestive for future scholarship on William James and his modernist legacy. Where the book may fall somewhat short, from a historical perspective, is in its somewhat cursory treatment of the First World War, and its ensuing psychological uncertainty and trauma, as instrumental for the period's negotiation of habit and shock. This is a minor quibble, for Schoenbach makes no grandiose claim to have said all that can be said about modernism's pragmatic aesthetics. Thankfully, her work generously opens up suggestive ways for scholars to continue this important conversation about modernist aesthetics and politics.

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PEIRCE, JAMES, AND A PRAGMATIC PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION by John W. Woell.
Continuum, 2012. 244 pgs. \$120 (hbk).

This is a deceptively slim, remarkably complex, and enormously ambitious monograph, the title of which is to some extent misleading. By his own admission Woell offers not a pragmatic philosophy of religion, but rather a preparation for and anticipation of such an enterprise. Of the anticipation, more to come. As for the preparation, this moves on a number of levels and accounts for the complexity and much of the argument of the book. Put simply, what Woell attempts is to disentangle from the work of Peirce his formulation of the pragmatic method in philosophy and to isolate in the work of James his endorsement and employment of this method. However profound their differences in other aspects of their work (Peirce's agapism and James's radical empiricism get mention), they are unified in their embrace of this method, or so Woell seeks to establish. He makes this case in the fourth and penultimate chapter of his book. What is definitive of early American pragmatists he maintains (in this context John Dewey makes a rare and fleeting appearance) is "a concern with the practical" so profound that it inspired them "to reformulate philosophy" in light of it (111). He proceeds to offer a detailed account first of Peirce's and then of James's approach to pragmatic inquiry. In the course of his exposition he devotes a good deal of attention to the nature of pragmatic "elucidation." He lobbies for "a more inclusive understanding of hypotheses open to pragmatic elucidation" (118). And he is keen to present truth on the pragmatists' understanding as "a regulative norm for properly pursued inquiry" (144). A primary aim of his own argument in this chapter is to extract from the writings of the two featured philosophers "a narrow and neutral pragmatism" that

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neither assumes nor implies distinctive metaphysical commitments. James's well-known metaphor of a hotel corridor off which many rooms open, a metaphor to which he returns at various turns in his book, helps Woell to make vivid this aspect of his analysis.

Woell's journey to his fourth and penultimate chapter is arduous. What he sets about to do in the "critical" dimension of his larger project is both to present and to undermine readings of Peirce and James that have become all but standard in contemporary analytic philosophy. Common to these readings, by his account, is the tendency to view the work of these early pragmatists in terms of debate over the merits of metaphysical realism or antirealism, on the one hand, and over the prospects for Realism or Nonrealism with regard to truth, on the other. In his lengthy first chapter, Woell takes pains to explain the terms of this debate and to canvas the views of prominent disputants. This account provides the framework for his inventory of prominent interpreters of Peirce and James who disagree amongst themselves over how best to position each philosopher within the context of these related debates.

In each of the following two chapters, Woell undertakes two further tasks. He aims first to explain how contemporary analytic philosophers have been led to interpret Peirce's and James's work in terms of the metaphysical and epistemological debates he showcases in his first chapter. He hopes, second, to demonstrate the ways in which these interpretations are profoundly mistaken. In both chapters, the avenue into as well as out of the misreadings Woell alleges runs through the terrain of early modern philosophy. His fundamental strategy is to argue that contemporary interpreters have misunderstood Peirce's and James's critiques of the work of Descartes, Hume, and Kant. The early American pragmatists do not engage the debate over Humean skepticism (Chapter 2) or adjudicate the merits of Kant's transcendental metaphysics (Chapter 3). To position them as either champions or opponents of skepticism, or as siding for or

against metaphysical realism is to distort their work. Rather, they seek to expose concepts such as the Kantian notion of “the thing-in-itself” as incoherent in the very contexts in which they are employed. In making this case, Woell expends considerable effort in expository work. The payoff for his project is cashed largely in terms of metaphysical neutrality. It is wrong to view Peirce and James as either metaphysical realists or antirealists, he maintains, inasmuch as they reject the terms in which the debate has been and is currently framed. Resetting the terms of the philosophical enterprise is fundamental to the task of pragmatism, or so Woell would seem to suggest.

What has all this to do with religion in general and philosophy of religion in particular? Woell assures us in his introduction that the answer is a great deal. Inasmuch as “a concern with the human was always near the forefront in [the pragmatists’] thinking” (1) and because “the competencies and limitations of human beings” that the early pragmatists seek to identify extend to engagement with questions of religious truth, pragmatism is well-positioned to illuminate the religious dimension of human life. Yet assertions Woell makes at the outset of his book, not simply about the relevance of pragmatism for religious claims, but more surprisingly about the relevance of philosophy of religion for pragmatism, go considerably beyond observations on this order and are nothing short of bold. With respect to the former, he maintains that without attention to “the fallible and functional aspects of religious concepts and claims,” as well as recognition of their “continued contestability across a variety of contexts” – features of concepts and claims crucial to pragmatic inquiry more generally – “religious claims cannot be properly understood” (5). With respect to the latter, he writes, “Not only is a pragmatic philosophy of religion possible and desirable, it is central to a fuller rehabilitation of pragmatism and to a fuller understanding of early American pragmatism’s key insights” (6). In the course of these remarks

he ventures to assert, seemingly in support of his sweeping judgments of pragmatism's and religion's mutual relevance, that Peirce and James "shared an understanding of religion in general and of philosophy of religion in particular" (5) and that the "religious sensibilities of each author" were "deep" (5).

In the closing pages of his book Woell makes what is best viewed as a down payment on the promise of his introductory chapter. While he declines to undertake "a thorough rehashing of the traditional issues in the philosophy of religion" (148), he finds it "obvious" that pragmatism "provides a viable resource for traditional topics" given that both Peirce and James "took religion quite seriously" (153). However this may be, what Woell envisions in connection with a pragmatic philosophy of religion is not an inquiry into the truth of religious beliefs, but an elucidation of "what it might mean for them to be true in the manner suggested by pragmatism" (148). Yet in order to set the stage for such an enterprise, he feels compelled to establish the very susceptibility of religious belief to pragmatic inquiry. In so doing, he raises difficulties for his project cast up by Peirce and James themselves, each of whom presents religious belief on occasion in seemingly non-cognitive terms. Indeed, a good deal of Woell's concluding discussion is dedicated to exposition and analysis of Peirce's 1898 Harvard lectures and James's "The Will to Believe" designed to resolve precisely these difficulties. His considered view on this matter is that Peirce's and James's "occasionally explicit rejections of the application of the pragmatic maxim to religious belief" are "in some tension with the resources actually provided" (168).

In this own attempt to tap these resources and to suggest what he modestly characterizes as "a prolegomena to a pragmatic philosophy of religion" (152), Woell aims to navigate a course between two extremes that divide contemporary interpreters and/or appropriators of pragmatism:

he hopes in some future work to provide an account of religious belief that does not view its object as “some power beyond ourselves to which we are answerable” (149), on the one hand, and that does not reduce it to a merely human affair, on the other. His concern is not to establish foundations for or to provide explanations of religious belief, he explains, because pragmatism applies to existing belief that has been “put into doubt by some surprise that arises in our experience,” no matter its origins or grounds (161). Pragmatic inquiry aims to resolve such doubts and to return belief to a settled state.

Germane to the project in philosophy of religion Woell envisions are first, the pragmatic account of differences among objects of inquiry; second, Peirce’s understanding of what it is for such an object to be real; and finally, the pragmatic approach to the question of truth. The differences among objects of investigation on a pragmatic account, be they scientific, mathematical, or religious, are to be understood in “functional” rather than in “metaphysical” terms – in terms of “their roles in inquiry” (163). What it is “to be real,” in Woell’s understanding of Peirce’s view, “is simply to be capable of impinging upon experience and to be recalcitrant to our expectations while being no less susceptible to discovery and investigation” (167). In the case of religious belief, “error or affirmation can only be seen in the consequences that the belief has in the life of the believer” (164-165). Finally, “the regulative assumption” of pragmatic inquiry is that if it “were pursued as far as it could fruitfully go” it would terminate in agreement (165). This last assumption in particular suggests deep problems for the projected enterprise, however, as Woell himself is the first to register in the conclusion of what he characterizes as a “preliminary sketch” (154). Given what he terms “the ambiguous character of religious belief and religious truth,” he feels compelled to “introduce the possibility that there

may be religious realities without their being final pragmatic truths about these realities” (167). If this possibility is actual, some would argue, “we would be forced to say that there is no truth,” as Woell recognizes (166). Leaving his reader with this problem very much in view and with no indication of the sorts of religious realities or truths he would investigate, he closes with an appeal to the authority of Peirce and James, a strategy prominent in his argument more generally. “In the end,” he writes, “I would argue that for both Peirce and James, religious beliefs are no less susceptible to doubt and inquiry than other beliefs, and are, at the very least, capable of being true in the same sense as all other beliefs” (168).

As the foregoing account will likely suggest, this book is not for the casual reader. It is perhaps best conceived as addressed to those already familiar with a broad range of recent interpretations and appropriations of the work of Peirce and James, much of which has been either inspired or provoked by Richard Rorty’s revitalization of American pragmatism. Yet for those seeking an inventory of figures participating in this conversation, Woell’s first chapter together with his extensive notes throughout may prove valuable resources.

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